

**THE**  
**OPEN**  
**YOUR**  
**BIBLE**  
**NEW TESTAMENT**  
**COMMENTARY**

**PAGE BY PAGE**

E M Blaiklock · F F Bruce  
H L Ellison · William L Lane  
I Howard Marshall · Ralph P Martin  
Leon Morris · Robin E Nixon

# THE OPEN YOUR BIBLE COMMENTARY

## PAGE BY PAGE

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- **Accessible**—it's written for the average, thoughtful Christian without assuming a great deal of background, yet it is never superficial.
- **Digestible**—it's written so you can read a section or two a day, working your way through an entire book of the Bible in days or weeks.
- **Dependable**—it's written by an amazing group of scholars and trusted pastor-teachers. The list is like a Who's Who of evangelical scholarship.
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- Understand the truths of the Bible
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THE  
**OPEN**  
YOUR **BIBLE**  
**COMMENTARY**

**THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**PAGE BY PAGE**

BY LEADING BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

EDITED BY MARTIN MANSER



**CREATIVE<sup>4</sup>**  
INTERNATIONAL

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## INTRODUCTION

AS A BIBLE teacher and college principal, I am regularly asked for advice about which is the best resource for reading and understanding the Bible. Many of us may be familiar with the Gospels, and perhaps Paul's epistles. But we may become a little more vague when trying to work out what Leviticus or Zephaniah has to do with either Jesus or being a twenty-first-century Christian. Well, here you will find help and guidance from trusted scholars on how to hear and correctly handle the very words of God. *The Open Your Bible Commentary* has four great strengths:

- **Accessible.** These studies address the average, thoughtful Christian without assuming a great deal of background information, yet they are never superficial. After all, the Lord Jesus commanded his apostles to feed his lambs and sheep and not his giraffes! In other words, this book is an excellent teaching tool.
- **Digestible.** No study section is overly long. The assumption is that we can read through a section or two a day without getting indigestion. However, the "little and often" approach means we can systematically work our way through a whole book over a number of days or weeks. One writer who worked on a commentary on Isaiah for some thirty years said he felt like a very small mouse trying to digest a very large and extremely succulent cheese. Well, here you can enjoy every mouthful of every Bible book!

- **Dependable.** A team of internationally renowned theologians, Bible scholars and experienced pastor-teachers has written these studies. You are in safe hands as you read their contributions.
- **Practical.** Sometimes, preachers are in danger of being too general in applying Scripture. The result is that the hearers can feel perpetually guilty to pray more, read more, give more and witness more than they do. One of the benefits of these studies is the diversity and subtlety of the applications suggested. Sometimes, things are clearly spelt out; other times, one is left to ponder for oneself. “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10) is always a fitting response when I meet the Risen Lord.

As a very young Christian, I was first introduced to this amazing series through a recommendation from a pastor who simply said that the money he had paid for the study guide on Psalms was the best he had ever spent! How right he was! Come and enjoy!

Dr Steve Brady  
Moorlands College  
Christchurch, UK

## AUTHORS

WHAT SETS THIS daily commentary apart from others is the pastor-teachers who wrote it. The list is like a Who's Who of evangelical scholarship:

**E. M. Blaiklock**, chair of Department of Classics at Auckland University, Greek scholar, and Christian apologist

**F. F. Bruce**, “dean of evangelical scholars,” head of Department of Biblical History and Literature at the University of Sheffield and Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism at University of Manchester

**H. L. Ellison**, Bible expositor and tutor at London Bible College, Spurgeon's Theological College, Cambridge University, and Moorland College.

**William L. Lane**, American theologian and professor of biblical studies at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Western Kentucky University, and dean of the School of Religion at Seattle Pacific University. He served on the translation teams of the New American Standard Bible and the New International Version.

**I. Howard Marshall**, professor emeritus of New Testament Exegesis, University of Aberdeen, former chair of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians. His wife was president of Evangelical Seminary in Hong Kong.

**Ralph P. Martin**, taught at London Bible College, University of Sheffield, Azusa Pacific University, and Fuller Theological Seminary. He is known for his encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament.

**Leon Morris**, perhaps Australia's most prolific biblical author, warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, and visiting professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois.

**Robin E. Nixon**, principal of St John's College, Nottingham.

With introductory articles by

**Harold H. Rowdon**, teacher at London Bible College and historian

**Donald Guthrie**, lecturer at London Bible College, and New Testament scholar. He wrote numerous books including *New Testament Introduction* and *New Testament Theology*.

**Pieter Lalleman**, tutor and Academic Dean at Spurgeon's College

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## REVISER'S INTRODUCTION

THESE STUDIES ARE a sensitively edited version of Bible Study books originally published by Scripture Union. The intention of that series was to encourage the daily study of the Bible at greater depth than was possible with Bible Study notes. This allowed fuller discussion of introductory, textual and background material, whilst still aiming at devotional warmth, sound exegesis and relevance to daily life.

The authors of the original studies were given a liberty of approach within the general scope of the series. This provides for a certain variation which it is hoped will prove stimulating rather than disconcerting. All authors are united within the circle of conservative evangelical scholarship.

This text may be used with the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), or indeed with any version of the Bible.

The principal aim of these studies is to stimulate daily Bible study as an aid to personal devotion and application to life in the firm belief that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

Martin H. Manser

## ABBREVIATIONS

Bible versions referred to in this book

ESV – English Standard Version

GNT – Good News Translation

JBP – J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English

KJV – King James Version (Authorized) 1611

NASB – New American Standard Bible

NCV – New Century Version

NEB – New English Bible

NIRV – New International Reader’s Version

NIV – New International Version

NJB – New Jerusalem Bible

NKJV – New King James Version

NLT – New Living Translation

NRSV – New Revised Standard Version

RSV – Revised Standard Version

RV – Revised Version (1885)

TM – The Message

Standard Abbreviations

c. – (circa) about

eg – for example

f. – verse following

ff. – verses following

Gk. – Greek

Heb. – Hebrew

ie – that is

LXX – Septuagint (Greek Version of the O.T.)

p. – page

pp. – pages

# THE WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

## HAROLD H. ROWDON

THE WORLD OF the New Testament was not the geographical world, but the Roman world, an enormous area stretching from Spain all the way around the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa. Its supreme ruler was the emperor. Technically he was no more than first citizen, but his power was supreme. He was commander-in-chief of the armed forces, his instructions acquired the force of law and he possessed powers which gave him the right of legal veto and jurisdiction to hear appeals.

The Roman empire consisted of some forty provinces which fell into two categories. Those which were situated in frontier or unsettled areas were under the authority of the emperor. They were governed by senatorial legates with the title of pro-praetor, or by nobles who were known as prefects or procurators. All were directly responsible to the emperor. More settled provinces were ruled by proconsuls appointed by, and responsible to, the Roman senate. This was an old established institution going back to Rome's republican days which still retained some power under the empire.

The Roman world was plentifully supplied with cities. Many of them had been founded in the days of the Greek empire. They served as centers of government and administration, contained lavish provision for recreation and social communication, light industry and trade, and provided a kind of focus for the surrounding countryside. In some ways they were rather like English market towns. They contained many voluntary associations, or guilds, which brought together people with common interests in matters of business or

social life. The banquets held by such associations, like the general civic festivals, contained religious overtones and created problems of conscience for Christians. Citizenship of a notable city was a source of special pride. The holding of municipal office might carry with it Roman citizenship. This was also given in recognition of outstanding services to the empire, and might be purchased.

Some cities which were formed by settlements of Roman citizens, often discharged soldiers, were known as *coloniae*. Others, which had been free cities before they were incorporated into the Roman empire, were allowed to retain their independent status, and were termed *municipiae*.

Radiating from the city of Rome was a superb system of roads which was better than anything before or since till the eighteenth century. Built for military purposes, they were maintained at the public expense and provided a unique system of communications – even if the motive power was only horsepower! Travel by sea was also relatively easy, because the Mediterranean had been almost entirely cleared of pirates. Navigational aids were few, however, and it was necessary to sail very close to the coast. Travel by sea was hazardous in bad weather and impossible in winter.

Judea had been incorporated into the Roman empire during the first century BC. Herod, son of Antipater, an Idumean who had been appointed procurator by Julius Caesar, ingratiated himself with Rome and was given the title of King of Judea. He tried to secure Jewish support by marrying Mariamne, heiress of the Jewish priestly house, and by rebuilding the temple on a magnificent scale. But he also built a temple to Augustus in Samaria and founded the city of Caesarea in honor of Caesar. He created a new nobility of royal officials, and there emerged among the Jews a party of Herodians.

On Herod's death in 4 BC, the three of his sons who had survived the murderous intrigues of his reign succeeded to his domain. Philip ruled the area northeast of Galilee. Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee, with Perea, east of the river Jordan. He built Tiberias in honor of the Roman

emperor of that name, but lived as a practicing Jew and even showed some regard for John the Baptist. Antipas was married to the daughter of Aretas, king of Nabatea, but this did not deter him from forming a liaison with Herodias, who was daughter of one of his half-brothers and wife of another. On the death of the emperor Tiberius, Antipas petitioned Caligula, his successor, for the title of king. Instead, he was banished on the ground of treasonable charges that had been brought against him by his nephew, Herod Agrippa I, who was rewarded by being given the territory ruled by Antipas.

Judea and Samaria, the greater part of Herod the Great's kingdom, went to his son Archelaus. He proved a thoroughly incompetent and unpopular ruler who managed to clear himself from one set of charges by a personal visit to Rome, but was eventually deposed in AD 6.

After that date, Judea was placed under the control of a succession of Roman procurators responsible to the emperor, except the years AD 41–44 when almost all the territory once ruled by Herod the Great was entrusted to Herod Agrippa I. He made a bid for Jewish support by persecuting the Christians, until his sudden death, recorded in Acts 12. The procurators, of whom Pontius Pilate was one (AD 26–36), resided in Caesarea, but in times of potential unrest, such as the Jewish feasts, made their headquarters in Jerusalem. They commanded a standing army of 3,000 men who were recruited from the non-Jewish sector of the population. One cohort was stationed in Jerusalem in the castle of Antonia which had been built by Herod and overlooked the temple. The procurator was responsible for taxation as well as law and order, but in general the Jews were self-governing.

Judaism was not confined to Palestine. Far from it: from the time of the Old Testament exiles, the Jews had become widely dispersed in the ancient world. In the first century AD there were probably more Jews outside Palestine than within it. In some cities they constituted a sizable proportion of the population. The Jews of the dispersion practiced their religion, though in a modified form. Synagogue worship, with its prayers to Jehovah, Scripture

reading and exposition, and lofty moral teaching, attracted numerous Gentiles. Those who did not become Jewish proselytes – and they were many – often proved receptive to the Christian message.

The ancient world was exceedingly religious. As a topic of conversation, religion was an excellent starter! It pervaded every aspect of life, political, social and family as well as personal. It was like cement which did almost as much to bind together a heterogeneous empire as the military power of Rome.

State religion was polytheistic, and often purely formal. It was concerned with retaining the favor of the gods by showing them due honor. Since first-century religion was essentially syncretistic, it was not difficult to equate the traditional gods of Rome – Jupiter, Mars, Minerva and the rest – with Zeus and the other gods of Greece. The worship of the state gods was essentially civic, and all loyal citizens were expected to be present at festivals in honor of the gods.

The first century saw the development of another form of state religion, even more sinister from the Christian point of view. The emperor came to be regarded as a kind of incarnation of the spirit of the imperial dynasty, and the savior and lord of Rome. Highly successful emperors, like Augustus and Vespasian, came to be included in the number of those who should be worshiped as divine. From the end of the first century, emperors came to expect divine honors during their lifetime, if only as a token of loyalty to the Roman empire.

There were innumerable forms of private religion. Diana of the Ephesians enjoyed a wide vogue. Asclepius, god of healing, was almost a universal favorite. Lares and Penates, symbolic of hearth and home, called forth the religious devotion of many families. Religious practices merged into the magical. In the countryside, religion was almost animistic. Shrines were set up wherever there was some manifestation of life or power, such as a spring

of water, a range of mountain peaks or a grove of ancient trees. To such shrines offerings of milk, cheese, grain or flowers were brought.

The first century saw the introduction into the Roman empire of new religions from the east, particularly the mystery religions with their sacred myths and their promise of “rebirth for eternity.” Their initiation ceremonies included purifications, robes and sacramental meals. They bear superficial resemblances to Christianity, but their main importance is as witnesses to something approaching a spiritual vacuum.

As a rule, Rome allowed individuals freedom to practice private religion unhindered, provided it was not antagonistic to the official cult, politically subversive or grossly immoral. It was taken for granted that the devotee would continue to observe the state religion.

Despite their rigid monotheism, the Jews had contrived to secure toleration. Theirs was a national religion, they were of great commercial importance to the empire, and they had influence in high places. Christianity at first shared in the toleration granted to Judaism, but with its increasingly obvious separation from that faith, it was compelled to be independent. It came to be regarded by those who had no intimate knowledge of its adherents as undesirable on political, religious, social and even moral grounds!

If Latin was the universal language of government and law within the Roman empire, common Greek was the *lingua franca*, at any rate in the towns. It was used in commerce and general social communication. Many examples of correspondence in Greek have come to light and show that it was widely used.

Greek philosophical thought had passed its peak, but in the first century the figure of the traveling philosopher was a familiar one. He might be a charlatan, offering cheap entertainment with his subtle pedantry. On the other hand, he might give careful instruction in one of the schools of Greek thought. Epicureanism extolled the pursuit of happiness. Cynicism despised external trappings of any kind and easily led to contempt for authority and

morality as well as religion. Stoicism offered a kind of pantheistic materialism which identified the divine principle with reason, and urged people to live a life in accordance with the dictates of reason. The old philosophy of Platonism, later to enjoy a revival in the form of Neo-Platonism, taught that ultimate reality belonged not to the material but to the spiritual world. Some Christian thinkers were to regard it as having prepared the human mind for the Christian revelation.

# THE TEACHING OF THE GOSPELS & ACTS

## DONALD GUTHRIE AND PIETER LALLEMAN

BECAUSE THE NEW Testament is a collection of books, written at different times to different people and with different purposes, it does not present the reader with a systematic account of what Christians believe. Together with the Old Testament it is, nevertheless, the only source of Christian doctrine. The unity and coherence of the New Testament can easily be brought to light, and it is the task of theology to investigate its various strands to discover how that unity exists in the midst of diversity. There are two main ways in which such a task can be approached. The first may be called the analytical method which analyzes the emphases of the various groups of books, and the second is the thematic method which classifies the main teaching into categories. In a brief treatment it is clearly impossible to do justice to the former method, but the latter offers the opportunity to present a concise survey of the contents.

Any arrangement of theological ideas must start with God. The most important initial question on this theme is in how far the Old Testament revelation of God differs from that in the New Testament. Much is undoubtedly the same, for the New Testament stresses the love and mercy of God in a similar way to the Old Testament. Moreover, the character of God as righteousness is carried over into New Testament thought. The person of God is basic to a right understanding of the mission of Jesus. He himself taught that God is holy (John 17:11) and cares for his creation (Matthew 6:25-33).

The most distinctive aspect of the New Testament view of God is his fatherhood. Although this idea is not wholly absent from the Old Testament, it is viewed within the covenant relationship. God was seen as Father to his people Israel. He called them collectively “my son” (Hosea 11:1). But Jesus took the idea much further into the realm of personal relationships. God the Father shows providential care for all humanity, but has a special regard for his children (see Matthew 6:32f.). Throughout his life, Jesus shows the importance to him of the Father’s will, so providing a pattern for his followers. However, he drew a distinction between his own filial relationship to God and that of his followers (John 20:17).

Although Jesus serves as a pattern, his own relationship was unique by reason of his person and of his perfect fulfilment of the Father’s will (see Matthew 11:27). The teaching on the personal aspects of fatherhood was addressed by Jesus to his disciples, not to non-believers. And the fatherhood of God constantly recurs throughout the epistles. It comes in the opening greeting to every one of Paul’s letters and there is no New Testament book (except 3 John) in which the title “Father” is not used of God.

Another core idea is the belief that God is king, which is particularly brought out in the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God. Here again there is strong influence from the Old Testament idea that God is the true king of Israel, but the distinctive feature of the New Testament is that members of the kingdom of God are those who have committed themselves by faith to Jesus Christ.

The nature of Jesus Christ is the key question in the New Testament. Jesus’ view of himself is best seen in the titles which he used of himself, and of these the most important is “Son of Man”. On many occasions Jesus used this title, and without doubt meant himself. Sometimes it is used when he could have said “I” (as in Matthew 16:13; see Mark 8:27), sometimes when he was making important statements about his death (as Matthew 20:18), and sometimes when he was thinking of events relating to his second coming (as

Matthew 19:28). But what did he mean by the term and why did he choose to use it? Not to draw attention to his humanity, as was often thought in the past. The title is derived from Daniel 7:13-14 and marks Jesus out as Israel's king and special representative. It is also in some way linked to the Servant spoken of by Isaiah. Jesus will have preferred it to "Messiah" because of the militaristic ideas associated with the latter title. It is doubtful whether the people who listened to Jesus understood fully his reason for using it.

Although Jesus hardly ever called himself "Messiah" (Matthew 26:63-68), he undoubtedly regarded himself as the fulfilment of all the noble messianic hopes of the past. The first Christians acknowledged this and the New Testament reflects the strong belief of the early community that many of the Old Testament predictions, including many that the Jews treated as messianic, pointed to Jesus Christ. The fact that throughout the New Testament the title "Christ" (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah) is used by others when speaking of Jesus, testifies to this strong conviction. His mission was not, however, to deliver Israel from the domination of their enemies as the Jews currently believed, but to save people from their sins. The messianic hope had become spiritual and universal.

On many occasions Jesus spoke of himself as Son, while the title Son of God is frequently used of him in the New Testament. As well as being perfect man, he claimed to be equal with God (John 10:30; 14:8-11). The apostle Paul speaks of him as the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), in whom the fullness of God lives (Colossians 1:19; Ephesians 1:23), who thought equality with God a prize not to be insisted on for it already belonged to him (Philippians 2:6). The New Testament becomes intelligible only when Jesus is regarded as both human and divine. Luke in particular stresses Jesus' humanity by reporting on his praying (5:16; 6:12; 11:1). Jesus is also seen as a king in the line of David (Luke 3:22) and his entrance into Jerusalem is royal (Luke 19:29-40). He is called the Savior (Luke 2:11, cf. 19:9-10) who

brings God's "salvation" (Luke 1:71,77; 19:9). The title "Lord" (Luke 7:13; 10:1), easily overlooked, sets him over against the Roman emperors who also claimed lordship.

There is a close link between who Jesus is and what he came to do; this is highlighted by his name, for Jesus, as Matthew points out, means "Savior" (Matthew 1:21). But the aspect of salvation with which Jesus was concerned was not primarily national but spiritual. The fact that he performed countless and various miracles was meant to point his audiences to his real person and to God as the One who had sent him. His ministry had to do with sins, and only by joining the kingdom of God would Israel be restored.

This exalted view of Jesus is at the basis of all New Testament theology. The Christian church was not founded on a mere man, but on the risen Christ. The confession of the resurrection is a key element in almost every book (eg John 20:24-29; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Peter 1:3; Revelation 1:17-18). Special attention will now be given to the mission of Jesus to bring out his significance.

What Jesus did for humanity may be gathered into the New Testament doctrine of salvation. This, broadly speaking, comprises the doctrine of the atonement and its application. What the New Testament teaches about the atonement is too many-sided to be stated concisely but some general idea may be given. Jesus himself made many significant statements which after his death were seen to reflect his own understanding of the meaning of the cross. He saw the cross as the main purpose of his mission. For him it was no accident. In his first specific mention of his coming sufferings he made it clear that he must suffer death (Matthew 16:21), which shows that he regarded the passion as a divine necessity. This at once disposes of any theories of the atonement which regard the death of Christ as accidental or unforeseen. Closely linked with this are statements which bring out the voluntary nature of his death, of which the most notable is John 10:18, where Jesus the Shepherd says that he will lay down his life for the sheep.

The announcement of John the Baptist that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) is of great importance because it shows that Jesus had come as a sacrifice, and because it is directly related to humanity's universal sin. This sacrificial idea is developed in the New Testament letters. Another figure of speech which was used by Jesus in describing his mission and which was further developed by the apostles was that of the ransoming of a slave (see Mark 10:45). The central idea is of the deliverance of the slave from a life of bondage to a life of freedom, a vivid illustration of the liberating power of the gospel. In order to bring out the effect of his passion, Jesus also used the picture of a seed of corn which has to be buried in order to become productive. It was left to the apostles once again to bring out the full significance of the illustration. The existence of the Christian church itself was a witness to the basic necessity of Christ's death. He himself had become the only foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11).

The motive behind the passion, in the mind of Jesus, was love (see John 3:16; 15:13): an aspect of the mission of Jesus which has always fired Christian imagination. This is backed up by the considerable emphasis in the Gospels on the compassion of Jesus, seen most vividly in the healing miracles. In the letters also the love behind the giving of Jesus is brought out (see Romans 5:8; 8:34-39; 2 Corinthians 5:14).

It is noticeable that the testimony of his enemies unwittingly contributed to an understanding of his death, as when Caiaphas declared that it was more fitting for one to die for the people than for the whole people to perish (John 11:50ff.). This substitutionary view of the atonement is developed in various ways in the apostolic understanding of the event. Caiaphas was nearer the truth than he knew. (Compare the testimony of the centurion in Luke 23:47 and that of Pilate in John 18:37-38.) The main focus of Jesus' thought about the application of his work is found in the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-30 and parallels) where the words of institution show that the passion is to be central in the continual memory of the Christian community. The bread was

broken and the wine poured out, to bring out the sacrificial significance. The coming passion was “for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Moreover, it was viewed by Jesus himself as the inauguration of the new covenant.

Yet Jesus’ life on earth was more than a prelude to his death, it has a value of its own. He shared in the joys (John 2:1-11) and sorrows (John 11, esp. verse 35) of the people around him. He showed particular love to children (Luke 18:15-17) and he was an excellent story teller (eg Matthew 13). His ministry is supported by the activity of the Holy Spirit (eg Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1,14), which then figures as an important subject in the farewell discourses in John’s Gospel (John 14–17). Jesus made it clear that the disciples were to be dependent on the Spirit for knowledge of the truth, for guidance, for convicting the world of sin and for leading people to faith (see John 14:15f.,25f.; 15:26; 16:7f.). The risen Christ breathed on the disciples and exhorted them to receive the Spirit (John 20:22). It was on the Day of Pentecost that the Spirit descended in power on the waiting disciples (Acts 2) and the record of the development of the church in the book of Acts is a record of the special activity of the Holy Spirit (esp. 4:31-33; 5:32; 13:1-3).

The New Testament idea of the church is twofold. Local groups of believers form Christian communities in specific places and the totality of these local groups comprises the universal church. On two occasions Jesus spoke of his church, once in the universal sense (Matthew 16:18) and once in a local sense (Matthew 18:17). The book of Acts gives insight into the formation and operation of many Christian communities such as in Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. During the life of Jesus and later in these churches women played important roles, almost beyond what was acceptable in the culture of the time. Women supported Jesus (Luke 8:1-3) and were among his close followers (Luke 10:38-42). Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection (Luke 24:1-11), they were in the first group of believers (Acts 1:14) and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17-18).

A belief in the return of the Lord Jesus and the final consummation of all things is integral to New Testament teaching. The second coming of Christ is basic to the various books, although more apparent in some. Jesus himself predicted his return (see Matthew 24:30-31,42-44; John 14:3). He gave special teaching regarding the end of the present age (see Matthew chapters 24 and 25; Mark 13; Luke 21), while many of the kingdom parables are related to the end-time (eg the “harvest” theme in Mark 13:26-31).

INTRODUCTION  
MATTHEW  
F.F. BRUCE

The Earliest External Evidence

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING to Matthew, like the three other Gospels, is anonymous. The names attached to the Gospels have been so attached since the first half of the second century at the latest, but none of them appears in the body of the work.

Our earliest evidence for the association of Matthew with Gospel-making is a fragment from a lost work of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia (cf. Colossians 4:13) about AD 130. Papias, who lovingly collected and recorded what remained of oral tradition handed down by those who had seen and heard the Lord in person, wrote in five volumes an *Exegesis of the Dominical Oracles* which is not known to be extant. His work was quoted by various Christian writers of the following generations and centuries. Among these Eusebius, in the third book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, ascribes to Papias the statement that “Matthew compiled the oracles (*logia*) in the Hebrew speech, and everyone interpreted them as best he could.” Statements by writers later than Papias which name Matthew as the author of the first Gospel appear to be based on what Papias said. But Papias did not say that Matthew wrote the first Gospel, which is a Greek work, but that he compiled the *logia* in the Hebrew speech. It is likely that, when Papias spoke of Matthew as compiling the *logia*, he used the word in the sense which it had in

the title of his work. When he composed his *Exegesis of the Dominical Oracles*, the “oracles” (*logia*) with which he was concerned were the sayings of our Lord, which Papias was so anxious to collect (at one or two removes) from those who had heard them. If the laws of Moses and the utterances of the prophets were recognized as divine oracles (cf. Acts 7:38; Romans 3:2), the sayings of Jesus, the anointed Lord to whom Moses and the prophets bore witness, were all the more worthy of such recognition.

### A Primitive Sayings Collection

Now there is one important element in the Gospel of Matthew which has been discerned as just the sort of composition of which Papias speaks—a digest of the sayings of Jesus, conceived after the fashion of those prophetic books of the Old Testament which present the prophet’s oracles in a minimum of narrative framework, introduced with an account of the prophet’s call but not including any account of his death. Such a “book of the prophet Jesus” appears to have circulated at an early date in the church, more particularly among Hellenists and Gentile Christians, before any of our present Gospels existed. It underlies the Gospel of Luke as well as the Gospel of Matthew, being the source of what are conventionally labelled the “Q” sections in these two Gospels, and has been envisaged as having its contents arranged under four main headings:

1. Jesus and John the Baptist
2. Jesus and his disciples
3. Jesus and his opponents
4. Jesus and the future

### Matthew and the Gospel

Who then was the “Matthew” who is said to have compiled “the oracles”? Papias was certainly understood by Eusebius (and probably by Irenaeus a century and a half earlier) to have meant Matthew the apostle, and this was a sound interpretation of his words. What Papias was interested in was apostolic testimony, and he gladly recorded anything that came his way on this subject.

Our tentative conclusion is that it was Matthew the apostle who composed the earlier work, “the book of the prophet Jesus,” and that his name was later attached to our present Gospel, in which that earlier work was incorporated. Happily, our understanding of the Gospel and the interpretation of its contents are independent of such uncertainties as these.

### Sources of the Gospel

In addition to “the book of the prophet Jesus,” the evangelist has drawn upon a parallel compilation of sayings of Jesus, circulating not in the area of the Gentile mission but in the stricter Jewish Christian communities of Judea. The narrative framework in which the teaching is set reproduces the substance of Mark’s record, often telescoped and abbreviated, but sometimes amplified by the inclusion of non-Markan incidents (especially featuring Peter), and rearranged in part (Matthew 7:28–13:58, parallel to Mark 1:21–6:13) to conform with the distinctive design of the Gospel of Matthew. This narrative extends from the preaching of John the Baptist (3:1ff.) to the passion and resurrection of Jesus (chapters 26–28); as in the other Gospels so in Matthew the passion and resurrection account is the goal to which everything that precedes leads on. The nativity account in chapters 1 and 2 is peculiar to Matthew and quite independent of Luke’s, with which nevertheless it agrees in theology (Jesus’ virginal conception by the power of the Holy Spirit), geography (he was born in Bethlehem of Judah although he

was later brought up in Nazareth) and chronology (his birth took place in the reign of Herod).

It is all too easy, when considering the sources of information on which one of the evangelists might have drawn in the composition of his work, to overlook his personal contribution. Matthew was a man of no mean literary ability, and over and above that he possessed in an outstanding degree the spiritual gift appropriate for his particular ministry. “We must not think of the evangelists as literary hacks producing Gospels by stringing other people’s work together; they were genuine composers, with gifts as authentic as those of the poet or the musician or the artist, and a good deal more important” (T.W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel*, 1960, p.46).

### Leading Themes of the Gospel

Matthew gives us five discourses;  
In threes and sevens he groups his sources.  
He writes to show what O.T. meant,  
With an ecclesiastic bent.

These four lines do not constitute elevated poetry, but their memorization has proved useful to many examinees who have welcomed the opportunity to expand the basic facts which they summarize when invited to describe the main features of the Gospel of Matthew. The “five discourses” in which the teaching of Jesus is arranged according to affinity of subject-matter (5:1–7:27; 10:5–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 24:1–25:46), dominate the structure of the Gospel. Matthew’s tendency to group his material in threes and sevens—from whatsoever sources it may have been derived—is illustrated by the seven parables of the kingdom in chapter 13 and the three in chapter 25. His writing “to show what O.T. meant” has special reference to the “formula quotations” from the Old Testament, appearing throughout his work from

1:22f. to 27:9f. As for his “ecclesiastic bent,” not only is he the only one of the evangelists who so much as mentions the word “church” (cf. 16:18; 18:17) but he shows an interest in the life, growth and witness of the Christian fellowship.

### Character and Purpose of the Gospel

In the first three chapters of the Gospel Jesus is introduced as King of the Jews, heir to David’s throne, acclaimed as such by Gentiles and anointed by God. The charge inscribed over his head on the cross, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” (27:37), is thus shown in advance to be no false claim but a well-attested fact. Yet in the body of the Gospel the rôle in which Jesus is chiefly presented is that of Teacher. It is his teaching that constitutes the most prominent feature of this Gospel. Indeed, the Gospel has been envisaged as the “manual of discipline” of a distinct Christian school (cf. K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew*, 1968), and one can well understand how useful it would have been as a handbook for catechists. It quickly became the most popular of the Gospels: once the four records began to circulate as a collection, the Gospel of Matthew invariably occupied the first place, whatever might be the order of the other three. Its position at the head of the New Testament books in their canonical order has a fitness of its own because of the way in which its opening section dovetails into the Old Testament narrative.

Its original setting appears to have been a Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian community: we may think of some Hellenistic milieu in Syria which preserved the ideals of those Hellenists who first, in the dispersion that followed Stephen’s martyrdom, brought the Christian message to Gentiles. The Gentile mission, entrusted to the eleven apostles, is the note on which this Gospel concludes. It is anticipated earlier in the inclusion of Gentile women in the genealogy of chapter 1, in the epiphany narrative of chapter 2,

and in the healings of the centurion's servant (8:5-13) and the Canaanite girl (15:21-28).

The evangelist himself has his portrait painted in the "scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven" whom Jesus compares to "a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52). He was a man of generous mind and comprehensive outlook, including in his record and weaving into a unity material cherished by Christian groups of varying viewpoint: the stricter Jewish Christians and the more liberal Gentile Christians, with the many intermediate gradations, might all find something congenial here.

### Date

The date of the completed Gospel of Matthew is probably to be fixed quite soon after the destruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem (ad 70). Echoes of the catastrophe and its aftermath can be discerned here and there; moreover, the new situation thus created was an opportunity for Christian consolidation and advance, and to this the Gospel of Matthew made its powerful contribution.

Outline  
MATTHEW

**Prologue: Nativity narrative: 1:1–2:23**

1:1-17

Genealogy of Jesus

1:18–2:23

Birth and Infancy

**The beginning of the ministry: 3:1–4:25**

3:1-17

Preaching of John and baptism of Jesus

4:1-11

Temptation in the wilderness

4:12-25

The first disciples and early ministry in Galilee

**First discourse (Sermon on the Mount): Law of the Kingdom: 5:1–7:29**

**Further ministry in Galilee: 8:1–10:4**

**Second discourse: Extension of the Kingdom: 10:5-42**

**Opposition and rejection: 11:1–12:50**

**Third discourse: Parables of the Kingdom: 13:1-52**

**Ministry beyond Israel: Suffering and glory foreshadowed: 13:53–17:27**

**Fourth discourse: Fellowship of the Kingdom: 18:1-35**

**The way to the cross: 19:1–23:39**

19:1–20:34

The road to Jerusalem

21:1–23:39

Jerusalem's visitation

**Fifth discourse: Consummation of the Kingdom: 24:1–25:46**

24:1-51

The Olivet prophecy

25:1-46

Three parables of the Advent

**Epilogue: Passion and triumph of Jesus: 26:1–28:20**

26:1-35

The Last Supper

26:36-56

Agony and arrest in the Garden

26:57–27:26

Before Caiaphas and Pilate

27:27-66

Execution and burial

28:1-20

Christ risen, directing and ever-present

## THE LINE OF SUCCESSION

# MATTHEW 1:1-17

God overruled Jesus' family tree to fulfill his promises.

THE OPENING PHRASE binds the Gospel narrative which follows securely to the Old Testament; as Genesis 5:1 introduces “the book of the generations of Adam,” the Evangelist does the same for the second Adam. He is, however, not concerned to present him as the second Adam (contrast Luke 3:38) so much as the son of Abraham (and so fulfiller of the divine promises regarding Abraham's offspring; cf. Genesis 22:18) and, more particularly, as the heir to David's throne. The line from David to Joseph probably marks the legal succession rather than biological descent (in some instances “father” may be used in a formal sense); in Luke 3:23-31 the line from David to Joseph coincides with Matthew's in Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, but otherwise deviates from it completely.

The genealogy from Abraham to Zerubbabel can be constructed from Old Testament records; the sources for the links between Zerubbabel and Joseph have not survived. But it was no exceptional thing in those days for a family to preserve its genealogical registers for many generations. The schematic arrangement of the genealogy in three groups of 14 (1:17) depends on the omission of certain names eg three between Joram and Uzziah (1:8; cf. 1 Chronicles 3:11f.) and one (Jehoiakim) between Josiah and Jechoniah (1:11; cf. 1 Chronicles 3:15f.). The four women mentioned in the genealogy—Tamar the Canaanite (1:3), Rahab of Jericho (1:5; her marriage to Salmon is

not elsewhere recorded), Ruth the Moabite (1:5) and Bathsheba, widow of Uriah the Hittite (1:6)—are all Gentiles: it is thus indicated that the blessing brought by the Son of David is not restricted to one race only (cf. 4:15; 8:5-13; 15:22-28; 28:19).

**Notes** The variant reading in 1:16 which a footnote in earlier editions of the RSV reproduced on the authority of “other ancient authorities” is actually found in one manuscript of the Old Syriac Gospels, and nowhere else; the footnote is omitted in editions from 1962 onwards. 1:17: It may be no more than a coincidence that 14 is the numerical value of the three letters making up the name “David” in Hebrew.

## THE NATIVITY

# MATTHEW 1:18-25

Jesus is described as “Immanuel”: “God with us.”

MATTHEW’S ACCOUNT OF the birth of Jesus is completely independent of Luke’s; where Luke tells the story from Mary’s viewpoint, Matthew tells it from Joseph’s, but both evangelists agree in affirming that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was conceived. The law as it affected a betrothed woman in Mary’s condition is laid down in Deuteronomy 22:20f.,23f.; Joseph’s decision not to expose her to the serious consequences of public repudiation marks him out as a man of decent feeling. Here it is he who receives an angelic annunciation and is told to call the child Jesus. The name (the Greek form of Joshua or Jeshua) means “Yahweh is salvation”; hence its appropriateness, “for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21).

1:22f. present the first of several Old Testament quotations in this Gospel which are preceded by an introductory formula which, with minor variations in wording, indicates that an event took place to fulfill a certain oracle. This quotation, from Isaiah 7:14, comes from Isaiah’s address to King Ahaz—when Judah was threatened with invasion from Syria and Israel. Isaiah in the name of God bade Ahaz keep calm, and invited him to name any sign that he might choose to confirm that the threat would vanish; Ahaz, who had already invited the intervention of the Assyrian king, pretended to be too pious to put God to the test by asking for a sign. Isaiah, discerning the truth behind the king’s affected piety and foreseeing the disastrous consequences of his

overtures to Assyria, gave him the sign of a royal child soon to be born who would not be able to distinguish right from wrong before the two kings Ahaz feared were laid low, but who would grow up to a devastated heritage because of Ahaz's fatal policy. The language of Isaiah's oracle is that of an archaic annunciation form (attested in a text from Ugarit c. 1400 BC and perhaps echoed in Micah 5:3). Matthew recognizes its definitive realization in the birth of Jesus, the virgin's son (according to the Greek version of the Old Testament which is quoted here) and Emmanuel, "God with us," in the fullest sense (cf. 28:20).

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

MATTHEW 2:1-12

Are we openhearted in wanting everyone to hear the good news of  
Jesus?

IF JESUS WAS the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, he was also the answer to Gentile aspirations. The “wise men from the East” were Gentiles, whose journey the early Church saw foretold in Isaiah 60:3: “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” Hence the festival of their visit on January 6, which is more ancient than Christmas, is called the Epiphany (manifestation) of Christ to the Gentiles; hence, too, their traditional description as “kings of Orient”—“three kings” probably because of the three gifts they presented (2:11). But in fact they were magi—a term originally denoting a Median priestly caste but in this context referring to students of the stars. The orbits and conjunctions of planets could be calculated in advance by this time, and one explanation of the star whose rising they saw identifies it with the conjunction of the planets Jupiter (the star of the world ruler) and Saturn (the star of Palestine) in the constellation Pisces (the sign of the last days) in the summer and autumn of 7 BC. Whether this be so or not, their quest brought them (naturally) to Herod’s palace, where it caused great alarm. Herod’s reign (37–4 BC) was approaching its end, and with each succeeding year he grew more morbidly suspicious. A new king of the Jews was a threat to his throne and dynasty, and must be eliminated immediately. Ascertaining from the chief priests and scribes

(interpreters of the sacred law) that, according to Micah 5:2, Bethlehem (David's birthplace) was to be the birthplace of the Messiah (great David's greater Son), he sent the strangers there to pay homage to the infant King. The reappearance of the star convinced them that they were on the right road; how it led them to the precise house can only be surmised—did they see its reflection in the well of the courtyard?

It is easy, with Origen and others, to read special significance into their respective gifts, “gold and frankincense and myrrh” (2:11), fitting donations to One who was both “King and God and Sacrifice”—but the evangelist leaves us to carry out such exercises ourselves. He contents himself with the statement that the magi, in response to a divine warning, “departed to their own country by another way” (2:12), thus denying Herod the information which would have enabled him also to pay homage to the new King, as he said (2:8)—or to take what alternative action he thought appropriate.

**Note** The mention of “two years” in 2:16, “according to the time which he (Herod) had ascertained from the wise men,” suggests that they arrived in Bethlehem a considerable time after the birth of Jesus; we may infer that their first sight of the star coincided with his birth, and that their journey was not a short one.

## DESCENT INTO EGYPT

### MATTHEW 2:13-23

This Jesus is as tragically fresh as today's headlines. Before he's old enough to walk, he's running from an assassination attempt.

THE MASSACRE OF the innocents, though unrecorded elsewhere (apart from a possible allusion in a contemporary Jewish apocalypse, which compares Herod's conduct to Pharaoh's plot against the Hebrew infants), is completely consistent with Herod's character in his closing years. The holy family's flight into Egypt was remembered in some Jewish circles; rabbinical tradition preserves a distorted reminiscence of Jesus' sojourn there. Herod died in March, 4 BC; his kingdom was divided between three of his sons, of whom Archelaus became ethnarch of Judea. Archelaus inherited his father's vices without his qualities of statesmanship (and his misrule led to his deposition in AD 6); Joseph was well advised, on returning from Egypt, to settle in Galilee, where another of Herod's sons, Herod Antipas (cf. 14:1ff.), ruled as tetrarch.

This passage is marked by three Old Testament quotations with introductory formula (cf. 1:22f.). The first (2:15), from Hosea 11:1, refers to God's calling Israel, his firstborn son (cf. Exodus 4:22), out of Egypt at the time of the exodus. Its application here to Jesus reflects the evangelist's intention of portraying him as recapitulating in his personal experience the experience of his people, and being afflicted in all their affliction (cf. Isaiah 63:9). The second (2:17f.), from Jeremiah 31:15, pictures the matriarch Rachel sitting by the frontier town of Ramah (near which was her tomb,

according to 1 Samuel 10:2), weeping for her children as they were driven off into captivity. Now Rachel, here perhaps symbolizing bereaved motherhood of all ages, weeps disconsolately again as more of her children fall victims to a new tyranny (Matthew may have in mind the alternative location of her tomb near Bethlehem; cf. Genesis 35:19). The third quotation (2:23) presents a problem: no such text occurs in any edition of the Old Testament known to us. The least improbable explanation sees an allusion here to Isaiah 11:1, where the Hebrew word translated “branch” (in reference to the coming ruler of David’s line) has the same root consonants as “Nazarene.” All these oracles are said to have been spoken by the Lord *through* various prophets; they are but his spokesmen (which is the essential meaning of “prophets”).

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN  
MATTHEW 3:1-12

Repentance isn't just being sorry about our sins—it's being sorry enough to stop ... and turn our whole lives to God.

WHEREVER JOHN THE Baptist is mentioned in the New Testament he appears as making preparation for the ministry of Jesus. His distinctive theme was the urgent need of repentance, because of the near advent of the Coming One. "The kingdom of heaven" is a phrase peculiar to this Gospel in the New Testament; elsewhere, and occasionally even in this Gospel, the synonymous expression "the kingdom of God" is used. It refers more particularly to the universal and everlasting kingdom which, according to Daniel 2:44; 7:14,18,22,27, the God of heaven was about to establish on the ruins of successive pagan empires. On John's lips the expression implies the day of judgment (cf. Daniel 7:9ff.); the judgment is the fiery baptism to be administered by the Coming One (3:11f.); hence the call to repent in time.

It may be that baptism was already established as one of the elements in the initiation of a convert from paganism into the commonwealth of Israel; if so, John warns his hearers that if they are to join the end-time people of God ready to greet the Coming One on his arrival they must first take the outside place, as no better than pagans, and enter the elect community by the baptism of repentance. Descent from Abraham was of no avail (3:9); here John anticipates Paul (Romans 9:7). Those then who confessed their sins were baptized in the Jordan.

John shows himself to stand in the prophetic succession (which had been in abeyance for generations) not only by his Elijah-like dress (3:4; cf. 2 Kings 1:8) and the convicting power of his preaching but also by the vigor with which he denounces the contemporary religious establishment (3:7). Worldly Sadducees and observant Pharisees are alike compared to serpents hastening away from the path of advancing flames.

**Notes** 3:1: “In those days”: a vague term; thirty years and more have elapsed since the end of chapter 2. “the wilderness of Judea”: the territory west of the lower Jordan and the Dead Sea; here the community of Qumran and other ascetics had their headquarters at this time. 3:3: “The voice of one crying ...”: this quotation from Isaiah 40:3 originally referred to the glad announcement of liberation for exiles in Babylon. The Qumran community used it as a prophecy of their settlement in the wilderness of Judea. In the New Testament the whole of Isaiah 40–66 is treated as a prophecy of the gospel age. 3:11: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”: Matthew presents the following ministry of Jesus as in some degree fulfilling this prophecy. 3:12: “His winnowing fork is in his hand”: separation is an essential part of judgment (cf. 13:30-41f.).

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS  
MATTHEW 3:13-17

Jesus' baptism says, "I am here as one of you, and in your place. I'm here to keep God's Law for you. I'm here to take your sins and their punishment on myself."

JOHN'S DEPRECATING ANSWER to Jesus' request for baptism at his hands (3:14) was natural enough: this was a baptism of repentance and here was One who had no sins to confess: better that John should be baptized by him. This is merely John's assessment of Jesus' personal character: thus far he had no inkling that Jesus was the Coming One for whom he was preparing the way. But Jesus' reply to John's remonstrance makes clear his purpose in seeking baptism: "Let it be so for the present; we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires" (3:15, NEB).

These words in a general way express Jesus' constant resolve to do his Father's will. Further, they indicate his recognition that John's ministry was a work of God and his desire to be publicly identified with it. He could not hold aloof from the righteous remnant of Israel which was taking shape in response to that ministry. But more: they declare in a special way his dedication to accomplish the purpose of God in his own ministry, now on the point of inauguration. If his ministry was to be launched by an act of self-identification with sinners, that would mark its course and pre-eminently its climax.

John submitted, and baptized him. Then came the divine response to his unreserved self-dedication—the opened heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the Father’s voice.

Here, in the baptism of Jesus, is a moment of divine revelation. The descent of the Spirit points to him as the One who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit: the Spirit must be received before being imparted to others. Of the Messiah of David’s line the prophet had said, “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him” (Isaiah 11:2); in introducing his chosen Servant God had said, “I have put my Spirit upon him” (Isaiah 42:1). Nor does this exhaust the reference of this narrative to God’s introduction of his Servant: if the proclamation “This is my Son” marks Jesus out as the Messiah addressed in the oracle of Psalm 2:7, “Thou art my Son,” the following words, “my Beloved, on whom my favor rests” (3:17, NEB), equally mark him out as the obedient Servant of the Lord.

The King is anointed, but the circumstances of his anointing show that his royal power and empire must be won by following the Servant’s path of teaching and healing, humility and self-sacrifice (cf. 8:17; 12:18-21; 20:28).

**Consider** how Jesus’ words to John in 3:15 might serve as an example for us.

## TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS

### MATTHEW 4:1-11

How can the way Jesus responded to temptations help us to deal with ours?

THE TEMPTATION MUST be understood in the light of the baptism: the repeated “If you are the Son of God” (4:3,6) harks back to “This is my beloved Son” (3:17). “God has called you his Son,” it is implied; “make him show that he means what he says; put him to the test.” The Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism leads him into the wilderness to be tempted; this is part of his appointed probation. Here too, the Messiah recapitulates the history of the messianic people. God’s purpose in leading Israel “these forty years in the wilderness” was “that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not” (Deuteronomy 8:2). That Jesus recognized this correspondence is indicated by his rebuffing the temptation three times from the context of Deuteronomy which includes these words. “You are the Son of God,” says the tempter; “very well, you have unlimited power at your disposal; use it for your own advantage. Turn these flat stones into the cakes of bread that they so much resemble, and satisfy your hunger.” The reply, “Scripture says” (4:4, NEB), quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 to express Jesus’ resolve to act in response to his Father’s direction and not from motives of self-interest.

“You are the Son of God,” comes the tempter’s voice again; “do something spectacular and compel him to intervene miraculously on your

behalf. Throw yourself down from the temple roof into the Kidron ravine; no harm will come to you, for Scripture says that his angels by his command will see to it that you don't even stub your toe against a rock—if you can quote Scripture, so can I" (and Psalm 91:11f. is pressed into service). Jesus' reply this time (quoting Deuteronomy 6:16) is a refusal to do the very thing that Israel repeatedly did in that earlier "day of temptation in the wilderness" when, says God, they "tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work" (Psalm 95:9; cf. Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 14:22f.).

The third temptation invites Jesus to attain the world dominion which was the Messiah's traditional heritage (cf. Psalm 72:8) on the devil's terms and by his well-tested methods. Many a would-be world conqueror before and since has sold himself to the devil thus to achieve his ends. The worship and service of the true God alone, prescribed in the words of Deuteronomy 6:13 with which Jesus repels this temptation, meant for him obedience to the heavenly voice which marked out the path of the Servant as his messianic way. World-empire more secure and permanent than any other conqueror has won has come to him in consequence, but it has come to him by way of suffering and death (cf. 28:18). The ministry of angels (4:11) anticipates his present lordship over "angels, authorities and powers" (1 Peter 3:22).

THE GALILEAN MINISTRY BEGINS

MATTHEW 4:12-25

Doing our present task well is the best preparation for a bigger one.

JESUS ONLY HAD to get on board a ship from “Capernaum by the sea” (4:13) to cross the lake and be out of reach of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, who had imprisoned John, so it was a suitable base for Jesus’ Galilean ministry. In the evangelist’s eyes it was suitable also because this is the area where, according to the oracle of Isaiah 9:1f., light (associated with the promised Prince of the house of David) is to break forth on those who had endured the darkness of defeat and depopulation. The Gentiles of Transjordan (4:15) are to share in the messianic blessing (cf. 8:28ff.; 15:29ff.).

Jesus’ message is summed up (4:17) in the same words as John’s preaching (3:2), but “the kingdom of heaven” on his lips had not the same connotation as it had on John’s (cf. 11:2ff.). Jesus’ call to repentance was a call to men to reassess all personal and social values in the light of the approach of the divine kingdom in his ministry; the nature of this re-assessment appears, for example, in the beatitudes of 5:3-12.

Right at the beginning of the Galilean ministry he summoned his first four disciples to leave their nets and come along with him: they were to become “fishers of men” (4:19), bringing them into the new order which Jesus announced. The claims of the kingdom of heaven were paramount and imperious; neither family ties nor business interests might stand in their way (4:22).

Jesus' ministry at this early stage was one of public teaching and healing; the synagogues of Galilee were open to him for his proclamation that the ancient prophecies were now being fulfilled. The "gospel of the kingdom" (4:23) was the good news that God, as he had promised, was visiting his people. The various kinds of physical and mental affliction enumerated in 4:24 were intrusions into God's good creation: the power of the kingdom of heaven was manifested in the relief which Jesus gave to their victims (cf. 12:28). The news of his ministry naturally traveled far and wide, and crowds flocked to him from all parts of Palestine and the adjoining lands.

**Note** 4:24: The word rendered "epileptics" literally means "moonstruck," but it denotes not lunacy (cf. KJV "lunatick") but epilepsy (as also in 17:15).

THE BEATITUDES

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Real happiness isn't to be masters of our own destiny but to be mastered by God.

MATTHEW'S FIRST COLLECTION of discourse-material, presenting the rule of life in the kingdom of heaven (5:1–7:27), is called the Sermon on the Mount (from 5:1 and 8:1), perhaps in comparison and contrast with Mount Sinai, from which the Mosaic law was promulgated (Exodus 19:1ff.). It is addressed to the disciples (5:1f.) in the hearing of larger crowds (7:28).

The opening section (5:3-10) pronounces blessings on eight categories of people. The “poor in spirit” (5:3) are those who, conscious of their own inadequacy, rely on God’s grace; lacking material wealth, they are inwardly rich. The expression occurs also in the Qumran texts (and cf. Isaiah 66:2). The mourners (5:4) refuse to close their eyes to human sorrow; they sympathize with the tragedy of life. The “meek” (5:5) are the opposite of the self-assertive; their reward has been announced already in Psalm 37:11. Those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (5:6) are consumed with the desire to see God’s will done—in themselves and among mankind at large. The “merciful” (5:7), the “pure in heart” (5:8) and the “peacemakers” (5:9) reflect the character of the God of mercy, purity and peace. In a world where the accepted standards of value are the reverse of these, such people are not likely to have an easy time. In fact, they are almost bound to be “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (5:10). But, says Jesus, here is no ground for

complaint, but rather for exultation: people such as he describes are the truly happy and fortunate people; on them their friends should press warm and sincere congratulations. The future is with them, not with the hardboiled “pushers” who put their own interests first and get on in the world. The rewards are not arbitrary; they are the natural fruit of the qualities that are commended. While eight qualities are mentioned, they tend to be found together; they were manifested in harmonious perfection in our Lord’s character. And lest his disciples should miss the practical point of the beatitudes, he repeats the last one in the second person. They will be persecuted and vilified because they are his disciples (5:11); let them rejoice in this, for it is a sign that they are in the true succession of the prophets (5:12).

It is only the familiarity of the beatitudes that blinds us to their revolutionary character; they turn the accepted priorities upside down. In their way they were an even more radical challenge to the establishment of the day than were the fiery denunciations of John (3:7).

**Note** The “mountain” (5:1; cf. 8:1) is probably the gentle slope rising above Capernaum: beneath the ridge parallel to the lake-shore between Tell Hum and et-Tabgha there is a natural amphitheatre. The ridge also satisfies the description of the “level place” in Luke 6:17, for one looks down on it (as Luke may have done) when approaching from the west. But above all, “the mountain” is for Matthew the place of revelation (cf. 17:1- 9; 28:16).

“NOT TO ABOLISH BUT TO FULFILL”

## MATTHEW 5:13-26

As salt must be rubbed into food to preserve it from going bad, so as Christians we are to be involved in the life of the world.

THE FOLLOWERS OF Jesus must be like salt, preserving their environment from corruption (5:13); they must be “the light of the world,” dispelling the surrounding darkness (5:14). Salt that has lost its essential quality of “saltiness” is useless for any other purpose, and what is the good of an invisible light? “If the New Testament is to decide what is meant by a true Christian, then to be a true Christian in all secrecy, comfortably and enjoyably, is as impossible as firing a cannon in all secrecy” (S. Kierkegaard). “Our Lord,” remarked George Tyrrell, “had only one thing to say about making proselytes, and it was not complimentary (cf. Matthew 23:15); he did say ‘Let your light so shine before men’.” The teaching of 5:16 is echoed in the New Testament epistles—eg Philippians 2:15f.; 1 Peter 3:1f.,13ff.

The Sermon on the Mount does not abrogate the ethical demands of the Old Testament law; it completes and sharpens them. The assertion that “all” that the world needs is the putting into practice of the Sermon on the Mount is naively idealistic in a society which finds the Ten Commandments beyond its capacity. According to Paul (who shows himself well acquainted with the ethical teaching of Jesus), it is in those who “walk by the Spirit” that “the law of Christ” is fulfilled (Galatians 5:16; 6:2). But while the standard is higher,

no disciple of Jesus can be content with anything lower. The Pharisees' standard was lofty enough, but it was not unattainable (cf. Matthew 19:20; Philippians 3:6). But who can perfectly keep the sixth commandment as interpreted here (5:21ff.)? Not only the murderous act but the angry thought, the contemptuous word or the denial of a man's integrity expose one to judgment in the heavenly court (5:22).

Two corollaries to this interpretation are appended: one insisting that God cannot be acceptably worshiped by those who are not in charity with their neighbors (5:23f.) and another reminding the listeners that, since they are all on the way to the heavenly court to give an account of their lives, they should come to terms by means of repentance while there is time (5:25f.).

**Notes** 5:22: "everyone who is angry with his brother": the later addition "without a cause" KJV is an eloquent commentary on the tendency of Christians to soften their Lord's "hard sayings." 5:22: "whoever insults his brother": literally, "calls his brother 'Raca'"—probably an Aramaic word meaning "vain" or "empty fellow." 5:22: "You fool!": Greek *mōre*, which may here be the transcription of Hebrew *mōreh* ("rebel"), the fateful word used by Moses in Numbers 20:10 which excluded him from the Promised Land. The "hell (Gehenna) of fire" is an expression for the place of retribution in the world to come, drawn from the Valley of the son of Hinnom south of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19:2), which served the city as its refuse dump and incinerator in the post-exilic age.

DIVORCE AND SWEARING PROHIBITED

MATTHEW 5:27-37

“Don’t commit adultery” means “love the sanctity of marriage, live by it in your looking and thinking as well as your behavior.”

OUR LORD GOES ON to interpret further requirements of the Mosaic law. The seventh commandment, prohibiting adultery, is shown to forbid also the unchaste thought or glance—a ban enforceable by no earthly code or court (5:27f.). Better lose the eye—or hand—that tempts to sin than lose the life by yielding to sin (5:29f.; cf. 18:8f.).

To this admonition is appended (5:31f.) Jesus’ interpretation of the law affecting divorced persons in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The meaning of “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1 was debated in the rabbinical schools: some (eg the school of Shammai) restricted it to evidence of premarital unchastity; others (eg the school of Hillel) allowed it to embrace a wide variety of features which might displease a husband. For reasons detailed later in 19:3ff., Jesus rules that marriage is binding for life; the exceptive clause (5:32) refers to the situation in which the parties are so closely related that their marital union would be technically “fornication” in Jewish law (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1; the RSV rendering “unchastity” is far too vague to convey the precision of the original wording). A divorced wife had no means of redress or appeal against her husband’s arbitrary decision, and as her existence in independence of a man to support her was practically impossible in that

society, she was more or less bound to remarry and thus involve herself and her new husband in a relation which was illicit by the standard here set up.

Next Jesus reinterprets the law regarding oaths, based on the third commandment and elaborated in Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23, and lays down a new procedure for his followers (5:33-37). They must not swear oaths at all: they should be known as men of their word, so that their simple “Yes” or “No” will be believed. To debate whether Christians, in view of this ruling, should or should not take the oath in courts of law is to indulge in casuistry foreign to its spirit. Some Christians indeed, notably the Society of Friends, apply Jesus’ words literally in such a situation; but their public reputation is such that most people would accept the bare word of a friend before the most vehement oaths of many others. The point is that all the followers of Jesus should have this kind of reputation.

The various oaths mentioned in 5:34-36 were substitutes for oaths sworn by God, perhaps in the vain supposition that their breach did not incur such solemn perjury as the breach of an oath taken in God’s name. The folly of such “limited liability” swearing is exposed.

“Anything more than this comes from evil” (5:37): perhaps “from the evil one” (the devil), but more probably from sinful human nature (cf. James 5:12, which echoes this injunction of Jesus).

“BUT I SAY ...”

## MATTHEW 5:38-48

Jesus demands the whole of us. Even our innermost thoughts belong to God.

A THIRD TIME Jesus goes beyond what “was said to the men of old” with his “I say to you”—the authority implicit in this emphatic “I” must not be overlooked. The prophets of old said, “Thus says the Lord”; the rabbis were never happier than when they could quote a legal ruling in the name of some illustrious teacher of the past, but Jesus appeals to no authority higher than his own when he brings out the inward sense of the divine law.

The law of retaliation, “An eye for an eye ...” (Exodus 21:24f.; Leviticus 24:19f.), originally marked an advance in civilized behaviour when it replaced the unlimited blood-feud; henceforth the rule was “one eye (and one only) for an eye; one life (and one only) for a life.” But Jesus’ teaching marks a further advance: his followers should not retaliate at all. On the contrary, they should take the initiative in repaying evil with good: the man who volunteered to carry a soldier’s pack for a second mile after being compelled to carry it for one mile showed himself a free person and not an involuntary automaton. The spirit in which these directions are obeyed is the important thing: one could even turn the other cheek in a provocative manner (5:38-42).

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) sums up the law of Israel; its application depends on our answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” The added words, “... and hate your enemy” (5:43) are not

quoted from the Old Testament; their spirit can be recognized, for example, in the Qumran literature, where love for fellow members of the community and “everlasting hatred for all the men of the pit” are alike enjoined. There is nothing extraordinary about loving. (i.e. doing good to) one’s friends: unregenerate human nature does that as a matter of course. The followers of Jesus must be marked by kindness towards their enemies; in this they will show themselves true sons of God, who dispenses the blessings of creation impartially.

“You, therefore, must be perfect ...” (5:48): this recalls “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2, etc), but the special reference here is to perfection in mercy (cf. Luke 6:36). This is no law to be enforced, but a pattern to be emulated.

**Note** It has been suggested that a blow on the right cheek (5:39) would imply that the striker was left-handed (contrast Luke 6:29, where neither right nor left is specified). But if we wish to insist on such precision, we might consider the possibility that a back-handed blow is envisaged, which would be more painful and perhaps even more insulting.

**Discuss** some familiar techniques for evading the uncomfortable directness of the Sermon on the Mount.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PIETY

MATTHEW 6:1-8

We have to be very careful never to “do our religious thing” in order to impress other people.

THE “PIETY” (LITERALLY “righteousness”) of 6:1 covers the principal forms of religious practice—almsgiving (6:2-4), prayer (6:5-15) and fasting (6:16-18), which were largely left to the discretion of the individual. In fact, the word is sometimes used with specific reference to almsgiving (cf. Psalm 112:9, quoted in 2 Corinthians 9:9, and the close association of “practising righteousness” with “showing mercy to the oppressed” in Daniel’s advice to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel 4:27).

The point of Jesus’ teaching is that those who do such things to gain a public reputation for piety get precisely that—and no more. Practiced with this motive, they are not truly religious acts. Let them rather be done so that God alone knows about them, and he will bestow an appropriate reward—the opportunity for the further practice of such piety (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:10f.). The KJV addition “openly” at the end of 6:4,6,18 perverts the meaning of the promise: publicity is as inappropriate in the bestowal of the reward as in the pious action.

The primacy of almsgiving among the forms of piety mentioned in these paragraphs is quite in line with Old Testament teaching: “he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed” (Proverbs

19:17)—a text on which Dean Swift preached one of the shortest sermons on record: “If you like the security, down with the dust.”

As for prayer, there is a place for public and “synagogue” prayer, but there is something specially distasteful about praying ostensibly to God but actually in order to be heard or seen by others and so to gain the reputation of being a man of prayer. We recall the newspaper report of “the most eloquent prayer ever delivered to a Boston audience.” The Christian to whom prayer is “vital breath” and “native air” will pray when no one is around, and his (or her) public prayer will take character from habitual secret prayer. The heaping up of “empty phrases” (6:7) may refer to the Gentile practice of including all the deity’s designations so as to make sure of not omitting the appropriate one; it has its counterpart in the grandiloquent phraseology which some Christians today imagine God prefers to the simple word “Father.” We do not acquaint God with our needs when we pray (6:8); we remind *ourselves* of them, and adopt that dependent attitude of heart which can receive his mercy in a spirit of grateful trust.

**Note** “Hypocrites” (6:2; cf. 6:5-16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13-15) means literally “play-actors”; people who go through the motions of almsgiving and prayer “that they may be seen by men,” without any inward sense of charity or devotion, are simply acting a part which does not express their attitude of heart.

PRAYER, FORGIVENESS AND FASTING

MATTHEW 6:9-18

Jesus gives us a pattern of prayer to follow.

THE LORD'S PRAYER, given to the disciples as a pattern to follow, summarizes as in a nutshell Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. It "can be repeated in less than half a minute, contains petitions which range from the common bread-and-butter needs of our breakfast tables to the ultimate achievement of the age-long purposes of God; puts God's glory first, our needs second, does not rule out material matters as too trifling to pray about, yet insists on the supremacy of the spiritual, and emphasizes the basic condition of the disciples' enjoyment of the Father's forgiveness" (C.F. Hogg and J.B. Watson). The clauses "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done" are probably three forms of what is basically the same petition; to each the words "on earth as it is in heaven" are applicable. Whether we render "our daily bread" or "our bread for the morrow" (margin), the petition of 6:11 is content with "rations" for one day at a time. In Aramaic "debts" and "debtors" (6:12) are idiomatic terms for "sins" and "sinners"; the reminder that only the forgiving can ask for forgiveness is reinforced in 6:14-15 (cf. 18:23-35). "Lead us not into temptation" (6:13) may mean "grant that we may not fail in the test"—the supreme crisis which puts one's faith and loyalty to the crucial test (cf. 26:41). The "evil" from which we should pray to be delivered is probably the "evil one" whose aim is to destroy faith in the people of God. The doxology which follows the prayer in KJV does not

belong to the original text but preserves very early church practice: a few decades after the publication of this Gospel it is appended to the prayer in the *Didache* (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”).

This document, the *Didache*, has a significant gloss on the next paragraph, on fasting (6:16-18), which shows how easy it was then, as now, to miss the point of our Lord’s teaching: “Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays (cf. Luke 18:12), but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.” Fasting, like almsgiving and prayer, should be a private and voluntary undertaking between the worshiper and God, not a means of acquiring credit with men.

When we read our Lord’s criticisms of the scribes of his day, we should consider whether we are not prone to treat his words with the same wooden legalism as they manifested in their application of the Old Testament law. Is it not possible for Christians today to fulfill their religious exercises as if they were so many rules to be kept, and to regard the fulfillment of them as constituting a stronger title to God’s approval than is available for others who are deplorably lax in these matters? In what way are such Christians better than the “play-actors” who incur our Lord’s censure?

THE CAREFREE MIND

MATTHEW 6:19-34

This section of the Sermon inculcates a freedom from anxiety, rising from implicit confidence in a heavenly Father's love and care.

VERSES 19-21 CONSTITUTE a perfect poem in Aramaic, showing unforced rhythm and even rhyme. The uncertainty of treasure laid up on earth is illustrated by the parable of Luke 12:15-21.

“Character is the only garment you can weave in this world and wear in the next.” An unsound eye, in the sense of 6:23, is an envious eye, which is apt to accompany concentration on earthly treasure; a sound eye (6:22) betokens a generous spirit, such as God himself shows (cf. 5:45-48).

“Mammon” (6:24) is an Aramaic word, etymologically denoting anything in which men put their trust, but in practice standing for material gain, which can so easily take the central place in life that is due to God alone. We may recall the apostolic equation of covetousness with idolatry (Colossians 3:5). In spite of the plain warning that God and mammon cannot be served together, a surprisingly large number of Christians try their best to prove that it can be done—and succeed in demonstrating the truth of our Lord's words. The Father who feeds the birds and bedecks the grass can be trusted to provide his children with enough to eat and wear (6:25-34).

We cannot be sure whether “span of life” or “stature” is the better translation in 6:27; in favor of the former is the consideration that worry has little effect on one's stature, but is more likely to shorten life than to prolong

it. The Gentiles (6:32) were supposed by Jews to have little or no spiritual appreciation: our Lord warns his hearers that they are liable to live on the same level as the Gentiles. 6:33 shows the true priorities.

An African ruler a few years ago modified this precept in a public inscription to “Seek ye first the political kingdom ...”; he soon discovered his mistake. Many Christians make their own more private modifications of the precept; they, too, are destined to discover their mistake. To seek God’s kingdom and righteousness first is to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously.

THE GOLDEN RULE AND ITS COROLLARIES

MATTHEW 7:1-12

The opening verses remind us that if we want to improve other people, we need to start with ourselves.

THE GOLDEN RULE (7:12) is the quintessence of the greater part of these twelve verses. Our Lord was not the first teacher in Israel to sum up “the law and the prophets” in such terms as these, although the earlier formulations of the Golden Rule are negative rather than positive. For example, a generation earlier, Rabbi Hillel said to a proselyte who asked for a brief summary of the law: “What is hateful to yourself, do not to another; that is the whole law, everything else is commentary.”

The exhortation against judgment (7:1-2) forbids not a judicious discernment but a censorious spirit which delights in finding fault with others. The picture of a man with a log in his own eye volunteering to remove a splinter from his brother’s eye (7:3-5) is a delightful sample of our Lord’s humor. A proper use of discernment is enjoined in 7:6, which incidentally is an example of chiasmus; the swine will trample the pearls underfoot and the dogs (pariah dogs, of course) will bite the hand that feeds them, even if it be with consecrated meat. This injunction does not refer specifically to the withholding of sacraments from the unworthy or unbelieving; still less is it (as some contemporary exegetes have suggested) a judaizing warning against offering the blessings of the gospel to Gentiles. It means, more generally, that

spiritual mysteries are not to be pressed on those who are unready or unwilling to appreciate them.

The encouragement to prayer in 7:7-11 reaffirms the teaching of 6:5-15, and does so by means of the “how much more” argument which Jesus loved to use. If even a reluctant and sleepy head of the house will rise at midnight to give his neighbor three loaves for the sake of peace (Luke 11:5-8, immediately preceding the Lukan parallel to our present paragraph); if even an unjust judge will give an importunate widow her rights to avoid being pestered to death (Luke 18:1-8); if even earthly fathers, sinful men though they are, give their children food when they ask for it and do not put them off with useless or dangerous substitutes, *how much more* will God, the heavenly Father, give his children good things, not harmful things, when they ask him? Therefore “ask ..., seek ..., knock.”

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

## MATTHEW 7:13-29

There is a note of urgency, even sternness, about these verses which is overlooked by those who make facile remarks about the Sermon on the Mount as an ethical ideal.

BY INSISTING ON the two gates, the two ways, the two destinies (7:13-14), the two kinds of tree and fruit (7:15-20) and the two foundations (7:24-27), Jesus presents his way as the path of life, and the refusal to follow it as the straight road to disaster. The *either-or* of his words is inescapable. In the day when all things are shaken, stability and salvation, for individuals and communities alike, can be secured only by accepting the way laid down in his teaching and exemplified in his life. Those who teach otherwise, however fair their approach and plausible their reasoning, are “false prophets,” wolves in sheep’s clothing (7:15). The repeated “you will know them by their fruits” (7:16-20) is a principle of universal application—“by their fruits,” commented William James, “not by their roots.”

To claim the status of disciples, to call Jesus “Lord” by way of lip-service only, to preach, exorcize and even do mighty works in his name will not avail unless there is genuine inward obedience to the Father’s will as he made it known. Only those who are thus obedient will gain entrance to his kingdom (7:21-23). The obstacle to such obedience is not outrageous wickedness but some of the most familiar human tendencies. “It will simplify the discussion if we admit the truth at the outset: that the teaching of Jesus is difficult and

unacceptable because it runs counter to those elements in human nature which the twentieth century has in common with the first—such things as laziness, greed, the love of pleasure, the instinct to hit back and the like. The teaching as a whole shows that Jesus was well aware of this and recognized that here and nowhere else lay the obstacle that had to be surmounted” (T.W. Manson). The fulfillment of the righteous requirements of the Sermon, as of the older Law, is possible only to those who “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4)—the Spirit of Christ himself.

The crowds might well be “astonished at his teaching” and recognize the authority of his words (7:28-29), but that is not the same thing as accepting his teaching or submitting to his authority. There is rarely an inconvenient throng around the narrow gate.

**Consider** the following statements in the light of the Sermon on the Mount:

- “The moral standard set up by Jesus is a standard of example rather than precept” (T.W. Manson).
- “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried” (G.K. Chesterton).

BLESSING FOR GENTILES AS WELL AS JEWS

MATTHEW 8:1-13

Jesus' authority could be seen in what he said and did, but people had to respond to it in simple trust.

HAVING GIVEN PROMINENCE to the Sermon on the Mount as the programme of our Lord's ministry, Matthew now relates detailed incidents from the earlier Galilean phase of his ministry (8:1–9:34). The healing of the leper illustrates his compassion and disregard for the isolation imposed on one whom the law pronounced "unclean" (Leviticus 13:46), for he "touched him" (8:3); at the same time it shows that he had no desire to overrule the recognized procedure, for the cured man was directed to offer the prescribed sacrifice and so obtain a priestly declaration that he was now "clean" (8:4; cf. Leviticus 14:2-32). Conflict with the religious establishment came soon enough, but it was not of Jesus' seeking.

The leper was cured by the healing touch of Jesus' hand: by contrast, the centurion's servant, like the Canaanite girl in 15:28, was healed at a distance (8:5-13). This may serve as a parable of the fact that Jesus' active ministry on earth, with rare exceptions, was confined to Jews. With them he lived in close physical contact. The blessing which in due course he bestowed in unstinted measure on Gentiles was communicated not by personal contact of this kind but from the heavenly throne of glory through the agency of his disciples (cf. 28:18ff.). Jesus did not withhold his sympathy from Gentiles; he was ready to "come and heal" the centurion's paralysed servant (8:7), and he saw in the

centurion's faith, which made his doing so unnecessary, a foreshadowing of the day when "many" would come from the Gentile lands and share the blessings which the patriarchs of Israel would enjoy in the new age. The ingathering of the Gentiles was an "eschatological" sign—a sign of the age of fulfillment of what the prophets had foretold (cf. Psalm 102:15; Isaiah 60:3). Jesus' ministry marked the inauguration of this new age, but not until the Son of Man was raised from the dead would its full power and outreach be manifested (contrast the commissions of 10:5 and 28:19). The centurion, recognizing that Jesus had unseen powers at his command which could obey him at a distance (8:8f.), exhibited a quality of faith such as Jesus had met in no one else; hence his delighted response (8:10). The hard saying about "the sons of the kingdom," ie those who were the natural heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (8:12), is absent from the parallel in Luke 7:2-10, but the same lesson is taught in the Nazareth sermon of Luke 4:23-27. The "outer darkness" (8:12) continues the picture of 8:11; those who expect to head the list of guests find themselves, because of their lack of faith, excluded from the brightly lit banquet hall, grinding their teeth in vexation in the darkness outside.

HEALING THE SICK AND SCREENING VOLUNTEERS

MATTHEW 8:14-22

True Christian commitment is ready for the cost—and cuts across every other claim and tie.

THE HEALING OF Peter's mother-in-law from her fever—again by the touch of his hand—is mentioned as a sample of the many cures effected by our Lord that day in Capernaum (8:14-16). (The mention of Peter's mother-in-law provides an “undesigned coincidence” with 1 Corinthians 9:5, where Paul confirms that he was a married man.) The “word” with which he relieved those who were victims of demonic powers (8:16) was the word of command which expressed his authority as Lord of all creation. The quotation of Isaiah 53:4 in this healing context (8:17) emphasizes the Servant's removing the infirmities and diseases of men rather than (as in its Old Testament context) his enduring them vicariously; the verbs used can bear either sense. He bore his people's sins; there is no suggestion that he shared their sicknesses, especially as demon-possession is included among these. Yet we cannot miss the note of sympathy which accompanies the power of his word and action: this is no dispassionate visitant from another realm who cannot be touched with a fellow-feeling for the ills of humanity, but One who is man among men, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh.

In 8:18-22 samples are provided of the tests which Jesus applied to discourage would-be disciples whose commitment was less than total. His reply to the scribe who volunteered to follow him wherever he went raises a

question about the meaning of the title “Son of man.” If it is here little more than another way of expressing the first personal pronoun, then he says that whereas wild animals have their resting-places he himself can never be sure of a bed for the night or a roof over his head and his companions must similarly be prepared to have no fixed abode. But there were homes where Jesus was most welcome. The suggestion that it is a proverb contrasting the plight of man with the creatures which by instinct construct suitable homes for themselves has little to commend it. Perhaps the point is that “everybody is at home in Israel’s land except the true Israel. The birds of the air—the Roman overlords, the foxes—the Edomite interlopers (cf. Luke 13:32), have made their position secure. The true Israel is disinherited by them: and if you cast your lot with me and mine you join the ranks of the dispossessed, and you must be prepared to serve God under those conditions” (T.W. Manson). The other volunteer promised total commitment when his last family obligation was discharged. Jesus’ reply assures him that he need not fear that his father will be left unburied when he dies; the business of the kingdom of God is urgent and brooks no reservation or delay.

TEMPESTS WITHOUT AND WITHIN

MATTHEW 8:23-34

Every “accident” has the potential to increase our estimate of Jesus.

MATTHEW DESCRIBES THIS storm on the lake by a very strong word, literally meaning “earthquake” (8:24), and it is a pity that translators have not given it its proper force, for Matthew intends its proper force to be understood. The stilling of the tempest, recorded by the three Synoptists, not only portrays Jesus as Lord of wind and wave, but does so in such a way as to recall the ancient Near Eastern motif of the Creator’s victory over the unruly sea, portraying the forces of chaos. Matthew’s choice of the word “earthquake” deliberately emphasizes this aspect of the matter: the upsurging of the deep—the “abyss” of Luke 8:31—symbolizes all the demonic powers which rise to overthrow the kingdom of God but which are overthrown by that kingdom.

The lesson which this incident teaches in the realm of nature is taught again by the following incident on the human level. It is the spirit of man that is the principal target of demonic hostility, as is shown in the description of the two possessed Gadarenes. The multiple schizophrenia and complete loss of personal identity from which they suffer have their counterparts in contemporary society, where one’s capacity for responsible decision can so easily be killed by the trend-setting legion. “If it is true that we are the contemporaries of Christ, as the gospel of the resurrection teaches us, then we can see how he moves through our consumer society and asks the anonymous member of the mass, ‘What is your name?’ A ring at the doorbell; and an

indistinct murmur of voices from within: ‘We are many, we are many ...’” (Olov Hartman). The juxtaposition of the “consumer society” with demon-possession is seen in the reaction of the Gentile population, more concerned about the loss of their pigs than about the healing of souls. A strange story in modern ears, no doubt; but it is our modern predicament that it uncovers.

**Note** There is considerable variation between Gadarenes, Gerasenes and Gergesenes in the manuscript tradition of this passage and its parallels in Mark and Luke. Gadara was 7 miles south-east from the lake, separated from the area indicated here by the Yarmuk gorge. The best-known Gerasa was modern Jerash in Transjordan, nearly 40 miles south-east of the lake. The readings Gerasenes and Gergesenes apparently preserve the ancient name of the modern village of Kersa or Kursi, on the east shore of the lake, at the only point on that coast where the steep hills come down to the shore. The incident should probably be located there.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON OF MAN

MATTHEW 9:1-8

Imagine you're in the scene of this reading. Where are you? One of the paralytic's friends? One of the teachers of the law? In the crowd?

The paralytic himself?

MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT OF Jesus' healing of the paralytic of Capernaum (here called "his own city," ie the city which he now made his headquarters; cf. Mark 2:1) is greatly compressed in comparison with those of the two other Synoptists (nothing is said here of the man's being let down through the roof), but the essential lessons are retained. This is not only a miracle story but a "pronouncement story," one which is told for the sake of the dictum to which it leads up—in this case: "the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (9:6). It is as easy to say "Your sins are forgiven" as to say "Rise and walk"; but the spectators could immediately see the effectiveness of the latter command, whereas the validity of the former utterance belonged to the inward and spiritual realm.

The scribes were justified in thinking that Jesus was exercising a prerogative of God; but some of God's prerogatives can be delegated if he pleases. So in Daniel 7:13f. his prerogatives of dominion and judgment are delegated to "one like a son of man" (cf. John 5:22-27), and it is as this Son of Man that Jesus now speaks. Yet, as the sovereign interpreter of the will of God, he claims for the Son of Man the authority not to *judge* sins but to *forgive* sins (cf. John 3:17; 12:47b). He to whom God has delegated the

judgment of the world can exercise that authority by pronouncing acquittal as well as by sentence of condemnation, and such is the good pleasure of the Son of Man. Not only so, but Matthew envisages this authority as shared in some sense with others, unless we are to treat the plural “men” at the end of 9:8 as purely a generalizing plural.

Here we have biblical precedent for the familiar assurance that God “hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins”; it is theirs to proclaim the forgiveness which the Son of Man has procured.

CONTROVERSY GROWS  
MATTHEW 9:9-17

Jesus loves to show mercy to those who know they aren't good.

