

No Longer Bondmen

Studies in Exodus

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What it Means to be Free

Readings: Exodus 2:23–25; 3:1–10.

And to put this story into its larger context: 1 Peter 1:3–5; Revelation 15:1–5.

It is always a wise and helpful thing to do when one commences the study of a book of holy Scripture to ask oneself what is the gospel according to this book? There are very few books in the Bible, I imagine, that are not concerned to preach the gospel message in one form or another. Certainly there are no books that are not intended to be practical; in fact, I defy you to find a comma that isn't geared to being practical. But most of its books are not only practical, they preach the glorious message of God's saving gospel and it is therefore a wise thing at the beginning to ask ourselves what is the gospel according to this particular book. If we ask this question of the book of Exodus there is no doubt what the answer should be. The gospel of the book of Exodus is a message of *freedom* and *liberation* and *liberty*, and along with that comes the other gospel message of *hope*.

In the first place this book preaches the story of freedom, the freedom of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and from slavery to Pharaoh. It tells us that glorious story of how God came down to deliver them from slavery and to lead them into freedom by means of his redemption. But you will notice it is not only the story of deliverance from slavery into freedom—for what use would freedom from slavery be if it merely moved the Israelites out from Egypt into the barren wastes of the wilderness and left them there to wander as best they might, to make what they could of the barren sand and rocks and the pitiless heat of that desert? Just to be put into a desert, to be left without a future, without any map, without any purpose, to wander uncertainly for the rest of one's life in a barren wilderness; there were people even in Moses' day who would have thought it preferable to have remained in Egypt. Slavery indeed is bad and can be a cruel and painful thing; but slavery with cucumbers and onions, the Israelites thought, was better than the mere desert without anything else.

We ought to be thankful, therefore, that our ancient story does not merely preach to us that God gave his people freedom from bondage in Egypt, but it preaches how God set before them a glorious hope that gave meaning and dimension to life. It offered them a future, radiant and joyful, that made it a meaningful thing to go out into the desert and to travel across it because a wonderful inheritance lay ahead. Travelling across the desert was sometimes fun, it wasn't all dreary and hard work and painful. There was many a delightful oasis and travelling could be challenging, new and fresh, interesting and thrilling. It could

also be tortuously painful. But whether the travelling was good or bad it was all given a greater meaning and dimension by the fact that, according to God's promise, at the end of the journey there lay a future worth travelling to.

So then, this book preaches the gospel of freedom from slavery and the gospel of hope in the future. From those two aspects we shall apply its message to our own hearts. Exodus is a book that comes to all who are suffering under any bondage or slavery whatsoever and assures them that there is deliverance, there is liberty. Exodus is a book that comes to anybody who has lost hope in life, and there are many. There are folks for whom the future is nothing but the grey monotony of joyless existence. Women from whom their partner in life has been taken—what joys that are left are not sufficient now to transform the future for them into anything more than a dreary monotony that is joyless and hopeless. Then there are men who in middle life have become disillusioned and the glittering prizes they have been striving for have turned to dust in their hands. Life has become drudgery and offers no hope. And there are young men and women who were brought up beneath the lovely sound of God's gospel and faith in Christ and belief in God, and their education has shattered their faith and left them without any ultimate hope or meaning in life. Nothing but the passing excitement of the years, leading, as far as they know, to the nothingness and hopelessness of the grave.

Two kinds of slavery

Exodus is a book that comes to us, whether we are in bondage or have reached a stage of hopelessness, and offers us freedom and hope. There are many kinds of slavery, of course. Some are obvious and clear to see; others are not quite so obvious and therefore more dangerous. It will be the task of our book of Exodus to expose the various kinds of slavery that can hold people in their grip.

For instance, we shall find with Israel that they were under a very obvious slavery, for they were bondservants to Pharaoh in Egypt. God broke that bondage and brought them out, but the story of the bringing of the Israelites out of Egypt is told us by the time the book reaches chapters 14 and 15 and there is still much of the book to follow. The bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt was not the only slavery that kept its grip upon these people's hearts.

There was another slavery, a slavery in their own breasts and hearts and in their mental attitude. So the book tells us how God was obliged not only to deliver Israel out of the slavery in Egypt, but that he was obliged to get the slavery out of Israel. Not only to stop them being servants to Pharaoh and slaves in the brick-kilns of Egypt by removing them physically from the land of Egypt, but how God was obliged to spend patient time working on these people to eradicate the slave's mentality that had grown up in their own hearts. For hundreds of years Israel had been used to being slaves; merely taking them out of Egypt would have changed that very little, as we shall see as we read their story. Literally and physically free from their bondage to Egypt, they were nevertheless still acting like slaves, behaving like slaves, thinking like slaves and talking like slaves. They would have gone on till now acting like slaves had God not brought them through experiences that were designed to get the slavish mentality out of their hearts and train them to live as free men and women.

But I repeat, the lovely thing about our book is how it shows us that God did those two things. We shall watch God with Israel then, releasing them from their bondage and we shall find that that release is in two parts.

Two kinds of release from slavery

First of all there is a sudden release—a once and for all release. As slaves in Egypt, one night Israel were delivered and they never needed to be delivered again; the bondage was broken and they were free. That side of the story will appeal to us immensely and we shall find there is something that answers to that in our own spiritual experience. A deliverance, a liberation that is immediate and needs never to be repeated.

On the other hand, we shall find that there is another side to this liberation—a liberation that took God years to accomplish and was only achieved gradually and bit by bit. And we shall take encouragement from that as well.

There are those who tell us that a person is set free from his bondage at the moment he or she trusts our Lord Jesus. But sometimes they forget to add that there are other slaveries and it will take even God himself some long process to really set us free from them. If we know that, we shall not be discouraged when we find by actual experience that it does take a long time.

Slavery in Egypt

We shall start then in this book by looking at Israel in their physical and literal bondage in Egypt. It was hard, grinding and oppressive slavery, in which their bodies, their labour, their lives were exploited by a series of tyrannical Pharaohs who used the Israelites and their sweated labour in order to build their treasure cities. But God set his people free from this physical bondage and the book of Exodus stands not only as the record of it, but as the divine protest at all forms of man's exploitation of man. God's protest against sweated labour; God's protest at men who use other men as though they were mere machines—paying them miserable pittance or nothing at all, using their bodies until those bodies break and then throwing them aside as mere chattels in the cause of building their industry and their art museums. God's protest then against all cultures that are built on sweated labour and man's exploitation of man.

But even at that level I would have you notice what Israel's bondage in Egypt consisted of. We must not think that slavery in Egypt meant simply that they had to work for nothing, or virtually nothing, and therefore liberty means getting paid good wages for the work you do. It means far more than that. We should not think that slavery for the Israelites in Egypt meant working for somebody else and freedom therefore meant that God set them free to work for themselves so that all the profit of their labour went into their own pockets. Nor should we think that their slavery meant hard, hard work and freedom meant either easy work or early retirement with no work to do at all. Some think Christianity would be a lovely message if it meant you could give up your daily work and that it's a more holy thing not to work than to work. Doubtless all these three things were elements in slavery and

therefore elements in freedom; but, according to the book of Exodus, the most serious element in Israel's bondage was that Pharaoh so organized their work that there was little or no opportunity for them to serve and worship God.

You will remember the early demands that God made to Pharaoh through Moses. It wasn't simply, 'Stop beating my servants black and blue,' or, 'Let my servants go to an early retirement—they've worked long enough.' It was, 'Let my people go that they may worship me.' It was the lack of freedom to worship and serve God that made Israel's bondage in Egypt so hard and intolerable.

Consider how Pharaoh had organized their day. It was work and more work, still more work and work again and a little food and more work and then sleep. And so it went on. (If they managed an occasional game of football the record hasn't told us!) Can you not see how that spells a grinding slavery? Who knows, you may have been through some experience like that yourself, when life has come to be little other than work and eating and sleeping, with an odd game of table tennis thrown in. If that is all life is, then sooner or later it becomes an intolerable slavery to the human spirit.

So God set Israel free, not that they might go out into the wilderness for a glorious holiday and never work again; he set them free from work in Egypt under Pharaoh so that they might work for God. In the wilderness they worked quite hard. Indeed, if I have judged the record right, some of them worked overtime. Busy women's fingers wore themselves down to the nails by stitching and embroidery work; carpenters flexed their hardened muscles as they chiselled and sawed and carved their woodwork; smiths and sundry men got hot and sweated dealing with their brass, copper, silver and gold. And so they toiled and they worked and they marched and they sweated and they grew tired.

You may say, 'What was the difference?' The difference was this. In Egypt they were working under duress merely to build treasure cities and pile up gold and silver for Pharaoh; in the wilderness they worked willingly, for they worked for God. And all they did, even if it was embroidery and stitchery, or sweating hard in the foundry, it was lovingly and willingly and meaningfully done for God. Every stitch had an eternal significance, for every blend of colour that their artistic sense embroidered into those tabernacle curtains was done as a sacrifice of praise to God and they had reason to believe it meant something to God. It gave all they did an eternal dimension and became a thing of unequalled satisfaction for their human spirit.

I have three brothers, one of whom (like the rest of us and like a good many Irishmen) didn't always go too readily to the washing up or the drying up of dishes! It is a chore, isn't it? I find it so. But this particular brother, having a great deal of sense, fell in love with a young lady and there came times in that process when he even went to the washing up with alacrity, for the young lady was drying the dishes! And in doing them together—I cannot tell you how or by what alchemy such experiences change the ordinary humdrum things (but apparently they do, for a while at any rate)—their friendship, for a few hours at least, cast a golden glow over the china!

Happy is the man or woman whose spirit has found God and is in love with God. It means that while you twist those old nuts and bolts in Mackie's foundry¹—or as a mother you prepare the bottle for the infant, or as businessmen you deal with stocks and shares and negotiate with the Union leaders—in spirit you're doing it for God. Toilsome as it may be and monotonous in itself, it acquires an eternal significance. It liberates the spirit from all thought and feeling of bondage. It transmutes ordinary daily humdrum work into something that makes God's heart glad now and shall adorn heaven with its eternal embroideries forever.

However high the pay, however beautiful the homes and the cars we get from work, what a slavery life becomes if, when it's all finished, our work has brought us nothing but the satisfaction of food in our stomachs, a red-bricked house, an amethyst ring upon our fingers and nothing else. Nothing for eternity. So we shall be applying this lesson to ourselves from time to time at this level. As Christian people we shall be asking ourselves what our attitude to our daily work is and we shall be helped to see that our ideal is not to give up, but to go about it as free men and women who have discovered freedom in daily work. That is, to seek God's Kingdom in our daily work, to please him and to do it for him. Thus finding liberation for the spirit and an enrichment of the soul now and a sure promise of a reward.

In this way Paul comforted the slaves among the early Christians. When they got converted they remained slaves, for they had no choice. It's a difficult thing for a free man to come alongside a slave and try to comfort him in his slavery, but writing to these men and women, for whom the future held nothing but literal slavery, Paul says they are to do it 'as for the Lord . . . You are serving the Lord' (Col 3:23–24). And when a man or a woman does anything 'as for the Lord' they are free indeed, because they want to do it. Paul went on to say to them,

Obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (Col 3:22–24)

Have you not said or sung at times that you would willingly be a slave for the Lord Jesus? You meant it, didn't you? What kind of slavery were you thinking of? If he should ask you to slave for him in bringing up half a dozen children, or stay at the carpenter's bench for the rest of your life, or go on thumping that typewriter until the keys (or you) are worn out, would you do it for his sake? Or is the only kind of slavery you would like is to be a preacher on tour?

A prototype of spiritual deliverance

When we have thought out the lessons of this ancient book at that level, we shall turn to a second level of interpretation. Theologians be warned! We shall apply these lessons as types

¹ James Mackie & Sons was a textile machinery engineering plant and foundry in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The company closed in 1999.

or prototypes of spiritual experience. Allow me to quote New Testament authority for that. In the book of Exodus we read how God delivered Israel in part by the sacrifice of a Passover Lamb (ch. 12). Having delivered them, he led them on to an inheritance that, if not incorruptible, flowed with milk and honey. You will remember then, how the apostle Peter in the New Testament takes up these terms and applies them at a much higher level. He tells us that we have been ‘ransomed from the futile ways . . . not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot’ (1 Pet 1:18–19). ‘He [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you’ (1:3–4).

I don’t really mind how you account for that kind of language. If you are one of those who say, ‘That’s not typology; it’s just Peter using a few metaphors from the Old Testament’—carry on my dear friend and call them metaphors, for I shall not quarrel with you. I know there are some folk who have a holy horror of the word *typology*. If you prefer to call them *prototypes*, *types*, or *shadows*—call them what you will. It remains the fact that Peter is taking this Old Testament history and using it as a kind of pattern of a spiritual bondage, a spiritual deliverance and a spiritual inheritance far greater than Israel knew. Let us turn our attention to it for a moment.

Israel set out delivered from Egypt and were promised this glowing inheritance in the future. What a gospel it was! It kept their feet plodding on as they walked across that wilderness, as the old stones got in their sandals and hurt their feet and on occasions they ran short of water and were thirsty. At times they became so disheartened and thought of giving it all up and going back to Egypt, but this glorious gospel glittered in front of them, nerved them for the fight and made it feel worthwhile carrying on. Yes, there was a future; life wasn’t just going round in circles and getting lost in the wilderness.

The New Testament uses that picture to remind us of the glorious inheritance that lies ahead of us. Let us not be ashamed or silent about it, for it is a glorious gospel message that we preach and I for one am not going to be frightened into silence by simple-minded agnostics who come alongside and tell me that this is all *pie in the sky*. Suppose it is pie in the sky; well I’d rather have pie in the sky than mere worms in the grave! But ponder the poor atheist for a moment and find some compassion in your heart for him; he has no hope. According to him there is no inheritance, nothing but this world and at the end a grave and dust and ashes. All his ambitions, politics, plans, purposes, his improvements and attainments according to him are bound, by definition, to lead him nowhere else but to the nothingness of the grave.

Atheists are no new invention, of course. There were many in the ancient world who tried to comfort themselves like this: ‘Suppose there isn’t any future, suppose there is no heaven—why should we complain at that? Let’s enjoy life while it lasts. A man who has gone along to a good hotel and had a delightful banquet of a meal doesn’t say, “I’m not going to this dinner, I’ve lost all interest in it because at 9.30 it will come to an end!” He says, “Dinner has come to an end, but that’s no reason why I shouldn’t enjoy it while it lasts.” Life comes to an end, so let’s enjoy life while it lasts and we shan’t complain if it comes to an end.’

And they think that's good enough; that's all there is. It's poor comfort to the person for whom life isn't a banquet! The man or woman whose life has been dogged by some serious mental or physical disability; the family who in mid-life have had all their happiness and enjoyment shattered. In their minds they see what life could have been, if only they had had their health; if only they hadn't always been stalked by grinding poverty. They have the imagination to see what life could have been, but they never realized it. Through disability, maybe, or other people's sinfulness, cruelty and selfishness, life has been a long frustration, full of pain. Will you tell them at the end to go gracefully from the banqueting table and be content with it?

And talking of minds, that brings us to the central point. We are human beings with minds, feelings, emotions, and imaginations. I know we are only tiny specks in this universe compared with the mountains or the elephant, let alone one of the stars, but I'll tell you something about elephants and stars—they haven't got much sense in their heads and very little imagination! Man has, hasn't he? I'm not flattering you when I talk about your intelligence, your aesthetic sense, your art, your talent and all those lovely creative things that you have that make you so infinitely superior to mere things or animals, however delightful they may be.

Now, atheist, let me tell you straight! According to you one of these days some little virus that you can scarcely see without the aid of a microscope, with not a millimetre or an ounce of sense in its head (if it's got one), will invade your body and tear it apart bit by bit. Some mindless cancer cell, not even knowing what a beautiful thing it destroys, will wrap itself round your insides and your brain and strangle your art, strangle your life and strangle your intelligence. What a prison-house to be in; to have a mind that can think and an imagination that can feel and to find yourself being destroyed by something that has neither.

There was a form of punishment and torture in the middle ages where they put a man in a room and the walls of the prison, little by little, gradually came in upon him; even while he lived he could see that presently he was going to be crushed to nothing by a mindless wall. And if there is no inheritance, my dear atheist, you are precisely there. A human intelligence in a world that is sheer material, mindless and purposeless that one day will crush you and all the lovely things that you were and stood for and once enjoyed. And when it's done it, it won't know it's done it. In a word, you are a prisoner, an intelligence trapped in the prison-house of a universe that, according to you, is only mere matter. Well, if that's how things are, I should keep it dark if I were you. I shouldn't gloat over it; it's not a message of freedom that you have but a message of tortuous bondage.

Let's break from that. Let's warm our hearts against the glow of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our world has been visited by that glorious Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ our Lord, born into this world a real man, with a body, mind and imagination as we have. He has faced death and the coldness of the tomb, the irrationality of men's hatred and the tangle of their iniquity, and suffered under it, even unto death. God has raised him from the dead and set him at his own right hand, and there is hope beyond this temporary planet earth. There is 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and

unfading.' Unashamedly we shall rejoice in it as we study this Old Testament book and use its lessons as a prototype of bigger things.

Foresights into the future

Finally, and very briefly, there is yet another level at which we shall read the lessons of this ancient book. As we progress we shall find that Israel's history ever and again is shot through with foresights into the future and becomes for us not merely history but prophecy. For that reason I read you those stirring verses from Revelation 15. Those chapters tell us of dark days that lie ahead at the end of this age, when men shall have to fight against the crass, crude materialism of the ultimate dictator and a totalitarian State. But John the apostle turns aside from the battle for a moment as he sees it coming, to picture for us some of those people of that day who remain faithful to God and come through triumphant. He pictures them by the glassy sea and as they stand before God they are singing the song of their glorious triumph, the song of Moses and of the Lamb. They sing a song that had been started ages before; a song of men who knew the iron of slavery in their souls, who suffered under dictators, felt their whip. Men who dared to stand for God and have been delivered. In a day to come Israel must face much suffering; multitudes of men and women at the end of this age shall have to reap the harvest of current materialism as they fall willingly, or unwillingly, under the domination of the ultimate totalitarian dictator who shall deny that there is a God out there at all.

Pharaoh was some king, was he not! When Moses came to him with the divine command, saying in the name of God, 'Let my people go', Pharaoh turned round and said 'Who is Jehovah? We don't recognize Jehovah around here!' One day there will come a dictator far more brilliant, far more powerful and more infamous than the Pharaohs ever knew how to be. The Man of Sin shall sit in the very temple of God exalting himself above all that is called God and all that is worshipped. In the name of the State and deified manhood he shall demand absolute devotion of mankind to the State and to himself. In those days, men and women who worship the true God of heaven shall do so at the cost of their very lives. And those who thought of getting rid of God, the notion of God and the claims of religion that would lead them to freedom, will have to discover the hard way that getting rid of God from their thoughts and from our world will lead—indeed must inevitably lead—to the biggest slavery that ever the human spirit suffered. In order to describe it the last book of the New Testament uses the language and the experience of Moses and the Israelites under the pharaohs of Egypt. We shall be wise men and women if, from time to time, we allow the ancient message of Exodus to warn us about what lies ahead.

I have not forgotten that lovely promise in the New Testament, whereby our Lord promised believers that they would be kept from the hour of temptation that is coming upon the earth. But I observe that, whilst this pharaoh from whom eventually God delivered the Israelites was an exceedingly cruel pharaoh to Israel, he wasn't the only pharaoh to enslave them; there was another before him. Indeed, it was the one before the pharaoh of the Passover that began the slavery and the Israelites didn't have to wait until that last pharaoh

of the Exodus to make their stand. Some of them, far-seeing enough, found they had to begin to make their stand against these trends even under that earlier pharaoh.

Let me tell you briefly about those two midwives (we shall hear more about them later in our studies). Under that penultimate pharaoh the decree went out that all the male children in Israel should be destroyed when they were born, and the two midwives dared to stand against that trend. Had they not stood in their day under that pharaoh, when things got really bad under the next one, there wouldn't have been any males to bring out of Egypt.

Thank God, the dark days of the man of sin are not upon us yet, but 'the mystery of lawlessness is already at work' (2 Thess 2:7), and there are trends around us already begun that shall come to their climax in those dark days. Let us not say it will be for other people to strive against those dark days. Let us be warned, and when we find ourselves up against the trends that shall eventually lead to that final apostasy, like those midwives, let us stand now for God and freedom and spirituality in a world that is fast going down the slope into the slavery of a totalitarian materialism.

To that end, God bless his word and our studies together in the book of Exodus.

Genocide and the Future of Israel

Reading: Exodus 1:1–22.

When the book of Exodus opens we learn from the genealogy that forms this preface that Israel has been in Egypt for some long generations and they had prospered exceedingly.

I want you to notice at once two things.

1. These long years and centuries, compared with the years of the patriarchs in Canaan, have been, as far as we are told, years of silence on the part of God. As far as our record goes they form a vivid contrast with the years when the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were living in the land of Palestine. Those patriarchal years were times of delight when God in his mercy treated his people as a father will treat his infant children; condescending to them, coming down to their level. Time and again God came down to earth—to visit Abraham's tent and eat dinner with him, to wrestle with Jacob in his difficulties. But then Israel grew up and came into Egypt and there they lived for centuries and prospered. In contrast to the patriarchal years, these centuries, as far as we are given to know, were centuries of silence on the part of God. No new revelation that we read of came to them; life just went on and there seemed to have been no further visions or voices.

2. As we commence this book of Exodus, those long years of silence are nearly over and this particular period of Israel's history is beginning to come to its end. Presently the end will come and it will come in an outburst of iniquity on the part of the Gentile nation, and in particular on the part of its king. Frightful violence, iniquity and oppression against Israel herself—an attempt even to destroy and eradicate her. And, what is more, a frightful outburst of rebellion against almighty God himself, as man, in the proud confidence of his scientific ability and the powers of the boffin² boys behind the scenes, challenges Almighty God to the rule of earth and defies Jehovah to do anything about his deliberate secession.

When this particular age of Israel's history comes to its end you will perceive how God cannot remain silent any longer, nor remain apparently distant. These are the days when God must intervene, when he must poke his *finger* in the works (to use the biblical metaphor) and show man that there is a God and that, 'The earth is the LORD'S and the fullness thereof' (Ps 24:1).

So we are to read of the final days of that particular era. They shall be gloomy days on the one hand, with records of judgment and warnings and catastrophes coming from the

² 'Boffin' is British slang for a scientist, engineer, or other person engaged in technical or scientific work.

hand of almighty God on a rebellious and defiant nation, though at the same time they shall be chapters bright with the glory of God's grace and the marvel of his mercy towards *vessels of mercy*, which he fore-prepared for glory. Eventually the rebellious nation shall be subdued, Israel will be delivered and, amidst those catastrophic judgments, God will teach the earth one of its early lessons about the nature of God, the glory of his character and the divine attitude to sin.

The previous pharaoh and his scheme of genocide

Now, however, our topic shall lead us, not to those final days of that era of history but to the previous years, to the run-up towards those final days. We shall not be thinking of that pharaoh of the time of the Exodus, but of the one who immediately preceded him. We shall think of the policies that he began to put into operation in those days that came just before the end of that particular age. For reasons of State and for reasons of economics and politics, this pharaoh put a scheme into action that virtually amounted to the genocide of Israel, to the deliberate extermination of a complete nation.

The story might have struck us in our modern times as perhaps lurid and exaggerated. Is it possible that any government would turn to the deliberate extermination, child by child, of a whole nation? Yet we have lived through such periods of history that we can no longer be shocked and we believe it implicitly. Many of us lived through the period in modern history when Hitler set himself to the destruction of the descendants of this same nation of Israel. Deliberately and systematically he gassed upwards of six million of them in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

In recent years and months we have heard rumours of what may well be true, the virtual extermination by physical massacre of all opposition in Cambodia.³ But whereas this kind of thing happened to other nations, we cannot help being struck by the fact that it has happened to Israel perhaps more than to any other nation on record. The persecution and anti-Semitism has been so persistent that it invites us to consider whether there may not be some deeper reason behind their persecution than behind the normal atrocities that politics have given birth to. We think of the early oppression of the Jews in Judea under Antiochus Epiphanes; of the anti-Semitic riots in Egypt under the Roman Empire; of those ugly days in Spain when a so-called Christian church tortured and persecuted Jews. We think also of Russian pogroms; of our own evil kings in these islands who persecuted Jews for the sake of their money. Then we think of Hitler's persecution and of what is still going on in the USSR.⁴ How will you explain Hitler's idea of deliberately gassing six million people merely in terms of human perversity and cruelty?

Behind this lies a far more sinister power, for even in those early days Israel was the carrier of the purposes of God. Even then the oracles of God had begun to be revealed to Israel and they were presently to be the vehicle of God's law from Mount Sinai. It was the

³ These talks were delivered in 1977, in the middle of the period of genocide known as the Killing Fields (1975–79).

⁴ These talks were delivered in 1977 when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was still in existence. It was dissolved in 1991, and some of the former Soviet Republics established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

nation to whom God had made the promise through Abraham, their forefather, 'In you, and in your offspring, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (see Gen 22:17–18). The divine purpose was already made known. Israel was to be a large nation in the middle of the earth, the vehicle of God's great redemption for mankind and through whom one day the blessed Redeemer himself was to come. So it is no surprise that Satan should once again attempt to exterminate them.

The courage of the midwives

When that evil king made his evil policies known, the impact and the challenge were felt in Israel. Not first of all by the prophets or priests, but by midwives in the course of their professional duty. These women have secured themselves an honoured place in holy Scripture. Perhaps they would have gone unknown had it not been that in the course of their professional duties they came head on against the policy of the government.

It is a reminder to us at once that in our age some of the biggest battles are not fought out in the positive calm of some august church. They are still fought out by midwives, gynaecologists, doctors and lawyers, businessmen and schoolteachers, as they go about their daily profession.

As we have been sketching in the conditions of things in this period of Israel's history when that particular age was beginning to come to its end, perhaps you have seen a faint and distant analogy of our own time. We too have been living through centuries when God has been silent. Since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ his Son there have come no voices, no additional revelations beyond our New Testament. For years God has been silent, but there seem to be signs around us that this age is beginning to come to its end. I suppose that could have been said by any apostle—and some of them did say it. Paul, for instance, observed in his day that 'the mystery of lawlessness is already at work' (2 Thess 2:7). And if Paul saw features already beginning in his day that shall come to their full harvest at the end of the age, it is perhaps not surprising that we should see those features even more clearly marked, and tendencies in our modern societies beginning to gather momentum that shall inevitably come to their harvest at the end of this age.

We shall find practical encouragement, as well as warning and exhortation, by the example of these midwives and the other faithful people in Israel whom we shall meet. In our daily profession we may yet be called upon to stand against the introduction of principles that shall insidiously undermine not only the truth of our gospel, but people's faith in the basic goodness of nature—the basic belief that all life comes from God and must be respected as something that comes from its divine creator.

Here was an Egyptian monarch who was prepared to regard human life as something of secondary importance to the State, to political advantage and to economic consideration. The midwives opposed him and they did so on two grounds.

1. They were Israelites and they were not going to stand by and see their nation exterminated and all hope of future generations stifled.

2. It went against their professional principles as midwives. Theirs was the great task to be the guardians and promoters of the sanctities of physical life. They were not going to use their profession for the destruction of human life, so they opposed the pharaoh.

I wonder if they were the only two midwives in Israel. Learned and scholarly men have questioned whether these records can be true. They say there were thousands of people in Israel; surely they would have needed more than two midwives? Scripture doesn't say there were only two; there could have been more. It singles out these two perhaps because they were shining examples that all the other midwives followed. I hope it was that way, don't you? I hope none of the other midwives gave in to Pharaoh. Had I been a midwife I might have found my knees quaking and been tempted to all sorts of rationalisations. Some of them could have been afraid that if they opposed Pharaoh they might have lost their jobs. Scripture records that when these midwives stood fast by their duty and their faith in God to guard the sacredness of life, God intervened and he made them houses! God intervened to look after them, to maintain their jobs, give them a roof over their heads and enough money to buy their daily bread. They were doing a very risky thing in opposing Pharaoh; they could have lost their jobs, and their necks as well.

The sanctity of life

Present day consultant doctors and surgeons must face equally demanding decisions. They may not get posts that otherwise they would get if, for conscience towards God and in opposition to certain features of the Health Service, they refuse to perform operations that they regard as unethical. These good midwives could have excused themselves by saying, 'It's not for us humble midwives to take decisions like this. This is government policy and we don't form government policy. If we carry out what they say God won't blame us, he'll blame the government.' Thank God that those two midwives, at least, didn't argue that way round. If the government bade them to do something that went against their conscience and the law of God, then they took the stand that later on the apostles took when they said, 'Judge you whether we should obey man rather than God, or God rather than man' (see Acts 4:18–19).

And they could have rationalised it. I am not now giving vent to imagination, but I heard a debate on the radio during the summer. It didn't exactly go like this, but it went something after this manner. 'Consider these darling little infants, every infant has got a right to be wanted in this world, but if some poor little infant comes into this world and it's not wanted then it would be better to eliminate him.' What a curious run of logic! You've a right to be wanted, but don't come if you're not wanted—how's that for a right to be wanted!

Then they could have argued, 'This is a wicked world and these pharaohs are more likely to get worse than better. Fancy bringing a little infant into this world to face all this trouble! Wouldn't it be better to snuff its little life out and save it a lot of trouble?' That might have salved their conscience.

Praise God, they didn't. They were midwives with tremendous responsibilities, but they didn't add to them the responsibilities of almighty God himself, to decide when a life is worth living. How would you measure it anyway? For Israel there was the possibility of life itself and, as now we know, the possibility of redemption and Canaan lying ahead. Even if Pharaoh didn't want them, who gave it to the midwives to decide whether life was worth living? When we think of the eternal potentialities that are around and within every human

being, we might be well advised not to start taking over the divine responsibility of deciding whether a life is worth living or not.

So you can see that the opening verses of this ancient book introduce us to problems that are pressing upon us still in our age and will press more as in our turn we come toward the end of a period of human history. In our day and age we are witnessing a sad and serious decline in the regard that is paid to the sanctity and sacredness of human life. I'm conscious that I speak as a layman of course, and please let me say explicitly that I am not now referring to *therapeutic abortion*. Christian doctors, taking their grave decisions responsibly in the fear of God and the love of their fellow men and women, come to different opinions on that topic and I am not the one to decide the matter for them.

But *abortion on demand* is another thing altogether from therapeutic abortion. What would worry me as a layman is that the arguments that are frequently put forward in favour of abortion on demand are arguments that could equally well, with the exact same cogency, be applied to the elimination of the old and the elderly. Say, for instance, here is a poor woman and if she gives birth to this child it will lead her to much physical suffering and distress in the family. They are hard put already to make ends meet and the woman has burdens enough without another child. Even I as a bachelor can feel sympathy going through my heart for a woman in that situation. And they who are privileged to be more than bachelors, I dare say feel even more genuine sympathy. But, before we let that sympathy be our final arbiter, ought we not to consider how that same kind of consideration would get rid of granddad as well? They haven't anywhere else to put the poor old boy so he is living with his married daughter. He's beginning to lose his memory and is a bit dodderly. Everybody knows that, when you've mustered everything that compassion can say, elderly granddaddies can sometimes be a source of trial in a home. If he goes on like this he'll be a burden to his daughter, hard-pressed mother that she is, and her health may well suffer. What is the answer then—to eliminate grandfather? I repeat, allowing that kind of compassion to be our final arbiter could lead us at the other end of life to very serious actions. In days gone by they would have been called *crimes*—but what shall we call them now?

Bigger problems

It is not merely in this restricted field at the beginning and end of life that presently we have to face problems on a big scale. Give our scientists and biologists a few more years to do their experiments, to make further advances if they can in biological engineering, and we may yet be faced with even bigger problems to decide. I admit to you I can only speculate here, but how far do you judge that God will allow men to go towards cracking the code that spells *life*? I know some seriously take the view that God will never let man discover what the secret code of life is; he will never be able to discover that combination of genes and chromosomes that eventually, when put in the right combination, spell life. You may well be right; God may never allow men to find that secret. I wouldn't myself wish to be one hundred per cent dogmatic.

I read in the book of Revelation that when at last the beast, the man of sin, shall come, his religious lieutenant, the false prophet, shall be able to do astounding miracles. With the

aid of supernatural and sinister and satanic power he shall come with all deceivable lying wonders. He shall 'call down fire from heaven,' says the book of the Revelation (13:13), a sign that in the ancient world was performed by Elijah as a clear and indisputable sign of divine power. In the final days of this age it will be the deceit wielded by the man of sin, when he shall counterfeit what used to be an indubitable and uncontroversial sign of God's power. He shall be 'allowed to give breath to the image' (v. 15) (I'll leave you to work out what that may mean) in such fashion as the image shall talk and be able to point out and declare who among men secretly do not worship the beast. If in his divine wisdom God allows men to go further into the secrets of those combinations that spell human life, there will inevitably arise grave ethical and moral problems relating to the sanctity of life.

In the past, governments haven't always stopped short of tampering with human life. Hitler got it into his head that it would be a good thing to produce a super-human race by controlling genetics. But suppose the psychologists prevail (they don't seem too strong just at the moment, thank God), who would tell us that man is merely a machine—his brain is nothing more than a sophisticated machine—and therefore wrong human behaviour should not be dealt with any longer in moral terms but simply in physical terms. After all, when your car won't start in the morning, or stalls in the middle of a traffic jam, you don't take it along to a preacher or give it a moral sermon! You take your car and its malfunctioning engine to a garage because the thing is only a machine and you don't ask its pardon or enquire whether it would like it done this way! You just twist the necessary screws and repair the odd valve. But in a society that has become utterly godless, what if one of these days there prevails the idea that man is merely a machine and evil behaviour is merely a malfunction of the machine? Then the proponents of that view will tell us that the way to cure wrong human behaviour is simply to get working on the mechanics of the brain by computers and electrodes, electric shocks and goodness knows what else; for according to this view man is nothing but a machine.

May God be thanked for all those advances in modern science that help us to understand those parts of our make-up that can be suitably dealt with as machines. But one of these days we may have to stand even more firmly and vigorously, and even more against the mounting tides of public opinion, for the fact that man is not just a machine. Coming from God, there is an element in human life that is related to God and made in the image of God. It is thereby sacred and eternally sacred. There is a spiritual dimension about man that, if we lose it, we have lost all that is worthwhile in man.

This kind of battle, I repeat, is liable to be fought out not so much in church, but in our daily professions of medicine and nursery school and university. It is not only what people do when the days are easy, it is what they do when there arises in politics a figure who is brilliant in his genius and almost absolute in his power, but half maniac as well.

Under the ancient Romans there were multitudes of highly intelligent men; Rome had not come to be mistress of the ancient world by being led by termites. But when there rose up figures like Tiberius and Nero, distorted freaks of personality, and by the changing circumstances of politics these men got virtually absolute power in their hands and committed the most dastardly of crimes against humanity, the professional men and the politicians grovelled at their feet, apart from certain notable exceptions. Germany was a

leading nation in Europe. Her poets and artists, her professional men of all sorts were leaders of world thought. They were not all dragons incarnate. But it is not what they did when they lived in fair days; it is what they did when they came under the power of Hitler and they grovelled.

These modern and ancient lessons warn us to think hard and think through our basic human values before God. When days are easy, little by little standards are whittled away until we find ourselves powerless to resist, then some turn of politics brings in a government that is totally atheistic and materialistic in its outlook and begins to press us to conform to their policy.

The initiative of Moses' parents

It wasn't only the midwives that earned themselves honourable mention. We come next to the story of Moses' parents. When Moses was born we are told that his mother saw that he was 'a goodly child.' Not that, perhaps you might think, there is anything remarkable in the statement, and we can't find fault with the mother who thinks all children are lovely but there never was a child like her child! When we've done with natural affection and some of the sentiments that come with it, it remains a perfectly natural reaction on the part of a mother.

Take any newborn child and it is literally true there never was a child like that child. That little personality is unique. The God that never created two blades of grass alike or two snowflakes alike creates with every child a unique personality, a something whose value is infinite and incomparable, whose potential beggars description. Made in the image of God, if redeemed here is a personality that shall one day be a prince or princess and adorn the heavenly court of its Creator eternally. That instinct that Moses' mother had over that infant child is not a mockery; it is not exaggerated. This is the beginning of a process that, please God, will grow into something even bigger; an ordinary mother's maternal instinct and love for her child that one day will develop into a care for his soul and spirit. The mother of someone who one day shall be conformed to the image of Christ and made all glorious eternally.

Moses' mother wasn't giving up that value. She would risk her life, she would risk her everything for the child that God had given her and his potential. She goes down in the New Testament as one of the heroines of faith because she saw in nature not something merely to be pleased and proud of, but she saw in that child a potential for God and dared to believe and stake her faith in God for the future of that child. And as it turned out, for the future of her whole nation, for the coming of the Redeemer, for the solution of the problems of the world and in the introduction of the millennium itself.

I suppose it would be arrogant of any one of us to think that we had given birth to a Moses, but the humblest child carries nonetheless an eternal potential. May God write it on our hearts in days when human life is cheap, in days when the average child by the time he's grown up has seen literally thousands of murders performed on a television screen, when in the name of pleasure and convenience human life becomes degraded and devalued. May God write on our hearts the basic values inherent in physical life, in parenthood and in the child.

The compassion of Pharaoh's daughter

And then not only the medics and the mothers; but thank God the teachers come in for their commendation. Pharaoh's daughter was moved with compassion for the child and his weeping. You gentlemen may think that's mere sob-stuff! All right, it could be a little bit sentimental, couldn't it? I like it better than I like the power lust of the politicians, I must say! If we're going to be guided by instinct, I think I would prefer to be guided by the instincts of the compassion of a woman for a child than by some great world politician whose instincts are sheer power lust. So when Pharaoh's daughter saw the child she took him into her home and her own establishment. Here was a child who was privileged to have an older sister looking on and guarding him. She suggested a bright idea to her Imperial Princess that the child would need a nursemaid and a teacher for his infant years and Moses' mother was secured and acted in those roles.

It is an honourable profession, if I may forget all modesty for a moment and speak—I who have the easier end of that particular profession. But teaching is an honourable profession indeed, and none more important than those who labour in those early days when the voice of teacher is for the child next to the voice of God—the fact that teacher said it is practically the last court of appeal on earth or heaven! It is a tremendously important profession, whether it is a mother with the child at her knee, or the infant school teacher, or in technical college, high school, or university, or wherever. To teach the sane, healthy things of life and literature and trade—not forever to be evangelising overtly and preaching John 3:16, but teaching in faith of God on that basic axiom that this world is God's world. Teaching the young minds that if there is anything lovely, truthful and things of good report, to think on these things and not on some of the filth that they are frequently served up. Teaching by example and sometimes by lip, that life makes no sense ultimately unless it is lived in faith of the Creator.

What do you think Moses' mother taught the young and growing boy, if it wasn't stories of their past; the great acts of God's redemption with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the promises that the faithful in Israel had nurtured and kept these passing centuries, in spite of the long silence of God? Doubtless in those early years the foundations were built for what was to be such a spectacular career for this man of God.

The necessity of redemption

As we close our study we must now observe that, noble as the stands of the midwives, the mother and the teacher-mother were, all these things put together would not have sufficed to redeem Israel. The trouble went far too deep. We must now turn to considerations that tell us quite plainly that if Israel is ever to be redeemed from this situation, then it shall not come apart from the personal intervention of God as Redeemer. There is no ultimate redemption in medicine, family life, education, politics, art or literature. We may stand as best we can for healthy standards at that level of ordinary life, and God help us so to do; but we must face the fact that redemption will not come that way and the millennium will not come that way. Man's problems shall not be solved merely by a better Health Service or a better Education Service, or by improving the lot of the infant in the nursery school, or the parents discharging their responsibilities better. The basic malaise of the human heart is a

deeper and more serious thing and to be delivered from it will mean nothing less than the redemption of God.

Consider now Moses as he has grown to be a man. He comes out one day from the palace with his love of his fellow countrymen and sees an Egyptian smiting an Israelite. His blood runs to his head and to his heart and he smites the Egyptian, thinking by sheer brute force to cure the problem. Stand up for the oppressed, use force if need be. He thought that would be enough to cure the world's problems. But he was in for a shattering disillusionment, for when he went out the next day he saw not an Israelite and Egyptian fighting but two Israelites fighting together. When he tried to calm them and sort out their differences, they both rounded on him and told him to go away. He found that day that not only are the oppressors wicked, but the oppressed are wicked too. Not only is the tyrannical overlord a sinner and selfish at heart, but the oppressed underdog is a sinner and selfish at heart. Not only was the pagan Egyptian a selfish, aggressive man, he found that the Israelite who professed faith in God was, at heart, a fallen, selfish and aggressive man. Mere force of arms and guerrilla warfare and paying out money to activist groups wouldn't cure the trouble then, and it won't cure it now.

Moses runs away from Egypt

Moses went off disillusioned into the wilderness. From the palace he came to the desert and from being a prince he came to be a shepherd. Even in the desert among those naturally simple folk, who weren't caught up in the rat-race of the modern world with all its pyramids and chariots and pharaohs and things, he found the very same thing. The women shepherdesses came to the well to get their water and the shepherd-men came and drove them away (they had a bigger Union, the shepherd-men). There was a demarcation dispute and the shepherd men had got together to stand up for their rights. Of course they were interested in the new social order, as long they got the biggest lot of the water first! I'm not quite sure that, having started out championing the cause of the underdog, they were really concerned with the weaker Union (I mean, women!), for the human heart is basically selfish, be it found here or there, right or left, capitalist or communist. It's a sorry tangled old world and political, economic and social engineering won't save it. There must have been many a day when Moses despaired and saw no future in anything, such a tangled world it was.

With such gloomy thoughts in his mind he was doing a shepherd's job. You've got to go on living and if you have a wife and family you've got to maintain them. Looking at all those thorn bushes, I wonder did he mutter through his beard, 'Once upon a time I used to be woken up by my Egyptian servants, now I get my own breakfast amidst these fleas in the wilderness and these stinking sheep. And look at these thorn bushes! This isn't Egypt and it isn't Eden either. Eden! Those stories my mum told me, of the time when the earth was beautiful and the trees were lovely and the fruit was luscious and God came down in the cool of the day and walked with men. Was it true, or was that merely an imaginary fairy tale concocted to comfort the slaves at their burdens in Egypt? Not now the fruit trees, but a barren wilderness with scratchy tangled thorn bushes. That old thorn bush, the very curse of God seemed to be on it. It must have spoken volumes to Moses about his own people; the

tangled quarrel there between his own brethren, the tangle of politics in Egypt and then the tangle of his own life. Where would it all end and what hope was there for it?

The burning bush

Presently he saw something. 'I thought I saw a flame there,' said he. 'Yes so it is, that bush is on fire. Well, so what if an old thorn bush is on fire? The end of thorns is to be burned, so we are told. Good riddance to bad rubbish.'

He was about to turn aside and go on when he noticed that the bush was burning but the bush was 'not consumed', and he went near to find the secret of why this scratchy old thorn bush, cursed of God, continued to burn. God had come down and was in the bush. What a marvellous thing! Man's sin had indeed made a desert and a thorn bush of what God had planted as a garden and ruined it all; why then didn't God scrap it? Why didn't he burn up the thorn bush, the desert and the planet and have done with this sorry phenomenon of human kind? But the God who made it is not to be so easily defeated as to give up now and God came down to meet with Moses. He isn't standing outside the thorn bush, criticizing it for not being an oak tree or an apple tree—God is in the bush and that's why it is not consumed. And that day Moses had a vision of God that started him on his spiritual pilgrimage. He had to wait to see this glory. First he had to see what a tangled, disillusioning thing life can be, then he turned to see God in the burning bush, guaranteeing a future for Israel forever.