THE STORY OF the call of the tax collector raises some interesting questions. Why, for example, is it only in the Gospel traditionally associated with Matthew that this tax collector (referred to as Levi by Mark and Luke) is called Matthew? And why is it in the apostolic list of this Gospel only that Matthew (mentioned by his bare name in the parallel lists of Mark and Luke) is distinguished as “Matthew the tax collector” (Matthew 10:3)? It is only from this evangelist that we learn that the Twelve included a former tax collector. That he should have become a colleague of the fishermen is noteworthy enough—“if ever cursing was justifiable, it was when such as Peter the fisherman cursed Matthew the publican” (W.M. Christie)—but that he should have been a member of the same group as Simon the Zealot is a near-miracle. For, while it was not for the Romans, but for the administration of Herod the tetrarch, that Matthew collected taxes in his toll-booth on the Capernaum quayside, tax-farmers as a class were regarded as unpatriotic characters, no better than robbers, and tax evasion carried no moral stigma with it.

The appended incident (9:10-13) is a pronouncement story, told for the sake of the concluding utterance, in which Jesus defends his association with such disreputable persons by appealing to a great prophetic declaration (Hosea 6:6; cf. Matthew 12:7) and to the well-known fact that it is sick

people, not healthy people, who need the doctor's care. "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13b) is one of the greatest single-sentence summaries of the gospel.

The fasting incident is another pronouncement story. Regular fasting (apart from the observance of the few fast-days of the Jewish year) was a voluntary act of religious devotion (cf. 6:16-18), undertaken by many religious groups in Israel but not by the disciples of Jesus. Jesus' defense of their behavior in this regard (9:15a) may have implications for his own understanding of his person and rôle. The additional words (9:15b) point to the later period, when his disciples did fast, and explain this change of practice. But during his ministry their deviation from the fasting procedure of other religious groups underlined the difference made by the proclamation of the kingdom and the incompatibility of this new order with that which preceded it—an incompatibility illustrated by the two short parables of 9:16-17.

**Compare** the two passages in this Gospel (9:13; 12:7) where Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 ("I desire mercy, and not sacrifice") and consider the relevance of the quotation in both places.

JAIRUS' DAUGHTER  
MATTHEW 9:18-26

No matter what our problem is, it has Jesus' whole concern.

LIKE THE NARRATIVE of the paralytic, the account of the raising of Jairus' daughter is greatly compressed in this Gospel as compared with the parallels in Mark (5:22-43) and Luke (8:41-56). It is from these parallels that we know that "ruler" (9:18) means "ruler of the synagogue," as also that his name was Jairus. The rulers of the synagogue (except where the title was honorary) exercised general supervision over the building itself and over the services which were conducted in it; they were commonly elders of the congregation and, since the synagogue served as the community center, would be persons of considerable local importance. No doubt only the most desperate need would have driven such a man to implore the help of Jesus, who was no longer in good odor with the synagogue.

The woman with the persistent haemorrhage who touched him on the way had not merely to endure the physical distress of her condition; according to the law (Leviticus 15:25) she was in a permanent state of ceremonial defilement, with all the social and religious disadvantages which this involved. The fringe of Jesus' cloak which she touched (9:20) was one of the tassels prescribed by the law of Numbers 15:38; Deuteronomy 22:12.

The flute-players of 9:23 were professional mourners, hired for the sad occasion. It has sometimes been argued that our Lord's assurance, "the girl is not dead but sleeping" (9:24), means that those who thought she was dead

were mistaken: but cf. John 11:11 (that the Greek word for “sleep” there is different from that used here is immaterial). It is implied that he raised her from death as easily as he might have roused her from sleep. Both the incidents in this section illustrate Jesus’ ready response to faith—the ruler’s and the woman’s.

**Meditation** “Maturity and youth ... much faith or little faith, touching or being touched, Jesus was the answer to men’s needs” (H.L. Ellison).

THE GALILEAN HARVEST FIELD

MATTHEW 9:27-38

Jesus is moved with pity as he sees lost people.

THE DUPLICATION OF the blind men (cf. Mark 8:22-26) probably emphasizes the note of witness (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15), as with the two demoniacs of 8:28 and the two blind men of Jericho in 20:30-34 (an incident closely similar to this). This incident also illustrates the power of faith (9:28f.). The “stern charge” of 9:30 is like that laid upon the leper (8:4a), but much more vigorously expressed (although the verb used here of the charge to the blind men is used in Mark 1:43 of the charge to the leper). The expression conveys a sense of indignation, and may combine anger at the forces which afflicted men with eager desire to prevent the misunderstanding of his real mission which could too easily arise from the blazing abroad of his acts of healing.

The exorcizing of the dumb demon and the imparting of the power of speech to its victim (9:32-34) occasions the mocking charge that one who exercised such mastery over the demons must be in league with their prince—a charge repeated in similar circumstances in 12:24, where it is refuted in detail. No silence can be imposed this time, because the cure was seen by crowds of bystanders. The two actions together represent a fulfillment of Isaiah 35:5f. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.”

When the crowds mentioned in the generalizing summary of 9:35f. are compared to “sheep without a shepherd,” we should remember the precedent

of 1 Kings 22:17 and conclude that what is meant is not a congregation without a pastor but an army without a captain—“a maccabean host with no Judas Maccabaeus, a leaderless mob, a danger to themselves and everyone else” (T.W. Manson). Jesus knew very well how readily they could be led to disaster if they found the wrong kind of leader. The political unrest in Palestine in this period was due in large measure to the desperate economic plight of the population and the high level of unemployment. The majority of them refused the leadership of Jesus because he would not be the kind of leader they wanted—one who would promise them political independence and economic rehabilitation—and in due course were led to disaster by others who made these promises without being able to fulfill them. But at the moment these leaderless multitudes presented, in Jesus’ eyes, a ripe harvest-field waiting to be reaped for the kingdom of God, if only sufficient harvesters were available for the task (9:37f.).

**Discuss** the various manifestations of faith in the narratives of chapters 8 and 9.

MISSION OF THE TWELVE

MATTHEW 10:1-15

This work is so vital that it calls for simplicity of life, urgency of manner and total commitment.

INTO THE RIPE harvest-field, then, the Twelve are sent two by two, and the evangelist takes the opportunity to list their names (10:2-4; cf. Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13). There are variations between the lists given by the several evangelists, but if the Twelve are divided into three groups of four, each group of four invariably begins with the same name: Simon Peter, Philip, James the son of Alphaeus. Thaddaeus (cf. Mark 3:18) must be equated with “Judas the son of James” of Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13 (cf. “Judas not Iscariot” of John 14:22). “Cananaean” (not “Canaanite,” as in KJV) here and in Mark 3:18 represents the Aramaic word which corresponds to “Zealot” (Gk. *zélótés*, Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), denoting a member (or former member) of the militant party of resistance.

The commission to the Twelve constitutes Matthew’s second body of discourse material. They were to function as an extension of their Master’s ministry, speaking and acting in his name. With the message of 10:7 cf. 4:17. The time was limited, and they must concentrate on “the Jew first.” That Jesus was willing to help Gentiles we have seen already (8:5ff.) and his friendly contacts with Samaritans are chronicled in other Gospels; but the time for their unrestricted access to his grace was not yet (cf. John 12:24-32). That the present restriction betokens no exclusive outlook on the part of the

evangelist himself is plain from the post-Easter commission of 28:19f., spoken when the earlier restrictions have been removed. The reference to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (cf. 9:36) implies that Jesus offered himself to them as their true Shepherd (cf. John 10:1-16, echoing Ezekiel 34:23f., where the son of David fulfills this rôle).

The Twelve were to take no provisions for their journey but to depend on charity. The dictum that “the laborer deserves his food” (10:10) has echoes elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:18). The expectation that in any town or village one “who is worthy” will be found recalls what Josephus says about the traveling Essenes—that they could always rely on the hospitality of resident Essenes. Jesus knew that sympathizers with the message of the kingdom might be found in many places; some at least of these would have been influenced by the preaching of John the Baptist (cf. 3:5f.).

The “peace” of 10:13 is that of the greeting “Peace be with you.” So terrible a judgment will be experienced by the place which refuses the gospel they bring that its dust must be shaken off as they depart lest that judgment extend to it and so to them (cf. Acts 13:51; 18:6).

**Consider** The Twelve had first to witness to their own people. It is a serious delusion to think that the “flop” at home will be a shining success in the mission field.

PERSECUTION AHEAD

MATTHEW 10:16-23

We are to reckon on difficulty and rejection in the Christian life.

WHILE THE CHARGE of 10:5-15 relates to the immediate mission of the Twelve, that of 10:16ff. looks forward to a later period, to their ministry in the period between AD 30 and 70. This section is parallel in part to 24:9-14; it is valuable for the degree of light it sheds on the Palestinian disciples' largely unchronicled mission to the Jews during these years (cf. Galatians 2:7-9). Their defense was to lie not in force but in wisdom and innocence (cf. Romans 16:19); the animals mentioned in 10:16 served as standard symbols for the qualities indicated.

The "councils" of 10:17 are "sanhedrins" (Gk. *synedria*)—mainly the local sanhedrins rather than the supreme Sanhedrin at Jerusalem (although it was by the latter that James the Lord's brother was sentenced to death in AD 62)—and the flogging inflicted in synagogues would be the "forty stripes save one" (cf. 2. Corinthians 11:24; Deuteronomy 25:3). The "governors and kings" of 10:18 might be Roman governors and Jewish kings (like Herod Agrippa, whose action against James the son of Zebedee and Peter is recorded in Acts 12:1-4).

The general sense of 10:18b-20 is illustrated by the earlier Christian martyrologies, where Christians on trial for their faith exhibit a ready eloquence in reply and defense which astonishes their accusers.(cf. also Acts 4:13; 1 Peter 3:15f.). The warning about domestic division (10:21) is repeated

in 10:35f. (cf. also Mark 13:12). With 10:22 we should compare Tacitus' description of Christians as "a class of men loathed for their vices" and especially for their "hatred of the human race" (*Annals* 15:44).

With 10:23a compare the action of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:5f.,19f. The interpretation of 10:23b has been a debated issue for long and the debate continues (one interpretation supplied the main foundation of Albert Schweitzer's solution to the *Quest of the Historical Jesus*) but in the context the coming of the Son of Man can scarcely be dissociated from the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 (see notes on 16:27f.; 24:3ff.). That this is Matthew's intention is more likely than the view which dissociates it from 10:16-22 and attaches it to 10:5-15, as though the Twelve on their immediate mission were Jesus' forerunners, preparing for his coming to the "towns of Israel" which they visited in advance of him (cf. Luke 10:1, where the seventy are sent "into every town and place where he himself was about to come").

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

MATTHEW 10:24-42

Jesus' claims cut clean across our personal aims, desires and even family ties.

SOME FURTHER SAYINGS of Jesus for the encouragement of his disciples are appended. The persecutions in store for them are no greater than what he himself must endure (cf. John 13:16; 15:20; 16:2; also Luke 6:40). There may be two plays on words in 10:25 if Jesus spoke in Aramaic: "it is enough for the disciple" would be *shewi le-shewilya* (if "disciple" be understood in the sense of "apprentice"), and the name Beelzebul itself may mean "master of the house" (Jesus is referring back to the taunt of 9:34). But if the servants share their Master's sufferings, they will also share his vindication: he himself will be their advocate with God, as he will be the prosecutor of the faithless (cf. Mark 8:38; Luke 12:8f.). They are to be his heralds, proclaiming the "secrets of the kingdom" (cf. 13:11) without fear or favor (10:26f.); if only they fear God, they need fear no one else (10:28). With the comparison of men and sparrows in 10:31 cf. 6:26.

The warning that his mission would divide families (10:34f.; cf. 10:21) echoes Micah 7:5f.; such domestic dissension was to be one of the woes of the end-time. The lack of sympathy which Jesus found in his own family circle may have taught him by experience how "a man's foes" could be "those of his own household" (10:36; cf. Mark 3:21; John 7:5). That the claims of the kingdom of heaven take precedence over all family ties (10:37)

is repeatedly emphasized in the Gospels (cf. 8:22; 12:46-50; 19:29). To take up one's cross (10:38) was in the circumstances of those days no easy metaphor for the endurance of this or that vexatious burden: it meant that Jesus' followers must be prepared to be crucified, as he was (cf. 16:24). The repeated "is not worthy of me" may reflect the same Aramaic phrase as the parallel "cannot be my disciple" in Luke 14:26f. But life lost in his service would be life gained; life gained at the expense of loyalty to him would be life lost (10:39; cf. 16:25-27).

The final paragraph in this section (10:40-42) was as applicable to the immediate mission of the Twelve as to all time following: the treatment meted out to his followers is accepted by their Lord as meted out to himself (cf. 25:40-45; Mark 9:41; Luke 10:16; John 13:20). With 10:41 cf. 1 Kings 17:8ff.; 2 Kings 4:8ff. The reference to "little ones" in 10:42 anticipates the teaching of 18:5-14.

**Thought** There is nothing in this section which does not apply to us. See how it was worked out in Acts. Are we prepared to take this teaching seriously today?

**Consider** actual examples of the way in which the claims of the kingdom of heaven may still cut across family loyalties.

JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

MATTHEW 11:1-15

John the Baptist was greater than the greatest Old Testament prophet  
—yet less than the least in God’s kingdom, for he faded out as the  
kingdom arrived.

WE HAVE NOT been told thus far of the imprisonment of John the Baptist: it is related as a “flash-back” in 14:3ff. John had announced that the Coming One would carry out a ministry of judgment, but the reports of Jesus’ activity which reached him in the cell at Machaerus had little to do with judgment. Was Jesus, he wondered, the Coming One after all? Had he himself perhaps been mistaken in so identifying him? When he sent his messengers for reassurance on these questions, Jesus performed before their eyes many of the signs which, according to the prophets, would mark the new age (cf. Isaiah 35:5f.; 61:1); when they told John what they had seen, his faith would be confirmed, and he would not feel that Jesus had let him down (for this is what “take offense” amounts to in 11:6.)

Jesus’ witness to John sets John on a pinnacle by himself. Those who remembered John’s appearance and demeanor must have laughed as they heard the inappropriate metaphors of 11:7-8. Jesus confirmed the general belief that John was a prophet—“and more than a prophet,” he added (11:9), for John, the last prophet of the old order, was the herald of the imminent kingdom (cf. 3:2), the messenger of Malachi 3:1 who would prepare the way of the Lord (cf. Isaiah 40:3 quoted in Matthew 3:3) and the returning Elijah

foretold in Malachi 4:5f., whose advent would precede “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” At the end of the old age of “the prophets and the law” John stood and announced the dawn of the new age, without himself entering that new age; therefore, unsurpassed as he was in personal stature, he was surpassed in privilege by the least in the new age (11:11).

The reference in 11:12 may be to the Zealots and other militant nationalists, who endeavored to hasten the new age by force of arms. They, too, were liable to “take offense” at Jesus when he refused to exploit his popularity by putting their policy into practice; and indeed, in this day as in that, all who find that he will not accommodate himself to their preconceived pattern do well to pay heed to the beatitude of 11:6.

THE DOOM OF THE LAKESIDE TOWNS

MATTHEW 11:16-24

Jesus is unambiguous. The day of judgment is no fiction.

THOSE WHO FOUND fault with John the Baptist for his ascetic way of life were equally ready to criticize Jesus for a way of life which was very different from John's. (Whatever inner significance the title "Son of Man" may bear elsewhere, in 11:19 it cannot be understood otherwise than as a circumlocution for the personal pronoun "I.") There was no pleasing such people: they were like children playing out-of-doors, at odds with one another because one half wanted to play weddings while the other half wanted to play funerals. (If 11:17 is turned back into Aramaic, it has the form of a jingling rhyme.) But the wisdom of God was vindicated equally in John's asceticism and in Jesus' eating with "tax collectors and sinners" (11:19).

For all the popular excitement which the Galilean ministry had aroused, it found little genuine or lasting response from those lakeside towns where Jesus had been most active. Chorazin is commonly identified with modern Kerazeh and Capernaum with Tell-Hum, while Bethsaida may be et-Tabgha or Mas'adiya, according as it is to be located on the west shore of the lake or east of the point where the Jordan enters it (the latter is the more probable). Gentile cities in Old Testament times had experienced prophetic denunciation (like Tyre and Sidon; cf. Ezekiel 26:1–28:23) and divine judgment (like Sodom; cf. Genesis 18:20–19:28), without a hundredth part of the knowledge

of God which these lakeside towns had been given during recent months: the judgment of the latter on the great day would be correspondingly greater than that of those more ancient communities; and indeed in their case the eschatological doom was anticipated when the Romans crushed the revolt in Galilee in the spring of AD 67. The opening words in the denunciation of Capernaum echo those addressed to the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:12-15. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility.

THE YOKE OF WISDOM  
MATTHEW 11:25-30

Notice the invitation: to take Christ's service on ourselves; the benefit: we rest in his salvation; the promise: his will for our lives will fit us perfectly.

WHILE JESUS DEPLORED the unbelief of the majority of his hearers, he reserved warm words of commendation for the minority that did respond to him, and—"babes" in intellect though they might be alongside the alumni of the rabbinical schools—were enabled nevertheless to appreciate the revelation of the Father which he imparted. This reversal of worldly standards was no innovation in the dealings of God with man: Jesus acknowledged it to be his Father's will.

11:27 (cf. Luke 10:22) has been described as an "aerolite from the Johannine heaven" because its style and content are so similar to what we find in the Fourth Gospel; yet it belongs to the earliest literary stratum of our Gospel material. Our Lord speaks here as the Son and Revealer of the Father (cf. John 1:18) and as One whose person and commission are known in fullness to the Father only. In the "comfortable words" which follow he speaks in the rôle of the divine Wisdom (cf. note on 23:34). A striking parallel in Jewish wisdom literature is provided by Sirach 51:23-30, where the author issues an invitation to draw near and lodge in his school in order to learn wisdom. "Put your neck under the yoke," he says, for under that yoke,

he adds, “I ... found for myself much rest.” He was a learner and teacher of wisdom; Jesus is Wisdom incarnate (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:24-30).

“Take my yoke upon you” (11:29) means “Enrol yourselves as my disciples”; with his “easy” yoke we may contrast the burdensome yoke to which Peter refers in Acts 15:10. On the lips of another the claim to be “gentle and lowly in heart” would not have the ring of truth. If it is said that the claim is unlikely to have been made by Jesus in person we may reflect (a) that generations of readers or hearers of the Gospel have been conscious of no incongruity here, (b) that it agrees with objective testimony (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:1) and (c) that, as has been said, it is uttered in the character of divine Wisdom.

**Thought** The yoke is a sign both of Christ’s lordship and partnership.

## SABBATH CONTROVERSIES

### MATTHEW 12:1-14

What is our attitude to the Sabbath? Laxness or legalism?

OUR LORD'S FINAL break with the synagogue establishment arose from the sovereign freedom with which he reinterpreted the Sabbath law in his teaching and action alike. The wording of the fourth commandment, "in it (the seventh day) you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), called for a more precise definition of "work"; the rabbinical schools distinguished thirty-nine classes of activity which were forbidden on the Sabbath. The disciples' actions fell within these prohibitions, for plucking the ears of grain was a form of reaping, and rubbing them in their hands to extract the kernels (cf. Luke 6:1) was a form of threshing.

Our Lord's reply to the Pharisees' criticism, with his appeal to the precedent of David (1 Samuel 21:1ff.) and quotation of Hosea 6:6 (cf. Matthew 9:13), amounts to this: the law of God in general, and the Sabbath law in particular, were intended to be a blessing to men, not a burden, and a fulfillment in the letter is no true fulfillment if it infringes the spirit and purpose of the law. Human need takes precedence over the best-intentioned religious casuistry, and the Son of Man's authority includes the right to interpret and fulfill the Sabbath law in accordance with the divine provision.

The second Sabbath controversy (12:9-14) had its setting in "their synagogue"—an indication, perhaps, that he was no longer welcome there. If an act of healing were necessary to preserve life, the rabbinical schools

permitted it on the Sabbath; if there was no such urgency, the proper course was to wait until the Sabbath was past. But Jesus maintained that the Sabbath was the most appropriate day to relieve men and women from sickness and other afflictions, because such acts honored the purpose for which the day was instituted. It is assumed that the Pharisees would relieve an animal in distress on the Sabbath (12:11); the Qumran community was so much more strict that in its Sabbath regulations precisely such a humane action is forbidden.

**Note** “The priests in the temple profane the Sabbath” (12:5), ie by continuing their work on that day, in fact by offering more sacrifices on it than on ordinary days.

BEHOLD MY SERVANT  
MATTHEW 12:15-21

The Father delights in Jesus Christ and the nations hope in him.

THAT THE BREAKING-POINT between Jesus and the synagogue was the conflict over Sabbath observance is attested by the Synoptic narrative and the Fourth Gospel alike (cf. John 5:9ff.). Withdrawing from the synagogue, Jesus was followed by many who needed his help even more than they needed the synagogue ministrations, “and he healed them all” (12:15). This pattern of withdrawal from the synagogue and detaching disciples from it is repeatedly re-enacted in the apostolic age (cf. Acts 13:46ff.; 17:4ff.; 18:6f., and especially 19:8f.). Again the secrecy motif appears (cf. 8:4; 9:30); on this occasion the evangelist adduces Old Testament authority for it.

It is noteworthy that the citation of Isaiah 42:1-4 comes at this point. The religious leaders of Judaism have repudiated Jesus, but the crucial question is: what is God’s estimate of him? This question is answered in the terms of what we know today as the first of the four Isaianic Servant Songs. Its opening words were echoed by the heavenly voice at the baptism (3:17). Jesus is presented by God as his Servant, and the words cited here convey divine approval of the kind of ministry he has been accomplishing, including the avoidance of publicity which characterizes it. The wording of this Greek citation in 12:18-21 is closer to the Hebrew text of Isaiah 42:1-4 than the common “Septuagint” version is; it is probably an independent translation of the Hebrew used, or perhaps actually composed, by the evangelist.

While the four Servant Songs in Isaiah 42–53 were not distinguished as such before the end of the nineteenth century, it was inevitable that the two passages beginning “Behold my servant” (42:1-4 and 52:13–53:12) should be related one to the other as referring to one and the same person. A citation from the second of these two passages (the fourth Servant Song, as we call it) has already appeared in 8:17 (see also notes on 20:28; 26:28). The final clause of the present citation (12:21) points on to the post-resurrection Gentile mission (cf. 28:19f.)

**Consider** in detail the relevance of the portrayal of the Servant quoted in Matthew 12:18-21 to the facts of our Lord’s ministry.

THE BEELZEBUL CONTROVERSY

MATTHEW 12:22-37

Where did Jesus get his exorcising power? Notice Jesus' very strong warning against speaking ill of the Holy Spirit.

THE AUTHORITIES HAD decided that Jesus' attitude towards the Law (especially the Sabbath commandment) excluded all possibility of his acting by the commission of God. Yet he undoubtedly performed works of mercy and power, like the exorcizing of the demon from the blind and dumb man of 12:22 (cf. Luke 11:14). The common people might find in this further evidence of his divine authority—"Son of David" (12:23) means "Messiah" (cf. John 7:31,42)—but the Pharisees felt compelled to seek the source of his power elsewhere. Their charge that he expelled demons by the power of their prince, Beelzebul (anticipated in 9:34), was refuted by Jesus as self-contradictory (12:25f.). Beelzebul was an ancient Canaanite deity ("lord of the high place" or "master of the house"; cf. 10:25), long since demoted to this inferior status.

"Your sons" (12:27) means "your pupils" (cf. the "sons of the prophets" in 2 Kings 2:3; 6:1, etc). The Pharisees and their pupils exorcized demons; why should not they derive this power from the same source as Jesus? The truth was far otherwise: it was by the power and "Spirit of God" (12:28; Luke 11:20 has "finger of God") that Jesus expelled demons, and this meant two things. It meant that:

1. the kingdom of God had come upon them unawares, for such actions were tokens of its power at work in their midst, invading the kingdom of evil and releasing its prisoners (12:29; cf. Isaiah 49:24f.; 61:1);
2. they were ascribing the work of the Spirit of God to the prince of darkness, and this deliberate shutting their eyes against the light was the one irremediable and therefore unpardonable sin. It was not that they were misled to a false conclusion; people in that condition can be shown their mistake and helped to appreciate the truth. It was rather that, with clear evidence of the Spirit of God at work before their eyes, their presuppositions made them refuse to accept it.

Other sins might be forgiven; even the opponents of the Son of Man could be brought to a better frame of mind; but if people have made up their minds not to accept the witness of the Spirit, what further witness will convince them?

12:33-37 comprise a number of sayings, some of them proverbial, which drive home the point of 12:25-32.

**Consider** The best proof that a man has not sinned against the Holy Spirit is the fear that he has.

THE SIGN OF JONAH  
MATTHEW 12:38-50

Jonah's generation, and the Queen of Sheba, did better than the Pharisees. They repented through listening to God's word, they valued it. And One greater than even Solomon is right here.

THE "SIGN" WHICH the scribes and Pharisees sought must have been something different from the works of healing and exorcism which Jesus performed. These could be explained away as wrought by demonic power; they wanted some sign that would compel recognition that Jesus was sent by God—perhaps such a sign as he refused to give when he was tempted in the wilderness (4:5-7). Such a sign, were it possible, would leave no room for faith. The "sign of Jonah," which alone they would be given (12:39), is interpreted here in terms of our Lord's resurrection (12:40). The Ninevites who repented when Jonah came to them from "the belly of Sheol" (Jonah 2:2) would be in a position to condemn the unbelief of Jesus' contemporaries at the last judgment (12:41), as also would the Queen of Sheba (12:42). The "something greater" than Jonah or Solomon (12:41-42) is the kingdom of God, present in Jesus' ministry (cf. "something greater than the temple" in 12:6).

The parable of 12:43-45 implies that the communities which had benefited temporarily from the ministry of Jesus would be in a worse state afterwards than they were before because they did not respond to it in wholehearted repentance and faith. "This evil generation" (12:45) recalls the

language used in the Old Testament of the wilderness generation (Deuteronomy 1:35, etc); its additional characterization as an “adulterous” generation in 12:39 implies its unfaithfulness to God.

The incident of 12:46-50 emphasizes not only that earthly relationships must give way to the demands of the kingdom of heaven (cf. 10:37) but also that Jesus’ true family comprises all who, like him, do the will of God, and that means in the first instance those who had abandoned the synagogue order and all that went with it in order to form his new community (cf. 12:15). The “brothers” of Jesus are named in 13:55.

**Study** Consider the relationship of Jesus to his mother.

PARABLE OF THE SOWER  
MATTHEW 13:1-9

The parables show some truth about God's reign and how he relates to  
us.

CHAPTER 13 BRINGS together seven “parables of the kingdom,” two of which (the sower and the mustard seed) are paralleled in Mark and Luke and one (the leaven) in Luke, while four (the weeds, the hidden treasure, the pearl and the dragnet) are peculiar to Matthew.

By his statement that Jesus “went out of the house” (13:1) before he spoke in parables, Matthew indicates that the context of the parables—at least of these parables—is the situation following on Jesus’ rejection by the synagogue (cf. 12:15). The “crowds” (13:2) are distinct both from the religious authorities and the disciples; they are still relatively uncommitted.

The first parable (13:3-9) is one of the “parables of growth,” describing an experience familiar to all Galileans. From 13:18 it is commonly called “the parable of the sower”; its main point, however, has to do with the four kinds of soil on which the seed was sown. If the modern reader in the west feels that the waste of so much seed is due to the carelessness of the sower in not avoiding unpromising patches of ground, it must be remembered that in traditional Palestinian procedure sowing precedes plowing. The sower therefore deliberately scatters his seed on the track beaten by the feet of passers-by and on the thorny ground because path and thorns alike are to be plowed up; as for the rocky ground, this was concealed by a thin covering of

soil and would be detected only when the plowshare struck it. So the message of the kingdom had been broadcast indiscriminately, to receptive and unreceptive hearers alike; the fact that some hearers were unreceptive did not mean that the proclamation was in vain, for the fruit that it produced in the lives of the receptive hearers made it abundantly worthwhile.

The threefold figures of 13:8 may indicate the yield in different parts of the good soil: the harvest was plentiful over its whole area, though even more plentiful in some parts than in others. A “hundredfold” crop would certainly be exceptional, but not at all miraculous. Matthew may have thought of the dimensions of the Church of his day by contrast with the small beginnings of Jesus’ ministry, as a result of gospel preaching (cf. Colossians 1:6, “bearing fruit and growing”).

AN OLD TESTAMENT SITUATION REPRODUCED

## MATTHEW 13:10-17

The disciples wondered why Jesus spoke in parables rather than in plain teaching.

IN THESE VERSES repeated reference is made (13:13-14f.) to Isaiah 6:9f., in which Isaiah at his inaugural vision receives his commission as a prophet to his people but is warned that they will pay no attention to him: in fact, all his speaking to them will but serve to make them the more insensitive and unresponsive to his message and the more incapable of enjoying the divine relief which repentance and obedience would have brought. This situation was being reproduced in Jesus' ministry, since the majority of his hearers refused his message. The Aramaic term for "parable" can also mean "riddle" and Jesus' words may have meant that whereas "the secrets (or mysteries) of the kingdom of heaven" were readily accessible to faith such as the disciples had, they remained "riddles" to the unbelieving multitudes. It is a truth of common experience that things which are easily understood by those who approach them in the proper attitude are unintelligible to others. But Matthew, narrating the parables against the background of Jesus' rejection, makes the telling of them the consequence of the multitude's unbelief: "*because* seeing they do not see ... (13:13). The general echo of Isaiah 6:9f. in 13:13 is followed by the formal quotation of the passage in 13:14f., in a form resembling that of the Greek (Septuagint) version of the Old Testament. The allusion to the Old Testament passage in 13:13 is paralleled in the same

context in Mark 4:11f. and Luke 8:10; it is quoted in different contexts in John 12:40 and Acts 28:26f. as an Old Testament “testimony” in advance to Israel’s failure to accept the gospel. The whole saying of Jesus in 13:11ff. is amplified by the inclusion of two utterances from other contexts: 13:12 is appended later to the parable of the talents (25:29), and 13:16f. have a parallel in Luke 10:23f., following on the return of the seventy from their mission. But the two additional utterances help to fix the sense of the accompanying words here.

How blessed are our ears  
That hear this joyful sound,  
Which kings and prophets waited for,  
And sought, but never found!

How blessed are our eyes  
That see this heavenly light!  
Prophets and kings desired long,  
But died without the sight.

The Lord makes bare his arm  
Through all the earth abroad;  
Let all the nations now behold  
Their Savior and their God.

**Compare** In the application of Isaiah 6:9f., compare “because” of Matthew 13:13 with “so that” of Mark 4:12 and Luke 8:10.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FOUR SOILS; PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

MATTHEW 13:18-30

How far do we let the message of God's reign penetrate deep in our lives?

THE INTERPRETATION OF the parable of the sower (13:18-23) is given to the disciples, not to the crowds: it makes the "mystery" plain. The parable is explained in terms of what happens when the "word (message) of the kingdom" is proclaimed, whether by Jesus during his ministry or by his disciples later. Some have their minds diverted from it before they have time to consider it; some are attracted by it until they discover that it may involve them in persecution and other forms of trouble, and then they are "put off" or feel themselves "let down" (the same word as in 11:6); others allow secular interests to stifle the power of the message in their lives. But those who accept it intelligently and hold to it firmly in spite of hardships or counter-attractions produce abundantly the "fruit" of the kingdom; that is, God's will is fulfilled in their lives.

The next parable, Matthew's second "parable of growth" (13:24-30), tells of "weeds" sown by "an enemy" in a man's wheatfield; the "weeds" (KJV and RV "tares"; NEB "darnel") were so like the wheat until each began to ripen that they could not be uprooted at an earlier stage without endangering the good crop. But when the harvest came, there was no difficulty in distinguishing the two. In the rabbinical schools darnel (*Lolium temulentum*) was regarded as degenerate wheat and its Hebrew name was fancifully related to a similar-

sounding word meaning “fornication”; there could therefore be a connection in our Lord’s mind between its appearance in this parable and his reference to an “adulterous generation” in 12:39; 16:4. However that may be, the harvesters bundled up the weeds and burned them before reaping the wheat. Evidently a situation is envisaged in which, for the time being, true “sons of the kingdom” and “mere professors” cannot be told apart.

**Consider** the statement, “Pressing spiritual meaning on all details of a parable is highly dangerous.” How do we determine the limits of interpretation in any given parable?

MUSTARD SEED AND LEAVEN; INTERPRETATION OF THE WEEDS

## MATTHEW 13:31-43

The growth of God's kingdom is phenomenal. The tiny start—one crucified man—was followed by the spread to every corner of the globe.

THE PARABLE OF the mustard seed (13:31f.), Matthew's third "parable of growth," is a reminder that a great enterprise may have very small beginnings; there may be a contrast between the modest following that Jesus secured during his ministry and the wide extent of the Church when this Gospel was published. The "birds of the air" are probably the Gentiles, as in Daniel 4:12-21; where the language is similar. Any reader who is concerned about the botanical exactitude of the phrase "the greatest of shrubs" (13:32) may reflect that the literal rendering is "greater than the herbs" (RV).

The parable of the leaven (13:33) also points to the far-reaching results that may come from small beginnings; in addition, the fact that the woman "hid" the leaven in the meal may suggest the unobtrusive growth of the kingdom, as in Mark's parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29). So Jesus was launching the kingdom of heaven on earth by his ministry: "now let it work!"

When he first the work begun,  
Small and feeble was his day;  
Now the word doth swiftly run,

Now it wins its widening way;

More and more it spreads and grows,  
Ever mighty to prevail,  
Sin's strongholds it now o'erthrows,  
Shakes the trembling gates of hell.

According to 13:34f. parabolic language was (henceforth) Jesus' regular—indeed invariable—mode of addressing the “crowds,” as distinct from his disciples (see comment on 13:2); and in this the evangelist sees the fulfillment of Psalm 78:2, where “parables” is equivalent to “dark sayings” or “riddes” (see comment on 13:13); the emphasis of 13:10-15 is thus underlined.

The interpretation of the parable of the weeds (13:36-43) is (like that of the parable of the sower) given privately to the disciples. If the life-setting of the telling of the parable is the ministry of Jesus, that of its interpretation may be the Christian mission of the evangelist's day. “The field is the world” (13:38), which in Daniel 7:14 is made subject to the Son of Man: it is his “kingdom” (13:41) in a wider sense than the kingdom of the Father (13:43), which is the kingdom of heaven consummated at “the close of the age” (13:39) with the final execution of judgment by the Son of Man (13:41). The dualism between “the sons of the kingdom” and “the sons of the evil one” (13:38) is radical so long as it lasts, but it is brought to an end when at last the Son of Man establishes his universal sovereignty, to which the latter must submit as completely as the former. With 13:43 compare Daniel 12:3.

THE TREASURE, THE PEARL AND THE DRAGNET

MATTHEW 13:44-52

God's reign is a treasure worth handing over everything for.

THE PARABLES OF the hidden treasure (13:44) and the costly pearl (13:45f.) are companion-pieces, each stressing the paramount value of the kingdom of heaven. The fact that the first man hit upon the treasure by chance, while the merchant was engaged in the search for "fine pearls," is probably irrelevant to the main lesson. It is better that a man should let everything else go than that he should miss this, for to enter the kingdom of heaven is to possess eternal life.

The disciples, who had left everything to follow Jesus (cf. 19:27), had learned the lesson of these parables; here and now they were initiated into "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11) and in the new world they would inherit eternal life (cf. 19:28f.). What seemed to outsiders to be folly was in fact the highest wisdom.

The parable of the dragnet (13:47-50) is a companion-piece to the parable of the weeds (13:24-30); in both the separation of the good from the bad is interpreted of the judgment at "the close (consummation) of the age" (13:39,49). In much rabbinical thought of that time the present age would give place to the age to come: the transition from the one to the other would be marked by resurrection and judgment. In some phases of thought the period of the Messiah's reign would intervene before the dawn of the new age. Christian thought modified this scheme in view of the belief that Jesus

was the Messiah; his reign began with his triumph over death and exaltation by God and would continue until his advent, which would accordingly mark the “close of the age” (cf. 28:18-20). But even in his earthly ministry, and still more from his passion onwards (cf. 26:64), the powers of the new age were already at work (cf. 11:5; 14:2; 15:30f.).

Whether in fact the disciples understood “all this” as fully as they supposed (13:51) may be doubted. But the evangelist, whose own self-portrait has been recognized in 13:52, sets forth the ideal for all who would be scholars and teachers in the school of Christ; to them, unlike the unbelievers, the parables would convey the instruction they required concerning the kingdom of heaven.

The source of the instruction was “old” (it went back to the visions and oracles of prophets in earlier days) but the mode of its impartation was “new” (it was interpreted in the light of the coming of the kingdom and fulfillment of the prophecies in the ministry of Jesus). Matthew has much to say in criticism of the Pharisaic “scribes” (exponents of the law), but he holds up the picture of the true scribe for the emulation of his readers.

WITHOUT HONOR AT NAZARETH

## MATTHEW 13:53-58

Familiarity can breed contempt and lack of faith.

THE FORMULA AT the beginning of 13:53, marking the end of a body of discourse, is similar to those in 7:28 and 11:1 (cf. 19:1; 26:1). By “his own country” or “his home town” (13:54) Nazareth is meant (cf. 2:23; Luke 4:16). His fellow townsmen, instead of feeling pride in the fame of a local boy, “took offense” at him (13:57; cf. 11:6; 13:21) because they did not see why a member of a well-known but undistinguished family of the place should gain such a reputation for “wisdom” and “mighty works” (13:54); why should he be better than any of themselves? Since “the carpenter” is not named (13:55), he may no longer have been alive.

The proverb of 13:57 appears in the same context in Mark 6:4 and Luke 4:24; in John 4:44 it seems to refer rather to Judea.

13:58 implies that in spite of their unbelief he did one or two mighty works there; cf. Mark 6:5: “He laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them.” But Matthew probably wishes to show that with his inhospitable reception in Nazareth the record of Galilean rejection is complete.

**Self-examination** The Galileans’ prejudice prevented their looking squarely at all the facts. What are the implications of this for me with regard to personal relationships, local church life, ecumenical movement, etc?

**Consider** There has been no space to discuss different interpretations of the parables from those suggested in the foregoing notes, but consider:

- the view that the mustard-seed portrays the kingdom as ceasing to be the lowly institution which it was to have been in the divine plan and becoming “a great corporation, a visible and comfortable sphere of operations for wicked spirits,” represented by the “birds of the air” (G.H. Lang, *Pictures and Parables*, p.122);
- the view that the parable of the leaven describes the growth of evil within the kingdom (in the light, eg of 1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9);
- the view that the merchant of 13:45f. is our Lord, and that the “pearl of great value” is the Church, or the individual soul.

## DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

### MATTHEW 14:1-12

It's foolish to make a promise you can't limit; when the cost is to someone else's neck, it's grotesque.

“HEROD THE TETRARCH” was Herod Antipas, the youngest and politically ablest son of Herod the Great and the full brother of Archelaus (cf. 2:22); after his father's death in 4 BC he became ruler of Galilee and Peraea and retained this position until he was deposed by the Roman emperor in AD 39. Herodias was not only the wife of his half-brother Philip (a private Roman citizen, not “Philip the tetrarch” of Luke 3:1) but also the daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus. Marriage with a brother's wife was forbidden by Leviticus 18:16 (apart from the “levirate marriage” of Deuteronomy 25:5ff.); it was the more heinous when (as in this case) the brother was still alive. John's denunciation of this illicit match was quite in the Old Testament prophetic tradition, and his influence with the people was such that Herodias could not feel her position secure while he was alive. Herodias' daughter (14:6) was probably not Salome, who by this time was the wife of Philip the tetrarch, but a younger daughter, otherwise unrecorded—“girl” in 14:11 is a diminutive (“little girl”). The “prison” where John was held (cf. 11:2) was the fortress of Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea, as we learn from Josephus, whose narrative of John's imprisonment and death supplements the Gospel account (*Antiquities* 18:116-119).

The events of 14:3-12 took place some months before those of their context; they are recorded here to explain Herod's reference to John's death in 14:2. The account of Jesus' activity, and no doubt of his disciples' Galilean mission (10:1ff.), made him feel that this was John the Baptist all over again; the "powers" of which he spoke were the supernatural powers by which Jesus' mighty works were performed (cf. 12:28).

FIVE THOUSAND FED

## MATTHEW 14:13-21

Jesus loved the people so much he couldn't turn them away.

THE WORDS “WHEN Jesus heard this” (14:13) refer not to the death of John, which was not fresh news, but to Herod's unwelcome interest in Jesus himself, recorded in 14:2. When the evidence of all the Gospels is put together, it appears that the disciples, during their Galilean mission, had at times spoken or acted with more enthusiasm than discretion. It was best therefore to withdraw to a “lonely place” east of the lake, out of Herod's jurisdiction. But even there Jesus was followed by crowds, whose urgent desire was that he would put himself at their head, overthrow their oppressors, and inaugurate a new era of liberty and abundance. To this desire he would not accede, but in his compassion (cf. 9:36) he healed the sick among them and then performed one of the greatest of his mighty works.

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” asked the unbelieving Israelites in Moses' day (Psalm 78:19). They had their answer then; a similar answer is given now. (Another Old Testament parallel is the incident of 2 Kings 4:42-44, in Elisha's day.) Over the produce of the land and the produce of the sea Jesus pronounces the blessing; the traditional Jewish grace before meat takes the form, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.” The lifting of one's eyes heavenward in prayer seems to have been a general practice (its omission is noted as exceptional in Luke 13:13).

The feeding of the 5,000 is narrated by Matthew, as by the other Synoptists, with an economy of language which leaves the reader with the impression that there is much more here than meets the eye. The inner significance is brought out in the dialogue of John 6:26-58. But even in Matthew's account it is possible to read between the lines and see Jesus revealed as the second Moses, the prophet of the end-time (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19), feeding his people in the wilderness, and as the true Messiah, giving them (in symbol at least) the food which sustains the life of the age to come. There is first-century evidence for the Jewish expectation that the gift of manna would be renewed when the Messiah was revealed.

The "twelve baskets" (14:20) correspond, probably intentionally, to the sum-total of the tribes of Israel (as also do the twelve apostles). Matthew alone of the evangelists adds the phrase "besides women and children" (14:21; cf. 15:38). An army of 5,000 men would not have been contemptible, had Jesus been minded to use the multitude thus.

WALKING ON THE SEA

MATTHEW 14:22-36

Peter's impetuous faith rises to a great idea: how about having a midnight walk too?

AFTER THE FEEDING, Jesus *compelled* the disciples to embark and make for the other side of the lake; the Greek word shows unambiguously that compulsion was required. The probable reason was that they were becoming infected with the militant enthusiasm of the crowds. His withdrawal for solitary prayer after he had persuaded the crowds to disperse may suggest that for him this had been a new "temptation in the wilderness" (cf. John 6:15).

14:22-33 record a second storm on the lake, not unlike the earlier one of 8:23-27. The main differences between the two are:

1. that the former voyage was from west to east, the present one from east to west, and
2. that on the former occasion Jesus was with the disciples in the boat throughout, whereas on this occasion he came walking for their relief over the water during the "fourth watch" (i.e. the three hours immediately preceding dawn).

Matthew amplifies his record at this point with an incident in which Peter figures (14:28-32)—the first of three or four such passages peculiar to this Gospel (cf. 16:17-19; 17:24-27; 18:21f.). Perhaps the church in which this

Gospel took shape had a special interest in Peter (the church of Antioch claimed him as one of its apostolic founders; cf. Galatians 2:11!). Peter's sinking through lack of faith, and his restoration by Jesus, is paralleled by the story of his denial (cf. 26:33-35,69-75); together with the whole context of the storm-tossed boat and ensuing calm when Jesus entered it the incident lent itself admirably to practical exhortation. The disciples' worship and confession (14:33) go beyond the earlier language of amazement (8:27); yet perhaps in their relief they hardly knew what they were doing or saying. No such importance is attached to this as to Peter's confession in 16:16 (cf. also 27:54).

**Note** Gennesaret (14:34, modern Ginossar) is the fertile plain north-west of the lake. With the generalized language of 14:35 cf. 4:24; with 14:36 cf. the incident of 9:20f.

**Thought** Peter walked on the water as long as Jesus filled his thoughts.

TRADITIONAL BARRIERS REMOVED

MATTHEW 15:1-20

Jesus never allowed his willingness to avoid confrontation to get in the way of his integrity.

THE BREACH WITH the scribal establishment in Galilee is followed by a breach with representatives of the same establishment in Jerusalem itself, who came (at the invitation, perhaps, of their Galilean colleagues) to assess this disturbing movement and its suspect Leader. “The tradition of the elders” (15:2) was the cumulative corpus of oral law by which the written law of the Old Testament was interpreted, supplemented and applied to the changing circumstances of Jewish life. While its intention was to safeguard the written law, its effect could be to nullify some of its fundamental principles. Jesus interpreted the written law differently—by appealing to the purpose for which this or that commandment was originally given (cf. 12:1ff.; 19:3ff.).

The Jerusalem deputation’s criticism that Jesus’ disciples ignored the ritual hand-washing before eating (cf. Luke 11:38) attracts the counter-criticism that the tradition of the elders, by ruling that the law concerning vows (Deuteronomy 23:21-23) took precedence over reverence to parents, neutralized the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; cf. also Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9). Property vowed to God, it was ruled, must not be used for other purposes, and if, after making such a vow, a man had nothing left for helping his parents in need, that was too bad. (The spirit of Jesus’ criticism was generally accepted among the rabbis by the end of the

first century ad, when the judgment prevailed that, if a vow adversely affected relations between parents and children, it might be annulled.) Such frustration of the divine intention is said (15:8f.) to fulfill Isaiah's denunciation of his contemporaries who paid lip-service to God but failed to render him heart-obedience (Isaiah 29:13). This contradiction between lip and heart calls forth the designation "hypocrites" (15:7; cf. 6:2ff.). Pharisees themselves recognized the presence of a hypocritical element in their fellowship, and the Gospels do not suggest that the designation applied to Pharisees as a whole (cf. 23:13ff.). 15:13 is reminiscent of the parable of the weeds (13:24-30); with 15:14 cf. Luke 6:39 (also Matthew 23:16-24).

But the teaching of 15:10-20 goes farther than a criticism of the oral law; it amounts to an abrogation of the written law, so far as concerns its food-regulations. According to Leviticus 11, various kinds of forbidden meat were "unclean" and "abominable"; Jesus rules that defilement is conveyed not by food but by moral evil in thought, word and deed (including infringements of the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandments). The defilement that matters is ethical, not ritual. But this teaching set at naught not only the Pharisaic ideals of purification but (in principle, at least) the whole basis of separation between Jew and Gentile.

A CANAANITE WOMAN'S FAITH

MATTHEW 15:21-28

How does this woman help us see more of what the gospel means for us?

THE EVANGELIST RELATES this incident against the background of the implied lowering of Jewish-Gentile barriers in 15:10-20. He knows that the Gentile mission proper could not start until after Jesus' death and resurrection (23:19f.; cf. 10:5f.) but he records the healing of this woman's daughter as an exceptional occurrence in the period before his death, like that of the centurion's servant (8:5-13). It has already been suggested that there is symbolical significance in the fact that these two healings were effected at a distance. The woman, called "a Greek, a Syrophenician" in Mark 7:26, is here called a Canaanite: the Tyrians, Sidonians and other Phoenicians were Canaanites who retained their independence for centuries after the other Canaanites lost theirs.

Matthew's readers might recall another Gentile woman in that area whose child was healed by the power of Israel's God in Elijah's day (1 Kings 17:17-24; cf. Luke 4:25f.). It is Matthew alone who records the woman's appeal to Jesus as "Son of David" (15:22; cf. 9:27, but the plea is of doubtful appropriateness on Gentile lips), the disciples' advice to "send her away" (15:23) and his reply (to them, evidently) that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24; cf. 10:6), which suggests that they meant "Do what she wants and let her go."

Jesus was indeed minded to do what she wanted, but with nobler motives than to get rid of a mother's noisy importunity. His further interchange with her was calculated to bring quite an exceptional expression of shrewd and determined faith. By Jewish standards Gentiles were "dogs," unclean creatures; it may be of importance that in Greek (the language in which presumably this conversation was carried on) the word used in 15:26f. is a diminutive which denotes not the pariah dogs out of doors but the puppies indoors, the children's pets. The phrase "their master's table" (15:27) may imply the woman's readiness to take a place of inferiority to Jews (Mark 7:28 speaks of "the children's crumbs"). For the instantaneousness of the cure (15:28) cf. 8:13.

**Meditation** Faith does not query the truth of Christ's statements: it argues from them.

FOUR THOUSAND FED

## MATTHEW 15:29-39

Again Jesus feeds thousands. He doesn't do it to make a point, but simply because his heart goes out to them.

THIS PASSAGE PRESENTS a close parallel to 14:13-22; in both passages great crowds come to Jesus and have their sick folk healed, and then are miraculously fed. The healings described in 15:30f. may recall the prophecy of the new age in Isaiah 35:5f. (cf. 11:5). The glorifying of "the God of Israel" (15:31) suggests that these people were Gentiles.

As for the two feedings, the intention of the two evangelists (Mark and Matthew) who record both was probably discerned by Hilary and Augustine when they interpreted the former as Christ's communication of himself to the Jews, and the latter as his self-communication to the Gentiles. If blessing to the Gentiles is indeed symbolized by the feeding of the 4,000, this narrative comes very aptly here, after the teaching of 15:10-20 and the incident of 15:21-28. The various numbers appearing in the narrative (which constitute its main difference from the feeding of the 5,000) have been allegorized in this sense, including the "three days" of 15:32, as though they reminded the reader that Christ's unrestricted self-communication to the Gentiles could not take place until he was raised from the dead (cf. 28:19). It has even been pointed out that two distinct Greek words for "basket" are used in 14:20 and 15:37, and that the word used in the former passage had a specially Jewish association, whereas that in 15:37 is a quite general word for "fish-creel."

Another verbal variation appears when “blessed” in 14:19 is compared with “having given thanks” in 15:36; the former denotes the ascription of blessing to God, while the latter is *eucharisteō*, but this should not be taken to imply a eucharistic significance, for it is to this day the commonest Greek verb meaning “to thank.”

The whereabouts of “Magadan” (15:39) is as uncertain as that of the parallel Dalmanutha in Mark 8:10; the KJV “Magdala” represents a later attempt to replace an unknown place-name by a familiar one. Some point west of the lake is probably indicated.

**Consider** the view that the bringing of gospel blessings to the Gentiles is anticipated in the three main divisions of chapter 15.

PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES

MATTHEW 16:1-12

Jesus says, “Come on, forget your stomachs and listen: beware of obeying human religious traditions rather than God’s plain word!”

THE REQUEST FOR a “sign” has already been made in 12:38; a “sign from heaven” might have taken the form of a public and conclusive announcement by God. But even such an announcement could have been explained away by those unwilling to accept it. Jesus’ answer was that, as they could foretell tomorrow’s weather by today’s sky, they ought to be able to see the outcome of contemporary trends—eg the disaster to which the increasing mood of rebellion against Rome would inevitably bring the people unless they saw where their true peace lay and changed their temper accordingly. With 16:4 cf. 12:39.

Matthew conjoins Pharisees and Sadducees more frequently than the other New Testament writers (cf. 3:7); thus in 16:1 he adds “Sadducees” to Mark’s “Pharisees” (Mark 8:11) and in 16:6 has “the leaven of the ... Sadducees” in place of “the leaven of Herod” (or “of the Herodians”) of Mark 8:15. The paragraph 16:5-12 is thus tied more closely to 16:1-4. The Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus’ day had little enough in common: the Sadducees rejected the oral tradition of the scribes and insisted on the literal rigor of the written law, and dismissed as a “fond thing vainly invented” the Pharisees’ belief in hierarchies of angels and demons together with their doctrine of bodily resurrection (cf. 22:23ff.; Acts 23:8). But both parties opposed Jesus, though

for different reasons. The Pharisees' opposition to him was essentially theological; while the Sadducees also objected to him on theological grounds (as they objected to the Pharisees too), their main objection to him was political. It was to their party that most of the chief-priestly establishment belonged, and they feared that his activity might upset their *modus vivendi* with Rome and precipitate the downfall of the Jewish commonwealth. "The teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:12) was no unified body of doctrine, but the skepticism of their demand for a sign (16:1), and the hostility which it barely concealed.

Jesus' reply to the disciples in 16:8-11 confirms the impression given by the evangelist that there is more significance than meets the eye in the feeding narratives (14:15-21; 15:32-38); this deeper significance (relating to their Master's person) had thus far escaped them. But new light was about to dawn.

**Meditation** Christians are not meant to despair at their apparent lack of equipment for life's journeys; they travel with One who will provide.

PETER'S CONFESSION

MATTHEW 16:13-20

Suddenly the cumulative effect of recent years came home to Peter:  
“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”

CAESAREA PHILIPPI (MODERN Banyas) was the capital of Philip's tetrarchy, situated at one of the principal sources of the Jordan; Jesus and the disciples were coming to the end of their visit to the territory bordering Galilee on the north and east.

The question of 16:13 is perennially interesting: by the account people give of Jesus they may not add to our knowledge of him but they throw much light on themselves. For his identification with John the Baptist cf. 14:2; for Elijah cf. 11:14; 17:10ff. As for Jeremiah (in this Gospel only), we may recall his language about the Temple (Jeremiah 7:4,11ff.; 26:2ff.; cf. Matthew 21:12f.; 24:2; 27:40a) and his counsel of submission to the Gentile power (Jeremiah 38:17f.; cf. Matthew 5:41; 22:21). But the personal question of 16:15 was the crucial one. The disciples may have thought of him as the Messiah earlier (cf. John 1:41), but Jesus had shown himself so unlike the Messiah of common expectation that they might well have changed their minds. Peter's declaration that he was, nevertheless, the Messiah, implied that the Messiah concept was being modified in his thinking into conformity with what Jesus actually was and did and taught. At this stage “the Son of the living God” may have meant little more than that Jesus was the Anointed One to whom, in Psalm 2:7, God says “You are my Son.”

Jesus was filled with joy: that Peter, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, should have reached this conviction was a proof of divine illumination (16:17). Now he could make a beginning and found the new Israel (16:18). The resemblance between “Peter” and “rock” in Greek (*Petros* and *petra*) was even closer in the Aramaic in which these words were probably spoken (*Kepha ... kepha*); cf. French: “tu es *Pierre* et ... sur cette *pierre* je bâtirai mon *église*”) (Segond).

It is not Peter in his own right, but Peter the confessor, that is the rock. The Church to be built on this rock is the company of those who share Peter’s confession. “The powers of death”—(literally) “the gates of Hades”; the realm of the dead is pictured as a prison-house whose gates will never close on the new community so that it is irretrievably extinguished. The “keys” (16:19) are given to the chief steward as his symbol of authority (cf. Isaiah 22:22). The binding and loosing (forbidding and permitting in rabbinic idiom) may point here to the declaration of forgiveness in the gospel (with the corollary of judgment for the impenitent) and the exercise of Church discipline (with the assurance of ratification in the heavenly court); cf. 18:18. Later we see Peter opening the “door of faith” to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14ff.,38ff.) and to Gentiles in Caesarea (Acts 10:34ff.). For the preservation of secrecy (16:20) cf. 8:4; 9:30; 12:16.

FIRST PREDICTION OF THE PASSION

MATTHEW 16:21-28

Impulsive Peter promptly imagines himself as a prophet: a sure way to become Satan's mouthpiece.

PETER'S CONFESSION MARKS a watershed in Jesus' ministry: "from that time" he began to speak to the disciples about his impending passion. They had begun to fill the traditional concept of the Messiah with new meaning, but they were not prepared for the radical reinterpretation which Jesus now began to impart to them. A suffering Messiah was a contradiction in terms—so much so that Peter expostulated with his Master for speaking like this (16:22), and the disciple who had just been greeted as the recipient of a divine revelation was now reproved as an adversary ("Satan") and a hindrance (16:23). In Peter's well-meant remonstrance Jesus recognized a repetition of the wilderness temptation—the temptation to achieve his messianic destiny by some other path than that of the Father's will (cf. 4:8-10). Peter's reaction was natural: he thought of Jerusalem as the place of the Messiah's enthronement, not of his humiliation. In the event, the humiliation and the enthronement were bound up together, but this was beyond the disciples' comprehension at present. The warning of what lay ahead at Jerusalem had to be repeated at frequent intervals (cf. 17:22f.; 20:18f.).

If suffering and death was to be their Master's lot, the disciples would have to reassess their own position. They might well be involved in his fate. To "take up one's cross" (16:24) was no mere figure of speech for some

minor inconvenience: a man who took up his cross was on his way to be crucified, and had “denied” himself in the sense of bidding a last farewell to all personal interests, hopes and ambitions (cf. 10:38f.). But the assessment should be made not by worldly standards but in the light of the day of final review and reward. In the light of that day, the man who lost his life by following Jesus would gain life eternal; the man who saved his life by turning back would incur total loss, even if he gained the whole world in the meanwhile. The Son of Man’s coming in judgment (16:27) is the occasion foreseen in Daniel 7:13f. But 16:28 need not mean that this coming would take place in the lifetime of some standing by: there might be earlier occasions for the manifestation of the Son of Man’s authority (cf. 24:30; 26:64); and the language of this verse is Matthew’s interpretation of “the kingdom of God coming with power” of Mark 9:1, which would be the sequel to the Son of Man’s passion (we may think of Pentecost; cf. Acts 1:8a).

**Note** If we consider the literal sense of the word translated “hindrance” in 16:23, we may see the “stone” image being carried on from 16:18: the disciple who has been hailed as a foundation stone is now described as a stumbling stone.

THE TRANSFIGURATION  
MATTHEW 17:1-8

Jesus is preparing his disciples for the close of his life and work on earth.

THE TRANSFIGURATION IS not the fulfillment of the promise of 16:28 (one does not say of something due to happen within the week that it will take place within the lifetime of some hearers), but it anticipates that fulfillment in the form of a vision. The Son of Man was manifested in glory before the three disciples' eyes. They might not have been able to say whether they themselves were in the body or out of the body (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:2f.) but they were enabled to see in advance their Master's "body of glory" (cf. Philippians 3:21).

There are some striking resemblances between this narrative and those of the resurrection appearances. Jesus had told them of his impending death and resurrection; this experience was calculated to confirm the significance of his words and show them something of the new age which these events would inaugurate. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, the old order now being superseded by the new (cf. 11:13). The passing of both of them from earthly life had been attended with mystery (Deuteronomy 34:5f.; 2 Kings 2:11f.), and something of that mystery still attaches to them as they reappear to bear final witness to him to whom law and prophecy alike pointed forward. Now he has come, and they say, in effect, "This is he!" before

receding into the background. They have said their say, but now, says God, “This is my beloved Son, ... *listen to him*” (17:5).

To the announcement of the heavenly voice at the baptism (3:17) there is now added the exhortation referring to the promised prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). All that God has to say is embodied in him. The “bright cloud” (17:5) from which the voice spoke bespeaks the presence of the divine glory, the *shekinah*. At the end of Jesus’ ministry, as previously on its threshold, his Father’s approbation is expressed: with this assurance he will set out for Jerusalem.

For Peter and his companions, this was the moment of truth. If only they could hold it, and prevent the vision from dissolving! But the whole point of the vision meant that they could not stay on the holy mount, good as it was to be there. They must descend to the plain and take the Jerusalem road: not until the Son of Man had accomplished his “exodus” there (Luke 9:31) could the kingdom come with power and glory.

**Note** The RSV “it is well that we are here” (17:4) rightly avoids the self-regarding tone of the KJV “it is good for us to be here”; Peter’s meaning may be: “It is good for you and Moses and Elijah that we are here, because we can erect booths for the three of you.”

## LITTLE FAITH

### MATTHEW 17:9-20 (21)

Nothing that is within Christ's will is out of the reach of faith.

AS ON OTHER occasions, secrecy is imposed: not until the resurrection of the Son of Man would the three disciples understand the vision well enough to speak about it intelligently to others (17:9). The question about Elijah (17:10) was prompted by that prophet's appearance in the vision. The fulfillment in John the Baptist of the prophecy that Elijah would be sent to discharge a special ministry before the coming of the great day (Malachi 4:5f.) has been mentioned already in 11:14. Here it is expounded in greater detail: what the first Elijah's enemies attempted in vain to do to him (1 Kings 19:2) the second Elijah's enemies had succeeded in doing to him (14:3ff.). In John's death Jesus saw his own foreshadowed (17:12).

From the exalted experience of anticipated glory the company now returned to the suffering and frustration of everyday life. The "faithless and perverse generation" (17:17) must be understood here as a reference to the disciples, who for all the length of their companionship with Jesus showed themselves still unable to exercise the authority he had given them (10:1). The phrase is drawn from Deuteronomy 32:5, where the wilderness generation is thus described (cf. 12:45; 16:4). As with several other healing incidents in Matthew, this account of seven verses is greatly compressed as compared with the Markan account of sixteen (Mark 9:14-29). "Jesus rebuked him" (17:18): ie the demon that possessed the epileptic boy. The

purpose of the story is to emphasize the all-importance of faith; the “little faith” of the disciples has been reproved before (cf. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31).

The point about the “grain of mustard seed” (17:20) is illuminated by the parable of 13:31f. “This mountain” (17:20) in the present context would be the mount of transfiguration (traditionally Mount Tabor, though some have thought of Mount Hermon); when the saying recurs in 21:21 the reference is to the Mount of Olives. 17:21 (KJV; cf. RSV note) is not an original part of this Gospel: it was added from a later form of the text of Mark 9:29.

**Thought** Faith: it is not the size of the mustard seed that matters but its ability to grow.

THE TEMPLE TAX

MATTHEW 17:22-27

Jesus didn't have to pay the temple tax—it wasn't the custom for kings' families to pay tax, and Jesus and Peter were children of the great King.

THIS FURTHER PREDICTION of the passion (17:22f.) was calculated to remind the disciples of the gravity of their situation: the first prediction (16:21) might well have begun to fade from their memories, especially the memories of the three who had witnessed the transfiguration (despite their Master's words in 17:12).

The incident of 17:24-27, recorded in this Gospel only, would have been valued by Jewish Christians in the period between AD 30 and 70, when they considered whether or not they should pay the annual tax of half a shekel, contributed by every male Jew between the ages of twenty and fifty for the maintenance of the Jerusalem temple. Their Master's action served them as a precedent: they were no longer under a divinely imposed obligation to pay it—with the coming of the kingdom “something greater than the temple is here” (12:6) and they were “sons of the kingdom” (13:38)—but out of consideration for their fellow Jews, who would be scandalized if they withheld payment, they should continue to do so as a voluntary courtesy.

The fish, which is incidental to the main point of the story, is presumably the *musht* or “comb” fish of the Lake of Galilee, which is prone to have glittering objects in its gullet; the coin in its mouth was actually a stater or

Tyrian tetradrachm, equivalent in value to a Jewish shekel and therefore sufficient to pay the temple tax for two.

THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM

MATTHEW 18:1-14

Do you welcome and respect children and the childlike?

THE “DISCOURSE” CONTAINED in this chapter consists of a number of Jesus’ sayings to the disciples dealing with various aspects of fellowship in the kingdom of heaven. The disciples appear to have been repeatedly concerned about the achievement of greatness in the kingdom. Here Jesus’ answer to their question, showing that true greatness in the kingdom consists in true humility, is illustrated by the example of a child, too young to have lost the unassuming truthfulness of infancy. Far from being greatest in the kingdom, they cannot even enter it unless they change their outlook completely and abandon all thought of self-seeking (18:1-4). To “turn” (18:3) or “be converted” (KJV) is not to be understood in the restricted sense which the latter term has acquired in popular evangelical parlance.

Our Lord’s practical identification of a child’s well-being with his own (18:5; cf. 25:40,45), coupled with his warning of the sure damnation incurred by teaching a child to sin (18:6), leads on to a further warning against all sources of temptation to sin (18:7-9; cf. 5:29f.).

The “hell of fire” (18:9) is Gehenna, as in 5:22-29f. The dignity of children is emphasized by the statement that their guardian angels (or angelic counterparts; cf. Acts 12:15) have direct access to the presence of God (cf. Luke 1:19; Revelation 8:2); their helplessness calls forth a special degree of divine interest and protection (18:10). “Little ones,” said one of the rabbis,

“receive the presence of the Shekinah” (cf. 19:14). The lesson is further inculcated by the parable of the hundredth sheep (18:12f.), appearing here in a different context from that of Luke 15:3-7. As for 18:14, it has been well described as “a text to display in the nursery of every Christian home” (Sir Robert Anderson, *The Entail of the Covenant*, p.18).

BROTHERLY BEHAVIOR

MATTHEW 18:15-22

Much church living could be transformed if people sensitively obeyed 18:15. Don't ask the minister or pastor or tell the gossips; win the offender!

THESE VERSES PRESENT US with a short “manual of discipline” regulating the conduct of Jesus’ followers one to another. In 18:15 the words “against you” are probably a later addition (cf. NEB): it is the duty of a disciple who sees his brother commit a fault to try to put the matter right privately or, failing that, in the company of one or two others. (The reference to “two or three witnesses” in 18:16 is a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15). To ignore the fault would be unfair both to the offender and to the community as a whole (cf. Leviticus 19:17 for an Old Testament precedent and Galatians 6:1; James 5:19f. and 1 John 5:16 for New Testament applications of the principle). But publicity must be avoided if at all possible. Only if the offender remains obdurate must the community at large be informed.

The “church” in 18:17 is (unlike that of 16:18) a local company of disciples. The situation envisaged is one that would arise after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Refusal to accept the verdict of the Church amounted to self-exclusion from its fellowship. If we reflect on Jesus’ attitude to Gentiles and tax collectors, we may conclude that the Church would consider it had a duty to win this self-constituted outsider back into its communion. But the verdict of the Church, reached in accordance with Jesus’ teaching, was

assured of heavenly validation (18:18); the authority conferred on Peter in 16:19 is here extended to the whole body of disciples.

The mention of “two or three witnesses” (18:16) is followed by an assurance given to “two or three” united in prayer in Jesus’ name: their concerted petition will be granted by God, for Jesus himself is among them (18:19f.). The reference is to his unseen presence after Easter rather than to his visible presence during his ministry, when he could be only in one place at one time. We may compare the dictum of an early-second-century rabbi: “When two sit and the words of the Law are between them, the Shekinah rests between them.” It would be incredible, if it were not confirmed by experience, that any single group should try to monopolize the Lord’s assurance of 18:20, which was intended for all his disciples.

Peter’s question about the limits of forgiveness (18:21) suggests (what is perfectly true) that to forgive the same person seven times would be a mark of exceptional patience (cf. Luke 17:3f.). Jesus’ reply, counselling unlimited forgiveness (18:22), perhaps expresses a deliberate antithesis to the “seventy-sevenfold” (or seventy times sevenfold) vengeance of Lamech’s song (Genesis 4:24). The disciples must emulate their heavenly Father’s all-embracing forgiveness (cf. 5:43-48; 6:12).

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT  
MATTHEW 18:23-35

If we know God's love and compassion, we would begin to live like this.

THE NUMBER OF parables which have their scene set in a royal court reminds us that Herod Antipas had his palace at Sepphoris, some four or five miles distant from Nazareth, until in AD 22 he built himself a new capital at Tiberias, by the lakeside. The happenings at his court would be the common talk among Galilean countryfolk and fishermen.

The present parable enforces Jesus' words to Peter about the brotherly duty of unlimited forgiveness; it might also be regarded as an expansion of 6:14f. The first servant, whose debt ran into millions, must be envisaged as the king's grand vizier: no other "servant" could have incurred so colossal a debt. Nor would the confiscation of all his property come anywhere near defraying the sum. His promise to make repayment in full (18:26) was a mere form of words: he could never have done it. This his master knew full well, but in his compassion he cancelled the whole amount. The forgiven servant showed immediately how little he shared his master's merciful nature by enforcing the law against his fellow servant who owed him a trifling sum (18:28-30). On hearing of this, the king revoked his cancellation of the enormous debt, and treated him as he had treated his fellow servant. Lest it should be said, "But this is just a detail in the story; God would not do that,"

Jesus emphasizes that this is precisely what God will do to any unforgiving servant of his.

If we find it difficult to accommodate 18:35 within our theological system, we should modify our system to make room for it rather than try to make 18:35 mean something different from what it says.

“So ends the fellowship section of the Gospel, and one of the greatest chapters in the New Testament” (J.A. Findlay).

## RULING ON DIVORCE

# MATTHEW 19:1-12

To cure disease you have to understand the healthy body; so when asked about divorce, Jesus spoke about marriage.

OUR LORD'S RULING on the divorce debate, which has already been recorded in 5:31f., is repeated here in reply to the Pharisees' question. Now it is made clear that his ruling is based on an appeal to first principles: the divine purpose in marriage is implicit in the creation ordinances. Two passages are quoted, the last clause of Genesis 1:27 and the narrator's comment in Genesis 2:24, following on the account of the formation of Eve—and note that this comment is treated as something "said" by God, since it is part of Holy Writ. From these passages the inference is drawn that marriage is an institution of God, designed to be permanent, and not to be annulled by man. To the natural question why in that case divorce is permitted in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1), the answer is given that this was a concession to "hardness of heart" but a departure from the Creator's ordinance, which Jesus reaffirms. The words "except for unchastity" (19:9) have the same technical force as the similar exceptive clause in 5:32.

In the social context of that time and place, Jesus' ruling had the further effect of redressing an inequitable balance in favor of women. The disciples' reaction (19:10), expressing a thoroughly male point of view, suggests that they felt his ruling bore hardly on men, by depriving them of the right of divorce (a right which Jewish women did not share).

Those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (19:12) are those who have remained unmarried in order to devote themselves with undivided mind to the service of God, especially in view of the impending crisis (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:26-35). The unmarried members of the Essene orders provided a contemporary example, which in due course was to be abundantly paralleled among Christians.

**Consider** Can the ruling on marriage and divorce in 19:3-9 be applied without modification today

- to “Christian civilization” in general;
- to committed church members?

CHILDREN AND THE RICH YOUNG MAN

MATTHEW 19:13-22

Sadly, this man preferred his money to Christ. What are we in danger of choosing in preference to Christ?

WHATEVER THE HISTORICAL relation may have been between the two incidents recorded in these verses—the blessing of the children (19:13-15) and the conversation with the rich young man (19:16-22) their juxtaposition in the Synoptic narrative in the setting of “Judea beyond the Jordan” (19:1), ie Peraea, is deliberate. They illustrate respectively the simple, childlike confidence which is an indispensable qualification for the kingdom of heaven (cf. 13:1-4) and the attachment to material interests which keeps one out. Those who brought the children may have felt that the touch of the Prophet of Nazareth would in itself impart a blessing to them: Jesus’ response probably points to children’s unsophisticated readiness to ask and receive, as an example of the attitude his disciples should have towards their heavenly Father (cf. 7:7-11).

In 19:16-17 there is a significant change in the relation of the term “good” from that in Mark 10:17f. and Luke 18:18f. “Eternal life” is practically synonymous with “the kingdom of heaven”; to enter one is to enter the other (cf. Mark 9:43-45 with 47). For the keeping of the commandments as the way to life cf. Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 30:15-20. Those enumerated in 19:18-19 form the second table of the decalogue, man’s duty to his neighbor, summed up in the second of the two great commandments (Leviticus 19:18;

cf. Matthew 22:39). The young questioner, like Paul, could honestly claim to be blameless in respect of legal righteousness (cf. Philippians 3:6); yet he was conscious of the need for something more. It is one thing to observe a series of specific precepts which are mainly negative; it is another to fulfill perfectly the all-embracing injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself. For the sense of "perfect" (19:21) cf. 5:48. Even the selling of his goods and giving the proceeds to the poor would not exhaust the meaning of the law of love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:3), but it would be a first step towards fulfilling it and would show that the man was in earnest. Jesus knew just where his readiness needed to be tested, and he proved unequal to the test. (For "treasure in heaven" cf. 6:20.) The young man's sorrow was genuine enough; Jesus' probing words revealed to him the limitations of his eagerness to be utterly devoted to the doing of God's will. If the incident makes us also feel a bit uncomfortable, good; that is what it is intended to do.

THE CAMEL AND THE NEEDLE'S EYE

MATTHEW 19:23-30

Jesus vividly illustrates the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom.

OUR LORD'S ASSURANCE that "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (19:23) is rarely taken seriously, despite the solemnity with which it is introduced. Even at the time he found it necessary to drive it home by means of a vivid metaphor (paralleled in rabbinical teaching), and we must not make it a little easier for the rich man by supposing that the "needle's eye" is a small gate within the large city gate or that he meant "cable" and not "camel." The disciples' surprised question (19:25) may have been prompted by their remembrance that in much of the Old Testament riches are a reward for piety and a token of divine blessing (cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Psalm 128, by contrast with those later texts in which "poor" and "righteous" are almost synonymous). Entry into the kingdom is difficult for all, but especially for those attached to material encumbrances: only with divine aid can it be achieved (19:26). But the apostles had given up all such things to follow Jesus: for them not only entry into the kingdom but high responsibility in the kingdom was reserved. The reference to "twelve thrones" in 19:28, which must not be dissociated from the lesson of 18:1-4 and 20:25-28, implies the establishment of the believing community or "Israel of God" (cf. Galatians 6:16) in the "new world" or "regeneration" (to be inaugurated by Jesus' death and resurrection)—the "Church" of 16:18—in

which the apostles would exercise the authority promised in 16:19; 18:18. For this use of “the twelve tribes” cf. James 1:1; see also Luke 22:28-30. The number of the apostles (cf. 10:1f.) is significant in this regard. For the Son of Man’s “glorious throne” cf. 25:31.

Moreover, all (not only the apostles) who gave up possessions and earthly ties for Jesus’ sake would “inherit eternal life” and be abundantly recompensed—though the recompense was not one which by worldly reckoning would make the sacrifice worthwhile. The assessment in the light of the coming Day is implied here, as it is expressed in 16:25-27: then it will be seen that the first (by secular standards) are last (by the standards of the kingdom) and vice versa (cf. 20:16).

LAST COME, FIRST SERVED!

## MATTHEW 20:1-16

Is the landowner mean to the early birds or generous to the latecomers,  
and has he a right to do as he pleases?

THIS PARABLE MAY be placed here because it illustrates another aspect of the principle that the “first will be last, and the last first” (19:30; cf. 20:16). Its details reflect the high unemployment resulting from the desperate economic state of Palestine in New Testament times. At harvest or (as here) vintage time there was always a large pool of potential casual labor. The work began immediately after sunrise; the third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours (20:3-6) were about 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 and 5 p.m.; the wages were paid (20:8) when work ceased at sunset (about 6 p.m.). The fact that a denarius (a silver Roman coin roughly equivalent to 5p or a dime) was the daily wage for a casual laborer illuminates other references to money in the Gospels. We can readily understand the heightened hopes and consequent disappointment of those who had toiled for twelve hours, enduring “the burden of the day and the scorching heat”—language bound to excite the sympathy of all who have had experience of unshaded noonday in a Palestinian summer.

If the story had been told for its own sake, its moral might be that the men who, through no fault of their own, had been idle for the greater part of the day, required a living wage to support themselves and their families as much as the others did: “to each according to his need” (cf. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*). But it is introduced as a parable of “the kingdom of heaven”; what is

the point of comparison? Since it is not explicitly stated, we cannot be sure. The complaint of 20:11f. might remind us of the scribes and Pharisees, who disapproved of Jesus' proclamation of pardon and acceptance to doubtful characters whose record of righteous achievement bore no comparison with theirs. But perhaps the lesson was intended more particularly for the disciples, lest they should claim special merit for having "left everything" to follow Jesus (19:27) and object to sharing the rewards of the kingdom with others whose commitment appeared to be neither so continuous nor so unreserved. In any case, the chief emphasis of the parable is laid on the householder's generosity. Those hired at daybreak had agreed to accept a denarius as their wage; those hired later agreed to be paid at his discretion (20:4). "It is fortunate for most of us that God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice and sound economics. ... God's love cannot be portioned out in quantities nicely adjusted to the merits of individuals. There is such a thing as the twelfth part of a denar. It was called a *pondion*. But there is no such thing as a twelfth part of the love of God" (T.W. Manson).

**Thought** What is my real motive for service?

ON THE JERUSALEM ROAD

## MATTHEW 20:17-28

Jesus says, aim for maximum service if you want to be ambitious.

OUR LORD'S THIRD prophecy of his passion is more detailed than the preceding ones (16:21; 17:22f.); his being handed over to the Gentiles (ie the Romans) for execution is explicitly mentioned for the first time, although it may already have been implied in the reference to the cross (10:38; 16:24). They are now on the way to Jerusalem, and the twelve must have the imminence of the crisis impressed upon them. But the fact that here (as in Mark 10:35ff.) the incident of James and John's request follows immediately suggests that, in the evangelists' opinion, the disciples' minds were not yet sufficiently attuned to their Master's to appreciate the solemnity of his warning.

The part played in the incident by Salome (cf. 27:56 with Mark 15:40) is peculiar to Matthew's account. Mothers are sometimes more ambitious for their sons than the sons themselves. The lesson of greatness in the kingdom (cf. 18:1-4) was hard to learn. Had James and John in due course been crucified on either side of Jesus instead of the two robbers, their request would have been in a fair way to being realized; but such distinction as this was far from their thoughts. The "cup" of 20:22 was their Master's passion (cf. 26:39); they professed themselves ready to share it, and in a sense they did, as Jesus assured them they would, but long after he himself endured it (cf. Acts 12:2 and possibly Revelation 1:9). As Jesus himself was subject to his Father's good pleasure, so his followers must be content to accept those

places in the kingdom which the Father assigns them. The indignation of the ten was due, not to the impropriety of James and John's request in itself, but to the feeling that they had stolen a march on them: the honor was one which each would have coveted for himself. So once again they had to be taught the secret of true greatness: their pattern must not be the Gentile rulers who command service but the Son of Man who gives lowly service. And the place of honor is not a reward or compensation for the service: the service *is* the honor. Is there any greater honor than to be allowed to serve God—and our fellow men? So the Son of Man rendered the lowliest and simultaneously the noblest service of all by becoming “a ransom for many.” It is as his people's Savior that he receives highest honor, and the shameful cross to which he was fastened has become the object of his people's chief glorying (Galatians 6:14). The language in which this service is described is reminiscent of the oracle of the Servant who gave his life as a “reparation offering” and thus “bore the sin of many” (Isaiah 53:10-12).

“Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood;  
Sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Hallelujah! what a Savior!”

Philip Bliss

BLIND MEN OF JERICHO  
MATTHEW 20:29-34

How much do we make time for people, especially those in deep distress?

THE LAST LAP of the journey to Jerusalem was the road from Jericho, leading up the Wadi Qelt. On either side of the lower reaches of the wadi lay New Testament Jericho, a new foundation built by Herod the Great as his winter residence, in imitation of contemporary Roman town-planning and architecture. Its site (Tulul Abu el-Alayiq) was about a mile south of Old Testament Jericho (Tell es-Sultan).

The incident of 20:29-34 is Matthew's counterpart to the narrative of the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; however, it features two blind men where Mark (cf. Luke 18:35-43) has only one. (For a similar Matthaean duplication cf. the two Gadarene demoniacs of 8:28ff. alongside the one of Mark 5:1ff. and Luke 8:26ff. But such duplication is not restricted to Matthew; compare the "two men" of Luke 24:4 with the "young man" of Mark 16:5 and the "angel" of Matthew 28:2.) A further point to consider here is the close resemblance between the present incident and the earlier one of 9:27-31; here, however, there is no stern warning not to broadcast the act of healing, for it was performed in full view of the "great crowd" of Galilean pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the Passover. As on the earlier occasion (cf. also 15:22), Jesus does not refuse to be called "Son of David," though he is not recorded as laying claim to the title himself. One old Syriac manuscript

makes the blind men say: “Lord, let our eyes be opened and let us see thee” (20:33). The incident illustrates the perseverance of the blind men in the face of discouragement, the compassion of Jesus, and the power of God which inhered in his word and touch. On receiving their sight, they not unnaturally joined the others who were following him up to Jerusalem.

## THE ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

### MATTHEW 21:1-11

The steep ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem has almost been completed.

JESUS AND THE pilgrim crowd have reached the Mount of Olives, which lies to the east of the city. Bethphage (the place of young figs) was a village near Bethany, on the eastern side of the mount, barely two miles from Jerusalem. There Jesus had made advance arrangements for his entry into the city. Matthew's mention of two animals (21:2-7), over against the other evangelists' one (Mark 11:2ff.; Luke 19:30ff., John 12:14), is "duplication" of a different kind from that in the preceding paragraph; here he emphasizes the express fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, in which "an ass" and "a colt, the foal of an ass" appear in synonymous parallelism (21:5). The other Gospels make it plain that it was on the unbroken colt that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The introductory formula of 21:4 in this instance implies Jesus' deliberate plan to give effect to the oracle—probably to see what the response of the Jerusalemites would be to his peaceful approach. It was not encouraging.

It was the pilgrims thronging around Jesus who uttered jubilant shouts—perhaps with more enthusiasm than understanding (21:9). "Hosanna" ("save now," "give victory now") is the festal cry of Psalm 118:25; "hosanna to the son of David" is as much as to say "God save the (messianic) King." The words of welcome ("blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord") come

from the same context (Psalm 118:26). The phrase “in the highest” is a substitute for the name of God: “Save now, (thou who dwellest) in the highest (place).” But when the people of Jerusalem ask the cause of all the commotion, the crowds claim nothing more for Jesus than that he is the prophet of Nazareth: Prophet or King, would the city have him on his own terms? Would it recognize him as the Shepherd of Israel, ready to “devote” himself for his people’s salvation, or would it prefer others who would involve it in ruin?

## ACTIVITY IN JERUSALEM

### MATTHEW 21:12-22

Jesus shows his anger at seeing God's house of prayer desecrated into a commercial racket.

THE EXPULSION OF the traders from the temple (i.e. from the "court of the Gentiles") is best understood as a prophetic action like those of Old Testament times in which a message is vividly driven home. Jesus' attitude to the temple of his day is similar to Jeremiah's attitude to Solomon's temple (cf. 16:14). His words of rebuke are partly drawn from Jeremiah 7:11 ("Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?") and partly from Isaiah 56:7 ("My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples"). The bazaars may have been installed there temporarily but, useful as they probably were to many visitors, they were occupying ground which ought to have been used for the worship of God. The protest was directed against the temple authorities, and they fully recognized this (cf. 21:23).

Whereas the rule had been laid down in the days of David that "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house" (2 Samuel 5:8), it is reversed when "great David's greater Son" appears (that the rule was not enforced for the outer court is evident from Acts 3:2). The use of the temple area for healing, and the children's taking up of the Galilean pilgrims' shout of greeting, scandalized the authorities, who invited Jesus' co-operation in moderating what they regarded as disorder; but he invoked Psalm 8:1f. in the

children's defense. The implication of 21:17 is probably that he spent each night during this Jerusalem visit in Bethany (cf. 26:6).

The withering of the fig tree (21:18ff.), which is here telescoped into a short time (by comparison with Mark 11:12-14,20ff.), is a further prophetic action, in which the tree (cf. Luke 13:6-9) may well represent Jerusalem, so unresponsive to Jesus' overtures (cf. also 21:43). The fact that at this time of year it bore only leaves, without any *taqsh* (the precursor of coming figs), showed it to be fruitless. To the disciples the incident is made the basis of a lesson on the power of faith (cf. 17:20). In the present setting "this mountain" (21:21) must be Olivet; the fact that Olivet was to be the center of a major convulsion on the day of the Lord, according to Zechariah 14:4, stamps the setting as authentic and suggests the interpretation: "If only you have sufficient faith, the new age will be inaugurated sooner than you think."

**Consider** What does the cleansing of the temple signify

- for the individual (1 Corinthians 6:19)?
- for the church (1 Corinthians 3:16)?

“BY WHAT AUTHORITY?”

## MATTHEW 21:23-32

Unbelief blinds us and steals the truth from us.

WHILE JESUS SPENT the nights in Bethany, he spent the days teaching in the temple area. The “chief priests and the elders” would be members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel (cf. 26:3,47; 27:1-3,12-20); in particular, the ultimate responsibility for maintaining order within the sacred precincts lay with the captain of the temple, who was a member of one of the chief-priestly families and ranked next to the high priest. Hence the question of 21:23, which related not only to his teaching and healing (21:15) but perhaps especially to his expulsion of the traders (21:12). But what answer would have satisfied them? If spiritual authority—the kind of authority by which the prophets spoke and acted—is not recognized as self-authenticating, no amount of argument, not even a sign from heaven (cf. 12:38; 16:1), will validate it. The questioners perhaps suspected that he did these things because he claimed to be the Messiah, but at this stage he does not voice such a claim. Instead, he asks them what they thought of the authority of John the Baptist—was it derived from God or self-assumed? The true answer, of course, was “From God”—and even more evidently this was the true answer regarding the authority of him whose forerunner John was. But they would not commit themselves to this course of reasoning and so their question remained unanswered.

The next episode, in which Jesus asks the opening question, also involves an appeal to John. (The variant, but inferior, reading in 21:31, where the answer given is “The last,” may point to a society in which politeness is more important than obedience.) John’s “way of righteousness” (21:32) required “fruit that befits repentance” (3:8), and this was produced by those who at first said “I will not” (the tax collectors and harlots) rather than the religious leaders who undertook to do God’s will but did not carry out their undertaking. Is there a counterpart to this situation in our own religious life?

PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD  
MATTHEW 21:33-46

Every Jew knew that the Old Testament called his nation a vine.

AS IN ISAIAH'S parable, so here "the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting" (Isaiah 5:7). The rulers of the people could not miss the point; they and their predecessors were the tenants (21:45). The "servants" (21:34-36) are the prophets (cf. 23:37), and the significance of the owner's sending his son (21:37) as a last resort cannot be overlooked. Of all the Gospel parables, this one (exceptionally) comes nearest to being an allegory, in which there is a series of correspondences between the successive details of the narrative—the "parables" (plural) of 21:45—and the reality to which it points. The killing of the son after he is cast out of the vineyard (21:39; contrast the order in Mark 12:8) reflects Jesus' being put to death outside Jerusalem. By the "other tenants" (21:41), ie the "nation producing the fruits" of the vineyard (21:43), the Church, the new Israel, is intended; its leaders (cf. 19:28) will replace the present rulers in Israel from whom the kingdom is to be taken away. The reference to "fruits" makes the same point as the fig-tree incident of 21:19. The "miserable death" of the tenants (21:41) may anticipate the disaster of AD 70.

The quotation in 21:42 (Psalm 118:22f.) is from the same festal psalm which provided the acclamation of 21:9; it is treated as a messianic "testimony" repeatedly in the New Testament (cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7),

together with the other “stone” passages (Isaiah 8:15; Daniel 2:34f.) alluded to in the doubtful 21:44 (RSV footnote). What is said of the multitude’s assessment of Jesus in 21:46 echoes their assessment of John according to 21:26. In both places the multitudes are probably the pilgrim crowds rather than the residents in Jerusalem; at Passover the visitors might outnumber the residents by three to one.

PARABLE OF THE MARRIAGE FEAST

MATTHEW 22:1-14

Only by Christ's righteousness, made ours through faith in him, are we clothed properly.

THIS PARABLE IS superficially similar to the parable of the "great banquet" in Luke 14:16-24, but its meaning is closer to that of the vineyard in Matthew 21:33-43. The proclamation of the kingdom of heaven is compared to a royal command, sent out to people already invited in advance to a marriage feast at the palace, to come and take their places, since the feast was now about to begin. (Since no emphasis is laid on the king's son in 22:2, he need not be allegorized as the Messiah.) The command, being unheeded, was repeated, but was received with deliberately offensive indifference—or worse, as when the servants who summoned the guests were beaten up or killed (cf. 21:35f.). The punishment of the murderers (cf. 21:41a) and burning of their city (recorded parenthetically in 22:7) point to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70; the first invited guests thus represent the religious establishment in Jerusalem. As in the parable of the vineyard the owner, after putting the first tenants to death, let out the vineyard to more trustworthy tenants, so the king here conscripts guests who had not been previously invited to come and fill the wedding hall and enjoy the feast. (The punitive action of 22:7 was not necessarily completed before the second lot of guests were gathered: otherwise the good things provided would have become cold and stale.) The second guests correspond to the "nation" of 21:43—the new

society of Jewish and Gentile disciples to which the kingdom was to be transferred.

So far so good, but the appended incident (22:11-14) presents a problem. It probably prefigures the final judgment, when every man will be repaid “for what he has done” (16:27); the “wedding garment” is best understood as the way of life that shows the genuineness of the initial repentance (cf. 3:8; Revelation 19:8). For the man’s expulsion from the banqueting hall into the darkness outside cf. 8:12; 25:30. The problem lies in the difficulty of fitting some elements in the incident into the whole narrative, for which reason it has been thought that two originally separate parables have been telescoped here. The moral of 22:14 is not to be understood in the sense of “effectual calling” (cf. Romans 8:28-30); it simply means that not all to whom the invitation is extended enjoy the banquet (the blessings of the kingdom). When a limited number of vacancies must be filled, several candidates may be short-listed and called for interview, but not all of these are appointed.

TRIBUTE TO CAESAR  
MATTHEW 22:15-22

In this world we owe loyalty to two kingdoms, secular authority and  
God's kingship.

IN 17:24-27 RESPONSIBILITY regarding one form of tax was discussed: the tax which figures in the present debate constituted the hottest political question of the day in Judea. It did not arise in Galilee, which was governed by a Jewish prince (Herod Antipas); but when Judea became a Roman province in AD 6 it became directly tributary to the emperor. Some Jews maintained that the payment of taxes to a pagan ruler constituted high treason to God, the true King of Israel, and revolted against Rome under Judas the Galilean (cf. Acts 5:37). The revolt was crushed, but its spirit survived among the Zealots (cf. 10:4). The Zealots' viewpoint enjoyed much popular support, whatever was thought of their violent methods (cf. 11:12). The Pharisees and the Herodians were strange bedfellows, but if the Herodians (who do not appear elsewhere in this Gospel) maintained the claims of the Herod dynasty to rule all Palestine, they would have had at least theoretical objections to the payment of tribute to Caesar.

It was hoped that the question would impale our Lord on the horns of a dilemma: if he said it was right to pay the tribute, he would forfeit general popularity; if he said it was wrong, he could be reported to the Roman administration for sedition (cf. Luke 23:2). For him, however, "the things that are God's," the interests of his kingdom, were primary; they would not be

adversely affected if a pagan monarch received back the denarius (cf. 20:2) which was self-evidently his. There were some Jews so scrupulous that they would not touch such a coin, because the imperial image infringed the second commandment. Jesus' words may suggest that such coinage was fit only for Gentiles to handle: Caesar's money was best designed for paying Caesar's tribute. Let them make God's kingdom and righteous requirements their principal concern (cf. 6:33). Thus Jesus not only avoided the dilemma but turned it to emphasize the central theme of his own teaching.

**Note** By "hypocrites" (22:18) we are (as in 6:2ff.) to understand "play-actors," whose words and actions do not express their personal thoughts. The reference is probably to the complimentary gambit of 22:16, which masked a desire to set a trap for Jesus.

HOW ARE THE DEAD RAISED?

## MATTHEW 22:23-33

The Sadducees didn't believe in life after death—that's why they were  
“sad, you see”!

THE SADDUCEES, the aristocratic party to which most of the chief-priestly families belonged, regarded themselves as conservatives in theology and rejected the Pharisaic “tradition of the elders” (cf. 15:2), sticking to the literal application of the written law. They repudiated the doctrine of bodily resurrection as a post-exilic innovation (cf. Acts 23:8). They understood resurrection (as indeed some of its proponents envisaged it) in terms of a restoration to the conditions of bodily life on earth; hence their improbable story (22:25-27) with the following question (22:28) was intended to expose the absurdity of such a belief. The command of Moses summarized in 22:24 is the law of levirate marriage (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 3:1ff.). No doubt the conundrum was one with which they were accustomed to embarrass their Pharisaic rivals. But Jesus assured them that their question revealed ignorance both of the nature of resurrection (as an act of divine power) and of their own Scriptures. Resurrection did not mean the resumption of former conditions of biological life and reproduction, but a new order of existence (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35ff.), sexless as the angels (22:30).

It is inaccurate to say, as has sometimes been said, that the Sadducees' canon was restricted to the Pentateuch (this was true rather of the

Samaritans); but they would certainly venerate it as supremely authoritative, and Jesus appealed to it rather than to (say) Isaiah 26:19 or Daniel 12:2 (the latter of which they may well not have acknowledged as canonical). Instead of quoting this or that proof-text, he grounded the doctrine of resurrection securely in the being and character of God. The God who could call himself the God of men long since dead (Exodus 3:6) showed by doing so that in relation to him they were not dead: “He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (22:32). “What does not die to God does not die to itself” (Augustine).

DEBATING WITH PHARISEES

MATTHEW 22:34-46

Love God with all your heart and soul, and your neighbors the way  
you love yourself: sincerely, constantly, actively, and with  
understanding.

THE PHARISEES COULD not but applaud Jesus' answer to the Sadducees; now they tested his judgment on the kind of question which they debated among themselves. Some of them distinguished "heavy" (more important) from "light" (less important) commandments (cf. 23:23), but that did not mean that they could treat the latter less seriously, for God's relative assessment of his commandments might be different from theirs. Was there one commandment which could be regarded as the greatest and, if so, how was it to be recognized? Jesus in reply quoted the injunction of unreserved love to God (Deuteronomy 6:5) which included the doing of all his commandments (cf. 1 John 5:3a), and coupled with it (by the rabbinical exegetical method of "equal categories") the injunction of unreserved love to one's neighbor (Leviticus 19:18b), which begins, like the former, with "you shall love." Of this twofold injunction the words might well have been spoken which Hillel used of the golden rule (see note on 7:12). All that God requires in the whole volume of written revelation is comprehended in these two injunctions. (It is noteworthy that in Luke 10:27 these two are quoted by a "lawyer" as a summary of the divine law, in response to our Lord's question.)

Our Lord's turn now comes to put a counter-question to the Pharisees. He and they believed that Psalm 110 was composed by David and referred to the Messiah. According to them, the Messiah was to be the son of David (cf. 1:1). But in Psalm 110:1 David refers to the Messiah as "my Lord," and does so by inspiration. How can the Messiah be both David's son and David's Lord? Those early Christians who heard or read this incident would feel that this question, which the Pharisees found unanswerable, presented no problem to them: they knew that Jesus, son of David (cf. Romans 1:3), had been highly exalted by God and made both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36), thus receiving "the name which is above every name" (Philippians 2:9-11). Throughout the New Testament, Psalm 110:1 is the principal Old Testament "testimony" for the acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord and for his session at God's right hand (cf. Acts 2:34f.; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:13; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21).

AN EXAMPLE TO BE AVOIDED

## MATTHEW 23:1-12

The Pharisees burdened people's lives with an impossible pressure of "oughts."

NOT ALL PHARISEES were willing to engage with Jesus in friendly debate. This chapter brings together a number of criticisms of tendencies to which people of Pharisaic attitude (today as in the first century) are specially prone. Where stress is laid on strict lawkeeping as an expression of heart-devotion to God, it is possible for some to emulate the outward law-keeping and so gain a reputation for a heart-devotion which is not there (cf. 6:1ff.). The Pharisees themselves were well aware of this, and while seven categories of Pharisee are enumerated in the rabbinical writings, only one of these—he who is a Pharisee for love of God—receives unqualified commendation.

Jesus warns his hearers, and especially his disciples, against the temptations to which Pharisees were exposed, setting up a standard of legal righteousness impossible of attainment for ordinary working men ("the people of the land," as they called them) and receiving deferential treatment because of their reputation for piety. The "phylacteries" of 23:5 are parchments containing four passages from the Old Testament. (Exodus 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21) in parallel columns, placed in leather containers and worn on the forehead and left arm in literal fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6:8 (before AD 70, as the Qumran discoveries indicate, the Ten Commandments were also included). The "fringes" were the tassels

prescribed in Numbers 15:38f.; Deuteronomy 22:12 (cf. Matthew 9:20; 14:36). Extra-large phylacteries and tassels (like an extra-large Bible carried under the arm) might be regarded by unthinking people as signs of exceptional piety. Jesus bids his followers avoid such ostentation, and dispense with the use of honorific titles. In this regard, as in some others (cf. 5:34ff.), his instructions have been taken with serious literalness by the Friends. This part of the discourse ends with a repetition of his characteristic insistence on service and humility as the hallmarks of his disciples (23:11f.).

**Note** At a rather later date “Moses’ seat” (23:2) was the actual chair in the synagogue in which a rabbi sat as he taught (cf. Luke 4:20), but probably not so early as this. Here the expression probably means that they expound the law which Moses received on Sinai.

**Thought** Somebody must have the place of honor: it is wanting, not having, the front seat that is wrong.

LAMENT FOR THE SCRIBES

MATTHEW 23:13-28

God's law was meant for our good; the Pharisees had made it a drudgery, and in so doing had missed the heart of it altogether.

THE SEVEN "WOES" of 23:13-32 can be read as laments rather than denunciations: "Alas for you!" rather than "Woe to you!" It is not implied that "scribes and Pharisees" are inevitably "hypocrites"; the reference is to hypocritical or "play-acting" scribes and Pharisees, whose "piety" was a matter of outward show. Such conduct is possible only in a context of sincere Pharisaism, such as is exemplified in the New Testament by Nicodemus, Gamaliel and Saul of Tarsus.

The charge in 23:13 refers to those who opposed Jesus' preaching of the kingdom themselves and discouraged others from paying heed to it. 23:15 bears witness to the active proselytization in the dispersion at this time (cf. G. Tyrrell's remark quoted in note on 5:16). 23:16-22 amplify 5:33-37 and expose the inconsistency of distinguishing between binding oaths and invalid oaths. The Pharisees were particularly scrupulous about tithing; in addition to tithing the main fruits of the earth (grain, wine and olive oil) specified in Deuteronomy 14:22f., they interpreted Leviticus 27:30 to cover garden herbs (23:23). But those who paid more attention to such minutiae than to "justice and mercy and faith" (cf. Micah 6:8) were aptly described as straining out midges from their drink while swallowing camels without noticing them (cf. 7:3-5).

The two “woes” of 23:25f. and 23:27f. return to the theme of outward respectability camouflaging inward sin. Tombs were whitewashed to draw attention to them, so that people who would incur ceremonial defilement by accidental contact with them—eg the high priest (Leviticus 21:11) or a Nazirite (Numbers 6:6) could easily avoid them.

LAMENT FOR JERUSALEM

MATTHEW 23:29-39

How often had Jesus longed to enfold his city in his divine care.

FOR THE ARGUMENT of 23:29-32 we may compare Stephen's charge in Acts 7:51f. The language of 23:33 is similar to the Baptist's in 3:7; "hell" is "Gehenna" (as in 23:15; cf. 5:22-29f.). The question could be answered in one phrase, "By repentance"; but it is implied that no sign of repentance was forthcoming. In 23:34-36 Jesus speaks in the rôle of divine wisdom; the words might well be put within quotation-marks, as in Luke 11:49-51. In the traditional order of Hebrew Scripture (which ends with 1 and 2 Chronicles) Abel (Genesis 4:8) is the first martyr and Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-22) the last. In the course of transmission the son of Jehoiada has apparently been confused with the son of Berechiah (Zechariah 1:1). For the emphasis on "this generation" cf. 12:39,41f.,45. The horrors of the war of AD 66-70 were greater than the sins of one generation could have incurred as a penalty. In Luke 13:34f. the lament over Jerusalem (which in both Gospels implies previous unrecorded visits) follows the remark: "it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem."

The words "you will not see me again" (23:39) apply to the temple, which Jesus now leaves for the last time, rather than to the city in general. 23:38 may recall the gradual departure of God's glory from the earlier temple before its destruction by the Babylonians (Ezekiel 8:4; 9:3; 10:4,18f.; 11:23); the day foretold in 23:39 would then be linked with the return of the glory to

the restored house (Ezekiel 43:1-5) and identified with the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:27,30f.).

**Consider** What can be gathered from these chapters about our Lord's attitude to the temple? Can we discover emphases in Jesus' Jerusalem ministry which distinguish it from his Galilean ministry? Does the severe language of chapter 23 justify us in expressing ourselves similarly about people whose religious beliefs or practices we consider to be wrong?

## CONVULSIONS PRECEDING THE END

### MATTHEW 24:1-14

This chapter tells us what to expect before Jesus returns as king and how to prepare for that coming.

THE FIFTH AND last discourse in this Gospel, dealing with the consummation of the kingdom (chapters 24–25), begins with the Olivet prophecy (paralleled in Mark 13 and Luke 21:5ff.), which is concerned largely with events associated with the destruction of the temple (24:2). Whatever the disciples' ideas of the future were in AD 30, it was possible by the time this Gospel was written to distinguish “this” (24:3)—ie the destruction of the temple, which had taken place—from Jesus' coming (*parousia*) and “the close of the age” (cf. 13:39,49), which still lay in the future. In the following verses we expect an answer to both parts of the disciples' question, but we cannot divide the prophecy neatly so as to make part refer exclusively to the nearer event and part to that which was more remote.

The temple restored by Herod from 19 BC onwards was internationally renowned for its architectural splendor. The lower courses of masonry on the western wall survive to bear witness to its vanished glories. No wonder that the disciples drew their Master's attention to the buildings (24:1). It was his predictions of the overthrow (24:2) that prompted their question as they looked across to the city and temple from the slopes of Olivet (24:3). His reply in the first instance warns them not to be misled by false messiahs (24:4f.), many of whom attracted large numbers of enthusiastic devotees in

the period between AD 44 and 70, and encourages them not to be dismayed by wars and natural calamities (24:6f.; cf. Revelation 6:2-8). These will be but harbingers of the birth-pangs of the new age (24:8). Then he prepares them for persecution and apostasy (cf. Daniel 11:33ff.) amid increasing wickedness (24:9-12) but holds out the promise of final deliverance for those who maintain their loyalty to the end (24:13). 24:9-14 largely repeat 10:1-23; the assurance that the world-wide proclamation of the good news of the kingdom must precede the end (24:14) is parallel to the enigmatic 10:23b; but what was there restricted to “the towns of Israel” is here “a testimony to all nations” (cf. 28:19), which indeed became a historical reality in the decades before AD 70.

Plague, earthquake and famine, and tumult and war  
The wonderful coming of Jesus declare.

DESOLATING SACRILEGE AND GREAT TRIBULATION

MATTHEW 24:15-28

Jesus warned the Jews what a terrible time it would be when the Roman armies besieged Jerusalem forty years later.

THE “DESOLATING SACRILEGE” of Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 was an idolatrous installation in the temple of God. The event predicted here can scarcely be equated with the victorious Romans’ sacrificing to their standards opposite the east gate of the temple in AD 70 while the building was still ablaze; it precedes the outbreak of war. The attempt to set up an imperial image in the temple in AD 40 would have been a fulfillment had it not been called off. The language suggests some distinct act of colossal blasphemy which would usher in unprecedented distress for the people of God; we may compare what is said of Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. “Let the reader understand” (24:15) is as much a challenge to discernment today as it was then (Revelation 13:18); it implies that there is more in the reference than lies on the surface. Instant flight will be necessary, and it will bear hardly on expectant and nursing mothers (24:19); winter would make speedy escape more difficult and a Sabbath would limit the distance that could be covered (24:20; cf. Exodus 16:29b). The historical departure of the church from Jerusalem before the siege of the city appears to have been more leisurely than what is envisaged here.

The “great tribulation” was already foretold in Daniel 12:1, together with deliverance for the elect; the means of deliverance is here stated to be the

shortening of its allotted duration (cf. Daniel 12:6ff.). As for 24:23-26, the “deceivers” whose rise is foretold in 24:5 multiplied as the doom of Jerusalem became more imminent, promising victory when there was none. When the Son of Man comes (cf. Daniel 7:13), his advent will be as sudden and unmistakable as the lightning-flash (24:27). 24:28 means that where a situation is ripe for judgment (as then in Jerusalem), there the judgment will fall. The mention of “eagles” instead of the expected “vultures” may be an allusion to the Roman legionary standards.

THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN

MATTHEW 24:29-35

When Jesus returns, it will be in power and glory, and literally everybody will know about it.

SUCH COSMIC PHENOMENA as are described in 24:29 appear in the Old Testament as metaphors for disasters like the overthrow of cities; cf. Isaiah 24:1ff., which depicts in this way the downfall of a hostile city (Isaiah 24:10-12; 27:10). The tribulation of siege and warfare will be followed by the fall of Jerusalem, and “all these things” will be completed within the lifetime of “this generation” (24:34). Here is the answer to the disciples’ first question, “when will this be?” (24:3). There is no need to make difficulties about “this generation,” as though it meant “this race” (the Jews) or the generation of the end-time; the phrase is identical with that in 23:36 and the two passages point forward to the same sequence of events. Unlike the advent of the Son of Man (24:27), the fall of Jerusalem will be heralded by signs which cannot be mistaken by those who have eyes to see: just as the appearance of leaves on the fig-tree is a token of the approach of summer, so the events of 24:5-14, and especially the “desolating sacrilege” (24:15) and attendant signs (24:24), betoken the imminent destruction of the city and temple (in 24:33 we might render with KJV “it is near” rather than “he is near”).

The coming of the Son of Man, the subject of the disciples’ second question (24:3), follows the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew alone speaks of “the sign of the Son of Man” (24:30), which harks back to “sign” in 24:3. Since

the Son of Man comes without preceding signs (24:27,37-44), his “sign” in 24:30 may be himself—the sign which is the Son of Man. Like Jonah, the Son of Man is his own “sign” (cf. 12:39). The expression was early interpreted as the sign of the cross in the sky, but this is improbable in the present context. His coming “on the clouds” with power and glory (cf. 16:27; 26:64) is based on Daniel 7:13; the trumpet-call for the ingathering of the elect (24:31) on Isaiah 27:13, and the wailing of “all the tribes of the earth” on Zechariah 12:10ff. As in Revelation 1:7, the original reference to the wailing of the families of Israel is given a world-wide extension.

The words of Jesus have the same binding and permanent validity (24:35) as the words of the law (5:18).

CALL TO VIGILANCE

MATTHEW 24:36-51

We can no more predict the date of Christ's return than the day a thief calls.

WHILE THE FALL of the temple and city will take place before the passing of "this generation" (24:34), no time indication can be given for the Son of Man's advent. While the Son's subordination to the Father is seen in his not knowing "of that day and hour," his supremacy over all created beings is expressed by his being mentioned after "the angels of heaven" (24:36). As no warning signs preceded the flood of Noah's day, so none will precede the coming of the Son of Man (24:37-39): it will overtake people as they pursue their everyday activities and separate one from the other in judgment (24:40f.; cf. 25:32f.). No opportunity now for flight!

The necessity of vigilant readiness, in view of the Son of Man's unpredictable coming (24:42-44), is illustrated by two parables—the thief by night (24:43) and the returning master (24:45-51). The parable of the thief by night recurs throughout the New Testament (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; 16:15); his nefarious plan succeeds only when the house is not adequately guarded. When the chief steward whose master leaves him in charge during his absence has no idea when his master will return, that ought to keep him on his toes: only a very foolish steward would abuse his authority and neglect his duty in such a situation. If, even so, he does misconduct himself, his master's return will mean for him not

commendation and reward (24:47) but flogging and dismissal (24:51). The reference to “the hypocrites” in 24:51 suggests that the defaulter played the part of a faithful steward only when his master was around; the parallel in Luke 12:46 has “the unfaithful.”

**Consider** Why did Christ not make it clear that we should have to wait so long? Can you think of events in this century which can be treated as significant in the outworking of God’s increasing purpose, as the fall of Jerusalem was in the first century?

LATE FOR THE WEDDING BREAKFAST

## MATTHEW 25:1-13

Do our lives have the vital inward supply of the life of the Holy Spirit  
and a personal relationship with Christ?

TO THE OLIVET prophecy with its short appended parables Matthew adds three longer parables reinforcing the lessons of vigilance, faithfulness and kindness.

In the first parable the ten maidens appear to be the bride's attendants (cf. Psalm 45:14) who are to go out to meet the bridegroom when, with his friends, he arrives at her house, and then escort the couple with a torchlight procession to the bridegroom's home for the marriage feast. If, however, we read "the bridegroom and the bride" at the end of 25:1 (cf. RSV footnote), then the maidens are girls of the neighborhood who plan "to light up the approach to the bridegroom's house as a welcome, in return for which they would hope to have some share in the rather promiscuous hospitality of an oriental festivity" (F.C. Burkitt). It is best not to allegorize the parable and determine whom the maidens stand for and what the oil represents. For example, if we allegorize the two sets of maidens, we have to reckon with the fact that they all fell asleep. And if we allegorize the oil, we have to reckon with the fact that the foolish maidens had oil to begin with as well as the wise, and that when it gave out they succeeded in buying some more, even though it was past midnight. What matters is that, by the time they bought a fresh supply, they were too late for the procession and when they reached the bridegroom's

home the doorkeeper would not let them in. So they had to go back tired and disappointed, because they were not ready when the bridegroom arrived. The story is a parable, not an allegory; the lesson for the hearers is: Don't be like those foolish girls; keep awake and be prepared. To the words "you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13) the "received text" (followed by KJV) adds "when the Son of man comes;" this is no doubt sound exegesis, although it forms no part of the original text. But there are partial comings of the Son of Man before the final *parousia* (cf. 16:25; 26:64); and the text as it stands bids the reader be ready for any hour of testing that may come upon him unannounced. Be ready to resist the temptation (whatever it may be), to meet the crisis, to grasp the opportunity. Yesterday's oil will not keep our lamps alight today; past experience will not suffice for present or future need.

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS  
MATTHEW 25:14-30

Jesus likens our present waiting for his return to the absence of a businessman who left servants in charge of his affairs.

THE PARABLE OF the talents elaborates the theme of the parable of the returning master (24:45-51). It bears a general resemblance to the parable of the pounds in Luke 19:11-27 but there are material differences in detail. A talent was not a coin but a weight, roughly equivalent to half a hundredweight or 25 kilograms of silver or gold, tied up in bags (cf. NEB). It is from this parable that the word has acquired its extended meaning of spiritual endowment or faculty. There are not so many five-talent or two-talent people going about; the work of the kingdom of God is done mainly by those who have one talent—and use it. The phrase “to each according to his ability” (25:15) expresses an important principle: no one is responsible for talents which he has not been given. Why did the third servant not trade with his talent? He probably reckoned that trading carries a risk with it—you may gain more, but if you invest unfortunately, you may lose. The safest course therefore was to keep his talent intact by burying it. When safe deposits were not so readily available, this was a common way of guarding valuables against loss (cf. 13:44). But nothing venture, nothing win.

The kingdom of heaven involves placing everything at hazard (cf. 10:39; 16:24-27). The portrayal of the day of judgment in terms of a master investigating his servants’ accounts (cf. 18:23) is familiar in rabbinical

literature. “The reward of a duty performed is a duty to perform,” said a first-century rabbi. So here the reward of the two faithful servants consists in opportunities for further service more responsible in character. “The joy of your master” (25:21-23) is probably the banquet of the resurrection age (cf. 8:11). The unprofitable servant excuses his lack of enterprise as best he can, blaming it on his master’s harsh exploitation of his employees’ labor. But his excuses are not accepted; he is ejected from the merry-making of his master’s “welcome home” feast and left outside in the dark with his frustration and remorse. 25:28 and 25:29 convey a subsidiary moral, already taught in another context in 13:12, which is of abiding application and does not refer to the time of the end. The penalty of neglected opportunity is the loss of further opportunity.

**Thought** A servant is known by his master’s absence.

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS  
MATTHEW 25:31-46

Judgment day will be a day of settling accounts.

THE SETTING OF this judgment scene was familiar to the hearers and probably to the readers: the coming of the Son of Man with attendant angels (cf. 16:27) and his sitting on his glorious throne (cf. 19:28), the gathering of all nations for judgment (cf. Joel 3:2,11,14) and the allocation of bliss or doom were themes of contemporary apocalyptic literature, derived ultimately from Old Testament revelation. It is in the criterion on which the verdict is based that the distinctive feature of the parable consists. The parabolic element, strictly speaking, is confined to the words: “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left” (25:32f.). A mixed flock of sheep and goats is not uncommon in Palestine: superficially they may look alike, apart from their tails, but from time to time they must be separated.

They may be gathered as nations but they are judged as individuals. And this, says Jesus, will be the principle of judgment: how have they treated me in the person of “the least of these my brethren”? He is fittingly called “the King” (25:34,40) because of his enthronement.

The expression “*these* my brethren” suggests that they are present: the followers of the Son of Man, “the saints of the Most high,” are associated with him in the judgment (cf. Daniel 7:22; 1 Corinthians 6:2f.). His kingdom is their inheritance (21:43), but here it is revealed that it has also been

prepared “from the foundation of the world” for those who have treated them kindly (25:34ff.) and in so doing are deemed to have shown this kindness to the King himself (cf. 10:40-42; 18:5). No wonder these Gentiles are amazed (25:37); readers of this passage have been amazed in generation after generation, and have found difficulty in fitting the teaching here given into their theological scheme. But which must be altered—the teaching of Jesus, or our theological scheme?

For the same essential insistence on the care of those in need cf. Galatians 6:10; Hebrews 13:2f.,16; James 2:15f.; 1 John 3:17. Those on the left hand are as surprised by their condemnation (25:44) as the others are by their acceptance; but the awards are completely impartial. As elsewhere in Scripture (cf. 16:27; Romans 2:6-11) divine judgment is rendered to men according to their works, be they good or bad. The “eternal fire” (25:41) is probably Gehenna (cf. 5:22-29f.; 18:8f.). As “eternal life” (25:46) is the life of the age to come (cf. 19:16), so “eternal punishment” consists in exclusion from that life; for those so sentenced there is no portion in the age to come.

**Consider** Do modern agencies such as VSO, Christian Aid, War on Want and Shelter qualify for the commendation of Matthew 25:40?

ANOINTING AT BETHANY

MATTHEW 26:1-13

A woman anoints Jesus for the task of his atoning death.

JESUS' TEACHING MINISTRY is over: his passion is about to begin. The Sanhedrin (or at least its "steering committee") resolved, at a meeting convened in the high priest's palace, to arrange for his arrest and execution, but felt that his popularity, especially with the visiting pilgrims, was such that their plan could not be carried out until after the seven days' festival of Unleavened Bread (which was inaugurated by the Passover meal). An opportunity was unexpectedly given them to carry it out much sooner.

We cannot be sure why the incident at Bethany (26:6-13) should have stimulated Judas to offer to put Jesus into the chief priests' power (26:14-16). He seems to have voiced the disciples' indignation at the "waste" of ointment which would have cost a laborer's wages for a year (cf. Mark 14:5; John 12:4-6). Perhaps, in addition, he took the woman's anointing of Jesus to be a form of coronation (cf. 1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13; 2 Kings 9:1-13) and was dismayed that Jesus should lend himself to this display of popular messianic enthusiasm. Whatever the woman's motive was, Jesus accepted her devotion as "a beautiful thing" done in anticipation of his burial: if she saw the cross looming ahead, she would know that it was not always practicable to perform the last rites for those crucified as criminals. The prediction of 26:13 has been fulfilled by the very inclusion of her act in the Gospel narrative; there may be the further thought that when the worldwide proclamation of the gospel was

consummated (cf. 24:14), her good deed would be recorded to her credit on the great day.

**Notes** “Simon the leper” 26:6—meaning possibly “the *former* leper”—may have been the father of the well-known family at Bethany, if we put this Matthaean narrative (and its parallel in Mark 14:3-9) alongside John 12:1-8 (Mary and Martha appear only in Luke and John, and Lazarus only in John). 26:11: “You always have the poor with you” does not state a binding economic rule; it simply means that the poor would still be available as recipients of their charity when he was no longer there.

## THE LAST SUPPER

### MATTHEW 26:14-25

Look at Jesus' amazing love: he still appeals to Judas and warns him.

WHATEVER PROVIDED THE stimulus, Judas immediately made his way from Bethany to seek an audience of the chief priests and undertook to enable them to lay their hands on Jesus. Matthew is the only evangelist who names the price of the betrayal as “thirty pieces of silver”; the last clause of 26:15 is almost a quotation of the last clause of Zechariah 11:12, where thirty shekels (12 oz. or 342 grams) of silver are the derisory wages paid to the prophet for tending the flock of Israel (cf. 27:9f.). This was the price fixed in Israel's earliest law-code as compensation paid to the owner for a slave gored to death by someone else's ox (Exodus 21:32), and God assures the prophet that the implied insult is directed primarily at him.

Jesus knew that there was a traitor in the camp; hence his care to make the arrangements for eating the Passover meal with the disciples as secret as possible. The venue had evidently been fixed in advance with the master of the house (26:18). There were more ways than one of calculating the date of the Passover and other feasts, and it is possible (though this does not affect the study of Matthew's narrative in itself) that Jesus and his circle followed a different reckoning from that which regulated the temple calendar (cf. John 18:28; 19:14). In that case they must have dispensed with the paschal lamb, which could be slaughtered only in the temple on the official date (and no

mention is made of Jesus and his disciples eating the lamb); but every Passover meal eaten away from Jerusalem lacked the lamb in any case.

During the meal, at which all reclined (the proper Passover posture), as is indicated by the Greek word rendered “sat at table” (26:20), Jesus reveals the presence of a traitor. None but Judas knows who is meant; each of the others wonders if he himself has inadvertently said or done something to his Master’s disadvantage. The words of 26:23 echo Psalm 41:9 (actually quoted in John 13:18), but as all were dipping their hands in the same dish the traitor’s identity was not thereby divulged. There may be an implication that, as the Son of Man’s way of suffering had been “written of him” (26:24) a reference perhaps to Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and similar Old Testament Scriptures—so the traitor was a subject of prophecy (cf. Acts 1:20). At any rate, he is the most unenviable of men. When Judas repeats his fellow disciples’ question, the responsibility for the answer is thrown back on himself (26:25): he had still time to renounce his plan. Here and in 26:49 “Master” is actually “Rabbi”; in this Gospel Judas is the only one to address Jesus by this title.

**Thought** Is it merely coincidence that money is involved in the downfall of both Judas and Ananias (Acts 5:1-6)?

THE NEW MEMORIAL

MATTHEW 26:26-35

The meal Jesus celebrated looks forward to the time when God's purpose on earth is worked out, and the church is complete.

THE NEW MEMORIAL is instituted within the context of the memorial of the ancient redemption from Egypt. Unleavened bread was broken and eaten after a blessing in the course of the Passover meal: Jesus, at the head of the table, takes the initiative in doing this, but adds words which give the act a new significance (26:26). No longer is this "the bread of affliction which our fathers ate when they left Egypt," as the Passover liturgy declares (cf. Deuteronomy 16:3), so that the participants year by year might share the experience of the exodus generation. "Take, eat," says Jesus; "this is my body." If the lamb was in fact missing from the table, his words might mean "I myself am your Passover sacrifice" (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7b); indeed, some such meaning is suggested whether the lamb was there or not. As the Passover sacrifice preserved Israel from the angel of death and effected their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, so Jesus devotes himself to death for the preservation and deliverance of his people. The cup (26:27) appears to have been the "cup of blessing" (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16), drunk when grace after meat had been said at the end of the Passover meal. The drinking of wine was of the essence of this meal, and the wine was usually red, thus providing a visible point of comparison between the contents of the cup and the new significance which Jesus gave it in the words of institution (26:28). The

“blood of the covenant” is probably deliberately reminiscent of Exodus 24:8, where the old covenant at Sinai was ratified by sacrificial blood; the covenant now ratified is the new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31:31-34, even if the adjective “new” (as in the best authorities) does not explicitly appear here, and it is ratified by no animal sacrifices but by the life-blood of Jesus, “poured out for many” (cf. 20:28, an echo, probably, of Isaiah 53:12). Matthew’s added phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins” (cf. Jeremiah 31:34), makes explicit what the parallel records imply. 26:29 suggests that Jesus himself did not take the cup: he looks forward to a renewal of table-fellowship with them on the other side of death, in the new age.

The “hymn” (26:30) was perhaps the second part of the “Great Hallel” (Psalms 114/115–118) with which the Passover concluded; the Mount of Olives was included by religious law within the city limits. Jesus, speaking as the Shepherd of Israel, foretells the imminent fulfillment of Zechariah 13:7, but promises to return from death, gather his scattered sheep again and lead them forth to Galilee (cf. 28:7). The disciples, led by Peter, stoutly assure him that they will not “fall away” or feel disillusioned on his account; they will die with him if need be. He knows them better than they know themselves; nevertheless, his promise remains.

CONSECRATION FOR SACRIFICE

MATTHEW 26:36-46

Jesus submits completely to his Father's will.

GETHSEMANE LAY ON the west slope of Olivet. Peter, James and John, who had witnessed his glory on the mount of transfiguration, now witness his agony, as he nerves himself for the impending ordeal and dedicates himself definitively for the accomplishment of his Father's will. For "cup" (26:39) in the sense of "lot" cf. 20:22f. While the spiritual conflict was something which he must endure alone, he craved sympathetic companionship, but this even his closest friends among the Twelve were unable to supply. If they felt themselves to be in the presence of a mystery so awe-ful that they were quite unequal to its demands, the reader of the narrative can share something of their feeling. "Watch" (26:38,40f.) means "keep awake" both in the literal sense and in the sense of vigilance against the assault which was about to be made on their souls by the forces of evil. Their resolution to stand firm and share his ordeal (26:35) was good; their capacity to abide by it when the test came was questionable (26:41). "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (that you may not fail in the test) is reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer (6:13) as is also "Thy will be done" (26:42; cf. 6:10). Jesus rose from his vigil prepared in spirit for the test that he had to face; it would be a test for them too, and how they acquitted themselves under it is recorded tersely in 26:56b.

“Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?” (26:45) is rightly punctuated as a question; treated as a command, it fits the context (especially 26:46) with difficulty.

The kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus could not have been more completely embodied than in him who said “not as I will, but as thou wilt” (26:39)—and acted accordingly.

ARREST IN THE GARDEN

MATTHEW 26:47-56

Jesus was submitting to arrest out of obedience to God's word.  
Scripture is coming true.

THE "CROWD" WHICH came under Judas' guidance to arrest Jesus consisted of temple police, whose commander was the captain of the temple (see note on 21:23); their services were at the disposal of the Sanhedrin. The word rendered "kissed" in 26:49 is more intensive than that in 26:48, suggesting the show of affection or enthusiasm which Judas puts into the act. As in 26:25, Judas addresses Jesus as "Rabbi"; Jesus in turn calls him "Comrade" (the same expression as is used in 20:13; 22:12) and adds words which, because of their elliptical construction, are of uncertain force to us (contrast RSV text and footnote) but which, from their appearance on a first-century glass goblet (probably from Syria), may be intended to remind Judas of their recent table-fellowship.

Some show of resistance was put up by the disciples (as in Mark, the identity of the sword-wielder is not divulged); then their nerve failed and they took to their heels. Jesus' rebuke in 26:52-54 is for the most part peculiar to Matthew. He submits to his captors in the conviction that thus it is written and that the prophetic Scriptures pointing to this hour must be fulfilled (cf. 26:24). Yet he points out the incongruity of their having come to take him by surprise at night, as though he were a bandit-leader, a Zealot terrorist, when day by day throughout the preceding week he had been teaching publicly in

the temple court. “I sat” (26:55) refers to the customary posture for instruction (cf. Luke 4:20).

**Note** The “twelve legions of angels” (26:53) may be understood, in the light of the Qumran texts, as hosts of militant angels under the command of the Prince of light, such as cooperate with the human sons of light in the eschatological warfare against the “sons of darkness.” But Jesus renounces recourse to angelic force as much as that to human or material force.

**Thought** Consider Peter’s mistake in drawing his sword—misplaced zeal leads Christians to do the wrong things in the wrong place, and to do them badly.

HIGH-PRIESTLY INQUISITION  
MATTHEW 26:57-75

The cock-crow was a moment of truth for Peter and it broke his heart.

MEMBERS OF THE Sanhedrin awaited Jesus at the high priest's residence. Joseph Caiaphas, son-in-law of Annas (who had held the high-priesthood AD 6–15), was appointed high priest by the Roman governor Valerius Gratus in AD 18 and remained in office for what was in those days the unusually long term of eighteen years. On Jesus' arrival, Caiaphas and his colleagues were not so much concerned to try him formally as to find evidence against him of which the Roman governor would take cognizance. Since the sanctity of the temple was protected by Roman authority, a threat to its safety would have been an offense against Roman provincial law, but the attempt to convict Jesus of having uttered such a threat was unsuccessful, and Jesus refused to say whether or not he had spoken such words as the witnesses alleged. An attempt to fasten quite a different charge on him was (from the high priest's viewpoint) more successful. Challenged to say whether or not he claimed to be the Messiah (acclaimed by God as his Son in Psalm 2:7), he replied in effect that the expression was the high priest's, and that he did not necessarily make the claim in the sense which the high priest intended: what he did claim was that "from now on"—"henceforth" rather than "hereafter"—the Son of Man would be seen enthroned at the right hand of the Almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven (26:64). In thus combining Daniel 7:13f. (cf. 16:27f.; 24:30) and Psalm 110:1 (cf. 22:43f.) He was understood (rightly) to

be speaking of himself. The reference is not so much here to his advent at the end-time as to the triumph and exaltation which would follow on his present humiliation and condemnation: vindicated by God, he would visit his people in judgment or blessing, according to their attitude of heart, and they would see the kingdom of God established in power. His judges could scarcely believe their ears: this voluntary affirmation was tantamount to a claim to be the peer of the Most High, and thus constituted a capital offense in Jewish law (blasphemy) as well as providing evidence which could be presented to the Roman governor as a clear basis for the death sentence. The tearing of the clothes (26:65) was a prescribed expression of horror at hearing blasphemy. The actions of 26:67f. are probably those of the police who guarded Jesus (but cf. Acts 23:2).

Peter's denial, which is inserted effectively between Jesus' appearance before the high priest and his accusation before Pilate, fulfills the prediction of 26:34. His following at a distance and mingling with the crowd by night in the palace courtyard is much to his credit; if his courage failed in the moment of sudden testing, it was a further proof of his Master's saying: "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (26:41). His repentance (26:75), unlike Judas' (27:3), was the making of him. "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

ENTER PILATE, EXIT JUDAS

## MATTHEW 27:1-14

There must have been a point in Judas' life when treachery, greed and dishonesty were first tolerated.

WHILE THE SANHEDRIN under Roman occupation could not execute sentence of death, its leaders did not go to Pilate to have their own sentence ratified but rather to have Jesus convicted and condemned by him on a charge of sedition. In whatever sense he claimed to be the Messiah, such a claim could readily be represented to Pilate as political in character, involving rebellion against the Roman emperor. In Jewish eyes the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, was by definition the King of Israel. From Pilate's question (27:11) it is plain that Jesus was charged before him with setting himself up as "King of the Jews" (the Roman equivalent of "King of Israel"), and it was on this ground that he was executed (27:37). He admitted the charge when Pilate put it to him, although "You have said so" (as in 26:64) implies that the form of words is his questioner's, not his own, and that he does not necessarily accept them in the sense intended by the questioner. But to the charges pressed against him by his accusers he has nothing to say (27:12,14; cf. 26:63a); it looks as if he is resolved to make the issue of his kingship the decisive one. Pilate governed Judea from AD 26 to 36; an inscription from his term of office discovered at Caesarea in 1961 shows that his technical title was "prefect" rather than "procurator." He quickly acquired a reputation for ruthlessness and obstinacy.

The Judas episode (27:3-10), like that concerning Peter (26:69-75), provides a dramatic interlude. Judas had served the chief priests' purpose and they had no further interest in him. But they had the responsibility of disposing of the thirty shekels which he left in the temple before taking his life. To understand the following narrative, we must realize that in Zechariah 11:13 there is a variant reading, *osar*, "treasury" (cf. RSV) for *yoser*, "potter" (cf. av). It is almost as if the chief priests said: "Which reading of this prophecy shall we fulfill? Shall we give the money to the *treasury* or to the *potter*? We cannot put it in the temple *treasury* because it is blood money; let us give it to the *potter* in exchange for his field." So they bought the potter's field with it as a burial-place for foreigners, and because it was bought with blood money it was called "Blood Acre" (27:8, NEB; in Aramaic *Akeldama*, according to Acts 1:19), traditionally located on the ridge south of the Valley of Hinnom. The quotation of Zechariah 11:13b is ascribed to Jeremiah (27:9-10) probably because in an early Christian collection of Old Testament "testimonies" it was attached to one or more passages from Jeremiah (18:2f. with 32:6-15, perhaps, or 19:1-13).

**Thought** There must have been a point in Judas' life when treachery, greed and dishonesty were first tolerated. Small surrenders to the enemy have far-reaching effects.

NOT THIS MAN, BUT BARABBAS

## MATTHEW 27:15-31

Barabbas went free because Jesus died instead of him, and as a result of Jesus' death many still go free.

THE BARABBAS INCIDENT, mentioned in all four Gospels (cf. Acts 3:14), is associated with a custom not elsewhere attested (27:15). In 27:16-17 some textual authorities read "Jesus Barabbas" instead of simply "Barabbas"; this fuller reading may be right, and is specially effective in 27:17. It is strange indeed that the man released had been rightly convicted of the very charge of sedition on which Jesus was wrongly condemned. The episode of 27:19 is recorded by Matthew only. If Pilate's tribunal was set up within the Antonia fortress, north-west of the temple area (which would thus for the time being have constituted the "praetorium" or "governor's headquarters" of 27:27), then his wife's message may have been sent from more comfortable quarters in Herod's palace on the western wall. Such a message would be taken seriously; every knowledgeable Roman was aware that Julius Caesar would not have been assassinated on the Ides of March, 44 BC, if he had paid heed to his wife's dreams and stayed at home instead of going to the senate. "Let him be crucified" (27:22-23) may imply "Let him have the cross which was designed for Barabbas"; in any case, crucifixion was the regular penalty for sedition except where the accused was a Roman citizen. Scourging (27:26) was a normal preliminary to crucifixion; it was a murderous torture in itself, and strong men sometimes died under it.

The incident of Pilate's hand-washing (cf. Deuteronomy 21:6-9), with the people's response (27:24f.), is peculiar to Matthew. The people's response (27:25) is seen by Matthew as fulfilled in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Luke 19:41-44; 23:28-30). The Jewish commentator who wrote of the "oceans of human blood, and a ceaseless stream of misery and desolation" occasioned by these words, was right in so far as they have been grossly misapplied as though fastening messianic blood-guilt on the whole people of Israel in successive generations. That Christian readers have too often misinterpreted the words in this sense is sadly and shamefully true. Nor is there any ground for supposing that the call for Jesus' crucifixion came from those who had shouted "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday: the city mob must be distinguished from Galilean pilgrims.

The soldiers' barrack-room horse-play, caricaturing their prisoner's kingly claim (27:27-31), is commonly and perhaps rightly believed to have been enacted on the "pavement" beneath the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, where the Antonia fortress then stood. The "scarlet robe" (27:28) was a military cloak; the thorns (27:29) may have been those of a species of date-palm whose thorns or spikes are sometimes twelve inches long, arranged in the form of a "radiate crown" as affected by "divine rulers" in the Hellenistic world.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

MATTHEW 27:32-44

Imagine you are present in this scene. Who do you identify with? Simon? One of the soldiers? One of the two criminals? The people passing by? The religious leaders?

THE “CROSS” CARRIED by the condemned man, or (as here) by someone commandeered by the military to carry it for him, may have been the cross-beam, to be fixed to the upright post at the place of execution.

“Golgotha” (27:33) represents Aramaic *gulgota*, “skull”; there is no certain explanation of the giving of this name to the place, which lay just outside the north wall of the city.

The “gall” of 27:34 recalls Psalm 69:21; a reference has been seen here to the soporific drink which charitable women of Jerusalem provided for men about to be crucified, but this involves a sudden change of subject, which otherwise from 27:27 to 27:37 is “the soldiers”; perhaps the soldiers offered him some of their own sour wine.

27:35 fulfilled Psalm 22:18, but the incident is not manufactured out of the Old Testament text; what was on the condemned man’s person became his executioners’ perquisites, and dicing was the natural way to determine the allocation.

In the wording of the charge inscribed over his head Matthew, like the other evangelists, sees a proclamation of the truth: Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, the kingliest King of all, “reigning from the tree.”

The “two robbers” or bandits crucified along with him (27:38,44) were probably nationalist insurgents, perhaps Barabbas’ lieutenants, originally intended to flank their leader on either side. The crosses were planted by the roadside, so that people passing in or out of the city gate could see and talk to the crucified men at close quarters. The derisory words addressed to Jesus by various passers-by (27:40,42-43) echo one or another of his claims, real or alleged. With 27:39,43 cf. Psalm 22:7f.

The taunt, “He saved others; he cannot save himself” (27:42), might serve as a motto for the whole scene—especially if “cannot” be replaced by “will not.”

**Consider** 27:44 in the light of Luke 23:39-43.

“THIS WAS THE SON OF GOD”

## MATTHEW 27:45-54

As you read these verses, ask God to grip you with an appreciation of your debt to Jesus.

ATTEMPTS (ATTESTED AS early as the middle of the first century) to explain the midday darkness of 27:45 as due to a solar eclipse are put out of court by the fact that the Passover was celebrated at full moon.

The cry of dereliction from Psalm 22:1 is quoted in Aramaic (although a few texts replace *sabachthani* by the original Hebrew form). It is not for us to rush in with an answer to our Lord’s question, since he left it unanswered himself; but his use of this psalm established its recognition in the church as a principal Old Testament “testimony” of his passion and triumph (for the triumph cf. Hebrews 2:12). If *Eli* (“my God”) was pronounced like *Eliya* (a pronunciation for which some Qumran manuscripts provide evidence), the bystanders’ misunderstanding his utterance as a call for Elijah would be intelligible. It was popularly believed that Elijah, who had never died, could make himself available to help people in desperate trouble.

The vinegar (sour wine) may have been intended to alleviate his thirst or to enable him to speak more distinctly. The statement that he “yielded up (dismissed) his spirit” (27:50) suggests that he remained in control of events to the end.

The rending of the temple curtain (probably the curtain separating the inner shrine, the holy of holies, where the invisible presence of the God of

Israel was enthroned, from the outer compartment) signifies that the hitherto hidden God is fully revealed in the death of Christ: its rending “from top to bottom” (27:51) indicates that this full revelation is God’s own act.

The statement of 27:51b-53 (made only by Matthew) is mysterious, and not only because of the time-lag between the first stirring of the Old Testament “saints” and their “coming out of the tombs after his resurrection” (they could not come out earlier because, as 1 Corinthians 15:20 affirms, Christ is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”). There is a suggestion that the death of Christ caused a radical disturbance in the realm of the dead; his victorious supremacy is attested over the grave for “to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Romans 14:9).

The centurion’s testimony (27:54) is impressive: Jesus’ death confirms his claim to be the Son of God.

VAIN THE STONE, THE WATCH, THE SEAL

## MATTHEW 27:55-66

Best to make sure that grave is safe! Quite right, guards. Jesus is full of surprises, and it's nice to know there's no way the disciples could have stolen the body.

OF THE THREE women mentioned in 27:56, only the mother of the sons of Zebedee has appeared earlier in this Gospel (20:20); for Mary of Magdala (west of the Lake of Galilee, between Capernaum and Tiberias) cf. Luke 8:2, and for “Mary the mother of James and Joseph” (called “the other Mary” in 27:61 and 28:1) cf. John 19:25, where she is said to have been the wife of Clopas (possibly a variant of Alphaeus), and Mark 15:40, where her son James is called “James the younger” (perhaps to distinguish him from James the Lord’s brother who figured so prominently in the Jerusalem church until his death in AD 62).

Once Pilate was satisfied that Jesus was really dead (cf. Mark 15:45), he had no objection to allowing Joseph of Arimathea to take away his body for burial. He had no further interest in Jesus, and was not impressed by the Jewish leaders’ anxiety to forestall further trouble. He knew his soldiers, and experience had taught him that if they certified that a man was dead, there was no question of his walking again. But the high priest and his companions could not get the words about rising “after three days” out of their minds—had Judas told them, or did they have some idea that this was the point of the saying about rebuilding the temple in three days (26:61)? If they wanted to

secure the tomb, said Pilate, by all means let them do so; they could use their own temple police, for Roman soldiers could not be spared for such a frivolous exercise. “A guard of soldiers” (27:65) represents Latin *custodia*, “watch,” used as a loanword in Matthew’s Greek. Matthew is the only evangelist to mention the guarding of the tomb and its sequel (28:4,11-15). The “Preparation” (27:62) was Friday of Passover week; the tomb, by Matthew’s account, was left unguarded over Friday night.

**Thought** Joseph acted when, humanly speaking, it was too late. But he was stepping towards the resurrection. The antidote to despair is to do the duty which lies nearest.

**Consider** those features of the crucifixion and events leading up to it, as related by Matthew, which bring out the fact that our Lord remained in control of the situation throughout.

THE EMPTY TOMB

MATTHEW 28:1-15

Jesus is alive—and he is Lord.

THE MORNING STAR was rising on the day after the Sabbath when the two Marys visited the tomb. The verb “was” in 28:2 should probably be rendered “had been” (pluperfect): in that case the earthquake was past and the guards had disappeared by the time the women arrived: only the angel of the Lord remained. His words and the empty tomb, accessible now that the stone was rolled back, bore witness to the fact that the body of Jesus was no longer there. It is worth bearing in mind that no New Testament writer tries to describe Jesus’ resurrection or his leaving the tomb. The women are invited to inspect the ledge on which his body had been laid on Friday night and directed to report his resurrection to the disciples. “He is going before you to Galilee” (28:7) repeats Jesus’ own promise before his arrest (26:32). The promise is repeated again by the risen Lord himself when he meets the women leaving the tomb, but whereas the angel had said “tell his disciples” (28:7), the Lord says “tell my brethren” (28:10; cf. John 20:17). Perhaps the word “brethren” is intended to embrace not only the disciples but the members of our Lord’s own family. They did not believe in him during his ministry, but were numbered among his followers in the days immediately following the ascension (Acts 1:14); to one of them, James, he appears personally in resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7).

The incident of 28:11-15 is proof enough that the guards were not Roman soldiers; no intervention by the chief priests would have kept Roman soldiers out of trouble for such dereliction of duty. The tale they were instructed to tell was feeble enough, but the chief priests “knew what they could get away with” (A. Lunn). If they had thought that some more probable story would hold water, they would not have been reduced to spreading this one. It was still circulating, however, when this Gospel was written, and it may have been responsible for an imperial decree published in Palestine some years earlier, forbidding interference with tombs on pain of death.

“The early Christians did not believe in the resurrection of Christ because they could not find his dead body. They believed because they did find a living Christ” (C.T. Craig).

THE EXALTED LORD SENDS OUT HIS AMBASSADORS

## MATTHEW 28:16-20

The promise of Christ's presence with us by the Holy Spirit is still available for us to know today.

THERE IS NO account of the ascension in Matthew's Gospel. The "mountain to which Jesus had directed" the disciples (28:16) is traditionally identified with the mount of transfiguration (17:1) and is so commemorated on the summit of Tabor. In any case, here as in 17:1 the mountain is a place of revelation (cf. also 5:1).

The statement that "some doubted" is ambiguous in Greek, in that it might refer to others than the eleven, but not certainly so. But Jesus reveals himself to them as the exalted Lord, vested by God with universal authority, and in the exercise of that authority he commissions them to be his ambassadors among "all nations" (cf. 24:14). No longer is their mission restricted to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," as it was during the Galilean ministry (10:5f.); all limitations have now been dropped. Their mission is to be mainly one of instruction—making disciples of all the nations and teaching the disciples thus made to keep all the commandments which they themselves had received from their Lord.

For the later prosecution of this teaching ministry this Gospel provided an excellent manual. The baptism into "the strong name of the Trinity" was specially appropriate for Gentile converts who "turned to God from idols"; Jewish converts and others who already worshiped the living and true God

were called to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and were therefore baptized specifically in (into) his name (Acts 2:38; 8:16, etc). In the discharge of their commission the disciples are given the assurance of their Lord's continuing presence with them "to the close of the age" (28:20).

William Carey, addressing the Northamptonshire Association Ministers' Fraternal in 1791, proposed Matthew 28:19-20 as the subject for discussion, and in particular: "Whether the command given to the Apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of all the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent."

**Compare** Matthew's narrative of resurrection appearances with those of Luke, John and Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-7).

**Consider** the commission of the eleven disciples to teach all nations in the light of Paul's account in Galatians 1:16; 2:1-10, which indicates that the Jerusalem leaders were entrusted with the evangelization of Jews, leaving Paul and Barnabas to evangelize Gentiles.

## INTRODUCTION

# MARK

I. HOWARD MARSHALL

BY ALMOST UNIVERSAL consent this is the oldest written account of the life of Jesus which we possess, composed some thirty years after his death in or for the church at Rome by John Mark, the “interpreter” of Peter.

The book presents Jesus as the Son of God who gave his life as a ransom for many, in terms obviously geared to the Roman, Gentile mind.

This, the shortest of the Gospels, is a vigorously written evangelistic tract, portraying Jesus as the early Christians saw him. And like every tract its contents call for a response to the facts it presents. While it is true that almost everything Mark records has been scrutinized by skeptical critics who are prepared to deny the historicity of the major proportion of Mark’s story, there are excellent historical grounds for accepting the reliability of his record.

THE PREFACE

MARK 1:1-3

In his opening words, Mark introduces us to the theme of all that is to follow.

MARK BEGINS HIS book by telling us what he is going to do in it. 1:1 gives the title and theme: it is the *good news of Jesus*, the good news which he proclaimed and whose essential content is himself. Since, however, the theme of the good news is a particular person, the book looks like a biography, although the interest is concentrated on those parts of the life of Jesus which constitute the good news. Moreover, the good news is a piece of history, although Mark does not stop to prove its historicity.

The theme, then, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Each part of the name is significant. Jesus was a name common among the Jews; for its meaning see Matthew 1:21. Christ is the Greek equivalent of “Messiah,” ie “anointed”; the deliverer of his people. “Son of God” gives us the deepest secret of the person of Jesus. The rest of the Gospel should be read as a justification by Mark for these titles being given to Jesus.

“The beginning” probably refers to the whole story of Jesus as the origin of the Christian good news, and the ensuing quotation is used to put the beginning of the ministry in its proper scriptural context. The words quoted are a compound from three places in the Old Testament—Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 (hence the correction of the text in later manuscripts recorded in RSV margin). The first part is taken from a passage in

which God promises to send his angel to guide his people to the Promised Land. In the Old Testament itself the exodus from Egypt was seen as the pattern for God's future acts of redemption. The second part of the quotation (Malachi 3:1) itself echoes the language of Exodus as it speaks of the coming of the Lord in judgment preceded by his messenger. The combination of this verse with Malachi 4:5 suggested that this messenger would be a second Elijah (cf. 9:13). Finally, Isaiah 40:3 summons captive Israel to prepare a way for the Lord in the desert along which he would lead them to redemption.

Thus the coming of Jesus is placed in a setting of redemption and judgment.

JOHN AND JESUS

## MARK 1:4-11

John emphasized that someone was coming who would be completely different from Jesus.

ALTHOUGH JOHN WAS popularly known as “the baptizer,” his work is described here as preaching (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17). He announced that God offered forgiveness of sins to those who would display their repentance in the act of baptism. He insisted on the connection of baptism with repentance, ie “a coming to one’s senses resulting in a change of conduct.”

In appearance John resembled Elijah (2 Kings 1:8); like Elijah he heralded the coming of a mightier One (Malachi 3:1; 4:5).

1:8 is not too easy to understand. When used with the word “water” the meaning of “baptize” is “dip” or “wash” for a religious purpose. But one can hardly speak of dipping people in the Spirit; “baptize” must be taken in a metaphorical sense to signify cleansing in which the Spirit purifies the “inner man” just as water cleanses outwardly.

But to what was John looking forward? In Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16 John speaks of a coming baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This may be understood as the cleansing effect of the Spirit in those who repent, being like fire in its effects (cf. Acts 1:5).

Mark does not tell us why Jesus submitted to John’s baptism (Matthew 3:14f.). He is more interested in the spiritual event for which the baptism

provided the form. But we see in his baptism his willingness to share in the lot of sinful Israel and to bear its sin.

The Spirit descended upon Jesus, and a voice spoke to him from the opened heavens. For the coming of the Spirit we are reminded of such passages as Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 61:1 which speak of the Spirit being given to certain people as their anointing for kingly and prophetic service. The significance of the heavenly voice is less clear. Probably we have a combination of two texts, Psalm 2:7, in which God addresses the anointed king as his Son, and Isaiah 42:1, in which God addresses his Servant in whom he delights and upon whom he has put his Spirit. Thus the heavenly voice addresses Jesus as the Son of God who must perform the ministry of the Servant of God, and this declaration is confirmed by the anointing of the Spirit. God's seal is set upon the vocation of Jesus and he goes forth in the power of the Spirit.

## THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

### MARK 1:12-13

Jesus' temptation was a preparation for his ministry.

MARK GIVES ONLY the briefest account of the event that immediately followed the baptism of Jesus (contrast Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). After Jesus had received God's commission and power for his work, he was sent by the Spirit farther into the wilderness, away from human contacts, and there he faced Satan in single combat. Satan appears in the New Testament as the one who tempts men to turn aside from the will of God, accuses them before God when they fall, and seeks their destruction. He is the prince of this world, and it was to defeat him and set his prisoners free that Jesus entered upon his ministry.

The position of the story suggests that the temptation was a preparation or probation for the ensuing ministry. Jesus encountered the prince of evil personally before attacking his minions. Support for this view has often been sought in the "forty days" which are regarded as being parallel to the forty years of Israel's journeyings in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2,16) or to the forty days of Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19.8); but neither of these Old Testament periods was one of temptation by the evil one, and it is probably best to conclude that forty days is simply a round number meaning a "long-ish" time with no typological significance.

The "wild beasts" suggest the loneliness and evil associations of the area, far removed from civilization (Isaiah 13:20f.; 34:9ff.; Psalm 22:11-21). There

may perhaps also be the thought that the wild beasts are subject to Jesus (Job 5:22f.; Psalm 91:13; Isaiah 11:69). On the other side, the angels are the allies of Jesus (Psalm 91:11f.) who aid him in his contest (cf. 1 Kings 19:5,7); “ministered” need not be confined to providing food, especially since Mark does not mention that Jesus fasted, but has a more general sense.

So the story ends, but not the temptation. See 8:11, 10:2 and 12:15 for the recurrence of temptation in a less obvious fashion, for here it comes through men rather than in a wilderness from an agent who may be more easily recognizable.

We are not told explicitly that Jesus overcame the tempter, but the fact is obvious from the way in which the story continues (see the comment on 3:27).

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

MARK 1:14-15

Jesus announces the good news.

JESUS HAD ALREADY been active before John was arrested (John 3:22-24), but this event marked the commencement of his own work proper in the area around Galilee. Galilee was a comparatively small area, some 50 miles long and 25 wide.

His work is fully summed up as “preaching the gospel of God.” Although the Gospel of Mark concentrates chiefly on what Jesus did, he was fully aware that Jesus brought a message of good news about God by word and deed.

We have here a précis of that message. It was that the time of waiting and expectation (cf. Daniel 7:22) had ended and the kingdom of God had drawn near. Here, “kingdom” really means kingship or rule. To the Jews this phrase denoted that God is the eternal King in heaven who expects men to obey his royal law. They cherished the hope that one day God would act visibly and powerfully to set up his kingly rule in a rebellious world. This act would be one of redemption for those who obeyed God as king (the Jews themselves!) and of judgment upon those who oppressed them (eg the Romans!). The announcement of its coming was therefore truly a piece of good news (Isaiah 52:7).

Jesus’ announcement contained two revolutionary points. First he stated that the kingdom was “at hand”; the Greek verb may mean that it had actually

arrived or (more probably) that it was very near. Jesus saw his ministry as the inauguration of a new era of salvation in whose coming Calvary and Pentecost were decisive stages. This new era would lead inevitably to the consummation of God's kingship in an open and glorious manner in the future. There would be two stages, the inauguration of the era of salvation in Jesus' earthly ministry and the church, and the consummation of God's rule with the final judgment upon all who refused God's salvation offered through Jesus.

The second revolutionary point was that Jesus summoned the *Jews* to repent in view of this great announcement. They as much as the Gentiles were not fit for God's rule. In this he was like John; but whereas John could only look forward to the coming of the mightier One, now the mightier One himself called them to believe the good news and prove for themselves that salvation really had come.

RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

MARK 1:16-20

Jesus calls his first disciples.

IT IS NO accident that the summary of the gospel message is followed by the story of the call of the first disciples of Jesus. It is thereby made crystal clear that to repent and believe in the gospel is nothing other than to follow Jesus. It is through Jesus that the gospel comes to men, and the witness of the whole New Testament is that the gospel cannot be separated from him. If he is the preacher of the gospel, he is equally the content of the gospel, and one cannot believe in the gospel in any other way than by making a personal commitment of oneself to him.

It is Jesus himself who calls men to be disciples. Plainly this does not rule out previous contact with or knowledge of him. We know from John 1 that some of these men had already met him. If we are told nothing about this here and almost gain the impression that Jesus' call came "out of the blue," it is because the story has been so abbreviated and sharpened as to bring out the one essential lesson that Jesus calls men to respond to the gospel by following him. The fishermen are thus brought into the story without any detailed introduction, and we learn nothing of the circumstances which enabled them to down tools and follow Jesus on the spur of the moment; 1:29ff. (cf. 5:18f.) show that a radical break with home and its associations was not involved.

The call of Jesus was to follow, ie accompany him, and to share his task. He was the first fisher of men. The metaphor was obviously suggested by the daily occupation of the new disciples, and those scholars who argue that Jesus could not have used the metaphor in a good sense because elsewhere it is used in a bad sense (Jeremiah 16:16; Ezekiel 47:10) prove nothing beyond the wrong-headedness of their scholarship.

To follow Jesus as a disciple did not always require literal walking in his footsteps through Palestine, but it did demand that a man should own Jesus as his Master and work out his whole life afresh in the light of that relationship (8:34f.). There is nothing intrinsically wrong in fishing as an occupation—Jesus himself joined in fishing on occasion (Luke 5:1-11)—but following Jesus may mean saying “No” even to what is normally legitimate when he has a task for us to do. The big question is: does he call all his disciples to be fishers of men, or was this simply a special call to the apostles?

## THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

### MARK 1:21-28

Jesus shows his authority by driving out an evil spirit.

THE SCENE WHICH follows the calling of the fishermen is very different in character, but is equally important in showing us at the outset the nature of Jesus' mission. If the preceding story told how men responded to the authoritative call of Jesus, this incident shows how his authority extended even to the world of evil spirits.

Jesus had gone into the synagogue and received an invitation to preach such as might be given by the leaders to any man whom they considered competent to address the people (Acts 13:15). All the emphasis lies on the fact that Jesus taught (ie preached) with a note of authority which was not characteristic of the other religious teachers of the day; what has survived of the teaching of the scribes or rabbis shows that they loved to quote their predecessors. The congregation's amazement at this prophetic type of utterance turned to astonishment and alarm as a man with an unclean spirit loudly interrupted the proceedings by challenging Jesus to his face (cf. 1 Kings 17:18 for the words). Jesus rebuked the spirit and called it to come out of the man.

To modern people demon possession is one of the most difficult things in the Gospels. Several times Jesus was confronted by men suffering from what we would be inclined to diagnose as some kind of mental or psychosomatic illness, and he cured them by a word. But demon possession differs from

mental illness in that the possessed showed uncanny insight into the true identity of Jesus as the holy One (Psalm 16:10; John 6:69) or Son (Mark 3:11; 5:7) of God.

Now stories of similar phenomena are found in pagan sources, and the temptation of the critic is to dismiss the Gospel stories as having been modelled on these pagan patterns. But is this so? Reports of demon possession in the biblical sense sometimes occur today, and some modern thinkers are coming to realize the existence of a world of evil that transcends the world of men and exercises a baleful influence upon it. We may also ask with regard to the biblical stories whether there may not have been a concurrent activity of unclean spirits in the mentally ill to give them their strange insight into the identity of Jesus just as we speak of the concurrent activity of the Holy Spirit in the minds of the inspired writers of Scripture.

JESUS THE HEALER

## MARK 1:29-34

Jesus performed his miracles as signs of God's presence and power.

THE DAY ON which Jesus came into Peter's home and cured his mother-in-law of a fever would be indelibly impressed upon his memory. The healing action of Jesus arose from his compassion and his determination to carry the rule of God into effect over physical evil, just as he had already demonstrated its authority over the demonic powers. His power was further demonstrated that same evening.

What is the place of Jesus' healing power in the gospel message today? An older form of Christian apologetic used to argue: because Jesus worked miracles, he must have been divine. Today, others, more skeptical about the very possibility of miracles, prefer to work in the opposite direction: if Jesus was divine, then he could have worked miracles. In other words, if they believe on other grounds that Jesus was divine, they will be prepared to consider the possibility that he wrought miracles.

The following points are relevant:

1. The popular modern supposition that "miracles do not happen" is only a supposition and is scientifically unprovable. The scientist's assumption that nature behaves uniformly is a necessary one if he is to pursue his scientific research, but it is only an assumption, and it cannot be used to

rule out the occasional, apparently arbitrary irruption of the supernatural into the world.

2. Granted, however, that miracles are not impossible events, the factor that weighs most with many scholars is Hume's celebrated argument that it is in general much more likely that the witnesses were lying or mistaken (a very common occurrence!) than that a miracle occurred. Can we trust the witnesses on whose evidence the stories of Jesus' power rest? On this point all that we can do here is to note that so critical a scholar as G. Bornkamm, who would admit the presence of much legend in the miracle stories, says plainly that it is hard to doubt that physical power to heal emanated from Jesus.
3. It was possible for men to see the miracles of Jesus and yet not to believe that he was divine or commit their lives to him. In a sense they were not compelling signs (John 12:37).
4. Jesus performed his miracles not as wonders to impress people with his supernatural power but as signs of the gracious presence and kingly power of God. It was their spiritual significance that mattered ultimately, *but they could never have had any significance whatsoever if they had not taken place.*

PRAYER AND HEALING

MARK 1:35-45

We see Jesus' prayer as the vital initial ingredient contributing to his power and authority.

THE STORY OF this day in the life of Jesus concludes with the account of Jesus rising early in the morning to pray quietly before the day's work. This was no doubt his normal practice. For his prayer life, study 6:46; 14:32-39; 15:34; Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18,28f.; 11:1; 23:46; Matthew 19:13; John 11:41f.; 12:27f.; 17. The force of his example was profound: his disciples asked to be taught to pray as he did (Luke 11:1-4), and he gladly responded to their request: see Mark 9:29; 11:17,24f.; 12:40; 13:18.

Probably Jesus prayed especially on this occasion because he was seeking guidance for the future. It was not an easy decision to leave a place of successful ministry and excellent prospects (1:37), but Jesus had to go to the surrounding towns ("villages" is a better translation): it was, he said, for this task of *preaching* to all Israel that he had come out, ie been sent by God.

So Jesus embarked on a wider ministry, although he returned more than once to Capernaum. One final incident is related, typical of this period of work. Leprosy is a word loosely used to cover a number of skin diseases ranging from true leprosy (Hanson's bacillus) to ringworm. Jesus' motive in healing was again compassion (1:41); the NEB, following a different Greek text, has "in warm indignation," which would refer to Jesus' anger at the work of evil in the world.

An important element in the story is that Jesus sternly commanded the man to keep quiet about his cure, except for registering himself with the priest who acted as the health official in a community where the physical and religious effects of unclean diseases were closely linked (Leviticus 14:1-32). Frequently Jesus sought to keep his miracles as secret as possible and silenced the demons who revealed his identity, but his wishes were hard to put into effect (1:45). Why Jesus sought to work in secret has become the major problem of interpretation in this Gospel. It is most reasonable to believe that Jesus himself was anxious not to make a public display which would precipitate a popular uprising. The people were looking for a Messiah who would fit in with their own preconceived ideas and would readily rally to Jesus if he gave them any excuse to do so. He made a “secret revelation” of himself so that those with eyes to see might recognize him as God’s messenger, and to those who accepted him he revealed himself more fully and openly. The way in which even they often misunderstood him showed how right he was to adopt this manner of working.

## THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

### MARK 2:1-12

Jesus heals a paralytic ... and forgives him too.

FROM A VERY early date the ministry of Jesus, whose general character we have now seen, aroused controversy and opposition; the next section of the Gospel (2:1–3:6) brings together a series of incidents which illustrate this conflict.

The present story, therefore, is told not simply to demonstrate the healing power of Jesus (contrast the earlier stories), but rather to demonstrate the deeper issues. It begins by carrying further the lesson on the need for faith which was implicit in 1:40ff. Palestinian houses had a flat roof, used for additional living space, which was reached by an outside stairway. Faith was seen in persistence and determination to reach Jesus by this unusual route.

But with 2:5 the story takes a surprising turn. Instead of healing the man in response to his faith, Jesus declared to him the forgiveness of his sins. Did this imply that the man was a notorious sinner (cf. John 5:14)? Or was this particular disease a consequence of sin? We cannot tell. Jesus explicitly denied that disaster and disease are necessarily caused by sin (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:2f.). But sin and disease are both effects of evil, and Jesus took this opportunity to show God's opposition to evil in the whole man.

The scribes responded to the declaration perfectly correctly. Only the offended person can forgive the offender, so that only God can forgive sin. A prophet could speak in his name (2 Samuel 12:13), but could Jesus be a

prophet in an age when prophecy had died out? Surely he was behaving blasphemously by violating the power and authority of God? Jesus, therefore, sought to give visible proof of his authority and ability to grant the invisible (and therefore unverifiable) act of forgiveness by performing the act of healing that was equally God's prerogative and impossible for an ordinary man. This would show that he did possess authority, but not simply that of a prophet. He claimed the authority of the Son of man. The Aramaic phrase which Jesus here used could apparently be understood as a substitute for "I" (like "this poor man" in Psalm 34:6) or as a title for a divine being (cf. Daniel 7:13). Jesus chose this ambiguous form of expression so as to leave an air of mystery around his identity.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE GOSPEL

MARK 2:13-22

Mark describes Jesus' mission in bringing his love to those who needed it most.

THE CALL OF Levi resembles that of the four fishermen, but its lesson is not so much to show how men should respond to the call of Jesus as to indicate the kind of men Jesus called. Levi, otherwise known as Matthew (3:18; Matthew 9:9), was a tax-collector, engaged in collecting customs dues for Herod Antipas on goods passing in and out of Galilee, and the kind of company that he kept consisted of tax-collectors and "sinners." The tax-collectors were, in general, in the pay of the Romans and fleeced their fellow Jews; they mixed freely with Gentiles, so that they were ritually unclean, and their morals were not above question (Luke 19:8). The "sinners" were either persons of open immorality or perhaps simply that section of the populace who made no effort to live up to the rigid standards of the Pharisees. For Jesus to consort with such people was to bring him into direct conflict with the Pharisees who were the most influential religious party in the country. The theme of the story is therefore Jesus' defense of his gospel of divine grace and of his mission in bringing it to those who needed it most. To ask whether 2:17 implies that there are some righteous is to miss the point; the implication is surely that Jesus would welcome the Pharisees if they realized their need.

Although the Old Testament prescribed fasting for all Jews only on the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), the Pharisees prescribed fasting

on Mondays and Thursdays (Luke 18:12). Unlike John, Jesus had not taught his disciples to fast frequently. He defended them with three parables:

1. “Can you expect wedding guests to fast in the bridegroom’s presence?” (Phillips). Wedding imagery is often used for the era of salvation (Hosea 2:19; Ezekiel 16:7ff.; Isaiah 54:4f.; 62:4ff.). The Jews did not think of the Messiah as the heavenly bridegroom, but Jesus evidently so regarded himself, and 2:20 is surely an allusion to his coming death (cf. Isaiah 53:8; John 16:20).
2. The ministry of Jesus was the time not only of joy but also of newness. To try to bind the new movement to the old religion of Judaism would be like attaching a new, unshrunk spare collar to an old shirt; disaster at the first wash!
3. It is equally foolish to contain new, fermenting wine in old wineskins; as the wine expands, both it and the skins will be lost. The joy of the new message is not to be checked by Jewish legalism.

**Consider** Levi as an evangelist.

## KEEPING THE SABBATH

### MARK 2:23–3:6

A rigid attitude to man-made rules and traditions is far from the spirit of the kingdom.

THE FOURTH AND fifth stories of conflict are concerned with observance of the Sabbath. The Old Testament law forbade plowing and reaping on the Sabbath (Exodus 34:21). The Pharisees' detailed interpretation of this law had been transgressed, and they demanded an explanation from Jesus. He referred them to David's action at Nob; a clear transgression of Mosaic legislation (Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9). It is often said that David was breaking the law of God in a case of necessity, and that Jesus was justifying the same procedure on the part of his disciples. Rather, he was showing that David's action is one that was not condemned by Scripture: similarly, his disciples were not breaking any Scriptural law but only the Pharisaic, pedantic interpretation of it. Two new positive principles are established. First, the Sabbath exists for man's benefit, and man-made rules that make it a burden to observe are wrong. Second, if the Sabbath is made for man, how much more has man's lord and representative, the Son of man, authority over its use. Note the deeper implication of this statement: in the Old Testament the Sabbath is the *Lord's* day, so that by claiming lordship over it Jesus is implicitly claiming equality with God.

In the story in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 the priest's name is Ahimelech; no fully satisfactory explanation as to why the better-known Abiathar is mentioned

here exists. The value of the story is not affected.

In Jewish law a man was warned rather than punished as a “first offender” since, it was argued, he might be acting unwittingly; if he transgressed a second time, he was obviously wilfully ignoring the warning and was then liable to punishment. This may be the background to this second story about sabbath-breaking. Healing was permitted on the Sabbath only if life was in danger. Opinions differ about 3:4: did Jesus simply mean by “do harm” and “kill,” “not to heal,” or was he not thinking of the malicious plotting of the Pharisees? The latter were rapidly hardening their hearts against the grace of the kingdom (cf. 6:52; 8:17). The Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas, and an alliance between them and the Pharisees was utterly inconceivable; evil can unite men as well as good (3:6)!

## THE CHOICE OF THE TWELVE

### MARK 3:7-19

The first duty of the apostles was to be with Christ to learn from him,  
and then extend his work.

ALTHOUGH JESUS MAY have found it judicious to “withdraw” because of the Pharisees’ opposition to his work, he was certainly losing none of his popular appeal. Crowds were coming from areas outside Galilee—from the south (Judea, Jerusalem and Idumea), the east (Transjordan) and the north (Tyre and Sidon). The impact of his healing miracles was so intense that he had to retreat to a boat in order to fulfill his task of preaching.

With this increased spread in his influence the time had come for Jesus to appoint twelve men as his special helpers. They were first of all to be with him in order to learn from him, and only then were they to go out and extend his work. These twelve were the nucleus of the later and wider group of apostles. Their number is significant; we cannot help comparing the fact that there were twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28), and also that Moses appointed twelve spies to go into Canaan—and gave one of them a new name (Numbers 13:8,16). We are justified in seeing here the beginning of a new Israel. It is also significant that Jesus himself was not one of the twelve.

The list as Mark records it indicates how some of the twelve received new names. Simon became Peter (Greek for “rock”; the Aramaic equivalent is Cephas), an allusion to the character of life and function which Jesus envisaged for him. James is the same name as Old Testament Jacob. The

name “Boanerges” continues to tease scholars. It is often taken in a derogatory sense (cf. 9:38; Luke 9:54-55), but it seems unlikely that Jesus would have given such an uncomplimentary designation to his disciples: was their witness to Jesus to be as loud as thunder? Andrew and Philip have Greek names, showing how far Greek culture had been assimilated in Palestine. Bartholomew is probably Nathanael (John 1:45ff.). “Thomas” is from Aramaic *Teoma* (a twin), identical in meaning with the Greek “Didymus.” James, the son of Alphaeus, is probably “James the younger” (15:40), possibly the brother of Levi/Matthew. For Thaddaeus, Luke has “Judas the son of James” (cf. John 14:22). “Cananaean” has nothing to do with Canaan, but means a Zealot or extreme Jewish nationalist. “Iscariot” may mean “man of Kerioth” or be connected with Latin *sicarius*, an assassin.

It is common to note what a mixed catch the Great Fisher had taken and how he brought them together in harmony. Christian unity begins at this individual level.

## OPPOSITION TO JESUS

### MARK 3:20-35

The spread of Jesus' fame was constantly accompanied by misunderstanding and opposition.

TWO NEW GROUPS now appear who swelled the opposition of the local religious leaders.

The local religious leaders had presumably invited an official deputation to come from Jerusalem and give a verdict. While even to his friends Jesus' conduct seemed strange, to his enemies it appeared that he was under the power of the devil. "Beelzebub" was the name of an ancient Canaanite deity ("Baal the prince"), probably understood as meaning "lord of the high place" or "lord of the dwelling" (cf. Matthew 10:25); here it denotes Satan. Jesus felt obliged to defend himself, and used a series of parables or similitudes. He argued that if the demons were Satan's minions, then exorcisms would be due to Satan acting against his own allies, and this would obviously speedily lead to his downfall. Consequently, to say that Jesus was in league with Satan was to be illogical. In fact the opposite was the case: the plundering of Satan's house by Jesus implies that he is in opposition to Satan and has bound him. The argument resembles that in Isaiah 49:24f. (cf. perhaps Isaiah 53:12): just as a hunter might overpower a wild beast and then release his prey, so God delivers his people.

But when did Jesus bind Satan? Elsewhere the defeat of the evil powers is associated with the cross (Colossians 2:15; John 12:31). Was Jesus thinking

of the temptation and conflict in the wilderness? Or was he simply using the comparison to show that the exorcisms proved that he must be opposed to Satan? In any case, the saying brings out how Jesus knew himself to be the Stronger One.

Then in 3:28-30 Jesus takes the offensive. To suggest that Jesus' works, done in the power of the Spirit, were really the work of Satan came perilously near to committing a sin that cannot be forgiven. This sin is the attitude that regards good as evil and evil as good; such a person has so sunk in moral insensibility that he cannot repent and be forgiven. It follows that the person who worries lest he has committed this sin is unlikely to have committed it.

The final lesson of the section was occasioned by the presence of Jesus' family. Spiritual relationships, says Jesus, matter every bit as much as physical ones. Those who obey God and hence know him as their Father find themselves to be brothers (Matthew 23:8f.).

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

### MARK 4:1-9

Notice the obstacles that interfere with the effectiveness of the seed.

ONE OF THE most characteristic features of the teaching of Jesus was his use of parables; they were collected together by his hearers, and this chapter gives such a collection of stories which were no doubt told frequently in many places. The present occasion was a return to the lakeside where once again Jesus had to find an improvised pulpit (cf. 3:9).

In the Old Testament we find a considerable number of sayings which might be described as parables—pithy proverbs (1 Samuel 24:13), riddles (Psalm 49:4), proverbial examples of disaster (Deuteronomy 23:37), oracles (Numbers 23:7), and fables, tales and allegories (Ezekiel 17:2-10). Almost any kind of non-literal statement could be called a parable. Parables are, therefore, unusual ways of speaking that convey a sharp and pointed lesson. The parables of Jesus include proverbs (Luke 4:23), metaphors and similes (Mark 2:21f.; 3:23), typical events (eg the Sower) and stories of particular incidents (eg the Good Samaritan). Sometimes there is only one main point, sometimes a more extended lesson.

Here is such a story, demanding the reader's full attention as much as that of the original hearer (4:3,9); make sure you get to the bottom of this, says Jesus, for it is not simply a lesson in agriculture! The story itself is perfectly clear with its description of the farmer sowing his seed broadcast over different parts of the field. But what does it mean? For the moment forget that

there is an “explanation” later in the chapter. The crowds did not hear that explanation: what would they have made of the parable? Was Jesus comforting his disciples who saw little result from the mission and promising that a glorious harvest was coming? Or was he telling the people to listen to the message with care, so that they might be like good ground? Or was he reflecting on the very mixed success of his work and concluding that, just as in agriculture, this was only to be expected? Or what? “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

## THE MEANING OF THE PARABLES

### MARK 4:10-20

The seed is good, but the ground may vary in quality.

AT THIS POINT in the chapter there is an interlude which relates how on a later occasion Jesus gave his disciples a private explanation both of the parables in general and of the parable of the sower in particular. 4:10 shows that the disciples of Jesus were a wider group than the Twelve.

The words of Jesus in 4:11-12 are not easy. The word “secret” almost means the opposite of what it usually means in English! It refers to the plan of God, long kept secret, but now revealed to the men of his choice. God’s plan to act in kingly power for the salvation of men has now been made known to the disciples, and they should understand what is taking place in the ministry of Jesus. But to those outside this circle everything that takes place in the ministry of Jesus happens in “parables” or riddles; they cannot understand what is going on. The result is that the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9f. is fulfilled; they see and hear what is happening, but they do not perceive its inner significance, and consequently they do not repent and receive God’s forgiveness.

There are two difficult points here. First, it appears from this statement that the parables—and indeed the whole ministry of Jesus—are meant to conceal the “secret” rather than to reveal it. But it is a biblical principle that “from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away”; when men close their minds to the truth, God takes away from them the chance of

responding to it. The parables were meant to provoke people to probe after their deeper meaning: but if they refused to make the effort, and thought that there was nothing in them, the form of the parables would effectively conceal the truth from them. Second, it looks as though Jesus is here dividing men into two rigid groups: there are those to whom God has revealed the truth and those from whom he has concealed it. This, however, is not so. Throughout the ministry of Jesus it was open to any man to pass from the group of “outsiders” and become a disciple. The revelation in the teaching of Jesus was for all, and it was only the people who persistently closed their minds to his teaching who found their opportunity of understanding it being taken from them.

The explanation of the parable of the sower shows that the parable is an appeal to men to be careful how they hear the teaching of Jesus. The seed is good, but the ground may vary in quality.

## FURTHER TEACHING IN PARABLES

### MARK 4:21-34

We are to let Christ's message have its full effect in our lives.

WITH 4:21 WE return to the public teaching of Jesus. A brief series of parabolic sayings is followed by a further two parables and a conclusion to the whole section in which Mark reiterates how Jesus used the parables to speak to the crowds.

In the opening sayings (4:21-25) the second part is easier to understand; it confirms our view of the parable of the sower by urging the people to take heed how they listen to the words of Jesus, for the way in which they listen will determine what they get out of them. Lack of attention will lead to loss, but keen attention will be rewarded by an even fuller measure of understanding.

But what of the preceding verses? Jesus says that lights are not meant to be hidden but to be placed where they will give illumination. If, therefore, a light is hidden, this can only be for a temporary period and in the end it will shine forth. Now in Matthew 5:15; 10:26f., where the same metaphor is used, the point is that the disciples must not conceal the message entrusted to them, for one day it will be openly revealed to the world. Here, however, the point is rather that at present the parables (and the whole mission of Jesus) are not easy to understand, but one day the meaning will be clearly revealed. Jesus worked secretly, as it were, in his earthly ministry, but the meaning of his

ministry was to be revealed in due course as God gloriously vindicated him and brought in his kingly rule in power.

This fits in with the two parables that follow. Once man has sown seed, the way in which it grows and inevitably comes to fruition without human intervention is God's secret. The ministry of Jesus was the time of sowing; that seed would certainly grow and lead to a glorious harvest. Similarly, the parable of the mustard seed contrasts the tiny beginnings of the kingship of God—the preaching of an unknown prophet in a corner of Palestine—with the greatness of the end result; perhaps the birds are meant to symbolize the Gentiles, but they may simply be meant to indicate the great size of the tree. Let not men, therefore, be misled by the smallness and quietness of the beginnings, but let them make sure that they penetrate the mystery of the rule of God and themselves enter in.

THE MASTER OF THE STORM

MARK 4:35-41

Jesus understands our weaknesses, but what can we learn from the disciples about how to respond to difficulties in our lives?

AFTER THE DAY of teaching by the lakeside, Jesus resolved to cross over to the south-east corner. Probably he wished for rest and quiet, and therefore sought an area where fewer Jews resided. The story continues in the next chapter as if everything took place on the same day; this would certainly overcrowd the remaining hours of the day, and it is likely that the journey took place overnight or that there is an unmentioned interval somewhere in the story.

The journey was interrupted by one of those sudden squalls which are characteristic of the lake, hemmed in as it is by steep mountains and narrow valleys down which the wind is funnelled upon it. Was this squall so severe that experienced sailors were worried? Or was it rather the landlubbers in the boat who panicked? 4:38 may suggest that the sailors expected Jesus to do something to save them (Matthew 8:25) rather than that they were simply complaining that, while they were working for dear life to bale out the boat and bring it under control, one passenger, like Jonah before him, was unconcerned and asleep. Yet when Jesus did act to rebuke the wind and the sea in masterful tones, they were stunned with surprise. They rightly asked, "Who then is this?" Their question is to be answered from the Old Testament where it is God who controls the elements (Psalm 89:8f.; 93:3f.; 106:8f.;

107:23-30; Isaiah 51:9f.). It was his power that was revealed in Jesus. But whether the disciples fully realized this is uncertain.

Some readers try to preserve the meaning of the miracle (the power of God revealed in Jesus) without accepting its historicity. It should be plainly said that if the miracle did not happen then the power of God was not revealed in this event; if the miracle did not happen, and yet the early church believed that the power of God was revealed in this incident, then their belief was mistaken and is worth nothing. You cannot have your cake and eat it.

THE GERASENE DEMONIAK

MARK 5:1-20

Do you have any vested interests that would be disturbed if Jesus was working powerfully in and around your life?

IT IS NO doubt bad enough to be a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde type of person, alternating between two different states of personality. It is much worse to be the victim of a whole series of simultaneous conflicting impulses and demonic powers, as was the case with this man who knew himself to be inhabited by a whole legion of demons. He suffered from what today would be called a particularly severe manic-depressive psychosis which rendered him incapable of living a normal life in human society; we get a grim glimpse of the only cure that the ancient world knew for such poor sufferers—restraint and confinement. Once again, however, the illness was not purely physical, for the man possessed the uncanny knowledge of the demon-possessed as to who Jesus was.

Three points of difficulty arise in the story:

1. Where did it happen? The manuscripts give different possibilities. Gerasa was some thirty miles south-east of the lake; its “country” must have stretched to the lake side. Gadara (Matthew 8:28) was six miles from the lake. Gergesa (RSV mg.) is modern Khersa on the lakeside, and the cure took place near here.

2. The aftermath of the cure. Many people have found it difficult to credit the story of the demons passing from the man into the swine. So far as the moral difficulty of the destruction of the swine is concerned, it is sufficient to say that one man is of much greater value than many swine. Attempts to give a rational explanation of what happened are all conjectural. The vital point is the effects of the cure on the local people. They showed themselves to be much more interested in their swine than in the cure. When every allowance is made for their loss of livelihood, can their attitude be justified? Note that the old argument that, as Jews, they shouldn't have been keeping swine, is dubious; the people concerned were possibly Gentiles.
3. Why was the man not told to keep silent about his cure? Was it because it was Gentile territory? Or because Jesus himself did not intend to work in that area himself?

THE WOMAN WITH A HAEMORRHAGE

MARK 5:21-34

Jesus can deal with many different needs at the same time, even when everything seems hopeless.

SOME INDICATION OF the pressure under which Jesus worked is given by this story of two people appealing for his help simultaneously. Jairus was a man responsible for the management of the synagogue. (The actual work was done by the “hazzan” or beadle mentioned in Luke 4:20.) His appeal to Jesus shows that by no means all the religious leaders of Galilee were opposed to Jesus. Knowing the power of Jesus he had the faith to seek healing for his sick daughter. According to Matthew 9:18 Jairus said that she had already died, but this difference is due to the fact that Matthew abbreviates the story and does not mention the servants who brought this news to Jairus (Mark 5:35).

As if to strengthen the faith of Jairus while the party made its way to his house, there took place the healing of a woman who had had a haemorrhage for twelve years. The reference to the doctors is not meant to cast a slight upon an honored profession, but to show how intractable the disease was. The woman was shy of appearing in public and especially before a religious teacher because her disease rendered her unclean. She hoped to take advantage of the crowd to touch the garment of Jesus and slip away unobserved. The uncharitable may say that she was superstitious. Perhaps in some measure she was, but Jesus is greater than superstition, and in response

to her real faith she received healing. The way in which her cure is described indicates a certain supernatural quality about the person of Jesus. It is wrong to think that the power passed involuntarily from him, just as a battery might be accidentally short-circuited by contact with a piece of metal. The spiritual power of Jesus is not to be narrowly confined within human categories of interpretation and consequently misunderstood. Jesus himself made sure that there could be no remaining ground for superstition in the woman's mind, and brought her into the open so that she might recover her self-respect and know healing for her soul as well as for her body. He showed his love and care for her as an individual, and spoke a healing word which transformed what might have been a mechanical act into a personal relationship.

There is a lesson here for all who help people. Care—even spiritual care—is incomplete if it is unaccompanied by love.

THE DAUGHTER OF JAIRUS

MARK 5:35-43

Here is a promise of Christ's power.

THE ARRIVAL OF the sick woman and her cure may have been providentially intended to sustain the faith of Jairus. He may not have seen it in this way. After all, she was taking the attention of Jesus away from him, and with every moment that passed his little girl could be getting worse. His fears were confirmed by the arrival of the message that she had died. This was surely the end. To cure illness was one thing; to raise the dead was quite another. It is surely more likely that Jesus "overheard" (RSV margin) rather than "ignored" the fatal message, and promptly acted to relieve the anxiety of the sorrowing father.

At the house the elaborate ritual of Jewish mourning had already commenced; in an eastern climate the whole business of burying the dead was accomplished with the utmost speed (Acts 5:5-7). Jesus upbraided the mourners because, he said, the child was not dead but asleep. That is enough for the rationalists! Obviously the girl had never died at all and was only in a coma; only later was the story heightened by saying that she had died. But notice that Jesus had not yet seen the child, and he was not in the habit of making medical diagnoses. On the other hand, he cannot simply be describing death as sleep. He means that she is in a state from which she can be awakened, death and yet not final, irrevocable death. Here, then, is promise of his power.

The miracle is simply described. The words of command are no magic formula, but the actual Aramaic phrase that Jesus used. His thoughtful care is seen in the command that she be given some food. The injunction that nobody should know what happened is strange. Surely a cure like this could not be kept secret? But Jesus was concerned with the actual act of healing which he conducted in privacy. The people outside the room could speculate about what had happened, but they could never be certain. Only in the presence of faith did Jesus show his power. Even the pagan Plato once wrote: "To find the maker and father of this universe is a hard task; and when you have found him, it is impossible to speak of him before all people."

## UNBELIEF AT NAZARETH

### MARK 6:1-6

May God strengthen our faith in him.

MARK'S PICTURE OF the ministry of Jesus contains sharp contrasts between success and failure, acceptance and opposition, understanding and misunderstanding; it is a reminder to the church not to expect a path of uninterrupted, smooth progress. Of all places, Nazareth, where Jesus was brought up, might have been expected to give a warm welcome to its son, just as a modern country town might celebrate the return of some distinguished man who has won a reputation in the wider world. But when Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and accepted an invitation to teach, the mood of the audience was sceptical; they were surprised, but not impressed. There was nothing that Jesus could do beyond healing a few sick.

That he could do no mighty work there means that to have worked miracles in the absence of faith or potential faith would have been contrary to his purpose. All that he could tell the people was the proverbial comment that great men are not appreciated at home. It is a proverb which has many exceptions, but it applies especially to prophets whose words are unwelcome. Note how Jesus tacitly assumes the rank of a prophet (Luke 13:33).

The brothers and sisters of Jesus (cf. 3:31-35) were almost certainly the children of Mary and Joseph born after Jesus. Two other theories about them arose in the early church. One view, associated with Jerome, is that they were cousins of Jesus, but this is an unsupported and unlikely supposition. The

other view is that they were Joseph's children by a previous marriage. This is, to say the least, improbable in view of Luke 2:7 and Matthew 1:25 which imply that Mary had other children.

The fact that Joseph is not mentioned here or elsewhere very probably means that he was now dead, and it has been conjectured that the reason why Jesus did not begin his work until the age of thirty was that he had to be the breadwinner while his brothers were still young. There may, however, be a deeper significance in this verse (6:3). To describe a person's parentage without naming his father was tantamount to hinting at illegitimacy. If so, the language of the people contained a calculated insult—and the knowledge that there was something unusual about the birth of Jesus.

THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE

MARK 6:7-13

The good news was sent out by those who were committed to a simple life and whose only resource was faith in God.

DESPITE THE LACK of response at Nazareth, the work of Jesus had now reached such proportions that the Twelve could be sent out on their own to do the same work as their Master, preaching, exorcizing and healing. The use of oil to anoint the sick was not simply because of its curative properties (Luke 10:34) but was meant also as a sign, possibly to demonstrate that the disciples were not acting by their own strength.

The Twelve were sent out in pairs. This was common practice both in Judaism and in the early church. In addition to the vital function of providing for companionship and mutual help in dangerous country, it enabled the missionaries to proclaim a message which was confirmed by two witnesses and did not depend on a single testimony (John 8:17f.; cf. Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15).

The instructions for the journey sound strange to us. The disciples were to travel as lightly as possible. They were permitted to wear sandals and use a staff; but even these two concessions are forbidden in the account in Matthew 10:10; Jesus was giving principles, not invariable rules. We are probably to think of a brief tour within a limited area, so that it was possible to live without any elaborate equipment. The disciples were to avoid anything that might smack of luxury and ease, and perhaps they were to take care not to

look like other wandering preachers who made a good thing out of a gullible public.

In their evangelism the disciples were to make one home their base rather than make a series of social calls. The acted parable of shaking the dust off their feet as they departed was an action which pious Jews performed on leaving Gentile territory; here it was meant to warn the Jews that they were behaving like Gentiles in rejecting the message of God (Acts 13:51). Here also the principles involved must be distinguished from the Jewish customs in which they found expression.

THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

MARK 6:14-29

Someone can have great respect for a good person but still remain bad.

AMONG THOSE WHO were talking about Jesus at this time was Herod, “King Herod” as he styled himself, although he was not entitled to this rank (cf. Luke 9:7). Of the various popular explanations of who Jesus was which were current, Herod’s bad conscience inclined him to accept the one which identified him with John the Baptist risen from the dead. John had done no mighty works in his lifetime (John 10:41), but if he were risen from the dead, he could be expected to have supernatural powers.

In explanation of Herod’s allusion to his beheading of John we are now given a “flash-back.” The event had taken place only a short time before (cf. Matthew 14:12-21). Josephus tells us that John was imprisoned at Machaerus, a grim fortress near the Dead Sea with magnificently spacious and beautiful apartments. John had criticized Herod regarding his second marriage. Herod, who was the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, had first married a daughter of King Aretas of Arabia. Then he fell for his own half-niece Herodias, the grand-daughter of Herod the Great and Mariamne; she had been married to Herod’s half-brother Philip (who was probably the son of Herod the Great and *another* Mariamne!). Herod the Great had been the archetypal Bluebeard, and his family were not much better as far as morality was concerned. John attacked Herod on the grounds of Jewish law (Leviticus 18:16; 20:21). Herod had some respect for John, but Herodias had no such

scruples and when she obtained a suitable opportunity put a scheme into action. Her own daughter, Salome, performed a dance at the birthday party which was sufficiently provocative to lead the king to make his rash offer. Those critics who allege that such a dance—it would have been on the level of a strip-tease act in a night club—would have been impossible for a *princess* are forgetting the moral (or rather, immoral) quality of Herod's family. In his half-drunk state the tetrarch was perfectly willing to part with a kingdom which he did not even possess (cf. Esther 5:3,6), but the girl, primed by her mother, asked for less: "Please may I have the head of John the Baptizer on a plate, and please can I have it now." The voice of John was silenced, but his condemnation of the king still stood, sealed by his blood. From now on a deep shadow hangs over the ministry of Jesus (cf. 9:12f.).

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

MARK 6:30-44

What can we bring to Jesus Christ today?

THE BIBLE LEAVES us in no doubt that God created the good things of this world for the enjoyment of men; if it emphasizes the duty of work, it also speaks of the privilege and delight of rest. But there are occasions when even well-earned rest must be postponed for further service. This was one such occasion. Jesus, filled with compassion for the crowd who thronged about him, *taught* them (contrast 8:2). They resembled an army gone forth to war without a commander (Numbers 27:16,17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:5), and Jesus took his place as their leader.

When it was late the question of food arose. (The problem of accommodation for the night [Luke 9:12] was of secondary importance. People then improvised much more readily than our modern generation which requires its caravans, tents and sleeping bags.) The disciples' suggestion was the sensible one. Jesus' rejoinder must have sounded quite mad; it aroused a sarcastic reply, for we may be sure that the disciples did not have so much money with them (the denarius was a laborer's daily wage). Then Jesus acted. The people were seated in groups of fifty and 100 (or does it mean 100 rows of fifty each?). Jesus said the usual grace before a meal; note that he blessed *God* and not the *food*—there is no justification here for blessing the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Then he divided up the

scanty food available so that all were satisfied and the twelve disciples were each able to gather up a basket of fragments.

What is the significance of the story? In John 6 the miracle is a picture of Jesus' ability to give the bread of life freely and abundantly to all who believe in him. Is this the point in Mark? Is there a repetition of the miracle of the manna in the wilderness or an anticipation of the heavenly marriage supper of the Lamb? The early church interpreted the feeding in the light of the Lord's Supper, and some commentators have gone so far as to speak of the Galilean Lord's Supper, but we may wonder whether this was the intention of Jesus. The Lord's Supper was for disciples only and was closely linked with the death of Jesus; neither of these elements is present here. Perhaps there is a clue to be found in Jesus' comments in 8:14-21.

THE LORD OF THE SEA

## MARK 6:45-56

“Take heart: have no fear” is God’s word to his people in distress.

THERE IS GOOD reason to think that Jesus sent the disciples away while he dismissed the crowds because the latter were in the mood to adopt him as their leader for an uprising there and then (John 6:15). Jesus may have feared that his disciples, who still understood his purposes so imperfectly, might be led astray by the crowd. Perhaps he himself also felt the pull of temptation, for he retreated into the hills to pray, and the fact that his prayer is mentioned so seldom (though we know it was his regular custom) suggests that this day was one of crisis.

Meanwhile the disciples were making little headway at sea against the wind. By the Roman method of reckoning four night watches (see 13:35 for their names; the Jews reckoned only three divisions in the night, Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:38) it was between 3 and 6 a.m. when they saw Jesus walking on the sea. To calm their terror Jesus came near and spoke words of reassurance. Their significance is to be explained from the Old Testament. “Take heart; have no fear” is God’s word to his people in their distress (Isaiah 41:10,13f.; 43:1; 44:2). “It is I,” literally “I am,” may simply be self-identification, but there may just possibly be an echo of the Old Testament form of revelation of God, “I am (He)” (Exodus 3:14; Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; 52:6). Finally, mastery of the sea is a divine attribute, and this incident ranks with the earlier one in 4:35-39 in showing that the power of God is revealed

in Jesus (Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19; Isaiah 43:1—note the occurrence of Isaiah 43 in each of these three sets of references). Were they beginning to realize the truth? Mark says that they were “utterly astounded,” but Matthew states that they worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33). Does Mark mean that they were “taken by surprise” at this revelation of the divine power of Jesus because they had failed to understand the significance of the feeding of the multitude?

Although the boat had set out from the north-east corner of the lake for the nearby village of Bethsaida Julius at the head of the lake, the disciples finally landed farther round to the west at Gennesaret (the region around Capernaum), and once again the crowds began to throng around the disciples. The “fringe” was a border of blue tassels worn on the outer cloak (Numbers 15:37ff.; Deuteronomy 22:12), and it was this that the woman with the haemorrhage touched (Matthew 9:20); Jews who liked to be thought especially pious made them unnecessarily long (Matthew 23:5).

## COUNTERFEIT RELIGION

### MARK 7:1-13

A sincere holding onto human traditions is not enough.

WITH THIS CHAPTER we return to the theme of conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus, and the two types of religion for which they stood are clearly drawn and contrasted. Two related themes run through the chapter; the question of religious purity and defilement, and the authority of religious rules and traditions.

Writing for Gentile readers Mark explains the ceremonial ablutions of the Jews. Although these rules may have had a useful hygienic result, the Pharisees were not concerned with dirt but defilement, which they regarded as something that could be spread by touch. Jesus did not follow the party line, and he was called to account for the conduct of his disciples.

He dealt first with the origin and authority of the custom (7:6-13) and only later with the true nature of defilement—sin (7:14-23). He began enigmatically by quoting Isaiah 29:13 and applying it to his questioners. They were hypocrites (the Hebrew word means “godless”) because although they made an outward fuss about worshiping God they did not give him true heart worship; scrupulosity in the things that he had not commanded was accompanied by subtle evasions of what he did command. Such worship could only be in vain.

Indeed, they were not above breaking God’s law in the interests of their own human rules. For example, the Old Testament law quite clearly laid

down the obligation to honor one's parents (Exodus 20:12; 21:17; cf. Deuteronomy 5:16). Such honor would include practical care for their needs (this is what "honor" means in 1 Timothy 5:3,17). Through their "tradition" it was possible for a man to declare his possessions to be "corban" (a Hebrew word meaning "dedicated" or "an offering") and give them to the temple, so absolving himself from the fifth commandment. Jesus strongly condemned this attitude which encouraged religious donations at the cost of religious duty to parents. This was to set human tradition above divine command.

The matter may have been even more disgraceful. The practice of corban is surrounded by much obscurity, but one view is that a man might make such a vow without taking proper thought for the future and then wish to retract it; this the Pharisees would not let him do. According to another view, the whole thing was a legal fiction, and the money dedicated to the temple was actually kept by the man, and he continued to enjoy the use of it.

What were the "many other such things" which the Pharisees practiced? Their restrictive Sabbath legislation was certainly one. More important, does the church today fall into the same trap? 1 Timothy 5:8 should not be forgotten by those consumed with zeal to dedicate their possessions to God.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN  
MARK 7:14-23

Our outward actions are the result of our inner lives.

HAVING DEALT WITH the question of religious authority, Jesus returned to the issue originally raised: religious cleanliness. From castigating the Pharisees for their personal rejection of God's law he turned to give a general principle which applied to everybody ("the people," 7:14). The principle was expressed in a brief and somewhat cryptic parabolic saying which required the careful attention of the audience (7:14b). The disciples asked for an explanation privately (cf. 4:33f.), only to be told that they should have grasped the meaning for themselves. As 7:19 makes clear, Jesus was thinking of foods entering the body and being evacuated. They do not enter a man's *heart* and therefore cannot make him religiously unclean. It is a man's heart—the word refers to the whole inner personality of man and not simply to his emotions—which is the source of the evil thoughts listed by Jesus, and it is the appearance of these which defiles him.

Thus Jesus makes certain basic lessons clear:

1. God is concerned with the moral behavior of mankind. This truth was plain to read in the Old Testament, but Pharisaic pettifogging had effectually obscured it. It is conduct that matters, and not all the religious ritual in the world, sacrifices, ablutions, fasting and penance,

can alter the color of a man's heart in God's sight (Psalm 51; Isaiah 58; Amos 5:21-24).

2. By this declaration Jesus rendered obsolete all distinctions between clean and unclean foods, vessels and people. A whole section of Old Testament legislation, which had served a purpose in its time, was thus "fulfilled" and finished by Jesus. Yet the early church was slow to realize the implications of Jesus' words. There were to be anxious debates whether Jewish Christians might eat with uncircumcised Gentiles, and what the Christian attitude was to be to foods sacrificed to idols. Paul surely knew this saying of Jesus (Romans 14:14) and applied it to the problem, but it took a long time for its truth to be recognized.
3. Jesus here speaks in the plainest terms about human sin and its source in the human heart. He did not use the word very often (2:5,9f.; 2:17; 3:28; 8:38 and 14:41 are the only uses in Mark), but the idea was a prominent one in his teaching. In what other ways does he speak of it (see 3:4f.; 4:24f.; 6:6,11,52)?

THE GOSPEL AND THE GENTILES

MARK 7:24-30

Sometimes the Lord tests us to see if we really have faith.

ONE OF THE things which may strike the modern Christian as strange in the ministry of Jesus is the way in which he confined his work to the Jews and to Jewish territory. There are few exceptions to the rule which he expressed in the words “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:2—note the context!—cf. Matthew 10:5f.). Yet the preceding discussion, in which Jesus firmly declared the invalidity of rules regarding religious cleansing, has as its logical corollary the declaration of the invalidity of Jewish particularism. There must, therefore, be some other explanation of Jesus’ conduct than simple rejection of the Gentiles. The present story clearly bears on this problem; as with some earlier stories (eg 2:1-12), its significance lies not so much in the miraculous power to which it testifies, as in the conversation which is recorded.

The mother who sought the help of Jesus for her daughter is described as a Greek from Syrian Phoenicia; it was so called to distinguish it from Libyan Phoenicia, ie Carthage in North Africa. Jesus met her with what sounds like a harsh refusal: the children (Jews) must be fed, their bread must not be thrown to the dogs (Gentiles). Now “dogs” was a well-known term of opprobrium for Gentiles, but it is going against all that we know of Jesus to imagine that he could have voiced this insult. What, then, did he mean? Did he say the words with such an expression on his face and tone in his voice that they sounded

gently ironic? Note how he talked of “little dogs” (the Greek word is a diminutive) which were allowed in the house (E.V. Rieu translates as “house-dogs”), and he qualified his statement by saying “first.” Was he trying to lead the woman to *faith*? if so, her response was immediate: recognizing the prior rights of the Jews she claimed the crumbs and her child was cured in an instant (Matthew 15:28).

The problem of Jew and Gentile is not wholly solved by this incident. It is clear that Jesus responded to those Gentiles who sought him with his customary compassion, but in the economy of God his calling was to the Jews first. It was to the church that he committed the task of the Gentile mission. Today the church has learned the lesson of “to the Jew *and to the Greek*” so well that it has almost managed to forget the Jews.

THE HEALING OF A DEAF MUTE

MARK 7:31-37

The witnesses of this miracle could not be constrained to obey Jesus' command to keep quiet about it, but our temptation is to disobey his command to us to spread the good news.

THE ROUTE FOLLOWED by Jesus here is a peculiar one. He went from the area of Tyre to the Sea of Galilee (south-east of Tyre) via Sidon (farther north of Tyre on the coast) and through the region of Decapolis (which lay east and south-east of Galilee). Certainly this was one of the most indirect routes that Jesus could possibly have taken back to Galilee! Some manuscripts have instead "from the region of Tyre *and* Sidon" (see KJV); this would simplify the geography and leave us with a journey round the north of the Sea of Galilee to Decapolis. The purpose of the journey was evidently unknown to Mark, and we can only guess why Jesus stayed in these parts. But 3:8 speaks of his fame spreading to this area, and he may well have ministered here; there were Jews throughout these areas, so that it is not necessarily implied that he went to the Gentiles.

Whether the deaf and dumb man was a Gentile is uncertain. He lived in a predominantly Gentile area, but Jesus' use of Aramaic to speak to him and the quotation from Isaiah in 7:37 may be pointers that he was a Jew. He is described as having an impediment in his speech (7:32,35), but it was apparently so bad that he was virtually dumb (cf. 7:37). The various gestures of Jesus were meant to indicate to the man by sign language what he intended

to do. "His tongue was released" (7:35) is a paraphrase of the Greek which he literally says "The bond of his tongue was loosed." Did Jesus regard the man as enslaved by evil or Satan (cf. Luke 13:16)? Once again Jesus commanded silence about the miracle, but the wonder was so great that it could not be kept secret.

What is the point of the story? It lies in the comment of the spectators. Their exclamation embodies the words of Isaiah 35:5f., a passage that prophesies the coming of the era of salvation. The miracle was a sign that that age was dawning. If so, the question becomes all the more pressing: who is this whose presence brings the signs of the age of the Messiah? Matthew 11:2-6 is a good commentary on this incident.

## THE FEEDING OF THE FOUR THOUSAND

### MARK 8:1-10

This miracle shows Jesus' concern for people's physical wellbeing.

IT WILL NOT surprise those who are familiar with the vagaries of biblical criticism to find that the majority of critical scholars today believe that the stories of feeding a multitude recorded by Mark are variant versions of one and the same basic story. The reasons for this hypothesis are of differing strength. Apart from the refusal of some scholars to believe that Jesus could ever have said the same thing twice or performed two closely similar acts, the principal difficulty is the dullness of the disciples in not realizing that Jesus could feed the crowds again after what had happened on the previous occasion. This is far from being an insuperable difficulty, for all along Mark has been showing us how very dull and uncomprehending the disciples could be.

The story is very similar to the previous one; the telling of each would influence the form of other, and the often-quoted illustration of how a policeman will use almost identical language in describing two quite different street accidents is a relevant one. Note, however, the differences. On this occasion the compassion of Jesus is linked to his *feeding* of the crowd. They had been with him three days, a phrase which (as in the resurrection story) need not mean literally seventy-two hours but one whole day and parts of the immediately preceding and following days. As a result they exhausted their

supplies of food. The numbers of people and loaves differ, as do the number and type of baskets of crumbs. Here large hampers were used.

The identity of the crowd remains a mystery. The indications are that the miracle took place in Decapolis, and if so, the crowd may have been composed of Gentiles. In this case, the purpose of the story is to show how Jesus fed the Gentiles after he had fed the Jews (cf. 7:27!). This would explain why Mark has used his precious space to report two very similar occurrences, but it must be admitted that the Gentile nature of the crowd remains uncertain.

In 8:10 “Dalmanutha” is a name not otherwise known, and the various manuscripts give different guesses at what the name of the place was. Magdala on the west side of the lake remains the most likely possibility.

PROBLEMS OF BELIEF

MARK 8:11-26

Remembering God's care in the past is to make us less anxious about the future and encourage our faith.

IN THE FIRST of the three incidents in this section the Pharisees asked Jesus for some kind of divine authentication of his message. Not even the feeding of hungry crowds was enough to convince them (cf. John 6:30). This suggests that although the Pharisees were asking Jesus for proof of his divine power they had made up their minds in advance. A belief which depends simply upon the compulsion of mighty deeds is not true belief, and involves no real change of heart (cf. Luke 16:30f.).

Nevertheless, Jesus had performed mighty works and would continue to do so. His words (8:12) must be taken to mean that although he would not perform conjuring tricks to overawe the unbelieving, he would continue to perform his works of compassion and salvation through which those who were prepared to believe might perceive the gracious rule of God at work in himself and find their faith confirmed.

Then Jesus set off with his disciples for Bethsaida. He was trying to instruct them to beware of the evil influence of the Pharisees and of Herod (why is *he* mentioned here? Is there a clue in Luke 13:31f.?), but their minds were taken up by what they thought was a much more pressing problem: there was no food on the boat! For the third time they failed to realize that with Jesus on board their wants were fully taken care of, and they had fallen

into that hardness of heart which ought not to have been found in disciples (4:10-12). Jesus strongly reproached them: had they forgotten his power to provide enough *and to spare* for their needs?

Finally, there is the brief story of the healing of the blind man. The healing of the blind, like that of the deaf and dumb, is a sign of the era of salvation (Isaiah 35:5). The story is unique for its two-stage cure, and commentators have wondered if there is something symbolic about it. The story comes just before the incident at Caesarea Philippi in which Jesus gave his disciples a *deeper* insight into his person. Is, then, the two-stage cure a picture of two stages in their understanding of Jesus? This is rather speculative, and it is safer simply to see in the stories of the opening of the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind a commentary on the opening of the ears and eyes of the disciples (8:18!).

THE WAY OF THE SON OF MAN

MARK 8:27–9:1

For the first time, Peter said what the disciples had suspected for some time: “You are the Messiah.”

THIS INCIDENT IS undoubtedly the central point in the Gospel. Jesus and his disciples were again in the north, in the vicinity of the “new town” of Caesarea Philippi some twenty-five miles from the lake. Here he asked them to sum up their impressions so far. The crowds do not seem to have thought of him as the Messiah, but Peter, speaking for the disciples, made this confession. Four important points now follow.

1. Jesus accepted the title as true, but he did not wish it to be generally known. An open claim to Messiahship would cause trouble with the authorities and lead to wrong ideas in peoples' minds.
2. Jesus revealed a new fact about himself. Referring to himself as the Son of Man (a title which included and transcended that of Messiah), he spoke of a path foretold in Scripture and divinely appointed for himself. As the messianic Son of Man he must undergo the fate of the righteous sufferer in the Psalms and especially of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah (Psalm 22; 69; 118; Isaiah 50:4ff.; 52:13–53:12; Zechariah 13:7). But the shock was too great for the disciples. The one who so readily recognized the Christ swiftly assumed the rôle of Satan.

3. A still bigger shock awaited the disciples, for the third thing that Jesus said was that they must go the same way of suffering and rejection (and resurrection) as himself. The reference to the multitude (8:34) is strange; the circle is silently enlarged and all are addressed who would follow him. A disciple must be ready even for martyrdom like Jesus. He must be prepared to give up his hopes of “life” in this world with all that it has to offer in terms of success, wealth, enjoyment and so on, for none of these things can stand comparison with the value of eternal life. A man’s soul or life is of inestimable value and if he loses it cannot be redeemed from death (Psalm 49:5-9,15). How does a man lose his life? By refusal to follow Jesus, for at the parousia or coming of the Son of man he will be ashamed of all who refused to follow him on earth. In other words, a man’s ultimate destiny depends on whether he accepts discipleship now.
4. A word of reassurance (9:1). Admittedly it is very enigmatic. At first sight it implies that the coming referred to in 3:38 will come in the lifetime of some of Jesus’ hearers (cf. 13:30). But this is unlikely, for Jesus expected a longer interval than this before the coming. Moreover, the reference is to the coming of the “*kingdom of God*” (1:15). It is therefore more satisfactory to see an allusion to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. At the same time, however, the saying seems to bear some relationship to the story of the transfiguration which immediately follows it; an event which in itself prophesies the revelation of God’s kingly power in Jesus.

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

### MARK 9:2-13

It must have been a hard climb up that high mountain, but who can deny it was worth it?

THE “HIGH MOUNTAIN” on which Jesus was transfigured before the inner group of his three disciples is usually thought to be Hermon (9000 ft.). This was close to the Caesarea Philippi area; the scene of Peter’s recent confession.

How should we interpret the incident? Peter was at a loss, and his suggestions are disregarded. The final emphasis on “Jesus only” (9:8) points away from venerating Moses and Elijah and confirms Jesus as the central character. Most probably the incident was to be a confirmation of Peter’s confession by showing a glimpse of the glory which was to follow the sufferings of Jesus—his transformed person, glistening garments, the heavenly voice and the cloud, symbolic of God’s presence (Exodus 24:16)—all exalt him. The scene is therefore an anticipation of the exaltation and the second coming of Jesus, these two events being “run together” as happens in biblical prophecy with its foreshortened pictures of the future, and thus confirms that God’s rule is at work powerfully in Jesus. At the same time the transfiguration shows that Jesus had not lost his heavenly glory on earth, though normally it was hidden from sight. The picture thus presented is of Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man.

But what are Moses and Elijah doing here? They may perhaps be regarded as representatives of the law and the prophets which bear witness to

Jesus, but Elijah certainly and Moses possibly were expected to appear before the end of the age, and there may be a reference to this rôle here.

On the way down from the mountain Jesus again issued a command to keep silent about what had happened until after the resurrection. This puzzled the disciples. They realized that Jesus must mean a special resurrection of the Son of Man before the general resurrection, and this was a strange idea. For the moment the problem remained unsolved, and a second difficulty was raised.

The Jews expected the return of Elijah to prepare for the coming of God or of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5f.). Now, if the Messiah had come in Jesus, as Peter had confessed, what had happened to Elijah? Jesus' answer contained three points:

1. Although Elijah was to come first to prepare the people, this did not remove the scriptural necessity for the Son of Man to suffer.
2. In fact "Elijah" had already come, for Jesus saw his rôle fulfilled in the work of John.
3. Just as this "Elijah" had suffered, so the Son of Man would suffer. It is not certain what Scripture is referred to in 9:13; possibly 1 Kings 19:2,10.

THE POWER OF FAITH

MARK 9:14-29

Even our great faith can contain unbelief.

WE ARE BACK again in the world of human need where there are no more visions to sustain men, and they must live by faith rather than by sight. The Jesus who was revealed as the Son of God on the mountain top is now to be seen as the Son of God with power to heal and save.

The story apparently takes place in Galilee, for the scribes are said to have been disputing with the disciples. We never learn what they were arguing about: clearly it cannot have been very important! When Jesus reappeared, the people were greatly amazed. This has sometimes been taken to mean that heavenly glory still clung to him (cf. Exodus 34:35), but it is more likely that they were simply surprised by his sudden return, especially at a moment when his presence was urgently needed. A man had brought his son, suffering from a demoniac attack associated with epilepsy, to the disciples, and they had been unable to cure him despite the commission in 6:7. Jesus reproached the people for their lack of faith in words modelled on Deuteronomy 32:5, and spoke directly to the father who sought his help with the words, “if you can help, save us.” Jesus at once seized on his word: “You say, ‘If you *can*’? All things can be done by the one who believes.” The answer evoked the noble response of the man in which he confessed his weak faith and sought the help that Jesus is ready to give those who find it hard to believe. Thereupon the boy was healed.

Preachers often handle this story in terms of the mountain top and valley experiences of life. Surely, however, the *primary* point in the story is faith in Jesus. Jesus reproached the whole company present for their lack of faith. He instantly responded to the appeal of a man who sought his help. When the disciples asked why they had failed, he replied that prayer, which is the spoken expression of faith and the active appeal for faith to God, was the one essential. (The addition “and fasting” in some manuscripts is probably not original.)

This is the lesson of this story. Mountains and valleys, the visible presence and absence of the Lord—these should be of no account. Faith is what matters. And where faith is weak, Jesus will draw near and help those who call upon him.

## SUFFERING AND HUMILITY

### MARK 9:30-37

Jesus' response to the disciples' argument is revolutionary.

THE END OF Jesus' work in Galilee was drawing near; he made his way southwards to Capernaum (9:33) and then towards Judea (10:1). From this point onwards he devoted more of his time to instructing the disciples and teaching them about what lay ahead. Only they could be entrusted with the revelation that he now brought, but even they failed to understand it. For the third time he reminded them of the coming passion of the Son of Man, repeating the pattern of words used in 8:31. We shall meet the same pattern again in 10:33f.

The skeptics have disputed the authenticity of these prophecies of the death and resurrection of Jesus. "Can there be any doubt," asked R. Bultmann, "that they are all *vaticinia ex eventu?*" ie history disguised in the form of prediction and created by the early church.

Behind these objections is often an unwillingness to admit the possibility of knowledge of the future by Jesus. Yet, even at the human level surely Jesus must have seen that some such fate awaited him if he pursued his present path. At the same time, we have seen sufficient already in this Gospel to realize that purely human categories are quite insufficient to explain this Person and that we cannot set arbitrary limits to what he may or may not have said. Furthermore, the mystification of the disciples was by no means odd. It was against all Jewish expectation that the Messiah should suffer, and the

disciples could not bring themselves to share the insight of Jesus. British people will remember how very few were capable of believing the prophecies of Sir Winston Churchill about the menace of Hitler in the 1930s. Men are slow to believe what they do not want to believe.

9:33ff. show this clearly. The disciples were more interested in status than in suffering. They needed a strong lesson, and Jesus gave it to them. The ambitious person, he said, must be prepared to take the meanest place. (The lesson evidently needed repetition! See Matthew 23:11f.; Luke 22:26; John 13:13-16.) Children were regarded as insignificant in the ancient world. To be prepared to care for the insignificant is a mark of estimate you place on yourself. More than that, it is to receive Jesus, who himself thus takes the insignificant place (10:45), and yet—*here is the amazing paradox*—to receive him is to receive God. Here is hidden the secret of who Jesus really is (see Matthew 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 12:44f.; 13:20).

HARD SAYINGS

MARK 9:38-50

True faith isn't preserved by adopting a narrow sectarian spirit and cannot be preserved at the expense of love.

THE LITTLE STORY in 9:38-41 is meant for those of us who think that we alone are “sound” and follow Jesus truly, and who do nothing to help the work of other Christians whose understanding of the faith may be different from our own. Here was a man doing effective work in the name of Jesus—unlike the exorcists in Acts 19:13-16. Was he not a disciple at all or simply not one of the Twelve who had been commissioned by Jesus to do this work? Surely the latter was the case. But Jesus gladly receives those who follow him even when the organized church despises them. Those who are not against us in Christ's service are on our side. At the same time a person who is not for Jesus is against him (Matthew 12:30); there can be no neutrality.

Then Jesus makes his promise of reward for all who care for the disciples by throwing in their lot with them, especially in time of persecution. It should be clear that Jesus is not here speaking of rewards for non-Christians, but is challenging men to personal commitment to himself and his followers.

The following sayings cover such a variety of topics that it is probable that they were spoken on several different occasions and then gathered together as a result of the presence of certain keywords in them (eg “sin” and “salt”). 9:42 stands in strong contrast to 9:37. Whether it refers to disciples young in years or in faith is neither clear nor important. Then Jesus speaks of

the danger of a man letting himself be led into sin by hand, foot or eye. The imagery used to describe the sinner's fate is drawn from Gehenna, a perpetually burning rubbish dump outside Jerusalem, and from the slow eating of dead bodies by worms (Isaiah 66:24). Since this is imagery associated with *bodies*, it would be wrong to press it to refer to literal fire for *souls* after death, but Jesus does say that the fate of the sinner will be every bit as bad as Gehenna.

9:49 and 9:50 must be taken on their own. 9:49 is an allusion to the purifying effect of tribulation and suffering. A second saying about salt comes in 9:50a. Matthew 5:13 suggests that it refers to the witness of the disciples which must not be allowed to become insipid. 9:50b says in effect: have the salt of the gospel in your own lives, and then you will live at peace with one another instead of bickering for precedence (9:34). Here is that same combination of grace and gumption which we find in the Sermon on the Mount.

## FAMILY LIFE

# MARK 10:1-16

Jesus talks about the origin of, and reasons for, marriage.

AT THE BEGINNING of chapter 10 we come to a change in the location of Jesus' work. From Galilee he moved to Judea and Perea, the region east of the Jordan (cf. John 13:40; 11:54). At this point Mark concentrates on the teaching of Jesus rather than on his deeds. The opening themes are marriage, children and possessions.

In asking Jesus about divorce the Pharisees may have been putting a catch-question to him: would he in his answer offend King Herod, as John had done, or would he contravene the law of Moses? Or perhaps they wished to know whether he agreed with the more strict or lax schools in Pharisaism. As was so often, Jesus directed them to the authority of the Old Testament law, and then proceeded to elucidate it. The law in Deuteronomy 24:1ff. did not represent God's ideal for mankind, but was enacted to prevent worse situations arising. Recognizing the existence of human sin and frailty, it took measures to keep it in check. But alongside this frank recognition of the possibility of divorce Jesus placed two radical statements. First, marriage is intended to be a partnership for life in which the couple become "one flesh" (RSV margin), ie "one person" or "one kindred." Therefore, a stern warning, reminiscent of 9:42, is issued to all who tempt others to matrimonial infidelity (10:9). Second, Jesus stated that if a man divorces his wife to marry another, he is committing adultery against the first wife. This was a new and

radical saying, for Jewish law did not regard the misdemeanors of *men*, but only those of women, as adultery. Jesus here puts woman on an equality with man. The second part of the saying (10:12) which says the same thing about the wife probably has Gentile society in mind, since divorce by a woman was almost unheard of in Judaism.

A story about Jesus' attitude to children follows appropriately. It tells how he received and blessed them, just as any Jewish rabbi might do. But his words go further than mere blessing. The kingdom of God is only for those who come trustingly and humbly to Jesus like children. Later the story was used in the church in connection with the baptism of infants, but of course there is no reference to baptism as such in it. It simply asserts that Jesus welcomed children, and just as surely did he welcome any adult who came with the right attitude of mind and heart.

JESUS AND A RICH MAN

MARK 10:17-22

Respectable, religious and charming people can be lovers of money ...  
and be lost.

THE RICH MAN addressed Jesus in an unusual manner by calling him “Good Teacher”—a term never used for a rabbi. It could be regarded as flattery giving a man a higher status than is his due, for true goodness is the prerogative of God. Jesus’ question was designed to test whether the man really knew what he was saying. Is there here a veiled claim to divinity?

This, however, was incidental to the main theme. The questioner was concerned about the future destiny of the individual as he sought after the experience variously called “inheriting eternal life,” “entering the kingdom of God” or “being saved.” All these expressions refer to entering the bliss of the age to come instead of being condemned to punishment. The orthodox Jewish answer was simple: salvation was for circumcised Jews who kept the commandments. Jesus’ reply to the rich man was at first entirely orthodox. He cited the so-called second table of the Ten Commandments not because the first table is unimportant, but because obedience to the second table is more easily tested by a man’s outward conduct. The rich man claimed, like Paul (Philippians 3:6), that he had obeyed them perfectly. There was here evidence of religious devotion, of an apparently sincere desire to serve God truly, and Jesus’ heart went out to his questioner. But a two-sided commandment still remained! On the one hand, Jesus bade the rich man to

realize his assets and give the proceeds to the poor. Here he failed. Why? he loved himself and his money more than he loved the poor. He was breaking the first commandment of all, for he had made an idol of himself and consequently could neither worship God truly nor love his neighbor fully.

On the other hand, Jesus, who is significantly described at the beginning of the story as “setting out on his journey” to *Jerusalem and crucifixion*, called him to follow him. This is the condition for inheriting eternal life, discipleship. Here too he failed. He was not ready for total commitment to God. This was his fundamental error.

Does Jesus call all rich men to give up their riches if they would be saved? No: it is not the possession of riches but the desire for them that keeps a man from salvation. But is this a complete interpretation of Jesus’ words? Is there in fact any New Testament evidence that Christians may enjoy their riches themselves instead of sharing them fully and freely with the needy?

## RICHES AND REWARDS

### MARK 10:23-31

Notice the encouragements Jesus gives to put him first.

WE NOW HAVE Jesus' comments on the story of the rich man. That story demonstrated clearly that it is hard for a *rich man* to enter the kingdom. The statement amazed the disciples because it was accepted Jewish thinking that a man's earthly prosperity was some index of his spiritual state, even although this fundamental proposition was inevitably crossed by others which took notice of the variety of human experience. To this Jesus replied with the more fundamental statement that it is *hard* for *anybody* to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, he said (reverting to the case in hand) it is as *impossible* for a rich man to enter the kingdom as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (It should not need to be said that Jesus meant literal camels and literal needles, just as in the similar Jewish proverb about an elephant and a needle.) Who then can be saved? The answer is: *nobody*. From a human point of view salvation is impossible. All this fits in with what we have already learned, that men are afflicted with blindness and hardness of heart and cannot of themselves respond to the message of Jesus. But where men cannot act, God can and does. He can bring men to a change of heart, open their eyes to understand the truth, and grant them to believe. This may sound like the doctrines of total inability and irresistible grace, but it would be wrong to harden what Jesus says here into rigid theology. Mark says nothing to restrict the scope of God's grace or make it irresistible.

What is the significance of 10:28ff.? Is Peter saying, “We are all right; we have given up our possessions to follow you”? This sounds very self-righteous in the context, but Peter was very human! Anyhow, Jesus responds with a promise that those who have taken this step will receive their reward. Here in this life they will share in the fellowship of the disciples with all its blessings in human relationships (cf. 3:35), and in the next world they will enjoy eternal life. There are two caveats. Jesus was too much of a realist not to mention the fact that persecution will come from outside the fellowship to those who join themselves to it. At the same time he issues a warning against setting one’s heart on reward: there will be reversals as well as rewards in the kingdom.

**For meditation** Does the promise of 10:30 come alive in your experience? Are you making it a reality for other disciples?

THE WAY OF SERVICE

MARK 10:32-45

What should be our attitude toward power?

REWARD AND POSITION are still the themes in this section. Now they are set in the context of our fourth reminder that Jesus is on his way to his passion. The awestruck disciples' fears are confirmed by this further detailed prophecy of his impending suffering.

In sharp contrast James and John, still thinking only of the traditional glory of the messianic kingdom, sought for themselves the places of supreme rank. The bitter “cup” and the “baptism” of the cross which Jesus set before them were both metaphors utilizing Old Testament language referring to suffering and distress; the former especially was associated with bearing retribution and wrath (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17,22; cf. Mark 14:36; Revelation 14:10; 16:19), the latter has as its background the idea of being engulfed in calamity (Isaiah 69:1-3; cf. Luke 12:50). To the disciples these metaphors may have conveyed the thought of a messianic battle, and they professed themselves willing to fight in it. Jesus promised that they would. As for the rewards for which they asked, these were not his to bestow, but are “prepared”—by God.

The rest of the disciples, though more backward in seeking honor, were no less covetous of it, and Jesus had to take them all to task. Wanting to be like Gentile rulers, they understood leadership in terms of commanding slaves and exacting service from them. That is not the way in the kingdom of

God. The person who wants to be first must take the lowest place and serve his fellows. This is not a recipe for success; it is a command to find happiness in service *instead of* being served, in loving others *instead of* commanding them. It finds its inspiration in the example of Jesus himself. At this point, as in 1 Peter 2:18-25, the thought moves from the example of Jesus to the saving results of what he did. His service was to give his life as an offering instead of the many. The background to this saving will be found in Psalm 49:7-9 and Isaiah 53:10-12. It plainly teaches substitution: the “many” not only benefit from what is done on their behalf (representation), but gain what they could never have achieved for themselves through One who loved them and gave himself for them. It equally plainly teaches a universally available atonement, for “many” is a Hebrew way of saying “all,” and all who will may take advantage of what is offered to them. No saying from the lips of Jesus in Mark is more precious.

FROM JERICHO TO JERUSALEM

## MARK 10:46–11:11

As Christians we have the exciting privilege of knowing that Jesus will ride in triumph on the things we give him.

BARTIMAEUS IS THE great example in the Gospels of a man who was conscious of his need of Jesus and let nothing stand in the way of having his need met. He recognized in Jesus the Son of David (the title is very probably messianic; see Isaiah 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5f.; Ezekiel 34:23f.; Mark 12:35), and believed that he could help him as he had helped others. When Jesus summoned him and asked what he wanted done for him, there was no hesitancy (contrast John 5:6f.). Thereafter Bartimaeus joined the company that was following Jesus. The story is an excellent parable of the meaning of discipleship.

Jesus had reached Jericho after crossing over the Jordan from the region to the east (10:1). He now continued farther to the south-west up the steep road to Jerusalem which he approached via the two villages on its east side. Here he made his plans for a symbolic entry. It is not certain whether the instructions about the colt reflect a previous arrangement or supernatural knowledge. But it seems strange to describe the incident in such detail if it were simply a prearranged plan.

The significance of the entry is to be gathered from the cries of Jesus' companions. "Hosanna" is an Aramaic word meaning "save now" which was used as a greeting for pilgrims; it was probably shouted without people being

aware of its meaning, just as people today may say “Hallelujah” without realizing that they are saying “Sing praise to Jehovah.” Then Psalm 118:26a is quoted: this was originally a blessing pronounced upon pilgrims, but here it may possess a deeper sense. This would be confirmed by 11:10, which speaks of the coming of the messianic kingdom.

What, then, did it all mean? Did Jesus take the bold step of entering Jerusalem as the Messiah, yet in such a way that the people might realize that his ideas of Messiahship differed completely from those popularly held? Did some of the people realize the significance of the colt as a pointer to Zechariah 9:9? Did their cries mean more than they realized at the time? John 12:16 suggests that something like this was the case. There was a mixture of understanding and perplexity among both the crowd and the disciples. For the moment there was nothing on which the authorities could lay the finger.

**For meditation** How would you reply to Jesus’ questions in 10:36,51?

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

MARK 11:12-19

Fruitless religion that is just a vehicle for personal status robs God.

DURING FESTIVAL PERIODS the city of Jerusalem was so crowded that many people had to stay outside in the vicinity, and Jesus followed this practice (Luke 21:37).

The fig tree bears its fruit in April to June, but earlier in the season (late March to early April) it bears a crop of small knobs which are edible and are a sign that the tree will later bear fruit. Either Jesus found no knobs on the tree and deduced that it would not bear fruit later, or else he deliberately acted in a strange way by looking for fruit out of season in order to arouse the attention of his disciples. We may safely dismiss the view that he was simply looking for food. Nor is the significance of the incident simply the power of prayer. It was an acted parable, and its point was that Israel, which had failed to produce the fruit that it should have done, would endure the curse of God (Jeremiah 8:13; Hosea 9:10,16f.; Micah 7:1-6; Luke 13:6-9).

This interpretation is confirmed by the close link with the story of how Jesus entered the temple. In the Court of the Gentiles the various requisites for sacrifice were sold, and money could be exchanged for the special coinage in which the temple dues had to be paid; it would be naive to imagine that these dealings were free from corruption and graft. Jesus' action had a three-fold significance.

1. The temple was not meant to be desecrated into a place of commerce and profiteering (Jeremiah 7:11).
2. Jesus' quotation from Isaiah 56:7 shows that he was attempting to make room for the Gentiles in the place allotted to them. It was an act which stressed the universalism which ought to have been part of the Jewish religion.
3. The cleansing of the temple was an act of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1ff.; cf. Ezekiel 40–48; Hosea 9:15; Zechariah 14:21). For those with eyes to see, this was a claim to Messiahship. In itself it was not a condemnation of the Jewish religion, but only of its abuses. The lesson, however, was not heeded, and the prophecy in chapter 13 followed inevitably. The temple authorities began to talk of doing away with Jesus.

TEACHING ON PRAYER; THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

MARK 11:20-33

The things that kept people from following Jesus Christ years ago are often the same things that keep people from following him today.

THE MORNING AFTER Jesus had cursed the fig tree it was found to have withered away. Peter was surprised by the fulfillment of the word of Jesus and remarked on the incident. Jesus replied with some remarks on the broader theme of faith and prayer. After proclaiming a general principle (11:22), he gave an example to show what he meant. “This mountain” would be the Mount of Olives or the hill of Zion, and the sea would be the Dead Sea which can be seen from there on a clear day. This is one of Jesus’ vivid, hyperbolic statements (like Matthew 23:24) which are not meant to be taken literally. It is to be taken metaphorically like Zechariah 4:7 and simply confirms the practical principle in 11:24 (cf. Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6). This principle is one of vital importance in prayer (John 14:13f.; 15:7; 16:23; 1 John 5:15), but there is a condition which must also be fulfilled, expressed in 11:25 (cf. Matthew 6:14f.). Note how Paul makes the same point (1 Corinthians 13:2). 11:26 is omitted in the best manuscripts; similar words occur in Matthew 6:15 to which 11:26 may owe its origin.

There now follows a series of incidents in which the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities flared up for the last time and led to their decision to do away with him. In the first of these incidents what seems like an official delegation came to question the credentials of Jesus. What was his

authority, whether as a rabbi or as a prophet, to teach and act as he did, especially in the temple? Jesus' reply, with a counter-question, neatly placed them in a dilemma and implicitly claimed the same direct authority from God as John had possessed ("heaven" is a Jewish periphrasis for the name of God, cf. 8:11). Note how Jesus here places himself alongside John; there is never any hint that the two men saw each other as rivals.

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

MARK 12:1-12

Jesus' purpose is to show the consequences of repeated rejection of God's messengers—and of his last messenger.

WHEN JESUS BEGAN to speak to the leaders of the people about a vineyard, it is probable that they would be reminded of a parable told by Isaiah in which “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts” was the house of Israel (Isaiah 5:1-7), and the application of Jesus' words would not be lost on them (12:12).

The “mechanics” of the story seem to be that in certain cases an estate which belonged to a foreigner or proselyte who died intestate could pass to anybody, and the tenants here were determined that they would be the ones to benefit. But although the general build-up of the story can be explained naturally in this sort of way, a number of features suggest irresistibly that the story is an allegorical one, cleverly designed to give a picture of Israel and the way in which it had treated the messengers of God. There are small differences in the way in which this is done in Matthew and Luke. It is, however, a moot point whether the hearers would have realized that “son” had an allegorical significance. Certainly Jesus meant himself by this term and was hinting at his divine Sonship, but the people at large, who did not commonly think of the Messiah as the Son of God, may not have grasped the point.

However, Jesus' main purpose was not to reveal who he was but rather to show the consequences of repeated rejection of God's messengers—and of

his last Messenger. Salvation would be taken away from Israel and given to others (cf. Matthew 21:43). The closing quotation from Psalm 118:22f. stresses how the rejected Son is God's Messenger and will be exalted by him.

**Meditation** Consider love and hate in the light of 12:12 (how it influenced the history of Israel—and ourselves). Perfect love casts out fear; so ultimately does perfect hate.

GOD AND CAESAR

MARK 12:13-17

Jesus talks about our allegiance to God and our allegiance to the State.

WE HAVE ALREADY met the extraordinary combination of the Pharisees and Herodians in opposition to Jesus (3:6). Now they reappear with a question regarding the duty of Jews to the Roman government. The word translated as “taxes” is “census.” This was a poll tax levied on all the people and paid directly into Rome’s treasury. It was a particularly hated tax, since it was one of the most obvious evidences of Jewish subjection to a foreign power, and there had been riots at its introduction (Acts 5:37). The question posed was a trap: was Jesus prepared to lose the sympathy of the people who paid the tax so unwillingly or to face a charge of subverting the people and even of inciting them to rebellion? Was the Messiah going to declare himself? Jesus’ answer, which skilfully evaded the dilemma, depended upon the fact that his questioners themselves used Roman coinage in daily life. This was why he asked *them* to produce the coin.

The coin bore the emperor’s head on one side and an image of the goddess of peace on the other, with an inscription which read in translation: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, Chief Priest”—all of which was repulsive to Jewish (and later to Christian) sentiment. Jesus elicited the fact that his questioners recognized that the coin belonged to Caesar: it bore his image and inscription. Therefore, he argued, they were bound to pay him for the use of his money and, presumably, for all other

benefits of his rule. One commentator stresses that the word “render” really means not simply “give” but “give back”; the money was Caesar’s and must be repaid to him.

The point was made, and Jesus could have stopped there. But he added, “And give back to God the things that are God’s.” This could be taken literally of paying to God the temple tax which was due to him (Matthew 17:24-27), but there is surely a deeper meaning. Men are “God’s coinage,” bearing his image, and what belongs to God must be paid back to him.

Thus the two duties are put side by side. The position of Caesar vis-à-vis God is not clarified. That is not the purpose of this story, and other passages of Scripture must be consulted when the problem of the Christian and the State is discussed. What is stressed here is that the disciple of Jesus has a duty to the community of which he is a member, and, inasmuch as he cannot live without receiving the benefits of the community, so he must make his contribution to it, even if he disapproves of it.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

## MARK 12:18-27

Do we really believe in the resurrection?

AFTER THE DISCOMFITURE of the Pharisees and Herodians it was the turn of the Sadducees to question Jesus. They were the materialists of their day, alike in their denial of the resurrection, angels and spirits (Acts 23:8), and in their worship of wealth and worldly position. In later years they were overshadowed by the Pharisees, whose greater religious zeal made them the leaders of Judaism at a time when the people had no national future; but in the time of Jesus the Sadducees occupied a powerful place in the Sanhedrin, and it was from their ranks that the high priests came.

Their question arose from a palpably absurd story based on the Old Testament principle of levirate marriage (Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5f.; the name has nothing to do with “Levite” but comes from Latin *levir*, a brother-in-law). Such complicated problems are found in Jewish discussions of the time. The purpose of this story was to ridicule the doctrine of the resurrection by a *reductio ad absurdum*; the modern parallel is when people ask what happens at the resurrection to a man who has been eaten by cannibals. In his reply Jesus enunciated two principles (12:24).

First, the Sadducean question ignored the power of God to create a new order of life in the heavenly world in which the earthly relationship of marriage would be transcended. The saying of Jesus has appeared hard to many, but the suggestion of C.F.D. Moule is helpful, that “the exclusive

loyalty of husband and wife in this life may prove to be a way forward into a wider and more inclusive fellowship in that other life.”

The other part of Jesus’ reply was framed especially to answer the Sadducees, for they based their denial of the resurrection on its alleged absence from the books of Moses, which alone were authoritative for them. But there God, speaking to Moses, affirmed “I—the God of Abraham” (Exodus 3:6). There is no verb present in the Hebrew text, as is normal in such a statement. Jesus implies that a present tense “am” must be supplied (as in the Septuagint). If God thus spoke of himself to Moses, then he was implying that these men were still alive because he was still their God. He who was their God in their lifetime would not abandon them in death; they still live to him. Thus the hope of immortality and resurrection depends upon the character of God.

## THE GREAT COMMANDMENTS

### MARK 12:28-37

Which is the most important commandment?

THERE WAS AT least one man who asked Jesus a sincere question during this time of testing and who would not fall under the condemnation in 12:38-40. He was a scribe or rabbi, a professional teacher of the law, and he asked Jesus a question which was a frequent subject of debate in scribal circles. Could all the commandments in the law—there were reckoned to be 613 of them—be summed up in one, or could the more important ones be picked out? A famous rabbi, Hillel, had said: “What you hate for yourself do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law: the rest is commentary; go and learn.” Jesus agreed with that sentiment (Matthew 7:12), but here he gives a different, and more penetrating answer. He quoted what was called the “Shema” (Hebrew for “Hear!”), the passage from Deuteronomy 6:4f. which Jews recited daily, and to it he added a second commandment drawn from Leviticus 19:18. Note especially how the call to obedience here is grounded in the nature of God, grace preceding the commandment. In making this reply Jesus was saying nothing very new, for there is evidence that this combination of commandments had already been arrived at by pious Jews. What Jesus was saying agreed with the insight into the spiritual and moral nature of true religion already found in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6).

But Jesus went a step further. He placed the scribe not *in* but only *near* the kingdom. Was this because the kingdom was still distant? Or was it not

rather because the scribe lacked some qualification? Is not the answer that the scribe had still to learn to follow Jesus (10:21) and so be in the presence of the “kingdom incarnate”?

The second incident here tells how Jesus took up the common teaching of the scribes that the Messiah was to be an earthly descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12f.; John 7:41f.) and suggested that this could not be the *whole* truth. If David, in Psalm 110, spoke of the Messiah as “my Lord,” how could the Messiah be simply his son? Some have thought that here Jesus was repudiating the Davidic descent of the Messiah; rather he was showing that “son of David” is an inadequate title for one who is David’s Lord and trying to make the people think more carefully about Messiahship and what it involved. An ancient J.B. Phillips might well have written a book for the scribes entitled “Your Messiah is too small”!

FALSE AND TRUE PIETY

## MARK 12:38-44

How do we show our devotion to Christ?

A THIRD PARAGRAPH dealing with the scribes now follows. It contains a warning against their brand of religion. The scribes, especially those of them who belonged to the Pharisaic party (others were Sadducees), were the “keen” religious people of their day. They knew the Scriptures well and were ready to teach from them. Their distinctive dress of a teacher’s long robe bore silent testimony to their zeal. They not only prayed, but prayed at length. Yet the virtues of their religion easily became vices. Instead of directing men’s attention to God and serving him humbly, they claimed credit for themselves. They enjoyed wearing their robes and receiving the compliments of men. They sat in their special seats facing the rest of the congregation in the synagogues, and like many a modern choir or kirk session (or its denominational equivalents) they glowed in the public esteem which they received. With it all, they were not free from corruption. Such religion is no religion.

The list of criticisms could easily be extended; see Matthew 23; Luke 11:37-52. While we should not forget the better members of this class, including the one who came to Jesus by night and heard of a new birth, we should not ignore the lesson that zealous faith may easily be corrupted into a pride which delights in its own piety and flaunts itself before the world. It is a good question: when does Christian witness become exhibitionism?

The following story is obviously meant to provide a contrast, whether or not it actually happened immediately after these scathing remarks. Free will offerings made by the people at the temple were put into thirteen collection boxes shaped like trumpets. Rich people put in their money ostentatiously and loudly; it cost them little to do so. The poor widow put in a gift that meant self-sacrifice, for she gave her whole livelihood, and had to do without other things that the money might have bought. This indication of her faith and devotion earned the praise of Jesus.

We had better ask: should our Christian faith lead us to give spontaneously our “whole living” to the service of God, and, if so, what does this mean in practice for us in our different individual situations?

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

### MARK 13:1-8

What can lead us astray as we look forward to Jesus' second coming?

THIS IS THE most difficult chapter in Mark for the interpreter, telling as it does of strange, future events and portents. A comment on the grandeur of the newly built temple prompted Jesus' prophecy that this great structure would be razed to the ground. The deeper implication of the prophecy is that the temple and all it stood for had had its day, but how much did the disciples understand then? When Jesus was alone they asked two questions. First, when would the temple be destroyed? Second, what would be the indication when "these things are all to be accomplished"? This second question seems to refer to the coming of the end of the present age (cf. Matthew 24:3), and suggests that the disciples were associating the destruction of the temple with the end of the age.

Many scholars doubt whether the discourse that now follows was actually spoken by Jesus on this one occasion, and it is possible that sayings spoken at different times have been gathered together (as in the chapter of parables or in the great discourse in Matthew) to give a fuller conspectus of his teaching on this theme. The first part of his reply (13:5-8) was a warning not to be led astray by events which suggested that the end had already come or that it was never going to come.

On the one hand, false teachers would lead the people astray. The phrase "in my name" suggests that they would either appear as representatives of

Jesus or even pretend to be him. They would say, “I am he!,” which could mean “I am the Messiah” or “I am God”; Simon Magus made claims like these (Acts 8:9f.). They would persuade men that the end had come, and turn their minds away from Jesus.

On the other hand, the outbreak of wars and natural disasters could tempt the faithful to believe that God had forgotten them and that the end would never come. Such events, however, were part of the “programme,” and must be seen as the travail which precedes the joy of birth.

We have seen the destruction of the temple, but close on two millennia have passed since then and the end has not yet come. The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is theologically part of the end, and yet the end still tarries. Throughout this chapter the events of AD 70 and the events of the “end of the age” (Matthew 24:3) are closely woven together by a prophetic foreshortening which links essentially similar and related events to each other. The reason for this may become clearer further on in the chapter. For the moment, the warning in 13:7 is as relevant for us as it was for Jesus’ first hearers.