Later Moses was to have more exalted visions of God. Visions of the glory of God on Mount Sinai in splendour, in the tabernacle in glory, but this was where it started—this was the thing that began Moses on his pilgrimage. And it is a similar sight that will start us on our pilgrimage—a pilgrimage that will give us hope even in this world, fallen and corrupt as it is. It will give us hope for a future for this world and for a future long after this world is done.

Life's thorn bushes

Do I speak to somebody who has discovered the thorn bushes of life? You had your ideas of what life could be. Is it now the unreasonableness of your children, the spitefulness of some you have loved dearly, the cruelty and perversity of men in industry? Be it what it will, it has disillusioned you. Well, perhaps that's the place where God will meet with you in your disillusionment, to begin for you a pilgrimage to a fairer world and a glorious inheritance that shall never fade.

Have you not seen his glory? In your mind's eye once more and in a spirit of worship, with the shoes off your feet, come with me to the most barren place this world has ever known, or shall know—Calvary. See a human figure spiked on a cross, torn with thorns and mutilated by men. Their envy, ambition, power-lust, greed, spite and sadism have worked until they have wrecked that human form and made it scarcely recognizable as human. O the poverty, the disillusionment of Calvary! Is there any hope?

Ah, see it again! See the crown of thorns and the emblem of a curse. But why wasn't he consumed? And the answer comes back, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing unto them their trespasses.' Here we find the dawn of heaven, while

upon the cross we gaze.’⁵ Here we find hope that ‘creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom 8:21). Here I find hope, not for the tangle that is this world and my contemporaries merely; here I find hope for that thorn bush of my own life. My tangled, gnarled, broken personality, for which there would be no hope were it not for a God who is faithful to what he has created. Here I find hope that through Christ, who bore my curse, one day I too shall be fully and finally delivered and fashioned to the image of God’s Son. That thorn bush is not the end of the journey, but it is the beginning that guarantees the end.

⁵ George C. Stebbins (1846–1945), ‘Sweet the moments, rich in blessing’.

[The Lord in the midst of the Earth](#)

Readings: Exodus 3:11–15.

New Testament commentary on these verses: John 17:6–8, 20–26.

Revelation 11:8 (taken completely out of context, but for a point explained in the talk).

I dare say that many of us have noticed that this world of ours is becoming progressively smaller. There was once a time when the journey from Cullybackey to Belfast was a matter of some hours, if not a whole day; now you can do it in a half hour or so. Days were when the journey from Belfast to London was a matter of a week or more; now you can do it in fifty minutes. Years ago the journey from London to New York was a matter of months and it was frequently doubtful whether you ever arrived or not. Now not only does Concorde land in New York a very few hours after it takes off, but Sputniks and astronauts go round the world and complete the circuit of our whole little planet in a few minutes at the most. And so our world is shrinking and becoming a very small place. Sometimes it is difficult to find enough elbowroom and the psychologists say that we are all therefore getting more aggressive.

It's not only geographically that the world is becoming a smaller place. You will notice that your agnostic and atheist friends have made for themselves this planet of ours an exceedingly small place. As far as human beings are concerned, they say that our life here is all there is, they deny to us any future, any 'inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet 1:4), when our journey on this planet is done. They totally deny it and thus shrivel life to the meagre space of some seventy years. As if that were not small enough, they then tell us that there is no vertical dimension to life even while we are here; our world and our little universe is a closed shop. There is no eternal God out there with whom we can have a relationship even in this life, no God out there who may give to our seventy years a quality of eternity as we live in fellowship with him. They say that it's all imagination to be dismissed with the fairy stories that we learned in the nursery. Life has no future beyond this planet and no eternal dimension here and now. Believing this they make life for themselves an exceedingly small thing.

Nor is it only agnostics and atheists that manage to live as though there were no God out there; many a man and woman who professes vaguely to believe in the Creator, nevertheless goes about his or her daily business as though there is no God, and lives his or her life through this world as though this world is everything. If you want to give a name to that attitude it is what the Bible calls *worldliness*. If you ask for an illustration of what

worldliness is you will find none better than what we find here in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus.

How Egypt becomes symbolic of the world

You will have observed that the last verses we read from the Old Testament point out that the ancient nation of the Egyptians under their pharaohs adopted a certain spiritual attitude. Therefore, when the writer of the Revelation comes to talk about Jerusalem City in Palestine, 'the great city where their Lord was crucified' (11:8), he says that, though it is called *Jerusalem*, spiritually speaking it had become no better than a veritable Sodom and a veritable Egypt. Once upon a time Jerusalem was the city of God's king, in the land of Israel amongst the Israelites themselves.

I suppose all of us are aware of what *Sodom* stands for, and if I were to call any modern city in this world a Sodom you would know exactly what I meant. But perhaps if I were to call Belfast an *Egypt* you wouldn't immediately know exactly what I meant. Let us ponder therefore some of the features of this ancient Egypt that turned it, for the people of God, into a veritable prison house of slavery. As we enquire into that, we find that Egypt becomes a vivid, practical picture of what the New Testament will mean when it talks about *the world* in its pejorative sense.

In Moses' day Pharaoh ruled in Egypt apparently with a rod of iron; certainly he ruled the Israelites in Egypt with a rod of iron. This was the pharaoh who tried to make Israel forget her past—her glorious past of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He tried to make Israel disbelieve that there was any future apart from Egypt. When Moses began to preach to his contemporaries that there was an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, Pharaoh openly laughed at him.

'O Moses,' he said, 'when will you grow up? Haven't you got beyond your nursery stage yet? To go and tell the people that there's some wonderful fairyland away out across the blue, you're just distracting the Israelites from the realities of life. Holding up before them visions of some land flowing with milk and honey out there in the beyond is nonsense, Moses! All there is for these Israelites is this Egypt; these bricks and stones, these kilns and treasure cities. That's all there is; don't go upsetting those people and making them restless by preaching pie in the sky or an inheritance in Canaan. Egypt is all there is.'

Pharaoh was a ruler who was determined to make Egypt, that tiny little place, nothing else for Israel but sleeping and working, and working and eating and sleeping and working—and that's all. He was a prince who, in order to do that, was prepared to stand up and defy almighty God, saying, 'Who is Jehovah? I don't know Jehovah, nor do I care about Jehovah. If there is a Jehovah let him keep his fingers out of my Egypt. I rule here!'

The prince of this world

As we listen to that man, his defiance of God and his treatment of God's people, we shall be dull indeed if we do not see in him a prototype of that other far more sinister figure of whom our blessed Lord spoke. He spoke of a certain sinister power that he called 'the ruler of this world,' nor did he refrain from admitting that he was its prince (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The rest of the New Testament adds to our Lord's testimony; the Apostle Paul

indicates that the present race of men and women, unregenerate and without God, live their lives subject to the domination of 'the prince of the power of the air' (Eph 2:2).

It is none other than his satanic majesty who, having introduced rebellion against the Creator into this planet and into the race of men, is keen to keep the power over men within his own hand. They must be kept from acknowledging the reality of *a God out there*. Satan wants men and women to think that this little planet is all there is for them and there is no God beyond the universe—no God who one day can poke a finger into our affairs. It is Satan that sets the current of thought, fashions and opinion and peddles his ideas of atheistic evolution—all to persuade men that there is no God out there. This universe is a thing of chance; as far as man is concerned this little planet and its environment is a closed shop, a self-contained flat into which man may retire and shut the door. There is no God who can come in and interfere.

Nor does he content himself with infiltrating the minds of the unregenerate. Constantly and without remission he attacks the hearts of those who know God. He is forever doing his favourite trick of taking this world and all its lovely things—all the good gifts that God himself has given to us so that we might use them and enjoy them—and instead of letting them bring our hearts nearer to God he uses those lovely gifts to take our hearts away from him, to make us forget God and live as though there were no God.

What a sad thing worldliness is

God is no miser; he richly provides us with everything to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17). But the multitude of his mental, physical and aesthetic gifts were meant to lead us closer to him, so that when this physical, temporary life is done—indeed when the planet itself has long since burned up to nothing—we may have formed a fellowship with God that shall go on living and existing and enrich the eternal ages of heaven. Satan takes those gifts and, perverting them from their purpose, uses them to attract our hearts away from God.

Our Lord sums it up in the parable that he spoke (Matt 21:33–41). It applied originally to Israel, but may well be applied to us all. He likened Israel and the nation to a vineyard that a man created and let out to tenants. They were to work in it and enjoy its fruits, but in due season they were to acknowledge the owner. When he sent for his tribute and rent they were to give to him the fruits of his vineyard, but they got it into their heads that they would like the vineyard for themselves. They wanted to own it and resented the notion that every now and then the owner might send his men to collect the produce. Therefore, when they saw the owner's agent coming down the road to get the produce, they ran out and seized him and beat him and sent him away empty. Presently, as they skulked behind their greenhouses, they saw the very son and heir coming down the road and they said, 'This is the heir, let's kill him! We've only got to kill him and the whole vineyard will be ours to be free forever of any interference from the outside.' And so they did. They took the son and heir and killed him and flung him out of the vineyard, muttering under their breath, 'And now forever the vineyard is ours.'

It actually happened in Jerusalem city as Pilate and Herod and the Jews took counsel together. Seeing the Son of God, the Creator, they took hold of him and slew him and cast him out of the world. They hung him on a cross between heaven and earth, thinking that if

only they slew him the 'vineyard' would be theirs. Hence, spiritually speaking, in the New Testament Jerusalem city is called *Egypt*. Those who had been out of Egypt for many centuries, supposedly redeemed by the Passover Lamb and singing the praises of God in his temple, had so slipped in heart that they had returned to the old Egyptian attitude, '*Hands off, God! We want the place for ourselves.*'

In Egypt it was an easy attitude to slip into. We are told that the Egyptian economy depended on the Nile and as far as the Egyptians knew it was independent of the rain. It flooded every year and the Nile was the secret of the land's fertility and therefore its wealth. It seemed to them that Egypt was self-contained and it didn't even depend on the rain from outer space, up in the clouds. The Egyptians had their gods—they worshipped the Nile and this god and that god and the other god. But when it came to the absolute God, the Creator of all things—Jehovah, the great I AM—the Egyptians dismissed him, taking no notice whatsoever. Egypt therefore stands as a vivid picture of what worldliness is.

How did God deliver his people from Egypt?

Then how should God deliver his people—how would redemption ever begin? You will immediately notice what God didn't do. He didn't first of all bring his plagues upon Egypt, kill all the Egyptians, break the fetters of the Israelites and let them run free. That certainly might have given Israel their physical freedom, but it would have done very little to break the slavery of their hearts and correct that vain attitude common to all men that is called *worldliness*. If ever Israel were to be delivered, not only from Egypt physically but from Egypt spiritually, it would have to be by something deeper than mere physical judgment on Egypt.

When God began to break that bondage, first of all he appeared personally to Moses his servant and filled Moses' heart and vision with the glory of the reality of almighty God. Secondly, he sent Moses as the great apostle come from God to Israel with the glorious message that God had sent him to set the people free and bring them to their great inheritance.

Moses had the sense to ask, 'But when I go to these people perhaps they won't believe me. If I go along and say to them, "The God of your fathers has appeared to me and he has come down to deliver you!" — what if they won't believe me?'

'Then,' said God to Moses, 'you will tell them my name. By telling them my name and making me known to them, you will provoke in their hearts the faith to trust you. As they learn to trust you they will learn to trust me; believing in me they will believe in you and together we shall bring them out. First you must go and provoke in them a profound faith in you and in me, and in my name.'

A greater bondage

Those of us who know our New Testament cannot help perceiving in that situation an early prototype of that greater reality, the strategy of God for our redemption. The redemption of Israel out of Egypt was but a primary run-through, an elementary lesson. There remains the great problem of the redemption of the world, the redemption of mankind, not from bondage to a pharaoh but from bondage to the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4) and all his

infernal designs. And how should it be done—how should I be delivered from the slave mentality of thinking that this world is all there is?

It was done this way. Down into our world came our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, telling us that he had been sent from God, 'I came from the Father and have come into the world' (John 16:28). On that very last occasion when he stood to say his farewell words before he went to the cross, he called his apostles around him and made it abundantly clear what lay at the heart of all he had been saying.

'I will no longer speak in parables to you, I will tell you plainly—mark it well. My significance as Jesus Christ of Bethlehem is that I have come from the Father. As you see me stand here with my two feet on your planet, do you believe that I did not begin in that manger where Mary bore me, but that I am the pre-existent Son of God and one with God? I have come down from that world, sent by the Father into your world. Do you believe it, gentlemen? I have come from God and presently I shall go back to the Father. You will see me impaled on a cross and your hearts shall have sorrow. But then you will have joy, exceeding joy that no one will take from you—I shall rise again and return to the Father. Do you believe there is another world for anybody to come from, or for anybody to go to? Do you believe that I am the Apostle of God sent from the Father into this world to bring you not only forgiveness of sins as the great Passover Lamb, but to lead you back to that glorious inheritance from which I came?'

Still today that is the primary message that Jesus Christ brings us. He will talk to us later on about the forgiveness of our sins, but there is no point in having forgiveness if this world is all there is.

God's message to Israel through Moses

Therefore, God's answer to Moses' first question was, 'Go to the Israelites and tell them I've sent you. Get them to believe that you have met the living God face to face and that you've come from him.'

Moses was the apostle of their faith—a prototype of our blessed Lord, the great apostle of our faith. 'But then,' said Moses, 'what shall I say to them in their grinding poverty and in the torture of their slavery? Thin and emaciated, kicked and beaten till they feel that this is an unjust world, won't they say that all talk of God and kindness and love is mere illusion and self-deception? Tales invented by grandmothers to comfort children when they're afraid of the dark, but no reality? How shall I get them to believe when they've got great shackles round their wrists and iron on their feet, when their days are hard and their nights are bitter? How shall I get them to believe there is a God who cares, who is interested in them and prepared to deliver them from slavery? When they say to me, "What is your God like and what is His name?"—what shall I say?'

How will God deliver his people from worldliness?

That was one of the uppermost parts of our Lord's own ministry. In prayer he addressed God in the hearing of his disciples before he went to the cross, giving account to the Father of what he had achieved in his life's ministry. Prominent in his ministry was this, 'Father, they have come to believe. What a triumph it is—these men that I've got around me, they've

come to believe. As I stand here looking forward through the centuries I can see them coming in their millions, men and women that are going to believe on you. I made your name known to them and *I will continue to make it known*, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

You see, my fellow-Christian, God has to do this with us all. If he is ever going to rescue us from worldliness of spirit and heart, then he's got to make himself known to us in such a way that his loveliness enraptures our soul, stirs our heart and provokes our faith until our eyes are open to see what God is really like.

Our trouble so often is that we've listened long to the slander of the prince of this world. He started it away back in Eden, suggesting to Eve that God was an old wet blanket, wanting to keep men down and spoil their enjoyment, forbidding this and that and making life difficult. The slander has spread its cancer even in our own breasts, hasn't it? There are days when we're prepared to stand and sing 'Hallelujah!' When skies are blue and circumstances are pleasing we're prepared to think there's a God up in heaven who loves us, and we praise him. But when things go wrong and disappointment and pain and bewilderment come our way, then how insistent is the devil's insinuation, 'Do you really believe there's a God who cares and a God who loves you? Wouldn't you be better advised to dismiss all dependence and faith in him and his character, go out like the world and try to make the best of this life and say, "Bother any idea of eternity, let me just live for myself and take what enjoyment I can out of this world"?'

If God is going to deliver us from worldliness, it will have to be as it was in his day. Jesus Christ, his Son and Apostle, coming alongside us and declaring the Father's name to us, until that name and all it stands for becomes surpassingly beautiful and indescribably attractive. Given the choice of this world on the one side and God on the other, we should seize God till we have learned to read everything in life, its blessings and its apparent sorrows, as the gifts of a God whose love we have dared to trust.

God making his name known

We shall consider Moses, first in his own personal experience, and then, as he becomes a picture to us of that greater than Moses, our blessed Lord. Follow with me for a moment as God makes his name known to Moses and to Israel.

First, Moses came to the Israelites charged to tell them that God was the God of their past. Pharaoh had made Egypt a tiny little place for the Israelites, pushing their noses to the grindstone hour after hour till they had little time to think of anything else. Now Moses came saying that he'd met God. He came to this race of slaves telling them a message, which if true was marvellous. It ran like this.

They hadn't always been slaves and their nation hadn't always been in Egypt. There was a God who loved them and long before they had come into Egypt—long before their parents and ancestors had come into the 'house of bondage'—God had been thinking of them, planning for them and speaking about them. He had foreknown them; he had foreseen their coming. In past centuries those Israelites had been so real to God that he had spoken to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about them. He had talked with enthusiasm of all his plans for the race that was now in Egypt. He had told Abraham how long their temporary stay should be,

how they should come out and what glorious things he would provide for them. The gospel message came through Moses that God had been thinking about them centuries ago and planning for them. He had foreknown them and fore-loved them, and was going to be faithful to his covenant.

The God of the past

That gospel is still being preached to us. Do we believe it? One of the things guaranteed to break the grip of worldliness upon our hearts, is to awake to the notion that God is the God of our past.

Long before you came into this world as an infant and were laid in a cradle, God had been thinking of you, talking of you, planning for you; it wasn't an accident that you came. It wasn't that you arrived in this planet by some accident and God scratched his divine head (if I may so speak, reverently) and said, 'Now what shall I do? I wasn't expecting him to come here and now I'm landed with him!' No! The divine Creator, who foresees and foreknows, had anticipated your coming and in Christ had chosen you before the foundation of the world. This temporary little world wasn't the beginning and neither shall it be the end. We are passengers through this temporary planet—*every mark of it is temporary*. But we come with plans of eternity behind us. It begins already to add dimension to life, as we discover the name of our God—the God of our past. He is the God who in that past made sundry covenants and declared that he will be faithful to them.

'I am the God of Abraham,' he said to Moses.

'Abraham—who is Abraham, and what about him?'

'Well, Moses, I made a covenant with him. Don't you know I covenanted with Abraham that in him and in his seed (KJV) all the world should be blessed? I covenanted with Abraham and his offspring that I would give him these vast territories for his possession.'

Doesn't that excite you? I hear some staid Christian say, 'Well yes, I would get excited if I were a Jew, but what on earth has Abraham got to do with me?' O my brothers and sisters, let me spell out the riches. If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to that promise. All those glorious promises made to Abraham and his seed in those far off days, God will keep them and honour and fulfil them to you.

Gentiles are fellow-heirs

We Gentiles were once afar off and 'strangers to the covenants of promise' (Eph 2:12), being without God and without Messiah we were without hope in the world. It's a sorry thing to be without hope, but as Gentiles we were, for God made no promise to Gentiles as such. He had made promises to Abraham and his offspring for glorious things lying in the future, but not to Gentiles. But now in Christ we who once were strangers and afar off have been brought near (v. 13). Gentiles along with Jews have been made into one and reconciled to the Father in Christ. So we are no more strangers but fellow citizens with those saints. We are of the same household, fellow-members of the body; Jew and Gentile being built together into that glorious temple that, when it is complete, should adorn eternity.

The God who came down to this planet and dined with Abraham outside his tent door on those rude and plain benches such as Abraham would have had—that God hasn't

forgotten Abraham and he hasn't forgotten me. I'm not to be regarded as some flotsam and jetsam on the river of time; I've come into this planet with God and his eternal plans behind me, 'even as he chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world' (Eph 1:4). I've come here by his deliberate forethought, so that I might be joined to Christ and in him proceed to God's great eternal future. *God is the God of my personal past.*

The God of the future

God talked to Moses and reminded him that he is not only the God of the past but the God of the future as well. 'I've come down to deliver them out of Egypt, but also *to take them to an inheritance.*' God is the God of the future, two ways round—it needs little explanation to see that God remains for us the God of our future inheritance.

Moses stood there amazed at the great terms of this gospel, scarcely daring to believe them. Feeling perhaps it was all a dream; an overheated imagination and craving for some certainty. Thinking to himself, 'How can I go and tell Pharaoh a message like that? He'd simply laugh me out of his court.'

'But Moses,' said God, 'I'm not merely the God of the nation's future, I'm the God of your personal future! Would you like a sign to prove that I am talking to you and I am with you, Moses? I'll give you a sign. When you have brought the Israelites out of Egypt, you shall all worship me precisely in this spot—on this mountain where we now stand.'

Did I hear you say that you didn't like that kind of sign? It's a curious sign to give anybody. How did that comfort Moses? When he was brought out of Egypt, he would worship God on this mountain! Why not give him a sign at once, some mighty miracle now in the desert that should convince Moses of God's power? If God is going to give Moses a sign, why give it to him in the future? It was because God wanted to impress upon Moses that he was the God of his future and Moses could believe in the future.

'You see,' says God to Moses, 'There are dark and difficult days ahead for you that shall challenge every ounce of your courage. As you stand here you are saying to yourself, "However shall I dare go into Pharaoh? What likelihood is there that I shall bring the nation out, and how can it be done?" You're shrinking from the future, wanting to return to your few smelly sheep and be safe away at the back of the desert. But, Moses, as I stand here at this moment talking to you, I can already see you as you will be—standing on this mountain, having brought the Israelites out of Egypt. It's as real to me as seeing you now is real!'

Have you got some difficult task facing you next week? Some exam, or difficult business problem to solve, something you feel like shirking? You would rather shrink back from it. You can't think how you're going through with it. My fellow Christian, dare to believe that God is the God of your personal future. He sees you not merely as you are now, but he sees you next week, next month, and where you will be a year from now. He sees it already, and he makes known to you his promise about the future so that you may dare to trust him and count upon that future. It is as real as your present and as real as your past. What a glorious salvation it is, to have a hope and to have a future. You dare to believe and to say, 'The God who has already led me thus far sees me as I shall be and I trust him and walk out into the

future that he has planned for me.' It begins to give us more elbowroom and open up this otherwise narrow little life. *God is the God of my personal future.*

The God of the present

'What shall I tell them your name is?' said Moses. 'Who are you? What are you really like in your heart? You've told us what you did in the past and what you said to Abraham, you've told us what you're going to do in the future, but tell me, God, what are you really like in your heart?' Have you ever asked that question?

We live in a thrilling universe. How beautiful it is on the surface and sometimes so ugly. I never did see much beauty in crocodiles, but perhaps daddy crocodile sees beauty in mummy crocodile! It's a mixed up world, isn't it? Some things are so beautiful and some so horrible.

It's a fascinating world. There's the beauty of a sunset and there's fear of the volcano and earthquake. There are those lovely little dogs and there are those horrible viruses.

It's an amazing world and it's terribly complicated. Let the scientists at it and they confuse and confound things that otherwise would be simple. They start talking to you about quarks and neutrons and protons and so on.

Tell me about the heart that lies behind it all! I'm prepared to trust its wisdom. It's obviously a bigger brain than I've got that lies behind this universe, but what about his heart? What's his heart like—what's he like himself?

The answer came back to Moses, 'Tell them that my name is I AM THAT I AM.' Eternal, unchanging, 'the same yesterday, today and forever.'

Universes may come and go, but God remains I AM THAT I AM. This little world upon which we stand is a temporary thing. Our bodies shall one day decay or be changed; but the God who invented and created us—the God whose idea we are—hear him tell us now what his heart is, what his character is, I AM THAT I AM! Did he love us yesterday? Then he loves us today and will love us tomorrow, for he never changes. Did he plan for us before the foundation of the world? The plans remain true today and they will remain constant tomorrow, for he never changes. Has he given you good gifts today? He'll give you good gifts again, for with him 'there is no variation or shadow due to change' (Jas 1:17). It's only in him that I shall find refuge in this impermanent world, something that is solid and eternal.

Did he love you yesterday? Yes, I am persuaded he loved you yesterday; for before the foundation of the world he had not only invented you but so loved you that he determined that even when you sinned he would not abandon you, but would provide a sacrifice for you that you might be forgiven. How shall I tell out its wonder?

A little child gets a toy. It's all gleaming and red, the clockwork inside goes wonderfully today and next week it breaks. So the child gets tired of it and the toy gets thrown into a cupboard and eventually out into the dustbin. A man gets his Ford car and a woman her Singer sewing machine, but eventually they're not good enough and not modern enough. He must have a Mercedes Benz and she must have—well I don't know what! We get tired of things, don't we? They become our toys and some people treat other people like that. They

use them when they can get advantage out of them, and when they cease to serve their purpose they throw them on the scrapheap.

What shall God do with me? I find myself in this little world that is so impermanent. I know that God created me but what will he do with me? Will he get tired of me? My clockwork is broken, the paint is worn off in places and the rust has got right through my machine! My personality is marked by sin and broken, what will God do with me? Will he get tired of me one day and sling me over the battlements of heaven on to the scrapheap of eternity? Back comes the answer from the mouth of God through Moses, 'Go and tell them, Moses—down there in that temporary world tell them what my name is—I AM THAT I AM. If I created them I shall remain loyal to them!'

You say to me, 'Does God love me like that?' Yes, indeed! It is no fairy story. He who planned and devised that there should be a Lamb tells me that, as far as God's counsels were concerned, the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world. He loved me once—enough to give his Son to die for me at Calvary—will he go on loving me like that? The God of Calvary in AD 29 (or whenever it was)—what's he like? The voice comes back, 'I AM THAT I AM and if I loved you when you were a sinner and I gave Christ for you when you were yet an enemy of mine, I shall go on loving you to the remotest bounds of eternity, for I AM THAT I AM.'

I look into the future and if I'm not mistaken there's a grave looming up. 'Death, what will you do to me when I close my eyes on this temporary planet and on my little years here? Will you lose me in some forgotten cupboard of the universe where God will forget about me?' And the voice comes back, now no longer through Moses but through God incarnate, that blessed apostle of our faith as he stood here in our world surrounded by its graves.

The Jews came to him and said, 'Are you greater than our Father Abraham? He's dead! Are you greater than the prophets? They're dead—and everybody around here is dead or dying. Are you greater than they?'

With the majesty of God he replied, 'Before Abraham was, I AM' (John 8:58). In that moment the grave gave way and the apostles could see right out and beyond.

Live for the great I AM and begin to see it. Form a relationship with the great I AM, it's like heaven, isn't it? It's like eternity begun. If he befriends you, that would be it always—he will never change. We've had human friends, God bless them, but sometimes they forgot us and sometimes they died and left us solitary. But if you form a relationship with this God, the relationship is eternal because he is unchanging. Death itself can't destroy it.

That is precisely what he offers us and this is his name. The great apostle of our faith stands before us and says, 'This is eternal life, [and I have the power to give it to you] that [you] know [him] the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [he has] sent' (see John 17:3). *God is the God of my personal present.*

Do you know God like that? He is the God of the past, the present and the future.

Signs given to Moses to prove to the Israelites and to Pharaoh the reality of God

Doubtless as Moses listened he found his heart thrilled to its core, but one of the virtues of Moses was that he never allowed himself to get carried away too far by flights of imagination or emotion. Presently he thought to himself, wonderful as this sounded, how should he convince the Israelites that it was true? 'If it's true it's wonderful. But when I come to them and tell them all this, it's likely,' says Moses to God, 'that they won't believe.'

'They're likely to say, "We've heard that kind of stuff before. Our mothers used to tell us that when we were kids. God was going to deliver us one day. They told us stories about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, ancient history stuff, but it never has happened. How can there be a God anyway, Moses? Man, use your eyes, look at these chains, look at our miserable hovels. Look at the injustice of Pharaoh! What's the good of your standing there and telling us there's a God? There's too much evil in the world for there to be a God.'"

'What shall I do to convince them?' says Moses. It's a fair enough question. So God says, 'I'll give you a sign or two, Moses.'

There is a lot of evil in the world and sooner or later we shall all have to make up our minds whether there is any God behind this world or not. The evidence will be of all sorts and kinds. We can't expect to find all of it in the Old Testament either, but we might as well make a beginning where Moses made a beginning.

'So you want some evidence,' says God. 'You want a few signs. What have you got in your hand Moses?'

'A rod.'

'Throw it down on the ground.'

Moses threw it on the ground and then leapt back in tremendous fright, for the rod that he imagined was a dead stick had turned into a serpent, a lethal, poisonous snake. He hadn't realized that he held anything potentially lethal in his hand, but the thing apparently had the power to turn into a snake. It might have poisoned him! God comforted the man's heart and said, 'Grab hold of it, Moses.' Moses grabbed hold of it and it turned back into a stick. That sufficed Moses for the moment.

Did I hear you say it wouldn't suffice you, because you're not quite sure whether it actually took place or not? If you're not a Christian that's a fair enough question! Tell me, what have you got in your hand or in your breast pocket? Is that a pencil I see? Well I should let go of it at once if I were you! Do you know that that pencil is potentially lethal? If they took that little snippet off the top and managed to prise the atom loose, it would blow you from here almost to eternity.

Do let me remind you that you live in a fantastically dangerous world. The marvel is how you've survived so far! We've already discovered that some atoms are unstable—you're best to keep away from them if you can. Windscale⁶ and such things frighten the life out of some people, but it has merely opened our eyes to the fact that this world is a potentially lethal place. How does it manage to keep going, I wonder. If it weren't for that

⁶ The Windscale Nuclear Reactor was part of the Sellafield complex in Cumbria, England, which is now a nuclear fuel reprocessing and decommissioning site.

stuff some miles above us that encircles our world, the cosmic rays would come through and fry us up, as the speedy ovens fry our beefsteaks these days with infrareds and ultra-violets and what have you—waves and particles coming in from outer space. What an incredibly dangerous world this is. What keeps it going?

‘Do you want another sign, Moses?’ says God. ‘Well, put your hand into your cloak.’ So Moses put his hand into his cloak and brings it out, and when it comes out it’s as white as snow. He’s got leprosy! Moses didn’t know that the cells in his hand had the power to turn into such corrupt nonsense before. Well he learns it now. What have you got in your hand? Put your hand in your jacket. Do you know there are millions of cells in your body that are marvellous? How do they manage to keep together? One of these days something could happen. A virus could get in and when it’s got in and made a mess of that cell, the cell itself has got a thing inside that will eat up the mess, and that’s the end of that cell. It is a fantastic arrangement! How do those two tiny cells that we get from our parents come together and eventually form a living person? How do they know to do it and how do they manage to stay together for the seventy years or so that we need them?

‘And if they don’t believe that,’ says God, ‘I tell you what you could do, Moses. You could take your staff and haul a few drops of water out of the Nile and put them on the land.’ So Moses did that, and presently the waters of the Nile on the land turned into blood.

Evidence that points us to God

I don’t know what the conservationists would have said about it! It’s an interesting thing to ponder. We do depend on the water supply and some of the pundits in these islands are getting a little bit worried whether eventually there will be enough water to go round and they get fearfully worried about the possibilities of pollution. What keeps the whole thing from not getting polluted anyway?

How did it happen that this planet we call *earth* goes wobbling around in space, when space is absolutely lethal? Poke your nose out of the front door of this world a few miles up there and unless you’re clad in all sorts of mysterious gear you’ll perish at once. We live in a world that is utterly hostile. How do you suppose it has become stable enough for us to live on it and the cells of our body keep together, stable enough for us to exist, and matter around us keeps itself stable enough not to disintegrate? Are you going to tell me that it’s all by chance? Well, if that’s what you believe, I shall have to congratulate you on the strength of your faith, for there isn’t anything you wouldn’t believe!

I have an agnostic friend, a colleague of mine, and when I sit down with him at lunch he delights to pull my Christian leg. Sooner or later he will bring the conversation around to my faith in God and in Christ. He professes to believe there is no God, but even he said to me one day, ‘You know, Gooding, the thing that sometimes makes me think—if anything was going to make me think— is what I find happening every Springtime.’ Not only is this world beautiful, but how staggeringly beautiful it is. It’s got its ugly things, but if the whole thing is simply by chance how does it manage to be so staggeringly beautiful? Secondly, how does it manage to be so staggeringly beautiful so regularly? Every Springtime!

When we begin to open our adult eyes to see the wonder of our planet as it goes around in space trying to follow the sun, we come to realize on the one side how perilously

dangerous the whole business is. Then the sense of the marvel that it's here at all and it works, that it is so incredibly complicated and so fantastically beautiful, would speak to our hearts that behind it all is a mind that designed it and designed us on it. God keeps it together so that it might be a stepping stone for us, his creatures, to become his children and journey to his heaven.

God can use us with our disabilities

Finally, as Moses thought about it and prepared himself to go to Pharaoh and preach the message, once more he felt he was too weak to go. Said Moses to God, 'This is all very nice, but I am a poor speaker. I wouldn't know what to say, my words would stumble because I can't speak very well. You know I have a disability' (see Exod 6:12, 30).

Said God to Moses, 'I'm the God of your disability as well. Who made man's mouth? Who made the blind and the mute?'

We are not to suppose that God directly makes people deaf or mute or blind—for a multitude of thousands of causes lie in between the original creation and what happens to each individual born. But you know, in the last analysis, nothing happens but what God permits. Have you got some disability that nags you and chains you and frustrates you, and you feel there can't be a God who allowed such a major disability in your life? You feel it frustrates the lifework that you could have done and it is all so unfair. Daren't you believe that behind that disability is God himself? You say, 'But how can I believe that God would allow such a thing to happen to me?' Well, friend, I know it's hard, but it's harder not to. For if it isn't God behind it, then it's a freak of chance and it's meaningless.

But if there is a God who has permitted your disability, as he permitted Moses' disability; he is a God big enough to take you—disability and all—and use you significantly now in this life. He can use even that disability to be a means in his hand of preparing you for greater glory.

'It's hard to believe that!' you say. My friend, it's desperately hard. It depends what you think of God, doesn't it? If it's true that he loved you enough to give Christ to die for you, then he loved you like that when he allowed that disability to overtake you. Though you cannot understand it, if you know his love and you dare to trust his wisdom, rest assured that the God of your past, the God of your future, the God of your present—God your Creator and Redeemer—is the God ultimately behind that disability and he can turn it to your blessing now and to your greater glory and enjoyment hereafter.

Vessels of Wrath and of Mercy

Readings: Exodus 4:18–23; 8:10, 22; 9:13–16, 2.

New Testament commentary: Romans 9:14–24.

On our last two occasions we have lingered long with Moses standing at the burning bush, there to behold the glory of God and to hear God proclaim his name. The hearing and recital of that glorious and gracious name have provoked our hearts to worship.

We were watching God, after all, in a thorn bush and among the Israelites thorns became metaphors for iniquitous and difficult men. In Jotham's parable, recorded in Judges 9, Jotham speaks of the trees going to make for themselves a king. They invited the vine and the olive to come and be king over them and both those lovely trees refused. Then they invited the thorn bush, the bramble, to come and be king, and with alacrity the thorn bush consented and laid down his terms. 'Let them all submit to me, and if they do not submit to me then let fire come out of the thorn bush and devour the cedars of Lebanon.' That was always the thorn bush's evaluation of itself; nasty, tearing, cribbed, tortured. It would gladly destroy the majestic cedars of Lebanon and take a pride in destroying all that is noble, all that is high and gracious, in expression of its own nasty, gnarled and tearing character. I have to add, for honesty's sake, that when Jotham was talking about thorn bushes he was, in fact, describing some of his own politicians!

And then you will remember King David, coming to the end of his long life of attempted government of the nation of Israel. From bitter experience he tells us that there are some men in this world and they are like thorns—destined to be cast away and burned. Then David adds some advice—if you go near them, handle them with a rod of iron and keep your distance, for if you don't they will tear you and hurt you. Be careful how you come near them. As he spoke he was thinking back over many trying and difficult years to characters like Joab who had torn David and left indelible wounds.

The glory of God's grace

Here we have seen God himself entering into a thorn bush—a symbol, a prototype of what happened at Calvary—and read in it the indescribable grace, tolerance and forbearance of God. When man's sin had turned God's world into a desert of thorn bushes God did not proceed to consume this world in his judgment, he came down amongst men—down amongst the thorns. Caiaphas tore him and Annas scratched him with their malevolent envy and power-lust. Judas wounded him with his unfaithfulness and Peter with his fickleness. And once more God was found in a thorn bush, with a literal crown of thorns upon his

head, emblem of the human heart and the curse that God must pronounce upon sin. Instead of destroying men, he suffered to save them and bore their curse so that they might be delivered and brought to that glorious land where there shall be no more curse.

So we lingered long, as was fitting, at this first vision of the glory of God as it confronts us in the book of Exodus and it is not the last vision that we shall see of God's glory. It signifies the name of God, the *name of grace and mercy*.

The glory of God's wrath

But now we must move on to hear once more the name of God proclaimed in our ears and to see the glory of God pass before us, but this time it is very different. Not now the glory of God's grace; it is the glory of God's wrath, and I use that phrase advisedly. Judgment may be *God's strange work*, but even in God's wrath and in his judgment we shall perceive God's glory. If our hearts are in tune with God, the wrath of God will in the end provoke within us worship and praise, as does also his grace.

We must not think that there is something unworthy in the wrath of God. In the wrath and anger of our fellow humans there is often—perhaps always—some trace of the unworthy, so that frequently we are given to apologising even for the best of our friends. But please let none of us be betrayed into apologising for the wrath of God. The wrath of God is an essential part of his activity. It demonstrates his holy character to us and we are to worship him for it. It shows us what God himself is like. A God that could look upon sin with equanimity and tolerance, a God that could face sin and say that sin did not matter would be a God convicted of sin himself and a God who would immediately lose the reverence and respect of any moral being. Sin matters, and God will never say that it does not matter. In God's wrath we see God's values; we see God's love.

A sense of values

You may have a valuable piece of jade in the corner cupboard of the lounge. You have warned your 16-year old son not to practise his golf strokes there because you perceive the potential danger to the jade. But one wet day there's nothing to do and he doesn't know how to amuse himself. He's practising his golf in the lounge, and smack through the glass case of the cupboard goes the golf ball and breaks the jade. And you say, 'Poor boy, don't get upset! It doesn't matter, it was only an old piece of jade anyway.'

But I thought you said that you liked it and you valued it; so you didn't really value it at all? It's only an old piece of jade that's been broken—so what?

'I did value it,' you say.

Then surely you will be upset. You can't say you didn't value it—you did value it—and then say it doesn't matter whether it was broken or not! You may eventually forgive the young gentleman; I suspect with a mother's heart you will. It may be that you will never ask him to pay for the repair or replacement of the jade because he couldn't afford it. You'll forgive him, but even forgiving him will cost you something. It will cost you suffering in terms that cannot be quantified or explained—the broken valuable thing, the sense of the folly and unreasonableness of disobedience. In your wrath at the sin that broke the jade, you will show your sense of values.

Pharaoh had his sense of values. He had treasure cities and filled them with wealth. His values were of the sort that if the building of those cities meant the hard lash of the taskmaster on the backs of his unfortunate slaves, what did it matter if they were crippled in the course of their work, or if a stone block fell off its rollers and crushed half a dozen Israelites to death? What were they but slaves? Yes, Pharaoh had his values.

And would you have God stand by and say it didn't matter? Am I to presume that God doesn't care for human beings; that the odd half dozen perishing under those blocks of stone don't really matter? No indeed! In getting angry with Pharaoh the God of heaven that created them shows us beyond all manner of doubt the value he places upon his people, upon the individual human being. Let all systems of economics hold it in mind, God values one human beyond all the material wealth of the world. While I speak in general of the wrath of God, I am provoked to say—if I may say it with reverence—that, far from God's wrath being something to be apologised for, the fact that God gets angry with human beings is the biggest compliment that was ever paid to them. I think of God and his infinity, his greatness and his might and his splendour; I think of how tiny human beings are and I say to myself, why should God bother with them? For God to count them significant enough to take seriously what they do is an indescribable compliment paid by the almighty Creator to his creatures.

The nature of Pharaoh's sin

Follow me in the text of Scripture as we consider for a moment the nature of Pharaoh's sin that provoked the wrath of God. Chapter 5 in its introductory paragraph tells us explicitly, the nature of Pharaoh's sin in summary was that he defied the living God. Not all men have defied God in that same sense as Pharaoh did. God indeed took exception to the way they behaved in Sodom and Gomorrah and overwhelmed them with a catastrophe, but that was because of their exceedingly wretched immorality. God took exception to the cities of Canaan and had Israel go in eventually and destroy them, but that was because of their idolatry and their indescribable cruelties and viciousness. You will not read of immorality in the story of Exodus. I am not saying that the Egyptians were never immoral, but nothing is said about it. The great issue between God and Pharaoh was not any form of immorality. It was this, that Pharaoh defied the living God and God as Creator and Redeemer came to Pharaoh and said, 'Israel is my property; Israel is my son and my firstborn; let my firstborn go.' Pharaoh stood up in the face of almighty God and refused. He defied him again and again.

It would almost stop the beating of the heart, to watch a human being—six feet of clay—rise up from his dust and defy the living God to his face. I say it is a thing to chill the heart; yet it speaks volumes for the character of God to observe that it was God himself that gave man the ability to do it. I hasten to add, not *permission* to do it—of course not, but the *ability* to do it. How is it that Pharaoh can get up on his legs and say no to God? There are many creatures in this world that have no such power. The humble bumblebee and the brilliant butterfly, and even the elephant with his enormous strength, have no ability to stand up and say no to God. He made them to work by their unalterable instincts; they have no choice, they merely work as he made them to work. It was God's inestimable gift—his majestic and,

if I dare use the term of God, *courageous* gift—that he gave to men and women and even to Pharaoh, the ability and choice to stand up and say no to him.

When you perceive what saying no to God must bring upon Pharaoh, perhaps your heart trembles and you say, ‘If there was such danger in giving Pharaoh that gift, why did God give it to him?’ It is not ours to ask Omnipotence in that challenging sense why it has done anything, but we can at least perceive what God has obtained by giving us that ability. He has obtained and made possible a relationship with him that is infinitely higher than that which the animals know, giving us a heart and a will that can say yes to God’s love, or no to God’s love. Loving God as a matter of choice is therefore more significant than if it had been merely an instinctive reaction. You might think that to make a creature with that potential was a staggeringly dangerous thing to do, but consider how poverty-stricken heaven would be if God had not decided to include that ability of choice.

But there was no permission to defy God. Therein lies ruin—disobedience of God must spell destruction. We may have the ability and freedom to decide, but we remain the creatures of God and, if God is the source of all good and the source of all life, for his creatures to defy him must in the end spell death. God is not willing that any should perish; but rather that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Pet 3:9). God gave mankind the ability to sin, but no permission to sin.

God’s patience with Pharaoh

But perhaps you will protest and say to me that chapter 4 tells you that God informed Moses from the very beginning that he was going to harden Pharaoh’s heart. Surely then, if God hardened his heart, he had no choice? But let us be fair to the text. In chapter 4 God is informing Moses of what he will eventually do; he is telling him his commission in its bare, basic detail. He is to go in the name of God and tell Pharaoh to let Israel, God’s firstborn, go. Moses is told beforehand that Pharaoh will eventually and finally refuse, because by the end God will have hardened his heart. That is perfectly true, God’s judgment will come upon Pharaoh and God will slay his firstborn. But if we then proceed to read the text we shall find that God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart at once; God proceeded first to plead with Pharaoh and to argue with him. There came at first a sign of God’s creatorhood and the sign was followed by nine plagues. The sign and the nine plagues came first as a warning to Pharaoh before the final judgment eventually came. Yes, God did at last harden Pharaoh’s heart but, if you follow the text, it was not until the end of the sixth plague. You will read of it first in 9:12, but many times before you read of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, you will read of Pharaoh hardening his own heart.