THE NEED FOR PERSEVERANCE

MARK 13:9-23

Be encouraged if you are facing some form of opposition: stand firm  
in your witness.

IF THE LESSON of the first part of Jesus' discourse was "Do not be led astray," that of the second part (13:9-13) is "stand fast." The disciples are not only to take care not to be misled by the signs of the times; they must also hold out resolutely to the end, no matter how difficult circumstances become.

Persecution will take place both through official channels (religious and civil courts) and through personal enmity as families are divided among themselves. In this situation three facts must be remembered. First, the disciples are to be *witnesses*. When they are tempted to despair and to give up their witness, they must remember that the end will not come until the gospel has been brought to all the nations. Second, they are promised the *help of the Spirit* in making their witness in the courts. Third, they are to persevere in their faith right *until death or the end* if they would attain salvation.

The next section prophesies definite events (13:14-23). The phrase "desolating sacrilege" is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew "the abomination that desolates," ie "the fearfully abominable thing" found in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. This prophecy was regarded as fulfilled in the desecration of the temple by Antiochus of Syria in 168 BC; the phrase is applied to this event in 1 Maccabees 1:54. Now a further fulfillment is prophesied. This fulfillment was the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in AD 70 (cf.

Luke 21:20). The coming of this event was to be the signal for flight from the ensuing scenes of battle and carnage in Judea. Yet even these terrible events would not mean the immediate coming of the end, and men would still need to beware of being led astray by false Messiahs (such as Simon ben Koseba who appeared in AD 132).

The whole of this section fits excellently the events in and around AD 70 when the sufferings of Jews were indescribably cruel. It is doubtful whether we are to expect a further fulfillment of the prophecy (evil follows a pattern, just as God's deeds conform to one) or simply to see these events as part of the sufferings associated with an end which has still not come. On either view of the passage, the warnings and advice given here are still relevant to Christians, and come alive especially at those times and in those areas where evil follows the pattern described here.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

MARK 13:24-37

Servants are to remain alert, not be slack, while their master is away.

WHATEVER BE OUR interpretation of the previous section, this paragraph (13:24-27) unmistakably brings us to the end of the age. Language almost fails Jesus as he indicates the cosmic significance of the coming of the Son of Man in the traditional language of prophecy (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4). The very heavens are affected by his appearance and hide their glory before him. Then comes the climax, the appearance of the Son of Man, as prophesied in Daniel 7:13. The clouds, power and glory all indicate that he is invested with the attributes of God. His coming has a double purpose. On the one hand, the One who comes is the Son of Man who suffered humiliation and death on the earth and was raised and exalted by God. He now comes as God's vice-regent and is fully vindicated before men (cf. 14:62). On the other hand, he comes to bring about the final fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that God's people will be gathered together from all the earth so that they may be in his presence and enjoy his salvation (Deuteronomy 30:4; Zechariah 2:6).

*And this is all that is revealed.* Jesus says nothing about the future age or the millennium, and there is no mention at all of the fate of those who do not belong to the elect. There is no encouragement to speculate about the fate of unbelievers. Instead, Jesus turns to exhortation. Having answered the two questions raised in 13:4, he now makes three further points:

1. *The time is near.* When the disciples see these signs coming to pass, they are to draw the glad conclusion: the end is at hand—as surely as the sprouting fig tree heralds summer.
2. *The time is unknown.* But just how near is the end? Now “this generation” (13:30) probably means the contemporaries of Jesus, but “these things” (13:29) surely mean the signs of the end rather than the end itself. Jesus himself said that he did not know when that final day would come; he did know that his own coming and the events he prophesied here were all part of God’s final intervention in the history of the world.
3. *Therefore, be ready.* Servants cannot afford to be slack when the master is away.

Once again the question arises: Where is the promise of his coming? It was asked by the contemporaries of Peter (2 Peter 3:4), and is now even more pressing. May it perhaps be that the time is dependent on the response of his disciples to his words in 13:10? So the church must watch and pray, and Immanuel will come.

THE PLOT AGAINST JESUS' LIFE

MARK 14:1-11

What is our response to Jesus today?

WITH THE LONG discourse about the future, the ministry of Jesus to the people and to his disciples had come to an end, and events moved swiftly to their conclusion. The point at issue with the chief priests and scribes was not whether to kill Jesus, but how and when. Their problem was answered by the offer of Judas to enable them to take Jesus quietly, so avoiding the tumult they feared (14:2).

The chronology of these days is highly complicated, and some brief clarification must be given. The two feasts of the Passover and Unleavened Bread were closely linked together. The former was celebrated on Nisan 15 with a solemn supper at the beginning of the day, ie in the evening, for the Jews regarded the new day as beginning at sunset rather than at midnight. The preparations for this feast, including the slaughter of the lambs, took place earlier in the afternoon of the same day by our reckoning; but this was in fact the end of Nisan 14 by Jewish reckoning. The feast of Unleavened Bread ran from Nisan 15 to 21 inclusive, both of these days being reckoned as special festival Sabbaths (Leviticus 23:4-8). According to Mark Jesus held his Passover supper at the normal time on Nisan 15 and died later on that same Jewish day (which was of course the following day, Friday, by our reckoning).

While the Jewish plot was being hatched, there took place an act that stands in complete contrast to it. A woman whom we know to have been called Mary (John 12:1-8) anointed Jesus with a lavish quantity of very precious ointment or perfume (worth 300 times a laborer's daily wage). It represented an act of devotion to him personally. Almsgiving was a worthy act (14:5), but this act was even more worthy (by Jewish standards, quite apart from the uniqueness of this particular situation) since it was really an anointing for his burial (14:8). We do not know if Mary realized the full significance of her action, but it seems that at least one person had begun to understand something of the mystery of a Messiah who must die.

The act is worth remembering (14:9). In a world where some would have us believe that the first of the two great commandments is adequately fulfilled simply by obedience to the second, we need this reminder that personal devotion to Jesus himself is of primary importance. Loving our neighbor is only part of what it means to love God.

THE PASSOVER MEAL

MARK 14:12-21

The highest exercise of free will is submission to God's will.

DURING THE AFTERNOON of Nisan 14 Jesus made his preparations for what he knew would be his last Passover meal. The feast required a suitable room in Jerusalem, and the food (the lamb, bread and bitter sauce) and wine. The story of how the room was obtained suggests a prior arrangement made in the interests of holding the meal in privacy and peace rather than an act of supernatural foreknowledge. A man carrying a water jar would be a sufficiently unusual sight to be a means of recognition. The room is often identified with that in Acts 1:13 (possibly in the house of Acts 12:12).

The meal was duly held in a context of tension and suspicion. Over the table hung the shadow of betrayal, a betrayal all the more awful because it meant breaking up the fellowship of the sacred meal (Psalm 41:9; John 13:18). The disciples were all sufficiently aware of their weakness to ask anxiously which of them Jesus had in mind as he uttered his fateful prophecy. But he refused to name the offender, merely indicating that it was one of those present who was dipping his bread in the same dish of bitter sauce as himself. (The identification in Matthew 26:25 was probably made in quiet reply to Judas himself, or else he might have been lynched on the spot: Peter had a sword!)

The New Testament does not speculate on why Judas behaved as he did. Jesus said that the way appointed for the Son of Man to tread was that laid

down by God in Scripture for him (cf. comment on 8:31), but this necessity in no way diminished the awful responsibility of the man who freely chose to betray him. That man's fate would be so dreadful that he had better never have been born. Here the factors of divine sovereignty and human responsibility are brought together in a way which denies the reality of neither but simply states the mystery of their juxtaposition. More important than speculation into that mystery (which we shall never be able to understand this side of eternity) is to observe how Jesus freely chose to follow the path laid down for him.

THE LORD'S SUPPER  
MARK 14:22-31

What reminder do you need to take to heart from celebrating the Lord's Supper?

THE ACCOUNT OF the Passover meal is confined to those essential details which showed how the church was to continue to perform the rite in memory of its Lord. The normal course of the meal would be as follows:

1. An inaugural blessing and prayer were followed by a dish of herbs and sauce and the first of four cups of wine.
2. The account of the institution of the Passover was related, Psalm 113 was sung, and a second cup of wine was drunk.
3. After a grace the main meal of roast Passover lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs was eaten, and after a further prayer the third cup of wine was drunk.
4. Psalms 114–118 were sung, and the fourth cup of wine was drunk.

The narrative here does not even mention the Passover lamb and the symbolism of the Exodus associated with it (for the *Christian* symbolism see 1 Corinthians 5:7), but concentrates its attention on how Jesus attached a new significance to the bread eaten with the main course and to the third cup of wine and made a solemn vow in connection with the latter. In the saying over the bread the word “is” (which would in any case be omitted in Aramaic

idiom; cf. 12:26) must mean “represents,” since Jesus himself was actually performing the act. The word “body” is variously interpreted to mean the flesh of Jesus or his whole self. The symbolism suggests that Jesus was thinking of himself as being offered in sacrifice like the Passover lamb on behalf of the disciples (1 Corinthians 11:24). The wine symbolizes the death of Jesus. Three thoughts are bound up with it. First, it is covenant blood (cf. Exodus 24:8), the new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Second, it is therefore sacrificial blood, for the covenant is inaugurated by a sacrifice in which God and man are reconciled. Third, it is the blood of the suffering Servant of God who lays down his life “for many,” ie for all men (Isaiah 53:12; Mark 10:45). The sacrifice is vicarious and substitutionary, and the disciples receive its blessings symbolically by receiving the bread and wine. Finally, in his vow (14:25) Jesus looked forward to the full coming of the kingdom of God, which was possible only through his death, and to the messianic banquet of which the Supper is a foretaste: “You proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes.*”

After singing the appointed Psalms the little company went outside Jerusalem, and through the gloom of impending betrayal and desertion shines the hope of Jesus in his resurrection and the coming of the kingdom.

THE CUP OF AGONY

MARK 14:32-42

If Jesus knew the reality of temptation and had to resist it with all his power, how much more do we need to beware of it?

GETHSEMANE WAS AN olive plantation at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Jesus came here with the intention of praying and took three of his disciples aside with him to be his close companions in this hour of anguish. His words, “My heart is ready to break with grief” (NEB), show that he was conscious of the approach of the hour of suffering and death and that he would willingly have avoided it. He therefore prayed that the hour might pass from him, ie might never come to him. He addressed his Father with the familiar, tender term “Abba,” which is the confident word of a child to a father who understands his needs. He confessed the onnipotence of the One who answers prayer, and made his request. The word “cup” (10:38; Isaiah 51:22) indicates that he saw what lay ahead not simply as suffering (would he have shrunk from that?) but as the cup of God’s wrath which he must drain on behalf of sinners. Then he freely put himself in God’s hands. Was his prayer answered? Hebrews 5:7 says that it was. How?

Jesus had instructed his companions to stay by him and remain awake. Did he want them to wrestle in prayer on his behalf or simply to have an object lesson in facing temptation? His words to them show that they were not equipped to face temptation either then or afterwards. It is not enough to have a strong desire to overcome it; the flesh and its conflicting impulses

must be brought under control. It is surely significant that the personal rebuke, “Simon ...” (14:37) is recorded in “Peter’s Gospel.”

The scene was repeated twice, as if to show the continuing strength of the temptation which Jesus faced. Then came the end. The disciples had slept and rested long enough (the meaning of 14:41a is very obscure). Now the betrayer had come, and in the strength won by prayer Jesus went forth confidently to meet him: “Up, let us go forward!” (NEB).

## THE ACT OF BETRAYAL

### MARK 14:43-52

What light does the story of Gethsemane shed on your suffering?

THE ENORMITY OF Judas' act is emphasized in the description. He was "one of the twelve," he addressed Jesus as "Master," he gave him the kiss of affectionate greeting. The Gospels make no attempt to whitewash his character but are unanimous that he was a traitor. His motives can only be guessed; most probably he was disappointed that Jesus had not attempted a *coup d'état* by force because he had never been truly converted to an understanding of the divine way of redemption.

He was accompanied by a rabble horde from "the chief priests and the scribes and the elders," ie "the government," to whom he had given information as to where and when they might quietly arrest Jesus. The band had instructions to arrest Jesus alone, and they made no attempt to prevent the flight of his followers, even though one of them (the Greek implies "somebody whose name I could tell you") made an attempt at armed resistance (cf. John 18:10). Jesus' one recorded comment stresses the incongruity of treating like a brigand One who had done nothing to cause trouble but had taught quietly in the temple. The Scripture which Jesus had in mind was probably Isaiah 53, especially 53:3,12.

The only reason for the inclusion of 14:51f., which contribute nothing to the main story, must be that they refer to the person who told the story; the young man was therefore Mark or somebody well known to him. "Naked"

may mean that he was wearing only a light undergarment, but quite probably it should be taken literally. In his hurry he had merely thrown a cloth around his shoulders. It has been suggested (assuming the last supper to have been held in Mark's mother's house) that the young man slipped out of the house when he should have been in bed, followed Jesus and the disciples to Gethsemane, and so, incidentally, overheard the prayer of our Lord's agony while the disciples slept, and thus subsequently became an eyewitness to the betrayal and arrest.

THE JEWISH TRIAL  
MARK 14:53-65

Christ's human judges would see the Son of Man exalted and coming with the clouds of heaven.

FROM THE SCENE of arrest Jesus was hurried away to be tried by a variety of "courts." The brief mention of Peter at the beginning of the scene reminds us that he was present throughout it and prepares us for 14:64-72. The scene here took place at night before the members of the Sanhedrin (seventy-one members, comprising representatives from the priestly families, the scribes and the laity). Since a further consultation was held in the morning, it is fairly certain that here an unofficial, even an illegal, meeting was held, "packed" with the high priest's friends.

The purpose was simple. It had already been resolved to put Jesus to death; the only problem was to find some justification for condemning him on a capital charge. Jewish law required that concurrent testimony be given by at least two witnesses, and the charges against Jesus broke down because of conflicting evidence. Even the "temple" charges were too garbled to stand. That Jesus had spoken about it is clear (13:2; 15:29; John 2:19ff.), and his words about erecting a new temple could be construed as a claim to Messiahship (2 Samuel 7:13; Zechariah 6:12f.). Perhaps this was what gave the high priest his cue to question Jesus himself. Finally, when the high priest asked him whether he claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus replied with an unequivocal "Yes"; for the first time he made a plain, public

avowal of his status. Then he proceeded to elucidate his statement by declaring, in words based on Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, that his human judges would see the Son of Man exalted and coming with the clouds of heaven. This prophecy does not fix the second coming as taking place in the lifetime of Jesus' hearers; its point is that the exalted Son of Man will one day act in judgment against the judges of Jesus.

The answer was enough to throw the high priest into a feigned paroxysm of horror at the blasphemy of Jesus claiming a seat at God's right hand, and the council forthwith condemned him to death. But the sentence would need to be confirmed by a formal meeting, and it could be carried out only by the Roman governor since the Jews did not possess the right to inflict the death penalty (John 18:31). Meanwhile, some of the rougher characters began to goad Jesus to perform acts of "second-sight," thus fulfilling Isaiah 50:6.

**For meditation**

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood.

PETER DENIES JESUS  
MARK 14:66-72

It is often from our bitterest failures that we learn our deepest lessons.

THE RECORD OF the disciples in this Gospel is a sorry one. They had persistently misunderstood the teaching of Jesus, they had all forsaken him and fled, one of them had turned traitor, and now the leader of the group openly denied Jesus.

The place where Jesus was tried was evidently a building with a central open courtyard from which the various rooms opened off. Here Peter sat with the guards and servants beside a fire, and in its dim light a servant girl recognized him as somebody who had been seen in the company of the Nazarene—the title is here used contemptuously. In this dangerous situation, when a wrong word from Peter might have led to his being placed alongside Jesus in the courtroom, he chose the easy way out (which we would no doubt have chosen too) and denied that he knew anything about Jesus. Then he moved away to avoid further questioning. But he soon discovered that one lie leads to the necessity to tell others. The merciless interrogation went on as the maid, not easily to be put off, voiced her suspicions to the bystanders, and they turned on the unfortunate Peter. Somebody noticed his “north country” accent which indicated plainly his association with Galilee where Jesus had won most of his support, and advanced this as a piece of evidence against him. Peter, caught out, began to protest vehemently that he did not know

Jesus, and even called God to bear witness against him if he were not speaking the truth. Then the cock crew, and Peter remembered and repented.

Peter, through Mark, humbly reveals himself at his weakest and worst. Not only for the early church but for those of subsequent centuries it has provided a vital lesson for Christians under persecution. It does not condone Peter's denial, but it shows that even for such sin there is the possibility of repentance and forgiveness. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13).

THE ROMAN TRIAL

MARK 15:1-15

The guilty went free and the innocent died instead.

BUSINESS BEGAN VERY early in the day in the ancient world, and it would have been no more than about 6 a.m. when the Sanhedrin met officially to confirm its previous night's informal proceedings. The prisoner had then to be handed over to the Roman government for confirmation and execution of the sentence. Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea, was in Jerusalem for his customary visit during the Passover festival, and Jesus was brought before him. The charge against him had now to be reframed and presented in a way that would make out Jesus to be a political danger to the Roman government. It was, therefore, as a pretender to the throne that Jesus appeared before Pilate.

C.H. Dodd has illuminated the non-committal answer of Jesus to Pilate by quoting from Scott's *Old Mortality*. Lauderdale, trying the Covenanter Ephraim Macbriar as a rebel asks: "Were you at the battle of Bothwell Bridge?" "I was." "Were you armed?" "I was not—I went in my calling as a preacher of God's word, to encourage them that drew the sword in his cause." "In other words, to aid and abet the rebels?" "*Thou hast said it.*" So Jesus' answer was a disclaimer, although of course, in a deeper sense than Pilate could understand, the answer was "Yes" (John 18:33-38).

The chief priests then made further accusations, to which Jesus offered no reply, and Pilate probably realized that they were trumped-up charges. His

plan to release Jesus misfired because the chief priests incited the crowd to seek the release of Barabbas, a revolutionary.

The flagrant disregard for justice shown by Pilate can easily be paralleled from the behavior of other Roman governors: one has only to think of the picture of Verres in Sicily painted by Cicero. But many have felt that Pilate shows here a weak vacillating character quite out of harmony with the description of “inflexible, merciless and obstinate” given to him by a contemporary. It is, however, by no means unlikely that Pilate should have baited the Jews over their desire to have him execute an innocent man and then adopted the course which seemed likely to cause least disturbance; in any case human life was cheap. It was a perfectly ordinary act of injustice, only this time it was the Son of God who suffered in person, as he does indirectly when the innocent are wronged (Matthew 25:41-46).

## THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS

### MARK 15:16-32

The story of Jesus' crucifixion is told with stark simplicity.

THE CRUCIFIXION ITSELF was preceded by mockery from the Roman soldiers who dressed up Jesus in a soldier's red cloak and a crown of thorns in imitation of the emperor's purple robe and diadem and then proceeded to bully him. He had claimed to be a king; let him receive royal homage! The incident is precisely what would be expected from rough men of the time. The palace where the incident took place was either the fortress of Antonia but adjacent to the temple or Herod's palace on the west of the city, probably the former. Equally uncertain is the site of the crucifixion; the vicinity of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the north of Jerusalem has the best claim. The fact that the sites of Jesus' death and burial are so uncertain shows how little importance was attached to these so-called holy places by the first Christians; they knew that what really mattered was that he was alive from the dead.

The cross was normally carried to the scene of execution by the condemned man himself (John 19:17), but Jesus could not sustain its weight, and a passer-by was requisitioned to help. His sons are named because they were known to Mark's readers and could vouch for the story; perhaps the Rufus in Romans 16:13 was one of them. The wine was offered as a soporific. The condemned man's clothes were customarily given to the executioners. The use of a "titulus" to indicate the charge against the criminal

was also customary. To the bystanders the crucifixion was the culminating proof of Jesus' self-deception, but for Christian readers their words are strongly ironical: in the weakness of the cross the power of God is hidden (2 Corinthians 13:4).

So the story is told with stark simplicity. No obvious attempt is made to interpret it as an atonement for sin. Yet the interpretation of the story is written into it for those who know their Old Testament. A study of Isaiah 50:6f.; 53:3,5; Proverbs 31:6; Psalm 69:21; 22:18; Lamentations 2:15 and Psalm 22:7f. will show how heavily the narrative is impregnated with allusions to the Old Testament descriptions of the righteous sufferer and the suffering Servant. His death was according to God's plan and purpose (Acts 2:23). The fact that he was so to suffer for us and for our salvation has already been made clear in 10:45 and 14:24.

**For meditation** Psalms 22 and 69.

## THE DEATH OF JESUS

### MARK 15:33-39

The message of the cross shows Jesus as the Son of God and his obedience to God even to the point of death.

JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED at the third hour, ie 9 a.m. At noon the land became dark (possibly, it has been suggested, as the result of a sirocco wind laden with thick dust from the desert obscuring the sun) by divine decree. Its coming was perhaps symbolical of the separation which Jesus felt from his Father and which he expressed in the words of his cry from Psalm 22:1. The words are given both in Aramaic and in translation. The plain and obvious sense of the words is as a cry of dereliction in which Jesus expressed his sense of separation from God. They imply, on the one hand, that he expected God to deliver him, and, on the other hand, that he felt himself cut off from God by being identified with the sin of the world (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

The bystanders misunderstood the cry. There was a tradition that Elijah would come to the help of pious Jews in distress, and some deduced that Jesus was praying to Elijah. One man offered him a sponge dipped in the cheap wine that soldiers drank, to allay his thirst (cf. Psalm 69:21); if the action is not the same as that recorded in Luke 23:36, it may have been meant as a rough kindness. But the end had now come, and Jesus breathed his last.

In direct connection with his death Mark records the splitting of the temple curtain. The event may have a two-fold significance; was it a sign that the prophecy quoted in 15:29 would be fulfilled, as well as a clear indication

that the way into the presence of God was now opened for men (cf. Hebrews 9:8-14; 10:19f.)?

A second incident in connection with the death of Jesus was the saying of the Roman centurion in charge of the execution squad. His words can be translated as “This man was *a* son of God” or “This man was *the* Son of God.” The centurion *may* have meant only the former limited sense of the words, but Mark reckoned that, if so, he spoke more wisely than he knew, and regarded this as the supreme confession of Jesus in his Gospel. This is the message of the cross: it reveals Jesus as the Son of God who was obedient to God even to the point of death.

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

MARK 15:40-47

When the fact of death had been confirmed, Pilate readily allowed Joseph to give Jesus' body a decent burial according to the normal Jewish custom.

AT FIRST SIGHT the brief note giving the names of the various women who were present does not add anything to the telling of the story and simply duplicates the list of names in 16:1. Its vital significance, however, is to show that the women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection themselves saw Jesus die. Consequently they were not likely to be deceived as to the fact that he had really died. We are also reminded of the care that they gave to Jesus and his comrades in Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem (Luke 8:1-3). Three women are mentioned, Mary from Magdala on the west shore of Galilee, Mary the mother of James the younger (probably the same as James the son of Alphaeus, 3:18) and of Joses (Matthew 27:56 has "Joseph"), and Salome, the wife of Zebedee (Matthew 27:56).

Normally the bodies of crucified criminals were left hanging and eventually cast into a common grave, but the friends of Jesus saw to it that he was saved from this indignity. Just before the Day of Preparation (Thursday sunset to Friday sunset) ended and ushered in the Sabbath, Joseph took measures which ensured that the Sabbath was not defiled by the crucifixion. Crucifixion was usually a painful, drawn-out process during which the victim might hover between life and death for two days or more. Pilate was therefore

surprised by the speedy passing of Jesus, but when the fact of death had been confirmed, he readily allowed Joseph to give the body a decent burial according to the normal Jewish custom which Mark clearly describes for the benefit of Gentile readers who might well be unfamiliar with it.

Joseph of Arimathaea appears in this story as a true follower of Jesus who was “looking for the kingdom of God” (15:43). Now this is a phrase which could be used of any Jew, since all Jews hoped for the intervention of God in their history to overcome the Romans. The fact that the phrase is used here especially of Joseph must indicate that he had a more spiritual view of the kingdom and accepted the teaching of Jesus about it. There is no reason whatever to suppose that he, any more than Nicodemus, approved of the Sanhedrin’s decision to execute Jesus (John 7:50f.), and we may be fairly sure that neither of them was wakened from his bed to take part in that illegal council meeting by night.

## THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

### MARK 16:1-8

If you were writing a Gospel for the first time, where would you end the story?

ALTHOUGH JESUS HAD spoken about his resurrection to his disciples, they had not understood what he meant, and nobody expected what actually happened. The disciples were plunged into grief (cf. 2:20), and the women prepared to carry out the last rites as soon as possible; it may seem strange that they waited so long in view of the haste with which decomposition proceeds in warm countries, but John 19:39f. may suggest that the body was embalmed. What was to be a final display of devotion ended in a flight of fear. Note the points of emphasis: *amazement* at the removal of a massive stone, heightened by an angel's presence and message, culminating in "*trembling*" and "*astonishment*"—"they were *afraid*" and "*fled.*" A sense of terror overwhelms a message of triumph.

If you were writing a Gospel for the first time, where would you end the story? With the death of Jesus, with the announcement of the resurrection, with the resurrection appearances of Jesus, with the ascension, with the story of his continuing spiritual presence with the church, or where? Here at the end of 16:8 is where the Gospel of Mark apparently concludes, and the problem is whether this is where Mark intended to conclude it or whether he wrote (or intended to write) more (as the writer of the supplement in 16:9-20 evidently believed). Is this a fitting conclusion?

Whatever is the answer to these questions, this is where the Gospel ends according to the best manuscripts and it is appropriate to see what this abrupt ending has to teach us. The fear and amazement which the first witnesses felt is in sharp contrast to what we almost regard as an expected and necessary occurrence. They were *terrified*. Here was revealed the power of God.

Second, the story puts before us the fact of the empty tomb; the women saw that there was no body there. This is of infinite importance. *If the tomb was not empty, then Jesus had not risen*. Of course the empty tomb by itself is not the sole or sufficient proof of the resurrection, but without it there could not be a resurrection.

Third, the story promises the appearance of Jesus to his disciples without actually recording an appearance which might seem to fix his risen presence to one particular spot in history. Still today he continues to reveal himself to his disciples in their hearts, and they know that he is alive. Can you confess “He lives—within my heart”?

THE APPEARANCES OF JESUS

MARK 16:9-20

Is this Gospel “good news” for us personally and for our world?

OUR BEST ANCIENT authorities for the text of the Gospel of Mark end at 16:8, and there can be no doubt that what follows (written as it is in a different style) does not come from the pen of John Mark. But very early the Gospel was felt to be incomplete, and more than one attempt was made to provide it with a fitting conclusion. The most popular of these attempts appears as 16:9-20 in our older English versions.

We are here given a brief résumé of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection. 16:9-11 summarize the appearance to Mary of Magdala (Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-18), and 16:12f. obviously refer to the story of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35); the note that Jesus appeared “in another form” explains why the disciples did not recognize him, and the statement that the others did not believe is probably based on Luke 24:41. The final paragraphs (16:14-20) join together the contents of Matthew 28:1-20 and Luke 24:36-53, but add some fresh information. Here alone we have the fuller note on the significance of baptism as the proper outward expression of Christian belief. Note that condemnation is for those who do not *believe*; while baptism is the proper expression of faith, lack of it does not lead to condemnation. The unspoken corollary is that baptism without faith has no saving power. Here too there is the promise of the miraculous powers which the early church experienced as it preached the gospel.

Noteworthy in this section is the emphasis on the unbelief of the disciples. It required the most rigorous evidence to convince them of the resurrection. Faith must rest on firm foundations, and the foundations for faith in the resurrection have been carefully tested and shown to be built on solid rock. A second point is that the disciples were slow to realize the implications of going to “the whole creation” (16:15) and at first confined their attention to the Jews.

So the story ends. But 16:20 makes it clear that the story is still in progress. The same Lord is still at work to confirm the message. Is this Gospel a “good news” for us personally and for the world in which we live? If we do not pause to ask and answer this question we have missed the whole point of what we have read.

## INTRODUCTION

# LUKE

E.M. BLAIKLOCK

### The Author

ALL THE EVIDENCE supports the view that the third Gospel was written by the physician Luke, friend and fellow-traveler of Paul. Style, outlook and language identify him as the writer of the Acts of the Apostles. External evidence, from archaeological and epigraphical studies, marks the same writer as one familiar with the world of the first century, and as the careful historian which he claims to be (1:1-4).

Granted that Luke wrote both books, a plain reading of the text supports the statement that he was familiar with medical literature, and was with Paul during part of his travels (note the pronoun “we” in Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16). If so, Luke’s close connection with Philippi is clear, a fact which in no way denies a familiarity with Antioch.

Luke was probably the only Gentile contributor to the New Testament, a fine historian in his own right, an admirable reporter (read *The Walk to Emmaus*, *The Riot in Ephesus*, *The Wreck of the Grain Ship*) and an ardent Paulinist, who appreciated the great apostle’s global outlook, and, in the light of it, was attracted by the universality of Christ, his appeal to high and low, his interest in Gentiles, and the attraction of his gospel for women.

## The Patron

Luke begins both of his books in the manner of a Greek historian, and with a dedication. For this reason alone Theophilus must be regarded as a real person. He may have been an official of standing, whose support Luke needed to win, for a project he had was to establish the fact that Christianity was not seditious. He also sought to win him to Christ, and the apparent growth in familiarity between the two dedications suggests that Luke may have indeed won his friend. There is no means of knowing who Theophilus was.

## The Authorities

While Paul was in Roman custody at Caesarea in the late fifties, Luke had time to find eyewitnesses. He penetrated the circle of John the Baptist, and may have interviewed the aged Mary. Hence the precious opening chapters with their unique hymns and the flash of light on the Lord's childhood.

He may have had access to Mark's material, which, if the recent fragment from Qumran proves of early date, could have been circulating by the mid-century. Luke was with Paul when Mark was present (Colossians 4:10,14; Philemon 24). He met James, such unknown disciples as the Emmaus couple, and many others of the "Third Force" in Palestine, whose testimony went back to the Baptist's wilderness revival.

## The Book

Hence a book in Greek of some polish with tracts of new information, clusters of stories like that of The Prodigal and The Samaritan, the opening chapters, the Emmaus walk. There are new emphases already mentioned, on

prayer, on the ministry of womankind, on gentleness. He spares Peter the record of his “cursing” (22:54-62), and his petulant word on physicians, passed to Mark (8:43, see Mark 5:26) .... It is a great book, the second of the narratives to see publication—probably very early in the sixties, and a by-product of Paul’s imprisonment. It had a Gentile public in mind, and was a major contribution to Paul’s ministry.

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST ANNOUNCED

LUKE 1:1-25

How would you feel if an angel appeared to you?

LUKE'S INTRODUCTION (1:1-4) is a remarkable piece of Greek written in the manner of the best Greek historians. Luke was conscious that he was engaged upon a task of vast historical importance. He dedicated to it all he had—a polished style, diligence and a careful, ordered mind. God does his work with human qualities, human skills and human worth committed to his creative hands.

1:5-7 tell of beauty and tragedy. “In the days of Herod the king,” in his last days, in fact, when a cruel and cynically evil life was hastening to its dissolution in madness and blood, there were good and godly folk in Israel. So it had always been (1 Kings 19:18). The remnant is always alive, and it is an honor, in any Herod's day, to belong to the few.

1:8-13 record a wondrous experience (see Exodus 30:7-8). All members of Aaron's tribe were priests and took a turn to make the daily sacrifice and call a blessing upon the assembled multitude. It was a rare privilege, the high moment of his career, and, when Zechariah's great day came he went, no doubt, with consciousness of the awesome occasion and a heart prepared. God met him in the place of duty and the hour of worship. He brought the burden of his childlessness to the altar and found his burden lifted there.

1:14-17 throw light on the fulfillment of prophecy. The closing words of Hebrew Scripture (Malachi 4:5-6) had promised the return of the fiery Elijah.

The Lord himself pointed out (Matthew 11:14) that this oracle was fulfilled in the fiery John (John 5:35). It is an interesting study to list the similarities between the two careers, eight centuries apart, and to note the likenesses of character between the two men.

1:18-23 reveal more of the good man. Voiceless and overwhelmed, Zechariah nevertheless continued to the end of his tour of duty. He gave the people the formal blessing and needed no words to convey a message which overawed them. A personality committed to God and owned by his Spirit can itself touch and sanctify other lives.

**Note** In his new revelation, God does not break with the past: he uses a *priest*, in the *temple*, in fulfillment of *prophecy*. The Old is the cradle of the New.

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS ANNOUNCED

### LUKE 1:26-35

Notice how the angel gently leads Mary as he explains God's plan.

VERSES 26-38 TELL the story of the Virgin birth. Read Matthew 1:18-25, and it must immediately be obvious that the New Testament asserts that the birth of the Lord was miraculous. There is no "controversy" as some are ready to assert. The narrative must be accepted as true or rejected as false. And if the Christian faith began thus in deception or in subterfuge it is difficult to see how Christianity can defend its validity, or the New Testament retain its authority. Read Luke's account with care, lingering over 1:35, and it will be seen that he agrees entirely with Matthew. John, by implication, says the same (John 1:14). Let it also be remembered that it stands proven, especially from his second book, that Luke was a careful and painstaking historian. While Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24; 25) he had two years to pursue his researches and to question witnesses. In this account there stands obviously what the apostles believed and what Mary stated.

1:39-45 present a vivid picture of Mary. She too was one of the remnant, and was chosen for her faithfulness—not doubting for a moment the promise of God (1:45). The "blessed" Virgin has sometimes been denied her proper due of reverence and regard by those rightly anxious to avoid the attribution of divine honors to a human person. She had to face the malice and slander of men (John 8:41). When God entrusts one of his servants with a task it is seldom easy. It is always glorious.

The significance of the Virgin birth is deep. God thus demonstrated a connection with humankind and a discontinuity with it; or, in other words, that the Messiah was one with those he came to save but unique in his heavenly origin. And strong support of that unique entrance into the human state is given by the fact that the human life which follows was like no other life. It is “a touchstone of faith in the mystery of God incarnate” (V.C. Grounds). Can effective faith survive its rejection?

**Note** 1:26: Nazareth was the original home of Mary, not the adopted home, as one might assume from Matthew 2:23. 1:28: “O favored one,” said Gabriel. The Latin version translates “O full of grace,” and on this appellation has been based the teaching of her mediatorship. However, these words imply the *reception* of “grace” or favor, and not the ability to bestow it.

MARY'S SONG OF PRAISE

LUKE 1:46-56

Mary's song is full of God, his power and goodness.

MARY WAS STIRRED to song, and the pattern of the hymn was poetry and imagery from the Old Testament. Study carefully Hannah's hymn of praise in 1 Samuel 2. Follow also the theme of "God's poor" into Isaiah. The *Magnificat*, as this song is called from its first word in the Latin version, is an answer to those who allege a division between Christ and the common man, and a reproach for those who, from time to time through the ages, have sought to sequester the faith, as both Sadducee and Pharisee did with Judaism, and make it the sole preserve of the privileged in wealth or knowledge.

Mary spoke as one of the common folk of Palestine (1:51-52). It was a land of shocking poverty, overcrowded, pressing hard upon its poor resources of food and water, as ravaged with hunger and want as India is today. And yet it was among the masses of the land that the deep currents of faithful religion ran. From Elijah to Amos God had spoken through the simple people of the countryside. He was not without witness in high places, and Isaiah is an illustration, but his word found readier resting place where no affluence had bred sloth and materialism, and where the sharp pressure of need had kept men humble and dependent. It is a subduing study to trace through Isaiah to Amos, to the Gospels and James' epistle, the condemnation of wealth. Consider this theme. The Bible has its men of substance, from

Barzillai to Joseph of Arimathea. What is the decisive factor, and the aspect of wealth, which Christ despised, and God condemns, and which man should fear? Why do the rich go empty away (1:53)? Empty of what good things? Which parables point this vital question?

Consider Mary in conclusion. Her true status should be recognized. While denying her worship, Christians do well to honor Mary as the noblest woman of all time. 1:48 envisages Mary's own expectation that all history would regard her as favored above all her kind. Gabriel and Elizabeth had voiced like opinions. Her devotion, humility and utter self-surrender are the marks of her worth. Observe God's care for her, and his provision of help in the hour of undoubted trial.

Mary's authority, it should be remembered, lies behind this account. Analyse the chapter, and note its careful construction of speech and fact, poetry and prose. Luke's researches are nowhere better illustrated. They vindicate his claim to write "in order" (Luke 1:3).

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

LUKE 1:57-80

Do our prayers and worship sometimes seem to be only concerned with ourselves and not really to be turned toward God?

JOHN MEANS “GOD’S gift” or “God is gracious,” and marks the humble thanks of a devoted couple for the privilege of bringing life into the world. A simple faith deepens joy and makes all living significant. Man loses the finer facets of his mind when he thinks of his life as aimless, as meaningless beyond his narrow span of years, and his actions as without responsibility to God.

After the Virgin’s hymn comes that of the priest, rich in his pondering over the great prophecies of his race, and solemn with the cadences and poetry of the Old Testament. Take a reference Bible, and follow word by word back into the Hebrew Scriptures the thoughts and phraseology of Zechariah’s song of worship and of praise. Rich dependence on Scripture is the mark of a good hymn, and the analysis of this priestly poem might conclude with some consideration of what hymns in our own collections best conform to the lofty standards set in the chapter.

Zechariah had high ambitions for his son, but they were interwoven with his zeal for God. With the old oracle of Malachi 4:5 in view, the good priest understood that his son was the forerunner of the Messiah. He probably understood as little as his son did after him the true nature of the Messiah’s ministry. Consider soberly this thought. A full, clear understanding of what God is doing or outworking in life and duty is not necessary for the faithful

prosecution of the task laid upon his servants. He always does “exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think”; his ways (“plans,” Moffatt translates it) are always infinitely above ours (Isaiah 55:9). How inevitable it is that finite and time-bound humans should be baffled by the thoughts and purposes of infinite wisdom, and how necessary that humility, which follows step by step, and does immediately what lies ready to do, should be the quality most needed.

John, the chapter concludes, was “in the deserts” until his tremendous ministry began. The Qumran community by the Dead Sea was one only of many such groups which were at home in the wilderness (eg Isaiah 40:3; Hebrews 11:9), and John undoubtedly owed much to the “Protestants of the Wilderness.” Whether he knew Qumran, and drew his knowledge of Isaiah from the actual scroll which reposes in the Hebrew Shrine of the Scrolls, and has been seen in a number of centers in the West, is an interesting speculation.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

LUKE 2:1-20

God broke through into history and became a human being, born into the humblest conditions.

VERSES 1-7. A tattered piece of papyrus found in Egypt contains the sort of notice which Joseph, the carpenter, must have read in Nazareth. It commands all people living away from their place of origin to report back to their home town authorities for the census. Before the torn document breaks off it speaks of provisioning arrangements for overcrowded conditions. The Egyptian document dates from a century later than the enrolment conducted by the Roman diplomat Quirinius (Cyrenius). This event probably took place in the autumn of 5 BC, for those who, as late as AD 525, established the chronology of Christianity, made a slight error in calculating the date. (Those who seek further information will find it in an appendix to *The Century of the New Testament*, by the writer of these notes.) But ponder awhile the human situation. Joseph, at this time of stress of waiting, had to take his wife to Bethlehem. He did not realize that, in fulfilling the normal and irksome obligations of daily life, he was also fulfilling a plan of God. The first obligation of godly living is to do properly that which we are obliged to do. "Live worthily as citizens of the gospel of Christ," says Paul (Philippians 1:27).

2:8-15. It was fitting that the proclamation of the Messiah's coming should first be made to the simple folk of the land. The story of the New

Testament moved through the cities of the world. Some twenty-three cities appear in it. The Old Testament moves through wilderness and countryside. Four cities only have prominence: Babylon, symbol of evil; Nineveh, the capital of the hideous Assyrians; Samaria, city of Ahab and Jehu, flayed by Amos; and Jerusalem, which, in the Lord's phrase, "slew the prophets." Amos came from a peasant's task; Elijah lived on Carmel; John preached in the wilderness. The shepherds were the old stock of Israel, uncorrupted by wealth, unspoiled by city living. God bypassed established religion and announced Christ's coming to the peasants.

**Notes** 2:1-5: Sir William Ramsay's *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* shows how Luke's trustworthiness as a historian can be vindicated here. 2:7: possibly the best "guest room" was occupied by Bethlehem's most distinguished contemporary, Hillel, the great Pharisee, with Simeon his son—they were of David's line. 2:8: not a winter scene—December 25 was chosen in the fourth century to overlay a pagan festival. 2:9: the "glory of the Lord"—compare Exodus 24:16, Numbers 14:10.

JESUS IS PRESENTED IN THE TEMPLE

LUKE 2:21-35

Simeon was the first to recognize who Jesus was by the Holy Spirit,  
rather than by being told by an angel.

VERSES 21-24. THE theme of the previous paragraph resumes. Joseph was a simple man whose whole life and religion consisted of doing what he ought to do—honestly, faithfully and uncomplainingly. God needs more men like him. The Law prescribed certain obligations, and in its mercy brought the requirements of sacrifice within the reach of God's poor (Exodus 13:12; Numbers 8:17; Leviticus 12:8). Jerusalem was on the way home, a fact for which the good man, no doubt, thanked God. He traveled north over the hills to Jerusalem, saw the fine view of the city and its temple from the high ridge of the Mount of Olives, went in through the gate which was to be called Saint Stephen's gate, after Christ's first martyr, and brought the Child to the temple. The consecration of the firstborn was a provision of the Law designed to cut at the root many foul practices of child sacrifice in the cults of paganism. It was a moving moment when the Lord came thus to his temple. He was to come again "like a refiner's fire."

2:25-35. One sensitive soul penetrated God's secret. Faith was not dead in the land, for all the cynical commercialization of religion by the Sadducees, for all the cluttering of simple things by man-made regulation by the Pharisees. The remnant of the Old Testament is a theme for study. God has always had his few. We have already met Mary and Joseph, and the parents

of John the Baptist. The religion of pomp and ceremony turned on Christ, and sought to carry on Herod's work of destruction. The faithful, undistinguished and unrecognized of men received him. Simeon was one of the honored few. He was familiar with the Scriptures. Note his quotation of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:6-7), which puts him in the tradition of John the Baptist. It is also a fact that the people of Qumran, the wilderness sect who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls, were devotees of Isaiah. The insight of Simeon flowed from his knowledge of the Word. Such insight always will.

**Note** 2:25: the image is that of a servant bidden wait through the darkness and announce the day—cf. Isaiah 60:1-2; Malachi 4:2. 2:35: the challenge of Christ causes men to reveal their true attitudes. Think of the trial scene and how it revealed the secret selves of every actor in it.

THE BOY JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

LUKE 2:36-52

Jesus wasn't even a teenager but he amazed the Jewish teachers with his insight.

VERSES 36-40. ANOTHER of God's remnant enters the story, this time an aged woman, but with insight akin to Simeon's. There is no end to usefulness. John wrote his Gospel in his nineties. Anna was eighty-four. Or, if the phrase means that she had been a widow for that total of years, she could have been well over a century old. She gave her life to prayer, and the old can always serve in this way. But let it be borne in mind that most people, for good or ill, are much the same in age and declining years as they have been through life. If Anna's extreme old age was prayerful, it is a fair inference that she had always been prayerful. Thanks to the triumph of medicine it is given to more and more to know long retirement and old age. God's plan for the evening should be the concern of the afternoon. Spend some time studying the old folk of the Bible.

2:41-52. This is a revealing picture of the pious Nazareth family, journeying to Jerusalem and remaining for the full length of the festival. Perhaps there was strong reason for this visit. A Jewish boy was accounted of responsible age at twelve years. He became "a son of the Law," and assumed a dress more proper to maturity. Joseph and Mary were forced to abandon the Galilee caravan which ensured their safety, and hasten back only to find a Child whom they must have felt they hardly knew. A new dignity had come

upon him, and there was now a part of him which they were unable to penetrate. Mary “kept all these sayings in her heart,” and we can almost hear her telling Luke the story. But is not Christ always thus? Could any earthly character have engaged the wonder, the love and the questing of man as he has done? Does any earthly character grow ever more awesome, as he did among those that knew him, without ever revealing flaw, fault or weakness? The character of Christ is the strongest proof of the deity of Christ. Consider this.

**Notes** 2:48: in civil law and everyday language Joseph was the father. Specious arguments against the miraculous birth are founded upon this verse. Luke saw no contradiction between the words and what had already been written, nor is there any. 2:49: the RV rendering, “in My Father’s house,” is correct.

THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

LUKE 3:1-9

When John began to spell out what repentance meant in practical terms, the truth became uncomfortable.

VERSES 1-3. HERE is Luke, the careful and exact historian, speaking. It has been demonstrated, first by the scholarship of Sir William Ramsay, that he was precisely that. He lists the rulers who held sway, from the old Emperor Tiberius to Caiaphas, priest of Jewry. The princes and prelates did not know that they formed merely the background for the events which really mattered. Of deep and lasting significance was the great religious revival led by John. It was no less. His preaching-place was the wide river-valley of the lower Jordan near Jericho. It is likely enough that John had spent years of preparation in the company of the sects of the wilderness.

A few miles from the place of baptism was the community of Qumran, the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is possible today, in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to see their roll of Isaiah, one of the many documents which they hid in the caves when the Romans were pacifying the Jordan Valley in the Great Rebellion of AD 67–70. It is possible that John himself saw it, for it was in use in his day.

3:4-9. Isaiah was more than once upon John's lips. He knew that his preaching was a fulfillment of prophecy. Using the splendid poetry of the prophet, he pictured himself as the herald of a king. There was a note of fierceness in the preaching of John which bears the mark of the Old

Testament rather than of the New. Snatching a figure of speech from the scrub fire of the Jordan wilderness, from whose running flame the hidden vipers of the undergrowth darted to safety, John castigated the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7), thrashed Jewish nationalism and pride, and demanded repentance. Israel's largest forest-land, the Jordan jungle, provided him with the image of the axe. Repentance, its reality and demonstration, was his theme, and gentler and more loving though the persuasion of the Christian evangelist may be, repentance is still the prerequisite for all blessing, for acceptance, for salvation. Demonstrate this from Christ's teaching.

**Notes** 3:1-2: compare Matthew 3:1, and note how carefully Luke links his Gospel to world history. Annas had been deposed by the Romans, but was recognized by the people. 3:3: Baptism had been confined to proselytes, but it was familiar as a symbol of purification (Ezekiel 36:25ff., Zechariah 13:1). 3:7-8: no substitute for repentance!

THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

LUKE 3:10-20

Why do we sometimes water down the truth to avoid offending others?

VERSES 10-14. THE call to repentance which was the point and appeal of John's preaching was no abstract doctrine. Boldly and simply John showed that religion had a form and shape in the conduct of every man, and in each day's living. Each mode of life has its peculiar temptations. Some are more prone to, and more exposed to, the temptations of the flesh; others to the faults of the spirit. Each personality, each trade or profession, has its own pitfalls. A genuine desire to have done with sin—and repentance is nothing else than this—finds its first expression in the immediate environment, in the first and nearest confrontation with the enemy of good. It is for society to adapt itself to the requirements of the gospel, not for the gospel to adapt itself to society. That is what those who journeyed to the west bank of the Jordan to hear John found.

3:15-20. The response of those who heard the desert preacher was as it has always been. There were those who saw the hand of God, and heard the accents of the Holy Spirit. They questioned, indeed, whether the great event of God's ultimate revelation might not have come. For them John had a clear and unequivocal word. Christ was another, and Christ was coming, and Christ would, by his very presence, reveal the worthless and the worthy, and separate the evil from the good. But others reacted as men still do. Fearlessly

John had rebuked sin in high places. Herod had with him, in illicit union, the ambitious, scheming woman who had been married to Philip (a brother to be distinguished from Philip the tetrarch, who lived quietly in Rome). When Herod was in Rome, Herodias trapped him, and fled with him. She was to ruin his life. Her story is worth reading for its warning. It would have been better had Herod listened and repented.

**Note 3:11:** the injunction to charity had its place in the fiery prophet's preaching. There is a world of difference between due severity in the preaching of the gospel, and that bitterness which only engenders hardness of heart. Not all who renounce the world do so with sound motives, and where these are twisted the condemnation of sin becomes an exercise in hostility.

THE BAPTISM AND GENEALOGY OF JESUS

LUKE 3:21-38

Many of us just drift through life. Have we really begun to live for God and fulfill the work he has for us?

VERSES 21-22. THE words mean no more than that Jesus waited until the mass movement of John's revival was past. He sought no spectacular publicity. John's thought moved in the orbit of the great Isaiah, and God, as he ever does, met him on the level of his thought: "Oh, that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down," the prophet had cried (Isaiah 64:1), and so it came to pass.

3:23-38. The genealogy makes dull reading for us. To the Jews it would have been of the utmost importance. Detailed records were kept at Jerusalem. Hillel, who lived at this time, had no difficulty in demonstrating his Davidic descent. There are Polynesians, alive today, who, without written records, can recite their descent to remote centuries. The difficulty of Matthew's variant genealogy is felt only by the modern world, inadequately informed about Jewish practice. It is obvious that Matthew and Luke, with access to the same information, and writing in the same generation, would not knowingly contradict each other. It is clear that they must have followed different plans. Matthew gives Joseph's line, while making it clear that Jesus was not Joseph's son, because Joseph was Jesus' legal father, a point important for more than one reason in Jewish law. It was also necessary to establish the fact that Mary had married within the tribe. Legislation mentioned in the closing

chapters of Numbers shows the necessity for this to be clear. Luke almost certainly gives the genealogy of Mary. Joseph, not Mary, is given as the immediate descendant of Eli because Joseph authenticated Mary's inheritance by the Numbers legislation (Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-13). It is probable that more exact information would establish some ritual of adoption in such cases. Note that Matthew takes the line back to David; Jesus was King. Luke takes it to Adam; Jesus was the Son of Man, the world's Savior, not the Jews' alone. Luke, the friend of Paul, has the world in view. He has just spoken of the baptism, necessary only as the sign of the identification of the Sinless One with sinful man. We have our part and place here.

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

LUKE 4:1-13

Do we aim to know our Bible, so that we can use it when the devil attacks us?

BEHIND THE PALMS, cypress and jacaranda of the town of Jericho, a mile back from the arid mound which covers the remains of a dozen ancient fortresses on the old, historic site, stands a harsh, bare mountain on the edge of the Judaeian wilderness. This is the traditional place of Christ's temptation.

How was he to conduct his ministry? As the wonder-worker, able to feed a hungry multitude and turn the stones to bread? The host will follow those who feed them, as he himself once said (John 6:26). Was he to seek the path of worldly influence and power in wider spheres than the little land? And as he wrestled with this thought perhaps he saw what he had often seen from the high uplifted edge of hills where Nazareth stood. The vast level floor of Esdraelon lies beneath. It was a highway of all nations. Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman had marched that way. Alive and vivid in his memory was the vision of the "kingdoms of the world," seen again "in a moment of time." Palestine was small, obscure, trampled by the vast empires.

And then Jerusalem. Should he stand aloft on the temple top, and shatter all the scorn and incredulity of men by demonstrating his faith in Scripture, and his own Messiahship? The storm raged through him, for he was "tempted in all ways as we are," and it is only those who do not yield who know the ultimate impact of the testing.

Matthew changes the order of the trials. And how true it is that temptation is repetitive, varied, resourceful. A mind is behind temptation, organizing the attack, in open confrontation or in ambush, varying the assault, probing for the weak places, returning, switching the attacking thrust now here, now there .... And for long weeks it continued as he threw back the invasion, and answered with Scripture each twisted argument. We are safe when we can so reply.

**Notes** Hebrews 4:15 suggests that this was not the only temptation. The temptation in the wilderness was an assault on Jesus as Messiah rather than as Man. 4:5-8: the repudiation of the Jewish idea of the Messiah is involved here. 4:10: Psalm 91:11-12 was regarded as addressed to the Messiah.

## JESUS PREACHES AT NAZARETH

### LUKE 4:14-22

Those who thought they knew him well were astonished at Jesus' power, but the reading he chose was a claim they couldn't take.

HE WHO CAME from Nazareth, and belied the reputation of the town (John 1:46), came back again. Luke begins his story of Christ's ministry at this point, but much had already happened to bring fame and reverence to his name. The times are uncertain, but events recorded up to Mark 6, Matthew 13 and John 4 had probably already taken place. 4:23 shows that Luke was aware of this.

Isaiah was an appropriate book. Since John's ministry Isaiah had been active in the minds of men. The passage read was Isaiah 61:1-2, with a phrase from Isaiah 58:6, though, perhaps, in the roll from which the Lord read, those words were included in the later passage. The Lord thus took up the theme of John, with one significant variation. John had spoken, and rightly spoken, of judgment. The Lord stressed the fact that the Day of God's grace postponed the final hour of retribution.

His method was dramatic. The passage should be read in Isaiah where, in all versions, it will be plain that the Lord broke off his reading in the midst of a verse. He can only have meant that "the day of vengeance of our God" was not yet. He could have chosen no more effective demonstration to impress upon all that a new age of God's grace was opening, and that no liberating crusade against the enemies of Israel was at hand.

Mercifully the day of acceptance continues. The poor are still found in an affluent society, though, like those of Laodicea, “rich and increased with goods,” they are not always aware of what God deems poverty (Revelation 3:17); the broken-hearted are multitudinous—lives soured by rejection, chilled by disappointment, disillusioned by love, because true love was misconceived; the captives, bound by evil habits, day and night under the mastery of alcohol, nicotine, drugs, or the masterful lusts of the flesh; the blind, who see no pervasive Presence in the loveliness of the world, no wider life beyond the grave, nothing save that which can be felt, looked at, heard or tasted; the bruised in spirit are a multitude who still need liberty from obsessive fears, gnawing hate, imprisoning bitterness ... Christ’s offer stands.

**Notes** The incident here is very probably that described in Mark 6:1-6 and Matthew 13:53-58. 4:17: “there was given to him”—Greek, “further handed to him”—ie after the reading of the Law. 4:18: a free version, based on the Septuagint.

JESUS IS REJECTED AT NAZARETH

LUKE 4:23-30

The people's reaction changed, as the significance of what he said sank in.

LUKE IS OFTEN a master of succinct irony. Look at his quiet description of the crowd at Ephesus (Acts 19:32). The same hand wrote 4:22. Charmed in their despite, the folk of Nazareth wondered at the gracious words of Christ. Then in an upsurge of bitter jealousy they realized that he was one of them, "Joseph's son," who worked with plane and saw along the street. The utter irrelevance of the thought is the center of its tragedy.

So it comes about that those nearest to the proffered blessing fail often to lay hold of it. Others—the Phoenician widow, the Syrian soldier—receive it. And it is here evident why Luke, the associate of Paul, who shared the great apostle's vision of a global gospel, chose to set this incident in the forefront of his story. Here was the Jewish response to the evangel, which was repeated with monotonous regularity throughout the ministry of Paul, revealing its tragic shape thus early in the ministry of Christ. The mention of Zarephath and Naaman suggested the appeal to the Gentiles.

This prospect was revolting to the nationalistic Jew. The Lord had refused an idle demonstration of his power in Nazareth. That is what they demanded, and the explanation of his words in 4:23 lies here. Matthew 13:58 remarks that their unbelief prevented his doing such deeds among them. And now his reference to the faith of Gentiles supplied the spark. In a flame of hate they

thrust him to the cliff-top with murder in their hearts. Nazareth lies in a hollow in a ridge of hills. The Mount of Precipitation, a likely enough site, presents a precipitous face to the Esdraelon plain. A score of biblical sites ring the vast landscape. The Nazarenes added another. Compare Acts 13:46,50; 22:21-22.

The Lord departed, as he departed from Gadara. It is possible to reject salvation in the very presence of Christ. And with fatal finality. He never came back to Nazareth. Carefully compare the story in the other two Gospels.

**Notes** There is no contradiction between 4:22 and 4:28. When the crowd began to talk, the evil words of the jealous (4:23) gained control. The morality of a crowd tends to be that of its lowest components. 4:29: “throw him down headlong”—a form of stoning, the punishment for blasphemy.

JESUS DRIVES OUT AN EVIL SPIRIT

LUKE 4:31-44

The main reaction to Jesus' message was amazement—but this is a far cry from real faith.

VERSES 31-37. THE ruins of Capernaum lie at the head of the lake whose level waters gleam through the screen of trees. There is a large remnant of an ancient synagogue. Hadrian tore down all the synagogues of Galilee when he finally crushed the second Jewish rebellion in AD 132 and 133, but foundations are not easily destroyed. There is little else—a few broken columns and shattered walls, some worn fragments of olive presses. The lizards run over the warm stone (Matthew 11:23).

The “devil-possession” mentioned in the story must not be too lightly dismissed. There are phenomena of evil not adequately explained by psychology. The horrors of voodooism, with the sudden seizure of bystanders by some alien influence, which obliterates personality, changes the voice, and imposes modes of behavior quite remote from normal, is one manifestation of something unseen not easily explained in familiar scientific terms. Other exotic cults, ancient and modern, display similar inexplicable phenomena. But suppose the “devil-possessed” of the New Testament narratives were actually suffering from forms of recognizable mental illness—how else could the Lord have cured them save on the level of their knowledge and their faith? He healed one blind man on the basis of his belief that the spittle of a saint was curative (John 9:6). It is part of his grace that he meets us where our

faith can operate. Otherwise, indeed, “how helpless and hopeless we sinners had been.”

4:38-44. This passage has inspired many hymns. The hot sun had dropped behind the hills of Galilee. The lake was silver in the twilight, and the snow of Hermon to the north-east pink in the last light. He came from Peter’s house where his cool touch had healed a good woman of her sickness, and though it was late found time to put his hands “on each one of them” (4:40); he did not heal in groups, but met each one in the place of need. Where love and grace meet faith and hope, at that point is salvation. We gather together for worship, but we meet Christ alone for the soul’s healing.

**Notes** 4:34: “us”—note the plural personality implied. Compare other similar occasions. 4:38-39: as an efficient doctor, Luke distinguishes, as the textbooks did, a great from a small fever. 4:40-41: the Sabbath ended with sunset. 4:43: the “kingdom”—the “kingly rule.”

THE CALLING OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES

LUKE 5:1-11

Jesus doesn't reject unworthy people; he gives them a new start and a new life.

FORMS OF MYSTIC interpretation which make Scripture strange and remote have done their worst with this human story. The deep water (5:4) is represented as the Gentile world; Peter's reluctance to put out as a foreshadowing of the story in Acts where he was led in his despite to bring the message to the Gentiles, a hesitation only overcome by the Lord's specific command ...

Such strained exegesis harms preaching and withdraws the gospel from ordinary men and women, who desperately need it. The Bible is meant to be understood, and any form of interpretation which destroys simplicity may be commonly dismissed forthwith as human perversity.

The story, in fact, is exquisitely simple. The low shore of the lake runs south towards Tiberias in a wavering line, once crowded with the busy fishermen of Capernaum. It was here that the first disciples were called, vigorous and able men, active in Galilee's chief industry, and converts, it seems, of John's great religious awakening, which had deeply marked the common people of the land. Christ taught in the place of business, amid all the coming and going along the line of little bays. So the message of the church, rightly emphasized, touches all life. Christ, who had preached in

Capernaum's synagogue, went also to Capernaum's fishermen at their place of labor.

Peter obeyed, though he saw no meaning in the command, and in the great haul of fish he saw, as he had never seen before, not even at the time of healing in his home, the glory of the Lord. His first reaction was like that of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), an overwhelming consciousness of unworthiness, inadequacy and sin. Ever ready in such emergencies to rush to speech (Mark 9:5-6; John 21:3), Peter begged Christ to leave him. It is the heart's desire (Psalm 37:4) which God regards, not the stumbling fashion of our words. Look on to 5:32.

**Note** Observe several marks of Luke's authorship: he calls Gennesaret a "lake"—his less-traveled fellow-evangelists call it a "sea"; he uses a technical medical term ("full of leprosy"); he gives prominence to the call of Peter, the apostle in whom the Gentile world was particularly interested.

JESUS' HEALINGS

LUKE 5:12-26

Why do you think it was important that Jesus healed the man as well as forgiving his sins?

VERSES 12-16. IN this story the Lord both disregards and conforms to the regulations of the Law. He touches the leper, an act which was forbidden, but he bids the cleansed man show himself to the priests (Leviticus 14). He conformed when love permitted. When love demanded something deeper than formality, he brushed formality aside.

The reason for the Lord's request in 5:14 is found in Mark 1:45. The Lord sought to avoid a mass movement and an epidemic of emotional enthusiasm. He sought to lay his foundations firmly in the rank and file of the land and in understanding, dedicated lives. Is not this still the better way?

5:17-26. The gathering of the religious leaders was part of the process mentioned by Mark, the spurious or hostile interest which he had sought to avoid. Enthusiasm which lacks tact and obedience can harm the work of Christ.

The experts had come to criticize; the prejudiced, in most situations, can find food for their prejudice. The advice of the practical Peter, and an armful of rope from his boat, may lie behind the drastic methods of the four friends who brought the sick man to Christ. Unorthodox methods are not always wrong, but should not be sought for their own sake. Let us use the door if it is there. Applicable, is it not, to evangelism?

The whole story shows that the Lord recognized the link between a troubled soul and a broken body. Most of our ills can in some way be shown to arise from disturbance in the spirit, and there is no deeper disturbance than sin, a nagging conscience and corrupted thought.

Read Matthew 9:2-8 and Mark 2:1-12. Note the minor differences in words and detail, remembering always that more words were said than those reported, and that what was said was in Aramaic. Even the basic Greek is itself a translation.

**Note** 5:17-26: Luke's theme, unfolded in ordered sequence, is the self-revelation of Christ. The Messiah who has demonstrated his lordship over sickness, demons and nature, now shows his authority in forgiving sin.

CALLING AND FASTING

LUKE 5:27-39

Here Jesus points to the fact that it wasn't just the old Judaism  
“patched up” inside an old framework!

VERSES 27-29. GOD looks more deeply than man. Capernaum saw only the cynic who despised his people enough to sell his services to the Roman or Herodian tax corporations. There were wide opportunities for bribery, exaction and all manner of corrupt and cruel practice in the ancient systems of tax-collection, and the class who lent themselves to a mode of livelihood so despised and debased were outcasts from their community and the subject of savage jibes and bitter sayings. Christ only, among those who passed the tax-booth, saw something more, the pathetic figure of a man in need of love, who longed for help to break free from a life he hated, a soul in desperation. And Christ was seeking entry into the submerged class of Matthew's kind. They were many in Capernaum, for the town was the customs-post for traffic up the lake.

5:30-35. There was little privacy in ancient society. Matthew's dinner party was no doubt observed by the critics, and their carping question evoked the Lord's ironical remark. Ironical it is, and must be so read. He by no means implied that there are righteous folk who need no repentance, much less that the critics themselves were such people.

5:36-39. Hence the Lord's method, which may be further illustrated by later encounters with the same strong opponents. He passed to the offensive.

Read chapter 20, and observe the same method. It is not good to be always on the defensive. Pass to the attack, but only with skill, confidence and understanding of the foe. The Lord's method was drastic. He thrust straight at their foundations. Their whole order, tattered and outmoded, was to pass away. Christianity was to be no makeshift patch on an ancient garment, no new ferment in the old containers. Luke, who had caught from Paul the vision of a global gospel, appreciated this, though the parable is also recorded by Matthew and Mark.

Note the attempt to divide John and Jesus on a minor issue of practice (5:33)—a favorite device of the enemy. 5:35: “taken away”—the first indication that Jesus expected a violent end.

LORD OF THE SABBATH

LUKE 6:1-11

If David could set aside God's ceremonial restrictions in a case of need, Jesus could do the same.

THE TWO INCIDENTS in this passage illustrate Christ's clash with the legalists in their jealously guarded province of Sabbath regulation.

Christ's point in both cases is that in the Old Testament the Sabbath was a beneficent institution. The scribes and Pharisees had turned it into a burden to be borne, and not infrequently a system of cruelty.

6:1-5. According to the humane provisions of the Law, as Moses laid it down (Deuteronomy 23:25), it was lawful thus to eat another's corn. But the Pharisees, infinitely elaborating and embroidering the simple laws of Sabbath-keeping, had listed such manual stripping of an ear of wheat and removal of the husks, as both reaping and threshing. Such absurdities were manifold. A chair, which could be moved on a firm floor, could not be moved on soft earth on the Sabbath, lest the furrow left prove to be plowing and sowing should a chance seed fall in.

6:6-11. An ox or ass which fell into a pit on the Sabbath had to be fed and bedded for later rescue. If it was injured it could be drawn up and killed. The Pharisees, in their system of escape clauses, which made it possible for the initiated to avoid their own burdensome regulations, had decreed that one could lift the beast on the declared intention to destroy, and then, finding it uninjured, let it go free. The Lord's point was that the critics of his men, and

of his own compassionate healing, could twist their laws for a beast, but not for a man. They had laid it down that medical help could be given on the Sabbath only in a case of life or death.

Pharisaism still lives where a movement once beneficent degenerates into a set of rules, postures and attitudes; wherever self-seeking, pride, love of place, reward or advantage find a place in religion; wherever man-made rules, exclusivism and absurdity clash with the splendid sanity of Christ; wherever men are preoccupied with doctrine and tolerate sin, deny God's good gifts to the needy, forget love or refuse mercy.

**Notes** 6:1-5: Luke takes his theme one stage further—the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath. 6:6: Dr Luke notes that it was the *right* hand. 6:7: “watched”—the word implies close and continuous scrutiny.

JESUS CHOOSES THE TWELVE APOSTLES

LUKE 6:12-19

Notice what a mixed bunch of people Jesus chose: their different backgrounds and temperaments were remarkable—perhaps like people in your church!

WORN BY THE conflict with the Pharisees the Lord withdrew for a time of close communion with his Father from whom he always drew strength and sustenance. Such times of peace and withdrawal are necessary nourishment and healing. Abraham went to “the place where he stood before the Lord,” Habakkuk to his “watchtower.” A walk alone can be a time of rich fellowship with God, and nature an aid to such communion. He sought not only the refreshment of withdrawal from the place of bitterness and conflict and the disturbing presence of evil. He was seeking the mind of his Father for the great task of choosing his men (John 15:16). Perhaps he faced the dread problem of Judas. It sometimes seems as if God can act on two planes, that which his omniscience knows will be, and that which might have been but for the rebel will of man. Judas, perhaps an able man, had his great opportunity.

Read the lists in Acts 1:13, Matthew 10:2-4 and Mark 3:16-19. The Nathanael of John 1:45 is Bartholomew, a surname meaning “the son of Ptolemy.” Matthew is Levi, and Judas, the son of James, is Thaddeus. Peter is always mentioned first and Judas from Kerioth (Iscariot) last. These men were not the “band of ragamuffins” of Frederick of Prussia’s phrase. They were all busy men as far as we can envisage their daily life, not without

property, successful in their way of life, and with much to give up (Mark 10:28-31).

They were called apostles, “special messengers” or “envoys.” The word means “one sent.” The word implies a goal and a purpose and a task to perform. “I have chosen you, and so placed you, that you should go and produce fruit ...” runs John 15:16, literally rendered. And look again at the renewal of the commission in Acts 1:8.

These were the men who were to change the course of all history. It is instructive to study them individually. Many are mentioned more than once. To keep a notebook and list all incidences and utterances of each apostle under his own name is to be impressed with the distinct and recognizable character which takes shape. God takes us as we are and variously expresses himself through the differing facets of our personality. Our unreserved committal is what he requires of us.

## BLESSINGS AND WOES

### LUKE 6:20-29

Jesus' message is revolutionary, as it is the direct opposite of the worldly standards we're used to.

THIS IS NOT the Sermon on the Mount reported at length by Matthew. Luke is clear in 6:17 that "He came down and stood in the plain." Some of the same sentiments find expression, but what preacher uses a sermon only once, and surely this address was worth repetition? Hence, too, some slight variety of utterance. The poor and the hungry, for example, find fuller definition in Matthew, but no Eastern listener, in the context of the speech, would misunderstand the briefer words. They are "the poor in spirit" and "the hungry for righteousness." The Lord was not promising a social and a material millennium, true though it is that his message came to the scorned and rejected of society, those neglected by the remote and aristocratic custodians of a corrupt religion.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have thrown some light on the meaning of the former expression. The "poor in spirit" are the tender-hearted. In one of the scrolls they appear as the opposite of the hard-hearted. There is no blessing in God for those who lack pity and mercy, and are not moved by the spectacle of human sorrow, the pathetic helplessness of little children, the sight of suffering and pain, and the pathos of man's plight. The imagery of the Bible sometimes loses its cutting edge outside its context of time and place.

Palestine was a stricken land, with deep need in its little towns and villages, and the power of the alien heavy in the life of men.

It was also a hot land. It is still a hot land, with water so precious that international strife between Arab and Israeli has frequently loomed over its distribution. Real thirst, when the sun dries the very fibers of the body, parches mouth and tongue, and fills the whole person with a longing for relief, is a commoner experience in Palestine than in more rain-blessed lands. But is it thus that we long for the will of God in our lives, is it with such insistence, passion and desire that we seek for righteousness?

Christ had little comfort for those who thought they had all life could give, or for the worldly popular. “What have I done wrong,” said Socrates once, “that this bad man should speak well of me?”

**Notes** A “saying” of Jesus, found in 1897, runs, “I found all men drunken and none found I athirst among them.” (See John 7:37: Matthew 5:6.) 6:22: “hate ... separate ... reproach ... cast out your name”—the four stages whereby a Jew was excommunicated from the synagogue. 6:24: the word for “have received” is that used to receipt a bill in the Greek of the period—“They are quit, their reward paid in full.”

## COMPASSION AND JUDGMENT

### LUKE 6:30-38

The love Jesus describes is a love for others that does not depend on what they are or on their treatment of us.

VERSES 30-35. IN the interpretation of such passages certain principles are to be consistently observed. First, realize that the East speaks in poetry, with image and illustration woven into the text in pictures rather than concepts. The West is logical, seeking abstract expression.

Matthew's parallel passage bids the Christian give the coat also to one who demands a cloak, to turn the other cheek to the smiter, to go the second mile. The fact that two of these expressions have been usefully absorbed into Western speech shows how truly they describe Christ-like gentleness and disarming meekness. And, of course, the true meaning is here. The Christian is not to be stripped bare by a cynical and greedy world, is not expected to double his contribution to income tax, while the Lord himself is illustration of what he meant by "turning the other cheek" (John 18:22-23).

The whole drift and purport of this teaching is selfless generosity, utter self-control under persecution, absolute compassion and Christ-like love. It is completely daunting. Secondly, remember that Scripture must be balanced by Scripture. The Christian who strips himself of necessary resources in spectacular or emotional giving may be falling short in other bounden obligations, in providing, for example, for his own family, a theme on which

Paul has a stern word to say (1 Timothy 5:8; read also chapter 6 for a statement of Paul).

6:36-38. Similarly with judgment. The Lord judged the Pharisees (Matthew 23), and a function of judgment is committed to the church and to its leaders (1 Corinthians 5:2-5). But remember that the Lord was in a position to judge in a manner denied to men. He could pronounce that there were those who had sinned beyond possibility of repentance (Mark 3:23-29). No man dare assume such certainty. What the Lord condemns in 6:37 is the censorious attitude which forgets personal shortcomings just as grave as those condemned, a ludicrous self-righteousness which adopts a pose of condemnation without knowledge of the circumstances of another's temptation or sin, and which sheds all love in criticism. It is the theme of love which he is continuing and developing.

**Prayer** Help us, holy Lord, to remember how far we ourselves fall short, and to be tender to the beaten, the desperate, and the defeated in life's battle.

THREE PARABLES

LUKE 6:39-49

As we are all forgiven sinners, we should not be quick to criticize others.

THREE PARABLES CLOSE the sermon.

6:39-42. The blind were primarily the corrupt priesthood and religious plutocracy. “Beam” is to be understood as a piece of oriental hyperbole. The “mote” was a scrap of chaff blown from the threshing floor and a common autumn nuisance.

6:43-45. The point of the illustration is that a change in nature is required if a tree is to change its fruit. The parable looks on to John 3.

6:46-49. The picture probably includes two ways of life. The dry river valleys of the Middle East, the “wadis” of Arabia, were the highways of trade, but subject to occasional disastrous floods. Going with the crowd, seeking the moment’s advantage, intent on gain, one man risks danger and builds on the sandy floor. The other, more concerned for security, builds on the “crag” (6:48, literally). His position is lonely, less convenient for trade, buffeted by the winds, but safe. So in life. The wrong foundations, chosen for the same reasons, are self-confidence, material wealth, social position. Hence, in the flood of life’s testing—moral, and often mental, collapse. The true foundation is defined in 1 Corinthians 3:11. Read also Ephesians 6:11-13.

This entire section emphasizes the principle that conduct depends on character. And it is what a man believes that makes him what he is. Recent

controversy has emphasized this: the so-called “new theology” was inevitably followed by the “new morality”—although it is straining language to employ the terms “theology” or “morality” to such nebulous concepts.

**Note 6:48:** Greek—“like a man building a house, who dug and kept on deepening ...” emphasizes the tedious persistence involved.

## THE FAITH OF THE ROMAN CENTURION

### LUKE 7:1-10

Following on from chapter 6, Luke now gives us an example of faith in practice.

THE CENTURION WAS a Roman seconded for special duty in a sphere of Herod Antipas' administration. It is a notable fact that the Roman officers who find mention in the New Testament are, all five of them, men of standing and visible integrity. Palestine was a turbulent province. Rome was seeking to hold it with a garrison of 3,000 men, which, as the ultimate disaster of the Great Rebellion was to prove, was totally inadequate. Hence Rome's cultivation of the Herodian house, and the collaborating priesthood and aristocracy. Hence, too, the obvious fact that officers picked for duty in Palestine were men of character and strength. It is not strange to find an officer of this type attracted to Judaism, whose lofty view of God, and stern standards of moral conduct, appealed to many pagans who found the religions of the Greek and Roman world unsatisfying.

It is also clear that the centurion was a man of insight who could see past the obtuse religious leaders, proud, bound by their own legalism, and suspicious of Christ. He saw the worth and wonder of the Lord, and came to seek him with courtesy, reverence and faith. It was inevitable that he should conceive God in the forms and terminology of his own soldier's profession. So it happens with every believer. An astronomer will think of God as a great mathematician, a poet will see his glory woven into simple things, and the

common bush aflame with him. The infinite Creator is infinitely varied, and each believer has his own contribution of understanding to make. But supremely, God would have us see him in the face of Christ. Here is his grace, his love, his ultimate revelation (John 1:18).

When Luke wrote his Gospel, much of the career of Paul was already over. Peter's dramatic meeting with Cornelius, the centurion of Caesarea, was more than twenty years behind. The door was open to the Gentiles, but there were those in the church, the heirs of the carping Pharisees, who still resisted the gift of the gospel to the world.

Luke was pleased to tell the story of a Gentile's faith, for it revealed in Christ's own experience and purpose that which Paul had woven into his world-wide ministry. In Christ was neither Jew nor Gentile, just as in him there is neither black nor white.

**Notes** 7:3: "elders of the Jews"—the leaders of the local synagogue, who ministered its affairs under the "ruler" (Luke 8:41). 7:9: note how this is expanded in Matthew 8:11-13.

JESUS RAISES A WIDOW'S SON

LUKE 7:11-18

Jesus showed his love and proved that he was Lord of life and death  
by raising the widow's son.

A GOOD MAP is always an interesting aid to the study of Scripture. The position of Nain is worth noting. It lies ten miles as the crow flies south-east from Nazareth, across the eastern extension of the lovely Esdraelon plain. A few miles south-west lies Shunem where Elisha similarly brought an only son back to life (2 Kings 4). At the same distance in the other direction lies Endor, scene of the doomed Saul's grim encounter with the dead. The village is called Nain today and there are rock-cut tombs nearby which may have been the goal of the sad procession which the Lord met coming from the gate.

It was a grievous sight. A woman utterly desolate, her husband gone, her only son dead. The widow of Nain need not have been over forty years, perhaps even less, and a long wilderness of left-over life stretched ahead of her, to live in the loneliness and anxiety which the ancient world regarded as the widow's lot. It is a vivid little scene as the Lord stopped the cortege of noisy mourners and touched the dead. Those who seek to "demythologize" Scripture and eliminate tales of miracle fail to explain the artless marks of truth on such narratives, how, in a community which could draw no advantage from mendacity, invention or deception, the stories found origin at all, or why a competent historian, as Luke undoubtedly was, came to include them in his narrative after due investigation (Luke 1:3), and no doubt the

interview of eye-witnesses. The New Testament is to be accepted or rejected. It cannot be rejected, and any semblance of Christianity retained. Honesty before God must at least face those alternatives.

In 7:13 Christ is called “the Lord” for the first time. The setting is significant. Luke was writing thirty years after the incident, and uses the term which had become current in the church. It should be our habitual usage.

JESUS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

LUKE 7:19-30

Jesus tells John to consider the facts. God's power was at work in the lives of ordinary people.

VERSES 19-22. **TORMENTED** and in prison, John fell into doubt. Doubt not infrequently arises from a discrepancy between our view of what God should do, and what he actually does. John had expected a conquering Messiah, who would cleanse the land of evil, and give the people their ancient liberty. He would burn wickedness and oppression away. Even after the daunting recognition of the Messiah in the person of his own relative (John 1:31-33), the old preoccupation persisted. Surely he would soon "reveal himself," and "give back the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6).

John did with doubt what should always be done with doubt, he brought it frankly to Christ. Observe the frequency with which David acts in this way in the Psalms. The Lord gave no special revelation. He sought to reveal himself in his works, and still called for faith. He was reminding John of the other foreshadowings of himself in the great prophet whom he loved (Isaiah 35:5,6; 61:1). On this John was bidden rest.

7:23-30. When the envoys were gone the Lord pronounced his great eulogy of John. He was no river reed, or tussock of the Jordan plain, bent under the wind's blast like any weak and pliant thing, nor some princely visitant delicately clad, whom the crowds gather to applaud at the palace gates. John was the greatest of the prophets, because he closed the whole

prophetic line, and saw the fulfillment of all messianic prophecy with his own eyes. And yet he was to die before God's final revelation in the atoning death and the empty tomb. In that he lacked what the least of Christians had. He was without the last insights into God's great plan.