Let us listen to what the New Testament has to say on this score (Rom 9:14–18). God pleaded with Pharaoh, he argued with Pharaoh; patiently God presented the evidence to him and Pharaoh hardened and hardened and hardened his heart. What would you have done if you had been almighty God? Knowing how we behave with mere human enemies and what we do to them when they become unreasonable, I’m not persuaded that we would have treated Pharaoh as God treated him. Willing to show his wrath and power, God *endured* that vessel of wrath—what a word to use of almighty God. A mere six feet of human clay stood up to defy and argue with God, and when God pleaded with him he argued back

and then made a mock repentance and went back on that repentance and lied to God. Holy Scripture bids us observe how almighty God—who could have snuffed Pharaoh out with a tip of his divine finger—instead of hastening to execute Pharaoh, endured with him. Let it be written in large letters across our sky that almighty God endured Pharaoh. Why should he? Men shall perish, some of them; but when I look at Calvary I say to myself that none shall perish without first Calvary being offered and I read there how God's incarnate Son *endured* the cross. How God should put up with me in my perversity, in my disobedience and rebellion; many a heart looks back with a certain trembling to days when we were still rebellious, still unbelieving and it staggers us to think now that God endured it.

See how patiently God endured him. When God eventually judged Pharaoh, it wasn't because God had favourites and judged Pharaoh when he wouldn't have thought of judging Israel or Moses. God would judge Israel as soon as he would have judged Pharaoh, so before we launch into God's argument with Pharaoh we must first listen (because the text obliges us to) to the argument that God had with Moses.

What kind of God is this?

He has just commissioned Moses to go with his divine message to Pharaoh. In Moses' hand is the rod of judgment, put there by almighty God in solemn trust to Moses to execute his wrath upon Egypt. Then presently we see God meeting Moses and beginning proceedings against Moses himself. Why? There is no favouritism with God; Moses may be the God-given lawgiver, but Moses had neglected to circumcise his firstborn son and God took great exception to it.

Why Moses should have circumcised his son

Let us pause to think of what circumcision signified. Circumcision among the Jews was first given to their father Abraham as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith. It didn't procure or produce that faith, it was merely a sign that Abraham had believed God and it was counted to him for *righteousness*—Abraham was right with God. How and on what ground was he right with God? It was not on the ground of his mere existence as a creature of God, for in common with all Abraham had sinned. He was guilty before God and under the wrath of God, but God in his mercy had appeared to Abraham and shown him how a man who is a sinner and ungodly can be made right with God. He had to take that place of humble and utter dependence upon God—entire surrender to God and faith in God. Abraham believed God and on that ground God pronounced him to be right with God.

Accepted then as a guilty sinner and justified by faith, Abraham received the sign of circumcision. It would remind him, on the one hand, that his confidence should not be in the flesh (as Paul would put it), but on the ground of God's grace. In its symbolic language it should also remind him that, now justified, he must walk before God and be perfect. It was a pledge on Abraham's part that he was now willing to live for God.

Moses is going to proclaim the wrath of God on Egypt, but God first confronts him. 'Moses, you mustn't think that, just because you have that rod in your hand and you call yourself a believer in me as your God, you can get away with sin and carelessness.'

Isn't that what we do sometimes? You should hear us in our self-righteous moods! We condemn this one and that one and somehow we imagine that, because we've agreed with God that other people's sins are wrong and God is pretty decent, he wouldn't round on us. We're on his side! We may cheat and tell a few white lies, but we are the people of God! Here we are, storming away at the things of the ungodly, as though we had some special favourite's licence to sin because we call ourselves the people of God, but there is no respect of persons with God. Be it Moses or anyone else there can only be one ground of acceptance before God—the full confession of our sin, putting our faith in God, the humbling of our pride, dependence upon him and the life that follows submitted to God, by his grace and Spirit seeking to walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh.

Why God must judge Pharaoh

I submit three reasons—you will find many others in our text.

1. *Because Pharaoh was crushing and destroying one of the most beautiful things in life.*

'Let my people go that they may worship me,' said God.

'No,' said Pharaoh. 'Get back to your factory; get back to your brick kiln! All this talk of worship is a mere form of idleness and escapism and daydreaming. How do you think the economics of this land are going to progress if we allow such reactionary ideas?'

Pharaoh was for making economics govern everything and *not allowing for a bigger dimension—the worship of God.*

What would you think of a man who told us that a tulip is nothing other than chemicals and forbade us to see that, when you've done the chemistry and the economics of producing a lot of tulips at the cheapest possible price, the final reason why you should have tulips at all is that people might enjoy their beauty? And what of the man who, confronted with life on this planet, shall say that it exists merely for the sake of the stuff, or for the aesthetics and that there is no higher significance? No enjoyment of life in company with God. Not only appreciation of the beauty of the tulip but, when you have risen to the aesthetic and enjoyed the beauty, to turn to the higher thing and share that beauty with the God who made it and be induced to worship him.

Is not life's fairest thing the worship of God and his service? When many tulips have forever perished, the worship of God that we have learned here shall abide as an eternal value and Pharaoh was for destroying it root and branch. Should God stand by and let him?

2. *Because Pharaoh was ruining people's faith!* Through Moses God painted a picture of a land flowing with milk and honey and provoked Israel's faith. Unsophisticated they may be, but with that natural instinct of the human heart planted by God their hearts went out to that glorious gospel. There was an inheritance, life wasn't made to be a mere slavery and their faith in God began to grow. *Pharaoh tried to smash their faith* and nearly succeeded. When Moses came to them they didn't believe him because of the bitterness of their hearts. When they tried to believe God's word that there was a fair inheritance, Pharaoh would pile on the agony until the people could scarcely believe that there was a God or that the gospel was true.

It may be easy for us sitting here to believe in a heaven and a paradise, but there are some dear Christians in other lands and if they dared to believe there is a mansion for them

and an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that fades not away (1 Pet 1:4), and the authorities knew that they believed it, then their daily lot would be increased a hundred fold and they should find themselves in slave labour camps on short rations until it nearly breaks their faith.

Why must God deal with Pharaoh? Because if he didn't deal with him it would break the faith of thousands of people and smash the only link that can spell a right relationship with God, blessing here on earth and a paradise to come. There are many such tyrants still to come. Our Lord warned us, saying, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8). The answer to that is, 'Yes, some.' God shall not allow wickedness to go forever unchecked and he will have mercy on his elect. Though he is long-suffering, he will intervene at last to smash not only Pharaoh but the future Man of Sin himself.

3. Because God had made a covenant with Abraham and *God himself has a purpose for this earth*. Do you count it strange or unreasonable that having made this earth God should have a purpose for it? Do you suppose that having made the whole thing the Creator should then stand aside and let men make what they will of it? Long before Pharaoh was thought of, God had a reason for his creation and a plan in history. He had chosen Abraham and made a covenant to give the earth to him and to his seed. In Abraham and his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed and God will not be moved from his purpose. If he has made an oath and a covenant, the very character of God is at stake and he will not break that covenant.

In Revelation 8 and 11 we are introduced behind the scenes in heaven to hear why those judgments must come at that particular time. We are shown the ark of God's covenant and the incense altar, and hear the prayers of saints. Those prayers are founded on the covenant promise of God. Because of that covenant and those prayers God must intervene to judge the wicked who destroy the earth. They have got rid of God's Son, Abraham's Seed, on a cross. They think to possess earth and hold it forever, but, 'The Lord shall laugh at them: he shall hold them in derision. He will set his King upon his holy hill of Zion' (Ps 2:4, 6). He will be true to his covenant.

Though it will mean he must intervene in judgment against Pharaoh and his hosts, God moved to judge them and I ask you again to please observe this. The judgment that God had warned Pharaoh of was that, if Pharaoh didn't let Israel go, God would take Pharaoh's firstborn—that was the judgment. All those plagues that came before, you should scarcely read them as judgments. They were arguments; pressures put on Pharaoh that, had he heeded them, might have led him to repentance and then to the possibility that judgment would not need to come. How long God spent troubling to argue with Pharaoh, pleading with Pharaoh; even in these dark chapters, see the mercy and incredible forbearance of God.

What was Pharaoh's sin?

He defied God; he laid hold of Egypt as though Egypt were his own possession. God would judge him for it, but first God would make the man's sin clear to him. And then he must prove, even to Pharaoh, that 'the earth is the LORD'S' (Exod 9:29). God will take time to prove it to him; it might be that Pharaoh didn't know it. Before he judges him for sinning against this great fundamental principle God will, in fairness, demonstrate to Pharaoh that

the earth is the Lord's. Moreover, God will demonstrate to Pharaoh that not only is the earth the Lord's, but there is none like God in the earth. And furthermore, that God is not some absentee landlord away up in his heaven who never visits his people, he is 'the LORD in the midst of the earth' (8:22). God will demonstrate to Pharaoh that he didn't merely create the world and then let it go; he is a God who from time to time reserves the right to stick his finger right in the mechanism and demonstrate that the earth is his, he made it and can do with it as he pleases.

But, having said that, you will perceive that proving this is not such an easy matter as you might think. In conversation with your unconverted friends you have doubtless learned this by experience. 'Why,' you say, 'of course it would be easy to prove that there is a God. Let God himself appear and it shall be done.' But have you thought what that would mean? If God were to appear personally before Pharaoh, there would be no more Pharaoh! When a holy angel visited the lovely Apostle John, the presence reduced him to a gibbering corpse. And when those superhuman beings (and perhaps the Angel of God himself) appeared to the prophet Daniel, then Daniel describes how he was left with no strength and couldn't put one thought in front of another (10:17). If God Almighty appeared direct to us it would so reduce us to indescribable weakness and confusion of wits that we couldn't make a choice or come to any moral judgment, we should be so overwhelmed by the immediate glory of God. It is because of God's great mercy that he remains behind the scenes and doesn't appear immediately to any of us. It is a thing of surpassing mercy that he has found a way that we may look upon him in Jesus Christ his Son.

But it remains true; no man has seen God, nor can see him. Then how will you prove that God is the God of this earth and he made it? Well it depends who you are talking to. Is the person reasonable, or determined not to believe and push inadequate logic perversely beyond its limits? It depends, as I say, what kind of a person you are trying to prove it to.

God's evidence to Pharaoh: physical signs; prophetic words; answer to prayer

So God began first of all, not with a plague but a sign. Moses appeared before Pharaoh and threw down his rod and it became a serpent. Pharaoh maintained his calm and with an affected amazement he said, 'So what? What am I supposed to take out of that, Moses? You have thrown down a rod and it has become a serpent! Am I supposed now to accept that there is a God? Nonsense Moses!'

And he pushed the button beside his throne and in came his magicians. 'There you are,' he said to Moses, as they cast down their rods and they became serpents. 'We can explain it scientifically; we can do it in the laboratory ourselves. Exit your evidence for the existence of a Creator God. We know how the whole thing ticks and therefore it's no evidence to us that there is a creator.'

Isn't it curious how people latch on to that argument? They think if only we can understand how the universe works that proves there was no creator. They tell us that in days gone by people believed in a creator because the workings of the universe were all mysterious to them. But we have found out how it all ticks, so now we need not believe in a creator.

Imagine me as a native in the rain forests of Peru. I suddenly come across a double-decker bus, the like of which I've never seen before. Some university students are on a safari, but they've left the bus and gone off somewhere else. The rest of my tribe and I get inside the bus and on top of it, and we poke it here and we poke it there. If you give us a few million centuries we'll find out how it works! First we find out how those pedals on the floor go. You push this thing and something happens inside; you push that thing and something else happens, but how it happened no one knows. There is a kind of a god, we thought, under the bonnet. But then we grew braver and one day we found the knobs that opened the bonnet. When we looked inside we could see what happened when we pressed the accelerator and what happened when we pressed the clutch. Now we understand how it all works! And then along come these students from Queen's University.

They say, 'That's our bus!'

'Nonsense!' I say, 'who are you? We don't believe in you! We understand how this bus goes; we don't believe that anybody made it and still less do we believe that anybody brought it here. There's no god under the bonnet, or outside either, we can explain how it works.'

Well if you think that's clever and you want to hold on to that kind of logic, all right. Then we shall not be able at that level to prove to you that this is God's world and, if you are as perverse as that, what will God do? Abandon you? No, my friend, he'll keep after you. That's what God will do. He's sorry that you have been led astray in your intellect to give heed to such absurd arguments, but just in case you are honest then he will keep on with you and give you more evidence.

Three lots of demonstrations came—showing Pharaoh by this means and that, not only did God make this world, but he owns it. He can do what he will with it; there is none to stay his hand. He is the God in the midst of the earth; there is none like him. He brought such exceptional phenomena to pass that it became utterly perverse to say that this wasn't unusual or indeed unique. He made differences between the Israelite and the Egyptian so that it might become evident to all except the perverse that God isn't away in his heaven but here on earth, producing the difference. Then there came a time even at that level that Pharaoh's own scientists said, 'We can't explain it—this must be the intervention of almighty God' (8:19).

But it wasn't only physical evidence at the realm of science that God offered Pharaoh, for in the last analysis that would be inconclusive, so God offered him two other things. He offered him *the prophetic word* through Moses—the word of God coming to him and working on his moral judgment, bringing with it the self-evident truth that is inherent in the word of God. He brought to Pharaoh *the evidence of answered prayer*. Not only when Pharaoh cried to Moses, 'Pray for us,' and God answered those prayers, but when Pharaoh asked Moses to pray for a particular plague to be taken away by tomorrow, God listened to him.

God spoke to Pharaoh finally, not merely through the physical sciences, not merely through the prophetic word and not merely through answered prayer; God spoke to him at length by the workings of his own conscience until Pharaoh himself was constrained to cry, 'I have sinned and I know it' (9:27; 10:16). Yet, in spite of it, Pharaoh refused to obey God. As our blessed Lord said of his own contemporaries, 'If I had not come and done among them

signs that no other had done, they would not be guilty of sin'—for you can't blame a man for not believing what he never heard or saw—'But I have come,' says Christ, 'and I have done signs that are altogether unique. Now they have no excuse for their sin' (see John 15:24).

You will say, 'God nevertheless hardened Pharaoh's heart.' Yes he did and we come finally to the most solemn thing of all. Read carefully and discern what it means. God did not harden his heart at the start, but when one sign and six plagues had passed then God hardened his heart. And when God began to harden his heart then God explains carefully and explicitly why and what he was doing.

'Pharaoh, I'm going to harden you and I'm going to make you stand now. You disobeyed me before and I could have wiped you out. Not only could I have done it physically, I could have done it morally. Shown to be a sinner and a deliberate rebel against God, you have shut your eyes to the evidence and refused God's truth. I could righteously have wiped you out at this juncture, but I'm not going to do that right now. I'm going to make you stand and I'm going to do it to make you an example, so that my name might be known. When men now look upon you, they see a man who has deliberately defied God and refused his message and his gospel. They will see what God thinks of him and what God will do with him.'

What did God do with him?

He continued the evidence of his demonstrations until those demonstrations came into Pharaoh's conscience.

Then Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me.' (10:16-17)

'All right,' says God, 'you know you've sinned and you know sin must lead to death. You ask for forgiveness, for the removal of the consequences and the penalty of sin. All right Pharaoh, I'll take them away.'

Pharaoh said, 'Yes,'—but he went on sinning and found he couldn't break the power of sin. Why couldn't he break it? There were times when, if Pharaoh had cast himself upon the mercy of God, God would have intervened in his life to smash that hideous thing that held him as a slave. But Pharaoh wouldn't have it and God hardened his heart and gave the man his own choice. Pharaoh went past the point where it is possible for a man to repent or give up his sin. And the hell of it was this, that even as he went back to his sinning he knew it was sin; he knew God was righteous and he himself was wicked. He knew it would lead to death and he couldn't give up the sinning, for he couldn't bring himself to repent.

How hideous perdition will be, when men at last see the emptiness of their pseudo logic and their defiance and unbelief in God. They know the things they do are sin and God is holy and they are wicked. They know it is nothing but death to continue in it and all eternity they find themselves unable to repent or to break off their sinning. That is *perdition*.

But why did God do it? What would you have him to do? The man had deserved it. Instead of consigning him at once to perdition, God made him stand here on this earth, so

that this side of eternity we might see the beginnings of a lost soul and be warned. To have my own choice—if my own choice is rebellion against God; to resist his Holy Spirit and his word and refuse to repent and to allow myself to be saved—if I must do it, then God in his infinite mercy has set up Pharaoh to show me that God is willing to wait a long, long while and plead with me. But he won't wait forever and this is what happens when a man goes beyond the point of no return.

At last the judgment came and Pharaoh's firstborn was slain. All the firstborn were slain, but for those who would have it there was a way of escape. There was salvation. Warned by what God did to Pharaoh, they came in their thousands to the sacrifice that God had appointed. They sheltered behind its blood and God saved them from his wrath and brought them to freedom. Let us in our day follow their example.

Decision to Quit

Readings: Exodus 12:1–17.

New Testament commentary: 1 Corinthians 5:6–8.

I suppose it is altogether probable that from time to time some of the Israelites must have dreamed. In the hours of darkness and their exhausted slumber, or fretful in their beds by their wounds and the lashes on their backs, they must have dreamed of days when life would be better, freedom and a place on the earth that they could call theirs, a paradise. And I dare say that from the time when Moses came and began to preach his gospel to them, even though some of them by the bitterness of their experiences refused to believe it in the daylight hours, at night I suspect it got all mixed up with their dreams. Perhaps they dreamed they were free and for a while it was a comfort to them, but the daylight of morning dissipated their dreams and they woke to face stern realities once more.

Some of us dream. When life becomes more than usually unsatisfactory, when we feel that our own lives are perhaps disordered and unsatisfying, we too dream. Sometimes in daylight hours we indulge in a little bit of wishful thinking. We imagine ourselves in a better house, a better job, and (God forbid) with a better wife, more obedient children and easier circumstances. We kind of dreamed that we would be better husbands, fathers, scholars and better workmen. We comfort and cushion ourselves against the realities by giving free play to our imaginations and build our moral, spiritual and sometimes material castles in the future.

The decisions that put their feet upon the path

It is not a bad thing to be content with the present and let the imagination roam a little bit as to what could be. But this much is certain; dream as they might, none of the Israelites would ever have come to anything better than what Egypt gave them. Not one of them would ever have set foot in that land flowing with milk and honey and known the reality of the blessings that God held out to them had they not been prepared to do more than dream. They had to take themselves securely by their shoulders and make up their minds to actually obey God and keep the Passover that he provided. So we are going to think together of that great decision that the Israelite nation took in Egypt, without which there never would have been a journey or an arrival in the promised land; they decided to quit Egypt and set out for the promised land.

In that one major decision to keep the Passover as God ordained it, we shall discover that there were other decisions implied and in them all, the greater and the less, we shall

find practical examples for ourselves. There is indeed 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet 1:4). It is no daydream; it is as real as God himself is real, but we shall never reach it by daydreaming or by feeling discontent with life as we know it. If we would reach that glorious inheritance we must start out on the journey, on the pilgrimage that leads to it. And we shall not set out on that journey unless we too definitely and deliberately take that prime decision that lies at the beginning of the journey—the decision that puts our feet upon the path.

In Israel's day God commanded them to keep the Passover at the beginning of their pilgrimage and we have just learned that Christ performs for us precisely what that Passover performed for the Israelites, only at a higher level. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us (see 1 Cor 5:7). We are redeemed from our empty way of life received by tradition from our fathers, not with corruptible things such as silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (see 1 Pet 1:18–19). We shall find many a practical lesson staring us in the face, quite obviously for our learning, as we consider together the great decisions that the Israelites took.

They had to decide that Moses' word was true

If they were to keep the Passover as God commanded them, the first thing that they would have to decide was to agree with God and with Moses that Egypt stood now under the wrath of God. Of course, for a long time Egypt had been an uncomfortable place and there was no denying that. I suspect the Israelites grouched and grumbled and complained and said hard words about their taskmasters—as sometimes we say hard words about our Income Tax inspectors. Israel would have agreed with you, and every man and woman in the nation would have agreed that Egypt wasn't right. It wasn't all that you could wish for and left a lot of room for improvement. But all those grouches and grumbings would never have got them out of Egypt. The thing that first set their feet upon the path that would leave Egypt forever and set them on the road to their inheritance, was their decision that Moses' word was true.

Egypt stood under the sentence of God's wrath and therefore something radical was to be done about Egypt. There was now no question of seeing what movements they could start for the improvement of Egypt; make the manacles and the handcuffs more comfortable, lighten their working hours; make the taskmasters more tender hearted—none of those measures now would suffice and all of them together might have left them simply in Egypt where they started. Something more radical had to be decided. Egypt was not only wrong and uncomfortable, it stood now under the sentence of the wrath of God. There was nothing for it but that they must come out of Egypt and leave it behind, or else suffer under the wrath of God themselves. They must stand clear! The prince of Egypt had defied God. Now God was to proceed to deal in his wrath with the prince of Egypt and all that remained under his dominion.

And similarly it is true of us. We shall be asked by the New Testament apostles to come to precisely that same decision. This world (using now that term in the biblical sense) and its prince stand likewise under the sentence of the wrath and judgment of God. You will remember what our blessed Lord Jesus said in those hours before he proceeded to Calvary.

'Now is the judgement of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out' (John 12:31). The cross of Christ is the eloquent speaking of the sentence of God. God's judgment and sentence has gone forth upon this world and its prince. In consequence we must face the radical decision—upon whose side shall we stand? Shall we continue to stand where we were born, members of this world and subject to its ruler? Or, recognizing that that ruler and this world's system are under God's wrath, shall we decide to stand clear and to quit?

There can be no middle path

Sometimes that is more evident and easily seen than others, but you will remember that this was the message that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost to his fellow Jews. He pointed out to them that in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ they had crucified God's Son and Israel's Messiah. No greater challenge to the authority of God could have been issued than deliberately to take his Son, his Messiah, and nail him to a cross. If ever the gauntlet was flung down before almighty God by Satan and this world, it was when the rulers of this world, Pilate and Herod and the Jews, inspired by Satan, cast out God's Son. On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down from heaven in all his plenitude to witness to men that they had made a ghastly mistake in crucifying God's own Son. Many in that nation were pricked in the heart, as convicted by God's Holy Spirit they came to see the enormity of their crime and they came running around Peter and said, 'Peter, what shall we do? Our nation has murdered God's Son and defied God.' And Peter said, 'You'll be baptized—that's what you'll do! And you will be baptized in the name of Jesus unto the remission of sins' (see Acts 2:37–38).

Some evangelicals, with their theories of how a man is saved, have under their breath whispered their 'tut-tut' to such theology as spoken by Peter. They have said, 'Surely Peter didn't mean that, did he? What did he say—"Be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus unto remission of sins"? No, Peter couldn't have meant that. He simply meant believe on the name of the Lord Jesus.'

But Peter didn't say so—not to these Jews. For these were men whose hands were reddened with the blood of Christ and the guilt of his murder. Some days before they had stood in that city and publicly said, 'His blood be on us and on our children. We take personal responsibility for the murder of Jesus of Nazareth' (see Matt 27:25). Now they said they had repented. 'Very good,' says Peter, 'you publicly denied him and now you say you've changed your mind. If you have really changed your mind you will publicly confess you have changed your mind. You publicly denied him—you will publicly confess him.'

What do you suppose Peter would have said had some Jew come along to him and said, 'Peter, just a word with you in private, if you don't mind. I wouldn't like to be seen talking to you publicly; I'm well connected in this city. But I'm really convinced in my heart of hearts that Jesus is the Messiah and I'm sorry for what we did. I'm sorry that I shouted so loudly on that fateful day and called down the sentence of death upon him. I've really changed my mind now, but you'll understand that I couldn't get baptized, holding the position I do in this city. It would be a terrible embarrassment. I have changed in my heart, Peter, but as a member of the Council I couldn't get baptized publicly.'

What do you suppose Peter would have said? Well, you're not left to suppose. When they came around him saying 'What shall we do?' he said, 'This is what you will do. You will separate yourselves from this crooked generation. You cannot continue to stand with the murderers of Christ and say you've repented of his murder; God won't listen to you.' Like John the Baptist before him, Peter demanded a radical, thoroughgoing repentance. A repentance that was not merely a repentance of word only, but a repentance that gave evidence that it was genuine by issuing in works. 'You say that you have repented of the murder of Jesus Christ, God's Son? Then you will publicly confess it! You will be baptized in the name of Jesus; you will save yourself from that crooked generation; you will stand clear of the murderers of Christ and come and stand with the people of God.'

Thus says our New Testament and it remains obligatory upon us all. We live in a world stained by the murder of God's Son, a murder engineered by the ruler of this world and by men who, with eyes opened or with eyes blinded, proved to be the tools of that dastardly deed. We make our first step on the Christian pathway when we come to see that the world is under the declared sentence of the wrath of God and we repent and stand clear. We stand with God and his people. God help us not to compromise—to suppose we can hunt with the hounds and run with the hare simultaneously.

They had to agree that they were under the sentence of the wrath of God

For them, it was an even more solemn decision. If the Egyptian system stood under the sentence of the wrath of God, then every Israelite likewise stood under the wrath of God as well. When the destroying angel was about to stalk through the land of Egypt, the Israelites were told that, if they wanted to be saved from that judgment of God, they must slay the Passover lamb and sprinkle its blood upon their doors and shelter behind that blood. That was no empty ceremony; it was commanded because it was so necessary. Without that shedding of blood (and were they found not sheltering behind that blood-stained door) Israel would have perished under the sword of the angel of justice equally as the Egyptian firstborn did. This, then, is the decision they made that night when they took of that Passover. It started them on the great pilgrimage home to Canaan when they realised that, as fallen and guilty men and women, they too stood under the sentence of God's judgment, deserving of his punishment.

We must come there too, and not be content with dishing out criticisms to the right or to the left. The Capitalists are wrong and you say so! The Left is wrong and you say so! Mrs Smith is wrong and Mr Brown as well—and you may be right! But merely expressing our criticisms of them does not set our feet upon the pathway that shall lead to the bright inheritance. We shall not start even, until in the presence of God we forget all others and our criticisms of them and look at ourselves. We stand as unregenerate men and women under the wrath of God; it is so easy not to see this. Many a man and woman would honestly confess, I'm not the person I ought to be. As a mother I get irritable; as a father sometimes I'm hard and cruel; as a businessman I haven't always played fair. It's a difficult world and we're not really what we should be. Come now! That's not radical enough. Many of us imagine that we are here and there infected with a bad habit, with a little bit of sin maybe. But it's not too desperately bad—only like an apple with a speck in it. If we could get the

speck removed then the rest of the apple would be very pleasant. And we set about improving ourselves, trying to get rid of that nasty little corrupt spot that so disfigures its otherwise rosy countenance. We imagine that if we could get rid of the speck we should have arrived at a millennial peace and bliss.

But it doesn't happen that way. We shall need to face ourselves far more seriously and radically. As fallen men and women, members of a fallen race, we stand under the declared sentence of the wrath of God. Hear the Apostle Paul sum up God's charge. 'We know,' says he, 'that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God' (Rom 3:19). That is what we must accept, but sometimes it is difficult to come there.

I remember having a conversation with an intelligent and very sincerely religious young lady, who was of the opinion (held by many) that the way to God's heaven is by doing the very best we can to keep God's holy law and thus improve ourselves. She was keen to prove to me that my doctrine of salvation was wrong and hers was right. My doctrine of salvation was that a person is saved, justified, by the grace of God without works. I had quoted her holy Scripture to that effect: 'By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing . . . not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8-9). And she came back at me finally, saying, 'But it must be by works, because the Bible says, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt 3:10). So you're going to be judged by your fruit and it will all depend on how good your works are whether in the end God accepts you or not.'

I said to her what you would have said (I hope). 'I don't have to wait until the final judgment to know what God thinks of my tree and its fruit. I know that already!' She looked perplexed. Then I said, 'And you know it already too, if you would think just a moment. You know what God thinks of my tree and its fruit! Scripture tells us that when Christ our Lord died upon the cross he was made a curse for us. Tell me, when the curse of God's law came upon Christ, was that God's verdict upon Christ's own personal life? Surely you know it wasn't; his life was sinless, but he was made a curse. It was the verdict of God upon somebody's life. If not on Christ's life personally, then on whose life? You know right well that it was God's verdict on my life. If righteousness could have come by the law, then Christ need not have died. The fact that he died—under the curse of God's holy law—is God's plain verdict, easy to be read, upon my life. I've long since acknowledged that and confessed it. This is not some lurid exaggeration on God's part; it is God's sober assessment of my life, the true sentence of his law. I have broken that law and merited its curse and I have accepted that. When I accepted it and acknowledged myself as a sinner under the curse of God's broken law, meriting his wrath, I found the Saviour directly by my side, willing to take that curse for me and bear it in my place. I have trusted him and I am free. He bore the curse so that the blessing of God might come upon me, a Gentile. These are my grounds and hopes of salvation.'

She thought for a moment—and do you know what she said next?

'No, no! I will never say it. I was baptized as an infant and never since that day have I done anything worthy of God's curse!'

‘Very good,’ I said, ‘but I’m sorry indeed to hear you say that, because what you are now saying is that you have no need of Christ. Christ avails you nothing.’

If we would set our feet on that path that leads at length to God’s glorious inheritance, we shall have to face ourselves and this solemn fact, that as sinful men and women we stand under the sentence of the wrath of God. If we do, immediately God’s Holy Spirit will show us what God has provided so that we need not perish; so that we may be saved from the wrath of God through that glorious provision of our Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ himself.

They had to decide whether the provision that Moses described to them was indeed the provision of God to save them from the wrath of the destroying angel.

Maybe you think that is easy, because to you Moses is a time-honoured figure. You have read of him in the Bible, but consider what he was to them. There wasn’t any Bible then, as far as we know, and here was Moses coming out from the desert somewhere, saying that he had come from God. But they had never seen God! Then he said there was going to come this judgment. It did seem perhaps as though he had some special powers—he had done signs and wonders and miracles among them—but now this was something fundamental. It’s all right for Moses to stand there and a few lice will appear now and again, but this was something fundamental, going down to the very heart and to their estimate of themselves. Moses was saying that they were such sinners that they must perish under the wrath of God. The wrath of God was coming, but he could show them the way of escape. Should they believe him? Nothing like it was heard before; must they take his word for it and if they took his word for it could they be sure it was true? If there was any truth in the first part—that the destroying angel was about to come—then they needed to be ten times as sure that this provision of a lamb was indeed God’s provision.

And similarly, we could not decide a greater question for ourselves. If there is wrath of God against sin, we are sinners. Conscience and moral judgment unite with the witness of the prophets and the apostles, and with the witness of Jesus Christ himself, that we are sinners and God is holy. But how shall I know that this great Passover Lamb, proclaimed by the New Testament, is indeed the provision of God and how can I be sure of it?

To answer that question would take us beyond the bounds of our limited time here. The New Testament brims over with evidence of all kinds and sorts that Jesus is indeed God’s Son and the appointed Lamb. I have time merely to ask you to come and stand around the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, in company with the fourth evangelist, to watch finally the spear put through his side, to see the blood and water come forth and to observe that no bone of him was broken. As John writes his message and gives us his description of that great event, he is exceedingly conscious of the importance of what he describes. ‘He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth’ (John 19:35).

He is aware that you want to question him. He is aware that, as you love your soul and you have an eternity to stake upon something, nothing less than utter truth will suffice you. ‘I saw it,’ he says, ‘and I bear record, and as I search my conscience I know that I speak the truth. I appeal to God and God knows I speak true—when they pierced his side there came forth blood and water, for *this is he that came by water and by blood.*’ Not by water only, but by

the blood and the water. He came that way—not merely he went that way, he came that way.

This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.
(1 John 5:6)

If you turn to the first chapter of the Gospel by John you will hear in what manner our Lord Jesus came officially and publicly into this world. At the age of thirty he stepped on to the stage of public history and John the Baptist, his forerunner, was there to proclaim him. How did he proclaim him? As a great moral reformer, come with new political ideals to set the people free from the oppression of men? Indeed not. Said John, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (v. 29). That's how he came. The one man in history who, coming into our world, had it announced that his major purpose for coming was to die for the sins of the world. It wasn't that he was crucified when his preaching of morality got him into disfavour with the Jews and then his apostles made up some story that he was a sacrifice, a scapegoat. It was that, when he came, he came announcing it. Many a time even his closest apostles were bewildered and confounded and didn't understand it when he said he had come to die.

What do you think of this Jesus Christ?

Have you made up your mind? At least you'll not have to make it up many times because there isn't anyone in competition with him. There have been many prophets and leaders of religion; they have come by the score and one or two are reputable in the sense that they have offered us very serious systems of morality. They come alongside and preach and cajole and exhort me, and they say, 'Be good!' As if I could! They don't seem to know the trouble that torments me because I haven't been good. And if there is a God who cares for righteousness, I am a sinner, I am lost and I stand under his wrath so what use is it telling me to be good? I pass them all by, not because I despise their moral systems—they are helpful in their way—but they have no answer to my need.

There's only one man in all history that ever began to put his finger on my need as a sinner guilty before God. 'He came,' said John, 'the Lamb of God to bear away the sin of the world.' He came that way and true to that prophecy at length he hung upon a cross. His devoted disciple said those words I repeated earlier, 'A soldier with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith there came blood and water. I saw it—God knows I'm telling you the truth as to the fact.'

Ponder it a moment; how his side came to be pierced with a spear and, what is more, how none of his bones was broken. It is an interesting thing that in this ceremony of the Passover it was laid down that no bone of the Passover sacrifice should be broken (Exod 12:46). John the evangelist records for us that the Romans came to break his legs and then, curiously, they changed their minds.

Nor was it the only thing that day over which the Romans changed their minds. Let me recall them to your memory. When our Lord had been sentenced to death and they had nailed him to a tree, we read that the high priests came to Pilate and said, 'Look what you've

gone and written over that cross—“This is Jesus the king of the Jews.” Change it to this—“He said I am the king of the Jews.” Don’t go and tell the world he is the king of the Jews. Put there that he merely said he was.’ But Pilate had had enough of these Jews. They had twisted his arm and threatened him with blackmail. They said ‘We have no king but Caesar,’ and Pilate was tired of them. Said he, looking them straight in the face, ‘What I have written I have written. I change it for nobody.’ And the writing of Pilate went unchanged that day.

Then the soldiers who crucified him took his garments and divided them into four parts, and his coat as well. Can you see them—those humble, honest, I suppose a little bit crude, men? They parted his garments and his coat as well. In his vivid way John pictures them with the thing already in their hands, about to tear it and divide it into four parts because it was expensive material. And then they didn’t; they changed their minds. What made them change their minds?

‘I will explain it to you,’ says John. ‘A writing, a scripture said that they shouldn’t rend it; they should cast lots.’

And I say, ‘But John, what did those ignorant Roman soldiers know about that Old Testament writing? It was written hundreds of years before.’

They knew nothing about it! But the man who was dying on that centre cross is the one who had had it written. This is God Incarnate, come as a sacrifice for men’s sin, and ages ago he had it written through his inspired psalmist that they should cast lots and not rend that particular part of his raiment (see Ps 22:18). Though nailed hand and foot to a cross that day, he made those Romans change their minds so that his writing would be fulfilled.

As he suffered there in his agony, fulfilling scripture after scripture as had been prophesied, he came to the point where every scripture, every writing, had now been fulfilled that the Old Testament had predicted—save one. That one writing said, ‘For my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink’ (Ps 69:21). There they were, ignorant soldiers around the cross and hostile Jews that would have done nothing for him, but he simply said, ‘I thirst,’ and they ran and took a sponge and filled it with sour wine, and he had that second writing fulfilled (John 19:28–29).

And now Jesus our Lord was dead and the Jews hadn’t been able to get Pilate to change his writing. He was dead on a cross and his head bowed. At the suggestion of the Jews the soldiers came from Pilate with their great mallets to break his legs. They broke the legs of the first that was crucified, broke the legs of the second that was crucified, and then they came to Jesus. The man lifted his hammer to break his legs and he stopped. ‘Go on, man,’ they say, ‘break his legs—the governor has ordered you to break his legs.’ But he laid his mallet down and didn’t break his legs. Why not? He himself didn’t know why, save that he was dead already. But he had another thought and taking his spear he plunged it into his side.

You will remember away back in Exodus 12, God instituted the Passover as a prototype so that men by its help might see that God’s provision is indeed as he prophesied and ordained. God had said they should not break a bone of that Passover sacrifice and there was a writing to that effect. Christ made the soldier change his mind and they did not break his legs. The soldier then had an idea and lifted his spear—of course he did, for there was

another scripture, another writing, ‘When they look on me, on him whom they have pierced’ (Zech 12:10).

John was given that tremendous privilege to stand by when that great deed was done, his mind filled with those ancient promises and prophecies—the signposts in the map of God. He says, ‘I saw it happen in front of my very eyes. I tell you I’m speaking the truth, so that you may believe. “At once there came out blood and water. This is he that came by water and blood.”’

How shall I know this is God’s Son? How shall I know this is God’s provision? As a man knows bread is good because it feeds him! I am a man under the wrath of God and guilty before God; he’s the only one who ever had any gospel to preach to me of something that will take away my sin.

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.⁷

I say with Toplady—and I hope you say it too,

Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save me from its guilt and power.⁸

Consider how safe they were on that fateful night in Egypt, when they came to trust God’s word. The sacrifice was slain, its blood put upon the lintel and doorpost and they sheltered behind that blood. But more than that; God said, ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you’ (Exod 12:13). Like a mother bird hovers over her nest and passes over the chicks when she sees the bird of prey coming to seize them, so God that night passed over those doors, between the destroying angel of his judgment and they who had trusted him and his sacrifice. The very person of God was interposed. Friend, where else could you fly for safety and refuge? Hiding in Christ, with God himself interposed forever between you and judgment, you may be utterly unafraid.

They had to decide to obey God’s Word, not in part but in whole

Not merely were they to slay that sacrifice and shelter behind its blood, but to eat the sacrifice and not to eat it raw but roasted. And not only to eat it roasted but to eat it with their shoes on their feet, their belts fastened and their staff in their hands (see Exod 12:8–11). It tells me in a word that they were now to be identified with that Passover lamb; not only sheltering behind its blood but identified with its very body.

Our blessed Lord used words that have shocked many by their vividness, and not only his own contemporaries. I know they are metaphorical. On a certain occasion when the

⁷ Robert Lowry (1826–99).

⁸ Augustus Toplady (1740–78), ‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me’.

Passover was near, he said to his Jewish compatriots, 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (John 6:53).

It was a shocking metaphor to use to Jews. But how else would you have got across to them that this matter of salvation is not merely giving intellectual assent to a theological proposition; it is the receiving of a person, the person of our Lord Jesus Christ? Not literally, of course, as the Jews had eaten the literal flesh of that ancient lamb. Our Lord makes it abundantly clear when, in that same context, he goes on to say, 'It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all' (John 6:63). Were it possible for men or women nowadays to eat the literal body of Jesus Christ, it would do them no good. We have our Lord's own words for it. Nevertheless, that vivid metaphor is needed to stir up my understanding. I say again, it is not a matter of consenting to some proposition; it is a matter of receiving Christ so that he becomes part of me. I am joined to him and he is in me to be my Saviour. I am identified with him.

'Do not eat any of it raw . . . but roasted.' If I come for salvation from the wrath of God, it is not the life of Jesus before his death that shall save me; it is the Saviour who died that meets my need. It is no use exhorting me to follow Jesus as an example until you have first pointed me to him as a sacrifice, offered and received and accepted of God for my sin.

'Eat it with your shoes on, your belt fastened and your staff in your hand.' Why? Because it's the Lord's Passover!

Two things are happening and you cannot separate the one from the other.

1. All who would be saved from the wrath of God must eat that Passover Lamb.
2. All who eat it must go out and depart. They couldn't eat of it just anyhow; they had to put their shoes on, fasten their belts, take their staffs in their hands and be ready to move, for this very day they would begin the journey towards the inheritance.

Shall we get it clear in our minds that those two parts of the scheme were inextricably linked together? There was no gospel that said the main thing was to escape the wrath of God. Imagine the unlikelihood, if you can (the impossibility, if you will), of Moses coming to preach such a gospel.

'My fellow Israelites, you know the main thing is to get yourselves saved from the wrath of God. Then, in addition, if you would care—if you would be interested—there is a further course for advanced people! Once out of Egypt you could perhaps consider taking it. The second course is that you leave Egypt behind and you begin the journey to the promised land. Of course if you're not interested in that, well all right; but the main thing of course is to escape from the wrath of God in Egypt.'

No, indeed not! Moses didn't preach that, for the good reason there is no such gospel. There never was and there never will be. The gospel is that God has come down to deliver them and bring them into that land flowing with milk and honey, and between it lies a journey. If you take the one bit you take the other; there is no having the one without the other. The very moment I take Christ as the sacrifice for my sin I declare that I am leaving my Egypt and beginning my journey.

And thus Peter spoke to the believers of his day, exhorting them to see the implications of being 'redeemed with the precious blood of Christ.' He says, 'I beseech you my dear brethren, prepare your minds for action' (1 Pet 1:13). Take your jacket off, do some

thoroughgoing thinking and work out logically what the implications are of trusting Christ as your great Passover lamb, for you have a journey before you and all who are redeemed must start their journey.

Thus our Lord preached to his contemporaries and John 6 tells us about it. It reminds us that, when our Lord Jesus Christ had talked to them at Passover time about their need to eat his flesh and drink his blood, some of the Jews were offended by him.

They said, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat? This is plain nonsense, it is gruesome, it is objectionable'.

'If you find that nonsense, and you find that difficult,' said our Lord, 'what if you should see the Son of Man ascend up where he was before? You know the flesh is no help at all, it is the Spirit who gives life—my words are spirit and they are life. Let me remind you what Passover is all about. Your fathers ate the Passover. They ate it with shoes on, belts fastened and staffs in hand. Why? Because they believed that to eat the Passover was to set forward on a journey that should take them to another land. But that's history; facing you is the ultimate decision of the significance of life on this planet. I'm telling you that I came down from heaven,' said Christ. 'There is another world; I came from it into your temporary planet to redeem you from the wrath of God and set you free from the bondage of sin. I'm going back where I was before. Are you not coming?'

And even as he speaks those words, an immense and indescribable thing opens before us. He came not merely to redeem me from my sin and to bring me forgiveness, but to tell me that this world is not all; there is another realm. He came from it and has gone back to it now and urges me to follow. Is it true? What is the way? How long is that journey? How uncharted are those spaces that lie between our world and that heaven? How big is the gap that lies between me as I now am, with all my faults (though I am a pardoned sinner), and what I hope to be one day? Long as those journeys may be, again I hear him calling me. This is the gospel, deliverance from the bondage that kept me here and I will be ready to start out with him, staff in hand, to journey to that other world.

'No,' said the Jews, 'that's nonsense! He is an extremist. He talks in pretty parables sometimes; and sometimes you think there's something in it, but then you see how extreme he is. No man should take religion to that length. I mean, we've got the Passover at Jerusalem haven't we—don't you think last time that Caiaphas did it very well? I always thought Annas was good at it! And then, what a show there is at the theatre after the Passover! This man is getting ridiculous, with all these notions of eating his flesh and drinking his blood and all this airy-fairy stuff of a world beyond the blue sky. O come on!'

And from that hour many of his disciples turned back and walked no more with him. They ate their Passover, they had staffs in their hands and shoes on their feet, but it was just a game. It left them as much a part of this world's system as ever they had been and I'm afraid it left them under God's wrath.

How about us? Are these things real?

Said our Lord Jesus, as he turned to the few that were left, 'Do you want to go away as well?' And Peter, the spokesman for the rest, replied, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have

the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:67-69). May God work that blessed certainty in our hearts.

The Implications of Redemption

Reading: Exodus 12:37–51; 13:1–4, 11–16.

From our reading of holy Scripture one thing becomes immediately apparent. Israel had not been five minutes on the road that led them out of Egypt into freedom until God began to explain to them the significance and the implications of the Passover that had just taken place. From the divine urgency with which he set about these explanations so soon after Israel's departure from Egypt, we may learn at once how important that Passover was—how important were the implications that it carried.

Certainly the Passover was important; but not only important, the Passover was unique. Never again would there be a Passover of this kind. Many times in the future, of course, the Passover would be remembered by suitable ceremony; but a Passover night in which the angel of God's judgment stalked through the land and executed the wrath of God on all who were not sheltered by the blood—never again would a Passover night like that occur.

Israel were now setting off through the desert towards their great inheritance. Along their road many discoveries would be made, many blessings entered into and there would come many enemies and many battles. But however far they progressed, however resplendent their blessings, however tough the battles they would be called upon to face—never again would they need to be redeemed by the blood of a Passover Lamb from the wrath of God against sin. The Passover was not only important—the Passover was unique.

Generations of Israel would grow up in centuries to come living in the luxuries of the land of Palestine, munching their grapes and enjoying their honeycombs. Every generation that ate its food in the land of Canaan and enjoyed that inheritance would have to look back to that one single event—the Passover that took place in Egypt—and attribute to it the basis of all their subsequent enjoyment. There was never a blessing in Israel that could not be traced basically to that once and for all Passover celebrated in that night in Egypt.

The once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ

I have only to describe the Passover thus and you will at once see it has immediate parallels with another night, likewise unique in history. That night in which our blessed Lord was betrayed, that fearful night shrouded from the eye of man in three hours of darkness, when the sword of Jehovah woke against the victim that was His Son and the blood of Christ was shed for sin, so that we might be redeemed from the wrath of God through Him. That

sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord is unique in all history; it shall never be repeated. There were types of it before it happened, but it itself never happened before. There is a memorial supper to that event still constantly repeated, but never again is that sacrifice to be repeated. It was a once-for-all act—a thing never to be enacted again—when Jesus Christ our Lord, God's Son, bowed beneath the wrath of God on Calvary and cried at length, 'It is finished!' However great and marvellous the blessings that we now enjoy; however far beyond our present imaginings those great kindnesses that God shall show to us in a coming eternity; every one of those blessings can be attributed to this unique event—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Why did God institute an annual Passover?

Because the Passover in Israel was a unique historic event that carried such basic importance, God immediately took steps that Israel should begin to remember it and annually celebrate it in order that its memory might not be lost to the children of Israel. I daresay that, as they came hot speed out of Egypt, the Israelites might have imagined that this was unnecessary. They might even have said in their hearts, as they heard the command from Moses, 'But how would we ever forget it? However long we live—should we live to be Methuselahs in our own right—how should we ever forget this great night in which we found deliverance?' But God knew the human heart. He knew how easy it would be for subsequent generations, enjoying the blessings that this Passover had brought the nation, even if they got engrossed in the blessings, God knew how easy it would be for them to forget it as their basis. Therefore he commanded that all subsequent generations should keep a yearly Passover sacrifice to remind them of that initial and unique happening when the wrath of God was averted on that original night.

But when God instituted this memorial he was not merely thinking of remote generations. You would scarce credit the story unless it stood in holy writ! Israel were not more than a few months out of Egypt when the very people that had witnessed that Passover night forgot completely what it was that had delivered them. Strange as it may sound, a few months out in the wilderness and they were concocting other theories to explain how they had become free. In another study we shall have to consider their sin in detail. Suffice now to anticipate it a little and I will remind you how it happened.

God had come down to Sinai's mount and summoned Moses to ascend the mountain to meet him. Moses came back to the people with God's proposition and they accepted the covenant. Moses had gone back up the mountain to meet God and, as he ascended up that high mountain and beyond the clouds, he was temporarily lost to their physical sight. He said that he would come back again, but he was gone some days. As one day followed another and he didn't come back, some of the Israelites began to say, 'Is it not a strange and remarkable thing that we come to be sitting here in the middle of a wilderness? And this Moses that is supposed to have led us out of Egypt—where is he? Gone up the mountain! Well, why doesn't he come again?'

'O,' said somebody, 'but before he went he said "If I go away I shall come again".'

'Ah yes,' said the other fellow, 'but they were saying that last Tuesday and he's not back yet. And isn't it altogether unreasonable that we should be stuck here in the middle of a

wilderness with nobody to guide us and nobody to lead us? Tell me, this Canaan that Moses was supposed to speak of—has anyone seen it? Has anyone around here been there and how do you know it's there anyway? It's only hearsay, you know. Perhaps it's mythology and needs to be demythologised! We must have something more solid than this to rest our hopes upon.'

And so they put their heads together and presently concocted a scheme. Plucking off their earrings they gave them to Aaron, who made a golden calf with them and they instituted another festival and danced before this molten calf. As they danced I beg you to hear what they said and what they sang—and remember, please, they were but a few months out into the wilderness. As they danced around this golden calf and bowed to it they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' (see Exod 32:1–4). It staggers credibility that people should have forgotten so soon what it was, and who it was, that brought them redemption and freedom.

Or at least it would stagger credibility were not the human heart the same all down the ages. How can we in Christendom say that things have been any better? For now there are current alternative theories in Christendom too that offer redemption to men and women. They offer improvement and deliverance, but not by the blood of the sacrifice of Christ. By other means, other gods and by other powers; social engineering, educating the masses, political performance. Therefore, God no sooner had brought Israel out of Egypt than he instituted this annual feast. Yearly they were to celebrate the Passover and thus remember how God brought them out of Egypt and what the basis of their redemption was.

Why did the Lord Jesus institute the Lord's Supper?

In similar fashion, our blessed Lord instituted a memorial supper for us. Indeed he didn't wait until five minutes after his sacrifice had been made. On the very night in which he was betrayed he took bread. And when he had broken it he gave to his disciples, saying, 'This is my body which is for you—eat of it.' And in the same way also he took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood—all of you drink it. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:23–26). And why do you think he made this ordinance for us, placing it as the central thing by which we should remember him? I think it is for the self-same reason as God instituted the Passover in Israel; so that Christians constantly and continually all down the ages might see what it is that lies at the basis of their redemption, vividly represented before them in the literal symbols.

Theoretically speaking we might have expected our Lord to use one of a number of things by which we should remember him. He could have ordained the way Christians should gather together. For instance, one of them could stand up and read the *Sermon the Mount*. It is a lovely collection of our Lord's teaching and vitally important to the formation of Christian character. Isn't it the thing by which he shines in the eyes of many people who are concerned with moral standards? Why then didn't he ordain that someone should regularly stand up and read liturgically the Sermon on the Mount? But he didn't do so. Or he could have ordained that someone should read those marvellous stories of his miracles of grace, so that all might remember him as one who came and performed signs of divine

wonder and mercy. But he did not choose even that as a means by which we should remember him. He chose that we should take bread and wine; and in eating and drinking them, remember him by proclaiming his death until he comes.

It is not of course that we repeat that sacrifice. On that score the New Testament is abundantly and explicitly clear. When, for instance, our Lord Jesus told his disciples to celebrate this supper and gave them the bread, he said, 'Take this, and . . .' (not, offer it in sacrifice)—'*eat it.*' Similarly, when he took the cup, he did not say, 'Take this, and . . .' (not, pour it out as a drink-offering to God)—'*drink it.*' Not then a *renewing* of the sacrifice but a *memorial* of the sacrifice. If that leaves us still in any doubt, then the Epistle to the Hebrews banishes all misunderstanding and tells us that when our blessed Lord, 'had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God' (10:12). In consequence, there are no other sacrifices needed.

But more! In consequence, the sacrifice of Christ itself *does not need to be offered again*, 'There is no longer any offering for sin' (v. 18). But there is a memorial written indelibly on our hearts by means of its constant repetition and held constantly before our eyes by our continual observance of it, with those memorials before us that tell us that the basis of all our redemption is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let me not sound as though I am laying down some irksome law. Is it not our delight as Christians to remember him? As we get along the journey we shall certainly find that it is a marvellous comfort. For us, as for Israel, there will be many battles on the journey and we shall not win every battle (though we shall at last win the war). There will come times of defeat, disappointment and dejection. Indeed, there will be times in our lives perhaps when it seems to us that, instead of making progress, we are going round in circles, fast getting nowhere—just as Israel did in the wilderness. In those days of disappointment and seeming failure, it will be a tower of strength to us to remember that our acceptance with God does not depend on how well we progress across the 'wilderness.' Our freedom from 'Egypt' does not hang on how well we fight the enemy; our deliverance from the wrath of God does not depend on how far advanced we are in our experience of God. Whether we have advanced a little way or a long way, whether we are making progress at this juncture, standing still, or going back a little, the basis of our redemption from the wrath of God and our acceptance with him is 'nothing but the blood of Jesus.'

There are many dear Christians that get unnerved in the Christian battle. They grow despondent and are near to giving up because they have fallen into the mistake of supposing that their acceptance with God does depend on their progress. It is not for me to belittle the importance of progress—we have many lessons waiting for us on that particular topic as we go through this book—but first things first, and basic things at the foundation. If we would be valiant in the fight and able to overcome at last, then let us settle it in our hearts that the basis of our deliverance from the wrath of God and our acceptance with him depends solely on the sacrifice of Christ. And they who have learned to put their trust in that sacrifice as the sole foundation can argue, as taught by God's Holy Spirit, if, when we were sinners, God loved us and gave His Son for us; if, when we were still God's enemies, Christ died for us—if that be true and unalterably true, then how much more shall we be saved through him? (see Rom 5:8–10).

It is very unwise to neglect the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I know life can be very busy and our supposedly Christian duties sometimes leave us little other time, but, I repeat, we are unwise to neglect the Lord's Supper.

I remember a student girl coming along and doing me the privilege of confiding in me that she was finding her Christian pathway difficult. She had been busy here and there, nobly serving the Lord, but, like us all, she had struck a difficult patch and was feeling weak and discouraged. As we talked I grew a little bit bold and said, 'Tell me, when were you last at the Lord's Supper?' She could scarcely remember; she hadn't made a habit of it. She thought it was a thing that you might easily forget and pass over, that it wasn't really very important.

Let me say to you what I said to her. Whether we understand why it is important or not, who are we to question God's wisdom? Who are we to turn round to the blessed Lord and tell him that we don't really need to do what he has ordained for us? On that very night in which he was betrayed, on that very night when he went forth to bear God's wrath for our sake and deliver us from our bondage—on that very night he called upon us constantly thereafter to take bread and wine and in all simplicity to come back to the very basis of everything and to remember him. As we do so we shall find it becomes a source of sustenance and strength and firmness and solidity. We shall find in it a perennial source of encouragement.

Who may keep the Lord's Supper?

Before I answer that, I turn back once more to my ancient text. Who may keep the Passover? In Exodus 12 God lays it down quite clearly who were to be allowed to keep the Passover. Everyone that is circumcised shall keep the Passover, 'but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it' (v. 48). You say, 'But is that really fair? Doesn't God love Egyptians as well as he loves Israelites? If it is so tremendously important, why wouldn't God welcome everybody to this Passover Feast? Doesn't he love everybody the same—Egyptians as well as Israelites?' Of course he loved Egyptians as he loved Israelites; but that isn't the point, is it?

This Passover feast was a memorial of a redemption that had taken place; to those who had been redeemed it was a memorial that they had been redeemed. If then you would partake of this feast, its first qualification was that you had been redeemed and you belonged to that holy nation that had been redeemed of the Lord. If Egyptians wanted to be redeemed, if they wanted to join themselves to Israel and trust in Israel's God, they could do so. The way was open for everyone to come and trust Israel's God. Wasn't it Ruth the Moabitess who came with her mother-in-law and God accepted her? But first they would have to come; and first they would have to believe; and first they would have to take their place with the people of God and submit to the outward sign, the sign of circumcision. For you see, as we were thinking in an earlier study, the Passover was not merely the means by which God saved them from his wrath and forgave their sins, it was the means by which God freed them from Egypt and set them on the path to leave it.

What will you say to the Egyptian, as you see him come up the road to argue with Moses? He too wants to enjoy this first Passover. Says Moses, 'Yes, come and join us and

believe in God and be circumcised.’ ‘No!’ says the Egyptian, ‘I wasn’t wanting to stand with you Israelites. Aren’t you leaving Egypt? I didn’t want to take things as far as that; I’m a moderate man myself! A little religion—not too much, you know, not too excessive in your zeal. I want to honour God and I want to believe in him, but I don’t want to trek with you across the desert. In fact, I’ve no intention of leaving Egypt, but may I not join in the Passover?’

You will have no difficulty in answering that man, because his attitude makes a mock of the whole thing. Yes all may partake, who are willing to trust God and leave their Egypt and be redeemed and travel to their inheritance. But there is no redemption, and therefore no partaking of that Passover memorial, for those who are not prepared to repent and not prepared to leave their Egypt.

What shall circumcision tell us?

All who would partake, therefore, had to be circumcised. We shall have to tread very slowly and carefully here and call upon our minds to come up with perhaps razor-sharp distinctions. We are, after all, talking about circumcision! But there are some people who have thought that circumcision in the Old Covenant represents baptism in the New. Indeed, there is a scripture in the New Testament that seems to say that, when you first read it. (If you read it quickly enough!)

In him [Christ] also you [Christians] were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11–12)

‘There you are,’ says somebody, ‘does it not say that baptism is in fact circumcision?’ Well no, it doesn’t say that. This circumcision with which we Christians are circumcised, it is here described as a ‘circumcision not made with hands.’ Israel’s circumcision was a literal one and it was of course made with hands; our circumcision is not made with hands.

Christian baptism

Having established that clear fact, let’s ponder Christian baptism. I’m not particularly concerned at this moment (I would be at others) in what particular way the baptism is performed. Remember every baptism you have ever set eyes on; can you remember whether or not it was done with hands? I think perhaps you have never seen a baptism performed that wasn’t done with hands! So Christian baptism performed with hands is not the same thing as this circumcision that is performed without hands. Christian baptism is indeed important; but far more important is this spiritual thing, performed not with any human hand but by divine power. Performed at the very depth of our personality, the roots of our personality being cut, so that ‘we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit’ (Rom 8:9). The flesh is still in us and we feel its presence, but we have God’s word for it that we (the real we) are no longer in the flesh. Praise God, we are in the Spirit.

Before you met the Saviour you were in the flesh; your very personality was rooted in what God calls *the flesh*, that rebel, fallen thing. One of these days, should you die physically

and your body is laid in the grave, when the Lord comes you hope to rise to meet him. Then that old flesh—that rebellious thing that has troubled you so long and resisted your spiritual advances—when you rise to meet the Lord Jesus, will it still be with you? You say, ‘No, thank God! That will be gone forever.’ O how interesting and how blessed—tell me, how will you get rid of it? What detaches it from you and you from it? Was it going into the grave that did it? Was it those little worms that gnawed it all away? If so, let the worms start now while we’re still here! Do you not agree? No, it is not the worms that shall do it.

The impenitent that rise to meet the judge shall rise in that rebellious thing that God calls *flesh*. For those who have trusted Christ, the thing that has cut the roots of our personality—so that we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit—is that profound operation of God’s Holy Spirit performed in the heart when we first repented of sin and trusted the Saviour.

Hear Paul on the topic. ‘We are the circumcision,’—the real thing, of which physical circumcision was but a prototype—‘who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh’ (Phil 3:3). Those who stake their faith and hope for salvation solely in Christ have learned like Paul did. He took his own righteousness, which was of the law, and cast it overboard in order to be found in Christ; not having a righteousness which was of his own, but that which is through faith in Jesus Christ. Have you come there? Abandoning all faith in yourself and your imagined goodness, owning yourself as subject rightly to God’s wrath—have you come to that point where, forsaking faith in all else, in true radical repentance you have put your faith in Christ? Then, in God’s sense, you are circumcised and you are fit to join in that glorious memorial supper, the Lord’s Supper, in which constantly we remember him and proclaim his death.

God’s clarion call to holiness of living

With that we turn to another implication in redemption and in the Passover. Exodus 13 spells out how God told Israel—watch again how soon it was after they left Egypt that he told them—that he would expect redeemed people to live a holy life. ‘Consecrate to me,’ he said, ‘all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb’ (v. 1). God’s call to holiness is dealt with negatively and then positively.

At this time of year the Israelites were asked not only to celebrate the *Feast of Passover* but to celebrate also the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*. For one week not a spot of leaven was to be seen in all their houses. They were to be ransacked and swept from corner to corner and every last crumb of leaven swept clear of their dwelling place. No leaven. God’s command to what you might call *negative holiness*. The firstborn in Israel were to be holy to God. They were to be devoted to him, positively separated to the Lord. And still today for us it is one of the immediate implications of redemption, that we begin to live a life of holiness. Indeed, when it came to sweeping leaven away, God didn’t wait until they had set foot on the road out of Egypt, he told them even before the Passover was celebrated. Before they sprinkled the blood on their houses God told them that, if they would keep this Passover, they must be prepared from that very moment on to keep this feast of unleavened bread. It was a decision they had to take the very same night in which they were redeemed. If they wished to be redeemed, they must be prepared to make a clean sweep in their lives and for this ensuing week to have done with the leaven. There was no deception here.

Having got them out into the wilderness there was no possibility that Moses would come to them one day and say, 'My dear good folks, do you know that the food you're eating is wrong? It's leavened!'

'We know it is, but what's wrong with that?'

'It's not good for folks that have been redeemed to be eating leaven. God said so!'

'You never told us before. We weren't prepared for this!'

There was no danger of such a situation arising because Moses preached the gospel to all and sundry in such terms that they were clear from the start. 'Seek for this redemption and find it, and it will involve you at once in a life from which leaven has been purged.'

Of course in Israel it was only a symbolic thing and life without leaven merely lasted a week per year. And what is more, originally it was occasioned by a simple physical and historical fact. When they came out of Egypt there was no time to make leavened bread, so they took their dough and pushed it into their belongings and off they went. They had to be content with unleavened bread for the ensuing week, but by that simple historical circumstance it became significant and symbolic of something deeper to the Jews. Many of them felt that leaven by its very nature was a symbol of a corrupting and fermenting influence and when at length we come to the New Testament we shall find it taking up leaven, in particular this feast of unleavened bread, and openly and frankly using it as a symbol.

Paul reminds us as Christians that we have had a Passover sacrificed for us. 'For Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us,' and immediately he adds, 'let us therefore keep the feast' (1 Cor 5:7-8 KJV). What feast? The feast of unleavened bread! Not now the literal feast of unleavened bread, of course. But at a deeper, spiritual level we are to keep the feast, not with the old leaven of malice and hypocrisy but with the unleaven of sincerity and truth. Nor is it merely that once a year we go through some ritual performance; the feast of unleavened bread that we are called upon to keep lasts a whole lifetime, unremittingly. Notice with me once more that there was no interval, no time between being redeemed and the beginning of leading a holy life. God impressed on them, and therefore on us, that they who claim to be redeemed are expected at once to begin a life of holiness.

Our Jewish friends, even in this city, still observe this feast once a year. They observe it literally and when it comes near the time the more orthodox among them cleanse their houses with meticulous care. Housewives, who would use their pots for this and that and the other in the kitchen, banish all those pots and get a new set of pots just in case there might be a bit of old leaven stuck to one of them and they hadn't noticed it. With meticulous—one might almost say, fanatical—though with loving zeal, they seek to carry out the literal feast and banish literal leaven.

Shall we who know the Saviour, the divine reality, the Passover Lamb, be less meticulous or less careful? I know it is beyond our power to immediately cast out all evil from our lives, but we are committed to begin the process and diligently carry on with God, seeking constantly the grace and power of his Holy Spirit to proceed. Is it not our bounden duty at the individual level to banish malice and hypocrisy? How easy it is to pretend we are different from what we are, to go around play-acting and make it sound as if we have progressed further than we have. How guilty we preachers are of doing that, so let

me interpose a warning. I am not claiming that my life is free from all leaven and I am experiencing daily and constant victory. Far from it! If you have any charity in your souls you'll be praying for me more than you pray for others. How easy it is for a preacher to say one thing and do another, to make it look as if he is good when all the time there are glaring difficulties and failures.

My dear Christian, we have no need to pretend. Even I have no need to pretend. I can go home and in the privacy of my room bare my heart and personality to God. He sees it anyway. I may confess all the ugly things and weaknesses that I find within and stay awhile and let him point to weaknesses I have not yet found myself. How can I do it? Yesterday I sat at the Lord's Supper and remembered that while I was yet a sinner God loved me and Christ died for me, knowing the worst. If I have been disappointed with myself today at what I have discovered, God certainly is sorry, but he is not disappointed. He knew it and loved me. And how I praise God that, at the rock bottom of it all, my redemption depends on him. He loved me while I was a sinner and accepts me still, whatever he finds within me. That gives me courage. I can stop pretending to be better than I am and begin to face myself and the leaven and the ferment within me. In a courage supplied by God's love I may ask his grace to strengthen my arm to wield the broom and the brush and clear out another little bit of leaven—perhaps for good.

Shall we not have to apply it to our churches?

Indeed 1 Corinthians 5 talks to us particularly of our duties as members of Christian churches. A case had arisen in the church at Corinth where a man who was called a *brother* had committed such an outrageous and antisocial sin that, inspired of God, Paul commanded that the man be excommunicated. The occasion was taken to show that if people who claim to be brothers constantly show particular attitudes and features that are so outrageous and antisocial, so dishonouring to God and to the church, they must be excommunicated.

It is a duty that some churches have found difficult to face and to perform. Indeed, some have said that it is not for us to cast anyone out of a church. They argue that our Lord himself forbade any such thing and they quote our Lord's parable of the wheat and the tares, where a man planted wheat in the field but an enemy sowed tares. When the servants saw this they came to their lord and said, 'Lord, look at these tares, do you want us to go and gather them up?' And the master said, 'No, don't gather them up, let them grow together with the wheat. Lest, in seeking to gather up those tares, you gather up the wheat as well. Let both grow till the judgment and then the division shall be made' (see Matt 13:24–30). Some Christians have applied that parable to the church. They say, 'There you are! It is our Saviour's expressed wish that the genuine and the false should be together in church fellowship, all accepted and part of the visible church on earth until the Lord comes and separates the tares from the wheat.'

But it cannot be true, can it? It cannot be right, for it would flatly contradict what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5. Moreover, when we look at our Lord's parable it was not concerning the church but the world. The field in which these things are sown is not the church. 'The field is the world,' said he (v. 38). At that level not even God himself is making his

discriminating judgment. The world goes on until that Great White Throne shall decide the issue.

While outside the church God waits, within the church it is another story. We are expressly told that solemnly and firmly he must be excommunicated. You say, 'Will not that give us a reputation for being narrow-minded?' Perhaps it will! But it will do a tremendous lot to make your gospel more credible. Would you have us return to the mediaeval age, when men who were known to be notorious sinners and profligates, oppressors of the poor and immoral, were allowed to sit as prominent members of the church? Who will ever credit the gospel of a church that allows notorious sinners to be undisciplined in her ranks? To allow such to remain in the local church is to tell the world that we preach a gospel that says there is no real difference, or at least none that we could make. Sinner or saint, profligate or a devoted follower of Christ, you have a right to be within the church. There is no such gospel! Even before they left Egypt God insisted that they cleansed their leaven out. And the plain implication of redemption is this, that Christian churches must cleanse from their midst those explicit cases of sin that the Bible has recorded and listed.

The positive side of holiness.

Said God, 'From now on every firstborn male, of animal and men, shall be sanctified and set apart for God.' The logic behind that demand was plain and simple and easy to be followed. Said God, 'Remember that you Israelites were once in Egypt and on that night of Passover, when the angel of my wrath stalked through the land, had the Passover Lamb not died in your place all your firstborn would have died. Today your firstborn live, but they live solely because I provided a ransom for them. Had it not been for my sacrifice, they would have had no life to live and because I have redeemed them with that sacrifice I count them mine. They have been bought with a price; they are no longer their own, they are mine and must be given to me.

Passing over the animals, let us simply confine ourselves to the human beings. All the firstborn were to be God's. But then God relented, if we may so talk of divinity. In those days it wasn't practical that every firstborn should minister to him in the sacred things of the tabernacle, so they were allowed to buy themselves off, so to speak. Many of these firstborns were allowed to buy themselves off by substituting Levites, paid professionals, in their place. They gave the Levite his food and drink and he did what they should have done.

I daresay some Israelites found that attractive. You wouldn't, would you? Redeemed by the blood of Christ, are we looking around for somebody else to fulfil our obligations to the Lord? Surely not! The option is not open to us anyway. We have been bought with a price and we are no longer our own; we are called upon to yield our bodies a living sacrifice.

In Israel, not only could they do it that way, but because there weren't enough Levites to go round they were allowed to buy themselves off with money. Sometimes, all unannounced (and by crafty passages and subterranean channels that run beneath our personalities), occasionally there creeps into the thoughts of some of us that it is still possible to buy off the claims of holiness upon our life. Suppose I present God with a fat cheque every now and again and contribute to this charity and to that church, then that's my job

done! I don't have to be so zealous as that evangelist, or so devoted as that Sunday-school teacher, I can go like ordinary men so long as I pay my money.

But that isn't possible. To buy off your life from devotion to Christ, you would have to pay at least what he paid for it! How much did it cost Christ to buy you—can we put a price on it or measure it? Shall we ever fathom it? The living one became dead; he, the rich, for our sakes became poor. Let us hear the exhortation of Scripture and not rely merely on our emotions. In our moments of devotion when we feel like serving God (and in those other moments when we don't feel like serving him), let us summon logic's power and reason thus—if one died for all, then that means all died; for without his death they must have perished. 'And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised' (2 Cor 5:15).

May God's Holy Spirit so speak to us that the love of Christ may envelop us and constrain us to live lives that are not only holy, but positively devoted to him and to his service.

The Road beyond Redemption

Readings: Exodus 13:17–18; 14:9–31; 15:1–3, 17; 1 Corinthians 10:1–4.

It is evident from the passage of the New Testament that we have just read that the New Testament sees some parallel between Israel's experience at the Red Sea and baptism. Indeed, we might say that more exactly and observe that the New Testament affirms that for Israel the experience of passing through the Red Sea was a kind of baptism. 'And all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor 10:2). It was a baptism in which they acknowledged not only that Moses had been sent from God to them with a message of salvation, but they committed themselves unreservedly to Moses as the captain of their salvation. On that particular occasion they proved the practical reality of the salvation that God had for them, a salvation that God had appointed they should experience through Moses and the captaincy of their lives through that Moses.

On hearing this as Christians we prick up our ears. If Israel had a baptism and were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, we are not to be outdone. We too have a baptism! We remember with a certain amount of pride and joy and gladness that we too have been baptized. They were baptized to Moses and we have been baptized to Christ. If Moses was the great apostle and high priest of their profession, then indeed our blessed Lord is the apostle and high priest of our profession. So when we hear that Israel had a baptism and were baptized to Moses, we inevitably start wondering what we may learn from Israel's experience that may help us to understand in more detail our own baptism to Jesus Christ our Lord.

To understand it all we ought to begin at the elementary level and observe that there were two parts in Israel's salvation.

Part 1. They were *delivered from the wrath of God through the Passover lamb*. On that never to be forgotten night the angel of destruction stalked through the land of Egypt executing the wrath of God on all who were not sheltered by the Passover lamb. Passover was the divinely appointed means by which Israel should be sheltered and delivered from the wrath of God. Immediately we perceive that we too have been delivered from the wrath of God by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Passover Lamb.

Part 2. But now we see that Israel had another part to their salvation. It was one thing to be delivered from the wrath of God; it was another thing to be *delivered from the power of Pharaoh and all his minions*. They were delivered from that power by this tremendous act of God that they witnessed at the Red Sea, when Israel were miraculously taken through it,

brought to the other side and set upon new ground as free men and women. The Egyptians, attempting to do the same, were drowned.

Eventually Pharaoh recovered from the stunning blow that God had dealt him. When the angel destroyed the firstborn, Egypt reeled under the shock. Indeed, for a moment, Pharaoh and his hosts were glad to see the back of Israel. But then he recovered himself and began to think, 'Why should I let these people go? Even if they were miraculously protected from the wrath of God that we have suffered, is that any reason why I should let them go? They have been my slaves these years, their fathers were our slaves and we Egyptians have always controlled them. Why should I let them go now? I will not let them go! I will re-establish the chains I had on them and get them back under my power. I will confirm the inveterate habits that they have got into here in Egypt.'

With a wry smile and smirk on his face I see Pharaoh planning the thing, counting on the psychology that had been set up in the Israelite mind. They had been slaves for centuries; slavery was second nature to them—you might almost say it was first nature to them. Pharaoh knew it and felt that he had only to show a little bit of his power and terror, the swish of the lash coming down through the air and habit would prevail. Israel would meekly go back to Egypt as his slaves. He wasn't going to let them go from his slavery just because they had escaped the wrath of God.

Salvation that can undo the habit of sinning

In Pharaoh's thinking we see an all too realistic picture of the slavery in which we ourselves once were held, when we 'walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience' (Eph 2:2). Yes indeed we have redemption from the wrath of God through the blood of our great Passover Lamb, but there's another side to this story. Satan and sin are not prepared to see us escape so easily. Satan will do his utmost to maintain the bondage into which he has brought us through inducing in us the habit of sinning. And it is to this side of salvation that we now address ourselves, thanking God that there is another side. God has broken the guilt of our sin and set us free from his wrath. He has provided a salvation that can break the power of Satan in our lives and undo the habit of sinning.

How then did these Israelites escape, and how shall we escape from the bondage to Satan and to sin? For most of us a ready answer comes to mind. Some will say that this is a simple question and there is a direct answer. We have been delivered from the wrath of God, we have forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ and now we have the Holy Spirit. He will empower us to fight against sin, struggle against the flesh and fight our enemies. As we avail ourselves of the gracious power of the Holy Spirit we shall fight our way through to victory, and in a sense that is a correct answer. It is perfectly true, there are parts of the New Testament that explicitly speak to us of how we become aware of his reality.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.
(Gal 5:17)

I suspect all of us realize that it is not an automatic thing. If we possess the Holy Spirit, we must be prepared to cooperate with him and work out our salvation. God is the one who works in and through us the doing of his will.

That's one kind of an answer. Freed from the wrath of God through the blood of Christ, we now have to fight against sin in the power of the Holy Spirit. But if that is the answer that comes first to our minds, it is not the answer we shall learn from our readings this evening.

Stand firm—the Lord shall fight for you

The text tells us time and again that on this notable occasion the Israelites did not do any fighting. Later on they fought. As they came out of the Red Sea and began to cross the desert there were enemies galore and often they were called to fight in severe and testing battles. But not now! Let us learn this first lesson, for it is of major importance. On this occasion they did not fight. God fought, and that wasn't by accident—it was God's deliberate intention. The very first verses that open this particular section of the book tell us directly that when God brought Israel out of Egypt he didn't lead them by a certain way lest they would have encountered fighting and war. Being totally unprepared to fight they would have been taken aback, lost courage, given in and gone back to Egypt.

Later on they would fight, but for the moment they were quite incapable of fighting and God did not expect them to fight. This time he had a salvation for them, which would require no fighting on their side at all. They were to 'stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD' (Exod 14:13). And what a mercy that is—calculated to rejoice our hearts. We should have a little bit of sympathy with those folks. Recently come out of Egypt, their knees were still shaking in the habit of slavery for years.

We have heard too well in our own day of what happens to people who live in labour and concentration camps. They may put up a bit of resistance at the beginning, but as the weary months add to the long drawn out years, as torture and pain and hard labour become all too real, bit-by-bit the bulk of the people give up any hope of trying to escape, any hope of resistance. The lash and the thumbscrew are too real for that and they develop a mentality of giving in. Anything to survive—cause the least trouble you can, for you'd rather survive as a slave than be killed trying to escape.

And here is Israel, in bondage and slave labour camps for years. They have had it engrained into them to submit to the taskmasters. They dared not even look the wrong way or they would have felt the lash on their backs. They didn't answer back, they did what they were told and didn't question it. They didn't moan or groan, they just went on doing it. It just wasn't realistic to hope to be free.

Half an hour down the road out of Egypt, do you suppose that they were psychologically any different? To ask them now to stand and face Pharaoh, with all his chariots and horsemen, would have been totally unrealistic. A salvation that depended simply on getting them free from the wrath of God and then asking them to take over and fight the Egyptians would scarcely have been a salvation at all. In his mercy God had set his hand to redeem them; he knew their weakness and had a salvation geared to their practical need. A real salvation that could break the bonds of Egypt, set the people free and do something in their

lives; something that would not only set them free from Egypt but set them free to begin to learn how to fight, so that when it became appropriate they would begin to assert themselves as free men and women and fight the battles of the Lord.

That is an encouragement to us. We have been delivered from the wrath of God through the blood and sacrifice of Christ and we surely have the Holy Spirit who will teach us to fight, to strive against the flesh. But in between those two parts of our salvation there is this other part—that part of our salvation where God has done the fighting. He has broken the power of sin. In the words of Romans 6:14: ‘For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.’

So let’s take up this interesting story, picture it in our minds if we can, and think now of those desperate moments when Israel turned round and to their shock and terror saw the Egyptian hosts following on behind. What a fearful experience it must have been. In the middle of their newfound joy, their scarcely credible good fortune, they were free. But were they? It seemed for a moment a dream and then they looked round. Yes, it was a dream and here was the reality—the hard iron of those chariot wheels, the prancing of the horses and the clash of the armed soldiers. Instinctively they cried out to God and to Moses. I can’t find it in my heart to blame them too much.

‘Moses,’ they cried, ‘now look what you’ve done! It’s just what we told you. We knew it would come to this, all this talk of getting out of Egypt and being free! Now here come the Egyptians and we shall be taken back.’

Already some of the Israelites could almost feel the lash coming down on their backs. They had been so psychologically conditioned that the very sight of an Egyptian would set all sorts of habits and thoughts and emotional reactions going in their brains. They couldn’t help it. Like lightning, the old electrical circuits in their brain would start turning over. They could hear the curse of the taskmaster again, they could feel his lash and they knew what it would be in solitary and on bread and water for a few days.

‘What fools we were even to think we could break it. Listening to a man like Moses; it would have been better for us in Egypt. We would at least have survived. It was so unrealistic to hope we should ever be free, only to perish in this wilderness.’

You’ve never felt like that? Well then, thank God for it. Some folks have. Perhaps you were a very respectable sinner and you didn’t get involved and tied up with terrible habits. You can say, ‘I was never a drunkard; drink had no strong hold on me, or smoking, or illicit sex, or anything like that. Nothing nasty.’ You went in for the nice things, I suppose? Just a little bit of pride now and again and the odd bit of retaliation. Well watch it, your time is coming! I suspect when we sinners—nicer sinners, as men count us—begin to realize that pride and all those other fashionable sins are towering tyrants and try to do something about it, then perhaps we too shall find and feel what other men, who have been victims of outwardly vicious and socially unacceptable forms of sin, have found. One moment they are rejoicing in the knowledge that their sins have been forgiven; then suddenly, realizing that they’ve got to go back and face the world and their old comrades and all the old temptations, there rises up within them the force of habit so strong that they almost curse

themselves for having attempted to get rid of it. They feel that Christian salvation is not for them because how could they possibly stop sinning?

I have a good friend who some years ago found the Lord and has lived since to prove it. But before he got saved he was a drunkard of the first order. A man of some ability but he could not keep down a job. He lived with his wife, when he was at home, in utter wretchedness. And then, by the good mercy of God and the help of friends, he came to know the Saviour and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and entered into forgiveness of sins. But then the test came; the man who was most used of God in leading him to the Saviour told it to me. He said that when it came round to a quarter to ten each night he would go round and visit our good friend. And I, being an innocent I suppose, said to him, 'Why a quarter to ten?' 'The pubs would soon be closing,' he said. 'I didn't doubt for one moment the man's salvation, but for a man who had been an excessive drinker and almost alcoholic, as the hands of the clock came round to the time when the pubs would be closed, the idea that he now couldn't get another drink if he wanted to, would create an almost overpowering longing for it.'

And will you criticize him? I hope not! Any more than you would criticize these Israelites. When they saw these Egyptians following on behind them they involuntarily cried out. They felt the whole scheme was useless and they had been fools to believe Moses. In his mercy, God, who knows the human heart and its struggles, knew what they were going through—and knows what we may be going through. He had ordained that the Israelites should come this way so that they should discover a salvation of the Lord. In discovering the reality of that salvation they should come to believe in God even more than they had done before, and believe also in Moses his servant.

Baptized under the cloud and in the sea

Let us therefore think of the two elements of this particular part of their salvation. Citing the Old Testament knowledgeably and exactly, the New Testament tells us that the Israelites were baptized to Moses in the cloud first and then in the sea (1 Cor 10:2). They were all under the cloud and they were all in the sea, and that of course is the order of events in this historic chapter 14 of Exodus.

Under the cloud

The Israelites were told first of all to stand firm. They wouldn't need to fight, for the Lord would fight for them. So on this particular night, when all was so dark and seemingly hopeless, they were told to stand firm and to watch as the cloud and the angel of the Lord that had gone before them to guide the way came now and stood behind them—between them and the Egyptians. 'They were baptized in the cloud,' says scripture.

Now I want you to observe what this means. It would be so easy to underestimate the significance of that cloud, thinking it was something like the wind God caused to blow the next morning. But this cloud was not some unusually thick bit of fog, it was a cloud that was there as the visible effect of the presence of the angel of the Lord, who otherwise was unseen. It was that holy person whom we now know as the second person of the Trinity, none other than he who has become Jesus, the Word made flesh. In his pre-incarnate days he

had come to lead God's people through that wilderness; he stood between them and the foe. What a glorious thing it was, the very basic element of salvation. When Pharaoh and his hosts would come to reclaim their prey, the blessed Lord stood in between.

And you might think this was enough, but let's pause for a moment. With God himself between them and their enemy, how could they be safer? How could they be more assured of victory by whichever means it would come? Now between them and their foe stood the angel of the Lord. No wonder Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 10, '... and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ' (vv. 3-4). This is no rabbinic hyperbole or foolish imagination; it was Christ, the divine Son of God, second person of the Trinity, come down to be his people's Saviour and to stand between them and the foe.

Earlier he had stood in the bush. Moses, wondering how a divine person could get himself all entangled in it, nevertheless saw that great miracle of grace as God presented himself there on earth in the thorn bush. He saw it burn but it was not consumed. Now that same person once more manifests his glory as he comes to save his people from their Egyptian foe.

And we do well to rest our salvation there. We have not been baptized in a cloud; but in a deeper and more profound sense—far more than anything Israel ever knew, we have our blessed Lord between us and our foe. We have been baptized into him and we stand in Christ. O the glory of it! 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Once we were walking according to the course of this world, under the thumb of the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience; but God has raised us, given us life and seated us in the heavenlies in Christ. It is a position that not even death shall break. When at last the apostle comes to describe the believers that have physically departed this life, he adds this glorious fact and distinction about them—they are not just the dead but they are 'the dead in Christ' (1 Thess 4:16).

Once in Christ, in Him forever;
Thus the eternal covenant stands.⁹

Says Christ, 'I give unto my sheep eternal life; and they will never perish, neither will any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father that gave them to me is greater than all' (John 10:27-29). Come wolf, come bear, come lion—nothing will pluck them out of his hand.

Pharaoh, you'll have to drive hard! You'll need to sharpen your sword and inspire your soldiers with an enormous courage, for do you suppose you will drag these unfortunate Israelites back to Egypt? First you must fight and overcome Israel's God. He stands between you and them and as far as you're concerned they're in him!

It is good that from time to time we go back to Calvary and gaze upon the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, as we see him bearing the curse of the law to set us free from the wrath of God. It is a wonderful thing as well, to wake up in the dark night of our trouble

⁹ Extract from H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Book of Joshua*, Loizeaux Brothers, 1950.

and temptation and to see the glory of God in Christ—living now, victorious and risen again—and to know that we are in him.

In the sea

But of course there was a second part. They were baptized into Moses in the cloud, but also in the sea. So now that they had security behind their backs they were asked to take this next adventurous step. Moses was told to lift up his rod, and as he did so the waters parted. It was clearly explained to the Israelites that, if they would be free of the tyranny of Pharaoh and Egypt, there was only one thing for it—they must accept the lordship and captaincy of Moses.

I think God did it on purpose, don't you? He generally puts our elementary lessons first and they scarcely had begun the wilderness journey. 'Let's get it straight,' says God, 'you once were slaves to Pharaoh; now you want to be free from Pharaoh. Well just remember that he is on the other side of this cloud. Do you really want to be free from him?'

If God had left the lesson until they were some miles or months out into the wilderness, they might have said, 'Moses, what do you mean? We weren't all that bad, were we? Were we complete slaves?'

But God didn't leave it that long. With Pharaoh breathing down their necks, it was either the dominion of Pharaoh or the captaincy and lordship of Moses. In professing to believe that Moses had the right message, they made the commitment to walk with him through those watery walls. It was not just some intellectual consent and assent to the message, and Moses was a remarkable preacher who did really preach the gospel faithfully; it was a personal commitment to Moses.

And some commitment it was! Would you have done it? You say, 'Yes I would have done it.' Would your legs have shaken any? I think mine might, in case the water came back over the top just before I got out the other side! You say, 'No it wouldn't—would it?' Well it's a bit of a risk, for they'd never done it before. Commit yourself to Moses like that and go wherever he leads without a murmur. Follow him and do everything he said, just because he said it; even a curious and seemingly frivolous thing like walking within these walls of water and risking death! God couldn't have made it clearer. There was freedom from Pharaoh and his hosts, but it was not so that you could cross the wilderness and please yourself; follow your own nose and walk according to your own ideas and thoughts and plans. There was freedom from Pharaoh on the condition they accepted Moses as lord and captain of their salvation and actually committed themselves to him. They were baptized to him in the sea.

And I think we might pause just there and get from this simple matter a very helpful and practical lesson for ourselves. There is deliverance for us too from the prince of this world if we accept Jesus Christ as Lord. That's why we are called upon to be literally baptized to our blessed Lord and that is normally right at the outset of our Christian career. Let a man confess to put faith in Christ, at once the New Testament commands him to be baptized. You will notice the verb I've used, *command*. Wouldn't it be glorious, if Peter had been the apostle that introduced you to Christ? It isn't too bad getting converted through Mr Smith, if Mr Smith is the preacher. But fancy getting led to faith in Christ by Peter himself!

‘What a privilege,’ you say. If Peter had been the man that led you to Christ, he would not have invited you to get baptized merely if you decided you liked the idea! Peter would have done with you what he did with Cornelius, he would have commanded you to be baptized with the fullness of his apostolic authority. God means business and he puts baptism there at the very threshold of the Christian life.

The Israelites had been set free from the wrath of God. But not through baptism! You see that, don’t you? It wasn’t the Red Sea water that kept the avenging angel and the wrath of God from finding them. No, indeed it wasn’t. It was the blood of the lamb that did that. And the blood of the Lamb can save us from the wrath of God and bring us forgiveness of sins. But now redeemed, the road beyond redemption starts here with baptism to the captain of our salvation.

Some folks may get confused by the variant voices of centuries of Christendom. When confronted with God’s claim and command that they should be baptized, they have said (and generally because they felt it—let them be praised for their honesty and sincerity), ‘But what’s the point of it?’ Sympathetic as I might be with that kind of remark, let me respond. Suppose there wasn’t any point in it. Suppose it was the emptiest of ceremonies, yet Christ and his apostles command it, what then? If Christ commands me to be baptized, shall I turn round to the Lord and say, ‘Lord, this is a bit of your teaching that I don’t see much point in, so I shan’t be doing it yet.’

If it were an ordinary captain in the army and he said to a recruit, ‘Thompson, two steps to the right,’ Thompson wouldn’t say, ‘But I don’t see the point of going two steps to the right, nor will I do it until I see what the point of it is.’ I for one could sympathise with Private Thompson, but what do you think the captain would say to him?