How should a Christian deal with doubt? He should ask first what he is doubting, and find whether it is something which he was never called to believe. He should also realize that doubt is temptation, and that temptation is not sin. Sin is cherishing doubt, and falling to temptation. He should take his doubt to Christ, and be prepared then to wait for an answer, alert for God's demonstration.

**Note** 7:20: "he that should come"—"the Coming One." At this moment John saw in Jesus neither the wielder of fan and axe (Luke 3:9,17), nor the fulfillment of Isaiah 53.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

LUKE 7:31-40

How do you deal with doubts?

VERSES 31-35. THE record of the Gospels is darkened by the lengthening shadow of the attitude of the religious leaders. They rejected John because the great movement of the Spirit which God brought to pass through him took no thought of the existing framework of established religion. The Baptist, indeed, had only fierce scorn for them (Matthew 3:7,12). Jesus mingled with the society he came to influence, meeting the sinner where the sinner was to be found, but, like John, paying no reverence to the leaders of religion. With like savagery they turned on him and reviled him for his association with the outcasts of society. Whimsically, he referred to a children's game with its accompanying ditty. It is not clear what it was, but wedding and funeral seem to have been similarly rejected.

Time tells, the Lord concluded, for foolishness and wisdom find expression in action and history, and men ultimately see plainly who is wise and who is foolish. Christ and John stand vindicated.

7:36-40. The Lord was no rigid proletarian. He was without class-consciousness as every follower of the Lord should be. He had dined with the tax-gatherers at Capernaum. He now dines with a Pharisee, who treated his guest rudely, with an eye, no doubt, to the comment of his critical fellows. People from the street could freely penetrate the public rooms of large

houses, and so it came about that the woman came in and ministered to Christ.

The incident is not that recorded in Matthew 26:7-13, Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-8. Simon the cleansed leper is not Simon the Pharisee. Similarity of names is always possible. If the records were largely destroyed, historians of a distant future might find it difficult to believe that Admiral Cunningham, General Cunningham and Air Vice-Marshal Conyngham commanded simultaneously in the eastern Mediterranean in the 1940s. In Luke, the incident apparently takes place in Galilee, and the woman is not known—in the others it is Mary of Bethany. Incidents can be repeated, as words also can, without the narrative being suspect, or the narrator careless or mendacious.

JESUS AT THE HOME OF SIMON THE PHARISEE

LUKE 7:41-50

Does our thankfulness to Christ for forgiveness show in our warmth toward him and other people?

THE SIMPLE HUMAN story of the woman in the Pharisee's house provoked the parable of the two debtors. Simon saw the point and rightly, if a trifle disdainfully, answered that gratitude in human affairs is commonly proportionate to benefit received. Simon, too, claimed forgiveness for his sins. The whole Jewish ritual to which he subscribed had atonement and reconciliation for its end. But forgiveness for Simon was part of a legal transaction between man and God. His sins were of the subtler sort, sins of the mind and spirit rather than the flesh—pride, disdain, discourtesy, self-esteem and contempt for lesser folk. He was like the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). He would, as a matter of course, admit a condition of sin, and claim that, by the processes of the Law, he was forgiven. He had never known the bite and viciousness of gross sin, sin which soils all life and ruins happiness.

The broken woman, on the other hand, had found something in the Lord which convicted her and brought her to his feet for cleansing. That one could so refashion and redeem, could so care and pity, filled her with a love which overflowed in passionate thanksgiving. Christ had brought God to her in such guise that she saw the mercy of the Most High, and his willingness to save. She believed that God must be like Christ, and therefore accepted the

Christian gospel, although Calvary, its last and complete manifestation, was yet without its cross. And so it was her faith which saved her as the last verse says.

It remains a fact difficult to explain that carnal sin fills the repentant with deep horror, and its forgiveness evokes the corresponding depth of love, while the hateful blemishes of the outwardly respectable, equally guilty in God's eyes, remain the theme of casual confession and small exercise of heart and mind.

**Note 7:47:** this does not teach justification by works; she is not forgiven *because of* her love; her love is the evidence of the forgiveness she has received. Love is weak where consciousness of sin is weak.

Lord and Master, make us sensitive to sin,  
and aware what it cost thee to redeem us.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

### LUKE 8:1-8

This chapter begins by telling us about the women who showed their gratitude for Jesus' help practically by supporting him and the disciples financially.

GALILEE TODAY IS not the most crowded part of Israel. In the first century it was much more densely populated, almost as full of busy little towns and villages as the Decapolis on the other side of the lake. To cover Galilee with a preaching mission was an arduous task.

The work of the women is mentioned only in Luke. Women are prominent in his Gospel. In his busy collection of material of interest, while Paul lay imprisoned at Caesarea, Luke must have made contact with a group of devoted women, perhaps Mary's circle, who provided him with much information. There is also a glimpse into the Lord's means of sustenance. Joanna, wife of Chuza, is mentioned only once more in the New Testament (Luke 24:10), Susanna does not appear again. Mary of Magdala is prominent in the narratives of the resurrection. She is not the "sinful woman" of the last chapter. The strange phrase about the seven devils means that there was a battle for Mary's soul, whatever else it means. And is it not a matter of personal experience that God's grace again and again restores, that God does not let the sinner go, but returns as often to reclaim as evil returns to its attack?

It is a fact which women should note with humble gratitude that, although there are numerous references in the Gospels to the ministrations and the reverence of women, there is no single example of a woman hostile to Christ. Traitors, cynical schemers, self-seeking cowards, brutes and hypocrites among men can find their counterparts in Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, the soldiers who wove a crown of vicious thorns and the Pharisees, but women who reject Christ and scorn his name can find no types or predecessors in the pages of the Gospels. Even Pilate's wife revered him.

Perhaps women have suffered more cruelly from sin, perhaps the care of innocence in little children has made them more tender. Let us thank God for the ministry of women in family, society and church.

**Note** 8:3: Joanna's presence indicates the early links Jesus' followers had with Herod's court—9:9; 23:8; Acts 13:1.

JESUS EXPLAINS THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

LUKE 8:9-15

There was nothing wrong with the seed—the only difference was in how the seed was received.

THE PARABLE OF the sower sums up the Lord's experience in Galilee. The use of parabolic teaching now becomes more frequent, not in order to conceal the truth, for 8:10 does not mean this, but to separate those willing to learn and follow truly from the merely curious, or the seekers for personal advantage and reward.

The parables are all earthly little stories, full of the life and daily activity of Palestine. They come vividly to life in the land of their birth with its outcrops of stone.

Some of the seed is trodden to death by passing feet. All unconsciously a material society makes much preaching vain. Secure and affluent, content in the familiar pattern of society, multitudes see no relevance in Christ because they have all they need. The preacher seeks in vain to stir concern for the things of the spirit or the life hereafter.

Some of the seed falls where the moist earth is thin and warm on a bed of rock. In such soil the seed quickly germinates, only to wither at the breath of drought. There are those who feel the stirrings of nobler desire but weakly allow old forms of life to reassert themselves, and allow the tender new growth of sweeter and more lofty aspirations to wither and fail in the arid world's hostile air.

Some of the seed falls among thorns. There are those like Pilate who cannot escape from the evil crop which they have allowed to grow. The thicket of cultivated sin, old compromise and base partnership is too dense to allow room for better growth.

Some of the seed sprouts, proves fertile and fulfills its divine purpose. It is variously fruitful, some more productive, some less ... and so it has ever been. But remember that all analogies fall short. The place of sowing, good or bad, is passive. The human field determines its own destiny. Man is free to choose. Hearing is an urgent business. Let each man attend to it. 8:8 says as much.

**Note** 8:10: the quote from Isaiah 6:9 occurs six times in the New Testament—Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27; Romans 11:8; and here. Cf. also the references to the Word of God as “seed.”

JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

## LUKE 8:16-25

Those who both hear the message and also do it are the ones who really belong to Jesus' family.

VERSES 16-18. THE ancient lamp was small and feeble enough. It gave little illumination from its tiny wick of flax or tallow. To set it forth to best advantage was common sense. So with the Christian's feeble testimony. The requirements of a lamp are that it should burn and burn steadily and consistently. It is a thought worth taking to heart.

8:19-21. The Lord's brothers and sisters are mentioned several times in the New Testament (Matthew 12:46; 13:55-56; Mark 3:32; 6:3; John 2:12), and he himself is called the "first-born." There can be no doubt that they were the children of Mary. The story that they were the children of Joseph by an earlier marriage, or even cousins of the Lord, was an invention of Jerome and other later writers who were adopting the absurd hostility to marriage and sex which is no part of Christianity but a feature of the obscurantism of the Middle Ages.

Before imagining harshness in the Lord's attitude, consider both the brevity and the purpose of the story. There are fifty-six words in the Greek text. The visitors were not necessarily rejected nor dismissed unkindly. The Lord delayed the commencement of his ministry until Mary's other children were sufficiently independent to sustain her, or to be no burden on her resources. He does, however, use the occasion to speak of the brotherhood

and close relationship of all believers, and it is a fact of experience that those who are one in Christ can be more intimately linked than blood relations who do not share their faith. It is also a sad situation, later to pass away, that at one stage the Lord and his family were not at one (John 7:1-5).

8:22-25. It was late in the day (Mark 4:35) when the band of disciples pushed out into the lake. The hills on the far side rise blue and steep not many miles away, but far behind them is the desert, spawning-ground of winds. Hence sudden storms. It was an awesome experience to see the turmoil of air and water fall still at his word. Let it be true of the soul's tempest.

**Notes** 8:16-18: an important complement to 8:10. The Lord turns from the imperious multitude to enlighten the Twelve. 8:24: note the development of Luke's theme—Christ is Lord of the elements.

JESUS HEALS A MAN WITH DEMONS

LUKE 8:26-39

Jesus remains calm in the presence of those who were frightened and disturbed.

GADARA LAY ACROSS the lake somewhere on the eastern shore where the hills rise steeply near the Yarmuk Gorge. By this time it must have been almost dark, an eerie time to meet a violent maniac emerging with a yell from the tombs. In the cool presence of Christ the distraught creature became harmless, and begged the Lord to depart. He was Legion, he cried, torn and rent by a possessing host of evil things, tramping, tramping through his hot brain like a marching regiment of Rome.

Perhaps he had once hidden, a terrified child, or ran screaming from some bloodstained village street, when soldiers of the garrison systematically cut down parents and playmates in reprisal for the murder of some Roman soldier. And there were graves of the Tenth Legion in Gadara. Sir George Adam Smith, the geographer of Palestine, found the headstones on the site. Cast out from society and haunting the tombs, the broken-minded man saw the hated name, and went mad with passion, breaking bonds asunder and tearing his body with stones.

The Lord had to prove to the stricken creature that he was healed. It cost two thousand swine. How valuable is peace of mind? How precious is a soul redeemed .... The folk of Gadara, preoccupied with swine, bade him urgently

to depart. They were in Christ's presence and preferred swine. They had God's salvation within reach, and chose swine.

Christ forces himself on no one. He went, but left behind the first apostle to the Gentiles, the healed lunatic. It was the Decapolis. A million Gentiles lived in its ten towns. The first missionary, in his borrowed fisher's cloak, set out to evangelize.

**Notes** 8:31: "abyss"—the abode of wicked spirits (Romans 10:7; Jude 6; Revelation 20:3). 8:39: there was no need for secrecy here to avoid a false Messianic rising; this area was predominantly Greek, not Jewish, which helps to account for the presence of the swine.

A SICK WOMAN AND A DEAD GIRL

LUKE 8:40-56

What do these miracles teach us about the need for faith and the way it should be shown?

THE LITTLE SHIP came back across the lake, perhaps to Tiberias, which lies half-way down the western shore. Here Jairus sought his help, and the Lord began to make his way through the thronging streets, and the crowds who were glad to see him return. There is a strong, vivid verb in 8:42. The multitude “were suffocating him,” it says.

It was a desperate situation. The little girl was dying, and the desperation of Jairus can be imagined, as the party made its slow progress along the packed street.

And then came fatal interruption. The woman with the humiliating and long-standing blemish in her body surreptitiously touched his garment. God met her, as God will, on the level of her faith, and she was healed. Then came the message which Jairus dreaded. It was too late. The child was dead. The cruel delay which had ended thus fatally must have been hard to bear. What was the woman’s burden compared with the life of a loved child? Jairus faced the uttermost of temptation. But as with the Bethany family, the Lord’s delay was purposeful (John 11:4,6). He wished to give Jairus not less, but more, than he asked, not a little one restored, but one brought back from the dead, and a deep lesson which would color all life and faith. God is never too late, and Jairus learned that in the room of death.

It is still true, or our faith is vain. He does not cancel today the law of death, but what is death as God sees it? He still appears to time-bound man to linger and tarry, but it is in order to strengthen the fibers of our faith, to give understanding which we might otherwise lack, to purge and ennoble our prayers. And yet he does not forbid the prayer: “Lord, make haste to save us.”

**Notes** 8:42: “one only daughter”—Luke notes this detail; cf. 7:12; 9:38. 8:43: a literal interpretation of Leviticus 15 would make her an outcast always, and Pharisaic severity would no doubt strengthen the prohibitions against her. Mark 5:26 adds a satiric comment on physicians, which Dr Luke omits; inspiration does not obliterate personality (similarly Luke omits the rebuke of Matthew 8:26). 8:44: “ceased,” “stanchd,” a medical term.

## JESUS SENDS OUT THE TWELVE

### LUKE 9:1-9

How far should the guidelines for preaching and the behavior of the apostles apply today?

VERSES 1-6. THE mission of the Twelve was to train them for their life-long task of evangelism without him visibly by their side. Bultmann has suggested that this passage was imported into the record to justify the later efforts of the church. Needless to say there is not a shred of evidence to support this. It is an example of the methods of criticism tolerated in New Testament studies which would be dismissed as ridiculous in any other branch of literary or historical criticism.

The directions laid down are still applicable in principle, though not in detail. The abandonment of all provision for the journey was practicable in the small area which they were called to traverse, and formed an object lesson in haste and complete dependence. The message was simple: the kingdom of God, by which is meant God's rule and government in life, the acknowledgment of him as Lord. Good deeds and the alleviation of suffering were to accompany the proclamation. The church should keep a balance between the two. The message is richer now that Calvary and the New Testament are woven into it.

9:7-9. The Lord's own progress through Galilee, and now the consolidating mission of his closer followers, occasioned in the north of the land something like the stir which the preaching of John in the lower Jordan

Valley had created in Judea. Herod was disturbed. The student of the New Testament should study the background history, and learn to distinguish the five members of the remarkable royal family who appear in its pages. Herod Antipas was a man who might have found salvation. Mark tells us that he had been moved by John's testimony (Mark 6:20). Herodias ruined his life. Unable to break free from a vicious entanglement, and claim liberty and forgiveness, he had descended to the crime which now filled his guilty mind with fear. It is impossible, as the stricken Macbeth remarked, "with the deed to trammel up the consequences." Man cannot sin in a vacuum.

**Notes** 9:5: "shake off the dust"—the action of a rabbi after traveling in Gentile territory. 9:7: lit. "utterly perplexed." Luke had sources of information at Herod's court (Luke 8:3).

## THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

### LUKE 9:10-17

It seems that the disciples wanted to keep Jesus to themselves. But he gave them a firm responsibility, although the resources seemed tiny.

BETHSAIDA JULIAS IS a mile north-east of the lake across the Jordan, a quiet countryside, where the Lord sought rest for his weary men (Mark 6:31). The eager multitude followed, and the Lord ministered to them. The weary Christian worker should note his example. To toil is part of dedication.

There is no bypassing the miracle. It is told by all four evangelists, and it is instructive to compare the accounts (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-13). There is no difficulty provided Christ was the One he claimed to be, and if he was less than that the whole fabric of Christian doctrine disintegrates. Creative hands increased that which was surrendered, and made it useful to a multitude (John 1:1-3).

A divine principle of action is apparent in the incident. God seems to demand some point of entry into the world, some bridgehead in the spirit of man. To bring blessing to mankind he seems to require some surrendered trifle, some shred of experience, a widow's mite, a handful of bread and fish, a sorrow, a pain, a joy. Given utterly to God the small gift becomes miraculous in his hands. David's and Isaiah's agony break the barriers of time, merge with the pain of Calvary, and become Psalm 22 or Isaiah 53. Habakkuk's perplexity becomes a book of poetry and prophecy built round a

text which echoes on to Paul and Luther (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17). The key is 9:16. That which God blesses, infinitely multiplies.

The blessing was no doubt the beautiful Jewish form of grace: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.” Affluent societies, rich and increased with goods, should remember that multitudes still lack the necessities of life, and should hold their plenty with humble, grateful and generous hands. And note, in the midst of such creativity, the Lord’s care for the fragments left in his possession. The Jew on a journey carried a “cophinos” or rush-woven basket so that he might avoid buying his bread from Gentiles. The disciples were thus equipped, and each of the Twelve gathered provision for the morrow. There was no waste, and a society prodigal of material goods, as no society has ever been before, should note the fact. No blessing lies on it.

#### **Prayer**

Let our small gifts be not wasted, Lord,  
but multiplied at thy touch.

RECOGNIZING JESUS AS THE CHRIST

LUKE 9:18-26

Nothing less than a life that is not self-centered but lived for Jesus day by day is what Jesus calls his followers to.

VERSES 18-22. IF Matthew and Mark are compared, it will be seen that there is a large gap in Luke's narrative at this point. This passage corresponds with Matthew 16:13-28 and Mark 8:27-9:1. The events of almost two chapters in the two other Gospels are omitted. It is quite absurd to suppose that Luke's abridgement of the story was not intentional. It is surprising that Luke did not include the story of the northern journey, the only excursion outside Israelitish territory, which is so prominent in Mark. One who shared the vision of Paul might have made much of the visit to Gentile territory, the story of the Syrophenician woman, and the implications of a Gentile share in the regard of Christ. Perhaps Luke had nothing new to add, and chose at this point to make one of the drastic abbreviations which are to be seen in Acts. It is a mark of his style of writing that he liked room to expand when the subject seemed of major importance and that he provided space by heavy pruning elsewhere. There was the simple consideration of the practicable length of a roll of papyrus. In both of his books Luke uses a roll of maximum length. We would surely prefer him to include the story of the Prodigal Son, and associated parables, than tell again what the other evangelists have told. And we would agree that space kept for the walk to Emmaus was well used. Writers on the New Testament become too complicated in their theorizing on

these points. Luke could explain it all by unrolling one length of papyrus, rolling it again, and allowing us to try its weight, one stick in each hand, rolling and unrolling as each column is read.

9:23-26. The longer narratives in the other Gospels make it clear that these events were a climax to weeks of fellowship and instruction in the Decapolis, where the Lord sought to prepare his men for what was to happen in Jerusalem. They have recognized him as the Christ, but the implications of that confession were not to be what they had envisaged. The cross comes into the life of the one who kneels before the cross to seek forgiveness. The cross stands for sacrifice, for love to the uttermost, for surrender, and sometimes for the scorn of men.

**Notes** 9:18: Luke refers to Jesus praying in six places where the other Gospels make no comment (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18,29; 11:1). All occasions are the preface to momentous words or actions. 9:20: “Christ”—Greek *christos*—Hebrew *messiah*, “anointed,” the title given to the chosen Servant of God foretold in the Old Testament. 9:22: “rejected”—Gk. implies examination and rejection. The three classes stated formed the Sanhedrin.

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

LUKE 9:27-36

Now that Peter had confessed him as the Messiah, Jesus showed his close friends a glimpse of his glory.

THE STATEMENT IN the opening verse must be closely linked with the story which follows. The Transfiguration was the prelude to the return to Jerusalem, the Passion Week, Christ's death and resurrection. So, in the truest sense, came "the kingdom of God"—not the consummation of all things, but the completion of God's self-revelation in Christ.

Dire testing and temptation lay ahead, and as a climax to weeks of spiritual preparation in the villages round Caesarea Philippi, the Lord chose to strengthen three of his men for the trial which lay before them, and the tense weeks in which their leadership was to count for much. Hence the night journey up Mount Hermon, the beautiful 9,000 foot mountain which lies 14 miles north of Caesarea Philippi.

The temptation which threatened would inevitably be to doubt whether the victim of Roman and priest could be the Coming One. Hence the strange scene on the mountain which showed Christ first as the consummation of Old Testament history. Moses was the great law-giver, Elijah the first of the prophets. Both were associated in prophecy with the Messiah. (Deuteronomy 13:15-19; Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6). Minds alert for Old Testament reference, soaked from childhood in its imagery and thought, would be conscious of other parallels: the cloud indicating the divine presence (Exodus 40:34-35),

the cloud of Sinai, the cloud of Carmel. They would remember that both Moses and Elijah had strange endings on the east of Jordan where they now were, and that Horeb was in the experience of both. Moses led the exodus. And the conversation, runs the Greek text literally, was concerning “the exodus which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Secondly the vision of John was confirmed, and Christ was shown to be the Beloved Son.

God sometimes fortifies the soul of those who are to face trial and testing for his sake with some special experience of grace, some deeper revelation of himself. It behoves us to remember in the darkness that which God taught us in the light. God’s method is often the rehearsal of familiar truth. Compare 7:22. Read something of Moses and Elijah again and try to imagine the impact on the minds of the three watchers.

**Notes** 9:27: three interpretations of this are suggested—the resurrection; the transfiguration; or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 which swept away the remnants of the old dispensation. 9:28: Matthew and Mark say six days; Luke’s eight days is on the Roman inclusive reckoning. 9:31: the same word, “exodus,” occurs in 2 Peter 1:15. 9:35: quoting Psalm 2:7 and Deuteronomy 18:15.

THE HEALING OF A BOY WITH AN EVIL SPIRIT

LUKE 9:37-45

From the dear Son, we come down to earth to another dear son. The disciples had the power but everyone lacked the faith.

THE CHILL WORLD of difficulty and defeat was waiting at the mountain's foot. Mark tells the story a little more fully, and it appears that the nine men who had not shared the journey up Hermon were the center of a curious crowd which included some of the religious leaders of Caesarea Philippi. The district was strongly Gentile in character, but also had a large Jewish population who watched with critical or interested eyes the doings of Christ.

The epileptic boy, like the blind man at the gate (John 9:2), was a theological problem to the disciples, a case for exhibition, not a spectacle of dire need and an object for sacrificial love. Hence their helplessness. It is not difficult to gather a crowd, and those who have a flair for doing so too commonly meet the crowd at its own level, set themselves in the center of the stage and dissipate real usefulness.

Mark tells the story at greater length, for Peter, Mark's informant, must have been deeply impressed by the spectacle of need and failure. Luke's briefer account still catches the dull tone of the stricken father's hopelessness. There is little in earthly pain to match the agony of a parent over the affliction of a beloved child. Let those called thus to suffer hold fast to the thought that in such experience they touch the edge of the love of God. The thought of God's suffering is an awesome one. The hymn is surely wrong which says:

“No trouble, nor sorrow, nor care, Lord, hast thou.” It is enough for us to remember that God was “in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

The man sought Christ in his distress, and found the church. In one he should, no doubt, have found the other, but too often, in the common scene, the church stands in the way. Like too many, the man saw that the church was helpless to aid him in his dire need, and imagined that Christ too was unable to help him.

**Notes** 9:41: “perverse”—see also Acts 20:30; Philippians 2:15. 9:42: again Luke thinks of the family—cf. 7:15. 9:43-44: “said” repeatedly: see Mark 9:31.

### **Prayer**

Help us, Lord and Master,  
not to hide thee from our fellows,  
and blunt the aspirations of those who seek or need thee  
by our dullness, impotence and self-esteem.

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

## LUKE 9:46-53

Notice the contrast between the wonderful self-sacrifice of Jesus and the blunt self-centeredness of the disciples!

THE CHAPTER MIGHT properly have ended at 9:50, because at this point Luke inserts a long tract of material not found in the other evangelists. In his usual fashion he has abbreviated on either side to make room for it. From 9:51 to 19:44 there is an account of the Lord's words and doings as he moved forward first in Galilee, then down the Jordan Valley, and up from Jericho, on his last journey to Jerusalem. Luke has concentrated much material here, and it is not necessary always to assume a strict chronological sequence.

9:46-48. Conscious that a climax was near, and still not grasping the spiritual nature of "the kingdom," the Twelve were becoming sensitive over matters of prestige and precedence. The choice of three for the mystic experience on Hermon may have accentuated certain tensions in the group. The Lord's quiet patience and continued confidence in them is a daunting spectacle. It is thus that he bears with others, equally obtuse and insensitive to his outworking purpose.

9:49-50. If these verses follow in time sequence, which may not be the case, they reveal how little John had heeded the talk on childlike simplicity. 9:54-56 are an even sharper demonstration. In life and in death the Lord illustrates how all evil in God's hands can be made an occasion of good. Such was the supreme lesson of Calvary, and again and again some fault, failing or

sin produces immortal words or acts. John's narrow sectarianism, which seeks smugly to elicit the Lord's commendation, produces the statement of 9:50, the rebuke of all intolerance. The contrary remark reported two chapters later (Luke 11:23) is not a repudiation or an afterthought, but a principle which applies to another situation. The two attitudes stand in tension, not in contradiction, and steady the Christian between two extremes. His fellowship must be wide, but not at the expense of fundamental truth and conviction, a fact which some, over-eager for a spurious unity, forget.

9:51-53. The Samaritan boorishness may have been disappointment. The stern mood of 9:51-53, so apparent in Mark's story, was upon him, and may have chilled their desire to retain him. Jerusalem and the cross were in full view. We must watch with reverence.

**Notes** 9:46: the reasoning may have been their reaction to Jesus' prediction of 9:44; they wonder who will succeed to the leadership. 9:48: the service of love is tested by its operation towards the most insignificant. 9:51: cf. Mark 16:19, where the Gk. verb is used whose noun form occurs here. 9:53: for Samaritan hostility, see Ezra 4:1-5; Nehemiah 2:19-20.

WOULD-BE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

LUKE 9:54-62

The shallow commitment of these people who toyed with following Jesus is so different from Jesus' determination.

VERSES 54-56. AS on the earlier occasion a demonstration of intolerance produces a precious saying. Sixty years later, the same John wrote the fourth Gospel and the letter which accompanied it, a document which is full of the plea for love which marked, according to tradition, the old man's last days. "Little children, love one another," he pleaded in Ephesus. "Why, master, do you always say this?" they asked. "Because," the aged apostle replied, "if you do that, it suffices." Experience had tamed the "Son of Thunder."

9:57-58. On sudden impulse or a burst of emotion, a scribe (Matthew 8:19) promised to follow Christ. He had not counted the cost, and we are not told the result when he came to count it. The Lord offers joy, not comfort. He makes no promises of material reward. He calls to strife, and has to offer, he might have told them, "nothing but blood and tears and sweat." He wants no one to follow him under any illusions, with any false hopes, any selfish or ill-considered motive.

9:59-60. The man surely would not have been there had his father been lying dead at home. The demands of an Eastern funeral would have preoccupied him. He must mean: "Let me wait, like Abraham at Haran, until my father dies, and I can follow without offending him." The Lord must have priority if duties conflict. It is easy to decide when good and evil are the

alternatives. The pain and difficulty of decision lie where good conflicts with good.

9:61-62. Another who came to Christ (Luke 5:29) did precisely this. Levi gave a farewell banquet to his friends, but in order to introduce them to Christ. This man had a divided mind. Like Lot's wife, he "looked back." In such is no stability. The good plowman fixes his eye steadily on a distant goal, takes firm grip on the plow, throws the whole energy of his body into the act, and does not stop, pause or waver until the long furrow is clean and straight to the end. Such are those whom the Lord would have follow him.

**Notes** 9:56: "another"—ie not Samaritan. 9:62: "the light plows of the East, easily overturned, require constant attention" (Farrar).

#### **Prayer**

Help us, O Lord of the field and the harvest,  
to drive our furrow straight today.

THE MISSION OF THE SEVENTY

LUKE 10:1-9

With so much still to be done, Jesus turned to a wider circle of people, and more followers were sent out.

THE MISSION OF the Twelve was to Galilee, the mission of the seventy extended to Judaea. The two projects of evangelism must not be confused, but may profitably be compared. As the Twelve represented the missionary function of Israel's twelve tribes, so the seventy perhaps suggested the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, the land's prime religious assembly whose purpose was ideally to prepare the land for the coming of the Messiah. Jerusalem Jewry had neglected Trans-Jordan, and it was through this strip of territory, with its admixture of Gentiles, that the seventy were to go, if they were to "go before his face."

The detailed directions given were proper to the urgency of a brief pioneering mission, and are not universally applicable in Christian work. Time was short, and the Lord forbade detailed preparation. He told them not to waste time in social activities, for salutation in this context is not the passing courtesy of friend meeting friend but the endless formalities of Eastern hospitality (see 2 Kings 4:29). Since the area to be traversed held many non-Jews, it was also directed that no exhibition of Jewish sensitivity over dietary prohibitions should be allowed to create awkwardness or spoil the visitor's testimony. Note Paul's application of this sensible rule in the

case of Corinth (1 Corinthians 10:27) where conscience could make a problem of food.

The principles which lie behind the instructions given to these first evangelists do contain points of universal application. The Christian preacher must be gentle in a harsh and hostile world (10:3), must go earnestly about his business, must be contented and courteous and careless of material comfort, must be simple in his message, and the envoy of his Lord. Paul must have read and heeded words like these, for his whole conduct as a missionary shows his effort to apply the Lord's directions. He sought no personal advantage, but was not ashamed to accept Christian hospitality (1 Corinthians 9:7-18; 1 Timothy 5:18; Acts 18:1-3; Philippians 4:10-19). But let the church at large not presume upon the self-sacrifice of those who serve it. The church has also its obligations, not listed here.

**Notes** 10:1: it has also been pointed out that the Jews thought of the Gentiles as seventy nations. 10:2: cf. Matthew 9:37; John 4:35.

THE UNBELIEVING TOWNS

LUKE 10:10-21

Jesus didn't hide the fact that the message would often meet with rejection.

THE LAKESIDE TOWNS had been uniquely blessed. In Capernaum the Lord had lived, and to many communities he was a familiar presence. To have lived in the light of the truth and to have neglected it is a dire responsibility. As though in illustration of the words of doom, the northern and north-eastern coasts of Galilee lie bare today. The level blue of the lovely lake laps empty shores. Capernaum is a ruin among its trees. Other sites are gone, or represented in a garbled name. Kerazeb, for example, may be Chorazin, but none can be sure. On the far side extends the eastern shore, its busy little ports all gone, and the Decapolis behind a wide scatter of ruined towns. Only Amman, the ancient Philadelphia, carries some semblance of the teeming life of the first century.

When the faith and principles round which a nation builds its strength and usefulness decay, inevitably disaster follows. Above all, the English-speaking nations should heed the warning. Uniquely privileged, enlightened beyond others, blessed with long centuries of faithful Christian witness, they abandon the old faith and prate of new moralities at their direst peril.

The seventy returned in jubilation. The Lord's remark about the fall of Satan was designed to check the insidious growth of pride. It is a phrase in the style of Jewish apocalyptic poetry. "Yes, I watched Satan fall from

heaven like a flash of lightning,” runs Moffatt’s paraphrase. Satan fell by pride, and minds taught in such imagery would see immediately the point of the warning. Success in their preaching mission could so easily lead to arrogance. In similar apocalyptic vein, and not likely to be taken literally by Eastern minds, is the remark about serpents and scorpions. They are symbols of cunning and vicious enemies. Then in sharp simplicity the Lord bids his men take humble thought of their privilege and not their power. And he speaks to all.

**Notes** 10:12: “that day”—Sodom’s final judgment was still to come. 10:15: “Hades”—the abode of departed spirits. Note question form as in RSV. 10:19: cf. Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 11:8; Revelation 9:5. 10:21: the contrast in the prayer is not between the educated and the uneducated, but between those who vaunt their understanding and those of simple faith.

THE SON AND THE FATHER

LUKE 10:22-29

Notice (including verse 21) the three Persons of the Trinity. How much do we realize the privileges of verses 23-24?

VERSE 22, WHICH is found again in Matthew 11:27, is alone and apart from all other evidence proof that the three Synoptic Gospels do not present a different picture of Christ from John. John undoubtedly takes up the theme more fully. It required re-emphasis at the end of the century when he was called to write. But here in Luke, where it is an integral part of the text, these words are testimony to the Son's oneness with the Father.

Such claims are not traceable to any accretion of myth or legend. They enter into the very substance of all he said. Consider, for instance, what is involved in his quiet use of the plural "We," when he speaks of himself and God: "We will come unto him and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). Consider what is implied in the necessity which he seems to feel to explain: "My Father is greater than I." Whenever he mentions God it is in tones of unique and superhuman intimacy. If we seek to prune such words away, to remould his speech, and find the human Christ which some have imagined might be found, a holier John Baptist, a more homely Elijah, who speaks and thinks and acts like a saint of earth, nothing at all is left. This impossibility to reduce him to human proportions without obliterating him is an unanswerable argument for deity. Reject this simple conclusion and the alternatives are these. Either—and its impossibility has been demonstrated—four ordinary

men created this astonishing character, and by four little books of simple Greek changed the history of the world, or else it was an unbalanced man who spoke like this, a deluded being for whom mankind's best have lived and died, and from whose teaching the sweetest things of life have ever flowed. Yet, for nearly two thousand years, up and down a skeptical world swift to bring down in derision the airs of high conceit, these claims have been preached. Men have turned away, have blasphemed and rejected. None has called him mad. And the world shall one day bow the knee before the Son of God.

**Notes** 10:22: typical references in John's Gospel—1:18; 14:6; 3:35; 6:44-46; follow these themes through with a concordance. 10:25: the lawyer's aim was two-fold—to trap the Master *and* to justify himself. The second aim is often hidden in a seemingly objective inquiry about Christianity. "Inherit eternal life"—another Johannine concept. 18:18ff. shows it to be synonymous with entering the kingdom. 10:26: "how readest thou?"—implies a reproach.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

LUKE 10:30-37

Jesus showed that our neighbor is *anyone* we happen to come across who is in trouble and who needs our help.

THE PARABLES IN Luke's Gospel are not parables in the strictest sense of the word. They are stories which could be true, pieces of life. This story bears all the marks of truth. From Jerusalem, 2,600 feet above the sea, to Jericho is the great rift valley. Even today the long sweeps of sealed highway curve and bend through howling wilderness. It was a place for bandit and highwayman, with boulders on the barren hillsides to hide the waiting thief, and deep desert to contain and to conceal his flight.

It was human enough for the priest and Levite to pass furtively by. The inert figure in the roadside dust might have been a decoy. The high priest at Jerusalem might have counselled caution and non-involvement. How many good people in some sombre modern slum would care to repeat the scene of the Samaritan's act of mercy with danger lurking in every corner of the sinister environment? To pass by, to shirk responsibility, to avoid a compromising entanglement in a situation of unknown difficulty, is a natural enough instinct.

The Samaritan was a compassionate man. He was also an uncommonly brave man. He belonged to a race despised by the Jews. Assyria overran and depopulated the northern kingdom of Israel, and by their cruel policy of population-transfer denuded the land of its inhabitants. To keep the province

from complete social and economic collapse, the Assyrian king repopulated Samaria with aliens (2 Kings 17:24-41). Instead of regarding the newcomers as objects of Jewish evangelism, the people of Judah, which survived in independence till Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem a century later, turned away in contempt, and the racial division between Samaritan and Jew began its bitter course.

In answering the lawyer, the Lord struck racial prejudice a stinging side-long blow. He also defined a “neighbor” as one who helps when and where he is needed, and who helps wherever he has opportunity to help, irrespective of rank, race or religion. And neighborhood is co-extensive with humanity.

**Notes** 10:31: “by chance”—the usual Greek word is avoided in the New Testament; for the duty of mercy see Deuteronomy 22:4; Isaiah 58:7. 10:34: “oil and wine”—Isaiah 1:6; Mark 6:13; James 5:14. 10:35: “penny”—*denarion*, a laborer’s normal daily wage. 10:37: the lawyer cannot bring himself to utter the loathed word “Samaritan.”

JESUS VISITS MARTHA AND MARY

LUKE 10:38-42

We, too, can be so busy, even “in the Lord’s work” that we aren’t prepared to listen to him.

JOHN 10:22 SUGGESTS that the Lord visited Jerusalem briefly during the last months of his life, apart from the historic journey up from Jericho to the final encounter with the hierarchy, the Passion and the cross. This was no doubt the occasion of the visit to Bethany and the incident here vividly described.

It is possible that the visit took Martha by surprise, and like a good hostess she set busily to work to entertain her guest worthily. Nor was there anything reprehensible in this. John, writing over half a century later, took occasion to remind the church that Jesus loved Martha (John 11:5). The rebuke to Martha, kindly and affectionate enough, must not be taken as a licence for casual entertainment of an honored guest, or diminished care and generosity in Christian hospitality.

But Martha was at fault in losing control of the situation and herself. She was “distracted,” came and “stood over them” (10:40), and rebuked her Master: “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve by myself? Tell her then to lend me a hand.” The Greek text, which no doubt renders the Aramaic conversation well, is racily vivid. “There is need only of one thing,” he replies, “and Mary has chosen the good part which shall not be taken away from her.” The reference may be to the dish of honor such as that placed

before Benjamin in Joseph's banquet (Genesis 43:34). Briefly the Lord's meaning was: we can be deprived of food and comfort without real harm.

That which we cannot safely lack is communion with our Lord. To be robbed of this is to starve indeed. The lesson for us? Unhurried calm in the press of duty, and priority for prayer. It is worth considering how the Martha and Mary incident relates to the parable of the Good Samaritan—two very different reactions nevertheless show love for the same Lord. Note the further implication—unruffled attention to what the Master has to say leads to truest service.

JESUS TEACHES ABOUT PRAYER

LUKE 11:1-13

There must have been something wonderful about Jesus' praying,  
which made his disciples ask this.

VERSES 1-4. THE LORD was never more simple than when he taught men to pray.

There are those who turn prayer into an exercise in resignation, a form of quietism, a ritual of meditation, or a process of psychological therapy. If Christ is to be heard on the theme, prayer is simply speaking to "our Father in heaven," and he would never have called God "Father" had he not intended those who heard him to take the word for what it means. God is infinitely wise, infinitely loving, and may be approached as an earthly father may be approached by his anxious child.

A father yearns for some interchange of love from his children, he treasures their complete confidence, he listens with sympathy to their smallest requests; although in his wider wisdom he does not always grant them, he is never deaf to their appeals, unmoved by their fears or untouched by their anxieties, even though he may know that the appeals are unwise, the fears without foundation and the anxieties groundless.

If an earthly father fails to respond thus, to that extent he lacks wisdom or lacks love. God, our Father in heaven, is all-wise, all-loving. If, therefore, we cannot approach him as a child comes to his parent, prayer is not what Christ taught it to be, and if he was wrong, it is futile to seek another basis. The

prayer which he gave was not intended to be a hasty gabble of words. It is a series of headings, by which a time of prayer, long or short, may be guided. It calls for pauses, in which the phrase of worship or supplication is related to all life, its varied needs, its personal problems. “Thy will be done” are words not to be uttered without committal, “our daily bread” involves more than mere food, “temptation” and “evil” have their private echoes in our own special circumstances.

11:5-10. By this everyday story, the Lord did not mean that God, like the weary neighbor, could be brought by importunity to a different frame of mind. What Christ meant was that in earthly relationships people are not put off by delay or a first refusal, if their desire is deep enough, or their confidence firm enough in another’s ability to give.

11:11-13. The words reinforce the previous contention that the fatherhood of God is no mockery. All good which comes in the normal, simple relationships of life from a loving parent, comes also from God, only magnified, timely, wisely. If man can be, in love, the author of good, how much more so will the all-loving God give himself. For is not the Holy Spirit God?

**Notes** 11:2: “hallowed”—treated as holy; “name” includes character. 11:3: “daily” here means for the coming day—it is a morning prayer. Most of the prayer can be paralleled from rabbinical sources; it is not new words but a new spirit which is all-important. 11:8: “importunity”—“shamelessness” (NEB). 11:10: cf. Matthew 7:7-11; Mark 11:24; John 16:23. 11:13: “who are evil”—sinful by disposition. 11:11-12: the round desert stones of Palestine resembled loaves.

JESUS AND BEELZEBUB

## LUKE 11:14-23

After expelling a demon, Jesus was accused of being in league with Satan.

IT IS PART of the viciousness of human nature to shut the eyes to good. Some perversity of mind corrupts the whole outlook of the determinedly rebellious. An ingenuity of wickedness suggests some means of rejecting good. It is part of human free will. Conviction is forced on no one. Nothing is so compellingly proved, that the obstinately skeptical has no alternative to faith. They saw the healing touch of Christ on distracted minds, were unable to deny the visible and factual evidence, but sought a base and evil explanation of it all.

What then is faith? It is not blind credulity. There is evidence on which the questing mind can build a structure of confidence. There is enough to satisfy the reason which seeks enlightenment, not enough to beat into submission the mind which is eager for a way out and fertile in objections. Alternatives stand before the seeker. He must, in point of fact, take one or another path of faith. For let the one who rejects God and his Christ realize that he is not done with faith. If he pleads insufficient proof to warrant acceptance, he must equally admit that the contrary choice also lacks final proof. The last act is the committal of the life to the likelier alternative, and the choice of likelihood is often, indeed invariably, determined by the desire that this way or that be true. The moral choice, therefore, at last determines

the balance of the intellectual choice. Perhaps this gives a glimpse of why faith saves. But, again, let the one who rejects Christ not delude himself into imagining that he avoids faith. He has committed his life to that which he cannot prove. For the one who accepts, the promise of John 7:17 proves true.

**Notes** Note here how the accounts in Matthew 12 and Mark 3 supplement each other and Luke's account; especially the strong words of Matthew 12:31-32. 11:14: the tense is significant—it suggests that the cure was not in this case instantaneous. 11:15: Beelzebul—in New Testament = Satan. Possibly derived from Baal-zebul—"Lord of the high place," a Canaanite deity. 11:19 "sons" = pupils. 11:23: see note on 9:50.

THE SIGN OF JONAH

LUKE 11:24-32

We see here Christ's astonishing claims. He is "greater than Solomon ... greater than Jonah." What sort of man is this?

VERSES 24-28. THE brevity of the narrative sometimes blurs the connection of thought, but consideration will sometimes recover it. The drift of the controversy, with determined wickedness obstinately set on rejecting Christ, suggested the possibility of neutrality. What of the man who is cleansed of the evil in his life, but does not fill the vacuum with Christ? Old sin will reassert itself, the defeated invaders of the soul will sweep back in force. The psychologists sometimes condemn the practice of repression, predicting a more damaging outbreak for evil pressed down and forcibly restrained. Christianity advocates no such half-measures. Most evil in the human personality is misdirected good. Beneficent impulses, desires, emotions, are bent and distorted by self-seeking and godless abuse into tyrannous and harmful things. Christianity advocates sublimation, the lifting and restoring of the damaged personality, the restoration of its sanctioned functioning. Christ, and all Christ means, takes control, and fills and purifies.

11:29-32. Two historic instances illustrate the point made in the previous discussion of faith. The choice is often determined by the moral attitude of the person. Men set on evil asked in vain to be convinced. "The sign of the prophet Jonah" was manifest in Nineveh of all places, the stronghold of the

grim Assyrians. Sheba's queen, likewise, the daughter of an alien civilization, came with open mind, seeking for conviction. She found it.

Note, in the same connection, Christ's astonishing claims. He is "greater than Solomon ... greater than Jonah." What sort of man was this who could claim such eminence and yet leave, as he did undoubtedly leave, the impression of meekness, and an authority which daunted and silenced all opposition?

**Notes** 11:24-26 had a particular application to the Jews, who had known the blessings of the Old Covenant and were now being called upon to accept the Messiah, following John the Baptist. The next half century provided grim fulfillment of 11:23 and 26. 11:29: Gk. "were gathering thickly." 11:30: the reference to Jonah is filled out in Matthew 12:40, which also relates to the hint contained in the future tense here. 11:31: "something greater than Solomon"—the Greek pronoun is neuter, NEB translates, "what is here is greater than ...." Jesus is the Prophet and the King.

## WOE TO THE PHARISEES

### LUKE 11:33-44

The Pharisees were so preoccupied with the tiny details that they neglected the important things.

VERSES 33-36. THIS passage looks like a fragment of the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord's teaching, like all good teaching, was repetitive, and this period of his ministry was one of arduous teaching, preaching and controversy. The light was most certainly not hidden. From Galilee down to Jerusalem the light was shining, openly, clearly and with no attempt at concealment. So should the Christian shine in the world's murk, and the smog of a self-poisoned society.

The strange saying about the eye touches another aspect of truth. There were many blind in Palestine. Bartimaeus was waiting down at Jericho. The light of heaven's sun was blazing in the Jordan Valley, and sharpening the shadows of all Jericho's palms and balsam trees. Bartimaeus saw nothing. His eyes were not functioning. If light is to flood the mind, the eye must receive and interpret the conditions without. God's grace is the waiting illumination of the sun. The eye is the faith which receives. Where grace and faith meet, at that point is salvation.

11:37-44. The washing which the Lord omitted was not a simple act of cleanliness. It was the ceremonial of the Pharisee, a ritual act, ordained and regulated to the smallest detail by the complicated laws which the Pharisees had invented. The amount of water was specified, the movements and

attitudes by which it was poured from finger-tip to wrist, and the manner in which hand was rubbed in hand. The regulations governing the cleanliness and uncleanness of tableware were equally detailed. This was the clutter of nonsense which the Lord treated with contempt.

Pharisaism, as his denunciation shows, had much to say of rule and regulation, little about the positive duties of mercy and love. It is still active in the world. To reduce religion to a set of prohibitions and attitudes, while neglecting the committal of the whole person to Christ, is a common fault of man. To judge another for non-conformity with rules and man-made demands which have no root or sanction in Scripture is a by-product of the same pernicious attitude. And yet the Pharisees began well. Thanks to them, in the stern days of exile, the Law was garrisoned and kept. But human institutions can introvert, become an end in themselves, lose their spirit, and perish.

WOE TO THE EXPERTS IN THE LAW

LUKE 11:45-54

Jesus didn't let the lawyers off the hook. They got other people to do difficult things and then wouldn't offer to help.

THE PHARISEES WERE laymen, fanatically preoccupied with details of the Law. The lawyers were professionals, the "scribes," associated with the Pharisees in their fantastic legalism. It is difficult to draw a sharp line between the two classes. They are linked in condemnation.

11:46 is the core of the charge. The lawyers had made the simple and beneficent Mosaic Law a complicated web of regulation too difficult for ordinary folk to follow. It is always true that any system of interpretation or of teaching which makes religion hard to follow or to comprehend, irrelevant to life, or remote from common experience, is forthwith wrong. But the lawyers had also made it possible for those who knew the way to evade their own burdensome obligations.

Examples may be quoted in multitude from rabbinical literature. The Sabbath day's journey is an illustration. It was limited to about 1,000 yards. This was of little use, but one could extend the distance by pushing out the limits of one's legal home. A rope across the end of one's street, no doubt briefly put in place, constituted the whole enclosure of one's "home." The "journey" could begin at that point. Or if greater licence still were needed, a parcel of food, concealed or placed, on Friday, at the end of the prescribed

distance, constituted a second “home.” One could begin again, and proceed for another Sabbath day’s journey.

It is easy to see how a personality thus preoccupied would become utterly corrupt. The spirit of man cannot endure, undamaged, hypocrisies like these. Hence the attitude which the Lord condemned. They honored the tombs of the prophets who had denounced spiritless legalism (Isaiah 1:11-15), but their forbears had persecuted the same prophets, and they themselves were unable to recognize One greater than all the saints of old. Consider John 3:17-21 as a commentary on all this.

**Notes** 11:47: dead saints are always more popular than living ones. 11:49: “wisdom of God”—cf. Matthew 23:34. 11:50: “shed”—“being constantly poured out.” 11:51: these incidents span the whole of Old Testament history. 11:52: a key was the law-teacher’s badge of office, his work being to open the Scriptures to others—see Isaiah 22:22. 11:53: note the forceful language.

## WARNINGS AND ENCOURAGEMENTS

### LUKE 12:1-12

Jesus wants his disciples to fear, but fear the right person!

IT IS DIFFICULT to say whether Luke has concentrated at this point a number of utterances, or whether this is a condensed summary of one address. Teaching was repetitive and the same illustrative material or metaphor could have been used with more than one point of exhortation.

The disciples are bidden to avoid the dissimulation of the Pharisees. The vice of the Pharisees was the concealment of an unsanctified life behind an exterior of complicated holiness. They acted a part, and that is precisely what hypocrisy means. But “play-acting” can have other interpretations. It can find a place in the Christian who conceals his real convictions, and tries to hide his faith. If conviction is real and faith genuine, such dissimulation is vain (12:2). Therefore anticipate the inevitable, and boldly speak out about the truth (12:3).

And why do people hesitate to do this? Fear of man is the inhibiting force (12:4), which should take second place, natural though it is, to reverence for God (12:5). Consider Joseph’s “fear” of God (Genesis 39:9), Ezra’s (Ezra 8:22), Nehemiah’s (Nehemiah 6:11). God knows and understands (12:6-7). By the roadside still in Lebanon the vendors of small birds stand, with the tiny feathered creatures hanging pathetically in dozens upon uplifted sticks. They were sold two a penny, said Matthew; five for twopence, says Luke. So worthless were the small birds that an extra carcass was thrown in for the

larger sale. But even such trivial death does not elude God's knowledge. Let those who trust such a God value above all God's honor and acknowledgment (12:8). To deny him is to forfeit such acceptance (12:9).

Indeed, denial can be rejection, and this thought must have led in the context of the full discourse to the solemn theme which Matthew and Mark develop more fully, the "sin against the Holy Spirit." It is obvious that this must mean ultimate, deliberate and final rejection of Christ as Savior, the self-willed and conscious repression of the movement of God's convicting Spirit in the heart and conscience, wilfully imputing to the workings of Satan that which is manifestly of the grace of God. Denying God can end in such disaster (12:10).

**Notes** 12:5: "hell"—*Gehenna*, Gk.; the valley of the sons of Hihnom, outside Jerusalem, where fires burned continually to consume rubbish (see Joshua 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31). The name was used metaphorically for a place of punishment after death. 12:8: on confessing Jesus, see Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11; 1 Timothy 6:13; Revelation 3:5.

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

LUKE 12:13-24

An interruption comes from the crowd. Jesus didn't take sides but his warning is deadly serious.

THE STERN REBUKE to the man who brought his problem of injustice to Christ must be looked at within its context. There is no reason why such difficulties should not be brought reverently to Christ, along with all our problems of conduct, suffering and perplexity. It seems apparent however, from the drift of a highly condensed narrative, that the man interrupted a serious discourse on dependence upon God with an untimely intrusion. Deaf to the immortal words which he might have heard to his eternal profit, the fellow blundered tactlessly forward with his financial problem. All he could think about in the presence of Christ was money. Hence the rebuke.

And hence the parable about the fool who could not see past material things. In other respects there is nothing to indicate that he was a bad man. He was a successful farmer. Palestine generally is not good agricultural country, save on the coastal plain. The chocolate-brown soil of the valley bottoms is fertile enough, but the boulder-strewn hillsides are hungry and difficult to farm. The Parable of the Sower gives a fair picture of the land. But the man in the story, no doubt both by good fortune and good management, had built up high prosperity. He was rich.

Unlike some rich people, he also saw that riches were meant for use and enjoyment. He knew when to retire. There is nothing to show that anyone

grudged him this pleasure. He had paid his laborers. He owed no man anything. His wealth was fairly won. But his fault is apparent. In a land marred by poverty, inequality and suffering, he had no thought of stewardship. It was “*my* barns,” “*my* fruits,” “*my* goods.” No other was to share. Lazarus might lie at the gate with the sores of malnutrition tormenting his body, but there is no relief from the comfortable and insensitive farmer. He has no mercy.

He has no thought, in fact, but for himself. And life for him is “eat, drink and be happy.” (This is the meaning of the word: eg “God rest you merry,” which of course means: “God keep you happy.”) Happiness was a state confined to self, and limited to eating and drinking. His error was threefold:

1. He imagined that he was in full control.
2. He mistook his body for his soul.
3. He confused means and end.

Here is the very essence of materialism.

**Notes** 12:13: “inheritance”—Deuteronomy 21:15-17. 12:14: “divider”—“arbitrator.”

A WARNING AGAINST WORRY

LUKE 12:25-34

If we have a God who cares for his creatures and who is our Father,  
we can trust him to look after us.

THE THOUGHT FLOWS on from the parable just told, and some teaching from the Sermon on the Mount is introduced. Life is more than food and mere physical necessities. All such matters must be kept by the Christian in due proportion. This is no call to a hermit's life and the spectacular abandonment of all possessions and modes of normal living, as the authorities of later centuries perversely regarded it. "God knows that we have need of all these things" is the closing thought.

Two points must always be borne in mind when reading the Bible. The first is that it is an Eastern book, and speaks in poetry as readily as in prose. For the same reason, it must also be expected that paradoxical and striking statements will be made.

Secondly, text must be balanced with text, and Scripture with Scripture. 12:33 seems a drastic statement until it is measured against fact. The disciple John had a home, for thither he took Mary when bidden by the Lord on the cross to treat her as his mother. The family at Bethany had a house and a competence wherewith they entertained Christ. What then did Christ mean? Look at the whole context of his remark. He began with comment on the rich fool who thought that the end of all life and activity was an abundance of

food and drink. He passed from this to the preoccupation with the necessities of daily living, which excludes and quenches higher and more vital concerns.

With the rich farmer the acquisition of material goods was a lifelong and absorbing passion. There are poorer and more enlightened men who also think too much about such things. Cast care and anxiety aside, Christ urges them. After all, does worry effect much? A “three-cubit man” and a “four-cubit man” were common terms for short and tall, and one of the twain cannot make himself into the other by anxiety. Who will deny that worry is a problem? None the less we should seek to quench it by faith; it is unreasonable for the Christian (12:22-24), useless (12:25) and irreligious (12:28).

**Notes** 12:29: “anxious mind”—the Gk. expresses the tossing of a ship—literally, “raised between heaven and earth.” 12:34: “heart”—a comprehensive term; thoughts, affections, actions. For the idea of being “rich toward God,” see Matthew 6:19-21; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; James 2:5.

A CALL TO BE ALERT

## LUKE 12:35-48

Jesus seems to be saying, “The most important thing is to be a faithful, sensible, alert and active manager of what’s already been given you.”

THE DOCTRINE OF the Lord’s return haunts Scripture. Note how frequent reference to it is in both the teaching of Christ and that of his apostles. It was once called the “blessed hope,” but has not today as prominent a place in the teaching of the church as once it had. At the human level, the reasons for this are two. The Second Advent has so frequently been central in the teaching of sectaries extravagant in their interpretation, given to date-fixing and crudity, that those jealous for the integrity of Scripture, anxious for the good name of the church and the effectiveness of evangelism among intelligent people, have grown suspicious of the doctrine. The second reason is the comfort of an affluent society. The church tends to be “at ease in Zion.” The sting of trouble and anxiety, chaotic times which reveal the instability of the social order and the fragility of civilization, turn the minds of men towards the intervention from above which alone could end all strife and bring the warring world to peace.

The doctrine of the Second Advent is nevertheless an integral part of the New Testament. No time is specified. The manner of the advent is not clear. The fact remains.

Nor is this ever stated merely as a theme for speculation. Rather, as here, it is a matter which prompts zeal, and calls for urgency and dedication. Like

servants alert for the return home of their master, so the followers of Christ must be ready for their Lord's coming. The best preparation for the consummation of all things, for the secret hour which shall end the long tumult of history, is to be busy with the task at hand. Compare 1 Corinthians 4:19ff.; James 4:17; 2 Peter 2:21.

**Notes** It is important to consider why the teaching about Christ's return occurs at this point in the Gospel, and how it arises out of the preceding verses. 12:37: "gird himself"—see John 13:3f. 12:41f.: note how Christ frequently answers one question by posing another. Much here is applicable to leaders in the church. 12:45: cf. 2 Peter 3:8f. 12:47-48: an incidental remark indicates variety in punishment. "Knew not" means partial enlightenment, not total ignorance.

JESUS THE CAUSE OF DIVISION

LUKE 12:49-59

Ultimately Jesus brings peace, but in so doing, he divides people into those who are for and those who are against him.

VERSES 49-53. THE words again must be taken in their context. It is a fact that Christ brought peace, peace between man and God, “peace that passes understanding,” peace between man and man, for those who applied his teaching and lived in the blessed light of it. It is also a fact that socially Christ sets man at variance with man. A binding and a demanding loyalty challenges some old allegiance. A new-born love clashes with old affection, and divides one person from another. Fire (12:49) both burns and purifies. “He who is near me is near the fire,” runs a saying of Christ, reported by Origen. Fire can never be disregarded. It cannot be approached without due calculation. Neither can Christ.

12:54-59. There is a clear division here. These words are addressed to the crowds. They were alert enough for the signs of the weather. The wind out of the west rolled in such water-laden clouds from the Mediterranean as Elijah’s servant saw (1 Kings 18:44-45). Out of the Arabian Desert the south and west wind brought the scorching heat. Worldly wise in such matters of simple observation and common prudence, they shut their eyes to “the signs of the times.” Hence the designation used: “hypocrites.” There was pretence, the blindness of obstinacy and pride. Like a man doggedly determined to push a bad or a hopeless case to the last arbitrament of the law-courts (12:57-58),

instead of seeking a just and reasonable accommodation out of court, the people were blundering on towards the disaster which lay ahead.

The signs of the coming Great Rebellion of AD 66–70 multiply in the New Testament. This warning is one of them. Wilfully blind, the Jewish people refused to heed the voice of prudence, and beat their nation to pieces against the iron wall of Rome. Among the few who survived in liberty were Christians who heeded such words as these.

**Notes** 12:50: “constrained”—see the other use of this word in the New Testament—2 Corinthians 5:14; on the picture of baptism, see Mark 10:38, and the language of Psalm 18:16; 42:7; 124:4-5. 12:58: “the officer”—lit. “the exactor.” 12:59: the coin was the Jewish *lepton*, the smallest coin in circulation.

REPENT OR PERISH

## LUKE 13:1-9

An important part of Jesus' message was that people must repent and turn from their sins.

VERSES 1-5. MENTION of Pilate's Galilean massacre, and the disaster of the Siloam Tower, flows from the words on judgment which closed the last chapter. It was no doubt suggested that the victims of the two catastrophes were under some special judgment of God. Not so, Christ replies. Man is exposed to the vicissitudes and chances of life, and God does not always intervene to protect the innocent from disaster. A little reflection will show why. Continual guarding of the good would make it *profitable* to be godly, on the lowest level of that word. If man is richly to believe it must be in spite of all, without special patronage or ready reward.

The mention of the atrocity at the altar is a glimpse of Pilate's rough-handed government. From the New Testament, from Josephus, and from Philo, a group of similar incidents may be collected. The same arrogant character, with its streak of cowardice, may be discerned throughout them all. It was a similar incident in Samaria which led finally to the procurator's recall in AD 36, and his disappearance from the pages of history.

13:6-9. Hosea 9:10 and Joel 1:7 are probably the key to the imagery. In 13:3 and 13:5 the Lord had used the chilling word "perish." How could a "chosen people" perish, was the spoken or unspoken response. The little parable is the answer. Fig trees were planted in spare corners of vineyards

and it was natural to expect signs of fruit after three years. The truth which the Lord sought to emphasize was that national privilege carried national responsibility. To those taught to think in the imagery of the Old Testament, it was plain that Israel was the fig tree. Israel, the similitude suggested, would stand only while she fulfilled the historic purpose for which she came into being. This is true of all living. Every privilege carries a responsibility. A duty attaches to every endowment which man enjoys. Historically the respite might represent the early ministry of the church in Palestine.

**Notes** 13:1: possibly men who caused a riot when Pilate used money from the temple treasury to build a 25-mile aqueduct into Jerusalem; the incident may have caused the enmity between Pilate and Herod (Luke 23:12). Did the questioners expect Jesus, as a Galilean, to take sides for personal reasons? 13:7: literally “for three years I have kept coming.”

## JESUS HEALS ON THE SABBATH

### LUKE 13:10-17

Sabbath do's and don'ts shouldn't become so fixed that basic needs are neglected.

THIS STORY BEARS all the marks of direct reporting. It is the last instance in this Gospel of an appearance in the synagogue. The places of regular assemblage were closing to the Lord's teaching, as the opposition of the Pharisees grew. The woman, the text runs, had a "spirit of infirmity." Luke could speak only in the language of his day, if he hoped to be understood by the people of his day. Dr Rendle Short points out that the woman's affliction was arthritic, with severe rigidity and deformation of the spine. The sense of firm and painful resistance to all efforts to straighten the back gave rise to the figure of speech: "a spirit of infirmity."

The leader of the synagogue emerges vividly from the brief account. He was chairman, in common Jewish practice, of a local board of ten men, who were in charge of the synagogue of the neighborhood. He does not dare to confront his visitor directly. He rebukes him indirectly (13:14) with an exhortation to the congregation on Sabbath-keeping. It was pharisaical "play-acting" of the first order, and earned the Lord's prompt retort. Sham and posing was a sin which stirred his righteous indignation. Compare Matthew 23.

The detailed Talmudic provisions for the care of stock on the Sabbath laid it down that water could be drawn for ox or ass on the seventh day, but that it

must not be brought to the animal's mouth. Men who reduced religion to such meticulous absurdity could look with indifference both on human affliction and human deliverance. Hence the confounding of his adversaries, and the joy of those who found the religion of their leaders an anxiety and a burden.

**Notes** 13:11: in spite of her infirmity, she attended the house of God—does this rebuke us? 13:12: the language of faith—it anticipates the fact. 13:16: a “daughter of Abraham”—physically and spiritually (“she praised God”). “Whom Satan bound”—not a concession to superstition: the spiritual “first causes” of infirmity are often underrated.

URGENT WORDS

LUKE 13:18-30

The stories of the mustard seed and yeast teach that the kingdom grows outwardly and has a growing and penetrating inner power.

VERSES 18-19. THIS appears to be the only instance of parabolic teaching connected with the synagogue ... The grain of mustard seed was the smallest kind of seed sown by the farmers of the land, and grew to be the largest of their seed crops. It was a picture of history. All the story of the Gospels took place in an area no bigger than Wales, the State of Vermont or the northern peninsula of New Zealand. Twelve men, one of whom defected, were chosen from obscure towns of Galilee to stage an assault on the world. Those who have found liberty, release, joy and fulfillment in Christ are “a multitude no man can number” (Revelation 7:9).

13:20-21. Those who regard leaven as a symbol of corruption in Scripture (see 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9) are in difficulties with this little parable. There is no doubt that it follows on the last, and carries a similar significance. There is no need to suppose that the same word or image must always be interpreted in one way. The picture here is surely the hidden working of a principle of life which permeates an inert mass. So works the gospel in society and in the personality. To be sure, the New Testament does not teach that the world will be completely Christianized by the preaching of the gospel, but parables are not to be pressed beyond their primary meaning.

13:22-30. The burden of these words is urgency. The Lord was moving down the Jordan Valley and its associated territories. He never came that way again. The cross is in clear view. Opportunity came and went, and some who saw the multitudes pass on their indifferent way, and the few who came to a live faith, were constrained to ask whether but few would be saved.

The question was rejected as irrelevant. There is one urgent need—to take advantage of the hour's opportunity, and to meet the challenge of the moment. The Jewish nation were failing at this point, and others were laying hold of their privilege.

**Notes** 13:18-20: the catacombs contain 4,000,000 Christian graves from the first three centuries; statistical analysis suggests that there were generations in which one third of the Roman population professed Christianity. 13:21: three measures—about 4½ pecks. 13:24: “strive”—“do your utmost”—see 1 Timothy 6:12; “fight” is same word. 13:25: possibly a wedding feast, held at night, with a porter at the door, checking the guests. 13:28: an unexpected allusion to the place of the Gentiles in God's scheme of things. 13:29: cf. Isaiah 49:12; 45:6.

THE SORROW OF JESUS FOR JERUSALEM

LUKE 13:31-14:6

Jesus laments over Jerusalem, the symbol of Israel's spirit.

VERSES 31-33. THE Lord must still have been within the boundaries of Herod's territories, which embraced both Galilee and Peraea (see "hence," 31). A map will help understanding at this point. It is impossible to say whether the Pharisees' warning was sincere concern, or a subterfuge to be rid of the Lord, to drive him into Judea. Some among the Pharisees did not deserve the reputation which the majority had earned, eg Nicodemus and Gamaliel. Jesus evaded Herod, sent him a message of contempt, and when brought face to face with him, had nothing further to add.

13:34-35. Luke anticipates. The sad remark about Jerusalem leads him to record here the lament over the city which was delivered from the summit of the Mount of Olives some weeks later. It must be remembered that a tidy and ordered narrative, with visible historical and geographical sequence, was not necessarily Luke's first object. The prime need was to record. There was a sense of urgency in his mind. He was free while Paul lay in custody at Caesarea to collect and set down the precious information. He died, if sudden silence bears that interpretation, before he could write the sequel to Acts, and much of his material may have been left in the form in which he first recorded and classified it. Hence some puzzles for commentators.

14:1-6. The strict Jew ate three times on the Sabbath. This was probably the midday meal. It is not impossible that the presence of the afflicted man

was designed to trap Christ into yet another Sabbath violation. He used again the devastating argument of the legislation over the care of animals which did contain the elements of mercy and compassion (compare 13:15 and John 5:17). They gave to the beasts that which they denied to suffering man. The beasts, after all, cost money. Human life was cheap. Where Christianity wavers, it grows cheap again.

**Notes** 13:32: “fox”—noted for slyness and cruelty. “Today and tomorrow”—“a brief time longer.” 14:1: lit. “kept on watching him;” Gk. implies close scrutiny with suspicious motive. The guests would be invited as a religious duty. 14:5: once again Jesus answers their thoughts. Notice “immediately”—they would treat *this* as a case for urgency.

## HUMILITY AND HOSPITALITY

### LUKE 14:7-24

What modern excuses in the form of possessions, work and home life are offered for not coming to Christ?

VERSES 7-14. THERE is a touch of irony in this table-talk. The gathering was a crowded one, and the competition for places of importance among the guests was embarrassingly evident. The Lord lays down some simple rules for such occasions, whimsically enough, but with serious rebuke for pride beneath it all. Compare John 5:44.

“How is it,” asks C.S. Lewis, in his chapter on The Great Sin, “that people who are quite obviously eaten up by pride can say that they believe in God and appear to themselves to be very religious? I am afraid it means that they are worshipping an imaginary God. They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but are really all the time imagining how he approves of them ... this does not come through our animal nature at all. It comes direct from Hell. It is purely spiritual: consequently it is far more subtle and deadly...” The whole chapter (*Christian Behaviour*, chapter 8) should be read.

13:15-24. (Compare carefully with Matthew 22:1-10.) The first man had business which could not be delayed. He was insincere. No man would buy a farm without inspecting it beforehand. He really wanted to enjoy his farm, and there was nothing wrong in the desire. The man’s system of priorities

was wrong. Harmless pursuits, hobbies, enthusiasms, pleasure—all these can deprive us of Christ.

The second man likewise was eager to see the brown earth turning as his new team drew the plow. A deep interest in profession or trade, one's studies or one's work, can shorten the vision and dry up the soul.

The third man had the Law behind him. A Mosaic regulation freed a newly married man from military service for a year. With conscious rectitude he "cannot come," like the man who "cannot" be a Christian because the church is "reactionary," the "tool of the governing class" ... or perhaps because he has some substitute for faith and worship in some form of public service. "I cannot come" in all cases is "I will not come." Rebel man shirks, but shirks in vain, the responsibility for his withholding.

**Notes** 14:12: lit. "Do not always invite your friends." 14:15: the hope of every Pharisee—to earn the reward of sitting at the Banquet of the Righteous. 14:16-17: Israel had received the first invitation through the prophets; the customary (in Eastern practice) second invitation had been given by John and Jesus himself. 14:23: the compulsion is not that of force, but of loving earnestness—see same word in Matthew 14:22 and Mark 6:45. 14:24: "you"—the disciples.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

LUKE 14:25-35

Jesus drives the point home: “Look before you leap—but leap you must, so make sure it’s the right way!”

VERSES 25-26. NO verses could more strikingly illustrate the need for Western readers to realize that they are reading the poetic language of the East. Hyperbole, or purposeful exaggeration, is a recognized figure of speech. The words cannot be taken literally, because the One who bade his followers love their enemies would not call them in fact to hate their own folk. The expression merely establishes absolute priorities, and its use in this context flows from the third excuse of the man in the story of the ungrateful guests. Loyalty to Christ is so demanding that it takes precedence over all other claims, however natural and legitimate, upon the life. It overrides all other obligations. See 12:51,53.

14:27-30. Christianity is an arduous, toilsome and costly business. It is like engaging on a building project, a metaphor taken up by Paul (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). It demands dogged perseverance, and continuance to the end.

14:31-32. Christianity is also a battle, a figure of speech also taken up by Paul (Ephesians 6:11-17). The warring monarch counts the cost of hostilities. Let no one forget that the Christian life is a challenge to the powers of evil, which will undoubtedly be taken up. It is a warfare which never ends, and recruits should count the cost.

14:34-35. Those who do count the cost, and are ready to pay it, are like salt; they preserve the mass from utter corruption. The rock salt of Palestine is said to have lost its sharpness and usefulness by some form of chemical breakdown in the place of storage. It was henceforth of no use save as a form of gravel. The Christian who has lost his usefulness, his antiseptic function in a corrupt society, his sharp distinctive flavor, is of no use at all. For Christian discipline, compare Romans 8:13; Philippians 3:7f.; Colossians 3:5.

**Notes** 14:25: en route for Jerusalem, Jesus, as a potential Messiah, was increasingly thronged—but plainly discouraged a mass movement. 14:29,31 refer possibly to the Herods indirectly, their building ambitions, and Herod Antipas' defeat by Hareth of Arabia. 14:33: “renounce” “say goodbye to,” 2 Corinthians 4:2.

## THE LOST SHEEP AND THE LOST COIN

### LUKE 15:1-10

Jesus shows he is like God the Father searching for his lost children.

THE KEY WORD for this chapter is “lost.” The sheep was lost, the coin was lost, the son was lost—and all were found. The Lord put a new meaning into the word, brought into relief and clarity its pathos and its tragedy. The proud custodians of “religion” had no pity or regard for the outcast crowd who saw with wistful eyes the new world, the new prospect, which Christ offered.

Folly, failure to mark the danger which lurked in the world of every day, thoughtless preoccupation with the petty needs led the sheep astray. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, the shepherd’s calling and the shepherd’s flock have formed an image. Moses was trained in the desert for the leading of the flock of God, the Lord is the Shepherd in the most heart-warming of all Psalms. He claims the title in the last book of the Bible to be written. It would make an interesting study to follow the thought, with the aid of a concordance, through all Scripture.

The similitude of the sheep is not flattering for arrogant man. The sheep is a foolish animal, helpless before bold and ruthless predators, needing protection—the crook which restrains as well as the staff which defends. Sheep go blindly in crowds, are prone to stampede, and fatally apt to wander. “All we like sheep are gone astray ...”

The shepherd’s care is the notable part of the little parable; see Matthew 9:36; Romans 5:6. To the Eastern shepherd sheep are individuals, not a

nameless flock. There is significance in the fact. If only one of all mankind had strayed, the whole plan of God's salvation would still have been necessary, or God would have shown himself that much less than all-loving.

The woman searching for the lost coin reveals another aspect of the same truth. The ten pieces of silver were no doubt the poor woman's dowry, worn about her neck as a precious possession. The nine which remained were no joy to her while her one was lost. The point of the story is again God's care for the individual, for each one of us.

**Notes** 15:1: "were drawing near"—ie repeatedly. 15:8: the silver *denarius* was the equivalent of a day's wage for a working man. Dark Eastern houses and a rush floor would make the search difficult.

THE PRODIGAL SON  
LUKE 15:11-24

It doesn't matter how far we have gone away from him; when we return to God, he is ready to take us back.

THROUGH THE SOUTH-EASTERN districts of Galilee, where the Lord appears to have been teaching at this time, ran the road to the Decapolis, the crowded half-Gentile region of the Ten Towns, astride the southward-swinging caravan routes and the highways of trade and activity. The ruins of Gerasa, streets, houses, temples, remarkably well preserved, give a vivid picture of one of the towns of this busy land.

The Prodigal did not necessarily go far. He was able to reach home half-starved, in time of famine. A far country is not necessarily remote geographically. The rebel boy was as alienated and separated in heart and mind even in his father's household. He merely translated a mental attitude into fact, when he laid premature hands on that which he might later have enjoyed in fullness and in peace.

Perhaps some wandering Greek philosopher had proved to him the illogicality of faith, that the idea of God was "meaningless," and that life, after all, is only the experience of the senses—as many teach today. He did not tell him that philosophy is a constantly changing speculation, and can by sleight of words argue its own self out of existence, and destroy with words the very words in which it finds expression.

Famine came. It was periodic in the first century. A papyrus letter from AD 100, written by a prodigal just such as this young man to his mother, brings the story of the boy from Galilee very close to us. He was outcast, in rags, rejected. There is no evidence that the mother forgave. But the father in the Lord's story is a picture of God. The boy's motives for returning are low enough, but he had faith enough to rise and go. And when faith moves out, grace more than meets it. The father did not keep him waiting at the door, or receive him gruffly, ironically, sarcastically ... he ran to meet him. It is the Parable of the Wonderful Father.

**Notes** 15:12: "his living"—Deuteronomy 21:17, one third. 15:13: Gk. "living ruinously." 15:15: "feed swine"—abhorrent to a Jew; sin degrades as well as alienates. 15:19: "hired servants"—lower status than slaves; could be dismissed at will. 15:22: "robe"—sign of honor; "ring"—sign of authority; "shoes"—mark of sonship.

THE UNFORGIVING BROTHER

LUKE 15:25-32

Are we at all like the older brother, who worked hard out of a sense of duty without ever realizing the Father's great love?

THE STORY IS also the Parable of the Unforgiving Brother. Like the Pharisees, who would have been horrified to jostle with Gentiles in the oval forum of Gerasa, the prodigal who had never left home claimed perfect obedience. Obedience? Yes. He had fulfilled meticulously the letter of the Law, and felt he had earned much from his father.

But it was a purely legal relationship, service rendered without love, and with no understanding of his father's heart. The elder brother also needed to kneel and say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But he had no sense of sin, no realization of his merciless heart, no conviction of his bitter jealousy. "This son of *yours*," he said, repudiating all bonds of brotherhood. He is a repelling picture. Note the rebuke in 15:32—"this *your* brother."

Let us give the parable a third name. It is the Parable of the Waiting Father. God sent his Son into the far country to pursue the prodigal. The elder brother might have done just this. The father in the story had no one whom he could send. He simply waited, as God still waits. Those whose children wander may take comfort here. They share the grief of God.

"O Lord, make haste to save us," runs the ordered prayer, and it is a cry natural enough. Indeed, the Prayer Book takes it from the Psalms. And yet it

shows the situation from the angle of time-bound man alone, and not as it is seen from heaven. God waits for the sinner's return. God is ready in grace to meet the sinner's inch with his mile. (See Isaiah 55:7; Jeremiah 3:12; Ephesians 2:4f.) The parable ends without a word of the future. The Pharisees are left free to make their own ending.

Let Hebrews 10:22 in the NEB rendering conclude: "So let us make our approach in sincerity of heart and full assurance of faith, our guilty hearts sprinkled clean, our bodies washed with pure water. Let us be firm and unswerving in the confession of our hope, for the Giver of the promise may be trusted."

**Notes** 15:28: "kept intreating him"—the father displays the same love to both sons. 15:30: note the direction in which the elder brother's suspicion at once turns ("harlots").

THE UNJUST STEWARD

LUKE 16:1-13

In what ways could we be more like the manager and look ahead,  
providing for the future?

THE STORY OF the unjust steward is an excellent illustration of the basic principle in the interpretation of parables. The parable must not be pushed beyond its specific purpose. In other words, a parable is not an allegory. In an allegory *every* portion has symbolic significance. It is important to understand the difference. In the Oxford English Dictionary “allegory” is given as one of the meanings of “parable.” This does not apply to the New Testament. None of its parables is an allegory.

The story is true to life. Among the papyri recovered from the sands of Egypt are many which illustrate such corruption. A hoard of letters found as part of the packing of a mummified crocodile proved to be the office file of a scamp named Menches, who held a petty official’s post in an Egyptian town in the second century. It is obvious that he was busy with embezzlement, took bribes, and used his position for base monetary ends.

The unprincipled fellow in the Lord’s story was just such a man. He miscalculated, as such villains sometimes do, and saw retribution coming. With wicked agility he set to work to use his master’s money to secure advantage after his inevitable dismissal. The “lord,” note carefully, was the master of the man, not Christ.

But the whole point of the story is that worldly rogues will use money to secure friends. On the basest levels of humanity money is seen to be useful only for what it can do. And yet there are those who should know better who seek money for its own sake. Christ despised money. That fact is evident everywhere. Jolting his hearers to attention with the strange story, Christ is asking them why they are not as inventive in a better cause. Earthly wealth is a loan and a trust which may at short notice be withdrawn. Heavenly possessions do not diminish nor fail. The Christian is expected to manage well and honestly the getting of money, to use money sanely, generously and usefully, but never to love money, never to trust it, never to use it for base ends.

**Notes** 16:1: unlike chapter 15 this is addressed specifically to disciples. 16:6: the “measure” (Gk. *baton*) was about 22 litres. 16:7: “measure” (Gk. *koros*) about 86 gallons. 16:9: “*mammon*”—an Aramaic word meaning money; the opposite of “true riches” in 16:11. 16:13: “hate”—see 14:26.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

LUKE 16:14-31

The rich man was a self-indulgent show-off!

VERSES 14-18. THESE verses form a highly condensed account of a clash with the Pharisees. As a class they loved money. As one commentator remarked: “Money-making generally agrees well with religious separation among the Jews and Christians alike.” Compact groups of sufficient size and disparity provide a common market and a mutual aid society which can be financially very effective. The Pharisees, to be sure, paid their tithes, but mechanical giving can be without grace, and can mean nothing in real terms of godliness.