Christ, the great captain of my salvation, commands me to be baptized. Shall I, on the very threshold of the journey—fresh from having confessed him as Lord, turn round and the very first thing he asks me to do I don’t do it because I don’t understand the point of it? Let me assure you that there will be a multitude of things we don’t understand on our way to glory. Consider what a journey it is that we have to take from this little planet home to the Father’s house. From the circles of time to the glory of eternity, through the temptations of this life and past the ranks of principalities, powers, might and dominions, who shall chart the way that leads us home to glory? For our sakes God has become incarnate; the blessed Lord himself has come down to our planet to redeem me. Having risen from the dead, he offers me his guidance and his captaincy. He knows the road. ‘No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven’ (John 3:13). He knows it and he stands at the very beginning as God’s appointed Captain, pointing out to me that the only way I shall ever get home to glory is really from my heart to accept him as the Lord of life, the veritable Captain of my soul.

I know I shall have many a struggle when my old rebellious flesh rises up within me. I know it well, but that’s no excuse for letting my mind join cohorts with my flesh and agreeing with it. If it is rebellious, at least let me with a renewed and regenerate mind agree with Christ that my flesh is wrong and he is right and pray God’s help to submit to Christ and be baptized to him right at the beginning. It means that as I go along the journey I

forsake my thoughts where they run counter to Christ's and I accept Christ's. I take his word and if it runs counter to my ideas then I let my ideas go. I am baptized to Christ!

God made the point that Israel must be devoted to God's appointed deliverer and they must be baptized to him. But you might think that he could have made that point without baptism and without going through the sea. Why did he do it that way? Well, because he was going to drown the Egyptians and break their stranglehold, so that this threat from Egypt that Israel feared would be done away with. Otherwise, never mind how far they had gone across the wilderness, they would always potentially have been afraid that one of these days the Egyptians might come up behind and grab them. But God was now going to demonstrate that they were free by slaying the Egyptians in front of their very eyes. It was a vivid lesson and it brought home to them now the difference between an Israelite and an Egyptian. In a sense, the Israelite and the Egyptian both did the same thing. Israel went into the Red Sea and the Egyptians went into the Red Sea. But Israel went into the Red Sea along with Moses their saviour and they came out again. The Egyptians went into the Red Sea without a saviour and never came out.

Not under law

How shall we apply the lesson? Indeed, may we apply it? I for one think so. If you don't think we ought to take the Old Testament typologically, well perhaps for the next few minutes you can go to sleep and I'll wake you up at the end of the meeting! But it seems to me there is a correspondence between this Old Testament event and what we read of our Christian baptism in Romans 6. If you don't like the typology I'm sure you will like Romans, so perhaps you'd better wake up after all!

Romans 6 is a delightful passage and as I hinted at the beginning it tells us of our great deliverance. 'Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (v. 14). Here, if ever there was, is a breaking of our bondage and we can see directly from this chapter that the secret of all this is somehow to do with our being identified with Christ. As the Israelites were baptized into Moses, so we have been baptized into Christ; and being baptized into Christ we have been baptized into his death. The passage tells us explicitly, 'Buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (v. 4). Dead with him, buried with him, raised with him; this is the thing that our literal water baptism symbolises. As a believer is physically baptized in the outward ritual of baptism he proclaims himself dead with Christ; he is then buried under that literal water and raised out of the literal water to symbolise that he has died with Christ and risen with Christ at the spiritual level.

But then, if we probe just a little bit deeper, for many people difficulties begin to arise—unexpected difficulties sometimes. They come about somehow like this. There creeps into our minds what looks like a very good interpretation of this chapter and it seems so obviously good that we take it sometimes without questioning. We deliberately and carefully try to put it into practice and it doesn't work.

The interpretation is this. Our *old man* was crucified with Christ and we fall to pondering—this ‘old man’, who is he?¹⁰ ‘Well that’s obvious,’ we say, ‘it’s the nasty part of me.’ But this verse is telling me that the old man, the nasty part of me, has been crucified with Christ and I’m to reckon it dead. Then along comes a preacher with a vivid imagination and he says, ‘My good friends, your old man is dead you know, because the Bible says it’s been crucified with Christ.’ We say, ‘Hallelujah!’ And with his vivid imagination he says, ‘Now if anybody is dead, ponder what happens—or rather what doesn’t happen. If you saw a dead body in the street and went up to it and kicked it, the dead body wouldn’t say anything. It’s dead, you see! A dead body can’t be proud, or hateful, or sarcastic. You’re dead,’ says the preacher, ‘that nasty part of you is dead. Believe it, my brother.’

Here I am, going about my daily work and trying to put it into practice, and along come some impossible students. (I’d better explain that 99.9% are delightful folks, but 0.1% of students are impossible!) Here comes this 0.1% of a student and by 11 o’clock in the morning I’m getting a rather strong feeling that this old man isn’t as dead as he ought to be somehow! I keep on saying to myself, ‘You’re dead, you’re dead, you’re dead,’ and the more I say, ‘You’re dead,’ the more he says, ‘No, I’m not dead and if I could get at that student . . .!’ In the end I say to myself, ‘What’s the good of pretending to myself like this?’ It was all right, when I sat in that meeting the other night in the holy atmosphere of prayer and hymn singing, to tell myself that my old nasty self was dead. It seemed like it then, but that’s not where I need to know it. Out in the world, on the factory floor, in the home, that’s where I’ll know it; precisely when temptation comes I find that the nasty part—what the Bible calls ‘the flesh’—isn’t dead at all.

Of course we have made our own difficulties, haven’t we? To start with, the old man isn’t the nasty part of us. What a curious idea we get into our heads sometimes; we thought before we were saved there was a nice part and a nasty part, but there was no nice part! And do you know, when God drowned the Egyptians he didn’t drown the nasty parts and leave the nice parts, he drowned the lot! And when you got baptized, which part of you did they baptize? They baptized the nasty part of you, I suppose, and left the nice part standing up beside the baptismal tank! ‘No,’ you say, ‘they didn’t do that.’ I thought not! They baptized the lot, didn’t they?

Who is ‘the old man’?

He’s the bit they baptized—the lot! What I was without Christ, David Gooding—body, soul and spirit, born into this world a fallen creature and going on by my will to sin. Coming before God’s holy law I find that it condemned me. Not condemned the nasty part of me and let the nice part go on, condemned the lot. What would have happened to me without Christ?

I will tell you straight what happened to the Egyptians. Without Moses all of them perished. And I should have gone down to hell—not merely the nasty part of me, but the nice part as well—the whole thing combined, body, soul and spirit, lost. But then Christ came and found me under the sentence of God’s law. Christ did that marvellous thing; he

¹⁰ The word in Greek is ‘man’, as in KJV. ESV translates it, ‘self’.

came and joined himself to me, allowed me to be joined to him by faith and I came to know him. Because he and I have become one, God's law reckons that what happened to Christ happened to me. When he died, I died. God's law no longer sees me separate from Christ; Christ and I have become one. I've been baptized 'in the cloud and in the sea'—I'm 'in Christ.' Therefore when Christ died, God's law counts it that I died, and when he was buried God's law counts it that I was buried and that's it finished forever as far as God's law is concerned.

I say it reverently, if you could climb heaven's stairs and go into the accounting room where the records are kept of every man, woman, boy and girl and turn up the account book where the name David Gooding stands at the head of that particular page of the ledger, you would find such things as to make you say, 'Now I understand why God's law sentenced him to death—not just the nasty part but the whole man.' But I tell you what more you would see. Written across the ledger in the divine handwriting are these words, *Account closed, criminal executed*. And you would say, 'When? But I saw him the other day! How can this book say the man is dead and executed?' The reply would come back, 'The man is now in Christ and what happened to Christ when Christ died happened to him and what happened to Christ when Christ was buried happened to him.'

When Christ died, he died to sin once. It's finished! I tell you straight, Christ doesn't sit in heaven saying, 'I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead.' He died to sin once; he bore the sentence of that law, he's finished it and he lives now forever, never again to die and I died with him. He arose and I've risen in him. He's given me a new life that I didn't deserve and I didn't merit. He's given me that new life unconditionally, it is his own life and it is not under law.

You say, 'But what difference does it make?' It makes this difference. Because, as believers we are no longer under law, the domination of sin has been broken. Did you hear that verse? 'Sin will have no dominion over you.' Why not? Some theologians would read it as though it said this, 'Sin shall not have dominion over you because now you have the Holy Spirit.' But that isn't what the verse says. The verse says that the reason why sin shall not have dominion over you is because you are not under law but under grace and that is what breaks the fetters and leaves me free.

Consider it this way. Suppose I was still under law, do you know what kind of thing the law is? It isn't some advice you know, not even good advice. Law says, 'You shall keep the commandment and keep it 100% or you must perish.' So I wake up one morning and there is the law standing by my bed. 'Gooding,' it says, 'get up! Now this day you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. And if you come one hair-breadth short I shall curse you.' What would you say to that? Well I know what I should say. I should say, 'I won't get up at all today! I'll stay in bed, for what's the good of my getting up? I shall take two steps out of bed, kick my toe off the bottom of the bed, and I'm afraid for that moment I shan't love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength! Then the law will curse me and I'm back to square one, so I might as well give up.'

If I were under law, even though I am now in Christ, sin would still hold me and I could never get free of it. Every time I failed and sinned I should be back under the curse of the law with the sentence of death upon my head. Thank God, I'm not under law. I don't mean

to sin; but when as a believer I fall and fail and Satan comes along to tempt me, I might think for a moment, 'It's now no good, I've blotted my copybook—what's the use? I always thought Christianity was an impossible thing. That other fellow is a nice, decent chap and there is some hope for him to live the Christian life. But me! I've failed and I might as well own up that sin is too engrained in me to ever be free of it. So why not give up!' And sin would maintain its hold because of the law. Bless God, my freedom is here—I'm not under law! And should I fail I may confess it to God and seek his forgiveness. I need not despair, I need not go back, I'm free still! Yes I'm free to get up and go again, for I am not under law. 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36).

'Very convenient, Mr Preacher,' you say. 'You make it sound that if Christians sin it now doesn't really matter after all. In other words you're saying, "Shall we not continue in sin?"' Is that how you feel? Well, that's precisely what they said to Paul when he preached what I have just preached to you.

It was wrong of course and in these coming studies we shall see just how wrong it is. Just because a man is free and not under law does not mean that God will let him go on in sin just as he pleases. No, indeed not. But while it doesn't, it is still true that a believer is not under law but under grace, the chains are broken and sin shall not have dominion over him.

The Discipline of our Daily Bread

Reading: Exodus 15:22–27; 16:1–7, 17–20, 27–36.

It was altogether natural and understandable that when Israel saw their enemies dead upon the shore of the Red Sea, they gave vent to their feelings in a burst of ecstatic praise. The relief from the nervous tension of the past few days would by itself account for a great deal of their feeling; and yet there was more to it simply than relief from their nervous tension and fears.

There was in their praise, surely, an element of genuine gratitude to God as the implications dawned upon them of what had happened. God had delivered them from the Egyptians, Israel was free and for evermore free. There might be enemies facing them in the wilderness, but they could be sure that, however far they advanced along the wilderness, Egypt would now never be able to come creeping up behind and impose the chains of their slavery upon them again. They were free and God had done it. In their praise there was an element of genuine gratitude to God.

And there was an element of faith, for the Bible itself tells us at the end of chapter 14 that when the people saw what God had done they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. It had been a vivid experience of God's salvation and it provoked their genuine faith. You may be inclined (if you are that sort of person), as you listen to their praise, to feel it is a trifle exaggerated here and there and maybe they were a little bit over-excited. Perhaps Miriam shook the old timbrel a little bit too much! Never mind, that is understandable and natural. There still was in it a great deal of genuine faith.

Listen how their minds are working. They have perceived that it is God that has saved them; they didn't have to do any fighting. The Lord fought for them and if the Lord had saved them from this Egyptian enemy, what does it mean? It means that they can begin to sing with all confidence, 'He not only brought us out, but he will bring us in. If our salvation depends on God, then we can not only be sure of the past we can be sure of the future.' Their faith is beginning to stretch out and build itself upon the work of God; they begin to have certainty about their future entry to the land. You nod your wise head and say that perhaps there *was* a little bit of over-excitement because a lot of them didn't get in! Yes, that's a sorry story. I would have to admit that there was some dross mixed in with the gold of their faith, but for the moment let's concentrate on the gold.

There was faith too, as they began to contemplate the enemies that might lie ahead. They were realist enough to know that there would be some. The Egyptians were overcome, but they didn't think that there would never be any more enemies along the road that lay ahead.

They mentioned them and counted them on their fingers. There was *Philistia* and the Philistines could be terrible. There were *Moabites* and the inhabitants of *Canaan* and the dukes of *Edom*. All of them could be expected to come out and fight them and try and prevent their progress along the desert pathway. But with this brilliant experience of the power of God behind them, they surveyed all the Philistines and the Moabites and the dukes of Edom. ‘What do we care about Edomites?’—and Miriam gave another bang on the timbrel! And the Moabites—they would all fall away. ‘In fact,’ they said, ‘our hearts are already melting. We are as good as conquerors; all our enemies shall melt away.’ And we echo, ‘We are more than conquerors through him who loved us’ (Rom 8:37).

Excitement—I couldn’t deny there was some excitement in it. But there was a good deal of faith. Faith so valuable to God that he thought it well worth the trouble to refine it. And so we join with them for the moment, Moses with his lovely bass voice (or was he a tenor?) and the cymbals and the joy and the gladness. The desert wasn’t always difficult and hard; the desert itself rang with the songs of joy as the people of God knew their victories.

Marah

And then it happened. A terrible shock, a bitter, unexpected disappointment. Murmurings against Moses and against God. ‘So soon?’ you say. ‘So soon after the singing had died away—how did it happen so soon?’ We should find it almost incredible if we hadn’t known our own hearts and experienced how all too easily the highpoints of our praise and excitement can be dashed almost at once by some difficult and unexpected bitterness on the desert pathway. As you try to understand it, try and have some sympathy and make some excuses for them. For when it happens to you, you will want people to make excuses for you! Don’t you think it was the shock of it that upset them so much?

They came to Marah. See them, running down with the children to this lovely oasis of water and they went to drink it. The sudden shock of it when they tasted it! The water was bitter and they couldn’t drink it. But then, didn’t they realise that’s the kind of thing that can happen in a wilderness? It wouldn’t be a wilderness if there were fresh, sweet-tasting water. It wasn’t Belfast, it was a wilderness; weren’t they prepared for things like that to happen in a wilderness? I suppose they were—or perhaps they weren’t. Perhaps they had forgotten. It had been such an exhilarating experience, that experience of the Red Sea, and they were so full of joy and gladness. I wonder for the moment had they forgotten that this wasn’t heaven yet; it was a wilderness and they must expect this kind of thing. If they had been expecting it, it wouldn’t have been such a shock.

Is it not true for some of us?

Becoming elated with some spiritual victory or other, we fall to thinking (I would never express it to anybody, of course) that the Lord will provide for us and all is going to be wonderful. We are going to march every step of the road, victors right to the end; but it doesn’t happen that way. There come experiences of which another spoke, ‘If necessary, you have been grieved by various trials’ (1 Pet 1:6). But the contrast between their praise and their murmuring is all the more clear and sad, in that they were not only murmuring against the water—that might have been reasonable. I don’t expect God himself would expect them

to say that the water was lovely; it was bitter and God didn't ask them to pretend it wasn't. They started to murmur at God—now it was God's fault that the water was bitter! As though somehow God had let them down.

It's a trait to be found in many a human heart. One day we will sing God's praise and the next day, when something difficult happens, there's that little unrest in the heart—an ugly thought will rear its head that somehow this is God's fault. Why has God allowed this? We feel he could have done better for us than he has done. That made the water doubly bitter. Sometimes we feel almost justified in our murmurings, but we would be wise to learn that when we murmur against the Lord like that it makes the difficult experience ten times more difficult. It's bad enough having to drink bitter water, but if on top of that bitterness you add this other bitterness, that God somehow has ceased loving you and it's God's fault—God somehow could have done something better; that will add a bitterness that will rankle in your mouth and heart for a long while. It would begin to take some of the joy of heaven away before we got there, for if God through his carelessness allows life to have its bitter Marahs, then perhaps he may allow heaven to be a little bitter at times.

So they murmured against God and we now begin to discover what we shall see on other occasions as well. Although these Israelites had praised the Lord at the Red Sea and had realistically anticipated there might be enemies over the horizon (Philistines and Moabites and dukes of Edom), and had tensed themselves to face whatever enemies there might be out there—they hadn't realised sufficiently that the biggest enemy they would ever meet was an enemy not out there but in their own hearts. An enemy that had been lurking there even when they had been praising the Lord for that deliverance, an enemy lurking underneath, waiting to be provoked. And here he comes! The moment they meet the bitter experience the enemy raises his head, his name is 'Distrust in the Lord.' Because that enemy lurked within their breasts, God (one would imagine) deliberately allowed them to come across this experience.

We gather from Peter's remark that God sometimes has to allow us to have our bitter experiences. He is obliged to allow it. There is an 'if necessary' in it, a necessity. 'We are grieved by various trials.' Why? Because there is no other way of getting rid of this enemy! There is no other way known to God, other than first of all provoking him and making him come to the surface and making us aware that he's there, so that then we might turn round and look him in the face and by God's good grace throttle him dead! It is important that we get rid of this enemy who would start blaming God when anything appears to go wrong, indulging in distrust of God and thinking it's God's fault.

Why is it important to get rid of him? Israel were now beginning on a journey that should lead them through many wonders that they had never seen before and many temptations they had never met before. It wouldn't be simply the difficult things of their experience that would prove to be temptations either; there would come times when they entered into Canaan and saw things the like of which they never had seen before. They had been living in Egypt in their little hovels and their huts, in the miseries of their plight. One of these days they were going to arrive in a country flowing with milk and honey, with beautiful solid houses built of stone (said the preacher in Deuteronomy) and vineyards,

olive yards, cows and free acres. There would be such wealth and wonder for their eyes, comparatively speaking, that the very wealth of it might perhaps one of these days take them away from the Lord. Unless they reach that land of Canaan with a faith unshakeable in God, then Canaan itself wouldn't be safe for them. And you know right well that for those who eventually did get there, Canaan proved not to be safe for them.

And what about us?

We are on our way to an inheritance as well. That's why Peter says that at times 'if necessary' you will pass through difficult experiences. Why? Because you have an inheritance ahead! God allows the difficult experience in order to refine our faith here, so that it might 'be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (v. 7). We shall need our faith when we get home to heaven. I said this before at a church in Belfast and they didn't throw me out; so if you think at this stage that I ought to be, grasp your patience for a moment! We shall need our faith in heaven.

It is a common thing to be heard many times repeated—in fact it has the backing of holy Scripture—that 'now we walk by faith.' And then the hymn says that faith will give way to sight—'And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight.'¹¹ Of course it will! We can't see heaven now; we have not yet seen its glories and its joys and its wonders, many of them we can't even visualise, but one day we shall see them. And, wonder of wonders, we shall see the blessed Lord himself; not having seen him, and still not seeing him, we love him. One day we shall see him and, in that sense, faith will give way to sight.

But tell me, when we get home to heaven will that mean we won't have to trust the Lord? We'll be at liberty then—we won't need faith any more! Will you have permission not to trust the Lord up there? When he says to you, 'My redeemed child, I've appointed to you galaxy 2304 in the nebula of Orion—I want you to go out there, taking all the helpers that I shall give you to develop it for me and I want you to do it this way.' When you get out there you say, 'This is a tremendous job—I don't know if I can do it! Is this the right way of going about it?' Will you not have to trust the Lord still—or are you going to be as infinite and omniscient as God when you get home? If he asks you to do something and tells you the way to do it, will you say, 'I'm as good as he is, I don't have to trust him—I could have told him how to do it!' Or will God not always be bigger than you are and his thoughts immensely and infinitely greater than your thoughts, so that there will always be occasion for you to trust him, because you won't understand everything about God? Are you going to be omniscient when you get home? No, indeed not! We shall still have to trust the Lord. If there came a moment in that glorious place when our faith in God wavered but a centimetre, then the lights of heaven would begin to dim.

You say to me, 'There won't be any nasty things up there, so it won't tax my faith too much!' I know there won't be any nasty things, but I suspect you have seen a child frightened by a toy. I seem to remember occasions when some good aunt has come along, generous soul, and she brought a beautiful thing with a trumpet sticking out of its mouth and when you press it, it goes 'honk'! It's for this nipper of nine months and the nipper is all

¹¹ Horatio Gates Spafford (1828–88). 'When peace like a river attendeth my way'.

excited at this wonderful thing that's beginning to appear and he's looking very pleased. And then it goes 'honk' and he's dismayed and his lip curls and he begins to cry. It was a present—he'll get used to it and soon be making it 'honk', but the first sight of this present was too much for him.

Have you no imagination? One of these days you'll hear the very trumpets of heaven! You have to hear Michael and Gabriel sing their praise of God, angels whose very voices are like the sound of many waters. God has presents and tasks ahead of you that would cause your little heart to quail if you knew them now. It's not merely glory that awaits us, says the Apostle. There is 'an eternal weight of glory!' (2 Cor 4:17). How shall I bear it and be unafraid?

There are some of you sisters who would go to Buckingham Palace tomorrow to talk to the Queen and the Duchess; any number of you would be unperturbed. But there are others of you dear sisters, if you were asked to dinner with the Queen tonight and all the Foreign Service and the Ambassadors of the world, you would rather not go! The sheer weight of the glory would overpower you. They are but trinkets compared with what you yet shall face. Because of the sheer weight of the glory that awaits us, our spirits must be strengthened and our faith purified and refined until it is utterly unmoveable in God. Our very joy in heaven depends on it. What shall it be to see the Saviour at last, in all his incalculable majesty, to sense his omnipotence and to realise that I am utterly dependent on him. My whole heaven depends on his unswerving love and faithfulness to me. If ever a doubt about it arose in my heart, heaven would turn into a sort of torture chamber. 'If necessary,' says Peter, 'there will come times in life now when we must go through a period of the testing and refining of our faith, the removal of mere excitement and cupboard love until our faith is left as nothing but the pure gold of genuine faith that can stand anything and remain uncorrupted.'

Signposts along the road

So God allowed Marah and a bitter experience it was. Look at the text and just notice that Marah is on the map—these passages are a kind of map of Israel's way from Egypt to Canaan. How kind of God to provide us with a map of our way from salvation to glory! You know how it is when you go on holiday and you've got the AA¹² map with you. It's a difficult job, because it says that you'll see a signpost and when you get there there's no signpost. Of course, it makes life a bit more interesting—rather than being told everything! But how nice it is when at last you see the signpost. What does it say? 'Broken down old tower'! It looks broken down enough, but we're right and the map said it would be here!

It's like that in God's holy word. There's a map here and it says, 'Shout for joy at this juncture,' and they praise him. Another mark on the map says, 'Weep for the sheer bitterness of the road here.' I'm glad it's there because when I strike the bitter path sometimes I feel I must be lost. Why haven't I got the joy I once had? Then I look at the map and it says, 'Around about here you will know bitterness.' Well that's pretty tough, but I know then that I'm on the right road—I'm not lost after all. And shall I tell you a thing? It was marvellous standing by the Red Sea and singing the praise of God—they felt they were

¹² The Automobile Association is a British motoring organization.

nearly in Canaan. But when they got to Marah and were sad and bitter, they were nearer Canaan than they were when they were singing!

You mustn't think that just because now you have struck a difficult patch you necessarily have lost your way. You are probably nearer glory now than you were down the road before. And not merely nearer in time chronologically, but perhaps nearer in spirit. When you stood singing, it was delightful and wonderful, but there was just that little bit of excitement in it and you were saying words that were a little bit too big for you. Never mind—you meant them. But now you are facing some of the realities and God is putting you through his discipline. Even though it doesn't seem like it, you are more ready in spirit now than you were before.

Let's look at this first bitter experience

There were in fact not one but two. The interesting thing is that these murmurings and grumbings and defeats that they suffered were not because they met some giant of spiritual wickedness in a high place. Their defeats came over the ordinary humdrum matters of their food and their drink. How true to life that is! In the moment of our faith we promised the Lord that, should he call us to Africa, we would go and we would meet the elephants and the lions head-on. Then somebody in the home was a little bit unkind! How often we get it into our heads that we shall be tested in the big things when it's in the ordinary humdrum things of bread and butter and daily living that the tests come.

There was a hymn that we used to sing in school chapel. I used to think it was such nonsense—as some saintly people sometimes wrote! I couldn't make head or tail of it, but as I got older I began to see the sense:

The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we ought to ask:
room to deny ourselves; a road
to bring us daily nearer God.¹³

Praise God if he calls you to an exhilarating task in the middle of some jungle. Praise God if he calls you through some concentration camp with all its horrors and tests your faith there. But you don't necessarily need some great, lurid experience like that, it's enough to live in a family house, you know; to have an ordinary job. In God's hand the ordinary daily round and the common task is enough to prepare you for glory, enough opportunity to develop those decisions and behaviour patterns by which God trains us for the greater things to come.

The lesson over their drinking water

They came to Marah, the waters were bitter and they murmured. You will notice at once the first thing that God did. He didn't first rebuke them; that came second. And even when he rebuked them there was a note of compassion and tenderness in his voice—reasoned explanations, as a father will give his child. The explanations didn't come first, but God's act to comfort their hearts.

¹³ John Keble 1792–1866, 'New every morning is the love'.

He showed Moses a tree and when Moses cut down a branch of that tree and put it into the waters, the bitter waters were made sweet.

You say, 'Do you believe that story?'

'Yes, I believe it! It's in the Bible.'

You say, 'Was it a miracle?'

'Yes, it was miracle. I suppose it was—I wouldn't know enough about chemistry and botany to know whether it was or wasn't.'

You say, 'But that was a long time ago. Is there anything like that today that you could put into your bitter experiences and turn the bitterness into sweetness?'

'Yes, there is!'

This is not here to mock us like some kind of fairy story that doesn't bear reality. There is another tree and when put into the waters of bitterness it will turn them sweet even for us. It is the story of Calvary when God did not spare his own Son.

The Holy Spirit himself teaches us to reason like this. I needed Calvary when I was subject to the wrath of God, the message of Calvary to be my protection against the destroying angel and his wrath. But I still need Calvary in the middle of my disappointments, public or personal. It's tough and I hadn't thought God would allow it to be so tough. What do I think of God? 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (Rom 8:32). When it seeps into my heart, it begins to turn the tide and the bitterness.

He spared not his Son!

'Tis this that silences each rising fear,

'Tis this that bids the hard thought disappear;

He spared not his Son!¹⁴

We should be mistaken to think that God isn't tough; there isn't one drop of sentimentality about God. Have you never witnessed the toughness of God in the lives of your fellow-Christians? You may think that if a man volunteered to be a pioneer missionary, God in response would always protect him and nothing evil would befall him, but you've learned different, haven't you? You have seen how God has allowed such devoted people to lose loved ones, their children, their spouses, and their own lives. I tell you again, God is tough; but 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). There was no tougher place on earth when Christ died on Calvary, but the God that gave him up for us all will graciously give us all things and the wood of Calvary in the water of my 'Marah' begins to turn the very bitterness to sweet.

That being done, God begins to explain things.

[He] made for them a statute and a rule . . . saying, 'If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.' (Exod 15:25-26)

¹⁴ Horatius Bonar, 1808-89, 'Blessed be God, our God'.

You will each have to make up your mind (you have probably done it long since) as to what those verses mean. Does it mean that God was promising them that if they obeyed him they would never be ill, never have a headache or tonsillitis, never have any boils? Who knows, it might be that; but, if it meant that for Israel, I'm afraid I can't promise you the same nowadays.

There are some Christians who say you can claim it—not only was forgiveness of sins bought for us by the redemption that Christ procured for us at Calvary, but healing was procured for us as well. We may claim healing when we are sick on the basis of the sacrifice of Calvary, and we can claim it now! Some go so far as to say that if you are sick and you don't get healed, then it must be your lack of faith. If only you had enough faith you would be able to claim healing. That isn't true! The New Testament itself explicitly tells us—it says to the believer, 'If . . . the Spirit of God dwells in you . . . if Christ is in you . . . the body is dead because of sin' (Rom 8:9–10). It doesn't say that if Christ is in me this physical body is disease-free. When a person trusts Christ it does not mean that he is relieved from the sentence that was passed on our forefather, Adam. Death was passed upon Adam and, even if you trust Christ, that sentence is not removed. If the Lord doesn't come, my brother and sister, you will die—'the body is dead because of sin.' One day you shall be raised and have a new body conformed to the body of his glory. *But not now.*

Notice what the Scripture says,

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.
(v. 11)

There are those who will say, 'The body is dead because of sin, but now we have the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit makes our bodies alive right here and now.' But did you notice what the verse said? '. . . give life to your *mortal* bodies!' And mortal means 'subject to death.' Mortal they are and still will be until the Lord comes. 'When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, *then* shall come to pass the saying that is written . . .' (1 Cor 15:54). *But not now.* The believer's body in this age remains mortal, with all that that implies.

We could gather something for ourselves from these verses. God says to them, by way of explanation, 'I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians.' What is the difference? You should know those Egyptian diseases—they started to come when the Egyptians refused to believe God and Pharaoh hardened his heart and disobeyed God. The diseases mounted in their soreness: murrains (Exod 9:3 KJV)—a very severe plague upon their livestock and boils and eventually death itself. The boils were painful, but they weren't as painful as the significance of the disease. It was a punishment from God, a penalty for their disobedience.

My dear Christian friend, it will never happen to you. There may come some painful things in your life, but if you are a believer learn this difference: there is now no condemnation, no penalty for sin—the penalty has been borne. There will come chastisement and when we are wrong and straying God may have to use severe chastisement to bring us back. Chastisement is one thing, penalty is another; there will never

come any penalty. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Says the Apostle Paul, 'But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined . . .' (1 Cor 11:31-32). Chastisement can be bitter, but listen, 'disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.' Forever and forever there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

'What difference does it make?' you say. It makes everything of difference. When the bitterness comes, if it were the bitterness of rejection by God, then it would be hell begun. But if I dare to believe it is the discipline of a Father's heart that loves me, then in that very love I can get the courage to face the pain.

Here's a young child and she needs an operation. The parent knows right well that it's going to be a very long operation and a very painful post-operative period. The child isn't old enough to understand and keeps protesting to the parent and doesn't want to go. 'Why are you handing me over to that surgeon, that cruel man with the knives?' Of course, it breaks the parent's heart to have to do so, but it will help that child in those long hours of suffering if the child can be made to feel that this isn't a punishment from the father. The parent isn't forsaking the child, being unfaithful or heartless; the parent is standing with the child. Not to save her from bearing the pain, but to communicate the strength of a parent's love and security till the child comes to believe that the parent is doing it because he loves her.

What a softening and a soothing of my troubled spirit when I come to see that God's ways with me are not punishments and rejections. I'm not an 'Egyptian.' Never will one drop of wrath fall on my head; there is no condemnation. Pains there will be, but the pains of love's chastening and, when I begin to see it, there comes another healing into my life. How natural it is for us to become embittered. It doesn't cure us—and I know it's easy for me to speak. In some great tragedy or trial it is easy to become embittered and difficult to resist being bitter, even towards God himself sometimes. 'Why did he allow it? Why has he singled me out for this and not allowed it for somebody else?' But the bitterness only makes the trouble worse. I used to get fearful headaches as a child. I still remember the kind parent who used to stand over me and say, 'Don't cry!' But how could I stop crying? 'The crying will make it worse,' she said. And so it did!

When I see that these things are love's chastisement and I hear his voice, 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline' (Rev 3:19), there begins to be an inner healing of the spirit and I say, 'It's all right; it shall be well.'

And so said the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews. They had been asked to stand by as their furniture was smashed and their homes ruined, their loved ones carted off to jail by their persecutors. Their knees were beginning to sag, their hands hung down and they felt like giving up. They believed in God's Son and here was God allowing them to suffer these tremendous atrocities. The writer explained that, whatever the enemy intended, God meant it for their education. Afterwards it would yield its harvest of pleasant fruit.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. (Heb 12:12–13)

Some of our wounds will leave scars as long as life shall last. A scar is a sign of a wound that's healed! 'I am the LORD your healer' (Exod 15:26).

The lesson over their daily bread

This is the other necessity of life and they ran short of food. This time it was by God's deliberate intention; he had a lesson to teach them about daily bread. He had, in fact, two lessons to teach them.

*Lesson 1. They must learn that their daily bread comes from God.*¹⁵

'But,' you say, 'they knew that!' If they did, they had forgotten it on this occasion.

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, 'Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' (Exod 16:2–3)

They came round Moses once more and said, 'At least when we were in Egypt there was a shop around the corner and we could have got the daily bread from it. If the Lord had sent some trials, we could at least have said, "It's too bad, but we've got our bread." Now we are out in this wilderness and there aren't any shops! Who did they think gave them their bread in Egypt, I wonder!

It reminds me of the story of a little girl who went out for the first time to a restaurant with her mother. When the waiter served the soup, the mother bowed her head and gave thanks. The little girl said in astonishment, 'Mummy, why did you give thanks? We have paid for this today!' That childish delight; nobody paid for it on ordinary days, it always appeared on the table!

Who supplied their bread down in Egypt? You say, 'They worked for it!' So they did, they worked hard for it. But does that mean it wasn't God that gave it to them? Who gives you your daily bread and butter? You say, 'I work for that in Mackie's¹⁶—jolly hard, too!' Well I daresay it is hard, but is that your sole source of supply? If it is, it will be too bad if ever you get unemployed. If Mackie's were the ultimate supplier of your daily bread it would be bad for you if they were to go broke. In order to teach them this very helpful lesson God on this occasion allowed them to hunger. Even when they worked for it in Egypt, it wasn't simply their work that got them their daily bread and it certainly wasn't the Egyptians. It was God who gave it and out here in the wilderness it will be God that gives them their daily bread, whether they work for it or whether it comes down from the sky.

¹⁵ Lesson 2, *They must learn to fight*, is in the next chapter.

¹⁶ James Mackie & Sons was a textile machinery engineering plant and foundry in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The company closed in 1999.

Why should they have to be told that it's God that gives them their daily bread? Because God had very good reasons for giving it to them!

'Yes, I know—it was to keep them alive,' you say. 'That was a marvellous march of theirs across the desert. They were full of singing good hymns and spiritual songs, exercising their faith in God, going to meetings around the Tabernacle and things like that. But they would never have got to their inheritance unless they had their daily bread. You've got to eat!'

Yes, that's true; and you'll never get to heaven unless you have your daily bread. Well I suppose you would! —But you might get there too quickly and unprepared, without having learned the lessons. So, if we've got to spend some time in the desert of this world learning our lessons, we shall need our Cornflakes!

'Yes, that's what we do,' you say; 'we work for the Cornflakes and God supplies the spiritual power.'

No, in the last analysis it is God that supplies the Cornflakes! It is important that I get hold of that because, when he supplies my Cornflakes, he is doing something more than keeping me going physically.

He tells them straight why he had held the food up and what the lesson was now when he did a virtual miracle and rained manna down from heaven. He was going to prove whether they would keep his commandments or not. That was what the daily bread was going to be about—a daily exercise in whether they were going to keep the commandments of the Lord. As the story proceeds, you will perceive how they needed the lesson.

Command 1. They were to go out and collect the manna and they weren't to keep anything till the next day. As sure as your life, someone did! A plain, straightforward commandment—you couldn't have misunderstood it if you tried. 'Don't keep any of it until tomorrow.' But some of them kept it and it bred worms and stank.

Command 2. On Fridays gather a double amount because there won't be any on the Sabbath. Sure as eggs are eggs, some of them gathered only one lot on Friday and went out on Saturday expecting the manna to be there and it wasn't there! 'How long will it be,' says God, 'before you learn to obey my commandments?' I detect a little element of divine impatience in the process because, important as their daily bread was, it was vastly more important that they learned to keep the commandments of the Lord.

Is it not so with us? What is this business upon which we spend some eight hours a day—some of us more and some of us less? Is it one of these awkward necessities that you wish you could cut out of life? 'If I were a millionaire,' you say, 'I wouldn't go back to that factory again.' What would you do? What is this all about? Let the blessed Lord Jesus tell us.

'When you go to work, don't go like the Gentiles go. When the Gentiles go to work,' says Christ. 'Let me tell you what they are doing it for. They are going for food and clothes.' (Matt 6:32)

'Well, what else would a man go to work for?' you say. 'If you had all the food and clothes in the world, a man would never go to work.'

Wouldn't he? I hope that's not true of you—if it is, you're an old Gentile! The first motive for going to work is not the food and clothes; they are the secondary dividends and your Father knows that you need things like that. He's a realist, he knows that your stomach

needs food. The prime thing in going to work is this: 'Seek first the kingdom of God' (Matt 6:33) (that is, the rule of God in your life). That's the first motive for going to work. Whether it is making the beds or the doughnuts, adding up the bills or shaking the computer, it's work that gives us the exercise to see whether we will keep the commandments of the Lord or not and to get us into the habit of obeying him and developing what the Bible calls, 'his *righteousness*'—God's right way of living my life. It gives me the opportunity to be honest, to be truthful and unselfish, to be kind, just and forbearing. Doesn't it?

For that there was never a better school than work. In the meeting, when we are surrounded by delightful saints, it's easy to be holy (sometimes!). But work is a good exercise ground and some of us find it so tough we wouldn't go unless God told us to. God made us to have stomachs that get empty; he doesn't give us rich grandfathers in America, so we've got to go to work! God uses work to see whether we will obey his commandments, develop his righteousness and a truly Christian character. We need it! I begin to think that the journey isn't going to be long enough for me. What about you? How much I have got to learn and practise; not just to learn it with my head but actually succeed in doing it. Heaven comes on apace—I pray that I'll have learned to behave properly before I go home.

It would be a sad thing if I disobeyed his commandments in order to get a crust of bread; if, because I was afraid of losing an order, I told a lie to a customer and said it would be ready next Monday when I knew it couldn't possibly be. I do what the unconverted man would do and tell the customer, 'Of course it will be ready next Monday,' when I know it couldn't be here for another three weeks. I'm afraid he'll go down the road to another shop, so I tell him a lie and then make some excuse on Monday when he comes in and the thing isn't there. Disobey the command of the Lord for the sake of a crust of bread—what a topsy-turvy way of living that would be!

When they got redeemed out of Egypt, God took them through a wilderness and started his practical lessons with the sheer basics of life, food and drink, so that he might prepare them for the inheritance that lay ahead. God help us to understand what life is about, accept its disciplines gratefully from the Father and take his courage to face them, so that when the food and the Cornflakes and the carrots are gone forever we may have learned through these humble lessons to develop a character that will last us eternally.

God's Way with Rebels and the Unending War

Reading: Exodus 17:1–16.

In our last study we were considering together the first lessons which God taught Israel after they came out of the land of Egypt. Those lessons were necessarily at the elementary level. Therefore, God taught them these lessons at the level of their daily food and drink.

They had recently been delivered from the wrath of God by the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb. But now they must be delivered not so much from the wrath of God as from that state of heart and attitude to life for which the wrath of God came upon the land of Egypt. In other words, the wrath of God came on Egypt because of Egypt's worldly attitude of heart and now Israel must also be delivered from the same worldliness of heart, that false attitude to God and to life. They must learn that there is much more in food and drink and in the work that is required to get them; much more than the mere matter of keeping our physical bodies alive. To start with, our daily bread and butter come from God himself. And secondly, that the prime reason why God makes us hungry, and therefore makes us go to work to earn our daily bread and butter, is that he might develop Christian character in us — what he calls *the kingdom of God*, the rule of God and his righteousness.

So God began to teach them these elementary lessons of life in the kingdom of God and they began very shakily. At first they failed and they murmured, but it is understandable that they should make mistakes. They were a race of ex-slaves, not long delivered from that slavish way of life, but they learned remarkably well for ex-slaves. They learned, for instance, the grace of sharing what God gave them (16:17–18). Each man went out daily to get the manna, some of them gathered more, some less. Nevertheless, when the manna was eventually measured out with the omer¹⁷, it was found that, whether a man gathered more or gathered less, nobody had anything over and nobody lacked.

There are some people who suppose that this happy state of affairs was brought about by some miracle. When the manna was gathered and was being measured out, God did a miracle in the basin and somehow the excess disappeared and the lack was made good. Maybe there was a miracle of that kind, but for myself I am disposed to think that, if there was a miracle, the miracle lay not in the manner in which the manna was measured but in the hearts of the Israelites themselves.

¹⁷ The omer was an ancient Israelite unit of dry measure.

I take my cue from 2 Corinthians 8, where Paul makes reference to the manna. In that context Paul is exhorting the Corinthian Christians to join in the fund that he is collecting to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In recent times there were difficulties in Jerusalem; there had been a famine and many of the Jerusalem Christians were hard up for money and could not buy enough food. Therefore, Paul determined to ask the Greek Christians to give of their excess so that they might send the money to Jerusalem, but he explains to the Corinthians that he does not want them to scrape and go short themselves so that somebody else might be supplied. 'That is not the idea at all,' he said. 'The idea is like it was in the wilderness, where some people had more than they needed and some people had less and therefore when all was gathered in they shared it out so that the surplus should be used to supply the deficiency of the others. In the same way,' he says, 'I would like you now to take what you do not need and send it to Jerusalem, so that the shortfall there can be met by your surplus.'

'As it is written, [he says, quoting Exod 16] "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack"' (v. 15). In other words, Paul is saying, 'One of these days it may be the other way round. It may be that the Jerusalem believers will have more than they need and you in Greece have less than you need. We hope that when that occasion arises the Jerusalem believers will take their excess and use it to meet the shortfall in your income.'

It's not a question then of some supernatural miracle in our bank balance. It is rather that the believers should learn the grace of the Lord Jesus and to regard what he gives them as a sacred trust and not just hug it to themselves, but be aware that sometimes God gives us more than we need so that we might share with him the joy of using our surplus to meet the deficiency in other people. Contrariwise, if we are short we shall need to know the proper grace and humility in being willing to accept from others what God has given them in excess. Not only will God have the joy of giving to us, but our fellow Christians will share in God's joy and learn the graces of true stewardship.

The Sabbath

And then Israel learned another lesson, the lesson of the Sabbath. On Fridays they were to go out and gather twice as much as they did on ordinary days, for no manna would come on the Sabbath and they would need this extra amount on Friday to carry them over until Sunday. At first they found it difficult to trust God like that. Some anxious souls went out on Saturday as well, to see if there was anything they could gather and God had to rebuke them for this lack of faith in God himself. God was writing into these early lessons the need for Israel to learn to rest upon him as a faithful God who would undertake for their need.

We still need to learn that lesson in principle. We are no longer required to keep Sabbath as a matter of the Law, but it is for the good of our souls—and our nervous systems into the bargain, to learn to rest on God in our daily work. Of course we have real need to earn enough bread and butter, so we have to go out and work. We must not fall into that mistake, at the one extreme, of imagining that because we have become Christians there is no longer any need for us to go out and work. Some Christians in the early churches did fall into that mistake. They thought that becoming Christians meant that now God would supply all their

needs and they would not need to demean themselves or soil their hands with ordinary secular work. Time and time again Paul had to speak to them quite plainly and directly, telling them that they would have to go to work. It is not an especially spiritual thing to abstain from working. 'If anyone is not willing to work,' says Paul, 'let him not eat' (2 Thess 3:10). Christians should learn to develop honest trades and professions so that they may have enough for themselves and enough over to give to the needs of others. They are not to sit around and do nothing under the guise of being especially spiritual—for it isn't spirituality but sheer laziness.

On the other hand, it is easy for some of us to go to the other extreme and let ourselves be burdened down by daily work as by some great gigantic load; ever anxious, never able to stop working, never able to relax and to trust God. We are so anxious for the needs of tomorrow, next week, next year, the children's education and whatnot, that the whole thing becomes an intolerable burden and hard labour. In that too we are dishonouring the Lord. It is God that has made us; it is God that has set us our daily task and God our Father would not have us to be overburdened like slaves.

He had just redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The God who set them and sets us our daily lesson of work is no taskmaster, no tyrant or prison officer. He gives us our daily work so that in it we might learn spiritual lessons and develop Christian character. But he wants us to trust him; from time to time to lean back on him and dare to believe that he who has given us our task will support us. It is he in the end that supplies our need. It doesn't hang altogether upon our own terrible, difficult efforts, but in the end our bread comes from him and we may trust him. Now and again he lays us aside so that we might learn to trust him; to learn that, when our own efforts can no longer be made and we must hang helplessly dependent upon God himself, God is faithful. God is *Jehovah-Jireh* still; the Lord who sees and the Lord who supplies and provides for our need.

In the desert Israel discovered God's faithfulness

We are told that God, who rained the manna down upon them in the beginning, continued to give them this bread from heaven all the way across the wilderness until at last they arrived in the promised land. God was faithful in spite of all their murmuring and disobedience, their wanderings and their shortcomings. Even though they were often unfaithful, God remained faithful and supplied their daily bread until they arrived home in Canaan at last. God's purpose was that they should come to Canaan, and unless he supplied their daily bread they wouldn't arrive.

And we must take comfort, for the God who lived in Moses' day is still the same today. He has pledged himself that if in our daily work we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these other things that we need shall be added to us. God's prime aim in our daily work is the fashioning of our character. He is preparing us for the enjoyment of our great inheritance that lies ahead and all those many spiritual blessings with which he has blessed us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. But God is aware that we cannot learn our spiritual lessons unless first we have enough food to keep our physical bodies going. We will not arrive in heaven, taught and complete in our lessons, unless we have had enough food to keep us through the time of our schooling here on earth. So, even

the humble Kellogg's Cornflakes are necessary if we are going to arrive in heaven duly prepared. And God, who has the greater aim in view, has guaranteed that he will supply our need. All these things shall be added at the physical level for as long as it is necessary to keep us here in school.

That doesn't mean that no Christian will ever die of starvation. When the Lord Jesus was teaching these lessons in Matthew 6 he bade us consider the birds, how that they have no storehouses or barns and yet God feeds them. God is faithful, but that doesn't mean that no bird ever dies of starvation. In the depths of winter you will see many a bird frozen to death, perhaps even in your garden. At the same time we mustn't be starry-eyed about God's promises to us. Unless the Lord comes first we shall die; the time of our schooling here will finish and God will take us home to our glorious inheritance. He will use various means to take us away; some illness, maybe cancer, that won't necessarily be very pleasant. The opening of the door, the walking out of our physical bodies and home to glory isn't always a very pleasant operation. But whether God takes us through illness or through starvation it will make very little difference—neither of them is particularly pleasant and we shall not be upset when our schooling is done. I have known plenty of boys who, when they came to the last term and the last day in school, were glad to have finished with the whole business and go out into real life. They didn't cry because they had to leave school, they were jolly glad! And one of these days our lessons on earth will be done. We shall have no more need of daily food, the Kellogg's Cornflakes and roasts of beef; no longer any need of our houses or our clothes. The time for schooling will be over and the doors will open and let us out and we shall go home to God. Until then God has guaranteed that he will supply enough for our needs.

The true bread from heaven

As we think of that lesson, perhaps our hearts are moved to think of these things at a deeper level. God rained down literal manna from heaven upon the Israelites and maintained them. But as we think of that and of our daily bread, we think also of that spiritual manna—the real bread from heaven that is given us to maintain our spiritual life, without which we should perish spiritually. What about that supply? Will it come always regularly and faithfully, carry us through, nourish us spiritually and maintain our spiritual life throughout this wilderness? As Israel went through the wilderness God gave them bread from heaven to eat, the literal manna. 'Man ate of the bread of the angels' (Ps 78:25). But in spite of it many of the Israelites perished in the wilderness and never got in. How glad we Christians must be that we have the words of the Lord Jesus on this matter. In the Gospel of John he tells us that he is the true bread from heaven, 'I have come down from heaven,' he said (6:38).

We pause at that statement to survey its wonder. He came down from heaven, not now simply as the manna from the sky. He is the true bread of God who came down from that other world, from the presence of God to our planet, so that we might believe him and receive him; that he might impart to us eternal life and maintain it constant and eternal within us until he takes us eventually into that spiritual realm from which he first came.

It isn't that Christ has given us certain information about it, so that we are to believe it and follow its rules and regulations in the hope that we may eventually arrive—Christ himself has come down from heaven so that we might receive him. We may *eat* him, so to speak, until he becomes part and parcel of us. We who have trusted the Saviour have known within us the beginnings of that great miracle. We have received the Saviour and daily we 'eat him,' as he himself remarked: 'As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me' (John 6:57). We are thereby assured that we shall never perish. Our eternal life will be maintained all through this wilderness and on into the eternal state because all who have trusted Christ have the living Christ within them. Just as you ate your food this morning, that food became part of you and gave you the strength to go about your daily business; so our blessed Lord has become part of all those who trust him. His eternal life abides in them; it shall never grow ill or feeble but remain in them; it shall never perish and shall bring them home to God at last.

Indeed, our Lord Jesus took the trouble to point out the difference between the believer in this age and Israel in the wilderness. 'I am the true bread that came down from heaven, that a man might eat of me and live for ever. Not as your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and died' (v. 58). They ate that physical bread from heaven but in spite of it they died. They died because they sinned.

What about us, then, for we are far from perfect? We have indeed received the Lord Jesus, but from time to time we sin, we fail and fall. Does that mean we shall be in danger of not getting in at last? The words of the Lord Jesus are comforting and clear—'With you,' he says, 'it is not as your fathers did eat bread in the wilderness and died. He that eats of me shall live forever. I am come down from heaven to do my Father's will'—and it is unthinkable that our Lord Jesus shall fail to do it. Then what is his Father's will, for whatever it is, he will do it perfectly. He explains: 'Here is my Father's will; that of all who see the Son and believe on him I should lose none. I will raise him up at the last day' (John 6:39). So then we have our Lord's guarantee that 'the manna' shall not fail until he has brought us home at last. He has come down from heaven; he will lose none of us; he will raise up every believer at the last day.

*Lesson 2: They must learn to fight*¹⁸

Strengthened by these glorious promises, by this heavenly food, we may now turn to face the next lessons that God taught Israel and through them teaches us still. When we come to Exodus 17, God took Israel into the next level in their school, so to speak. They must now learn the next lesson—they must learn to fight. That is a very interesting thing, for on a previous occasion we discovered that, when God first brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he didn't let them fight. They were not prepared for it. He took them a roundabout way in the wilderness so that they should not meet any Philistines and they should not see war. In those early days he was afraid that, if they had been faced with the need to fight, they would not have been able to stand up to it, they would have turned and gone back to Egypt.

¹⁸ Lesson 1, *They must learn that their daily bread comes from God*, in previous chapter.

Do have compassion on them. For years they had lived in Egypt and their fathers before them, until the slave mentality had dyed them through and through. It is a sad thing about slave labour camps that in the end they take away something out of the human spirit. When people first go into captivity they very often make some effort at resistance; but, when they find the awful suffering that is incurred by trying to resist, in the end they give up resisting and their sole thought comes to be for survival. When any attempt at violent resistance would bring you torture; when even so much as an angry look or a resentful spirit would bring down the taskmaster's lash upon your back or put you in solitary confinement, then you generally give up any idea of resistance and do what you are told, whatever you think. It does something terrible to the human spirit.

Israel had been in the slave labour camp. When first they came out God did the fighting for them and they didn't have to fight, but he couldn't let things go on like that forever. He had to start to deal with this side of their character and build into it what the years of slavery in Egypt had suppressed. He had to build into them the ability and the willingness to fight evil and to join with God in fighting his enemies.

God is intent to teach us to fight as well. Of course nowadays we are not to fight with carnal weapons. As believers, the New Testament tells us quite plainly that God does not wish us to fight with carnal weapons. In fact he forbids it. When Peter drew his sword to defend the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus told him to put the sword back again into its sheath. Peter had mistaken the nature of the kingdom of God. He attempted to defend the kingdom of God and its king by the literal sword and Christ forbade it. 'If my kingdom were of this world,' he said to Pilate, 'then my servants would fight [with literal weapons] so that I should not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not now of that sort. My kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. It is not to be defended or promoted by the use of physical violence' (see John 18:36).

Spiritual warfare

It would have been a happy thing for the Church, if the Church had always remembered that. Alas for those travesties of Christianity that have taken place down through the centuries, when Christians, sometimes with goodwill and sometimes otherwise, have taken to the sword and cut people's heads off and maimed their bodies, ostensibly in order to promote or defend the kingdom of God. These occasions have been ghastly travesties of the true nature of the gospel. Since Israel's time things have happened that have changed the nature and the level of the war in which believers fight. In Israel's time they had to fight with literal weapons at the level of the physical world. Since those times God himself has become incarnate; the prince of righteousness has been born in Bethlehem. He has joined in the battle himself and fought it at Calvary, at the level of the grave. Now he has risen and gone back to heaven, and sent forth his Holy Spirit. That has transferred the battlefield from the physical level to the spiritual. 'The weapons of our warfare,' says Paul, 'are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds' (2 Cor 10:4).

But though we fight at the spiritual level, the fighting is no less real and we must be taught to join with God in fighting his enemies and our enemies. It is part of our spiritual character that we should be both able and willing to fight—keen to fight the battle against

sin here on earth before we are taken home to God's heaven. We must learn to face sin, to know what sin is, to see the terror and the evil of it and of our own accord voluntarily to wish to fight sin. Otherwise, when we get home to heaven it might be that some of us wouldn't be altogether convinced that sin was sin and we might want to take a little time off from heaven to indulge in some of the things we haven't had time to indulge in on earth.

It has sometimes happened to me, I confess in my stupidity, that I have regretted that I got saved quite so early on in life. These times have come over me, for instance, when I have been listening to some people giving their testimony, how they got saved, and they make it all sound so wonderful. Not merely what happened to them after they got saved. Of course that was wonderful, but even what happened before. They describe it in such glowing terms—what marvellous sinners they were and what tremendous things they got up to. And here I am, feeling to myself how stupid I was to get saved so quickly! I too could have experienced all those wonderful things and enjoyed them to the full, as obviously the speakers did, and then, when I got tired of them, I could have had a marvellous and spectacular conversion. Everybody would think me wonderful for having such a lurid past and for getting converted in such a spectacular way; then, after my conversion, here am I, the most marvellous Christian on earth. So I've had it all ways round! But I got converted before I had a chance to indulge in all these marvellous things.

As you can see, such reasoning is altogether nonsensical and if I indulged in it seriously it would be wicked. It shows that I would have a faulty idea of sin. In the back of my mind I should still be thinking that sin is a bit naughty and we shouldn't do it, but it still is attractive; it is spectacular and it is interesting. And if I avoid it, it's not because in my heart of hearts I don't like it, but because the elders wouldn't approve of it, or some other Christians would say it's bad, or something of the sort. If I have any trace or taint of such an attitude in my heart God has to deliver me from it. What a terrible thing it would be if I got home to heaven and at the end of one of the choir pieces I put up my hand and asked Michael or Gabriel or somebody if I could be excused because there was a certain activity down on earth that is not done up in heaven (nobody does it up there), but I would like to just go and have a few years indulging in it. Well then, not only would heaven itself be aghast, my own enjoyment of heaven would be seriously lessened.

God is determined that, by the time I get home to heaven, I shall say goodbye to sin. Not merely because he tells me to, but because I want to. I don't want to sin any more, I know sin for what it is and I am determined to have done with it. Therefore God leaves me here in this world surrounded by the flesh and the devil and temptation. He doesn't always deliver me and put me into some sinless world; he wants me to face sin, to be attacked by it from time to time so that I might learn what it is, how to face it and learn to fight it. Hence he leaves me to struggle and to strive and to fight. He doesn't arrange things so that I never get tempted, he allows me to be tempted so that I might develop a strong Christian character and attitude and, by the very necessity of fighting, learn to fight.

Two more lessons

Israel were going to be taught to fight and on this occasion they learned two lessons—two fundamental and vital lessons. The lessons they learned were so vividly etched upon their

memories that they named a couple of places after them, determined never to forget these experiences.

The first lesson

They fought against Amalek at Rephidim, 'They called the name of the place thereafter Massah and Meribah'—testing and quarrelling (17:7).

They made first of all a colossal mistake—as they were preparing to fight they mistook who the enemy was. Instead of fighting the real enemy they got it into their heads that the enemy was God himself—God was the enemy! They murmured against Moses and they tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?' It was a ghastly mistake and when they found out that their murmuring and fighting had not been simply against Moses, but against the Lord himself, they called the name of the place 'Massah and Meribah.'

The second lesson

In order not to forget the first lesson, they called the name of an altar, *Jehovah-nissi* (v. 15 KJV)—The LORD is my Banner.

In spite of all their failings, they learned that God was not against them as originally they had thought. God was for them and in their fighting God was prepared to be their commander-in-chief. God was still prepared to fight for them and fight with them. Indeed, they weren't expected to fight on their account by themselves; it was God's battle. All they had to do was to join up with God under his colours, his standard, and fight with him as their general. They called the name of the place Jehovah-nissi—The LORD is my Banner.

Let's look at these two stories

1. They fought against the Lord, thinking he was their enemy

It was an experience full of bitterness and perhaps we can understand the bitterness they felt, for this time they journeyed by the commandment of the Lord (17:1). It wasn't now as it was before when they came to Marah. There too they had grumbled—when they had found the water bitter instead of sweet they had grumbled—thinking it was God's fault. But now on this occasion things went very much deeper. When they ran out of water this time they didn't merely say it was God's fault; they came to wonder whether God was with them at all. Whether there was anything in his promise that he would be with them and guide them and provide for their needs and they were driven to saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not? Is there anything in the whole business? Does God exist? And if he exists, is he really with us? Or is the whole thing some psychological deception and God has never really been with us at all?' (v. 7).

It was an exceedingly bitter experience. It came about, as I say, because they had been taking their journey by *the commandment of the Lord*. Notice that phrase; they had honestly made an attempt to follow the leading of God. If they had been rebellious or careless; if they had just gone on through the desert regardless of the Lord's wishes and made their own decisions, then of course when they got into difficulty and the water ran out they would simply have had themselves to blame. They might have said, 'We were stupid, we never prayed or consulted the Lord. We just went on without prayer doing our own will and

never considering the Lord's guidance. Now we have got ourselves into this muddle and it's high time we got ourselves back to the Lord in repentance.'

But it wasn't like that. They had made an honest attempt to seek the mind of the Lord. They had prayed about it, consulted Moses and followed the cloud. Step by step they had gone on, honestly believing they were going just where the Lord would have them to go. That was what added to their bitterness, for presently they ran out of water and there was no water for the people to drink. When it happened they thought it odd, of course, but they said, 'Perhaps this is a little test that the Lord has brought upon us. God is leading us, so tomorrow there will be water; he won't let us down.'

But then tomorrow there was no water, nor the day after. Day after day went by and still there was no water. The people began to be very puzzled and doubtless they prayed and approached Moses. They were assured, 'God hasn't forgotten you, be patient and he will supply.'

But still no water came and it got to the point when it began to be very serious. What was happening? It's no fun to be in a wilderness with no water and what do you say when the children come around and you see that their poor little lips are all parched and their tongues swollen? They are crying, 'Dad and Mum, give me some water, I want some water.'

And dad and mum have to explain, 'Sorry, there is no water!'

What do you do when the child says, 'Pray, Dad. Ask God. Doesn't God love us? God will give us some water if you ask God. Go on, Dad, pray to God and he will give us some water.'

What do you say to the child then? It isn't funny, is it?

When the Israelites got to this stage, now beginning to feel the results of excessive thirst, driven almost crazy with the plight of their children and the demand of their cattle and frightened almost out of their wits—it was then that the bitterness began to seep into their spirit. 'What's happening?' they said. 'We've been honest on our part, we tried to follow the guidance of the Lord; why doesn't he give us water? It's all right making promises about tomorrow and the next day, we want water today! What's the good of telling us that the Lord is with us if there's no water for us? We're not asking for excessive riches; we're not asking to be millionaires. We're simply asking for a little cold water and if God can't give us the cold water what's the good of telling us that he's with us? Try telling the children that God loves them! As parents what are we going to say to the kiddies when they say, "Dad, give us some cold water. Pray to God—God loves us, doesn't he? And if he loves us, he'll give us the water." What are we going to say to them?'

But the water didn't come and then the old reaction came. It wasn't now as it had been the first time; it wasn't merely that they said it was God's fault. Things went more seriously now. As they argued with Moses and with the Lord, they said, 'Is the LORD among us or not?' They tested the Lord; please observe what they were doing. This wasn't a meeting of humbled hearts, gathering for prayer and saying, 'We'd better search our hearts before the Lord, for perhaps the Lord is speaking to us and disciplining us. It may be that he can't show us his normal favours because we have sinned and his presence isn't with us. Let's come in contrite hearts before the Lord and wait upon the Lord that he might come again among us and lead us.'

It wasn't that. It was defiant, sulky and full of unbelief. So full of unbelief now that just an inch or two more and they would have gone over the precipice of apostasy. They said, 'It doesn't make sense! If the Lord is around, why are we waiting? We have come to the point that we're wondering whether there's anything in this business at all. You say that the Lord is with us—it's all right for you to talk, Moses. Why doesn't he give us enough water if he is here at all?' And they began to test the Lord. 'If he doesn't give us enough water, we're not prepared to believe that there's anything in it at all.' How near they came to the precipice of sheer apostasy.

You can see at once how serious it was, because if God wasn't with them that day he never had been, had he? If God didn't love them that day he had never loved them! A God who loved me yesterday but doesn't love me today, he isn't God. If I must come to the conclusion today that God doesn't love me, that he has forgotten and forsaken me—then I must also come to the conclusion that he never did love me. And I speak with sympathy, I trust. Sometimes good Christian believers strike such bitter experiences in life that in the emotional turmoil of the moment they don't just blame God, they begin to wonder if there's anything in Christianity at all.

I remember an elder coming to me at one stage, younger man though I was. He had been busy and active in young people's work, but underneath for many years there was a haunting problem. His wife had taken very serious cancer. He told me, 'David, when my wife first took cancer, both of us prayed and we prayed hard that God would spare her life. He didn't. When the cancer became so hideously bad, then we both prayed that God would take her life and he didn't do that either. David,' he said, 'what's the good of our praying? Is there anything in it?' What shall we say to such things?

How much do I trust God?

What did God do? Why did he allow it? How should he cure it? We come here to one of the remarkable battlegrounds that perhaps sooner or later we shall all have. It's where the sheer basic issue between a human created soul and God is fought out. Dare I trust him? Do I trust him when trusting God means I trust him simply because I *will* trust him? Do I trust him more than I trust myself? And when everything seems to point to the fact that I am right and God isn't being fair, do I then trust God or trust myself?

We had better make up our minds before we get home to heaven, because if there is a God then God is infinite in power. If in certain circumstances I am wiser than God, then heaven itself will be a hell because, to have a God who is infinite in power but not quite so wise as I am, even heaven itself won't be ordered the right way round. If there is a God of infinite power and he doesn't love me quite as much as I love myself, then it wouldn't be worthwhile going to heaven. Heaven itself would be a haunting dread. Even though God loves me, if he doesn't love me quite as much as I love myself there would be times when what I see could be good for me, he wouldn't be interested enough to give it to me.

The issue has got to be thought out at some time or other. Abraham will have to climb his Mount Moriah, Job will have to sit on the rubbish heap (2:8), while they make up their minds what they think about God. Have compassion with these folks, don't write them off as if they were deliberately ungodly. This is a painful lesson to face; the sheer bitterness of it!

How they wished everything had gone well, so that they could have stood there without any hypocrisy singing their hymns to God, but the fact that they couldn't understand what on earth God was doing made it more bitter.

In their bitterness they tested God and that's a hard thing to have to do. Have you never done it—never been driven to have to tell God that he's making some mistakes? Never been driven to feel that, if he loved you a bit better, he would have ordered it differently? Never in your prayers tried to twist his arm? Well then, you are a saint indeed; nearer heaven than I am! I confess to you that I envy Christians who can sing, 'He is not a disappointment.' I would have to take my stand with John the Baptist, who on occasions found that Christ himself didn't do what he expected him to do. John was disappointed. My Christian friend, if you attempt to strive with God it will wear you out. He's bigger than we are and it only adds to the burden and misery of life to try to test him. What shall I do if I can't trust him? Though I can't see how, I know that it would be better for me if I were wrong and God right and there's a heaven ahead. If only I could say and believe it, in spite of all the circumstances, 'Yes, by definition, it must be that God is right and I am wrong.' If only I can say it, then praise God there's a heaven for me; whereas, if it should ever happen that I am right and God is wrong, there's no heaven anywhere.

How would he cure this outcrop of rebellion? What a merciful God he is—he knew the bitterness of it. Long before he created our world he knew the sort of battles the human spirit would have to fight before they would get victory and he planned what he should do to deal with the rebellious human heart and mind.

'Moses,' said he, 'I will come down and stand on that rock. Gather the people round it. You know that rod of yours that you smote the waters with? Take it!' If we have any imagination, our hearts should begin to chill. Indeed we do remember the rod! When Moses took it and hit the waters they turned to blood. Whatever is God going to do? The people are rebellious because they have no water to drink—will he turn the last few drops into blood? It will only increase their rebellion further! Watch as God comes down and stands upon the rock and Moses takes the rod. 'Hit it, Moses. In front of all the people, smite the rock on which I stand!' says God. That's a funny thing to do, isn't it? But it's pretty obvious what it meant, surely?

Imagine that one of these days they erect some great platform in Hyde Park for the queen and assemble her citizens around her while she comes and stands upon the platform. As she is about to deliver her oration, some citizen rushes out of the crowd with a stick in his hand and begins to hit the platform upon which the queen stands. How would you interpret it? I know how the British police would interpret it—the man would be accused of treason.

Says God, 'Go on Moses, hit the rock! Hit it hard, for that's what they've been doing with their tongues and how they feel about me in their hearts.' We often do with our tongues what we wouldn't like to do with our hands—but what's the difference? Consider another time when God came down and stood upon a hill in the sight of all men—in the sight of a world gone from God and rebellious in its heart. 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom 8:7). Into such a

world, packed full of rebels, God came down and stood upon a hill called Calvary. That's *the* story of the ages.

Jehovah lifted up his rod;
O Christ it fell on Thee.
Thou wast sore smitten of Thy God;
There's not one stroke for me . . .
All for my sake, my peace to make . . .¹⁹

God couldn't save them from the bitterness of that lack of water nor the bitterness of spirit as they went through their dismay, but God loved them, though he must chide them and allow them this bitter experience. He himself would bear the rod so that he might spare the rebels. By seeing that, we know what God is like. God is no tyrant. He must break my rebellion, for if my rebellion is persisted in there can be nothing for me but a lost hell. His heart empathises with the human spirit, the difficulties of circumstances, the painfulness. He shows in himself that there isn't a rebellion you've ever had, or a word spoken against God too bitter, but God himself is prepared to take it, suffer for it and forgive you—if you will drop the rebellion. Where else shall rebellion be stopped? There is only one place, Calvary, where rebels find their rebellion broken and their hearts reconciled to God. Those who can go past Calvary unrepentant shall find the rebellion in their hearts never broken, though they suffer an eternity of pain.

With their rebellion broken Israel discovered a glorious thing. The waters came out from the rock that had been smitten—the very rock where God stood. Yes, it was a miracle! They had discovered that their water supply in the wilderness was no longer an accident of geography; the water came where God had stood. That's what God wants to tell us. Our supplies, be they daily bread or anything else, are not accidents—a statistical curve, fluctuations in the market, chances of geography, or what have you. Our supplies come from the God 'who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, [then] how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (Rom 8:32).

2. *The rebel was broken*

'Then came Amalek' (17:8)—well of course he did! What did you expect him to do? Who is Amalek and what's he doing butting in at this sacred moment? He had his eyes on them long since. Among those early tribes who met and resisted Israel, the Amalekites had this distinction in the Old Testament; they are referred to as 'the sinners, the Amalekites.' I know all men are sinners, but the Amalekites were real sinners. These were the sinners who stood before them in the wilderness and defied them to go any further. God said, 'Go'; Amalek said, 'Don't go.' Amalek was the king who in the end opposed Israel in the time of Saul and it was an Amalekite who took the crown off Saul's head. 'The sinners, the Amalekites' (1 Sam 15:18).

You say, 'Why did they come just now?' Well I'll tell you! If you excellent citizens of Northern Ireland (and I count myself one nowadays—am proud to be one) should adhere to democracy, you may find that Marxists are kept at bay. But suppose if, in your heart of

¹⁹ Anne Ross Cousin (1824–1906), 'O Christ, what burdens bowed Thy head'.

hearts, in your schools, colleges and universities, inwardly you nurtured the principles of Marxism, you shouldn't be surprised if one of these mornings you wake up and find Russia on the doorstep! As believers in God, if we deny ourselves and trust him, we may keep the enemy, Satan himself, at bay. But suppose we start complaining and murmuring against God and begin to fight against him and question his wisdom, you mustn't be surprised if you look round and see Satan himself coming to help you in that rebellion! The world will come in like a flood because the world is no friend of God.

Israel had been indulging in the luxury of striving with God, so when Amalek came decisions had to be taken. Should they fight, or shouldn't they? They've just had a vivid experience of God and for the moment their rebellion was broken, but at this level in the pilgrimage there's another side to it. If the rebellion is indeed broken then they will be given the chance to show it; stand on God's side and fight God's enemy, the Amalekites.

Christianity is not all about sitting in pews, even for a long time (battle as that may be!). It is getting up on Monday mornings and facing the enemy, be it outside, or inside our own hearts, and then to look ourselves straight in the face and say, 'You traitor against God, you whining self-pitier! Stop your nasty little suggestions, your complaints, your supposedly injured righteousness and all that nonsense! You're going home to heaven, aren't you? Why are you going around as though God were dead?' Monday morning will give me a chance to fight the old enemy! When I find a fellow-Christian who has been through the mill, full of difficulties and complaints, there will be a chance to discern what the true enemy is—not that poor soul's emotions, but the pressure of a Satan who attacked Job in his weakness—and I shall have a chance to mediate something of the love of God that could break that rebellion.

So Israel was given a chance. But finally, notice what the text says. 'Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim'—and what did God say? Please notice that he didn't say, 'Tell them to write it in a book that *Israel* is to have a war against Amalek for ever.' No he didn't say that.

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven . . . 'The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.' (Exod 17:14–16)

The Lord will have a war with Amalek—I like it that way round! It's God's war, not my war. God is going to have a war to the end and forever, though God never began a war that he didn't win. Says God, 'It's going to be my war. Would you not like to come and enlist on my side, under my colours?' So they lifted the standard and they put upon it not *Israel* but *Jehovah-nissi*—The Lord is my Banner. They enlisted in the war under God's colours, so they were certain of victory in the end.

Not content with that, there were three provisions that God made

First of all there was Moses, sitting upon the mountain. Can you see him there, a noble figure with his beard and white hair? Thank God for Moses. When Amalek came down the road Moses raised up his hands; and when Moses stands in front of you and puts his hands up and says, 'O no you don't!' he is a force to be reckoned with. I hope you haven't

dismissed him, for you'll need him. We are not under Law as a system of earning salvation, thank God, but we still need Moses. When the enemy comes along to my unsuspecting soul and puts distractions in front of me, in those moments when I would give in I need Moses to say, 'O no you don't!'

Secondly, Moses' hands were weak and both Moses and his law combined would be weak because of the weakness of the flesh. I shall need something more than Moses; so there came those two priestly men, Aaron and Hur, and they held up Moses' hands. Thank God for a high priest. On those days when the battle is hard and it's difficult to go against my feelings—difficult not to side with my own rebellious heart—thank God for that ever-vigilant High Priest who intercedes and sends me the succour that I need to avail in the fight.

And then, thirdly, not only the priests up above on the mountain; there was Joshua the saviour down on the ground, bearing his lovely name of 'Saviour' because God designed him to be a picture of that greater saviour who is in heaven interceding for us. When the battle is hard he is down here fighting our battles with us and in us, so that we might get the victory.

May the Lord so encourage us by his word. God is going to win the battle—'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2:13)—may he give us the grace to cooperate with him in his war and work out our own salvation.

The Ascension of Moses and the Goal of Redemption

Readings: Exodus 19; 20:1–3; John 12:23–32; Hebrews 12:14, 18–29.

In this study we are to consider together the goal of redemption. It is a topic that in our less thoughtful moments we might easily make a mistake about. Having read earlier in Exodus and relying upon our memories, it would be desperately easy to imagine that the goal of Israel's redemption was nothing other than Canaan, their glorious inheritance. An easy impression to gain, an easy mistake to make; but an exceedingly serious mistake, for the goal of Israel's redemption was not Canaan. Not its butter, however good; not its honey, however sweet; not its milk, however pure; not even its freedom and independence, however much longed for. Canaan and all its glorious delights was not the goal of Israel's redemption; the goal of Israel's redemption was nothing other than God himself.

Long before Israel reached Canaan's land, God took drastic steps to make it clear to them exactly what the goal of their redemption was. No less than to come down to the wilderness and stand upon Mount Sinai in the view of them all. Hear God spell it out in the ears of Moses, to have him tell it to Israel. 'You have seen,' said he, 'what I have done to the Egyptians; and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' [not to Canaan] (Exod 19:4). Long before they ever reached Canaan, God took the trouble to come down from his heaven to explain in simple and direct words what the goal of redemption was—it was God himself.

Why did he take so much trouble? It was an exceedingly important point. Israel had been redeemed from Egypt, redeemed from the wrath of God upon Egypt. Why did the wrath of God descend upon Egypt in the first place? What was wrong with their treasure cities? What was wrong with their gold? What was wrong with their art and those glorious pyramids that we still admire to this present day? What was wrong with their science? What was wrong with the way they lived? —There was nothing wrong with all those things, as things; their wrong consisted in this, that Egypt enjoyed all those lovely things, but without God. They enjoyed them as though they were ends in themselves, as though they were the goal of living when they weren't the goal of living. They had never been designed as the goal of living. Those lovely things were but the logic of a creator by which he might charm the hearts of men and women and bring them to himself. Egypt had grown defiant in their worldliness. Content with their own material and artistic treasures, they had defied the living God and didn't care to know him.

God's wrath had visited upon that land and Israel had been saved. Now they are on their wilderness journey en route to their own glorious inheritance. God knew the dangers

that might lie ahead of them, even in Canaan itself, if now he didn't tell them explicitly what the goal of redemption was. When they got into Canaan, with what joy they would see those lovely things—green grass and dappled cows and milk with its cream popping its fresh warmth over the milk-pail! Houses made of stone and vineyards and the lovely landscape of all these glorious things. In that very moment there would have been a desperate danger that Israel, redeemed from the poverty of her slavery in Egypt, should have got it into her head that these things were the goal of redemption and gone after them, head over heels, to enjoy them and bit by bit forget the God who gave them. Had Israel done that—though they were physically released from Egypt—in that moment they would but have transformed Canaan itself into another superior kind of Egypt. They would have gone on to live in Canaan in as worldly a spirit as the Egyptians had in Egypt.

Do we not readily see the danger? I'm sure we do! We have noticed it in our own hearts. Redeemed, delivered from this world with all its iniquity, saved, forgiven, justified and on our way to heaven; but who among us hasn't sensed the danger in our own heart? And it is not merely that sometimes we might be tempted to regard the material or the intellectual pleasures of life as the goal of living and become engrossed with them and forget God. Sometimes, even in our holy and spiritual exercises, we mistake what is the goal of our redemption and imagine that it is our joy and our peace. So, when days come in which we are enjoying the peace and love and tranquillity of being a Christian, we loudly sing the praises of God. But in days when our relationship with God brings us into trouble and difficulty, persecution and loss and when God has to discipline us for our perversities—how readily we begin to cringe and give up and we're not interested any more. We're interested in God if he gives us peace and joy—the lovely blessings of our heavenly Canaan—but not necessarily interested in God himself.

We're sometimes like that young gentleman who, being a penniless soul and rather careless where he parked his car, parked it in the wrong place and incurred a heavy fine. Being unable to pay, he was in difficulty. Then his rich uncle came home from America and paid the £50 fine. The feeble old uncle would come round and visit and you could see the young man's impatience rising. There was uncle sitting in the drawing room on a summer's evening, when the young man wanted to be out playing tennis! He would say to his friends, 'I know he paid my £50 fine but now he thinks that I've got to sit down and talk to him. I mean, there are limits to your gratitude!'

So it is easy sometimes for us to take God's blessings and feel disposed towards him in that kind of fashion, forgetting that the whole goal of redemption was not redemption's blessings but the Redeemer himself. As the hymn writer said,

My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God.²⁰

Let us survey this marvellous situation in our mind's eye, this wonderful happening that took place in the deserts of Sinai. It was the goal that God had set his eye upon when first he spoke to Moses at the burning bush. 'Moses, this is the sign I will give you that I am with

²⁰ Frances Brook, b. 1870.

you. When you have brought Israel out from Egypt, you will come to this place and worship me on this spot' (see Exod 3:12). I should need a veritable seraph's tongue to describe the situation as it should be described! God himself—uncreated master of the universe in all his glory and magnificence—took the trouble to come down to a barren desert to seek the friendship and love of his creatures.

And there was Israel, now ex-slaves—a few months ago they had been toiling in the brick kilns of Egypt—a rough-and-ready host if ever there was one! But see them now as Moses marshals the people into their companies. They've all got their clean linen on for the occasion and Moses leads them out of the camp to meet God. What volumes it tells us about God. He has redeemed them, but like an impatient lover he cannot wait until they arrive in Canaan before he comes to meet them. He will leave his jewel-spangled throne and come down to the wastes of Sinai Mountain, eager to put his proposition to the people whom he has redeemed. It's no wonder that later rabbis used the language of romance to describe this scene. They call it 'Israel's nuptials.' Indeed, some of the inspired prophets described the scene in those glowing terms. 'Do you not remember the day of your espousals, how I went after you in the wilderness, as a man courts and woos and seeks a young lady?' (see Jer 2:2). So God himself came down from his heaven into that barren wilderness to seek a race of scarcely civilized slaves; he was wooing them in the day of their espousal. He summons Moses to his presence to tell him what he shall say to the people, what propositions he shall put to them. Moses was the go-between—between the lover and his love.

'First of all, you will remind them what I have done for them and what I did to the Egyptians. They know me only vaguely, but I was there on that dark night in Egypt when the destroying angel passed through the land. They shed the lamb's blood, but it was only a literal lamb and its blood was paltry and worthless. They were saved because I stretched myself over their door; I loved them though they scarcely knew me and saved them by placing my very person between them and the judgment. Moses, *tell them first what I've done for them.*'

'Then, when their hearts are welling up with gratitude for their deliverance, put my proposition to them. Put it in winsome terms, for I want them to accept it. Tell them that I've brought them to myself on eagles' wings and I have a proposition to make to them. They don't have to say yes now to what I've got to say. Ask them if they'll have it, obey my voice and keep my covenant. Tell them that I'm the God who owns the whole earth and everything in it. I own Egypt and its treasure cities, the spice of Africa and the jewels of the mines, the planet and the myriads of those star systems—tell them that I own it all! *But I would like them to be the treasure that I value more than anything else.*'

As we hear those staggering words our sense of values begins to change, doesn't it? Pharaoh had counted those men and women as bits of stuff, mere human machines. As he built his treasure cities, what did Pharaoh care if one or other had fallen under some great pile of bricks? They were mere human beings, mere slaves. Pharaoh loved his gold and his silver more than he cared for them, but values are reversed here. God, who owns all the gold, silver and pearls and every precious thing, is proposing to these people that they shall mean more to him than any and all treasure.

'I'll bring them into a special relationship with me. Tell them, Moses, if they will have it, that I will love them and value them and treasure them. I will give them the privilege of being a kingdom of priests and they shall minister to me. They shall be selected so that life should be a constant ministering to the pleasure of God for my satisfaction. They shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation—go and tell them that, Moses!'

I imagine that Moses (as he frankly admitted later on) shook in his shoes, for several reasons—not the least of them being that it sounded so fantastic. How would those poverty-stricken ex-slaves believe him? He could go down and tell them that God was about to give them a chariot or two, or that he would do a miracle and a goldmine would open in front of their feet. They would find that difficult to believe, but to tell them that they meant more to God Almighty than anything else—how would you ever get it to seem real to them? Real enough for them to believe!

Maybe it's a problem that you have? At a student conference recently I was talking of some of those glorious and wonderful things that Paul writes about in the epistle to the Ephesians. When I had finished, a disarmingly frank student said to me, 'That's all lovely, of course, but it's all so airy-fairy, isn't it?' And, truth to tell, as you stand next to Jesus Christ and hear him pray—can you take it in? 'Father, thine is mine and mine is thine; all that the Father has is mine.' Our minds creep out into the vastness of space, the incalculable riches of this universe and others if there be any—can it be true that we mere mortals, formed of clay and dust on this temporary, impermanent little planet, are not only destined to be redeemed but mean something to God Almighty? More to him than all beside—how could you take it in?

Said God, 'It's important that these people believe you, Moses. I want their hearts; I want them. Everything will depend on whether they believe you. Go down and bring them out of the camp and I will come down myself and stand in all my glory upon Mount Sinai. I will speak to you in their hearing so that they shall hear my voice and then they will believe you.'

That was how our Lord Jesus did it; he came down to our world with his fantastic message. This little planet of ours has been swung into space, maintained by who knows what complicated mechanisms, but the whole of it is here because God wants the love of our human hearts. He proposes that we become his and mean more to him than all beside. Therefore Christ Jesus our Lord stood by the people of his time and said, 'You believe in God? Well then, believe in me!' (John 14:1). As he stood with them on the streets of the city there came a voice from heaven—not some imagined psychological happening within the minds and brains of those local people—an objective voice from heaven and men heard it. Some of course didn't understand it and said that it thundered. Said Christ, 'This voice didn't come for my sake but for your sake.' This is the battle of the universe, where God himself enters the planet to plead and strive and compete for the hearts of men and women. 'The prince of this world shall be judged and cast out,' he said. 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw people of all kinds to me' (see John 12:28–32).

Consider the awe of the situation for a moment. Being brought up in a Christian atmosphere it would be so easy for us to forget the wonder and awe of Sinai's mount and to imagine that the God whom we worship has somehow changed from the God whom Israel

worshipped. Who is he that makes such fantastic propositions to our hearts? It is written that on this occasion God came down on the third day and the whole mountain was on fire, so to speak. It blazed with fire and yet with darkness and a cloud. There was thundering and lightning and a voice of a very loud trumpet, until Moses himself said, 'I tremble with fear' (Heb 12:21). The people wanted to run away and hide themselves in their tents from the majesty of God that had come down to meet them. God is still like that. Says the writer to the Hebrews, 'Our God is a consuming fire' (12:29). If it unsettles us and makes us tremble, then all to our good. Let us not seek, by our irreverent ways and undue familiarity, to bring God down to the level of our next-door neighbour. In the end that would belittle our own status and our own treasure. Awful in his holiness, incalculable in his might, fearful in his wonders, he remains the God who wants the love of my poor heart. He said, 'I come to ask them to love me with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, and have no other God but me.'

The covenant

Consider the proposition in its detail. 'If they will obey me and hear my voice I propose to them not some haphazard, will-o'-the-wisp kind of relationship, a relationship that shall depend upon the emotion of the moment. I propose to them no less than a covenant. I, almighty God, and my redeemed people shall together enter into a covenant; I shall be their God, they shall be my people and we'll seal it and sign it here on the desert sand. I will remain forever true and faithful to my pledge and troth, if they will have it. Then I expect them solemnly to promise me now that they will be faithful forever to their word.' Can you not see why later rabbis called it a kind of a betrothal?

Those who observe these things (and they also who read them from the newspapers), have the impression that when a young man and a young lady come together to form between them their goal for living, they do not content themselves with passing emotion. 'We'll be faithful to each other today because it's Monday and we like each other, but not tomorrow because it's Tuesday and things have gone wrong.' At least, that's not how they used to do it! Because of their love for each other, they want to put it into some words—some pledge, guarantee—a covenant, if you will. They assure one another that their love is a real and deep-flowing thing; a matter not merely of the emotion but of the will. So they pledge themselves to each other, for better or worse, until death do them part.

It was such a proposition that God made to Israel. He would be their God and they would be his people; to have no other God but him; to cast all idols from the heart and to cleave to him and him only. They should write it out in a covenant and it would be signed, sealed and settled.

I know you'll say, 'That was the old covenant and Christians live under a better covenant with new and better promises.' Indeed we do! Shall its standards be any less? It is the blessed new covenant given by God, the goal of redemption, in which I give myself to the free love of Christ. He takes me and I take him, and in the taking of him I promise that my faith will be in him and in him only. I will cast all idols from the throne of my heart and make him the goal of all my activity.

‘Go down,’ says God to Moses, ‘and, because you love those people, you must make your preparations carefully and exactly. Put bounds to the mountain, sanctify the people and sanctify the priests. Tell them to wash their garments, they are to sanctify themselves and be ready against the third day.’ (‘Strive for . . . holiness without which no one will see the Lord’ [Heb 12:14].) Our hearts pound with the wonder of it. Is this friendship between God and these ex-slaves possible? Is it even realistic, for where shall they find sufficient holiness to stand before him and be loved by him and consort with him? Even at the level of human marriage, when there has been some kind of fairy story romance—a prince from the palace has found a working girl from the slums and liked her and proposed marriage—people have shaken their learned heads and said, ‘But will it work; there are different levels, you know!’ Even John the apostle, who had leaned on the breast of the Lord Jesus in the days of his flesh, when he saw him in his resurrection glory, fell at his feet as one dead.

That first covenant ended in disaster, in breaking of heart and pain on God’s side; sorrow and misery on Israel’s side. And when we consider it we might have feared for ourselves, had we not found the greater than Moses who came down from God’s presence, sought and found us. Before he went back to heaven he stood with his own around him and said, ‘Father, you gave me authority over all flesh that I should give eternal life to as many as you have given me. Now, Father, I have finished the work. While I was with them I kept them and none of them is lost except the son of perdition. And now I come to you. Keep them, Father. Sanctify them in your truth; your word is truth. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they may be one in us’ (see John 17).

What glorious words! This is not some fairy story that shall be dissolved in the hard light of a Monday morning. Our blessed Lord has visited the planet. He knows the strength of the power of this world, the wiliness of the way that the world thinks and all its charms; those constant forces that drag our hearts away from God, our goal. He came to seek us and he died to save us; now he has set himself apart and gone up to give himself to this holy ministry of sanctifying us so that one day we may see the Lord. O the wonder of it! See Moses bringing them as far—and as near—as they could get. Bringing the men and their young ones out of their camp as far as the boundary would let them, Moses goes up the mountain into the very presence of God to represent his people.

I tell you something more wonderful still. There stood a woman in a garden one day and how bitter her tears were. How churned her personality was in days gone by, with forces and powers that she could not have controlled. This Jesus of Bethlehem, who had come to seek and to save that which was lost, had entered her life and brought the real meaning of love and sanity, peace and health. It was like a heaven begun on earth, but now he was gone. She thought that there was nothing but a dead body—which is where all such visions must end. There wasn’t even a dead body, but an empty tomb. What was the point of living, why exist, why be made? Since the heart must have something to give meaning to life, she sought for a dead body. At least she had the memories of happier times; she’d feed on the memories, shut out the grim realities of life and so comfort her heart till it was her turn to lie in the tomb.