The word on divorce (16:18) no doubt came from the same discourse on the legalism of the Pharisees. The liberal school of Hillel allowed divorce on the most trivial grounds. The stricter school of Shammai was not the target of this implied reproach.

16:19-31. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus must be interpreted in the manner already stressed. It is designed to teach that the place and time of opportunity is here and now, that the measure of earthly prosperity, social standing and wealth is no indication of a man’s standing before God. The rabbis regarded riches as a special mark of God’s favor. Obviously the details of the picture are figurative. Paradise and hell are not visible each from each, with facilities for communication but none for transfer. “Abraham’s bosom,” “the great gulf fixed,” “this flame”—all are apocalyptic details, and not intended to teach physical realities.

This fact by no means strips the story of its deep significance. Heaven is not won by charity, but the rich man's callous carelessness for the sad need in sight was an indication of his hard and alien heart, a sure measure of his lovelessness; love awoke too late (16:28).

Misery had not turned the poor man to God, for want is no more a way to heaven than plenty, and it was the grace of God rejected or embraced which reversed circumstance in the other world. Like his brothers the man had God's word. Hence the sad prophecy: those who failed to heed the word failed also to heed when One indeed came back from the dead.

**Notes** 16:16: cf. Galatians 3:24; Matthew 11:12. 16:23: "Hades" (Old Testament Sheol), in Jewish belief an abode of all the dead, but in New Testament the place where unbelievers await final judgment. 16:24-25,28: note the evidence for continuance of personality and place of memory. 16:29: the Old Testament is adequate to point to Christ.

SIN, FAITH AND HUMILITY

## LUKE 17:1-10

Is the number of times we should forgive others limited by our calculators?

VERSES 1-4. THESE crowded chapters in which Luke presents material from the last discourses of Christ read sometimes like notes taken by hearers or disciples. Indeed that is what they may have been. Much of the teaching of the philosopher Aristotle survives in what appear to be notes taken by his students, and only roughly edited. Luke, eager to record and to preserve the precious words of the Lord, packed this portion of his book with all the sayings he could find, and the connecting thread is not always to be found. It is, however, there, more often than not. Forget the artificial intrusion of a chapter heading, and let the story run on. Woe, indeed, to such men as the merciless rich man who allowed a helpless beggar, one of God's "little ones," to lie in unrelieved and unpitied misery. Better by far had he been drowned before the years piled guilt's weight or burden on his soul.

17:5-6. This section, as the opening words show, is part of a discourse between the Lord and the Twelve. The language is Eastern. Rooting up a tree (the sycamine had deep roots) and planting it *in the sea* is an impossible process. It is intended to underline the vast power of faith: its reality, rather than its quantity, is what matters.

17:7-10. This difficult little parable can only be rightly understood if the principles of interpretation already stressed are rigidly applied. Note first that

this is a picture from life. This is what happens, or happened in that world of master and man, and before such assumptions of superiority produced the egalitarian reactions of today. The servant had to be prepared to “labor on, spend and be spent.” This is not a picture of God, nor of God’s way with men. It merely stresses the fact that one who serves goes on serving past the point of weariness. The servant of God must be prepared to serve as doggedly, to expect no special rewards, to know and realize that his performance is nothing more than he owes. The lesson is humility. Surely we should give to God without grumbling that which man, without complaint, gives man. The rest of the story is not told here. See Revelation 3:20.

**Notes** 17:3: note there is a place for the loving rebuke. RSV omits “against thee.” 17:4: “seven”—see Matthew 18:21; the rabbis said that a man was perfect if he forgave three times. 17:6: “sycamine” = mulberry. 17:10: “unworthy servants”—see 19:17, and compare Paul’s experience (1 Corinthians 9:19; 2 Timothy 4:7-8).

TEN HEALED OF LEPROSY

LUKE 17:11-19

This incident shows how hard and ungrateful some people are.

THE GEOGRAPHY IS difficult, and this section perhaps has been displaced, and should have appeared earlier in Luke. In 9:51-52 and 13:22 we are assured that these events take place on the journey from Galilee, by way of the Jordan Valley, to Jerusalem. 17:11 is correct in RSV. The Samaritans had been hostile, and denied him passage through their territory (see 9:51-53). He therefore passed out of Galilee through Bethshan, crossing the river where it winds through the flat valley floor not far south of the lake, and then proceeding down the eastern bank almost to the Dead Sea. He re-crossed the Jordan at Jericho, at or near the place of his baptism. A map will help.

Somewhere on the road which threaded the Galilean border the band of lepers met him and found healing. Of their number one returned and rendered thanks, and he found not only cleansing for his body but salvation for his soul.

Gratitude is the heart's memory. "It is a fruit of great cultivation," said Samuel Johnson, "you do not find it among gross people." "It is not only the greatest of virtues," said the Roman orator Cicero, "but the parent of all the others." By this he meant that the cold and the thankless heart can never know humility, can never surrender, and therefore can never know God.

There are mean souls who would agree with Henry Ward Beecher, that "next to ingratitude, gratitude is the most painful thing to bear." It warms the

heart to receive that unexpected response, the open joy of the one in ten, who is able to render thanks in simplicity and joy. It warms but humbles. There are meaner souls who are unable to entertain, to give, or utter thanks, and yet are ready enough, human fashion, with complaining and reproach. How frequently is the problem of unmerited suffering discussed; how seldom unmerited good. Consider Psalm 50:14; 100:4; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 2:7.

**Notes** 17:15: the Samaritan would go to his priests at Gerizim. 17:18: the wording suggests a mixed crowd of lepers—the community of suffering breaks down barriers. 17:19: his return sealed the connection “which his cure had formed between Jesus and him” (Godet).

### **Prayer**

Make us mindful of our benefits, O Lord,  
thankful for thy touch of cleansing,  
grateful for abundant life in thee.

THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

LUKE 17:20-37

The future judgment is bound to come and will be terrible.

THIS HIGHLY COMPACT passage can only be understood if taken with Matthew's fuller account of the Lord's teaching on last things. The Lord answers the Pharisees negatively (17:20) and positively (17:21). 17:20 is a difficult saying, but must mean that no one can predict the coming of the Lord as one *can* predict the movements of the sky. Meticulous observation fixes sunrise and sunset and the phases of the moon. It will not fix and date the Second Advent. Compare John 1:26. But trouble awaits (17:22), and stressful circumstance, which will make Christians long for God's decisive intervention, but at the same time expose the careless and the thoughtless to false Messiahs (John 1:10-12). Of such were Theudas (Acts 5:36), and Bar-Kochba, the leader of the last ruinous and desperate Jewish revolt in AD 132.

The consummation of all things comes upon a world utterly preoccupied with its worldly pursuits (17:26), without regard for the minority, the Noah, the Lot, who look for other things than the carnal round of each humdrum day. Suddenly God breaks in. The word "suddenly" is worth studying in the Bible. God's judgment is as the lightning, flashing unexpectedly forth, visible, decisive (17:24).

And it is judgment which seems to be in view in 17:31, with its specific warning. In Matthew's Gospel it is striking to observe how, in the parallel account, the nearer and remoter events of history are intermingled. This verse

seems to embody a warning about the calamity which was to come upon the land in the awful four years which closed the sixties of the century. The mob had called down judgment on themselves (Matthew 27:25). The Christians of Jerusalem did “remember,” and escaped in large numbers to the Decapolis as the Roman army closed the ring round Jerusalem. The eagles of 17:37 may be a symbol of the legions, each with its eagle standard at the head (see note below). Let one clear message emerge: the end of the age will be God’s intervention. Christians should watch, work, and hold the material world with light hand.

**Notes** 17:21: RSV “in the midst of you” is correct. 17:25: “generation”—some commentators see this as reference to the Jewish nation. 17:33: “preserve”—Gk. “bring to new birth.” 17:34: possibly husband and wife (“men”—humans). 17:37: “eagles”—vultures. “Where the spiritually dead people are, there the judgment will be executed” (Geldenhuys).

THE PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

LUKE 18:1-8

Have you become discouraged in prayer? Then this reading is just for you. Keep on praying!

HERE IS ANOTHER of the forceful stories which Luke discovered and preserved. Yet again it illustrates the need, in the interpretation of parables, to keep the central meaning in view, and to recognize the details which have no doctrinal significance. The story is manifestly from life. Here, perhaps, is the godless and arrogant petty magistrate of some Galilean community denying a widow woman the simple benefits of justice. The widow is chosen as the victim of the scoundrel's callous disregard because the widow was the weakest and the most pitifully helpless unit of that sad society.

She was a dogged woman who worked upon one simple conviction. The magistrate's duty was to dispense justice with impartiality and to all. She was determined to hold him to his task, and so besieged his court day by day. Preoccupied with more profitable cases—those which, on the evidence of the papyri, were rich in the profits of bribery and corruption—the judge adjourned the widow's case, until at last her very importunity forced him to act.

God is no unjust judge, but for other reasons he appears to delay, and to leave his children to suffer the injustices of the world. If a village woman in some local court can be sufficiently convinced of ultimate action and final justice to go against all discouragement to final success, how much more

should Christians persevere in faithful petition! They at least can be assured that the delay which seems so often to confront their desire is not the delay of selfishness and corruption, but of wisdom and beneficent purpose (read Romans 8:28 in Phillips' rendering).

Review, at this point, the series of illustrative stories which Luke has recorded. Note their characteristics, their realism, their characters. Observe how the characters talk to themselves (the prodigal, the steward, the judge). It is part of the dramatic machinery. And out of the evil of common life the Lord draws a lesson of good.

**Notes** 18:2: the judge breaks both the great commandments. 18:3: note RSV, "kept coming." 18:5: Gk. lit. "gives me a black eye." 18:8: "speedily"—not "soon," but "by a decisive intervention." The reference to faith indicates that this parable is not concerned with God allowing himself to be bullied into answering prayer; he is encouraging us to hold on by faith in times of adversity.

THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

LUKE 18:9-14

The starting place with God is always a humble, penitent heart.

THE LAST DEGENERACY of prayer is self-congratulation. The Pharisee's God was too small. Like those of Psalm 50:21, he had made himself a God in his own image.

The picture is vividly drawn and is again from life. The Pharisee "takes his stand," the text runs literally. He had his place, doubtless a place most carefully chosen, where his words could be heard by all, for this man was guilty of that vast irreverence, not unknown in the prayer meeting—self-advertisement in the holy place.

He "prayed thus with himself." His prayer was for himself and about himself. It did not reach the ear of God. He prayed aloud so that all could hear. This was common practice in the ancient world. Horace, the Roman poet, pictures just such a hypocrite making a public petition in the temple of Apollo, and adding to the impeccable prayers which others can hear the whispered private petition that heaven's blessing fall upon his trickery and deceit.

Pride is everywhere evil. In the holy place it approaches blasphemy. The pompous creature was not as other men. With a curled lip of contempt, he even draws God's attention to the poor publican. The wondering crowd were expected to look from the richly robed figure gazing up to God to the bent and downcast form of the broken man who sought forgiveness.

*He* came with the first requisite of forgiveness, “a broken and a contrite heart,” which God does not despise (Psalm 51:17), as he certainly despises the arrogance and sham of self-satisfied hypocrites. (See Job 40:1–42:6; Isaiah 2:22.) The publican heard what the Pharisee said about him. He did not utter a word of reproach. He cried with bowed head: “God be merciful to me *the* sinner.” Why the Authorized (KJV) Version says “*a* sinner” is without explanation. The definite article is plain enough in the Greek. “Yes, Lord,” he said, “I am the sinner of whom he speaks. Thy mercy, Lord.” If we desire justification it is found thus and in no other way (1 John 1:9).

**Notes** 18:12: “twice in the week”: Mondays and Thursdays, a practice imposed by tradition, and a work of supererogation; the Law ordained one fast day only (Leviticus 16:29); “all that I get”—cf. Deuteronomy 14:22-23 with Luke 11:42. 18:13: “be merciful”—Greek “be propitiated.”

LITTLE CHILDREN; THE RICH MAN

## LUKE 18:15-23

By depending completely on God, we show a childlike, humble, trusting heart.

VERSES 15-17. THE worth of humility is the thought which links this section to the last. At this point Luke's account rejoins those of Matthew and Mark. A glance at Mark's account (Mark 10:13-16) will show that Luke tones down a little the rebuke of the Twelve. This is a characteristic of his writing. After all, he was not as free to speak as Matthew and John, who were themselves members of the apostles' band, or Mark who wrote under the specific direction of Peter. It is instructive to collect from the Gospels the Lord's sayings about children. He stands in some contrast with the Jews generally, whose attitude towards children tended to be disciplinary in the narrower sense, and severe. Christianity is the charter of freedom for both women and children. A papyrus letter dating from about the time of Christ's birth throws vivid light on this. It is an affectionate note from a Greek workman in Egypt to his wife in Alexandria, who was expecting a child during her husband's absence. "If it is a girl, throw it out," he concludes casually. And such was the way of the hard pagan world. The unwanted children died on the city rubbish heap, or were diligently picked up by slavers and other vermin.

18:18-23. The theme of self-abasement continues into another story. "Good Master," cries the young man, without consciousness of the true significance of the term. The Lord's reply is not a repudiation of goodness,

but an attempt to bring the young man face to face with realities. The answer should have been: “I call you good because you are the Son of the Living God, the Messiah.” A pause ... and the Lord, having failed here to elicit a true answer, challenges the youth with the commandments, only to meet a naive claim to perfection. He had certainly not understood the commandments as Christ interpreted them in the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord thrust home to this unsundered corner of his life. It was the technique of John 4:16. Unable to face such a test of self-abnegation, the young man withdrew. It is a sad picture.

**Note** 18:19: the emphasis is on “Why.” See Matthew 16:13-19. Note the difference in the way Jesus answers here from the case of the lawyer in 10:25-28.

THE WRATH OF THE YOUNG MAN

LUKE 18:24-30

What is the main preoccupation of our life?

THE LORD LOOKED with grief after the retreating figure. He was like so many, pleasant to know, upright in character, generous, no doubt, and a useful member of the community, but unwilling to follow Christ. The dominant power in the young man's life was his wealth. The guarding, cherishing and maintaining of his fortune must have been the main preoccupation of his life. Had this not been the case, the Lord would not have recommended such drastic surgery.

His attitude must, in fact, have been unusually severe, for it puzzled the Twelve, especially when the strange saying about the camel and the needle was added. Much ingenuity has been expended on the phrase. Some suggest a gate into Jerusalem so small that it was called the "Needle's Eye," the access point in the hours of darkness when the main gates were shut. A camel could pass through only if its load were removed. There is no evidence that such a gate ever existed.

Another explanation is that the words for "cable" and "camel" were alike. The Greek for camel is *kamelos*, with a long "e" pronounced like "air" or "aye." If the word for cable or ship's hawser was *kamilos*, with a long "i," confusion would be easy, since vowels in Greek were already undergoing the transformation which has made them all sound like "i" in modern Greek. This is an attractive explanation: "It is as hard for the wealthy to make a full

committal of their life to God as it is to thread a cable through a needle.” The only doubt lies in the paucity of evidence for the existence of the word *kamilos*.

The simple explanation is Eastern hyperbole, or picturesque exaggeration. The West always finds such poetic language difficult. Even the Twelve found it disconcerting. The Lord’s enigmatic word in 18:27 means: “God sees things differently—sees possibilities lost on us, openings for grace which elude us.”

**Notes** 18:24: “entering the kingdom of God” is synonymous with “inheriting eternal life” (18:18), and “being saved” (18:26). 18:28: Gk., “abandoning our homes.” 18:30: “age to come—“the age which is being realized.”

THE ROAD TO THE CROSS

LUKE 18:31-43

This is the third time Jesus predicted his death, but this time it is more detailed.

VERSES 31-34. THEY were nearing Jericho. To the left was the blue level of the salt sea. The green river valley, flat-floored and covered with farmland, green patches of the “jungle of Jordan,” trees and crops, were at their feet. The oasis of Jericho formed, as it still forms, a splash of verdure in the midst of the plain. Perhaps they could see the beginning of the road which climbs from the deep-set plain, 1,300 feet below the level of the sea, to Jerusalem, perched 2,600 feet above the Mediterranean.

It was the road to the cross. It is clear from the other Gospels that the Lord had spent much time training his men to meet that which was to be. They had understood little of what he had to say (see 9:22, 44; 13:33). This must have been a lonely time for him, with none to mark and know, and understand, in love and fellow-feeling, the burden which he bore .... The road dropped to the valley floor, crossed the Jordan near the place where he had been baptized, and bent slightly north towards the green of Jericho.

18:35-43. The healing of the blind man (a contrast to the blindness of the disciples, 18:34?) took place as the party entered Jericho. Mark speaks of Bartimaeus, and Matthew of two blind men who found healing as the Lord left the town. Those anxious to discover “contradictions” in Scripture have made much of this. If the three accounts are read precisely as they are set

down, it will be clear enough that three or perhaps four men were healed, one of whom was named Bartimaeus. Incidents took place on both sides of the town. What is more likely than that the news of the first healing, and the words which claimed attention, should spread through the crowd and provoke other requests? Others see a confusion between Old Jericho, the mound which covers the Canaanitish city-fort, where the excavations may be seen today, and New Jericho, Herod's foundation, the modern tree-filled town. There is no careless reporting. It is the brevity of Scripture which causes misunderstanding.

**Notes** 18:32: Mark 10:33 emphasizes Jewish responsibility. 18:33: Jesus always speaks of the Crucifixion in the context of Resurrection. 18:38,41: compare Isaiah 11:1 and 35:4-5. 18:39: "cried"—a different word from that in 18:38, signifying more intense emotion. 18:43: Luke makes a special point of recording doxologies.

## ZACCHAEUS AND JESUS

### LUKE 19:1-10

When a man starts giving his money away like this, he's really repented!

MUCH TRADE PASSED through Jericho. It lay on the highway from the fords of the Jordan to Judea, an east-west artery of commerce. At such points there was much to gather in customs dues. Jericho, with its balsam groves, was itself a rich place. Jericho was a desirable place of residence, apart from the sultry heat, which may have been less burdensome in those days than now. There are some indications that the temperature of the whole Mediterranean area has risen over the last 2,000 years.

Zacchaeus' eagerness to see the Lord is some indication of his deep longing for something better than the despised calling of a hated tax collector, with its temptations, corruptions and ostracism. It is an extraordinarily vivid scene, not without its humor, as the small man, forgetful of dignity, outdistances the crowd and climbs just such a roadside tree as those which may be seen in Jericho today, palms and jacarandas. The story may have been first written in Aramaic. There are numerous "ands" and turns of phrase which suggest such an original. It would be interesting to know Luke's informant.

Observe the Lord's warm response to the man whose humble wish was only to see him. Zacchaeus wanted a glimpse of another world, a world of peace with God and a heart at rest. He did not realize how close such a realm

lies to the turmoil of common life. Like one who turns aside from some roaring motorway to picnic in peace behind a hedgerow down some quiet English lane, so those who will can step from the tumult of the world into the peace of God. The delight of the poor man is evident. Christ cannot come truly as a guest into a home without cleansing it. He cannot enter a life without bringing sanctification. It all illustrates 18:24,27.

**Notes** 19:3: the crowd express their hostility by keeping Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus. 19:5: Jesus knows about Zacchaeus' home. 19:8: Zacchaeus repays on the scale of Exodus 22:1 rather than Exodus 22:4,7,9; Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7. 19:9: "son of Abraham"—spiritually as well as physically—Romans 4:16.

THE MAN OF NOBLE BIRTH

LUKE 19:11-19

Note the background to this story of a nobleman who went far away to receive a kingdom.

WHEN THAT CLEVER scoundrel Herod the First died, his will divided the kingdom between his sons. Judea was part of the portion of Archelaus, and this was why Joseph and Mary, returning from Egypt, did not go back to Bethlehem, but went north to Nazareth in the realm of Herod Antipas (Matthew 2:22-23).

Archelaus, who had a full share of his father's vices, without the first Herod's diplomatic astuteness, began his rule over Judea with the sanguinary suppression of disorders in Jerusalem. A widespread Jewish uprising necessitated the armed intervention of Varus, the governor of Syria. It was at this time of tension that Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt, and the disturbed state of the country was abundant reason for their change of residence.

But it was vital for Archelaus to have his authority confirmed by Augustus in Rome, and necessary, in consequence, for him to hurry to the capital before reports from Palestine, and especially the despatches of Varus, presented the condition of affairs in Judea in too unfavorable a light. A Jewish embassy, and Herod Antipas in person, opposed Archelaus' appointment. Augustus, surprisingly, did confirm his title to Judea, but refused the appellation of "king."

Archelaus, then, was the “nobleman” who went abroad to “receive a kingdom,” and it was natural enough for the Lord to use the incident as a parable in Jericho, because this was his starting-point. Archelaus had a large palace in Jericho, and the sight of its white marble and terraces suggested the pointed story.

It is a further striking illustration of the necessity of dissociating the incidental machinery of a parable from the moral or doctrinal significance. There could be no greater contrast between the Lord, leaving behind him his followers with responsibilities, and the villain of the Herod family, whose tyrannical rule until AD 6 altogether failed to justify the confidence which Augustus had placed in him. We shall look further at the exegesis in our comments on the next section.

DELAY AND RECKONING

LUKE 19:20-27

In the final analysis, faithfulness will be rewarded and faithlessness punished.

THIS PARABLE IS NOT another version of the Parable of the Talents told in Matthew 25:14-30. Jesus must not be supposed to have taught each lesson only once and in the same form and context. The differences between the two stories and their teaching should be carefully listed. For example, the unprofitable servant is not cast out in this case.

The reason for this parable is given in 19:11. There was excitement among the Twelve, and Mark's account of incidents on the journey up to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-45) reveals the mood of expectation. "The kingdom" was at hand—the kingdom as they disastrously conceived it, with an earthly Messiah dispensing the rewards of victory.

The parable hints first at long delay. The ruler went to "a far country." The servants of the ruler had one task to perform in his absence. It was a test of fidelity and capacity when he gave each a modest sum, and left them to demonstrate in the arena of trade their fitness to serve in a wider field, and their concern for his work.

Archelaus may, indeed, have done something like this, and, when he returned from Rome in a bitter mood of frustration over Augustus' refusal of the royal title, he may have meted out just such savage punishment as Luke here records. At any rate, the rough and ready method of examination did

reveal to him those who gave and those who grudged their service to the new regime.

The second point which the parable teaches is the inevitability of the day of reckoning. Archelaus inevitably returned. The certainty of God's judgment day is yet more sure. The servants of the Lord are called to long and arduous service, to dogged day-by-day prosecution of their task, to inventiveness and to endeavor. Faithfulness in the hard trial of Christian living will determine wider opportunity to serve, and every man, before the judgment seat of Christ, will give an account of the service rendered (1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

**Notes** 19:23: cf. a traditional saying of Jesus—"show yourselves approved bankers." 19:26: those who use spiritual opportunities will be given even more; those who fail to do so will lose the ones they had. For the Christian's attitude while waiting for the Lord's return see Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5; 2 Timothy 4:1-2.

### **Prayer**

Prepare our souls, O Lord, for that great day.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

LUKE 19:28-40

We have just read a lot about the kingdom and now we see the king himself, riding into Jerusalem on a colt, fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah.

THE LONG CLIMB up from Jericho reaches its highest point on the Mount of Olives. It approaches the summit by way of a long uplifted ridge on which the village of Bethany still stands. The mountains of Moab are a pale blue rampart above the Dead Sea, which lies out of sight in its great trench. In the other direction, still screened by the Mount of Olives, lies the Holy City. The modern road skirts the foot of the hill. The ancient road lay right over its summit, no doubt in order to give approaching travelers from that direction the magnificent panorama of Jerusalem which the hilltop offers.

The Lord probably had some arrangement about the ass; he deliberately fulfilled a prophecy of Zechariah when he chose the ass for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9). It was on an ass that the ancient monarch rode when he came on a mission of peace. A horse was the beast of war. On that momentous day he was offering himself to Jerusalem, not as the Messiah of war, which their carnal expectation desired, but as the Prince of Peace. He wanted no illusions.

He wants no illusions today in the minds of those who serve him. Churchill, in the grim days of 1940, offered nothing but “blood and toil and tears and sweat.” Christ offers more than that—the peace which passes

understanding, his presence and his championship; but he would not have those who follow him imagine that they will be favored with material advantage, protected from all ill, exempt from the world's spite and bitterness.

The cheering multitude saw the coming of One who would perhaps lead them to victory over the occupying power, would form a rallying point for the proletariat against the priesthood and the collaborating aristocracy. Hence the change of mood a week later. The Lord was offering himself as he always does on his terms. So many were accepting him on theirs. And yet, unwittingly in many cases, they uttered truth. Hence his closing words.

**Notes** 19:29: Bethphage—an outer suburb; Bethany—two miles away. 19:35: a royal honor (2 Kings 9:13). 19:37: the raising of Lazarus (John 11:45) had intensified the interest and excitement.

## JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

### LUKE 19:41-48

The crowd largely saw Jesus as a political messiah, so it's not surprising that we see Jesus bursting into tears over Jerusalem.

VERSES 41-44. FROM the high swell of the Mount of Olives Jerusalem may be seen entire. Over the valley of the Kedron the ancient walls top the stony ridge on whose slopes Stephen was to die. The packed roofs of the old city fill the view. Hence the Lord's distress. The veil of the years grew thin before him and he saw what the Roman ballista teams saw from the same spot almost forty years later. In the stark vision of forty years on there were no grey-green olives on the slope, only blackened stumps, there was no going and coming on the road below. The gates were closed. The walls were marred and scarred by the catapult stones ... And not long afterwards the city was a ruined heap of ash and blackened stone covering a multitude of dead. It was a day of visitation indeed.

When the Lord spoke there was still a choice between the terror which was seeping through Palestine, the growing power of hate, the rising tide of violence, and the acceptance of Christ, with a rôle in the world which might have changed all history in some unimagined way. But "they would not."

19:45-48. From Mark 11:11 and 15 it appears that Jesus crossed the Kedron, entered the city and went straight to the temple. It was only a few hundred yards to the left of his place of entry. He observed the situation there. The old abuses had crept back to the holy place since the earlier

occasion, described by John, when he had driven out the traders and money-changers (John 2:13-17). He then retired to Bethany for the night, came back to the city the next morning, and cleansed the temple afresh. This seems the best reconstruction of events. The Sadducean priesthood, who authorized this vulgar but lucrative bazaar in the Court of the Gentiles, were hesitant to act because of the popular support for the Lord among the multitude. It required a few days for them to develop a plan of campaign. They waited cunningly for the onset of disillusionment in those who had expected a spectacular demonstration of messiahship; they cornered Pilate, and circumvented the rest. But what of the temple of our lives (2 Corinthians 6:16-17)? Note also Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Zechariah 14:21; Malachi 3:1-2.

**Notes** Compare Christ's lament with 13:34-35. 19:41: "wept" aloud; contrast the silent tears over Lazarus (John 11:35). 19:46: "cave of brigands" (Gk.)—cf. Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11. Birds and animals for sacrifice were sold at exorbitant prices; Greek, Roman and Tyrian coins had to be changed into Jewish money—at a premium, of course.

THE QUESTION ABOUT JESUS' AUTHORITY

LUKE 20:1-18

Jesus' opponents asked him in effect, "Who do you think you are—  
doing all these things?"

VERSES 1-8. THE imposing group from the Sanhedrin "came upon him." It is the same verb as that which is used in 10:40 of Martha's sudden and exasperated approach to the Lord. They came on him suddenly, they came and stood over him: both of these meanings are in the word. It is used again in 21:35 for the coming of judgment. The dilemma of the authorities is apparent. What authority had he to empty and to appropriate the temple court for his preaching? At this point they were fumbling for a charge against him. He countered with a devastating question, and the example is one to note.

Controversy is sometimes inevitable, although it should never be sought. If such strife of words is thrust upon the Christian, it is well for him not to stand on the defensive. Be ready, by all means, to give a reason for faith (1 Peter 3:15), but counter question with question.

The opponent of the gospel has many questions to answer. He also has a faith for which he must give a reason, for he too has staked his life upon a belief—a belief that chance ruled creation; that the world and all things visible are a great joke played by no one or everyone; that all the best of all the centuries was built upon a delusion or a fraud, that evil has chosen the better part.

20:9-18. This parable is closer to being a full allegory than most of the other parables in the New Testament. There was no doubt in the minds of the religious leaders at whom it was directed. The image of the vineyard was deep in Scripture (Deuteronomy 32:32-33; Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:16; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1; Joel 1:7). History was woven bitingly into the story. Those who were entrusted with the guardianship of the vineyard looked upon it as their private preserve, and neither Israel nor Israel's rulers, who were the twin objects of the parable's two-fold significance, held a prerogative here. The parable passed from history to prophecy in 20:14-15. 20:17 is from Psalm 118:22, a song said to have been sung at the completion of the walls of Jerusalem in 444 BC. The Lord showed the true content of the words. The early church remembered this—see Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7-8; Romans 9:33.

**Note** Mark 11:12,20,27 suggest that this Day of Questions was Tuesday in Holy Week. Each of the main groups puts a question reflecting their dominant concern—the Pharisees (authority, 11:1-20); the Herodians (political responsibility, 11:21-26); the Sadducees (speculative theology, 11:27-38).

PAYING TAXES; THE RESURRECTION

LUKE 20:19-38

Jesus' opponents now adopted a different method—flattery—when they sent a group to try to catch him out.

VERSES 19-26. SINCE AD 6 the land had been under procuratorial rule. A procurator was a minor governor directly responsible to Caesar himself, so Roman rule was immediate and clear. The tribute was, however, its clearest and most irksome symbol. The silver denarius, bearing Caesar's image and superscription, was issued for the purposes of taxation. The legal fiction was that coinage so stamped belonged to the emperor, who, in receiving tribute but recovered his own. It was a subtle point, but not without its usefulness among the legally minded Jews, who avoided in this way some of the impact of direct payment of dues to an alien, and also the reproach of accepting a form of "graven image." Taxation, however, and the use of the embossed coinage, was a burning problem, and the trap thus set was a deadly one. It would have been fatal to answer either way.

The reply which the Lord gave established an abiding principle. Those versed in the Old Testament could not well ponder the words without realizing that man too bears an image—that of God, in whose likeness he was made. "Give back to Caesar what Caesar owns, but give back to God that which is his—your persons and all that which you are."

20:27-38. The Sadducees were a worldly sect who controlled the priesthood, and formed the core of collaborating Jewry. They accepted only

the five books of Moses, and so among the vital doctrines which they had rejected was that of the resurrection. Their question was an attempt to make both teacher and teaching appear ridiculous, a not uncommon method of attack.

The Lord replied to the absurd question with dignity. A future life must not be crudely regarded as a material continuation of the present life. It is another mode of existence, altogether different but utterly blessed (1 Corinthians 2:9). It is the perennial fault of man to conclude that there can be no reality outside the competence of his five senses to apprehend. In fact he is the prisoner of those senses, and can only break free by faith. The Sadducees applied the limited faculties of sense and mind to spiritual matters, reached absurd conclusions, and rejected truth. Later Pharisees used the argument of 20:37.

**Notes** 20:19: they resist the plain truth of Christ's parable, and so are led—as always—to greater wickedness. 20:21: note the flattery. 20:22: "lawful"—by Moses' law. 20:24: Jewish coins bore agricultural emblems. 20:25: "render"—Gk. "pay what is due."

TRUE DEVOTION

LUKE 20:39–21:4

Now Jesus asks a question. This amounted to, “Is Jesus just a descendant of David?” No—he is David’s Lord, the Son of God, to be worshiped!

VERSES 39-47. THE Lord’s use of Scripture was one with which his opponents and questioners were quite familiar. The Christian authentication of Christ rests on other grounds—his resurrection, and all that which the New Testament has to say on its significance.

The church has the Gospels, also, and the record of his life and death. The prophecies of the Old Testament, with their clear indications of Davidic descent, were much more significant as arguments in a Jewish context (2 Samuel 7:8-29; Isaiah 9:5-7; Micah 5:2; Psalm 110:1, etc).

It is well to remember that a messianic meaning in these places is not precluded by some other or local significance which may have had a place in the Scripture concerned. It is often the case that a passage of Scripture has both primary and secondary meaning. The Lord was also speaking within the context of the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament, and confounding his critics with their own doctrine and methods of exegesis.

21:1-4. After distasteful conflict on the levels of their choice, the Lord appeared to turn with relief to a spectacle of humble devotion. “He looked up and saw...” He had been sitting, weary, with downcast eyes, and was refreshed to see the poor widow’s sacrifice. She little knew the magnitude of

her gift, its vast fruitfulness, the fame it was to win, and the joy it gave to the Lord himself.

Gifts are relative. Legalistic tithing systems, indiscriminately pressed by some churches, take no thought of this. Money, like all else, is held in trust. There are priorities in its use. A man's family must first be properly provided for. Children made unwisely to suffer by a father's financial sacrifices are more difficult to win for Christ; and to win one's own family is the first and most essential duty of a Christian parent. And let it also be observed that a tithe is no sacrifice for others.

The New Testament gives no authority for tithing. Christian giving is a far less mechanical obligation.

**Notes** 20:45-47 may well sum up the condemnation of Matthew 23 (cf. Matthew 22:41-45; Luke 20:41-44). 20:42-43: note the use of these in Acts 2:34-35. 21:2: the temple authorities prescribed two gifts: hence this was a minimum. The "mite" (*lepton*) rated 128 to the denarius.

WATCH OUT THAT YOU ARE NOT DECEIVED

## LUKE 21:5-19

Jesus warned his disciples against some who would come with a false message.

THE GROUP WAS inside the building. The “goodly stones” were the marble walls; the gifts included a table from Ptolemy of Egypt, a chain from Agrippa, a golden vine from Herod. Tacitus, the Roman historian, who told of the siege of Jerusalem, called the temple a “shrine of immense wealth.” It was a shock to the hearers to be told that destruction awaited the mighty and beautiful place. But a “greater” had been rejected; judgment was inevitable (Deuteronomy 18:19; 32:35; Leviticus 26:31-33; 1 Kings 9:6-9; Micah 3:12).

The prophetic words of Christ gave a grim preview of terrible years which lay ahead. They telescope the centuries in the frequent fashion of prophecy, but have first in view the two dark generations of judgment which followed the rejection of Christ. The mad challenge to the might of Rome, in the days of the empire’s ruthless strength, was already taking shape in the time of Christ.

The warning of 21:8 is the core of this section. There was to be persecution, but delusion was a greater danger. Those who heed the Lord’s words will not readily be led astray by the heresy, exhibitionism and folly which have so often spoiled and marred the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord.

The special directions given to the persecuted were probably intended to meet their immediate need. There was no New Testament, with its rounded body of doctrine, no record of the experience of the church. Simple and unlettered men were often called upon to make their defense before the learned and the great, and the promise of the Spirit's aid was intended for them, and for all who at all times were similarly challenged. The words are not meant to excuse those who are equipped and able to prepare from proper attention to defense and proclamation. God can and will guide in preparation as well as in utterance.

**Notes** 21:10-11: an earthquake ravaged Phrygia in AD 61; Vesuvius erupted disastrously in AD 63; worldwide famines occurred in the 50s and 60s; there was war in Britain, Parthia and Palestine; AD 69 saw *four* emperors (Nero died in AD 68). 21:12-17 all find fulfillment in the book of Acts.

THE LAST TIMES

LUKE 21:20-38

Here is a lot to occupy the mind, so Jesus also gives something to take to heart—and to affect our way of living.

VERSES 20-24. THE local garrison were quite unable to deal with the first passionate outbreak of revolt. The Roman army group which watched over the eastern and north-eastern frontiers was located in Syria, because Rome regarded the Parthians as the gravest menace on this flank. The Jews in consequence had notable initial success in AD 66. But inexorably the strength of the Syrian legions was brought to bear on the situation. Under the capable Vespasian, who was to emerge from the complex civil war of AD 69 as emperor of Rome, the disciplined armies of the eastern command began to deal with Palestine. The conquest was methodical and complete, with Jerusalem left until the countryside had been combed and subdued. Hence the relevance of the warning. The city could appear deceptively as a place of refuge to the rural population of Judea. But all who were trapped there found death or slavery. A million Jews died; 97,000 went into servitude. Eusebius describes the escape of Christians to Pella.

21:25-28 have a main reference to “last times” at the end of the day of grace, the “times of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:25). The closing words of 21:25, “the sea and the waves roaring,” is clear enough indication that the Lord is using “apocalyptic” language, a recognized type of poetic symbolism, the meaning of which was plainer to the Jews than it is to us. The sea has

been an image for the restless surge of nations in more than one language. The heavenly bodies are an image for those in authority (eg Genesis 37:9). The rise and fall of kings and tyrants has been a commonplace of history, but seldom more strikingly than in the first century and the twentieth.

21:29-36 seem to refer back primarily to the fall of Jerusalem. The word “generation” in 21:32 illustrates the dual meaning of this passage of apocalyptic poetry. It can mean those living at a given time, and also “race” or “stock.” Both meanings are common through all the range of Greek literature. It is true that there were those living who saw the horror descend on Palestine. It is also true that the Jewish race has outlived all attempts to obliterate it, and it is the Lord’s prophecy that it will be living still at the consummation of man’s history.

Meanwhile let us heed 21:34, stand alert, and be prepared in heart, for the Day could be today. 2 Peter 3:1-14 is relevant.

## THE PLOT AGAINST JESUS

### LUKE 22:1-13

At festival time, crowds were coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from captivity in Egypt.

VERSES 1-6. IN this sombre narrative note two points. Judas was “of the number of the twelve.” To be numbered with a group can be of small significance. It is sympathy, love and fellowship which bind a man to his fellows. Judas had long been alien in heart. Betrayal opened a way for a successful attack from without. The church can fall only by betrayal from within, the sabotage of standards, the decay of faith. Judas plays his part in all centuries. And “they were glad” (22:5), for Jewry, gathered in vast hordes round Jerusalem, was a formidable force (see Mark 14:2). The one deterrent had been fear. Injustice, false witness, unutterable cruelty wreaked on the innocent and good, treachery—all these vicious and noxious things were taken in their stride by men who feared for comfort and prestige. God was “sifting out the souls of men before his judgment seat,” and these men were demonstrating the depth of their perdition.

22:7-13. The house thus honored was probably that of Acts 12:12, the home of Mark’s mother, or perhaps of both his parents. If Mark’s father was still alive at this time, his cooperation in the Lord’s plan must have been one of the last deeds of his life. The evening cannot be better spent than in such service. The Lord was aware of Judas’ plotting, and was seeking to conceal the place of the Last Supper for as long as possible. It was easy enough for

the faithful two, Peter and John, to distinguish their host among the many pilgrims in the crowded streets, for it was quite unusual for a man to be seen carrying a pitcher of water. Women carried pitchers, men skins.

The room shown today as the “cenaculum” in one ancient corner of Jerusalem is medieval, but could occupy the site. It is a blessed home which entertains Christ and keeps open table for his men. Its young people are the likelier to follow Christ, for it was thus that Peter won Mark. (Motto at Oak Hill College, London: “It became known that he was in the house.”)

**Notes** 22:1: a colloquial explanation; the Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted from 14 to 21 Nisan, and 15 Nisan was the Day of Passover. 22:4: “captains”—the Levitic Captain of the Temple and his force.

## THE LAST SUPPER

### LUKE 22:14-23

Jesus left something precious for his disciples to remember him by.

THE ORDER OF events is described in Matthew. Mark and the first Corinthian letter show some variation but this has no significance. A Syrian manuscript of Luke is different again, and may represent an ancient tradition: “And he took bread and gave thanks over it, and brake and gave unto them, saying, ‘This is my body which I give for you; this do in remembrance of me.’ And after they had supped he took the cup and gave thanks over it, and said, ‘Take this and share it among yourselves. This is my blood, the New Testament. For I say unto you that henceforth I will not drink of this fruit, until the kingdom of God shall come.’” It is also a fact that several cups of wine were drunk at the Passover feast. If a full and detailed account had survived, the details of all accounts would no doubt be integrated.

It was a time of solemn fulfillment. The symbolism of the Paschal lamb was deeply relevant to the last hours and coming sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The Passover feast was the most colorful of all Jewish ceremonies, a demonstration in dramatic ritual of substitutionary sacrifice, and of God’s own saviorhood. It was about to be replaced by a Christian ceremony which speaks as eloquently of God in flesh appearing, and of life sacrificially outpoured.

The hand of the traitor was on the table with him, and the fact stirred the conscience of the other men who were abashed by the divisions which had

appeared among them. John tells how the Lord had washed their feet, and the deep rebuke of that moving action still lay on their hearts and made them sensitive to sin. This, indeed, should be the mood in which we draw near to the table. The bread and the cup are for sinners, and none can approach the feast with perfection of heart. All can come with Christ's righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30), for his perfection is granted by God's grace to those who claim it. It was still not too late for Judas to abandon his unholy treachery and rebellion, to cry for his forgiveness and to be forgiven. Let our hand, O Lord, when it rests by thine on the table, be innocent and clean of evil. Forgive and restore, we pray.

**Note** 22:17: in Talmudic directions, the wine preceded the breaking of the Passover bread, so this would not be the "cup of the New Testament" (1 Corinthians 11:25). Luke knew well the established practice of the early church, and of Paul himself.

THE ARGUMENT ABOUT GREATNESS

LUKE 22:24-38

How petty this scene is! Who really was the greatest? And what example did Jesus give to prove this?

THE DISSENSIONS AMONG his men, which made the long walk up from Jericho a lonely one, and darkened the Lord's last hours, appear in all four narratives (Matthew 18:1-5; 20:24-28; Mark 9:33-37; 10:41-45; Luke 9:46-48; John 13:2-20).

Dispute may have arisen again as they sat down to the Paschal feast. There were positions of honor (Luke 14:7-11), and perhaps there was unseemly competition at the table.

John's narrative of the footwashing (John 13) appears at this point.

There was some range of age among the men, as 22:26 suggests. Peter was the eldest. He was a married man with his own home (Luke 4:38), when he joined Jesus as a disciple, and calls himself an "elder" in the sixth decade of the century (1 Peter 5:1). John, who lived until the death of Domitian in AD 96, was probably the youngest of the band.

22:30 is apocalyptic language, and those trained in this poetic mode of communication should not have taken the words literally. 22:31 is a reference to the dramatic opening of Job. Peter, like the Old Testament character, was to pass through a period of darkness and temptation, from which he was to emerge toughened and trained, and fitted to help his brethren. Note the use of "Simon," the name of frailty. It is in this fashion that we should approach

such experience: “God has allowed this to happen. What beneficent purpose has he in view? What do I lack which this trial can give me? How can it be turned to ultimate usefulness, and made fruitful in my life?”

The reference to the sword is again to be taken as apocalyptic speech. Since the Lord later that night repudiated the use of one of the fisher’s knives, which were produced in answer to his words, it is obvious that he cannot have intended them to be taken literally. As with the parables, he was seeking to evoke a more spiritual attitude, and turned away with weary words from the sight of their puny weapons. He sought to show that they were called now to courage and to testing. Their soldiering for Christ was about to begin. And they did not know. “Enough,” he said, “enough of dull misunderstanding, of trial and weariness!”

It was late, later than they thought.

**Notes** 22:29: “appoint”—Gk. “make a bequest”; the Lord’s last will and testament. 22:38: “swords”—*machairai*, long knives or swords (used for preparing the Passover Lamb?).

JESUS PRAYS ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

LUKE 22:39-53

Jesus knew what no one else did, that in this strange and frightening way, God's plan for saving men and women was being worked out.

VERSES 39-46. A remnant of the Garden of Gethsemane still lies across the Kedron on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. Two or three trees of immense age stand there, their short but enormous trunks gnarled, twisted and eroded with the passing of centuries. The hill was bared of all growth and greenery in the two great rebellions, but olives are the most tenacious of all trees. They will spring again from their ancient roots when all visible portions of the tree are burned and shattered. The roots of the trees visible today could have been those which gripped the stony ground when the Lord knelt in prayer, and put for ever into all prayer the words which every true follower of his must observe: "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine ..."

That Jesus, knowing what was to be, should yet shrink in horrified humanity from the fearsome reality of shame and agony, is not strange. In him deity and humanity were perfectly blended. Here we see the Perfect Man, perfectly understanding, and in the grip of suffering unimaginable to duller, imperfect minds (Hebrews 5:7-9). The haematidrosis, the rupturing of tiny blood vessels into the sweatglands, is a known medical phenomenon, and indicates the fearful stress of the mind's agony.

22:47-53. Only John reveals that it was Peter who turned to violence. When John wrote, almost forty years later, it was safe to reveal the name.

Peter was long since dead. John also, acquainted as he was with the high priest's house, knew the name of the injured servant. It was like Peter to turn to action in a moment of bewilderment or distress. This trait more than once appears in the Gospels. And so they led him away, and Judas' name became a name of treachery and base betrayal. For what will our names be remembered?

**Notes** Who heard and reported the prayer? The three intimates (see Matthew and Mark) probably heard much of it; and Mark, if he were the mysterious young man of his own account, may have heard it all (Matthew 26:37-38; Mark 14:51-52). 22:42: see Matthew 20:22; Psalm 75:8. 22:47: the kiss was a customary way for a disciple to greet his rabbi.

PETER DENIES JESUS  
LUKE 22:54-71

Jesus knew Peter, but Peter didn't know himself.

LUKE CONSISTENTLY SPARES the apostles, whenever it was possible to do so. Matthew and John were themselves of the number of the Twelve, and Mark wrote under Peter's direction. Luke showed fine feeling in his understandable reserve. Here he omits Peter's outburst of bad language.

Peter perhaps should not have been there, though it was natural enough that he should follow. Besides, John, his closest personal friend, had access to the high priest's house, and tells very naturally the story how Peter came to be there (John 18:15-18). He should not have sought comfort at the fire of God's foes. It is well to estimate carefully the nature and impact of temptation, to know the weaknesses and capacities of our own personality, and to avoid localities, situations and all company which is likely to try the spirit or the flesh beyond the point of possible resistance. There is no disgrace in evading temptation. Luke is reaching the length of narrative which a maximum-sized papyrus roll could conveniently contain. He had material such as the story of the Emmaus walk which could not be abbreviated without loss. Hence a certain sketchiness and telescoping of narrative in such sections as this, a device visible enough in the Acts, Luke's second "treatise."

In 22:69 the Lord is again speaking in the accepted forms of apocalyptic language. The reference is to the resurrection. The "glorifying" of the Son of Man began with the crucifixion (John 13:31). The phrase "Son of Man" was

a recognized Messianic title (Daniel 7:13) and was so taken by those who heard. Hence the direct question of 22:70. Mark renders the same reply: “I am.” This is indication enough that the formula of 22:70 is one of assent. See also Acts 2:33-35; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3-4; 1 Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21; 12:5. It is important to understand how, and in what sense, the Sanhedrin took Christ’s words. Western minds are prone to literalism and to logical statement. The East spoke in imagery with greater ease. The important point is that the Jewish leaders clearly understood that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah.

**Notes** 22:63-71: Luke tells of five trials of Jesus; comparison of this first one with Mark 14:53-64 suggests that the Sanhedrin met with Annas to draw up their charges against Jesus, and then (as they were not supposed to meet by night) the morning’s business was a mere formality. Even so, the proceedings were irregular. Witnesses for the defense should have been summoned first and solemnly adjured to speak from knowledge; the meeting should not have been held on a feast day; sentences of condemnation should have been held over for twenty-four hours. 22:69 would recall Psalm 110:1.

JESUS BROUGHT BEFORE PILATE AND HEROD

LUKE 23:1-12

The Sanhedrin had accused Jesus of blasphemy, but they wanted a clearer, political charge under Roman law.

VERSES 1-5. PILATE, as a procurator, was directly responsible to Tiberius himself. Arrogant and heavy-handed conduct of his office had left him vulnerable to threats of complaint to Caesar. Above all, Caesar wanted peace in Palestine. It was a vital corridor of communication between the valleys of the Nile and the Euphrates. Egypt and Syria were provinces of immense importance. Palestine linked them. Pilate would undoubtedly have been commanded to cherish the collaborators, especially the Sadducean priesthood, to handle the rank and file with circumspection, and to manage relations with the petty kings of the area with wisdom. Pilate had done none of these things, and his failure was known to the grim old emperor. Pilate could not afford another complaint. It was obviously the best policy for those who sought to be rid of Christ to represent him as a subversive agitator. Note the development in the nature of the charge—see Mark 14:57-58,61-64. In spite of this Pilate actually pronounced acquittal (23:4). At this point he could have played the man, but clamor reached the stratum of cowardice in him and he turned with relief to the thought that the tetrarch of Galilee might take the case off his hands. He could also demonstrate unusual courtesy.

23:6-12. Herod was in Jerusalem for the feast—he kept up appearances. He had once listened gladly to John (Mark 6:20), and had John's murder

heavily on his conscience. Some curiosity made him eager to see the prophet from Galilee, perhaps to silence his fear that John might be alive again (Mark 6:14). Herod had known his day of opportunity. He had openly chosen his vicious course. Christ does not speak to those who have set their will against him. But Herod was too practiced a diplomat to be caught by Pilate's trick. This was the Roman's responsibility. John had been burden enough on his murderer. He was not prepared to take measure against a Galilean with half Galilee in Jerusalem for the feast. It is idle to try to force someone else to make decisions which we ourselves should make.

**Notes** In John's account Pilate appears to disconcert the priests by opening the trial in legal fashion—perhaps under the influence of his wife. 23:11: “gorgeous apparel”—a white festal gown to add to the mockery. 23:12: see 13:1. For this entire passage, see 1 Peter 2:21-23.

JESUS SENTENCED TO DEATH

LUKE 23:13-26

Read these verses and listen to the raging cries of the frenzied mob:  
would you have been among them?

LUKE ONLY, OF the four evangelists, tells of the visit to Herod, and records it as an acquittal. He had some first-hand source of information (see 8:3), from which he derived such details as these, and those of Acts 12:20 and 13:1.

The struggle between Pilate and the priests is intensely dramatic and is told in Luke's most vivid manner. In Acts he is eager to show that Roman magistrates, as well as experienced local rulers, found nothing subversive in Christianity. His treatment of the trial of Christ clearly anticipates this preoccupation of his later work.

Pilate stresses the dual acquittal, and should have released his prisoner under safe conduct. In 23:16 his streak of cowardice is visible. There was no case for scourging if the prisoner was innocent. Scourging is what is meant here by chastisement, and it was a shocking punishment, ending often in death. Nor need he have given any indication that the release was the customary Passover favor.

Observing the hesitation, the priests, shrewd and ruthless men aware of their advantage, renewed their clamor. The chanted chorus: "Crucify! Crucify!" drove Pilate to a weak reopening of the case. "What evil has he done?" It was a case for peremptory dismissal, and a calling out of the guard,

and this could have been done before the mob, abroad now in the streets, took up the cry for Barabbas.

To call for Barabbas, the terrorist, was illogical enough in those who had brought Jesus before the Procurator on a charge of subversion and disturbance of the peace. It was a significant choice. It was still not too late for the nation to choose the way of peace, and escape the holocaust towards which the land was moving. Midnight struck when they chose Barabbas. It was no longer the eleventh hour. It was too late.

**Notes** Rome prided herself on her justice, Jewry on her religion. Here both reveal fatal flaws, yielding to the pride and fear of sinful men. 23:13: at Gabbatha, the Pavement. 23:18: Barabbas—"son of a rabbi." 23:26: Simon of Cyrene—see Mark 15:21, and, possibly, Romans 16:13. He may have come for the Passover—Acts 6:9 shows that the Jews of Cyrene had their own synagogue in Jerusalem.

THE CRUCIFIXION

LUKE 23:27-38

The eternal Son of God was about to be separated from his Father. Yet even here, Jesus prays.

IT HAS BEEN suggested that the place of the crucifixion could have been the skull-shaped knoll, north of the city, not far from the Damascus Gate, known as Gordon's Calvary. Gashes in the rock-face represent eye-sockets and the shattered features of a skull. The Jordanians built a bus-terminal hard against the knoll where battered vehicles moved in and out, and crowds rushed for seats or hurried away. The traditional site, under the Holy Sepulchre Church, has to be sure some archaeological support, but whatever the exact location, at some such place the most significant event of history was enacted, and that fact must at least be conceded by all. Vast issues were decided at the Place of the Skull. Notice the dignity and the restraint of Luke's narrative the physical horrors of crucifixion are passed over.

But at Calvary the issues of eternity also found their climax and consummation. The story has only to be read in its simplicity to see the first lesson of the cross. Could man's rebellion against God and good be more shatteringly demonstrated than it was that day? The brutal soldiery, the leaders of religion mocking the spectacle of despair and agony, cruelty which no beast would practice upon beast, were a spectacle which a world inured enough to blood and horror was never to forget. Here is man when sin has done its worst with him.

What was not yet so clear was that here too was God. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Some were soon to see this scene with other eyes, for here was the spectacle of God himself involved in human sin. Lord, make us understand it.

**Notes** 23:27-32: Luke gives a large place to women, and their presence in the story both illustrates his sources and throws light on the early church. 23:27: the women may have come to offer drugs (Proverbs 31:6). 23:34: the Lord asks forgiveness not so much for the soldiers as for the people at large; forty years of opportunity for repentance were given. 23:38: the varied versions of the superscription result from its being written in three languages. If Matthew’s version is turned into Latin, Luke’s into Greek and John’s into Aramaic, lines of nearly equal length result.

THE DEATH OF JESUS

LUKE 23:39-49

As you read about Jesus' death, do you feel that you know him more closely?

VERSES 39-45. THERE is of course no clash between this narrative and that of Mark. Both criminals at first soiled their last hours of life with abuse and blasphemy (Mark 15:32). One observed the Lord's demeanor, heard his words, and in the midst of his unimaginable pain found a Savior. Forgiveness was immediate and complete. The broken creature, already bleeding and gasping to death, had no chance or opportunity to do anything to remedy or compensate for a life's misdeeds. He could only cry for pardon, and pardon he received. There could be no more striking demonstration that salvation is of grace, "and not of works" (Ephesians 2:8).

The rending of the temple veil (23:45) was a sign of deep significance to the Jews. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes much of it in his masterly exposition of the Christian significance of the Hebrew ceremonies. He relates the symbolism to Christ in 9:3-8,11-12 and 10:9-22. Access to God became the right of all. The curtain which indicated separation was divided, and no priest nor mediator other than Christ can come between.

23:46-49. The story of these awful minutes is told at greater length by the other evangelists. Perhaps Luke found it too painful to be other than brief. He heard the story perhaps from the women who had followed Christ (23:49).

The awesome solemnity of the moment seems to have subdued the crowd. It is a fact of mass psychology that crowds are subject to sudden changes of mood, and the fact is demonstrable in the story of the Passion week from Palm Sunday to Calvary. The ribaldry died and “they smote upon their breasts,” some, no doubt, in saving sorrow and repentance (Luke 18:13). It was finished, and salvation won for all who chose to repent, believe and follow Christ.

**Notes** 23:43: “Paradise”—garden: the abode of the blest spirits awaiting the general resurrection (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7). 23:44: the darkened sun was a sign to the Gentile, the rent veil to the Jew. The sun was not darkened by an eclipse, which cannot take place at full moon; the event was supernatural.

JESUS IS BURIED

## LUKE 23:50-56

Notice Joseph's character and his actions. This took courage!

AN INDICATION THAT Gordon's Calvary is the place of the crucifixion is found hard by. The ridge of rock which ends in the skull-shaped knoll runs back to form a low cliff. In the cliff-face is cut an ancient tomb. It is a squared chamber with a low ledge on the side nearest Calvary. A great groove shows where a wheel-shaped stone once rolled to close the entrance. A walled garden on two levels encloses the place and gives an air of simplicity and sanctity not to be found in the great church, cluttered with the tawdry symbols of devotion, which covers the alleged site now within the city walls.

It is refreshing to meet another of the Lord's "remnant." They are of all ranks of society. Joseph was a Sanhedrist, who now with uncommon courage went to the Roman governor, who was, no doubt, still tense and irascible from the day's frustrations, and begged for the body of Christ. He gave it reverent and honorable burial, and the women were there also, an intent and observant audience. Hence perhaps the fuller account in Luke. He who was more brief than either Matthew or Mark about events on Calvary, gives more detail here, and in so doing provided material for much Christian art.

Luke had other purpose than mere narrative in view. The resurrection was the first prominent feature of the Christian gospel, as the earliest preaching shows. Skepticism, faced with the empty tomb, would find its readiest argument in the statement that the Lord was not really dead. It is a theory

recently revived by a medical man. Luke was also a medical man, and took some care over this matter. Such witnesses could not have been deceived. Joseph and those with him could have no doubt that it was a dead man with whose mortal remains they were dealing. The great stone was rolled in front and the garden emptied, until the tramp of the guards resounded, set to watch the tomb.

**Notes** Had Joseph not intervened, the body of Jesus would have been thrown out for the dogs and vultures. We do not know whether he openly opposed the condemnation of Jesus or merely absented himself from the Council. 23:53: see Isaiah 53:9.

## THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

### LUKE 24:1-12

The day of days had come at last. Of all the people in this paragraph, who are you most like?

LUKE CHOSE TO record the appearances of Christ associated with Jerusalem. There is no reason at all why he should not have been selective in his recording of events. It would have been held against him with equal cogency had he merely traversed ground covered by the other evangelists.

The alleged discrepancies in the narrative are likewise of little consequence. Luke, for example, mentions two men in the tomb. Mark mentions only one (Mark 16:5). Mark was writing in great haste, and appears, indeed, to have been unable to finish his account before violence or arrest interrupted him. He naturally mentions the spokesman of the two visitants. Such words in no way deny the fact of two appearances recorded by Luke. Two contains one, as the greater contains the less. For a detailed study see N. Geldenhuys' Commentary on Luke, pp. 626–628.

Luke's informants are again apparent. Joanna (Luke 8:3) probably gave him such details as those set down in this story, as she no doubt gave him those of 23:8-12. When Luke was combing Palestine for surviving witnesses of the resurrection, twenty years later, the apostles were abroad. The women were a more stable group. It is also to be remembered that Luke was a close friend and traveling companion of Paul who was in prison at Caesarea, but accessible to his associates. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-7 Paul penned what is

probably the first account of the resurrection, for the epistle antedates Mark. It is quite impossible to imagine that Luke did not know of the events which Paul enumerated. He was deliberately selective.

Observe also 24:12. As Mark omitted one angel, so Luke omits one apostle from his account. He had no doubt heard Peter describe the event: "I ran to the tomb, stooped and looked in. I saw the grave clothes ..." John naturally tells a fuller story (John 20:3-10).

**Notes** The alternative to sane and honest reporting by the Gospel writers is pious fraud; such a tainted source would have smoothed out the apparent differences. Note how the behavior of the disciples likewise militates against the theory that the story was fabricated. 24:8: contrast 22:61. 24:10: Mark 16:1 adds Salome to the list. 24:11: "idle tale"—a medical word for "delirious babbling."

ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

LUKE 24:13-24

The disciples' world fell apart when Jesus died. They had forgotten his words, and they had failed to realize it had to happen this way.

THIS EXQUISITELY TOLD story is peculiar to Luke. Two Christian men (they were not apostles) lived at Emmaus, perhaps the modern Kalonich, to the north-west of Jerusalem. They were walking home in animated discussion, with the light of the sloping sun in their eyes, when a stranger joined them. Here is a simple translation of the verses which follow, choosing a reading for the end of 24:17 found in the *Codex Sinaiticus* and one other ancient and important manuscript. "He said to them: 'What words are these that you are tossing back and forth as you walk along?' They stopped and looked sadly at him. And one of them named Cleopas replied: 'Do you live alone in Jerusalem, seeing you do not know what happened there in these last days?' He said to them: 'What sort of things?' They said to him: 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who spoke the words of God, a man of power in word and deed before God and all the people, and how the high priests and our rulers handed him over to be condemned to death, and crucified him. And we were hoping that it might have been he who was going to redeem Israel ...'"

The word for "redeem" is allied to that of 1:68. The whole reply rings with the hopelessness of the disciples after the crushing events of the week's ending. Set this broken spirit over against the triumph and the jubilation of the days which followed. Only some cataclysmic event could have so

transformed a shattered group of men. One and all must have been utterly convinced about the central fact of their faith. How pathetic before such certainty seems the speculation of the philosophic school of post-Christian theologians. “It does not matter,” wrote one of them in 1964, “whether the empty tomb created the faith of the disciples, or whether the faith of the disciples created the empty tomb.” The experience on the Emmaus road was no illusion. It was no group of deluded enthusiasts who were thus transformed. Of course it matters. If the tomb was not indeed vacated by a risen Christ, there is no Christian faith—and theologians who deny the fact might more appropriately seek less compromising employment.

Note the clear and specific report of events in 24:22-24. These were not gullible men. They admit only what their eyes have seen. Their animated discussion when the stranger joined them was probably about the interpretation of those observed facts.

JESUS REVEALS HIMSELF

## LUKE 24:25-35

What was the secret of the disciples' joy?

THE STORY MOVES naturally and convincingly to its climax. It has been widely rendered in art, especially that of the stained-glass window. And in such representation it is not the arid Judean landscape which finds a place, but the trees of Europe and America, "the oak, and the ash, and the weeping-willow tree." It is altogether appropriate. Christ still walks the road with those who are eager for his company. They are still dull and slow of heart to apprehend all his plans and purposes. He thrusts his presence on none, but is glad to be the guest of any home which opens doors of welcome to him. "Thoughtless men," he said. "Fools" is too strong a word. It must have been a lesson indeed to hear the risen Christ unravel the thread of his own foretelling from the Old Testament. Before turning from this vivid Gospel, an hour should be found with concordance and reference Bible to retrace some of the path of that late afternoon's instruction.

Realization burst upon them as he broke the bread. Perhaps it was only then that they saw the torn and ravaged hands. Perhaps a familiar gesture revealed him. Weariness forgotten, they hurried the seven miles back to Jerusalem to find the eleven. They, too, were agog with strange and thrilling news. The appearance to Peter, mentioned here and in 1 Corinthians 15:5, is nowhere detailed in the New Testament. Perhaps Mark would have told it, had he had time to finish his hastily concluded Gospel. Perhaps the words of

that interview were too painful or private, perhaps too personal, for common knowledge and publicity.

But note the artlessness of the whole narrative. It is told naturally and gracefully. Word and incident bear the marks of truth and the manner of the eyewitness. This is not fiction. Prose fiction, indeed, was hardly born and its rare examples in Mediterranean literature have none of the simple and delightful realism which mark this narrative. Nor could the walkers of the Emmaus road, and the group which they sought in Jerusalem, be easily deceived in such collective fashion.

**Notes** 24:26: they had failed to link the idea of the Suffering Servant with that of the Victorious Messiah. 24:27: see refs. in RSV margin. 24:34: see Mark 16:7.

## JESUS APPEARS TO THE DISCIPLES

### LUKE 24:36-45

Jesus had to eat something to prove to them that he was real and risen.

THERE CAN BE no doubt at all that the New Testament teaches that the Lord rose physically from the dead. The witnesses were clear that they were not in communication with a spirit. He ate food in their presence. 24:39 is part of their testimony.

The witnesses to this first appearance of Christ to the apostles themselves are Luke, John (John 20:19-23) and Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5). In Luke, as we observe, the narrative links with the Emmaus story. In John it is a distinct episode, and adds the important detail that the men were assembled behind closed doors, “for fear of the Jews.” John, of course, was there, and his account supports the authenticity of Luke. Only Luke speaks of the fish and the honeycomb, but John speaks of the Lord’s eating with them on the beach in a Galilean resurrection story told only by him.

The greatest care has been taken by the evangelists, as has been already noted, to establish the fact that the body in which Jesus appeared was a real body, no phantasm or manifestation of the spirit. It was the body of the cross and the tomb, still bearing the marks of suffering. On the other hand, it belonged to a different order of existence. It appeared and disappeared. Something about it baffled immediate recognition, though identity became evident when he so willed it. It is over seventy years since James Orr, in speaking of this phenomenon, hazarded the guess that “physicists are not so

sure of the impenetrability of matter as they once were.” Physics since then has demonstrated that matter is only apprehended by sight and touch in the form appropriate to those senses. Its overwhelming proportion of empty space, if that term itself makes sense, the fantastic motion of seemingly motionless material, all emphasize the fact that we see only that which we see, and that there is an order of existence beyond comprehension on such levels of evidence. This does not explain the resurrection appearances of the Lord, but does suggest the thought that there are other orders than those of common experience.

**Notes** 24:41: “disbelieved for joy”—a realistic observation; compare 22:45. 24:44: “still with you”—points to the difference between his pre-resurrection presence and his post-resurrection appearances. His abode now was elsewhere. “Moses ... the prophets ... the psalms”—the three great divisions of the Old Testament.

YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS

## LUKE 24:46-53

What were the disciples to do with this message? How would they be equipped?

LUKE CONCLUDES HIS Gospel with notable brevity, because he was already planning his second “treatise,” and intended to enlarge on some of the events of the forty days in that place. Hence his rapid treatment of the period of instruction (24:44-48), and of the Galilean appearances mentioned elsewhere. Forty days precede 24:50.

They came back to the city “with great joy,” says Luke. Let it be again emphasized that Luke had spoken with these men. Literary theories aimed at destroying the tradition of his authorship, and along with it the authenticity of his narrative, fall far short of their object. Luke was a competent historian, and sifted his evidence. Moreover, the life of peril and toil which necessarily followed his holding such convictions was not the life which one would choose apart from the drive and compulsion of a commanding faith.

Paul, too, was in the background. Luke knew him intimately. He must often have heard from Paul himself about the events which transformed the persecutor of the church into its greatest apostle. Paul, too, applied the powers of his keen analytical mind to the evidence for the empty tomb in the garden, and the simple explanation of that overwhelming fact.

The “great joy” of the group who came back from Bethany was also translated into historic fact. The church was born of it, and the church in the

first century, indeed in the generation after the ascension of its Founder, is a solid reality. Some tremendous conviction gave power and coherence to a feeble, scattered group. The earthly ministry of Jesus ended in apparent defeat. The powers of evil and dissolution seemed victorious. Look again at 24:21 and catch the atmosphere of broken hopelessness. Doubt was dispelled, despair quenched, fear cast out, defeat turned into a victory manifest in history. How? There can be only one explanation.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy, begat us again unto a living hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, which fadeth not away.”

INTRODUCTION  
JOHN  
ROBIN E. NIXON

THERE ARE MANY different theories about the origin and meaning of this Gospel, and the following summary will indicate only the standpoint adopted in this book. For other views commentaries or reference books should be consulted.

The Gospel was traditionally believed to have been written by John, the son of Zebedee, who is thought to have lived at Ephesus until about the end of the first century. Because John is nowhere mentioned by name (there is only a reference to the sons of Zebedee in 21:2), and because the Baptist is simply referred to as “John,” there seems little doubt that the evangelist intends the readers to suppose that “the beloved disciple” is the apostle John. It would seem likely, then, that John was the real author of the Gospel, even if he did not necessarily pen or dictate every word of it. While some scholars suggest that chapter 21 was added later as a sort of postscript, possibly after he died, others maintain that this chapter too is very substantially the work of John. In either event, even if the date of publication is late, the material in the Gospel, coming from an eyewitness, will have as much historical value as that in the Synoptic Gospels.

The purpose of the Gospel is similar to that of any Gospel. It is to present a selection of the deeds of Jesus in such a way that people will come to put their faith in him as the Son of God and find eternal life, and that those who have done so will be built up in the faith (20:31). It may have been written in

the first place for Greek-speaking Jews who lived outside Palestine, but its message has gone home to men of every race in every age.

The relationship of the Gospel to the Synoptic Gospels presents a large number of problems, few of which are dealt with here. Some scholars have held that John knew Mark and adapted that Gospel for his own purposes. Others have suggested that he is independent of Mark and that any resemblances go back to Peter and John who were eyewitnesses of the same events. Recent study has suggested that all the evangelists were interested in the facts and in their interpretation. While John makes the interpretation more obvious, he is not necessarily less interested in the facts. Archaeological discovery has done a certain amount to confirm that a number of things found only in John fit well into the background of the times. It is often difficult to know when John intends things to be taken symbolically, and imagination must not be allowed to run riot! But the discovery of a symbolic meaning for something does not automatically mean that it was not also a historical fact.

There are seven “signs” in the Gospel which present in dramatic form the challenge of the person and work of Christ. There are seven “I am” sayings which are evangelistic appeals. In the Gospel many people recognize Jesus partially, but only the confession of Thomas after the resurrection, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28), is adequate. One of the features of the Gospel is the divine irony. Men say and do all sorts of things with deeper significance than they realize. God’s own people put God’s own Son to death. (“The Jews,” who are mentioned frequently, seem to be the Judeans, the people who live in the Promised Land and have a vested interest in the old order of things.) The supreme paradox is the way in which the shameful death on the cross reveals the glory of the Father and the Son.

The Gospel may be divided as follows:

Chapter 1

The Prelude

Chapters 2–12

The Book of Signs

Chapters 13–19

The Book of the Passion

Chapters 20–21

The Resurrection and Epilogue

There are many useful commentaries on the Gospel. But no books about the Gospel can be a substitute for careful study for oneself of one of the greatest books of all time. For here in a unique way we meet the Word of Life.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

## JOHN 1:1-5

Even before the universe came into being, the Son enjoyed close, deep oneness with the Father.

THE PROLOGUE (1:1-18) gives us a preview of some of the great themes of the Gospel and sets the earthly ministry of Jesus in its heavenly perspective.

When did Jesus become the Son of God? The resurrection was the great event which confirmed his divine Sonship (Acts 2:36; Romans 1:4). But a voice had declared it before that at his transfiguration (Mark 9:7) and even earlier at his baptism (Mark 1:11). Matthew and Luke show that he was divine from his birth and his conception (Matthew 1:20-23; Luke 1:35; 2:10f.). Yet all these events were but stages in the revelation of an eternal truth. “In the beginning was the Word”—long before he took human flesh in the person of Jesus. Mark’s “beginning” (Mark 1:1) is the beginning of the saving ministry culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus. John’s “beginning” is the beginning of everything. If God *created* “in the beginning” (Genesis 1:1), the uncreated Son was “in the beginning.”

“The Word.” This would mean something to Greek readers for whom *logos* meant “reason.” For Jews “the Word” was the revelation of God’s character, expressed in increasingly personal terms in the Old Testament “The Word was with God,” ie in personal relationship with him. “God” has the definite article, marking this out as a reference to the first person of the Trinity. “The Word was God”—here there is no article since the Word is not

said to be the same person as God but to have the nature of God. The NEB paraphrases well: “What God was, the Word was.” This is the starting point for the evangelist, but in the Gospel story he shows how people failed to recognize the full deity of Jesus until Thomas’ confession of faith (20:28), which is in some ways the climax of the Gospel.

After reaffirming the pre-existence of the Word and his relationship to God (1:2), the evangelist goes on to describe his work in creation (cf. Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-4). Through him everything came into being—not just material things but life itself. So we meet two of the great themes of the Gospel—life and light. The light shines on (present tense). The darkness made an attempt to master it, but failed decisively (past tense). In that fact lies our salvation.

**Note** In 1:4 follow the RSV rather than the margin.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS CHRIST

JOHN 1:6-13

While all things were being made, the Son left his mark on everything,  
whether hills, sea or sky—or the human mind.

VERSES 6-8. THE first paragraph has seen the Word and his work in the divine perspective. Philosophers of various cultures and religions might have used similar terms, at least to some extent. In the second paragraph, we come to earth with a bump! For the great philosophical truths have been brought into focus in human history. The drama has been played out with human actors. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

The Gospel begins with John the Baptist as does Mark (Mark 1:1-11). Matthew and Luke give additional material about the birth of Jesus. But here, at least, is the essential starting point of the apostolic proclamation (the *kerygma*) (Acts 1:21f.). John is the forerunner (Mark 1:2f.) and the link between the old and the new covenants (Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16). In John, especially, he is the witness to the incarnation rather as the apostles were to the resurrection (cf. 1:15,32,34; 3:26; 5:33). He was sent from God with divine authority as a prophet. (Jesus, too, was sent from God—4:34; 5:37f., etc.—but unlike John he *was* God.) John was sent with the purpose of testimony which had as its purpose faith. He was the lamp (5:35) but not the light itself. No higher privilege could be given to any man.

1:9-13. The significance of Jesus Christ is world-wide. He was the genuine light in contrast to the many false lights that seemed to shine, and he

came to lighten every man. His sphere of activity had to be the world—made through him (1:3) and loved by him (3:16) but refusing to acknowledge him. So in the Gospel “the world” often comes to mean human society organized apart from God. The rejection by the world of its Maker is brought into sharper focus in the rejection by God’s people of their Messiah. His own home (theologically) is Judea (4:44; contrast Mark 6:4). His own people were the Jews, and again and again in the Gospel the emphasis is on their being Judeans, living in the Promised Land. But God’s purposes are not frustrated. The gospel goes to the whole world and all who receive him in faith are given legitimate authority to become members of God’s family. Their birth, like that of Jesus, is not natural but supernatural. Only those who have experienced it can understand. But there is a human element. The two verbs, “received” and “believed” (1:12) do not indicate two separate actions but, rather, two aspects of the total response to the Savior.

**Note** 1:9: “coming into the world” is rightly taken by the RSV to refer to Jesus rather than to “every man.”

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

JOHN 1:14-18

Moses and the Law show us our need of God. Jesus offers us grace—undeserved and unlimited blessings—forgiveness and new life.

WHATEVER THE GREEK philosophers might have said about the cosmic operations of the *logos*, they could never have said that it “became flesh.” This is the startling assertion of John. The eternal Word became flesh—became man in all his weakness, sharing our nature, living and visible in our midst. It was not God taking over a human being, nor the Word ceasing to be God in order to become man. Somehow, in the most profound mystery of all time, he remained God and yet became man. One who was with God (1:1), dwelt among us as in a tent, for his permanent residence was not here (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1). He was no ordinary man, for he was full of grace (which shows the generosity of the action of God) and truth (which shows the reality of it). These had been demonstrated partially in the Old Testament, now they are displayed perfectly. Christ fulfills the redemption and the revelation of God. His glory is the outshining of the divine nature. This had been seen in the divine presence in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34), and in the temple (1 Kings 8:11). Such men as Moses (Exodus 33:22) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:3) had caught glimpses of it. But its fullness was reserved for the future (Isaiah 60:1) and here it is shown in the divine presence incarnate among men. This he brings as the unique Son of God (cf. 3:18; 5:16,18).

The evidence of John is re-emphasized in order to show that though Christ “came” after him as far as his birth and his ministry were concerned, he “was” before him (1:1). The fullness of grace was for all to receive as they received him (1:12). Grace was unlimited. The contrast with Law is more a feature of Paul than of John, but he is concerned to show the superiority of the new to the old even though that too was given by God. No one ever yet saw God, not even Moses (Exodus 33:20). We live in a privileged position (Matthew 13:16f.). Jesus has explained him by who he was and what he did. One day we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

**Note** 1:14: the consonants of the Greek word for “dwelt” are the same as for the Hebrew *shekinah*—the divine presence among the people. The divine glory was no longer in tabernacle or temple (cf. 2:21) but in Jesus. “We have beheld” may mean the apostolic church as a whole, but suggests eyewitnesses. His glory was seen especially in his signs (2:11; 11:4,40). There is no account of the transfiguration in John.

**A challenge** Do we live like “children of God” (1:12)? If we, like the disciples, “have beheld his glory” (1:14) do we reflect it? The secret is not in ourselves but in the fullness of his boundless grace (1:16)

## JESUS THE LAMB OF GOD

### JOHN 1:19-34

What can we learn from John the Baptist's attitude to Jesus?

ONE OF THE most important themes of the Gospel is that of the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. Here is the evidence of John, whose ministry had the essential purpose of giving testimony to him (cf. 1:7,8,15). He was the last of the prophets, but while they had spoken in general terms of the Messiah, it was John who was actually to identify him. He is the first to give evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, in order to induce that faith which is the object of the Gospel (20:31).

John's evidence is in the first place negative (1:19-21). His ministry and unusual appearance and habits had aroused curiosity. What did it all mean? Who was he? he explains in shorter and shorter sentences that he is neither Messiah, nor Elijah reincarnate, nor the prophet promised by Moses and said to be like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). In answer to repeated questioning he claimed the rôle of forerunner (1:22f.) as shown in Isaiah 40. The emphasis was not on his person but on his message. He insists on directing attention away from himself (cf. 3:30).

The supplementary question inevitably followed. Why then was he baptizing? For a ministry of baptism was generally thought to be the preparation for the messianic age (1:24f.). He replies that his baptism is only an outward symbol and his own dignity is nothing compared with the coming One (1:26f.).

The Gospel does not mention the baptism of Jesus, and the evangelist may assume that it is well known to his readers (cf. also the omission of the transfiguration and the institution of the Holy Communion). He does, however, record John's allusion to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus to commission him for his work, and his description of his own baptism as a foreshadowing of the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1:29-34). The title which he applies to Jesus, "the Lamb of God," is of considerable importance and may combine ideas of the lamb of the sin offering, the Passover lamb (cf. 19:36) and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. He deals not just with individual *sins*, but with the *sin* of the whole world. Such was the price of our rebellion against God! John's solemn declaration (1:29), probably coming immediately after Christ's temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), would underscore vividly his renunciation of any short cut to success. Christ's ministry *began* under the shadow of the cross. The *promise* contained in John's statement must not, however, be eclipsed by this note of foreboding. The cross, finally, was a place of triumph.

**Note** 1:21: in the Synoptic Gospels, John is said to be Elijah, but this was presumably in a typological sense (Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13; Luke 1:17). Jesus fulfilled the rôle of the prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22).

## JESUS' FIRST DISCIPLES

### JOHN 1:35-51

Notice how naturally new disciples bring their family and friends to Jesus!

THE EVIDENCE WHICH John the Baptist gave, that Jesus was the Son of God and the Lamb of God, led to two of his own disciples leaving him and following Jesus. This was a literal following which was also to become a spiritual following in due course (cf. 8:12; 12:26; 21:19,22). But it was not to be simply on second-hand evidence. Jesus invites them to come and see for themselves, and to stay with him. (For a spiritual *coming* to Jesus, cf. 3:21; 6:35, etc.; for a spiritual *seeing*, cf. 14:9; for a spiritual *staying* or *abiding*, cf. 15:4-10.) Notice that John was concerned not to attach disciples to *himself* (unlike the leaders of many modern cults) but to Jesus. He could even rejoice in their transferred allegiance (3:29f.); an indication of his spiritual greatness.