Then she heard that voice, saying, ‘Mary! Why do you weep? Dry your tears, for I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’

And he has gone into heaven, my brother, my sister! Gone in, a greater than Moses. Gone in to represent Mary Magdalene and all the faithful. Gone in as a bridegroom goes home to tell his Father of the wonderful bride he has. Gone in to prepare the way. He has forged a relationship that shall never be sundered. The Almighty and the Eternal that was rightfully his Father has become our Father too and his God is our God.

God's dwelling places

So God proposed to them a covenant and provided for their sanctification. To crown it all, he loved them so much that he proposed he wouldn't wait until they got to Canaan. If they would fall in with his proposal, hear his voice and keep his covenant; if they would sanctify themselves and obey him and be his, then, impatient for their love, he himself would come down. He'd have them make a dwelling place for him, an abiding place on the desert sand. He would come and live with them and travel as one of them all the way home to Canaan's inheritance. The marvel of it, he wanted them so much!

They built him a tabernacle, which has long since perished. But listen to an even greater proposal.

Said our blessed Lord, as he sat with his own disciples in the Upper Room before his death, 'You believe in God, don't you?' As orthodox Jews they did believe in God.

'Believe also in me,' he said. 'I am going to tell you something that will strain your belief, so I appeal to you now to believe in me as you believe in God himself. In my Father's house are many rooms and I go to prepare a place for you. How could you know it if I didn't tell you? Not all your philosophy and science combined could find out what my Father's house is like, but I have come from there!' (see John 14).

I wonder will they have to adapt heaven to receive human beings? Was heaven made for humans, or when God designed the human race did he design them in such a way that they could eventually be changed? Could beings made for the murky atmosphere of this little temporary planet be changed in such fashion as to still remain human and yet be able to inhabit the very dwelling place of God? I don't know, for it lies in the future and he's gone to prepare a place for us. He says, 'I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also' (v. 3). That will be glorious—but we're still in the wilderness! Listen as the departing Lord goes on to speak, 'If a man really loves me, my Father will love him. And if you love me you will keep my commandments [of course you will], and my Father will love you. And we [the divine persons] will come and make our abiding place with you' (vv. 15–17).

And again you see it, don't you? The love of God's heart is impatient, as love always is. He can't wait until he gets us home to heaven; he must have a tabernacle with us now. He cannot stand at heaven's door and greet us when at last we arrive; he must come down to the desert and dwell amongst us as we travel, walk each patient footstep with us the journey through. But he must have a tabernacle to do it in and he proposes that that tabernacle shall be the hearts of them who love him. 'It's like heaven begun,' you say. 'Is this what redemption is? Not merely heaven some way off out there, but heaven begun now? The divine persons coming out on the road to meet us, to live with us from Monday through to Sunday and travel with us the road home to glory?'

But it is so, for the story is told how God came down to Sinai in the wilderness, and said to them, 'You yourselves have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Exod 19:4). Taking up the story, the New Testament says, 'We have not come to a mountain like that, that burned with fire, dreadful and terrible, so that Moses himself said, "I tremble with fear." A mountain so terrible that it needed to be set around with bounds, and if anybody came near he was to be shot through or stoned' (see Heb 12:18–21). No, we have not come to a mountain like that. *But we have come!* For a moment get rid of your fear of grammar and notice the tense of the verb. It is not, 'You shall come at long length,' it says, 'You have come' — *already come*. 'You have come to Mount Zion' (v. 22).

As we have sat here this evening, it isn't all imagination or the emotion of the moment. There have been angels' wings a-fluttering round, my brother and sister, for we have come and are within touching distance. Not now with our hands, but we have come where our spirits may make contact with the very Spirit of God. We've come to the mount of the living God, to the innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. To those just men of past ages whose spirits are now made perfect (vv. 22–23). *We have already come*.

And there is Abraham, if only you could see him! Don't you feel yourself just at this moment near to Abraham? I do! I read his story of all those centuries ago; how Abraham saw the glory of God, came out of Ur of the Chaldees and lived as a pilgrim. 'He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6). And I say in my heart, 'Abraham, I know what you meant and how you felt. I know that experience too. When I get home to heaven you may be too big to know and recognize me, but I know what you mean, Abraham, for I too have come. I too have believed and I stand 'justified by faith.'

'David! How you sinned, but we've no stones to throw at you. Those lovely words you penned when you discovered forgiveness, 'O the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven' (Ps 32:1). We sing your Psalms, not merely as some matter of ancient history; we sing them because we know what you mean, for we too have entered into the experience.

Moses, you're in a brighter sphere than ever now; you walk and talk with the Saviour. You were with him on the transfiguration mount when there came a voice from that glorious majesty and Peter, James and John heard it (Luke 9:28–35). Moses, we know what you mean; we know how you felt when the glory of God came down on that tabernacle. You heard his voice and felt you couldn't stand before his presence. Now you see him and presently we shall see him too. But already, as we still walk the wilderness journey, we too have come unto Jesus, 'the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel' (Heb 12:24). We have come with holy awe and reverence, Moses, but we are no longer afraid for we feel ourselves at home.

Happy people, if already in your ordinary lives here you can say, 'Yes, I have already come.' At Sinai God shook the world once; but he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens' (v. 26). This 'once more' signifies that when God Almighty does it again this earth and heaven shall disappear. And then what? This present earth and heaven can't last for ever. It is only the staging, then we shall enter that eternal mountain of God and dwell with him eternally. And because we are already there in spirit,

we may watch without undue perturbation the beginnings of the shakings that one day shall dissolve our planet for ever.

God use his word, then, to deliver us from overmuch enchantment with the temporary things of life. May we so take the love gifts of God and all those lovely things that he has given us and perceive them to be what they are—the gifts of a heavenly lover who through them wants our hearts. Even now he seeks to lead us to himself, the goal of our being. He jealously craves our undivided loyalty and unvarying love. Like the two on that road to Emmaus, as the stranger would have gone on, may we say, ‘O Lord, the day is far spent, don’t go further; come in and abide with us, if you will, and walk the rest of the way home to glory with us.’

The Covenant with God and the Building of his Sanctuary

Readings: Exodus 24:1–18; 25:1–9, 17–22; Hebrews 8:6–13; 9:1–2a.

We spent our last occasion together considering the goal of redemption, the goal that God had in mind when he delivered his people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt. We found that that goal was not Palestine, the land of Canaan with all its milk and honey, glorious as that land was as an inheritance—*the goal was nothing other than God himself*. We observed how God came down from his heaven and stationed himself in his condescension upon Mount Sinai so that he might make that point explicitly to Israel. ‘You have seen,’ said he, as he stood among the fire and the thunder of Mount Sinai, ‘what I have done to the Egyptians, how I have carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’

Of course that does not mean that he had given up on the idea of bringing them at length to their glorious inheritance in Canaan. That was still his intention; but long before they should reach Canaan and enjoy its particular blessings they were to know this goal of their redemption. Stationed in their midst, while they still travelled across the sand of the desert, God himself had come down to meet them. The God who had redeemed them and protected them from his wrath in Egypt had now come down to meet them and receive them—himself the goal of their redemption.

Then we noticed that God made two propositions in order to achieve the present enjoyment of that goal:

1. He offered Israel that they could enter into a covenant with him; he was to become their Lord, their husband, as well as their redeemer. Therefore he offered them a relationship that was to be secure; a relationship guaranteed by a covenant so that they may be in no doubt as to his intention, nor have any fear in their hearts that his proposals were fickle. Having brought them so far, he would not abandon them. He offered them a covenant so that the relationship between him and his people might be securely based and ratified by the blood of the covenant sacrifice.

2. He offered that he would come and dwell among them; not only would he be their Lord and Sovereign but he would journey with them and dwell among them. It wouldn’t be merely that, while he waited for them at the other end of the journey, they were to cross the wilderness as best they could and eventually find their way to the promised land where he would meet them. God himself would come down and walk with them—travel with them, journey with them and share their experiences. He would lead them by the cloud and fire of his presence every mile of that desert journey until at last he entered Canaan with them, and brought them to their destination.

For that purpose they were invited to make him a sanctuary so that he might dwell among them. As he journeyed with them there would be a place where he might invite them to come and share fellowship with him. I need not at this moment stay to describe how glorious that would make the wilderness pathway. Wildernesses are wildernesses and there's very little you can do about them! There's no sense thinking that you can plant a few shrubberies and make it anything less than the wilderness it is. Wildernesses will be wildernesses—they always have been and always will be—and it can be hot, thirsty and tiring work to footslog your way across them. Whatever the difficulties of the journey would be, a certain glory would be cast upon it, the pain would go out of it and the difficulty and labour would seem much less, as Israel journeyed with God himself in their midst. God would journey with them, sharing their toils and their travels. The glory of God in that tabernacle would cast a certain glory and radiance even over the desert. There would come days when, after a footslog over that wilderness, Israel would sit in their camp doors at night and see the glory hovering over the tent of the tabernacle and they would scarcely know whether they were still on earth in a desert, or wafted in spirit to some far, distant inheritance, so real would the glory of God be in their midst. It would be a kind of 'taking heaven with you.' That was God's proposal.

The covenant and the tabernacle

We ought to stop for a while and examine in more detail those two elements in the relationship that God now proposed. On the one side his covenant and on the other side his tabernacle. You will see how they come together in the record; Exodus 24 the covenant, Exodus 25 the tabernacle. In the New Testament they likewise come together, for Hebrews 8 talks about the new covenant that God has made to replace the old. And, having talked of that new covenant, immediately Hebrews 9 goes on to talk about the tabernacle. Let us think of those two twin things.

What was this covenant?

In our previous study we have already likened it to the covenant relationship of marriage in the ancient world. We can help ourselves again if we remember that in those days covenants were also instruments of government. Nowadays, thanks to the archaeologists, we know a lot more about covenants in the ancient world than once we did. Israel's near neighbours for instance, the Canaanites, were very much used to covenants. Archaeologists have uncovered scores and scores of ancient records of covenants made in particular between emperors and their vassal kings. They were in the habit of making covenant agreements with their vassal king's subjects.

Allow me to digress and tell you about those covenants and I think you will see the relevance for our own topic. When an emperor had vassal kings and was concerned that they behaved themselves and went about their life and their politics obediently to the emperor, the emperor would try to secure their obedience by a covenant. The covenant would run after a certain formula. It would start off by identifying the great emperor: 'I am (whoever he was),' and then it would proceed to say what the great emperor had done for his subjects—'I have generally bashed you up and beaten you and done various other things

to you.’ Then in the third place it would say, ‘Now your bounden duty is this: you shall not have any other emperors apart from me. (None of this business of making covenants with other kings and getting up to crafty political moves behind my back.)’ It would proceed to list all the things that the vassal king must do and be obedient to—the ‘You shalls.’ And then all the things that the vassal king mustn’t do—the ‘You shall nots.’ It would pronounce curses on the man and all his subjects, if this vassal king were to disobey. Presently it would lay down that the covenant document had to be housed in some secure place and that the vassal king was from time to time to take it out and read it in the ears of the people, so that they might be reminded of the stipulations within the covenant and not only obey their vassal king, but through him obey the great emperor himself. It would call the gods to witness that the covenant had been made and indicate the curses and disasters that should overtake anybody who disobeyed it.

As I have rehearsed the ancient formula of those Near Eastern covenants between the emperor and their vassal subjects, your minds have been working fast and you’ve been saying to yourself, ‘That’s extraordinarily like Exodus 20.’ Yes, of course it is! Exodus 20 begins like this. God himself now, not some great Canaanite emperor, saying first of all, ‘I am the LORD your God’—announcing his identity. And, in the second place, proceeding to say what he had done for Israel, ‘I am the LORD your God that brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’ And in the third place, like those other covenants, ‘You shall have no other God but me.’ And then of course, as you well know, in the ten words there come the ‘You shalls’—the positive commands, and the ‘You shall nots’—the prohibitions. In other books of the Pentateuch, likewise, there come these solemn pronouncements of the curses on Israel if they were to break that covenant and the happy blessings that would come upon them if they kept it. At the end of Deuteronomy heaven and earth are called to witness that God has made a covenant with Israel; he will bless them if they keep it and curse them if they break it.

And finally we are told (in our text) how God directed that when their covenant was made Moses was to build a sanctuary and in that sanctuary place an ark in which to store the tables of the covenant. The ark was to be their depository where the covenant between God and his people should abide; the very centre and terms of his relationship with them, the instrument of his government. From time to time the kings of Israel were to take out that covenant and rehearse it in the ears of the people. One such great and glorious occasion is described in the final chapters of Deuteronomy. Just before Israel entered into the land, Moses, the man of God, read again with much sermon and exhortation the great covenant that God had made with them on Mount Sinai. He pleaded with them that they should observe the terms of the covenant so that it might be well with them when they entered the land.

So God made a covenant with Israel in the same manner as the great emperor did with his vassal subjects. God stood upon Sinai’s top, looking forward to taking Israel out across the great wilderness into the promised land, but first of all he took steps to secure their obedience and their allegiance to him.

The new covenant

When we come to the New Testament we find it being repeated. We are certainly not under that old covenant, but we are under a covenant. Peter himself remarks that we whom he subsequently describes as those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb are elect. 'We are elect,' he says, 'unto the obedience and to the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 1:1-2). Notice the coming together of the two terms, *obedience* and *the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus*. The holy apostle has in his mind the background of Exodus 24, where Israel stood under the mount and God offered them the terms of his covenant.

'Moses, make it clear to them, write it in a book and put the proposition to the people. Will they accept my covenant, obey it and keep its terms?'

The people answered, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Upon saying that they would obey, Moses took the book of the covenant and the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled the book and the people (24:7-8).

In the signing and sealing of the covenant that the people were now making with God, and God with the people, there was evidence that they promised him their obedience. He did it at Sinai's mount. It was not some far-off experience that Israel were eventually led into when they had matured after some centuries; this was right on the threshold of the desert. God made his covenant and claimed their obedience so that he might lead them on towards their inheritance.

Peter reminds us that as Christians we stand in similar obligation to obey the Lord. We have been called to a great inheritance and between us and our inheritance there stretches a desert. We are not home yet and our Lord has the responsibility of seeing us through the pilgrimage, through the desert, and bringing us home at last. Therefore, at the beginning of our sojourn he lays it down straight for us. He offers us a covenant—the new covenant, admittedly, not the old. But in that covenant he is asking for our obedience. We are 'elect . . . unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.' You will say to me that the new covenant is far better than the old covenant; so much better that, in one sense, it is altogether different. I could not agree with you more. Of course the new covenant is better and different. God willing, we shall speak on its details another time. For now, let me merely stay to point out the fact that *it is different*.

Although this is 1977, there are many people who haven't seen yet that there is a difference between the old covenant and the new, so just let's remind ourselves what the difference is. The old covenant was a two-party thing, an agreement between God and Israel, that if Israel performed such-and-such requirements then God would in his turn bless them and be their God. But similarly, if Israel broke the terms of that covenant and failed in their obedience, God would be set free from his obligation to bless them and would be entitled to curse them. It was a two-party covenant therefore, in which Israel had something to fulfil and God had something to fulfil. In the last analysis all Israel's blessings would depend on them fulfilling the terms of the covenant.

And of course they broke it. They broke it beyond all possibility of repair and patching up. God disregarded them; that is to say he brought down upon them the curses that were written in the book of the Law and disowned them as his people. Our covenant is infinitely better and different, or else it would be with very sad and doubtful hearts that we sit here

this evening. For we are not home yet, we are not yet in our inheritance and if we thought that our relationship with God was no more secure than Israel's was, we should be a gloomy people indeed. We are no better than Israel—if Israel couldn't keep the terms of the covenant, what hope have we? When they broke the terms of the covenant, God cast them off. If we should fail in our obligations will God cast us off too? It is with tremendous relief therefore that we hear that the old covenant was eventually set aside by God and replaced by a new covenant—that glorious covenant instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord when he took the cup and said, 'This is the blood of the new covenant, shed for the remission of sin.'

How is that new covenant different? In many respects it is different, but just for now let us think of the basic one.

The old covenant was a two-party covenant; the new covenant is a one-party covenant

Now I must talk of legal matters. There is a vast difference between a two-party covenant and a one-party covenant. If you want a house built you make a contract with the builder; he builds you your house and you pay him the money. That's the scheme, so if need be you make a covenant and write it into an agreement. He's got to build the house to the specifications and if he does his part you do your part, you pay him the money. If he doesn't do his part right you can sue him at law. If you don't do your part right and pay the bill, he doesn't give you the house. That's a two party covenant.

There are many people who think salvation is like that. I do my bit and God does his. I obey his law and keep it as best I can. So long as I do it moderately well, God will respond by giving me his salvation. However, that's the old covenant. If I am speaking to anybody who thinks that salvation is like that, let me tell you with delight that you are some two to three thousand years out of date! Salvation isn't like that anymore. Salvation proceeds now not under the old covenant but under a new covenant, a one-party covenant.

A will is a modern illustration of a one party covenant. I have not had the good fortune yet to be left anything in a will—but there's always a chance! Those who have known that they can be marvellous things. You get a notice from a solicitor saying that if you report to his office there could be something to your advantage. You go along and find that some wealthy millionaire uncle of yours in California, that you never knew, has died and left you oodles of money and his ranch as well. You can't keep your eyes off the paper as you read it through and then read it again. The more complicated it is the more you like it! You don't say, 'That was a complicated will, it took the man an hour and a quarter to read it. I shan't go to that solicitor's office again, the man went on and on and on. I don't want to hear a long thing like that again!' You wouldn't mind if it went on for two hours, so long as the details keep coming up of all the marvellous things that had been left to you in this will.

Among the most marvellous of the lot would be if it just said that he had left it to you—you don't have to deserve it, earn it, or purchase it; you just have to come along and say thank you very much and take it! Of course, if you wanted to, you could say to the solicitor, 'Nonsense! I know the likes of you. Always making up these silly bits of paper and charging a lot of money for them. I don't believe you!' You could throw the thing back in his face, but I don't know many people who would. If you want it, you just take it. And the glorious thing is that, if the will has made these provisions for you, nobody can cheat you out of it.

That's the whole idea of having a will. It was drawn up, signed, sealed and witnessed and once it is sealed no man adds to it or takes away from it. It is yours by legal covenant—a one-party covenant. The man who signed it was your wealthy uncle; you don't have to sign it, you just have to take the benefit.

When it came to the new covenant our blessed Lord made it abundantly clear that it differs from the old covenant in this precise particular. The old covenant was a two-party thing, the new covenant a one party-thing. He took the cup that was a symbol of his own blood and with his own blood and sacrifice he sealed to all who trust him the incalculable blessings of God's redemption. All we have to do as bankrupt sinners is to come and take the blessings guaranteed to us by the new covenant, free, independent of our merit, unearned, unpurchased. The new covenant is a kind of will. In Hebrew and Greek they use the same word for a *will* and a *covenant*. But the new covenant is such a distinctive thing of our Christian salvation that Christians call the inspired books that have come down to them *The New Testament*—the new will, the new covenant, if you like. This is the very heart of salvation; it is what all the good news is about. God has written out a new covenant in Jesus Christ and given it to all who trust the Saviour, and on another occasion we shall have to think of its terms in slightly more detail.

Why did God give Israel the covenant?

We ought now to ask another question. Since God knew that the Old Testament people couldn't keep that old covenant and one day he would have to make a new covenant, why on earth did he give it to them? Wasn't it a waste of time and wasn't it unrealistic? Didn't he realise how failing and feeble they were and how impossible it would be for them to keep the covenant and earn his salvation? Why then did he give it to them?

That's a very sensible question. It has two answers, among others.

1. God knew that they couldn't keep it, but Israel didn't

The only way Israel would find out that they couldn't, and believe that they couldn't, was to discover it by experience. Yes, they had had some difficult experiences in the wilderness already, but there is an almost incurable pride in the human heart that always imagines it is better than it is—pride in its own abilities and self-sufficiencies. Not until that pride is cured and broken and men and women come to face the realities of their bankrupt spiritual position, will they really be delivered and ready for those deeper depths of God's salvation. So God had to let Israel find out.

If you were paying close attention to the text of Exodus 24 you will have observed what God said. 'I propose to make a covenant with this people. Go down and tell them, Moses.' So Moses went down and told them all the words that God had spoken, all his detailed commands and prohibitions.

In God's name he said to Israel, 'If you are prepared to keep all those details and enter into a covenant with God like that, he is prepared to be your God and to bless you. If you break them you bring down his curse upon your head. Now, what about it, Israel? Will you have a relationship with God based upon such a covenant?'

And Israel said, 'Why, of course! Yes! Why not? All that the Lord has commanded we will do, and be obedient!' So Moses reported it to God.

And God said, 'I think you had better write it in a book. We'll have it in black and white, Moses! The people mean well, spur of the moment-style; but perhaps they didn't realise what all was involved. So write all the details in a book—large print and small print as well. Then get the people together again, and this time read the book to them. It's in black and white!'

So Moses read it to them and said, 'Can you see what's involved? Can you understand the details and the small print? If you break this covenant God will curse you; your relationship with God depends on you keeping your part of the bargain. Will you do it and have a relationship on those terms? Look, it's in the print!'

The people responded just as eagerly as they did before. 'What's all the fuss, Moses? Of course we will. We can and we shall—all that the Lord has spoken we will do!'

And you and I, who have known the centuries go by and know our own hearts, I suspect we tremble a little bit as we hear Israel in their comparative innocence talking like that. How little they knew their hearts. How little they could foresee the history that was yet to be.

Finally, Moses went up to God and God with his own finger wrote the summary of that covenant in the ten words of the Law. Israel made a covenant on those terms; it was scarcely made but it was broken. Until such time as our blessed Lord instituted the new covenant the rest of Israel's history is a very chequered lesson, showing how they disregarded God's covenant and broke it. Not only accidentally, very often they broke it deliberately. God was obliged to chastise them and bring his curse upon them until at length the lesson was written in writing that nobody could possibly mistake or misunderstand. There can be no salvation on the terms of that old covenant—there can be no buying of salvation now, or of heaven hereafter, on the basis of our own effort to keep God's holy Law. See it written large in Israel's history and learn the abysmal incompetence of the human heart.

Israel had to discover their own bankruptcy and for that reason they were given that first covenant. They should have discovered their need and the impossibility of finding salvation on those terms. Though God's favoured people, now emptied of pride and a feeling of superiority of being better than anybody else, they had to be brought to the point where they were prepared along with the Gentiles to accept the new covenant and God's salvation totally by grace. That's one answer to the question.

2. Though the old covenant could not bring perfection, nevertheless it had a tabernacle adjoined to it
Did you pick up what the New Testament was saying in Hebrews 9? The writer there has just observed that the new covenant we Christians enjoy is far better than the old covenant. Thank God for it! But then he adds that, though the old covenant wasn't as good as the new, even the old covenant had a sanctuary. Yes of course it did! It had a sanctuary and systems of sacrifice to go with it, for God was a realist. He would have to teach Israel a lesson and a long lesson it would be—it would take centuries. While the nation as a whole discovered the abysmal blackness of sin and sin became exceedingly sinful, meanwhile he had individual people and succeeding generations to think about. What about their needs and their personal relationship with God? When in human weakness they sinned and displeased God,

did he just abandon them? Of course not! Even though they stood under that inadequate old covenant, even the old covenant had a sanctuary and a system of divine worship.

Let's start at the very beginning with that literal generation in the wilderness. God was proposing to take them across it to their promised inheritance; how should he ever get them there?

More than that. Have we not just heard how God came down to Sinai to explain to them, 'I have brought you on eagles' wings, and I have brought you to myself'? This was no vague typology that didn't apply to them but would apply to the Christian church one day. It was spoken to those folks in the wilderness as well, and God meant it. He was to be their goal, and to be their goal right now. He offered them a personal relationship on the terms of that covenant. In the goodness of his heart he offered a tabernacle so that he might dwell with them. He wanted them and loved them. They were real people, not just pictures in an album for the benefit and instruction of Christians. Insofar as was possible God longed for an experience of them and for them to have an experience of him. Not when they got into Canaan at last and Solomon should arise and build a temple in all its magnificence, now on the desert sands God would come down and meet with them, form this relationship with them and know them. And they would know him as best they could.

You say, 'How is it possible? How could they—poor, broken, feeble, erring people—maintain any significant and real relationship with the living God in that wilderness?' I'll tell you how. Even the first covenant had a tabernacle and vessels for divine service. Divine ingenuity was not hard up for finding a way and a means whereby those pilgrim ex-slaves might enjoy his company as they travelled home to Canaan. As we read it, two things shall strike us; the tremendous grace of God to those ancient people and his grace to us and the exceeding glory of the favours that we have been given in Christ.

Where God meets with his people

Let us pick out some of the main details. Says God, 'Moses, ask the people to build me a sanctuary that I might come and dwell among them.'

'What shall I build first, Lord?' asks Moses.

'First you build an ark; in it you will put the law and on it you will put a mercy-seat.'

'What for, Lord?'

'Ah,' says God, 'for the very purpose that I want the tabernacle. Between those cherubim above the ark of the testimony, there I will meet with them and talk with them. I will commune with them.'

Oh, the lovely ingenuity of God! Ex-slaves though they were, he loved them and he wanted them. He wanted their fellowship and would go to any length to devise means so that they might come and meet him and he could talk to them on the way home. They were not just to be comforted by odd visions, dreams of what should be when they got to Canaan at last; but they might know that God was in their midst. He was real, alive, speaking—a God who could be met, who talked to you. He was really there; that's why he had the tabernacle.

What volumes that speaks to our hearts. One day, when at length we are home, we hope to see the blessed Lord face to face. But we don't have to wait until we get home to our

inheritance before we can meet God, do we? Where, then, is that place here on earth? Where is the spot where I, a traveller from time to eternity, may come and meet God? Let it into your heart, we don't have to wait until we get home to heaven. You don't have to wait until you have crossed your Jordan and passed through death and launched yourself upon eternity before you can meet God. If you wait until then you might find yourself unprepared to meet him. There are many thousands of our fellow men and women who wander on through life like that. They have not yet met God; they have not yet heard him personally. He has never spoken to them, or they to him. If they think about it all, they realise that one of these days life will be done and perhaps they will go to some heaven somewhere. But the reality is vastly different. On this planet, while we yet travel through time, there is a place where a human soul can come and meet their God and be spoken to.

The ark and the mercy seat

The New Testament talks first of all to the unconverted—to people in their sins, pointing them to the fact that they can never find salvation by that law of Moses. Next it points them to the ark that contained the law of Moses, and then to the mercy-seat—that slab of pure gold that covered the ark, with its cherubim of glory. It bids them see in their mind's eye that ark and the law, the mercy-seat and the cherubim; and then that mercy-seat stained red with the blood of the sacrifice of atonement. That picture of the ancient ark and its mercy-seat sprinkled with blood cries in their ears, 'Just as Israel came to that ark, met God and were accepted and forgiven, so it is possible to meet God on earth now. To show God's righteousness, he has set forth our Lord Jesus Christ to be a mercy-seat, through faith in his blood. Not only did he forbear and pass over the sins of previous ages, he can meet sinners now. If they come in bankrupt repentance and faith, God will justify them and pronounce them to be clear and right with God.'

The New Testament talks to the believer as well. Let me say it again—though how can we forget?—we are not in heaven yet; we are very much in the wilderness. Another week has found us out and we know our weaknesses ever more deeply. We have overcome some of them only to find that another has defeated us and painfully we are aware that we are not yet at home with the Lord in our glorious inheritance.

Sometimes we say, 'Shall I ever be there?' Then we remember the glorious words of the epistle written by John, 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father . . . He is the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 2:1-2). In its basic meaning the word *propitiation* is leading to the mercy seat. It tells us not merely of the place but of the person who made that great sacrifice, the availing sacrifice that I need as a believer for oftentimes I sin. I tell you something else about me—the extent of my spiritual ignorance is that often I sin and don't even know that I am sinning. I can say, 'I'm better than that man; I'm a better preacher than that man!' I think I am being so marvellous and spiritual, when the old pride is rising like the stench of a sewer and I don't even know that I am being proud. How does God put up with me? You will see that he's got a lot to do before I am fit for his presence and can behave properly in heaven. You wouldn't be very comfortable in heaven if I were there not considerably changed, would you? There you are with five or six crowns on your head and I go by with half a little one as if I owned the place! That would spoil your heaven. How does

God put up with me even now, while he is bringing me to my senses? He does it in the same way as he put up with Israel.

How did that tabernacle stay with Israel in the wilderness in spite of their uncleanness? It stayed with them because once a year there was a great Day of Atonement and they brought in the sacrifice and put the blood of atonement on the mercy-seat. The tabernacle was atoned for so that God might continue with them in spite of their sin. And thank God for that sacrifice of Christ. I am on my way to God's heaven and one day I shall be there. I know there'll need to be a change, but Christ has paid the expense of it. He paid the price of my spiritual education, made it possible for a holy God to keep on with me, to keep bothering with me, stay with me and never let me go until at last he has me home.

If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 2:1-2)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

Did you ever hear such a gospel, realistically designed to get erstwhile sinners and slaves through this wilderness and home at last to glory? There is a place, a mercy-seat. Come to it! Who doesn't have times of trouble? Perhaps you are in a similar situation as the people to whom that letter of Hebrews was written. They had blotted their copybook so much that they were thinking of abandoning their Christian profession. They were saying, 'It's no good, we can't stick the pace. We have made such a muddle of it, what's the good of still claiming to be Christians?' And the writer says, '*We have a high priest; and, what is more, we have a mercy-seat; it's a throne of grace and a throne of mercy. You needn't throw up your Christian profession. Hold fast to it! Abysmally weak as you may be, God has made adequate provision for you. Don't give it up. Come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain the mercy you need for the past and the grace for the way that lies ahead.*'

The table and the lampstand

There were two other major vessels in that tabernacle. One was a table with bread on it and the other was a lampstand with lamps on it. What were they for? They were for presentation; the table held up twelve loaves in the presence of God—'before the LORD,' as the ancient text says, and the lampstand held up lamps to shine 'before the LORD' (40:23; 25).

If I came to your home I should find similar things there. I shouldn't find the lamp-bulb on the end of an old lead on the floor, I should find it on a stand—simple or ornate, according to your taste. But I suspect the lamp would be on a stand so that it might give light to all who are in the house. And I suspect that, if one of these days you were to invite me to supper, you wouldn't put the food on the floor! I hope not! It would be on a table, simple or ornate; but you would present the food to me on a table.

God had come down to Israel. How would they entertain him? It's bad enough, so I'm told, to have the preacher come to stay with you sometimes, but fancy having God always!

How would you entertain God? So Israel were instructed to put loaves on a table before the Lord (Exod 25:30).

Did God have to be entertained with food on a table? God doesn't need food. It's God that makes the food and feeds us. We don't have to feed God!

'I thought we did!' you say. 'You've got your typology wrong! That bread on the table is a picture of the Lord Jesus, who is the Bread of Life to us. We come and eat of him and are fed.'

That's right! I would have to agree with you. But the Bible does tell us as well that the food was put there and left *before the Lord* for a whole week and nobody touched it. At the end of the week the priest came along and ate it; but that wasn't its prime purpose. For a whole week it claims that its purpose was to be presenting that bread on the table before the Lord.

'But,' you say, 'God doesn't need to eat bread, does he?'

You're right; God doesn't need bread to eat!

Let me quote you a New Testament text to bring you round to my way of thinking! The Lord is standing outside the door of a church and he says, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me' (Rev 3:20). Eat my dinner with him and he will eat his with me—what did he mean? No longer, as with Mary and Martha, would he come knocking on their door and Martha would invite him in and set him down to a well-spread table and enjoy his fellowship and conversation as he enjoyed hers. Risen Lord though he is, in a deeper, more intimate and higher way, he still looks to be entertained by his people. He knocks on our heart's door and, coming in, he expects a feast to be spread on the table of our hearts so that he might dine and eat with us.

If I were your guest for a week you couldn't always be sitting there with me. You have your business to attend to, but I hope you wouldn't leave me in your best room and never come and talk to me. We have God dwelling in us and he expects to be entertained. How can I entertain him? I am not so much conscious of what I say, because he looks beyond and behind what I say to what I am. I know in my heart that he looks to be satisfied with me; to enjoy me in the way I behave at my work, my leisure, my pleasures. How can I meet his demand? How can I shine before the Lord, so that men might see my good works and glorify him?

It would be impossible were it not for this. Much as God loved Israel, they couldn't come very near so they had to make do with symbols. They took twelve loaves of bread and they wanted to present them before the Lord for the Lord to enjoy, so to speak. They couldn't just be left on the floor, so they were told to make a table that should carry and present them before God.

Why am I saved?

I turn to my New Testament and enquire as to what is the goal of my salvation. The epistle to the Ephesians tells me that it is God's electing good pleasure; he has chosen me in Christ before the foundation of the world that I should be holy and without blame *before him* (1:4). That's why he has chosen me! Forever I shall be before him and he will be able to look upon

me with delight and satisfaction and enjoyment. That's why he made me in the first place and now that he has redeemed me he wants to set me before his face.

I say to myself, 'Yes, that's all right, God. One of these days, when your work is finished and I am home at last with the Lord, perhaps you will find satisfaction in me.'

Then the word comes, 'No, long before that! While you are still on the desert sand I want you to be before me.'

And I say, 'How is it possible, Lord?'

The answer comes back, 'I've already done it. It was my intention that you should be before me and the thing is done. Even as I chose you, I have blessed you in Christ. I have raised him from the dead and set him at my right hand; in raising him and putting him there, I have put you there.'

I can scarcely believe it—can you? Yet it is true. As true as that table took those loaves and presented them before God to his satisfaction, so the Saviour has taken those who trust him and he presents them before God. He holds them *before him* to the satisfaction of almighty God now and forever. So, in Christ, God's great purpose is being done on the desert sand. This humble believer and that believer, presented in the gold of the person and the character and the worth of his Son, is held before God and God can already accept me and find something to delight in while we journey towards home.

The holiest of all

Do you know what the secret of it all was? There was an altar and a laver and an altar of incense and I need not elaborate how they tell us the secrets of God's ways with us now—Calvary, Pentecost and the present ministry of our Lord's intercession. But one thing I must say. However hastily I have sketched it, God's provision for Israel surely has shown me how realistic God was. He wanted their fellowship in the wilderness and even the first covenant had a sanctuary that actually made fellowship with God possible to a certain degree, but in it all there was one thing they never could do, as the text reminds us. God was among them, for sure, and dwelt behind the curtain, but it was only once in a year that the solitary high priest could penetrate the curtain and come into the presence of God.

Those days have long since passed. The Lord Jesus has come and the new covenant has been instituted. We have a tabernacle more glorious indeed; it is being built now out of all those who trust the Saviour and one day it shall adorn eternity as a finally erected and permanent building of that eternal tabernacle. But now, even on these desert sands, we can do what Israel never did; we can enter the holiest of all. As I say it, I begin to sense that my geography is getting a little bit unearthly. God with me here, on the desert sands, my very body and the church of which I am a member, the temple of the Holy Spirit—God is with us!

I say to myself, 'I know where the holiest of all was for Israel; it was on the desert sand. But where is the holiest of all into which I may enter?'

You say, 'The holiest of all is the immediate presence of God. It is his very innermost heaven!'

'It's not on the desert sand, then? You mean, it is in heaven, where my inheritance is?'

'Yes,' you say.

‘Well that’s a curious thing! I’m not in heaven, am I? This very night we are on the desert sand, but was there a time today when you lifted your spirit to God in the virtue of the blood of Christ—you came boldly to the mercy-seat and you entered? Tell me, where did you enter?’

You say, ‘I entered through the veil and by his Spirit I made contact with God and he with me.’ That’s a wonderful thing—on earth and in heaven simultaneously. As Paul put it,

God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess 2:13–14)

Believing in the Saviour, it is certain that we shall obtain the glory of the Lord. We shall enter in—bodily we shall enter in. While bodily we are not yet there, in spirit we already have the right to enter in and see ourselves at home with the Lord. O marvellous salvation, it’s a taste of heaven here on earth!

Even now, may we take hold more readily and more meaningfully of that great provision that God has given to us and come ever and again boldly to the throne of grace and find fellowship with him. As we do so we shall rise above our temporary world to the eternal, into God’s own presence in the here and now, and know the glorious assurance that grows within the human heart, that though we travel (and there are many miles yet to be covered), in another sense we are already there.

The Delayed Return and the Great Apostasy

Reading: Exodus 31:18; 32:1–35.

You might have thought, I suppose, as anyone might have thought, that the matter of getting Israel out of Egypt and into Canaan was a simple and straightforward matter. Not an easy matter, of course—that journey in those days could not, under any circumstances, have been thought easy—but though not easy, it should have been a straightforward matter. After all, Egypt was down there in the south west and Canaan was up there in the north east and what could have been more simple and straightforward than to take them out of Egypt, point their noses towards Canaan and keep on going until they arrived?

In the event it proved to be anything but a straightforward matter to get the people from Egypt into Canaan. In fact, they were not so many months out of Egypt when the nation lost their way completely and came within an ace of not getting anywhere near Canaan. They lost their way because they lost their goal, or mistook their goal. For their true goal and destiny, they substituted a false goal and teetered for a while on the very precipice and edge of utter apostasy.

The true goal of Israel's redemption, as we have been seeing in our past studies, was not the geographical land of Canaan. That was the land to which they were journeying. Their goal, as we discovered, was not Canaan but God himself. 'You have seen,' said he early on, 'what I did to the Egyptians; how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. If you will obey my voice I shall make you a treasure to myself and grant you a ministry of being a kingdom of priests, whose goal in life is to minister to me. I shall be the goal of your activity and the goal of your faith' (Exod 19:4–6).

In order to implement that, we have seen how God proposed to his people not only a covenant (that their relationship with him might be secure), but also that they build him a tabernacle (that he might come and dwell among them). They would have the goal of their lives present and resident with them and be able to approach him, love him, worship him, serve him and travel with him. Even as they travelled geographically towards Canaan they would follow the leading provided by his presence, marked in the cloud and in the pillar of fire by night. Canaan would certainly be a fuller experience that should lead them into a deeper understanding and enjoyment of God, but long before they got to Canaan their journey through the wilderness would be a journey into a deeper experience of God. He would become more wonderful and more detailed to them, ever more surprising and enhancing. God was their goal.

Rising doubts

Then they apostatized, or nearly apostatized. That glorious tabernacle, which God had suggested they build for him as a dwelling place in their midst, was almost never built. The people turned and substituted for God as their goal something that was wretched, miserable and utterly blasphemous.

It happened like this. Moses had gone up the mountain to get the final directions for the building of the tabernacle, a final signing of the covenant by God himself and to bring down the tablets written by the very finger of God, as God pledged himself to that people. Moses went up the mountain, disappeared and was lost to their view. Before he went he pointed out that he would come again, but now he had been gone several days. As the days went on to weeks, some bright spark started to do a little theological thinking or philosophy—call it what you will.

Said he to his fellow, 'This man Moses, who we are supposed to be following, you can't see him! What an extraordinary thing it is in this modern world for us to be sitting here in the wilderness. We are neither here nor there! We are not in Egypt; we are not in Canaan. And the man we are supposed to be following, where is he? You say he's gone up the mountain, but we've only got his word for it. How do you know it's true—can you see him? You can't prove he's up the mountain! Why hasn't he come back again?'

Another said, 'He's coming back very soon for when he went he said, "If I go away I'll come again."'

'But we heard that last Wednesday and he's still not back, and we heard it the Wednesday before! It's curious how, week after week, people are prepared to believe this kind of stuff. He didn't come last week and he didn't come this week, still you go on hoping that he'll come again. The fact is that we don't know where Moses is or what's become of him.'

That certainly was a difficult situation to be in. Moses, whom they followed, whose word they believed—the intermediary between them and God—had disappeared and they could no longer believe that he was coming again.

When you come to think about it, you are in a similar position! Believing, as I hope you do, in Jesus Christ as a greater than Moses and the apostle and high priest of your confession, you would certainly tell me, if I asked, that he has risen from the dead and human eyes saw him ascend into heaven. You would further tell me that you truly believe and surely affirm that he is coming again. You would quote me his very words, 'If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am there you may be also' (John 14:3). The fact remains that you have never seen him, have you? You still can't see him and here you sit in this wilderness of a Belfast, believing in a man you still can't see and loving a man you never have seen. If you look at it with a sceptic's eye, you must admit that it is an extraordinary situation. But your faith holds,

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:8–9)

You live in the expectation of the grace that shall be manifest to you at his return.

A question of values

At that moment in the wilderness the faith of some of Israel wore thin. Finding themselves in that situation, they did what is a very natural thing for the human heart to do. They said to Aaron, 'We must be sensible, now we find ourselves here. We can't stay here like this; we must have some goal in the wilderness, some sense of purpose. We can't just lounge around here day after day; we are getting nowhere like this, we must make progress. Make us gods to go before us!'

Most people feel they must have some assistance in life—I suspect you do. There may be a few idle rich who sit around doing nothing, aiming at nothing, fast getting nowhere, gliding through life with no plan, no aim, no purpose, just meandering. Few of us find that acceptable, or even intelligent. Our hearts crave a goal; we want to be aiming at something. Not prepared to let things slip by, we want a plan, a purpose; we want to feel we are making progress.

These folks were no different. When they lost their faith in Moses, their mediator between God and men, of course they lost their faith in God's plan for them and had to substitute another goal, another guidance. So they said to Aaron, 'Make us other gods that can go before us, something we can aim at and follow and feel that we are getting somewhere. Give us an object to which we may devote our energies and toil and progress. So they knocked their heads together with Aaron and made themselves gods to go before them. And what do you suppose those gods were, the goals that now they proposed to follow? 'These are our gods,' they said. Well, if you please, they were earrings! It sounds comical indeed. What on earth were people doing, following earrings in the wilderness? 'Take off your earrings,' said Aaron. So they took their earrings off and gave them to Aaron, he fiddled around with them and presently he came out with a god! But it was still earrings, only in another form. 'A god that you might follow!' said Aaron, and from now on they would have followed earrings. If they weren't going to follow Moses and they weren't going to follow God, what would you have had them follow? At least they proposed earrings, which would have been one of the most valuable things they possessed.

In those days there were no banks, so if you had spare wealth you tended to carry it on your person. If you had a lot of gold it could wear holes in your pocket, so why not make earrings out of it? Maybe it would adorn your person and enhance your feeling of importance. Gold is treasure to most people. It's not just money—it's gold and treasure. Aaron could think of no better thing. And what is life, anyway? If you have no living faith in Moses or in God, find something to aim for in life. What will you aim for? The most valuable thing you can think of, the richest concept. Perhaps your fancy doesn't go for literal gold, as it does with many people—some would risk their lives for it. Maybe yours would be art or music, or literature or power, or some such valuable thing? It's understandable that they should choose the most valuable thing they could get their hands on and make that their goal and their god.

Those earrings weren't only valuable and aesthetically delightful just by way of taste, very often earrings were turned into a kind of amulet or a charm. They thought that if they wore them they would ward off undesirable spirits and other such things as might be lurking around in the wilderness. So they wore them as amulets. You've got to have

protection, haven't you? You will need protection if you are going to walk through a waste, howling wilderness and achieve your goal. You must be aware that there are hostile powers against you and you will need some security in life, some protection to find your way through. Where will you get it, if not through your goal?

I submit to you that, rather than being simpletons, they were doing what wise men and women have always done when they have lost faith in God—entrust all their endeavours, affections and their wealth to the most valuable thing they could get hold of. They took their golden earrings and collectively they made the 'gross national product' and set it up on its pillar. 'These are your gods,' they said, and proposed that the gods should go before them and they should follow.

If you are going through a wilderness, it is a very perilous, difficult and unsatisfactory thing to make gold your object and guidance. Indeed it is dangerous to make anything short of God your goal. Pause for a moment and listen to the words of the Saviour. 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth' (Matt 6:19–20). Mark the term; he did not say, 'Do not lay up money upon earth,' did he? He said, 'Do not lay up treasures on earth.' There is a difference between treasure and money. Some folks that I have met, just a few, have so much money that for them it's like dirt—at least that's how they seem to spend it and it isn't treasure for them at all. One day it's in their pocket and the next it's down the drain. Treasure is not necessarily money; it can be anything that we really value.

There's a little four-year-old, he's been playing in the garden and found wonders galore, and he's found something that he's not going to let go. It's the most valuable thing to him and when mother unlocks his hand, lo and behold it's a worm. But he thought it was lovely! Five pound notes to him are not very interesting—worms are treasure!

It's surprising what 'treasures' people keep under their pillows. Treasures are powerful because they are the things that get hold of our hearts. My heart will go where my treasure is. Put my treasure in heaven and my heart will go after it and my feet will go there too. Put my treasure on earth and my heart will go after it and it will take my feet and my life there too. 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matt 6:21). It's not wrong that we should have treasure, but it is exceedingly important that it should be the right treasure and that it should be put in the right place. Whether we are young and have just begun the journey or are near its end, let us hear the words of Christ, 'Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.' Aim at what will guide your journey to its goal.

When they could have made the living God their treasure and let him capture their hearts and imagination, so that as they went step by step along that journey God could become ever more wonderful to them and draw them at length to that wonderful paradise that he had designed for them—instead of believing in God they lost their faith in him and made earrings their treasure and their goal.

What is your goal, what gods are you following? What are those things that go before you? God grant that we can honestly answer, 'Lord, it is yourself! Thank you for all those lovely things and people you've given us, but our final goal is nothing but you yourself. We are waiting for that supreme goal and moment when he who ascended through the clouds will come again as he promised. We are waiting for the Saviour.'

Incidental blessings of redemption

It may be dull and dismal work, but we must spend a few more moments with these people and their earrings. As we do so, we should not imagine we are so superior that we should never be like them.

Think again of the significance of the earrings. In the first place, where did they get hold of them? They were slaves in Egypt, where did they get these golden earrings? They got them when they came out of Egypt. They had been slaves for years and never got any proper wages, so when they came out of Egypt God directed them that they were to ask the Egyptians to give them all sorts of things. They had a right to it; here was some of their back pay that was owed to them. God saw to it that they got these earrings and other lovely valuable things. They deserved them, they had earned them and God saw to it that they got paid. As one of the results of redemption these folks were rewarded with some hard cash, some gold. There was nothing wrong with the earrings as such, not then or now as far as I am aware. In fact, it was God in his mercy who had seen to it that they got them. But do you see the difference that has come now? When they first came out of Egypt, this gold and these earrings were the incidental blessings that came to them as the result of being removed from the wrath of God and set free from the tyranny of Pharaoh. They were the incidental blessings of redemption, lovely things to be enjoyed. God loves to give us all things richly to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17). But rather than being the incidental blessings of redemption, the people had now turned them round and they were the whole goal in life—gods that should go before them.

Sometimes it may have happened even with Christian folks. Before Mr X got converted he spent so much money every week on cigarettes, on the dogs or the horses. When he got converted he didn't spend it on these things and as a result he found himself with a lot of money, so he bought himself a better house and a better car. (I hope it took him to the meetings!) Why not have a better car? It's better than an old jalopy. And then, and then, and then . . . and presently you wouldn't see him quite so often at the meetings. His Bible wasn't open quite so often as it used to be. His heart was so full of the incidental material blessings that had come to him as a result of being redeemed, that they seem to have become the major goal in his living. It could happen to any one of us.

They not only took those incidental blessings and made them the goal of their activities, but by some curious logic they turned these incidental blessings into the very source of their redemption. Did you hear what they said, as they danced hand in hand? Looking at the golden calf that had been made out of their earrings, they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' (Exod 32:4). That's a curious turn of events! Did they mean that as payment for their work in Egypt they got a lot of earrings and gold, which paid their way out of Egypt? No, surely the secret of their coming out was that the living God had intervened; by his redeeming power, the blood of that Passover lamb and by his Spirit God had brought them out of Egypt. He had told Moses to take to them that glorious gospel message and when they believed it they were saved. But their memories had got distorted; now they were saying that it wasn't the living God and his gospel, the blood of the lamb and the power of God's Spirit, it was the earrings that did it!

Have we not seen something like that happen from time to time in Christendom? Men have preached the gospel and through its redeeming power they have seen thousands of souls converted. It led to an improvement in their circumstances—clothes on their back, shoes on their feet, education and things that they never had before. Lovely things, the incidentals to redemption. But then, have I heard those folks say, ‘We don’t want so much of that gospel preaching, that *ransom* stuff? It’s total improvement that we need! What’s the good of preaching the gospel? It’s clothes on a man’s back that he wants, education is the thing that improves people. Get going with the infant day schools, adult schools, better facilities, a new health service and these will redeem humankind. Have you never heard it?

It’s a sad and distorted perversion of the facts. Men thank the incidental blessings of redemption and imagine that those blessings are the cause and the means of human improvement and salvation. Surely in this country at this time we have a generation that has the evidence before its eyes that it is not the health service, however good; nor the education service, however advanced; nor material blessings that will redeem us. If we ever get it into our heads that this is our redemption—material, educational and physical benefits are the redeeming powers leading us to the glorious utopia and our inheritance—it will lead us into a waste, howling wilderness. It is mere materialism without God.

The importance of defining what people mean when they use religious terms

Then there was something profoundly disconcerting. When they made a golden calf from their earrings they didn’t change their religious vocabulary. They didn’t say, ‘Tomorrow we will cease to worship the Lord and we will cease to talk about Jehovah. That was old-fashioned stuff, we will now talk about *deified earrings!*’ They substituted their idols but they went on using the same terms and they called their idol *Jehovah*. It was Aaron himself that led them—he was used to that terminology. They still talked about Jehovah but they no longer meant the same. ‘Tomorrow,’ said Aaron, ‘will be a feast of Jehovah.’ Had you been around at that time you would have said, ‘Aaron does confess to belief in Jehovah!’ But Aaron wasn’t talking about what you would have meant by Jehovah; he was using the same word but now he was talking about an idol.

The theologians in Christendom do precisely that. If a man uses the name of Jesus and says that he believes in the resurrection nowadays, you cannot necessarily be content and rest assured. You will have to enquire what he means by *Jesus* and what he means by the *resurrection*.

I remember being on my travels and, for the sheer joy of the architecture, entering that vast and glorious cathedral that stands in the city of Ulm in Germany. I found some leaflets on the pews, scattered here and there all over the cathedral. I took them up and as best as my German would allow I tried to read them. From those leaflets I gathered that there was a battle stirring in that part of the world, a battle we have known in many other parts of Christendom too—men and women concerned with what was happening to formal theology. They had listed various things: the deity of Christ, the resurrection, the word of God. Under those headings they had written what holy Scripture has to say about those particular things and alongside each one the comments of the theologians of that country. I cannot forget one of them. It was on the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Now the Bible

says (and herein is all the gospel), 'that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3–4).

Still claiming to be a Christian, one particular theologian said, 'I believe in the resurrection, but not that the body actually came out of the tomb. I don't believe there was a point in history when a body that was actually dead came to life and came out of that tomb. I can't believe anything so crude. When I say that I believe in the resurrection I mean that Jesus Christ was a brave young man who, though he was many times defeated, never gave up. He always got up and had another go, he persevered in his heart and left us an example how we should do the same.'

You will not need me to point out what is happening here. People using the same terms and not meaning the same thing.

We ask, 'Where is Christendom going?' Instead of believing that our great High Priest has gone up into heaven and is coming again, hear what some of them say.

'I can't believe he's coming again! What do you mean, "He's coming again"? You don't really want us to believe that he literally went up from Mount Olivet and he's literally coming again, do you? It's a myth, it's merely saying that somehow or other God is always breaking through in history.'

So, we're not talking about the same thing then!

You say, 'If that's what they believe, why don't they give up the biblical terms, come clean and say that they don't believe it? They should tell us what new thing they have manufactured that they do now believe.'

I ask the same question and it is not mine to answer. We have lived to see a day when men, using the same biblical terms, no longer believe, admit, or confess what those terms originally meant. They talk about *Jesus*, but they do not mean your sinless Lord. They don't mean the man who literally came from heaven to this world, for they don't believe there's a heaven to come from. They talk of the *resurrection*, but they don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter, literally came out of the tomb. And they talk of his *coming again*, but they do not believe that heaven shall part one day and we shall see him descending the sky. They use the same terms, but they have substituted the living God with an idol concocted of modern intellectualism.

The difference between truth and apostasy

In imagination, then, we are with Israel in the desert, and the desert is a difficult place. You will have observed in the scripture we read earlier that when Moses came down the mountain he came with the tablets 'written with the finger of God' (31:18). What do you think that phrase means? Someone may say, 'You are not going to demand that we take it literally, are you? You don't suppose that God has a hand with four fingers and a thumb like we have?' No, I'm not proposing that, any more than when it says he brought Israel out of Egypt by a strong arm and an uplifted hand that God has an arm formed of bones and a hand such as I have. I shall tell you what I think it means from holy Scripture and you must make up your mind. When Moses went up that mountain God was there and by his divine power God inscribed those tablets. Maintaining the metaphor, God 'put his finger' into our

world, he used his voice and 'spoke' all these words. The people at the bottom of the mountain heard the voice coming out of heaven, a voice objectively real that could be heard.

'No!' says the modernist, 'that isn't what it means at all. There was no literal voice, God didn't literally come down and stand on Mount Sinai. It is all a myth, a picture, symbolic language. God has given us all moral judgment and even the weakest of us can tell the difference between right and wrong in some things. God gave it to us all and to Moses in an extraordinary degree. He was a genius and, therefore, when this newly delivered nation needed a moral code, Moses thought he would climb a mountain to get out of the hubbub of daily life. As he sat there and thought (and prayed, of course) he came to a conclusion. Through his moral judgment he decided that murder, adultery and stealing would be wrong and Moses wrote it down. There was no voice from outer space. We have to make up our minds to believe that, when a genius like Moses gives us the benefit of his moral judgment, in a sense that is God.'

The difference is a difference between truth and apostasy. Of course, God has given us all moral judgment. When you deliberate, 'How should I treat my neighbour? —he has offended me, he has done something wrong, how should I respond?' —I don't suppose you are getting a direct revelation out of heaven. The voice of God does not come down upon your back garden and speak to you through the window, saying, 'This is God here and I am telling you how you should behave!' Those marvellous theophanies don't happen every five minutes—I don't know if it has ever happened in Belfast. God has given you moral judgment; you use your moral judgment and trust that God leads you.

While that is perfectly true, what happened on Sinai wasn't just that. It was not that Moses used his moral judgment and we have to believe that it was God. What happened on Mount Sinai was that the living God came into time, put his finger in our universe and caused his voice to be heard. When Moses stood upon the mountain that day, his knees all a-tremble, he heard a voice but there was an objective reality standing there. There is a heaven and there is God—a God who from time to time has been pleased to speak into our world. Indeed, he has come into our world. Tell me what you think about Jesus Christ of Nazareth. If you love your soul, make up your mind on this. He taught us the Sermon on the Mount and those lovely things about his Father's house—what was happening when Jesus Christ spoke?

I have had elders in the churches that I have been privileged to be a member of, and good and godly men they have been. When they have stood publicly to minister the word, or comforted me by their fireside through their conversation, they have helped me to see something of the meaning of God's holy word. They have strengthened my soul and I do believe God has used them for it. But you wouldn't put them on a level with Jesus Christ, would you? What do we hear when Jesus of Nazareth speaks? Somebody who had a finely developed religious sense of moral conscience, a perception second-to-none, not even to Isaiah? When he spoke do we have to do a leap of faith and believe that in some sense it might be God, or do we believe that when he stood upon our world this was God incarnate coming into our universe? As I say, the difference is between the gospel and its truth and apostasy.

Let us look to our terms and no longer be content that a man should say he believes in Jesus, the resurrection, or the inspiration of holy Scripture. Let us ask what he means by those terms and make sure it's what the Bible means by them; he is not using them to cover up or describe some modern concoction of demythologization.

An angry God and Moses' intercession

What then should be done? God informed Moses of what was happening. You must understand how serious this thing is and that I have not been exaggerating these implications. God's anger 'burned hot' and he threatened to destroy them (32:10). It was an affront on the very person of God, on his reality. However aesthetic and refined their golden calf was, it was an idol taking the very place of God in the people's hearts and minds. But Moses (in whom some of them had abandoned faith) stood in the breach.

'I've finished with these people,' said God. 'I've waited long enough. I started with Abraham, called him out, taught him justification by faith. I taught Isaac and Jacob and your fathers and now see what I have done to redeem you. I had a glorious purpose for this nation, the Jews, but if they don't want me I have finished with them. I won't give up the idea of saving mankind, I will just write off the Jewish people as one colossal failure and start again with you, Moses. I will make a nation of you.'

Now if I had been in Moses' place (but how could I ever be?) I should have been thinking, 'Look what they did to me at Marah, and at Massah they nearly stoned me. They're always blaming me, always finding fault with me, always grumbling and never seeming to remember that I left the palace in Egypt to come and share their lot. I needn't have been in this wilderness at all. If all they can do is to murmur and grumble, then I agree with you, God. Get rid of them, blot them all out.'

But Moses was made of different stuff. Down on the desert sand the people couldn't see him; he was beyond the cloud up that mountain. But when God made him that offer, Moses remained faithful to them. 'No, God, not that; if you blot them out, you blot me out. I won't be separate from them!' I think the Almighty, in spite of his wrath, would have smiled in his heart. What a man Moses was. He had a heart like the divine that should cry later on, 'How can I give you up, O Ephraim?' (Hos 11:8).

'You can't do it,' says Moses. 'I know they are a miserable crowd, but you can't do it for your own reputation's sake. What would the Egyptians say? If you wipe out Israel they would say, "Aha, all this talk of the Jews and the living God, there's nothing in it!" You gave your oath to Abraham; you made a covenant with him and sealed it with the covenant sacrifice. How can you give up Abraham and his seed?'

Moses, the apostle and high priest of their confession, pleaded with almighty God on behalf of the people. He gained his point and God did not cast away his people whom he foreknew. He didn't then and he hasn't since. In spite of their glaring provocations and the murder of his own dear son, God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew. He has purposes for them—all Israel shall yet be saved (Rom 11:26).

But for our own sake we let our minds go a-wandering. Is there any danger that we should go as far as those people slipped when they worshipped the golden calf? Don't you remember what Paul, the inspired apostle, wrote?

[They] all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea . . . with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness . . . Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' (1 Cor 10:2-7)

Fooling about in the wilderness, with little gain. When these great issues between faith and unbelief were being fought out on that plain they were fooling their time away. It's like a nursery rhyme, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.'

Are we better than they? I feel the propensity of my own heart to go drivelling off into idolatry, but then, with relief, I think of him. 'Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession' (Heb 3:1). You say, 'I can't see him.' No, you can't indeed; but consider him. Consider him, 'being faithful' (as the Greek has it—v. 2)—this very moment being faithful. Though I can't see him, and very often I have failed him and grumbled, he is faithful to me, remaining faithful, and I shall never perish. 'He is able to save *to the uttermost* those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

Praise God for him. If you haven't lost your way and the goal shines in front of you still brighter, raise your heart before you sleep and praise God through Jesus Christ our Lord. By his priestly energies he has maintained you in the past when you wandered; when you got lost in the maze of materialism and in modern theology, so that you didn't know what you really believed at all. Come to the throne of grace where he ministers. Consider him, the apostle and high priest of your confession, being faithful to you. If you are a child of God at all, know it, and by his intercession he will bring you through and lead you on until at length he comes again 'down the mountainside,' fulfils his promise and takes you to be forever with himself, so that where he is there you may be also.

Let us be awake to the tendencies of our age and to the issues of the battle that is around us. By God's grace, may we be faithful and alert and strong in our minds and our thinking so that we might discern where truth is. May God revive our hearts and make them ever more alive and full of love and devotion to his Son that, in spite of our many stumbles, we may be drawn to where our treasure is until at last we reach our home above.

The Reprieve of Israel and the Renewal of the Covenant

Readings: Exodus 33:1–23; 34:1–10, 27–35; 2 Corinthians 3:7–8, 12–18.

Last time we considered together the sin of Israel, when they made the golden calf and fell into grievous idolatry. Instead of the living God as their goal and their guide, they made a substitute god to go before them. They took their earrings, made them into a golden calf, danced and played before their idol and said, 'These are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.'

We considered how on that occasion God became exceedingly angry with his people. It was no wonder, when God had redeemed them. And redeemed them for this express purpose, that he might bring them to himself and they should live for him. The people turned away and so wandered in heart and memory from him as to believe that it was this god of gold that had brought them up out of the land of Egypt. They believed that they should serve it as their goal and the object of all their worship, and proposed to bend all their energies to follow that god of gold, making it their chief ambition and their chief guide. God was angry beyond measure.

Now we turn to the brighter side of this episode. We are to consider the reprieve that God granted to this people, owing largely to the intercession of Moses his servant. We began on our last occasion to consider how Moses won for the people this reprieve from God and opened up for them the possibility that, instead of dying in the wilderness, they should be allowed to survive and go forward and make further progress before their day should end and pass.

Before anything else should happen, or anything else should be done to the people—before even they had been made aware of their sin and were brought to contrition and repentance—we found that Moses began his intercessions before God. When God threatened to remove those people and destroy them, he offered to make of Moses a people in their place, but Moses refused to abandon his people, Israel. He refused to be separated from them, stood solidly with them in their sorry plight and asked God to spare them. We found in Moses' intercessions a picture of the intercessions of our blessed Lord. We exhorted ourselves in the words of Hebrews 3, to remember and consider the high priest and apostle of our confession; gone up the mountain, as Moses went up the mountain, now standing in the presence of God, where we cannot see him. We exhorted ourselves nevertheless to

consider him being faithful to us at this very moment and reminded ourselves that, because he abides faithful, he is able to save us to the uttermost.

Having received from God the pardon that Israel needed, Moses proceeded to hasten down the mountain to deal with Israel. It is at that point that we take up the story.

Moses breaks the tablets of the law

At the end of our last study, if you were impressed by the tender heartedness of Moses as he stood pleading for Israel with God, now you must steel yourself to find that Moses is a man of granite, a man of implacable sternness. As he comes down this mountain, see his way with his erring people. Taking the two tablets of the commandments he smashes them on the ground in their presence—a violent thing to do indeed, with tablets that had been written with the very finger of God. But it was no use playing about now. Somehow or other Israel must be brought to realise what a sin it is that they are doing. He must strip from them the illusion that they are suffering under. Did you not hear them, so sunk in the folly and the fatuousness of their disobedience and idolatry? They put this golden calf upon its perch (a golden calf made of earrings) and Aaron of all people, supposed priest of the Lord, encourages the people to worship the image. ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD!’ he says (Exod 32:5). With his ceremonial robes, will he in the name of God so confuse the people’s minds as to think that they can hold idolatry with one hand and christen it with the name of God on the other?

It will require some stern and straight talking. Moses takes these tablets of the commandments, written with the finger of God, and smashes them on the ground. That is what Israel had done and he will bring home to them their grievous sin—they have despised the name of the Lord and the words spoken by the inspiration of God. They had already broken the very first commandment, so Moses breaks the tablets in front of them. It is a curious thing about *idolatry* that it never likes to be called ‘idolatry.’ Indeed, there are some curious forms of *unbelief* that do not care to be counted as ‘unbelief.’ Many a man in our modern age has been cajoled into thinking that he can still profess faith in God’s holy word, yet disagree with the holy Apostles and with the Lord Jesus.

I remember coming across such a young man at one stage. I was told when I was asked to meet him that he was brought up in a Covenanter or Crusader class (I forget which now). He was converted to the Lord, living valiantly for him and determined that he would give his life to the Lord. So, not knowing anything better to do, he decided to go up to a university and read Theology. But the particular brand of theology that he read in this particular university was as modernist and idolatrous as you could find. He told me straight that he didn’t believe in the deity of Christ and yet he was still a Christian! He didn’t believe in taking the Bible literally. He said, for instance, ‘Take that bit in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus said to the Sadducees, “Don’t you remember what I said to Moses at the burning bush? ‘I am the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob,’” and therefore there is such a thing as a resurrection and all the dead live to God—that’s nonsense,’ he said. ‘That verse from Exodus doesn’t prove what Matthew says it does.’

I said, ‘Is that so? Tell me then, when our blessed Lord Jesus used that verse as evidence for the resurrection, which way round was it, according to you? Was it that Jesus Christ was

ignorant and didn't know what he was saying and the verse doesn't mean what Christ said it means—he was an ignorant and incapable thinker? Or was it that our Lord Jesus Christ knew that it didn't mean what he said it means, and nevertheless used it—he was a deliberate fraud? Which was it?

He said, 'I don't care what it is—I don't believe it anyway!'

I said, 'When one of these days you stand before God's throne and you are asked why you didn't believe, will you tell him straight that Jesus Christ wasn't true?'

He brushed my arguments aside. He had been taught that when Jesus Christ humbled himself and became man, he emptied himself of all divine knowledge and was therefore as ignorant as any other man. It won't do! Let men, if they will, go off into such apostasy and unbelief, but let them have the intellectual honesty to confess openly that they have abandoned all faith in the inspired word of God, instead of trying to do the spiritual splits. On the one side professing that they have faith in the Bible as God's word, and on the other side denying it.

The bitterness of idolatry

So Moses broke the tables of the covenant. And not only that! Next we read that he came to the old idol, ground it to powder, strewed it on the water and made the Israelites drink the water in which he had mixed the dust of their golden idol. I suspect it tasted bitter. If they wanted idolatry they must be allowed to find out how bitter it is in the end. Moses' action stands as a solemn warning to us all. If we will do foolishness, God will allow us in the end to find out how bitter our folly is.

I wish I had the tongue of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah or an Ezekiel, to make it apparent how bitter and foolish and nonsensical idolatry is. Listen to God through Isaiah, 'Here's your idolatry for you,' he says—could you imagine anybody being so stupid? 'A man is determined to make himself an idol so he searches out a tree that does not rot and cuts it down. He knocks the excess branches off it and takes the bark, cuts a bit here and there and makes an idol that is beautiful and lovely to look at. When he has made his idol by his skill, he puts it on a pedestal. Then he notices all the pieces of the wood that are left over. He can't leave them lying around his idol, so he puts them on the fire and cooks his breakfast with them. After breakfast he turns around—there's the rest of the wood and he falls down and worships it!' You say, 'Does he worship the wood that cooked his breakfast?' (see Isa 44:13–20).

Shall we be like that in our day and age? We don't fall down and worship literal images, of course not! But the essence of idolatry is that we worship the work of our own hands and put our trust in the faculty of our own minds. It is a common thing to be heard, 'Idolatry means loving something more than you love God,' and of course that can be true. But in the ancient world they very rarely loved their idols; they feared them and they trusted them. Maybe at times we are tempted to love something more than we love God and make an idol of it, but more often, perhaps, we are found trusting something more than God and making that our idol. We trust the work of our own hands and the deliberations of our own minds.

'We have to trust the work of our own hands!' you say. 'Here's a carpenter and he makes a chair—shall he not dare to sit down on it? If a man makes a chair he must trust the works

of his own hands and sit down on it. Of course he must! And shall we not trust our own minds? If we add one plus one, can we not trust our own minds to reach the conclusion two? What do you mean, we shouldn't trust our own minds?'

We are to trust our own mind; we are to use the physical powers that God gave us. But in that ultimate thing (where I get my bread and butter from and how I run my world), where shall I get the wisdom and the knowledge to solve life's ultimate problems?

It is at this level that we face the danger of idolatry. God has given us his holy word, written (if you might have it) with the 'finger of God.' It stands always as a challenge to our intellect. Shall I trust what God has said? Or, supposing that my intellect is wiser than God's word, shall I allow my intellect to cower at God's word and trust myself rather than him? It is at this crux that many men and women in our modern age have stood. Will they trust Jesus Christ, God's Son, with their minds? Will they trust him implicitly? Will they say, like Peter, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God?' (John 6:68–69). Or will they turn aside and for those ultimate things trust not God's word but their own intellect?

When Israel turned to worshipping idols in the wilderness Moses made them drink the idol mixed into their water, until its bitterness nauseated them. When, under the kings, they turned to idolatry and proved incorrigible, at length the divine wisdom threw them out of the land and took them down to Babylon. Once more God was saying, 'If you want idolatry, have idolatry! You don't want to be my people and worship me, you want the ways of the nations—then go and learn the ways of the nations! Go down to Babylon where every street corner is full of temples with idols. Go there and have it!'

At the end of this age, men and women that have abandoned faith in the living God and put their ultimate faith in their own intellects, brains and brawn, will find that God will do the same thing. 'If you won't have me, the living God, have your idols!' And this age shall end, as we have had occasion to remark before, with people turning from the living God and bowing down at the feet of an image. An image set up by that last ruler of this present age, the man of sin himself, who exalts himself above all that is called God and in the place of the living God puts man. People shall worship and trust in a man. The modern world has gone a long way down the road that shall lead them there. One fears there is no turning back now for the multitudes. The little kiddies from their earliest age are taught that this whole universe needs no further explanation than mindless materialistic evolution. Man is the one you must trust; man's brain is what ultimately you must trust to solve all your problems. In the end God will let man have his idol and find out the fearful bitterness of tyranny that shall come upon humankind when, forsaking the living God, man goes the whole road of idolatry and bows down at the feet of his fellow man.

Food which has been offered to idols

You may not live to see such a lurid time, but there is a similarly grave word spoken to us by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10. The question of whether or not a Christian is free to eat meat offered to idols was a practical and grievous problem to some in the early church, and there was more than one way of looking at the problem. From one point of view, Paul could tell them that an idol was nothing. Therefore, it hasn't done anything to the meat if it

is offered to an idol and you are free to eat it. From another point of view an idol was something, for in the view of the Gentiles that idol was the representative of a demon behind it. Therefore, in eating food offered to idols, the Gentiles were having fellowship with demons.

‘Would God want you to have fellowship with demons?’ says Paul. ‘You cannot, in fact, partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons; so you had better make up your mind as to what you do. You can do it physically; but if you do it please be aware of what you are letting yourself in for. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? Be it known to you,’ says Paul to the believers, ‘that if you will persist in having fellowship with the table of demons, thus compromising yourself with idolatry, the Lord himself will deal with you. If you don’t deal with yourselves, he will deal with you. If you don’t take steps to repent and forsake it, God will take steps to make you repent. “That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (11:30).

These are strong words, but words that we need still to hear. Businessmen will not need to be told that the modern business world is riddled through with idolatry. There is one secret society, if not more, that for the sake of trade and professional advancement encourages businessmen to meet in their secret meetings and engage in the oldest and most banal idolatry that men ever knew—Bel, Bul, the king of Tyre and all these hosts, along with Isis and Osiris and all the rest of them. Belfast is riddled with it from end to end. They say you can’t run commerce without it; if you don’t join you stand to lose orders and you could lose your profession. More than once in this province a man has told me of the pressure that was put on him and the temptation that assailed him. With a wife and children to maintain and a natural desire to make progress in his profession, how difficult the decision was when the principals of his firm put the pressure on him. Where was he going to get his salary from and what of his hopes of increase if he wasn’t prepared to bow and become a member of the society? There are men who salve their consciences and say, ‘I don’t go to many of the meetings but I have to be in it!’ My dear brother, you cannot partake of all the material benefits that come from the table of demons and the table of the Lord as well. If you try it and you are a believer, God will bring you to repentance.

Who is on the Lord’s side

So Moses broke the old idol, cut it up and strewed it on the water for their daily food and drink and let them taste the bitterness of having trusted in idolatry. The discipline wasn’t over yet, there came something even more stern. Moses saw that Aaron had let the people loose and their enemies were laughing at them. Have you not seen it in modern times? When that abominable book *Honest to God* came out, I remember the smiles and the laughter of some of the atheists and agnostics. ‘That man professes to be a Christian! Now you Christians are saying the same as what we have always said. Is this what Christianity has come to? Virtual humanism!’ And they smiled and laughed.

Moses got up in the camp and called for sanctification—true sanctification.

Who is on the LORD'S side? Come to me . . . Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbour. (32:26–27)

I shall not need to remind you yet again that sanctification in our day does not require us—indeed it forbids us—to use the literal sword on people that we might suppose are apostates. Or anybody else, for that matter! In the Middle Ages they did use the sword because they had forgotten the lessons so clearly taught by our Lord. Catholics burned Protestants and Protestants burned Catholics, to the dishonour of God and the denying of the very famous commands of the Lord Jesus. Not for us now the literal sword in our fight against idolatry, but there remains a lesson for us. With idolatry all around us, sanctification calls for the sharpest and the keenest drawing of a line. Mark what things have come to now. It is not this little particular and that little particular over which people might well be expected, and indeed be allowed, to hold different opinions. The issue at stake is not some minor doctrine of prophecy, some detail of church organisation, the issue at stake is nothing less than loyalty to God on the one hand or apostasy on the other—loyalty to the inspiration of God's word or disbelief. If the issue is put so starkly, then the line must be drawn keenly and clearly. 'Who is on the Lord's side?' You can't be on both sides.

Do I speak to some young man or woman, troubled in your studies with modern unbelief? Then allow me to remind you that, behind all the intellectual and academic stuff, there remains this question of loyalty to the Lord Jesus. You will have to seek his grace to decide the issue and take your stand. It is a question of, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' When modern theories are taught, that by implication deny his deity and his inerrancy, then you can do no other but make up your mind and take your stand. There can be no compromise.

In the course of my professional duties recently, I was in one of our training colleges. The students had organised a seminar to consider what happened after death, both to the believer and the unbeliever. I was asked to come and give my view and another professional to give her view. I gave what you would have given, I suspect. I gave in my simplicity what the word of God says—for the believer it is 'to depart and to be with Christ, for that is far better' (Phil 1:23). As our Lord told the dying thief, it is to be immediately with Christ. 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).

When I had finished the other professional began. 'We used to believe this and that; but now, because of the advance of ideas and the advances that theology has made, we don't believe any of that at all. What a lovely relief it is! You read in the New Testament this and that, and when people die they go off to heaven here, or somewhere else. But of course we can't believe that, for this reason. The New Testament was written in a pre-scientific age when men believed in the three-decker universe, with heaven up there, earth in the middle and hell beneath. And now in this modern age we know that there is no such thing as a three-decker universe, so we can't believe what the New Testament says.'

The depth of ignorance is awful! In the times when the New Testament was written, the learned didn't believe in a three-decker universe. And two hundred years and more before the New Testament was written it was known that the world was round. Scholars like

Eratosthenes had measured the circumference of the earth and its distance from the moon. The stoics in Paul's day didn't believe in a three-decker universe, they believed that the earth was the centre of the universe. The Epicureans didn't believe in a three-decker universe; they believed in infinite space and the atoms flowing down in space endlessly and eternally. Paul knew what the Stoics and the Epicureans believed; he talked to both groups on Mars Hill. It is altogether gratuitous to suppose that the writers of the New Testament believed in any three-decker universe.

But that's by the way, for it is a small point. Here was this professional, professing to be a Christian, telling us that you can't believe what the New Testament says about what happens beyond this life. You can't believe it—when our Lord said it! If he said it, can we not believe it? Right down the middle of religious education this sword must swing, *'Who is on the Lord's side?'* Let us come and take our stand, for in the end that is what is at stake. With the honour and veracity of the Lord Jesus at stake, there can be no false sentiment. We stand with him, or we stand against him.

The difference between being deliberately disobedient and being deceived

When on the one side we talk of making a clear cut and a distinction in our doctrine, then we must be careful (as God by his grace is careful) to distinguish men and women that knowingly do what they do and teach what they teach out of deliberate disobedience and disbelief and many another man and woman and young person who, without realising the implications, is taken up with this and that bit of modernism. It seems so reasonable and they have no intention in their heart of dishonouring the Lord. They don't even realise what the implications are of the things that they are now imbibing. Have mercy on them, won't you, for if they really knew the implications of what they have been taught they would have thrown it over. For the moment they have been deceived. It is a comfort to know that God can and does draw the distinction between people who knowingly and deliberately disbelieve and those who by dint of lack of knowledge have simply been deceived.

The promised land, but without God

So Moses went back up the mountain to God, and Moses' heart was broken. Did you see him down on the plains, smashing that golden calf? As he called on the Levites to show their loyalty and sanctification by slaying each man his brother, you may have got the idea that Moses was a hard-hearted, severe and cruel man, but see him now. There wasn't a man down there on the plain that he wouldn't have died for.

'Lord,' he said, 'have mercy on them, or else blot me out of your book.' It was no hardness of heart, no nasty little persecution mania that had moved him to those strong measures. Behind them there was a love that would have died for every one of those rebels, had it been necessary.

Mark the word of God that comes back in reply, 'Very good, Moses! I won't blot you out of my book and a good many more of them I won't blot out of my book, but I will deal with those that have sinned.'

Before we come to the second part of the reprieve—and it is altogether a happier thing—let us listen to what God says in answer to Moses' intercession. 'All right, Moses, I grant you

what you ask. Go down and take this people that you have brought up out of Egypt to the promised land. I will spare them and I will not take them prematurely in my discipline. They may go on towards their promised land. I shall send my angel before you, Moses, *but I myself shall not come* (33:3). I couldn't possibly come among them, an arbitrary and stiff-necked people like that. They don't want me anyway! They want my blessings, they want the promised land, the milk and honey, but they have no interest in me. Why should I go with them? No, Moses, I should destroy them if I came with them. There would be so many arguments, I should have to reprove them for their insidious idolatry. No, I won't go with them, Moses. You take them. You can have them, with the milk and honey, but without me.'

When God began to talk like that it brought the people up with a jolt. It's the first time I read of them weeping. The significance of what they had done began to dawn on them. Suppose they did get to Canaan, with all the milk and all the honey, and God wasn't there. What then?

Suppose I become the wisest man on earth, the wealthiest and the most famous, and God isn't with me. What is it? Suppose you get home at last, wander around those golden streets, in and out the pearly gates, and you see all the wonders there are to be seen, and in the end you find it empty and God isn't there. I tell you, you will soon tire of the roads—driving along golden roads isn't much different from driving on tar macadam, except the first time you do it perhaps. Pearly gates instead of mahogany doors may seem exciting for the moment, but that won't content you very long. Star clusters without number, all the gold and all the silver, the bright company of the angelic host—the whole lot combined wouldn't content you many years if God were not there.

The people begin to think over the proposition, 'You can have Canaan anyway, and the milk and honey—but you will have them without me,' and they began to tear off their ornaments. Do you notice the reasoning? Those old earring things, there's nothing wrong with them; they made some of them look a lot better than perhaps they would have done! I know there's a lot to be said for that. But if God wasn't going to go with them, what are ornaments? So they pulled off the ornaments and the fine clothes went as well, and they got down to what they were without God.

What are we without God?

A little bit of play, a few years of beauty when we are young, something to do now we are sixty-five, perhaps a little bit of success and what then? Dust and ashes! And even while we live, underneath we are broken and twisted. (I'm not insulting you—you are sinner, aren't you?) What would any of us be without God, stripped down to what we really are inside? Poor, broken, twisted sinners. There isn't an angel that would come near any one of us if God hadn't commanded him to. He is the God of the universe and we have made a veritable hell of our planet. What should any of us be without God? Suppose one day we had all the butter and milk of Canaan and the gold and silver of the eternal city itself; without God we should fall a-squabbling over the very pearls of Jerusalem and destroy heaven as we have destroyed earth.

The glory of the Lord in their midst

They were solemn and serious days. Moses and Israel had time to think about it as they waited and lived those stationary months in their tents. God hadn't left them, of course. In those days, before the tabernacle was completed, Moses used to have a little tent (see Exod 33). Not the same as the tabernacle, it was a little two-man tent that Moses and his servant Joshua could pitch from time to time outside the camp in the wilderness. They would get inside and God would come down in his glory and the cloud of God's presence would stand outside the tent. It's a different set up from what the tabernacle eventually was. With the great tabernacle it was the other way round; they built a tabernacle and God came down and dwelt in the tabernacle and the people stood outside. But with this little tent it was the reverse; Moses was inside the tent and God came and stood outside it.

There were other occasions that would be like it. For instance, Elijah stood in the mouth of the cave on Mount Horeb as God passed by. Such an occasion was soon to happen now. Moses was told to come up the mount, he was put in a cleft of the rock and Deity came and stood outside the cleft and spoke with Moses as he passed by (33:22).

These were marvellous days. Amidst all this idolatry Moses had been faithful and God could come down in the desert and stand outside Moses' door and talk with him. When it happened the people would peer out of their tent doors, look across the camp and watch the glory descending. They said to themselves, 'What a marvellous man Moses must be! The very glory of God comes down outside his tent. Sometimes (so the text says) they got near enough to sense something marvellous that was happening to Moses (34:30).

They were given to understand what the conversation was from time to time. It went like this: 'Lord,' said Moses, 'you told me to take these people that you are pleased to call my people, but actually Lord they are not my people—they are your people! You told me to take them through this wilderness into the land of Canaan. How do you propose that I am going to do it? Show me, Lord, your way' (see 33:13). It wasn't Moses being devotional so much as being practical and hard headed. He was saying to God in effect, 'Look, God, we are in this wilderness with this people. I know we have grievously sinned, but you have told me to take them up to Canaan! Please fill in the details! How do you propose to get these people from here to there? Would you mind showing me your ways? You said, "Take them up," but you haven't yet told me who will go with me. How are you going to do it?'

Said God to Moses, 'All right, Moses. I will tell you my ways and how I propose that you are going to get the people from here to over there—I will go with you after all.'

'Thank you,' said Moses, 'for if you don't go with us we might as well stay here. Don't tell me to take them up unless you are prepared to go with us. It can't be done.'

How shall we get home to glory?

As we think of Moses in his tent and the people seeing his glory, perhaps we cannot help but think of verses that come in the New Testament, in John 1.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (v. 17)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

What stirring moments they are when, with your book in hand and lost to the world, you begin to read that glorious good news of those wonderful days when the Word pitched his tent among us. As you read of the glory that was the man, Jesus—God incarnate here in our very desert, in our planet—and all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in him, you are amazed and wonder-struck at the words of grace that proceed out of his mouth, the acts of power and the sinlessness of his life, the evidence that God was with him and it bows your head in worship. It is wonderful; but I tell you it isn't enough!

The life of Christ on earth in the manifest glory of God isn't enough to get you from here and now the rest of the way home to glory. And certainly it won't be enough for you to try to get there on the dint of some other human's experience. It must have been a wonderful thing to sit and listen to Spurgeon, for instance, in full flow and sense the very glory of God coming down on the man. It must have been marvellous to creep into George Muller's study, see him on his knees, hear him pray to God and sense the very presence of God come down to Muller's front door. It must have been marvellous to hear Billy Graham preach and sense the power of God with him and the realities of eternity there by his very side. If it has thrilled you and moved you, well thank God for that but it won't get you to heaven! Being impressed by other people's experiences won't get you to heaven.

Hear now that 'greater than Moses' talking to God about his own

'Father, these are the men that you have given me out of the world. Now I have to leave them. Father, how are we going to get them home to glory? I will that those whom you have given me be with me where I am. But how?' Hear him begin to pray, 'Father, be with them; more than that—be in them. Just like you've been in me, Father, be in them—I in them, you in me. There's no other way you'll get them home to glory' (see John 17).

In answer to that prayer, on the day of Pentecost God the Holy Spirit came down to reside in his people, never to leave them until at last he had brought them home to heaven. What a marvellous God! How could I ever get home to heaven, how should I cover those last miles and how should I ever get in, were it not that God himself has come down and I have made my poor broken heart his sanctuary and tabernacle to walk home to glory with him?

The glory of God in the face of Moses

'I now see, Lord,' said Moses, 'that your way of getting us home to our inheritance is for us to cross the desert sand with you. You have shown me your way; now would you show me your glory?' Moses was told to come up and to stand in the cleft of the rock. God put his hand over the cleft and passed by. As he did, he proclaimed the name of the LORD—'gracious and compassionate, who will by no means clear the guilty.' Then he took his hand away and Moses saw a little part of God, his back. And seeing it, his very face was transfigured and transformed. When he came down the Israelites saw it and marvelled at the transformation. They too had seen a little bit of the glory of God in the face of Moses. (Exod 33:18–23; 34:29–30).

Unfading glory

Some centuries later there came a time when Paul got very discouraged over his converts in Corinth. They had begun well, they had believed the gospel and been converted. They had been cleansed and sanctified and justified, but in more recent times they had fallen into idolatry and immorality, into strife and all sorts of sorts of carnality. Paul's enemies were beginning to whisper and say, 'There you are, Paul, you got what you deserve. Fancy preaching that men and women can be saved by grace without works! If you preach that nonsense you will reap what you sow. Look at your converts, what a disgrace they are. That's what comes of telling people that they can be saved by grace and sure of salvation. Why don't you preach the law of Moses for salvation?'

Paul presently thinks of Moses and he says, 'Preach the old canon? No, indeed not! When Moses came down that mountain, it was of God's magnificent grace that the old covenant should have been renewed and his face was aglow with the very glory of God. But the glory faded and the covenant came to nothing. I shall not be preaching that old covenant; I shall be preaching the new covenant of which God has made me an able minister (2 Cor 3:6). In that new covenant I find the very heart of God, his name proclaimed and forgiveness of sin so complete that I may know the Lord personally. A knowledge so intimate that he writes his laws not on tablets of stone but upon my very heart. It is a wholly new covenant,' says Paul. As he talked about it, the glory began to come across his face. That old covenant was glorious, but what could it do in the end but condemn a man—sentence him to death for his failure? Were we under it, we should have no hope of ever reaching glory. But with this marvellous new covenant Paul's face began to shine with the glory of God. 'It is a glory that shall never fade,' said Paul.

As we gaze upon the face of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, even here as we tread the desert sands, we 'are being transformed . . . from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit' (v. 18)

Show me your way; show me your glory! How shall I be kept on course, to arrive home at last and be like the Saviour? How shall I be saved from being turned aside to the little baubles that Satan throws in my way? How shall I ever be saved from the glitter of the golden calf and all idolatry, if from time to time he doesn't come near me and show me his glory? So that the very glory of God overpowers all else, demolishes all other attractions and wins my heart so overwhelmingly that before I know what I am doing I am up and moving ever more readily and steadily to where I see the glory shining—the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

I think you have seen him, my brother, my sister! How do I know? When you have made every allowance for all the failures and weaknesses of God's people, a glory is being written upon your heart that is beginning to dawn already on your personality. 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared' (1 John 3:2). Already the family likeness is being formed, I thought I saw it just now in the way you forgave that other sister. I thought I saw it in the way your heart went out for the preaching of God's gospel. I thought I saw it when you didn't grasp for place, but knelt and scrubbed the floor of that lonely widow because she was Christ's. I thought I saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ beginning to dawn in your face—you must have been looking at him! There's a lot of

road yet to go, but keep on looking at him and as you look at that glorified Lord Jesus Christ the glory of God fills your soul. It will keep you like nothing else on earth; keep you journeying on and bring you at last to where you shall sit down with him, fully transformed and conformed to the image of God's Son.

As we complete this particular series of studies we realise that learning is not doing and we are not home yet. As Moses asked, we ask again, 'Show us, Lord, your ways,' and, even while we tread this wilderness, may it please him from time to time to show us his glory.