Christ-centered testimony is infectious. Each “carrier” has a vital part to play. Andrew’s first thought is to share his new experience with his brother. Finding him was, as William Temple said, “perhaps as great a service to the Church as ever any man did.” Simon (perhaps the name has overtones of hearing and obeying) will become Cephas (Peter, the rock man). Little could either of them see what Jesus would make of him!

Andrew had found Simon for Jesus, now Jesus himself finds Philip, and Philip in turn finds Nathanael—the Israelite without any touch of the guileful Jacob (Genesis 32:28). To every misconception about his true origin (that his

true home is Nazareth or that his real father is Joseph), there is the answer of experience—“Come and see.”

The titles ascribed to Jesus in this passage are probably, as Temple puts it, “rather an outburst of exalted hope than a rooted conviction of faith.” But “Rabbi” (1:38), “Messiah” (1:41), “Him of whom Moses ... and the prophets wrote” (1:45), “Son of God ... King of Israel” (1:49) are all inadequate because they are limited by the preconceptions of the time. Jesus prefers the cryptic title “Son of Man” (1:51). Only after he rose from the dead did true Christian faith come. Only then could Jesus be seen as Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:10-17), as the house of God (cf. 2:19-22) and the gate of heaven (cf. 10:7,9; 14:6).

**Notes** 1:35: “The next day”—suggests different days in a momentous week. 1:40: “one of the two.” The most natural assumption is that the other was John. 1:41: “first”—there are three possible meanings here: (a) that Andrew sought out Peter the very first thing on the next morning; (b) that having found Peter he then found someone else for Christ, possibly Philip (cf. 1:44); (c) that while Andrew was the first to find *his* brother, John the evangelist, probably the second of the two questioners, also found *his* brother, James. All three alternatives have something to say to us! 1:47: Nathanael is probably the same as Bartholomew (Mark 3:18). Being under the fig tree implies studying the Law. It seems likely that the preliminary meetings with the apostles recorded here were the reason for their immediate response to Jesus’ call in Mark 1:16-20. So today there may be meetings with Christ before committed discipleship.

## JESUS AT THE WEDDING IN CANA

### JOHN 2:1-12

Christ often wants us simply to obey.

JESUS, HAVING ACQUIRED some disciples, is now invited with them to a wedding. Cana is probably the modern Khirbet Qana, eight or nine miles north of Nazareth. And the presence of Jesus' mother there suggests that some friend or relative of his family was being married. The wedding celebrations might last several days and it seems as if Jesus and his disciples did not arrive until near the end. It may be that the presence of a number of extra guests put a strain on the resources and the wine ran out. Jesus' mother (she is never named in the Gospel, cf. 6:42; 19:25-27) mentions the need to him as a simple statement of fact. The seeming rebuff was not one of disrespect—but, nevertheless, a clear indication that he would not be “pressured into action.” His power was not to be controlled merely by a mother-son relationship.

The six stone jars were used to provide water for the washing of hands and of vessels. Jesus' command to fill them is put into effect completely. Then there occurs what is undoubtedly described as a miracle and no attempt at “rationalizing” looks convincing. God, who is always turning water into wine, now does so in a “speeded-up” way (cf. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*). It is not clear whether all the water in the pots was turned into wine or only what was drawn out.

The miracles in John are described as *signs*—that is, they have a deeper significance than just the action itself. Here the old flat water of Judaism is turned into the sparkling new wine of the gospel. This has been kept “until now.” Christ comes as the heavenly bridegroom (3:29; cf. Mark 2:19-22), who by his presence enriches the social occasions of life and points us forward to the marriage feast of the kingdom (Matthew 22:1-14). His glory is revealed at other times in the Gospel (11:4,40) and the purpose was to bring those to faith in him who had eyes to see. The majority were ignorant about what had happened, the servants knew and expressed wonder, but the disciples saw and believed. How often we fail to have the eye of faith!

**Note** 2:4: “O woman, what have you to do with me?” seems harsher in English than in Greek. Perhaps it is best to render “Mother,” with the NEB. Jesus emphasizes his independence from human influence in carrying out the will of his Father at his hour (cf. 17:1). We too may pray but never force his hand.

**For meditation** This incident suggests that mundane, domestic problems such as the dislocation of a wedding feast and the embarrassment of the host are not outside the range of interest of the Lord of Glory. Does this encourage you to share all your problems with him?

## JESUS CLEARS THE TEMPLE

### JOHN 2:13-25

How can we show something of Jesus' zeal for God and against injustice?

JESUS NOW GOES up to Jerusalem, where John shows that he presents the challenge of his person and work to the Jewish leaders. He has just demonstrated, by his sign at Cana, the superiority of the new religion over the old. Here he makes a symbolic purification of Jewish worship as an indication of the coming of the Messianic age. The Lord of the temple comes suddenly into his temple (Malachi 3:1-3). He finds at the very heart of Judaism, in the very place which the Lord had chosen to make his name dwell, commercial exploitation and corruption. This allowed for a kind of "instant religion" where everything was on hand—convenient for the "worshiper," no doubt, but governed mainly by the profit motive. True religion withers in such an atmosphere, as many, visiting so-called "shrines," have discovered.

The prophecy of Zechariah 14, which had spoken of the Lord's reign over all the earth and the pilgrimage of all nations to Jerusalem to worship him, ended with the words: "And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day" (Zechariah 14:21). The zeal of Jesus for God's house and honor was such that he was prepared to use strong methods to drive out those who were profiteering from the need of the people to have

animals and birds for sacrifice. There are times when Christians too may be called to forceful action.

The Jews demand a sign to authenticate his action and he gives them an answer which they misunderstand (cf. Mark 14:58). The temple, as the symbol of God's presence with his people, was theologically redundant, as the Word had become flesh and was tabernacling among men (John 1:14). It was doomed to destruction in due course, paradoxically through their possessive attitude to it (John 11:48; cf. Luke 13:35, "*your* house"). But the new temple of Christ's body had to go through death to resurrection before it could be a spiritual temple and body of believers (1 Corinthians 3:16; 12:27). As always there was a mixed response to him and some very superficial "belief." At that stage Jesus was not ready to trust himself to them as he now so graciously trusts himself to us.

**Note** The chronology of the cleansing of the temple creates a problem as the Synoptic Gospels place it just before the Passion. The evangelists were not bound to write in a strict chronological order, and it may be that John has put it here as a "programmatic" incident symbolizing the nature of Christ's mission, or that the others have put it for conciseness in the one visit to Jerusalem which they record. But there are sufficient differences of detail to allow the possibility of two separate cleansings.

## JESUS AND NICODEMUS

### JOHN 3:1-8

Have you been born again?

IF THE MESSIAH brings a new beginning for the nation and its religion, he also brings one for the individual and his religion. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. He was probably both theologian and diplomat. He comes by night in anonymity. His questions show an inability to understand the spiritual significance of the gospel. Eventually he is “faded out” of the scene and Jesus is left talking to a baffled Judaism and to puzzled and uncommitted religious men as a whole.

Nicodemus’ approach is cautious. He not only comes by night, so as not to commit himself (cf. Joseph of Arimathaea in 19:38f.), but his opening gambit is also non-committal. He recognizes in a general way (“we know”) Jesus as a rabbi, doing signs and sent by God in some sense. When “Jesus answered him” (3:3) it was his thoughts rather than his words. He calls directly for a radical response—a completely new start. Without a new birth a man cannot even see the kingdom of God—cannot begin to understand what it is all about. Nicodemus probably takes Jesus literally, as others do mistakenly (cf. 6:42,52; 8:33). But perhaps he does see that it is figurative and protests that a new spiritual start is impossible.

If understanding the kingdom is impossible without new birth, how much more is the commitment of entering it! Men must be born with water, and the reference in the first instance is perhaps to the baptism of John as an external

rite signifying repentance (cf. 1:26,31-34). From there the extension may be made to Christian baptism, which in its turn must be linked with the internal experience of new life in the Spirit. Two worlds are shown to us in the Gospel—flesh and spirit, the earthly and the heavenly (cf. 8:23). Even a man's religion may be on the level of "flesh"—human effort. It is not surprising that spiritual life needs spiritual birth. The Spirit is like the wind—free, powerful, unseen, unpredictable—but its results may be observed. The power of the Spirit goes far beyond the physical realm to every sphere of life. He both illuminates and empowers the believer. There is no area of our lives where this influence cannot be effective. Let us never seek to limit his power.

**Notes** 3:3: "born anew," cf. RSV margin "from above." The Greek word can mean either, and both may be in mind. "Kingdom of God" means his reign rather than his realm. 3:8: both Hebrew *ruah* and Greek *pneuma* mean wind or breath as well as spirit.

**Prayer** "Breathe on me, Breath of God."

HOW CAN THIS BE?

## JOHN 3:9-15

New birth is God's work in us, though the way to it is by putting our trust in the One who died for us.

THE NEW ANALOGY of the wind and the Spirit which Jesus introduces baffles Nicodemus further. "How can this be?" he asks, not so much, it seems, wanting to know how to take the step of faith himself, as unable to comprehend what it is all about. Jesus expresses surprise that someone appointed as a theological teacher of God's chosen people should be so out of his depth. The idea of birth by water and the Spirit was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, especially in such a passage as Ezekiel 36:25-28.

Jesus speaks not only from Scripture, but also from experience. On the basis of both he gives his testimony. But Nicodemus and those like him did not receive it. An earthly analogy was meant to clarify the heavenly reality. It would be impossible to speak directly of unseen heavenly things to those who cannot understand what they see. In fact there is only one interpreter of heavenly things: the Son of Man. His origin is heavenly, he has a foot in both camps, he bridges the gap between heaven and earth in his own person (cf. 1:51; 1 Corinthians 15:47). Man could never ascend to meet God. God had to descend to meet man.

Not only was the incarnation necessary to reveal the life of heaven to men, the atonement was also. The bronze serpent on the standard was a symbol of healing (Numbers 21:4-9). The Son of Man was likewise to be

lifted up (in a double sense—cf. Genesis 40:12f.,18-22; see also 8:28; 12:34; 18:32). As the One lifted up was not a bronze serpent but the living and dying Son of Man, so the benefits were far greater. Here was no temporary cure but eternal life as the result of faith.

**Notes** 3:11: “We speak of what we know.” This may refer to Jesus’ disciples, and John the Baptist possibly, as well as to Jesus himself. No words of a Christian are worth listening to unless they spring from inner conviction. 3:13: “who is in heaven.” NEB: “whose home is in heaven.” Some manuscripts omit this. Jesus did not cease to be God when he became man.

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

## JOHN 3:16-21

If you are not certain that you are “born again” and have the “light of life,” read verse 16 again and put your own name in that verse.

HERE IS AN important paragraph which summarizes some of the main themes of the Gospel. It shows the purpose and effect of the mission of the Son and the reason why it did not meet with a full response.

3:16 has been described as “the gospel in a nutshell.” It tells us that the love of God was the motive force behind the incarnation and passion of Christ. It was a love great enough to embrace the whole world—a world which was made through the Son but which did not recognize him (John 1:10) and even hated him (John 7:7). It was love shown not just in sentiment but in giving. God’s gift was the greatest that could ever be made—his only Son (cf. Genesis 22:2,16). It was a love which required a response of faith, a commitment, in return. The relationship resulting from this could be described as eternal life, the life of the age to come experienced in the present.

Light inevitably casts shadows. Though the purpose of the Son’s mission was salvation (rescue and health), the effect of it was often judgment. (He can even say that in one sense its purpose was judgment—9:39.) This was not something arbitrarily imposed but it resulted naturally from a refusal to be exposed and to face realities. It is something which, like the offer of eternal life, is taking place already. It is even now showing up what is genuine and

what is shoddy and mean. Light and the process of discrimination are inseparable. How terrible it is that for some the offer of life should almost become the means of death!

Superficially, the act of belief appears a very small factor to determine the difference between salvation and destruction, but in reality this is not so. Belief is indicative of a fundamental change of life. It involves the open acknowledgment of sin, whereas, as Christ observes, a man's corrupted nature impels him to avoid the light of exposure (3:19ff.). It also involves a sense of need, an awareness of a personal insufficiency and the appropriation of God's provision. All this includes the acceptance of his estimate and standards. So conversion should mark the beginning of a walk in the light—a concept which John develops in his first epistle.

**Note** It is not certain whether 3:16-21 are a continuation of the words of Jesus (RSV margin, NEB) or a comment by the evangelist (RSV). As punctuation marks were not used in the New Testament manuscripts, it is a matter of individual interpretation according to the context. A similar problem is found concerning 3:31-36.

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S TESTIMONY

JOHN 3:22-36

How would our attitude have to change if we followed the example of  
John the Baptist?

VERSES 22-24. THE ebb and flow of the ministry of Christ can be seen in the movement between Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee. Jesus has made his first challenge to Jerusalem and his claims have been misinterpreted. Now he goes into Judea (3:22) before returning to Galilee (4:3). In the Jordan Valley he began a ministry of baptism parallel to that of John. This was not performed by Jesus himself but by his disciples (4:2), but it was done with his authority.

3:25-26. The ministry of Jesus was inevitably controversial, and there were occasions where controversy occurred amongst those who should have been his supporters. The Jew involved here (3:25) is unknown (some manuscripts read "Jews" and it has even been suggested that there could have been a scribal slip in copying an abbreviation for "Jesus"). The issue, so common amongst religious people, was one of pastoral jealousy. It seemed to John's disciples that he had precedence over Jesus, whose growing popularity they probably resented (cf. 12:19 and the attitude of the Pharisees).

3:27-30. John shows great wisdom in understanding his rôle as "best man." his precedence was one of service and preparation (John 1:30f.). He never claimed to be the Christ (John 1:20). His privilege was to make arrangements for the uniting of the Messiah with his bride Israel. Far from

causing jealousy, the God-given success of Jesus was a source of joy to him; there is no other success that matters in Christian work today.

3:31-36. These verses may be a comment by the evangelist (see previous day's note). John's ministry is essentially on a human and earthly level. Jesus has a heavenly origin and his testimony is about heavenly things (cf. 3:11f.). Sent and loved by God, he speaks the truth of God and imparts the Spirit of God. The response which men make to him is decisive for life or for wrath (God's implacable hostility to sin). God's revelation of himself in Christ cannot be trifled with. Our duty, as believers, must always be the humble, self-effacing part of witnesses to Christ. But 3:34 has its application to us also, we have superhuman reinforcement for a superhuman task!

**Notes** 3:23: "Aenon near Salim"—"Aenon" means "Fountains" and was chosen because of the water there. "Salim," meaning "Peace," may have had symbolic significance. 3:24: John does not record the Baptist's imprisonment and this allusion suggests that he expects his readers to know something of the subsequent story. 3:31: "from above." The Gospel uses the picture of "up there" to show the "transcendence" (otherness) of God and Christ. It also shows the One in whom is life (John 1:4) to be "immanent" ("the ground of our being").

**A challenge** Does John's magnificent affirmation truly reflect your own attitude?

JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

JOHN 4:1-15

Jesus continues with us until we are prepared to stop running away  
and meet him face to face.

JESUS WAS ANXIOUS not to provoke a major clash with the Pharisees until “his hour had come.” He therefore left Judea to which he had made his challenge (almost “left it to its fate”) and went back to Galilee. Geographical necessity took him through Samaria, for this was the shortest route home, though Galilean pilgrims often took a long way round to avoid it. But, as so often in the life of Jesus, the action of divine providence could be seen also, for it gave him the opportunity to present to the sectarian Samaritans the true way to worship God. In his own human weariness and thirst he was able to offer them true satisfaction of all their needs.

The story illustrates, vividly and at some length, the way in which Jesus dealt with individuals (cf. also 9:1-41; 11:1-44). It has often been used as a pattern for personal evangelism. (For a fine exposition see Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, ad loc.). Jesus meets a Samaritan woman on the level of felt and shared human need. He begins by asking her a favor, which caused considerable surprise. There was a barrier of race and of sex which would normally have prevented anything but a superior and scornful attitude by a Jewish rabbi to a Samaritan woman who may have been an outcast in her own community. The manner of our approach to others reveals how much we care for them as people.

The surprising thing did not, however, lie in this encounter but in the fact of his identity and the spiritual offer which he was making. But talk of living water is understood by her on the level (cf. 6:52; see also Jeremiah 2:13; Zechariah 14:8; Ezekiel 47:9). How can a tired stranger be greater than Jacob the ancestor of the race (cf. Abraham in 8:53)?

Jesus had to open up a completely new dimension. The rabbis sometimes used “water” as a figure of the Law, sometimes of the Spirit. Jesus speaks of the water of eternal life which satisfies people at the deepest spiritual level (6:35; 7:37f.).

**Notes** 4:5: “Sychar”—probably modern Ashar near Mount Ebal. “Jacob’s well” may still be seen. 4:9: probably read with NEB: “Jews and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common.”

### **Testimony**

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
“Behold I freely give  
The living water—thirsty one,  
Stoop down, and drink, and live.”  
I came to Jesus, and I drank  
Of that life-giving stream;  
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,  
And now I live in him.

**Prayer** “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst.”

THE TRUTH BECOMES PERSONAL

## JOHN 4:16-26

It is only when we have given in to Jesus Christ that we begin to know he can satisfy our deepest longings.

BEFORE THE WOMAN can receive the living water, Jesus tells her to call her husband. The gift of God is personal but not private—it has to be shared. She had probably not come to draw water just for herself—the water of life was to be for others too. The partner in marriage is the first with whom it needs to be shared.

The mention of her husband brings a denial that she has one, and Jesus shows (presumably by supernatural insight) that he knows all about her marital and extra-marital relationships. Her sin had to be acknowledged before she could experience the new life of God. There is no faith without repentance.

The woman's reaction is natural. Someone with such insight is a prophet. He can therefore solve the great denominational dispute. Is Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion the right place to worship? So often will people try to deflect the personal moral challenge of the gospel to a question of general interest.

Jesus shows that Gerizim and Zion are temporary local symbols. When God's hour comes worship will be universal and its location irrelevant. That, however, is not to say that all religions are the same. Samaritan worship in many points was in ignorance, Jewish was with knowledge. God's saving actions had been among Jews, and the Jewish people, as a cradle for the

Messiah, were the means of salvation for the world. Yet even Judaism pales before the worship opened up now.

God's nature is spiritual not local. He is the living God and seeks living worship. Men's worship must therefore be not in Jewish letter but in spirit (that aspect of man which answers to God and is made alive by the Holy Spirit), and not in Samaritan falsehood but in truth (in sincerity which depends on the reality of God's revelation in Christ). As she does not understand, the woman pushes off the challenge until later, when the Messiah comes. Back comes the startling reply: "I am He." The enjoyment of his presence is still the key to worship.

**Note 4:18:** "five husbands" may refer to the five peoples with their heathen "baals" ("baal" meant "husband") who were the ancestors of the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24-33). If this were so, it would explain why the woman raised the question of the right place to worship.

## THE DISCIPLES RETURN TO JESUS

### JOHN 4:27-38

What lessons does Jesus draw for Christian work and evangelism from this picture of the harvest?

THE PRIVATE PERSONAL CONVERSATION which Jesus has with the woman has to come to an end with the arrival of the disciples. They are still at the stage of being surprised at his attitude to women, but have become aware that they are in no position to question his actions. The woman left her waterpot and went off to spread the news of her meeting with someone so remarkable that he might even be the Messiah.

If the woman has made a possible discovery after misunderstanding, the disciples continue to misunderstand. They are rightly concerned about Jesus' physical welfare, but cannot appreciate his spiritual metaphor. He was sustained by doing his Father's will (5:30; 6:38) and completing his work (5:36; 17:4; 19:28-30). Others too were to be sustained (and still are) by his obedience to the uttermost (6:51).

In the natural world there may have been four months between the end of sowing and the beginning of harvest. In the spiritual world sowing and reaping may seem almost simultaneous. The work of the gospel is teamwork, and there are always different parts for different people to play in its furtherance (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6). As far as the presentation of the gospel to the Samaritans was concerned, John the Baptist and his disciples had done their part, Jesus and his disciples were now doing theirs, and in due course

Philip and others were to do theirs (Acts 8:5-25). Each group and individual is helping in the mission of the Son and of the Spirit. No comparison should be made between the importance of the spiritual work of one group and that of another.

**Notes** 4:28: she left her jar probably because she was in a hurry to tell her friends and come back. It was not necessarily because her mind was totally absorbed with what she had heard. 4:35: although this could have been a proverbial saying there is no precise evidence that it was. It might simply be that the scene was set four months before harvest. The fields were “white” probably with the head-dresses of the Samaritans.

**For meditation** One simple, factual testimony led many to “come and see” (4:29f.). Does your testimony provoke such a response?

MANY SAMARITANS BELIEVE

## JOHN 4:39-45

Can we echo the words of the Samaritans?

THERE IS NO stopping the testimony to Christ. Despite the unbelief of the Jews (John 1:11), knowing all that they did of God (4:22), we see the Samaritans believing in Jesus. This was not yet a full Christian faith. In the first instance it was based upon what the woman had said about a man who had some sort of supernatural knowledge of her life. Nevertheless this was testimony—part of the unfolding of the whole testimony to Christ in the gospel. The testimony of God (John 5:37), or of Christ himself (John 3:32), or of his deeds (John 5:36), or of some other person (John 1:7) is one of the bases of faith in the gospel.

The Samaritans gave Jesus an invitation to stay with them. There is no hint that a stay in Samaria was in Christ's original plan, but he was sufficiently flexible to meet an obvious need (4:40). Are we adaptable enough to make the most of *our* time and opportunities (Colossians 4:5)? So the Samaritans moved on from acceptance of testimony at second-hand to experience of Jesus at first-hand. It was the word of Jesus which they heard for themselves which brought life (cf. 4:53; 5:24). The Jews, from whom was salvation (4:22), were preceded by the Samaritans in the confession of the Messiah as Savior of the world. There is no order of ecclesiastical precedence in spiritual enlightenment. *Prejudice* could have viewed Jesus as a Jewish, nationalistic prophet—*personal experience* proved that he was the Christ.

Samaria is a stop on the road to Galilee (4:3) and Jesus continues his journey. Here too he will have more honor than in Jerusalem. In fact, the Galileans welcomed him because they had seen for themselves at first-hand his signs in Jerusalem (2:23). Here is the irony of faith and unbelief—the Samaritans believed without a sign, the Galileans with a sign, and the Judeans (his own people) not at all despite a sign.

**Notes** “Because of the woman’s testimony” (4:39); “because of his word” (4:41); “because of your words” (4:42). The same Greek preposition is used to denote the means through which faith comes (cf. 1:7; 17:20). It should be our privilege today to be those “because of” whom others believe, even if we do not always know it. 4:44: in John, if Galilee is where Jesus lives, Judea is theologically his own country (cf. Mark 6:4). It is to Jerusalem that the challenge is repeatedly made and it is the Jews (seen usually as the Judeans) who as a whole do not believe.

## JESUS HEALS THE OFFICIAL'S SON

### JOHN 4:46-54

This second miraculous sign shows that people are a priority for Jesus.

JESUS RETURNED NOT only to Galilee but more especially to Cana, the scene of his first sign. The general pattern of his movement is repeated: departure to Galilee (John 1:43; 4:43), arrival at Cana (John 2:1; 4:46), going up to Jerusalem for a festival (John 2:13; 5:1). Here at Cana he performs another sign. This shows his power, even at a distance, to heal and rescue from the gates of death.

The official was probably an officer at the court of Herod Antipas. It is not clear whether he was a Jew or a Gentile. He must have known of Jesus' reputation as a miracle-worker, so he left his sick son at Capernaum and came to ask for Jesus' help in his desperate plight. Jesus' reply seemed off-putting (cf. 2:4). He addresses not only the official but others like him ("you" in 4:48 is plural), deploring their dependence upon spectacular miracles before they believe. But the man's urgent need shows that there is faith of a kind in the power of Christ to help. It is an appeal from the heart which does not go unheeded. Jesus confidently assures him that his son will live.

The man took the first step to faith by believing Jesus' word and acting on it. Confirmation of his faith was provided by his servants with their news of the boy's recovery. Natural curiosity compelled him to seek the extent of the connection with the word of Jesus. The discovery that the healing was instantaneous and simultaneous with it brought him and his household to a

committed faith in Jesus. For it is his word which brings life from the gates of death (5:24). So, in the second sign (4:54) as in the first (2:11), individual faith and obedience were matched by Christ's response, and led to belief in a limited sphere. Is there a principle of abiding relevance here?

**Notes** Many commentators have suggested that this is a different version of the story of the healing of the centurion's servant found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). There seem, however, to be sufficient differences in detail between the two to make it more likely that this was another, though similar, event. The vivid phrase "Your son lives" comes three times (4:50-51,53; cf. 1 Kings 17:23). It is better taken as present (with KJV and Phillips) than as future. Some have seen the descriptions of "an official" (4:46), "the man" (4:50) and "the father" (4:53) as indicating a progressive revelation of his real self and situation as he drew nearer to Christ. In our spiritual dealings with people we should likewise find them becoming increasingly real to us.

THE HEALING AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA

JOHN 5:1-9

What makes us unwilling to be helped by Jesus?

THE WORD WHICH has recently given life in Galilee now gives healing in Jerusalem. There the emphasis had been on the rescue from the jaws of death, here there is the return of lost powers. Once again water plays a prominent part. At Cana water was turned into wine (2:1-11), at Sychar water was unable to satisfy true human thirst (4:13f.), and now at Jerusalem water cannot make a man's paralysed limbs function again. As "water" was one of the terms used by the rabbis to describe the Law, there is probably an implied contrast between the impotence of the Law and the life-giving power of the word of Christ.

The Pool of Bethesda was a shrine for sick people who wished to be healed and, presumably having despaired of a cure by other means, came in the superstitious hope that they might be able to benefit from the mysterious powers of the pool. Some manuscripts include 5:3b-4 which state that an angel of the Lord went into the pool and troubled the water and the first person in after that was cured. This is no doubt simply a deduction from the authentic text and describes what was believed to happen. Jesus comes to this scene of helplessness and superstition and as always his eye picks out an individual in special need of help. He altogether removes the idea of healing from the realm of chance and puts it in the realm of will. The man proves his real desire to be healed by his obedience to Jesus' startling three-fold

command to rise, take up his bed and walk (cf. Mark 2:11). But there is one snag, forgotten no doubt by the man in his joy. It is the Sabbath.

**Notes** 5:1: it is uncertain which festival is referred to but it was not a major one. 5:2: manuscripts differ as to the name of the pool. It may be Bethzatha, Bethesda or Bethsaida. The pool seems to have been discovered just north of the temple. “Five porticoes”—some see this as symbolic of the Law with its five books. 5:5: some have seen symbolism in the thirty-eight years, for this was the time of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 2:14). The primary reason for its mention is to show that he had been ill a long time.

## HEALING ON THE SABBATH

### JOHN 5:10-18

While the Jewish leaders were getting angry with the man, Jesus went out of his way to increase his understanding.

JOHN TRACES JEWISH reaction to the person and ministry of Christ as it was unfolded in his actions and words. The true Light had come into the world (John 1:9), and men whose habitat was darkness rather than light (John 3:19) were disturbed; eventually they were to attempt to extinguish the Light.

If Jesus has really come to give new life in a way that the old order could not, then he is bound to clash with the guardians of the old order concerning their religious institutions. He has tried to show them the true significance of the temple (2:13-22), now he has to reveal to them the true meaning of the Sabbath. In one sense there was no urgency about this miracle, one extra day could hardly have made much difference, and it may be that its performance on the Sabbath (cf. Matthew 12:9-15; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6) was a direct challenge to the Jews. The Sabbath, intended for man's benefit and enjoyment, had been so hedged about with petty restrictions, many enforceable by death, that man was shackled in legalistic bondage. But the question of the Sabbath could not be solved without going back to the more fundamental point—the origin and authority of Jesus himself.

The healed cripple is the first object of their attack. To carry his bed on the Sabbath was against the Law (Jeremiah 17:21). He has the feeling that the man who gave him healing has also authority in other matters, and defends

himself by referring to Jesus' command. Naturally enough they wish to know who it is who gives such illegal orders. But Jesus had not been ready to reveal himself and had slipped away, so that, like countless others, the man was ignorant that Christ was the source of the blessing which had come to him.

Jesus does not wish to leave him in ignorance, and after finding him gives him a solemn warning. The spiritual lesson must reinforce the physical healing. There is a far worse fate for persistent sinners than even the pathetic condition of paralysis. What the man made of this we do not know, but he dutifully gave the authorities the information for which they had asked. This attitude to the Sabbath became a main cause of the persistent hostility of the Jews towards Jesus. Yet he takes the matter further—God his Father does not stop working on the Sabbath, nor does he. Such apparent blasphemy turns Jewish hostility into a desire to kill him.

**Notes** 5:14: this does not imply that the man's illness was directly the result of his own sin (cf. 9:3). It does mean that spiritual warnings are to be taken from physical evils (cf. Luke 13:1-5). Too easily we fail to see and heed them. 5:17: God's Sabbath rest (Genesis 2:2) did not mean that the Creator of the world was inactive. He was seeking to give life on the Sabbath; they were seeking to kill. There was no doubt which was God's work (cf. Mark 3:1-6).

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON

JOHN 5:19-29

It is because Jesus has divine authority that we do well to honor him as God and to trust and obey his word.

THE REAL ISSUES have now been revealed. They concern the relationship of Jesus to the Father and his consequent right to exercise the divine prerogatives of giving life and judging. This is a struggle which cannot reach the point of decision until life comes through his death (John 12:23-26) and until judgment comes upon the unbelieving world and its ruler through the sentence passed upon him (John 12:27-33).

5:19-24. Jesus speaks of his authority in the first instance as far as his incarnate nature is concerned. In this it is derivative, and in a sense imitative. But it comes from the close relationship of love which exists between Father and Son. There is in a way little to marvel about in the healing of a cripple. They could begin to marvel when they saw the Son raising the dead and giving them life, for that was the work of God alone (cf. 2 Kings 5:7). God the Father who is judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 94:2) in fact delegates his judicial office to the Son. With these prerogatives there logically follows a title to divine honor, a denial of which shows failure to honor the Father. To hear the Son's word and to believe the Father gives life on an eternal plane, bypassing the terrors of judgment.

Some men, like the Jews, have rejected outright those tremendous claims. After all, no prophet, not even Moses, had assumed such prerogatives. Most

men have given them token acceptance. But if they are true, then Christ's claim on our love and our allegiance must be taken seriously—God himself is knocking at the door of our lives and claiming them. Note the conditions of acceptance (5:24) and compare them with 1:12.

5:25-29. Having stated the general principle, Jesus now shows that these will be given concrete expression in the future and even in the present. Those who believe receive spiritual life now, those who are physically dead will come into the fullness of the resurrection. How easily Christians forget the amazing extent of their salvation!

**Notes** 5:19: “whatever he does”—the Son is associated with all the work of the Father (cf. 1:3). 5:20: “greater works”—specifically the raising of Lazarus (chapter 11); and the resurrection (chapter 20). 5:25: “the hour is coming, and now is”—a characteristic phrase of Jesus in the Gospel (cf. 4:23; 16:32). It shows the way in which divine and human time-scales overlap in the ministry of Jesus. 5:27: the Son of Man, as a human figure with divine origin, was particularly well qualified to act as judge (cf. Daniel 7:9-14).

WITNESSES TO JESUS

JOHN 5:30-47

Jesus commends the study of Scripture. But what should the study of the Bible lead us to do?

SUCH A CLAIM to authority cannot be accepted without evidence. There follows therefore a presentation by Jesus of the evidence upon which he bases it. Again he states that it is derived authority, and adds that the unselfish nature of his motives reinforces his claim to the truth (5:30). A man's own evidence is not sufficient, and the Law did not allow it without corroboration (Deuteronomy 19:15). But Jesus has another witness of whose testimony he is sure (5:31f.).

On the human level there is the evidence of John the Baptist (5:33-35). His mission is described in similar terms to those used before (1:6-8). He was a lamp which was kindled and shone temporarily, but he was not the light itself (1:8). His evidence could have led to salvation, but it was not the real evidence that mattered in the case.

The real evidence was that the Son was doing the works of his Father (5:36-38). This was supported by the Father's witness both in Scripture and in experience. This was unavailable to the Jews because they could not see or hear him directly, and they did not accept his Son who gave perfect expression to him. So there came about the extraordinary situation that those who possessed, read and professed to trust in the Scriptures were unable to recognize the One to whom the Scriptures were referring (5:39f.).

As so often, failure to understand has a moral cause (5:41-44). The Jews were blinded by prejudice towards Christ. In his attack on them he had shown that they had no personal knowledge of God (5:37b). Of course, no man could expect to see God physically, but he was revealed in the Scriptures and through Christ, and here the Jews had a massive blind spot. They were motivated by a preference for human approval over divine approval (cf. 11:42f.). The irony is that those who professed to be Moses' disciples (9:28) were going to have Moses in the witness box testifying for Jesus and against them (5:45-47). When a man is blind to the spiritual truth which lies before his eyes, there is little hope for him (cf. Luke 16:31).

**Notes** 5:32: "another" is the Father rather than John. 5:39: "you search" almost certainly indicative rather than imperative. 5:45: "on whom you set your hope"—they had fallen into idolatry by confusing the sign (the Law) with the thing signified (eternal life with God through the Messiah). The temptation to do this has not disappeared. Some modern-day evangelicalism is in danger of elevating the Scriptures above the Christ, but life is not in the Scriptures themselves but in the One to whom they point. The Scriptures are the *signpost* to Christ the Savior.

## JESUS FEEDS THE FIVE THOUSAND

### JOHN 6:1-15

Notice what follows when people obey Jesus: God never does things in half measures.

WE HAVE SEEN Christ as the provider for human need (2:1-11) and the giver of life (4:46-54). Now in providing again for human need he demonstrates that he is not only the giver but also the gift of life. He is the bread which alone can sustain men's souls. He reveals this spiritual truth through a miracle in which, as at Cana, he brings into focus in a single dramatic act what God is always doing in multiplying bread and fish.

The Passover setting of this miracle, and the discourse which follows it, are of considerable importance. Under the old covenant the great act of redemption was the exodus from Egypt. This had associated with it the feeding of the people with manna in the wilderness, which was a sign to the people and a temporary provision for their need. As a continual remembrance of this redemption the annual festival of the Passover was held in which each succeeding generation identified itself with those whom the Lord had brought out of Egypt. So under the new covenant the great act of redemption is the cross and resurrection of Christ. This has the Lord's Supper as its permanent festival of remembrance. But it also has a temporary sign parallel to the feeding with manna, namely, this feeding miracle. Both old and new covenants point forward to the final Messianic banquet. It would be a mistake to think that the chapter is essentially about the Holy Communion. Rather, it

seems to be about the central theological facts of the divine redemption to which also the Holy Communion points. When we partake of the Lord's Supper in faith we link ourselves up with all that Christ has done for us.

Notice in this incident the various reactions to Christ:

1. Philip calculated human need in terms of cash, and in the unlikely event of their having such an amount it would only blunt the edge of the crowd's hunger (6:7). Yet he was in the presence of the Son of God, with his unlimited resources!
2. Andrew was more hopeful. He noted the scanty, inadequate provision, but appears to have left the question open, as does Ezekiel in 37:3. In the presence of God nothing is impossible.
3. The crowd, seeing possibly the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), were about to respond (6:15). But all they sought was a Messiah of their own devising who would fill their stomachs (6:26). Note how resolutely Christ dealt with this temptation to short-circuit Calvary (6:15, cf. Matthew 14:22f.). Temptations can come in attractive guise, and to entertain them even momentarily is to court disaster.

**Notes** 6:1: a gap must be presumed after chapter 5. 6:5: the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. John's is an independent account which illuminates, and is illuminated by, the others. 6:10: "men" means males. Their possible military formation (Mark 6:39f.) suggests there might have been an attempt at a Messianic uprising as it was Passover time. Jesus will have none of it (6:15). 6:12: some see this as a picture of the gathering of the remnant of true believers (cf. 11:52). 6:15: when his hour came men did come and take him by force (18:12), and made him king (19:1-22).

JESUS WALKS ON WATER

JOHN 6:16-24

If you're in a situation today which makes you afraid, believe Christ's promise and invite him to deal with you too.

VERSES 16-21. AFTER the feeding of the five thousand Jesus again demonstrates that he is Lord over nature by walking on the surface of the Sea of Galilee. Some have suggested that there is a further point of exodus typology here and that this symbolizes a new crossing of the Red Sea. The evidence for this is rather slim and it is better to take it as showing the power of Christ to help and guide even in the face of adverse natural conditions (cf. Mark 6:45-51). His presence banishes fear and guarantees arrival at their destination.

6:22-24. These verses give a somewhat complicated explanation of how the crowds on the east shore of the lake discovered that Jesus and his disciples had gone over to the west shore and how they followed across as soon as there was transport available for them. They were sufficiently impressed by what he had done to be anxious to search for him, though their motives were materialistic (6:26). We need to have a proper assessment of such seekers today.

**Notes** 6:16: they were presumably given instruction by Jesus in order to avoid the attentions of the crowd. 6:17: they expected Jesus to join them somehow. 6:19: the lake was about eight miles across, but this may have been a shorter crossing near the northern end. "On the sea": the Greek phrase could

mean simply “on the seashore.” The story in Mark 6:45-51 and the general context here make it most unlikely that this is what was intended. (Even less probable are the “rationalizing” theories concerning the feeding miracle which suppose that when the boy took out his sandwiches many of the others followed suit!) 6:20: “It is I.” The Greek *ego eimi* may mean this, or simply “I am,” or “I am he” (18:5). In view of the “I am” sayings in the Gospel and such a claim as is found in 8:58, it is probable that there are intended to be overtones of divinity in the expression.

THE PEOPLE WANT A FURTHER SIGN

## JOHN 6:25-34

Jesus points to himself as the only evidence people need, and the only  
One who can truly satisfy.

THERE NOW FOLLOWS a long discourse of Jesus with the Jews about the meaning of the sign which he has performed. This is similar to the discourse in 8:12-59 concerning the Light of the World and related themes which precedes the healing of the blind man in chapter 9. In each of these dialogues there is an “I am” saying of Jesus and a failure by the Jews to understand his meaning.

A query as to when he had come across the lake is met by a rebuke to those who had found him, on the grounds that they wanted him for the wrong reason—merely as a purveyor of bread for the hungry. He had already rejected this as an adequate Messianic programme (Matthew 4:2-4). Like water (4:13f.), food is a sign of spiritual sustenance. It must be worked for, yet paradoxically it is the gift of God. Work of this kind is therefore not an external striving but faith in the Son.

The people then want a further sign, as if the feeding were not enough for them. (No one depending on seeing wonders will ever be satisfied. Paradoxically, however, the greater the objective proof supplied, the less is the demand for the faith which Christ requires.) Their ancestors had been fed with manna in the wilderness. A repetition of this was expected to be one of the marks of the Messianic age. Jesus reminds them that the source of the

manna was not Moses but God, and that the manna was not the genuine bread from heaven. This was to be sought, not in anything temporary and corruptible, but in something of heavenly origin which could bring life to the whole world. This sounded so good that they wanted to have it always available to themselves (cf. 4:15). The mystery is still hidden from them.

**Notes** 6:26: “saw signs”—they did see the actions but not their significance. 6:30: they depend on physical sight, but the physical sight which they have already had has not turned into spiritual sight. 6:31: the Christian manna is referred to in Revelation 2:17 and may be alluded to in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:11).

JESUS THE BREAD OF LIFE

JOHN 6:35-46

Jesus hints that we have a far deeper hunger than our physical needs ... and he claims only he can meet that need.

THE JEWS HAVE been looking on Jesus as one who claims to give sustenance. Now comes the startling assertion that he is the sustenance itself. His claim to be the bread of life is the first of the seven “I am” sayings in the Gospel (cf. 8:12; 10:9,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). Each of them is a statement about the person of Christ coupled with a consequent promise of what he offers to the believer. The emphatic “I am” may carry overtones of deity (cf. Exodus 3:13f.). This saying is an offer of complete and eternal satisfaction to those who trust in him (cf. 4:14). O taste and see!

The offer to faith reveals as ever the problem of unbelief. Men could see without believing, for true faith depended not upon physical sight but upon the gift of God. The identity of will between Father and Son is such that those given by the Father will be received by the Son and brought to eternal life in the present, and resurrection at the end. The twofold reference to “the last day” (6:39f.) would remind the Jews of the Old Testament concept of the “day of the Lord” (eg Amos 5:18) when God’s purposes would be consummated. Christ’s claim that this was in his control was a further assertion of his deity.

A claim such as this could hardly fail to be disputed. The most obvious objection to it was that this was a local young man of known parentage. It

was a preposterous thing for him to say! But Jesus stands his ground concerning his Father's calling people to him. Living experience of the Father inevitably leads to faith in the Son, though true sight of the Father is reserved for the Son alone (cf. 1:18).

**Notes** 6:37: the ground of Christian assurance is not a man's own actions or feelings but the unfailing purpose of God. Nothing less is a safe foundation for life. David Livingstone described this promise as "the words of a perfect gentleman." 6:39: some connect this with the gathering of the pieces of bread (6:12f.). 6:41: "the Jews"—the scene is in Galilee, but, in every other instance in the Gospel apart from 6:52, they seem to be Judeans. 6:42: as so often in the Gospel they think that they know his origin, but they see it only from the human side (cf. 7:27,41; see also Mark 6:3). Our Lord shows that their misunderstanding was the result of ignorance, firstly, of any genuine work of God in their hearts (6:44), and, secondly, of the Old Testament revelation which, properly understood, would lead to him (6:45).

FAITH IS THE WAY TO LIFE

## JOHN 6:47-59

We share in Christ and receive his life—we eat the bread—when we put our trust in him.

JESUS REPEATS SOME of what he has said before in a slightly different way in order to reinforce his message (6:47-51). Faith is the way to life, to be enjoyed in the present (cf. 3:15). He alone in his person can give true spiritual sustenance of a permanent kind which enables men to avoid death and brings them into a new spiritual realm. But the bread must be given—in death—for the life of the world. And the bread is his flesh. It is by his incarnation and Passion that the world can be sustained.

There is inevitably misunderstanding not only of his person but also of his offer. It is taken as a literal promise of his giving his flesh for them to eat, which sounds very much like cannibalism. In reply Jesus makes no attempt to soften the language which he has used. Rather he strengthens it. He speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood as being essential for life and for resurrection. He describes it as the true food and drink. He asserts that it is the means of union with him and mutual indwelling. He claims that those who “eat” him will have his life in them as he has the Father’s life in himself. He reminds them once more of the temporary effects of the feeding with the manna, and contrasts the heavenly origin and eternal effects of this bread.

The language is supposed to be strong and startling. The metaphors, eating and drinking, clearly point to that act by which one “comes” and

“believes” in Christ (6:35), and through which he is made one with him. His flesh and blood alone provide our spiritual sustenance. This is clearly demonstrated in the Lord’s Supper, but the sacrament is not the source of this experience nor is it the only place where this spiritual truth is realized. The believer knows it as a permanent reality, and enjoys a closeness of identification with Christ, parallel to his relationship with his Father, drawing upon his unlimited resources in a relationship of absolute love, dependence and obedience.

**Notes** 6:52: “How can ...?” This question is not answered directly (cf. 3:5,9). 6:54: “eats”— the word is a harsh one almost meaning “munches.” 6:59: perhaps the synagogue lesson was the story of the manna.

## HARD TEACHINGS

# JOHN 6:60-71

Some disciples now faced up to the real issues of faith and life.

JESUS' MINISTRY HAS already for some time been causing controversy with "the Jews." Now dissension comes to the disciples as well. There were clearly a good number of people who followed Jesus in some way or other during his ministry, for he was able to send out seventy on a mission as his representatives (Luke 10:1). Amongst those associated with him would be some whose commitment was very loose or who had badly mistaken ideas of what sort of ministry the Messiah would have. Possibly we can hardly understand the "cultural shock" on men with the traditional Jewish background of allegiance to the law, religious observances and good works. Instead, Christ claimed their complete loyalty to *himself* as the repository of spiritual life. The harshness of his statements shocked them because of their materialism and maybe also because of their implication that life came through death. To their objections Jesus makes a two-fold reply. On the one hand, the return of the Son of Man to heaven, after his death and resurrection, will show them the true meaning of what he is talking about. On the other hand, they had left the Spirit out of account. He is not talking about anything merely carnal nor is he offering automatic salvation through mechanical participation in a sacred meal. The Spirit gave life and the word he spoke was the living interpretation of this figure. But because they did not believe it was lost upon them.

We are now faced clearly with the issue of faith and unbelief amongst his disciples. Jesus knew who would be faithful, and true faith was the gift of the Father. Some separated themselves from him at this stage. But disloyalty and unbelief have gone further. The Twelve are now challenged about their position. Simon confesses him on their behalf as the Holy One of God, but even then Jesus must describe one of them as “a devil.”

Notice the great place that testimony is given in John’s Gospel (6:68f., cf. 1:29-36,41,45; 4:29). Has this any significance for us? Observe, too, that opposition often serves to clarify truth and sharpen our awareness that Christ is what he claims to be, the one Source of true satisfaction.

**Notes** 6:60: the NEB paraphrases: “This is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such words?” There are many truths which we find it no easier to receive. 6:67: this is the first mention of “the Twelve” as such. Jesus uses the expression in 6:70 to emphasize the fact of their being the chosen inner circle. The evangelist repeats the phrase in 6:71 to show the tragedy of the betrayal (cf. Mark 14:10,20,43). In the Greek these words come with vivid dramatic effect at the very end of the sentence. The problems of predestination and moral responsibility and their relationship are found in as acute form in the case of Judas as anywhere in the Bible.

JESUS GOES TO THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

JOHN 7:1-13

Are you rushing ahead of God in a friendship? A change of job? An important decision?

THE CLOUDS OF conflict increasingly overshadow the ministry. Jesus still continues with his offer of life for his own people and for the world. His own people have decided upon his death. Jesus pauses for a while in Galilee. When the Feast of Tabernacles comes round Jesus' brothers are most anxious that he should go and reveal himself in Judea. For this was one of the great festivals at which there would be present pilgrims from all over the world. But his brothers, who had still not come to faith in him, were arguing with purely human strategy. Galilee, to them, was an unimportant backwater; Judea was where he ought to be if he was to gain acceptance. Let him be venturesome and dazzle men with an open display of power! Jesus is concerned about the divine strategy. The thing that really matters is whether his hour has come. We are no more entitled to try to push him into action.

In the end, after a delay in Galilee, Jesus went up to Jerusalem, not publicly, as he did for the final Passover when the issues had to come to a head, but privately. The people had expected that he would come and there was a great deal of excited informal discussion about him, though largely at a superficial level which failed to wrestle with the challenge of his claims. Clearly, at this juncture there was much uncertainty, influenced by official hostility which muzzled discussion (7:12f.). Both opinions expressed were

somewhat nebulous. The discourses which follow show Jesus presenting himself to God's people as life and light for themselves and for the world, and being rejected (1:4f.,9-13).

**Notes** 7:2: the festival was held in September or October and was the most popular in the calendar. It was a thanksgiving for harvest (Exodus 23:16) and for the provision which God had made for the people when he led them through the wilderness (Leviticus 23:39-43). To commemorate this the pilgrims erected tents all over Jerusalem and lived in them for eight days. 7:3: "His brothers"—the natural assumption is that they were sons of Joseph and Mary born after Jesus. 7:8: the apparent difficulty of reconciling this statement with 7:10 seems to have led to a scribal alteration of "not" to "not yet." But it may be that the word "go up" carries with it the sense of going up to the Father by way of the cross (3:13; 6:62; 20:17). 7:13: "fear of the Jews"—cf. 19:38; 20:19.

JESUS TEACHES AT THE FEAST

JOHN 7:14-24

What blind spots do we have in our own religious traditions?

THE GOSPEL SHOWS that the festivals were the most significant occasions, and the temple the most significant place, for Jesus to present his challenge to Judaism (2:13-22; 5:1; 10:22-39; 12:12-36). So about the middle of this feast he went into the temple and taught. His ability to engage in rabbinic argument was a considerable source of surprise, for he was without formal education in that discipline. What should have impressed them was not the style of his discourses but their content. Intellectually they had to acknowledge his skill, spiritually they were blind to his authority. Jesus' authority should have been accepted as God's authority because his motive was clearly God's glory. They could not accept it unless they were willing to obey God's will. In this controversy Christ appears as the one person completely sure of himself, his origin and his mission. Notice the practical test which he offers (7:17f.)—honest investigation, with the *will* directed to seek God's truth (cf. Philip's "Come and see," 1:46).

The question of authority can be pinned down more specifically—those who claimed to accept the authority of the Mosaic Law did not even keep it themselves. They made a great issue of his breaking the Sabbath by his healing of the cripple while they themselves practiced circumcision on the Sabbath. Moreover their lawlessness was such that they wished to kill him.

No wonder that he has to impress upon them the need for just, rather than superficial, judgments! It is so much easier to be superficial.

**Notes** 7:14: the Lord whom they sought (7:11) came suddenly into his temple (Malachi 3:1). 7:15: the same charge of lack of rabbinic education is made against Peter and John (Acts 4:13). 7:18: “seeks his own glory” (cf. 5:30,41-44). 7:20: “the people” they may be different from “the Jews” and may have been ignorant of plots against him. 7:23: if a ritual operation may legally be performed on one part of a man’s body on the Sabbath, how much more may a man’s whole body be healed. There must be some conflict of laws, and it should be clear to all but petty legalists which was the more important. 7:22: Moses gave the law about circumcision (Leviticus 12:3), but the practice originated in Israel with the patriarchs (Genesis 17:10).

IS JESUS THE MESSIAH?

## JOHN 7:25-36

People couldn't remain neutral with Jesus and his teaching. Some were confused; some opposed him; some believed in him.

FROM THE MORE superficial questions which have been raised, the discussion passes to the question of who Jesus really is. Some know him only as a wanted man and, when they find him teaching without being arrested, they wonder if the authorities have decided that he is after all the Messiah. This solution, however, seems to be ruled out by the fact that they know his origin. Jesus retorts that that is precisely what they do not know. His true origin is from his Father and it is for that reason that he comes with the authority of his Father.

The Jewish leaders decide that after all they must try and arrest him but Jesus is protected by the fact that it is not yet his hour. Many of the people are sufficiently impressed by the number of his miracles to believe that he is the Christ after all. What more could be expected of the Messiah (7:31)? Their estimate of Christ was shallow, with little understanding of his person and nature. But it was at least a movement towards truth.

The authorities accordingly make another attempt to arrest him. But they cannot stop his ministry. For Jesus is confident not only of his origin but also of his destination and of his time. His destination is one that is out of reach of the unbelieving Jews. They think that the barrier is a geographical one and fail to see that it is a spiritual one.

**Notes** 7:26: despite his having visited Jerusalem privately, he teaches, as always, openly (18:20). Phillips: “Surely our rulers haven’t decided that this really is Christ!” 7:27: they cannot believe he is the Messiah because they knew where he came from (cf. 6:42; 7:41f.). They did not know about his birth at Bethlehem, which is not mentioned in the Gospel. Others did not believe because they did not know where he came from (9:29; 19:9)! It is amazing what excuses unbelief can find. 7:28: “You know me, and you know where I come from?” The question mark brings out the irony. 7:35: “the Greeks,” this need not mean the Gentiles. It could be a term used by the “Jews” (Palestinian Jews) about the Jews of the Dispersion (cf. 12:20). It was inconceivable that the Messiah would go where they (the Jews who actually lived in the Promised Land) could not find him. Our ecclesiastical pride can be as great.

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER

JOHN 7:37-52

When they remembered God's leading through a dry wilderness, Jesus offered to meet a deeper thirst, through the Holy Spirit.

IT IS ONLY on the last day of the feast, the "climax of the festival" (Phillips), that Jesus is ready to make an astonishing offer to his people and to the world. On this occasion water from Siloam's pool was solemnly offered in the temple; probably this was an ancient rite invoking God's help in bringing the refreshing "former rains" to end the long summer drought. Jesus seized this opportunity: any thirsty soul was invited to find deep and lasting refreshment through faith in him. The blessing which he offered was to be made available through the Holy Spirit, who had not yet been given in a new way to believers.

As usual there was a mixed reaction. For some this offer marked him as the promised prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15; John 1:21; 6:14). For others it showed him to be the Christ. Those who knew their Scriptures knew that Christ had to come from Bethlehem. So there was a division among them, with one party relying on Scripture and the other on experience, and neither probably aware that had they known the facts Scripture and experience could have been reconciled! Again a desire to arrest him fails. The temple police find that there is something about him and his teaching which marks him off as unique. But ignorant men can soon be crushed, without any need of reasoned argument, by an appeal to superior office and knowledge. When

Nicodemus does dare to raise his voice in protest in the name of the very Law which they professed to uphold, he too is scornfully dismissed as having baseless provincial sympathies. Galilee of all places!

**Notes** 7:37: probably the eighth rather than the seventh day. The punctuation of the saying of Jesus is uncertain. It is probably better to follow the RSV margin and NEB in making two parallel invitations and then referring the quotation to Jesus himself rather than to the believer. The Scripture in question may be Zechariah 14:8, which was part of the lesson appointed for the Feast of Tabernacles. It is no longer Jerusalem but Christ who is the source of blessing. 7:39: the Spirit had been active in the world from the beginning but was not to be given to the believer in the full Christian sense until Pentecost. The phrase is literally “the Spirit was not.” The third person of the Trinity had to wait for his full personal revelation in the world as did the second person. 7:43: divisions are also described in 9:16 and 10:19. 7:50: Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus by night had suggested timidity (3:1f.). Now as “one of them” he plucks up courage to speak up, even if tentatively, for Jesus. 7:52: had they forgotten Jonah? (2 Kings 14:25).

**Thought** Jesus is a perplexing figure to those who refuse to accept him at his own estimate as Son of God and Savior.

THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

JOHN 7:53–8:11

When confronted by Jesus' words, none of us is without sin.

THIS STORY DID not originally belong here nor indeed anywhere in John's Gospel. This is clear both by the evidence of the manuscript and by the style. It was probably inserted by a scribe at this point as an illustration of the principle enunciated in 8:15. Some manuscripts put it elsewhere in John, others after Luke 21:38. There is no reason, however, to doubt that it is a genuine story about our Lord's ministry.

There is a close parallel between the story and that of the tribute money (Mark 12:13-17). Each of them represents an attempt to force Jesus into a position where he makes a pronouncement which will put him out of favor with either the Romans or the Jews. His accusers, hypocritically pretending to be scandalized by this woman's conduct, were using her, not as a person, but as a political pawn. In this case to advocate stoning would be to usurp the power of the Roman authorities, who alone were allowed to carry out death sentences. To do otherwise would be to contravene the Law of Moses which ordered stoning in such circumstances.

The answer which Jesus gives is a model. He transgresses neither Roman nor Jewish authority. Instead he turns an attempt to trap him into a penetrating moral challenge to those who were prepared to play politics with human sin and misery.

His point is well enough made both with them and with her. Note how conscience works in the presence of the sinless One; these men, convicted of their hypocrisy, soon made their exit. In the end all know themselves to be sinners, and the one who has committed the greatest sin in letter and probably the smallest in spirit leaves with his word of counsel and exhortation.

**Notes** 8:3: “adultery” cf. only in the case of fornication by a betrothed virgin was stoning laid down as the punishment (Deuteronomy 22:23f.). The same punishment was laid down for the man, but the woman seems to have been an easier victim for their scheme. 8:6: it may be that he was writing the sentence as the Roman judge would do and that the words were what he then spoke to them. Any suggestion is pure guesswork. 8:11: Jesus does not condemn her; the witnesses having left, he is in no position to pass judgment according to the Law. By implication he offers her forgiveness but does not excuse her conduct. For she is to go and not to sin again.

**Prayer** Lord, make me sensitive to your presence, aware of my own sinfulness, and help me to “walk in the light” (1 John 1:7).

JESUS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

JOHN 8:12-20

As Jesus himself is the source of light, we are to allow his light to reflect from us.

THE SCENE CONTINUES in the temple at the Feast of Tabernacles. This festival commemorated, amongst other things, the pillar of fire which had been given as light to the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21f.), and one of its most impressive ceremonies was the lighting of the golden candelabrum. The light was said to be so brilliant as to illuminate every courtyard in Jerusalem. It was a festival of light. And the Law was also held to be light (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23). But neither ceremonial nor even Scripture is the true light. It was God who was the light of his people (Psalm 27:1), and Jesus therefore comes to direct men's attention away from the symbols to the reality—God's own presence in his person in their midst.

His great claim to be the Light of the World is challenged on the ground that it is testimony in his own case. Jesus replies that there is a validity about such evidence in this instance because he had a knowledge of his origin and destination which they did not share. Their idea of judgment was governed by purely human rules. He had in fact the testimony of his Father in support of him, a fact which they could not understand because they did not know him.

**Notes** 8:12: “the light of life”—the light which has and gives life (cf. 1:4f.). This is given not to those who simply gaze in admiration but to those who follow. It was the destiny of the Servant of the Lord to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). The theme of light is forgotten until the next chapter. 8:13: the argument concerning evidence is similar in many ways to that in 5:31-39. 8:15: the question of judgment is one of the most paradoxical themes in the Gospel. It was not Jesus’ purpose to judge men (3:17; 12:47), and yet it was (3:18; 12:48; 5:22; 9:39). 8:17: “*your* law” perhaps implies that they had treated it as their own preserve. Such spiritual possessiveness is still with us. 8:19: “Your Father”—they may think he is speaking of Joseph. 8:20: the treasury was just beside where the Sanhedrin met, but even so because of the divine purpose they could not arrest him.

## JESUS' IDENTITY

### JOHN 8:21-30

Jesus' death led to resurrection and ascension, confirming the truth of his claims.

THE LONG DISCOURSE, which follows to the end of the chapter, is connected with themes which have already been introduced. Here are discussed his origin, his destination, his parentage and his identity. The contrast is made between what he claims to be, and in fact is, and what the Jews in fact are, despite their claims.

Jesus speaks first of going away. His destination is somewhere that they cannot reach (cf. 7:33-36). Their tragedy is that death will overtake them before their sin is forgiven. The probable allusion to death is picked up by the Jews, but they suspect that he is planning suicide. Jesus goes on to point the contrast between himself and them. There are two worlds, one above and one below. His origin, unlike theirs, is from the one above. Their failure to believe in his supernatural origin is the reason why they will die in their sins. There is nothing optional about the gospel of Christ.

To a direct question about his identity, Jesus replies that he has been telling them all along if only they had been able to exercise spiritual discernment. His authority was a derived authority. As they could not understand this, Jesus went on to speak of the lifting up of the Son of Man which would authenticate his message. In all circumstances he enjoyed his Father's presence and lived a life of perfect conformity to his will. Such

claims, though baffling to many, led others in some measure to believe in him. Faith in him should result in our doing always what pleases his Father.

**Notes** 8:24: "I am he." The Greek is simply "I am" (*ego eimi*). It is used on its own three other times in the Gospel (4:26; 8:28; 13:19). Here it seems to carry clear overtones of deity and the NEB renders "I am what I am," giving the echo of Exodus 3:14 (cf. also Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 43:10). 8:25: Jesus' reply may be rendered as in the RSV margin, "Why do I talk to you at all?" This seems less likely in the context. 8:28: "lifted up" (cf. 3:14; 12:32,34). It already had a double sense in the Old Testament, where the heads of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker were "lifted up" in exaltation and in death (Genesis 40:20ff.). Here it obviously marks an important point of transition in Christ's relationship with the world (cf. 3:14). Later on, Christ made clear that this expression referred to his cross (12:32ff.).

TRUE FREEDOM

## JOHN 8:31-47

Is your Christian experience best expressed in terms of slavery or sonship?

THE DEBATE MOVES ON from the question of authority to that of freedom. The basis for the proper enjoyment of this most treasured human possession is discipleship and truth. But few concepts are so much misunderstood as freedom. National pride revolts against the suggestion that they are in need of liberation. Is not the fact of their ancestry sufficient guarantee of their freedom?

The assertion of their descent from Abraham gives Jesus an opportunity to discuss the real issues of their ancestry and his. Only the Son of God is able to offer them the true liberty of God. Whatever their physical ancestry, their rejection of his offer shows their failure to enter into that liberty and their consequent enslavement by sin. To be Abraham's children in the true sense required moral conformity to Abraham, and this they clearly did not have. They must, spiritually, have another father. Oh, yes, they agree about that. Their father in that sense is, of course, God. No, says Jesus. If that were true they would recognize God's message which he had come to proclaim. Their complete failure to do so marked them off as children of the devil with all his hatred and falsehood. They could find no moral fault in him, yet they did not believe him. Their attitude proved quite plainly that they did not belong to God.

**Notes** 8:31: “believed in him”—as the discourse shows, they must have been nominal believers. True discipleship is shown in continuing obedience to him and only in this way can true freedom be attained. 8:33: despite periods of foreign domination, such as the Roman occupation at this time, they always thought themselves to be truly free as Abraham’s sons. For reliance upon their descent from him, cf. also Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8. It is similar to their reliance upon being Moses’ disciples (9:28). Pedigree is no substitute for faith. 8:34: “commits sin”—lives a life of sin (cf. 1 John 3:4,8). 8:35: the position of servants and sons in a house and their relationship with God are often contrasted in the New Testament (Hebrews 3:2-6; Galatians 4:1-6). 8:41: the emphatic “we” suggests that there may be a charge against him of physical illegitimacy after he has accused them of spiritual illegitimacy. 8:43: they cannot understand the *words* he speaks because their heart is not open to his *word*.

**To ponder** It has been well said that God has no grandsons. What is meant by this? How is it possible for apparently God-fearing men to be so spiritually enslaved as to merit the condemnation of 8:44? How can we avoid this?

JESUS AND ABRAHAM

JOHN 8:48-59

If Jesus was not the Son of God, his claims were madness. However, if he was, then we are to take far greater notice of them.

MOST OF US are familiar with the alleged marginal note against a portion of a written sermon: “argument weak here—raise voice and thump pulpit!” There is something of this attitude in Christ’s adversaries who, unable to combat his teaching, resort to slander and invective. They cannot understand Jesus’ claims or accept them in so far as they do understand them. They therefore accuse Jesus of being a demon-possessed Samaritan. Jesus will not allow them to get away with such slanderous suggestions, for the fact is that he is honoring his Father in doing his work, and it is God who will make the truth plain. Obedience to his word is a passport through death.

Such an assertion settles the question of demon-possession as far as the Jews are concerned. Abraham, the great ancestor of the race, had to die. How could a man like this promise immortality? Jesus has to remind them again that what he does and says is not simply his own whim, for his mission is inspired and authenticated by his Father. It would be false for him to say less than the truth of his relationship with God. Abraham had rejoiced to see his day, for even before Abraham was born he was there in his eternal being. This is sheer blasphemy and an attempt is made to stone him for it, but again, for the moment, he escapes.

**Notes** 8:48: to be a Samaritan was one step worse in their eyes than being a Galilean. The Samaritans' ancestry was mixed (2 Kings 17:24) and this may be a further charge of illegitimacy (cf. 8:41). He is accused of having a demon in 7:20 and 10:20. It is only here that he refutes the charge. How easy it is to conduct our theological arguments by "labelling" people and then thinking we have refuted their views! 8:53: "Are you greater...?" The woman of Samaria asked the same question with relation to Jacob, and the answer given was indirect, as it is here. "Who do you claim to be?"—literally "make yourself" (cf. 5:18; 10:33; 19:7,12). He made himself nothing, what he was he was by the will of the Father. 8:56: Jewish tradition said that Abraham saw the whole history of his descendants and the messianic age. 8:57: "have you seen Abraham?" is the best reading. It shows how the Jews misquoted his claim, still assuming that Abraham is the greater of the two. 8:58: Abraham not only died but was born. Christ is eternally. Here, as the reaction shows, there must be a claim to deity (Exodus 3:14). 8:59: by hiding himself, Christ was, in effect, passing judgment on them: they had rejected him and stood condemned (cf. 3:18).

**For meditation** Note Christ's desire throughout this chapter to glorify the Father, and not himself Are we as selfless in our lives and service?

JESUS HEALS A MAN BORN BLIND

JOHN 9:1-12

After Jesus healed the man born blind, the man didn't know much about Jesus, but told his neighbors what he did know.

WHILE THE SIGN of the feeding of the five thousand had preceded the discourse about the bread of life, the sign of the healing of the blind man succeeds the discourse about the Light of the World. John does not record many miracles compared with the other Gospels, but when he does, it is usually with full detail and careful explanation, in order to illustrate a divine truth. It was one of the marks of the Messiah that he would open the eyes of the blind (Isaiah 35:5; 61:1f.; Luke 4:18; 7:21f.). Here Jesus is shown in action demonstrating the truth of his claim that he is the Messiah and the Light of the World.

As Jesus was going along, perhaps from the temple on the last day of the festival, he noticed a man who was blind from his birth. This pitiful condition is assumed by the disciples to be punishment for sin. As the man was born in this state the possibilities were that he had committed some ante-natal sin (Genesis 25:22; Psalm 51:5), or that he had sinned in a previous existence. If neither of those explanations seemed satisfactory, then it must be assumed that parental sin was the reason (Exodus 20:5). Such speculation failed to take into account the fact that, while there is a connection between human sin and human suffering as a whole, there is not necessarily a direct connection between a man's suffering and his own sin. (This was pointed out in Job.) Jesus in any event looks not to the past (as we usually do) but to the future

and sees it as an opportunity to glorify God (cf. Luke 13:1-5). He had only limited time to work in his rôle as the Light of the World. He therefore anointed the man's eyes and sent him off to wash. When he returned with his vision restored, so incredulous were those who had known him that they questioned his identity.

**Notes** 9:1: "from his birth." he had never known the realm of sight for himself. This illustrates men's spiritual condition. 9:3: Jesus does not deny that either party are sinners but asserts that this is not the point at issue. 9:6: this was an ancient remedy but its use on the Sabbath was specifically forbidden by Jewish tradition. 9:7: "Sent"—the mention of the meaning of the name suggests symbolic significance. The name was due to the water being sent from another pool. Jesus, the source of living water, is also "sent" (3:17; 4:34; etc.). As the Jews "refused the waters of Shiloah" (Isaiah 8:6) so they refused him. The pool was the source of the libations at the festival.

**For meditation** "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day" (9:4). The plural "we" emphasizes both the privilege of the disciples in being associated with the work of the Master and the responsibility we all have to use our time to the best advantage (cf. Ephesians 5:16).

THE PHARISEES INVESTIGATE THE HEALING

JOHN 9:13-23

When the Pharisees investigated the healing miracle, notice how blind and prejudiced *they* were.

THE ACQUAINTANCES OF the man were baffled by the whole business so they took him to the Pharisees in order to investigate further the issues raised by the incident. In particular there was the fact that the cure had taken place on the Sabbath. The Pharisees asked the man what had happened and he gave them a straightforward, factual reply. There was a division among them. On one side were those who knew the religious traditions and on the other those who could see the evidence which lay in front of them (cf. 7:40-43; 10:19-21). They decide therefore to ask what the man himself thinks. He replies bravely, but inadequately, that he thinks Jesus is a prophet.

The Jews then revert to the position his neighbors had adopted. This was a case of mistaken identity. Sensibly they ask his parents to tell them. They are perfectly prepared to vouch for his being their son and his having been born blind. But the method of his cure they will not state. Maybe they had no first-hand evidence themselves, but in any event they were afraid of reprisals. For if they were led into a statement that Jesus was the Messiah they were in danger of excommunication. They therefore transfer the responsibility for that part of the answer to their son.

**Notes** 9:14: the cripple was also healed on the Sabbath (5:9). The two stories have much in common, but at this more advanced stage of the ministry this man is much nearer to a full faith in Jesus, and gives a far more spirited defense of his own experience and of Jesus than does the healed cripple. 9:21: the age of legal responsibility was thirteen. The idea may, however, simply be that he is old enough to tell his own story without their intervention. 9:22: this would probably not be more than a temporary ban. What an eternal opportunity they may have lost because of it! Open confession of Christ is the essential accompaniment to faith in him (cf. Romans 10:9f.). Tragically, there have been many times, too, in the history of the church when the issue has virtually been whether a man is cast out of the institutional church or out of the kingdom of God.

THE MAN WILL NOT BE BROWBEATEN

JOHN 9:24-34

Every Christian should be able to say the words at the end of 9:25.

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS decide to examine the man a second time and on this occasion they are in a tougher mood. He must make a clean breast of what had actually happened. They clearly could not believe his story, for they knew that Jesus was a sinner. The man will not be browbeaten. He is not concerned with technicalities which are beyond his understanding. He knows one thing with full conviction—the reality of his change from a state of blindness to one of sight—“though I was blind, now I see” (9:25). They inquire again how it happened.

Now it is the turn of the man to be tough with them. He had already stated the facts quite clearly. They had taken no notice then. There was no point in repeating them unless they too wished to become disciples of Jesus. The crushing retort follows that they are disciples of Moses, a known recipient of God’s word; he is a disciple of someone utterly unknown (cf. 7:48f.). Yet the man will not abandon his defense of his experience. His eyes have been opened, there is no doubt about that. And if they must force him into theology, into his own simple theology he will go. God does not answer the prayers of sinners. No one has ever heard of the healing of a man *born* blind. Such an extraordinary miracle therefore proves that he is not a sinner but is from God.

But as the man born blind moves steadily into clearer sight, the Pharisees plunge into deeper darkness. There is no attempt to answer the man. Assessing of evidence gives way to prejudice. Living experience is rejected by the dead hand of tradition. Those with a vested interest in the religious establishment put themselves beyond responding to the word of God proclaimed through a humble sinner. “Would *you* teach *us*?”

**Notes** 9:24: NEB: “Speak the truth before God.” It probably suggests making a confession (cf. Joshua 7:19). 9:28: “We are disciples of Moses” (cf. 8:33: “We are descendants of Abraham”). But their discipleship of Moses was very blind (5:45-47). 9:29: ignorance of his origin is the ground for rejection of Christ just as supposed knowledge of it was before (7:27).

**Meditation** “Though I was blind, now I see” (9:25). This simple conviction has brought strength to many Christians, persecuted, reviled, laughed at or out-manuevered in argument.

## SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

### JOHN 9:35-41

The Jews thought they knew God's truth. But like many, they were in fact blind and needed sight as much as the blind beggar did.

HITHERTO IN THIS chapter the whole discussion has been concerned with the physical healing of a blind man and the identity of a person who was able to perform it. Now Jesus draws out the further lesson of his spiritual mission to the world and to individual people. Not even a miracle was sufficient, by itself, to create faith—a personal meeting with Christ was required.

Jesus had disappeared from the scene (9:12) but had kept an interest in the man, and on hearing that he had been thrown out by the Jews, he found him (cf. 5:13f.). He now asks him the direct question whether he believes in the Son of Man. The man is baffled as to who such a person might be and Jesus has to explain that it is he himself (cf. 4:26). The man gives him his trust and his reverence up to the limit of his understanding.

Jesus then utters one of his hard sayings. His purpose in coming into the world was judgment. There has just been a perversion of the judicial process. He will set things right by giving sight to the blind and blindness to the seeing. Some of the Pharisees were disturbed enough by the whole affair to ask whether they too were in some measure blind. Jesus replies that the really incurable blindness is that which has convinced its victims that it is in fact sight.

**Notes** 9:35: some manuscripts read “Son of God” but “Son of Man” is more likely to be correct. Jesus is still revealing himself cryptically. 9:38: these words may not have their full Christian content yet, for “Lord” may be only “Sir” and “worshiped” need only mean “bowed before” (NEB). To us, who know the risen Lord, they mean so much more. 9:39: a hard saying, but all the Gospels allude to the saying about blinding in Isaiah 6:9f. Though salvation was the primary purpose of his coming (3:17), judgment was its inevitable consequence and so could be said in one sense to be its purpose. “Those who see” are those who have some understanding of spiritual truth which they regard as sufficient, and so they fail to see the true message of the gospel.

THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP

JOHN 10:1-10

Christ is the door for the sheep.

CHAPTER DIVISIONS IN the Bible can be misleading. While in a sense the story of the man born blind is rounded off at the end of chapter 9, there is no evidence that the evangelist intended a break there. The blind man and the Pharisees are mentioned again in chapter 10, and, while the main figure changes from light and darkness to the shepherd and his sheep, the theme of judgment is still prominent.

First, Jesus distinguishes between two kinds of people who go into sheepfolds—there are those who use the door put there for the purpose and those who choose some other way in. The shepherd is known to the gatekeeper and to the sheep. Because of the shepherd's personal knowledge of the sheep they are willing to follow him wherever he leads. They would do the opposite for strangers. This allegorical parable is lost upon the Pharisees. They are unable to apply the teaching of Ezekiel 34 about the true and false shepherds of Israel to their own situation.

Jesus therefore has to be more explicit. He identifies himself first of all with the door and then with the shepherd in two further "I am" sayings. Other claimants to spiritual authority over the people of God had a destructive purpose in coming. The purpose of his coming was to bring life—life in far fuller measure than they had ever had it before.

For the people listening to Christ, the picture of a shepherd calling his sheep one by one, by name, was familiar (10:3,27). It is a vivid picture of the fact that God knows people as individuals. In 1929 Dr. L.P. Jacks wrote a prayer which ended “Help us to regard each son of man not by his number but by his name.” Since then, vast increases in the population have made the impersonal numbering of people, and the placing of them under tighter control, almost inevitable. But God has not changed; he still knows his people by name—an indication of his loving care for us as individuals.

**Notes** 10:1: “the sheepfold” was probably the enclosed courtyard of a house. Some have seen significance in the description of Judas as a “thief” (12:6) and Barabbas as a “robber” (18:40), but it is false spiritual claimants who are in view in the first instance. 10:4: “brought out” comes from the same word as “cast out” in 9:34. It may suggest his bringing his flock out of the fold of Judaism. 10:6: “figure.” This is not the same as the sort of parable usually found in the Synoptic Gospels. It means a symbolic utterance but not every detail is necessarily symbolic. 10:9: here as in 10:7 a second metaphor is introduced, comparing Jesus to the door as well as to the shepherd. This “I am” saying is similar to that recorded in 14:6. Access to God is through Christ alone.

JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

JOHN 10:11-21

With Jesus as our good shepherd, we can feel secure in his loving care and enjoy his provision.

NOW WE COME to the specific identification of Jesus with the shepherd. The proof that he is the good Shepherd is shown not by any outward office or external display of strength but by the fact of his sacrificial love for the sheep. There is a clear contrast between him and those whose supposed work of shepherding is done not for love but for financial or other reward. When it comes to the crunch, they do not really care about the sheep. Jesus, on the other hand, has such a knowledge of his sheep and such a love for them, that he is prepared to lay down his life for them. Not all his sheep are to be found within the fold of Palestinian Judaism. He will unite his flock which is at present scattered all over the world.

The secret of all this is not that Jesus will accept a martyr's death which he cannot avoid. It is rather that he lays his life down voluntarily and with a specific purpose. He lays it down in order to take it up again. This is a fulfillment of his Father's command and a reason for his Father's love. Once again his claims bring division and a charge of demon-possession and madness (cf. 7:43; 9:16). Once again a gap opens between those who have written him off and those who will consider the evidence.

**Notes** 10:11: “good”—the particular word used here (*kalos*) suggests a moral beauty and attractiveness. This is shown to every generation in his love to the death for us. The figure of the shepherd was applied frequently to God in the Old Testament and also to such leaders of Israel as Moses and David. It is not by itself necessarily a Messianic title. 10:12: “wolf”—there is no need to try to identify this precisely. The point at issue is the different attitude of the true and false shepherds. The point, so far as Christian ministry is concerned, is well made in 1 Peter 5:2-4. 10:14f.: the relationship between Christ and the believer is derived from the relationship between the Father and the Son (cf. 15:9; 17:21; 20:21). 10:16: “one flock”—the KJV translation “one fold” could be seriously misleading. The people of God is one, even if denominational and other differences exist. The “other sheep” may in the first instance be the Jews of the Dispersion but the thought of the Gentiles lies in the background.

THE UNBELIEF OF THE JEWS

JOHN 10:22-30

We may sometimes lose our grip on God, but he can never lose his grip on us!

THE VISIT OF Jesus to the Feast of Tabernacles, which has occupied a large section of the “Book of Signs” (7:10–10:21), has ended in division. This is the inevitable effect of light coming into the world (3:19-21). After a further two or three months, he comes back to Jerusalem to make his last challenge before the final crisis. The festival in question was the Feast of Dedication (or *Hanukkah*). The temple, which had been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC, was rededicated by Judas Maccabaeus three years later and this was commemorated annually in late December. (It is of course possible that the visit to the Feast of Tabernacles ended earlier, and that to the Feast of Dedication began earlier, perhaps at the beginning of chapter 9.)

It seems that Jesus did not take the initiative in pressing his claims but was available to be questioned further about them. The uncertainty and speculation had evidently not abated and he is now pressed to make an unequivocal statement as to whether or not he is the Christ. But an apparently straight answer would be misleading in view of the climate of belief and Jesus points them yet again to his deeds as the evidence (cf. 5:36; 10:37f.; 14:11).

What is wrong is not the evidence but the fact that they do not belong to him. If they belonged to his sheep their obedience and discipleship would be

evident and there would never be any doubt about their salvation. The unity of Father and Son meant that if they enjoyed the protection of the Son, they enjoyed the protection of the Father also.

**Notes** 10:23: “winter”—as this was always a winter festival perhaps this is an eyewitness touch which is meant to emphasize the particularly cold weather. The reference to the portico and to the Jews gathering round in a circle seem to be similar touches. 10:26-28: the fault of unbelief is in them and not in him. There is in this passage as strong a strain of predestination as there is in the Pauline epistles. The positive side of it provides the only foundation for the Christian life. 10:30: the oneness is more than just of will. But the two Persons are still distinguished.

JESUS IS REJECTED  
JOHN 10:31-42

Jesus' miracles support his claim to have a unique relationship to God.

THIS LAST ASSERTION of Jesus is such that for the second time the desire of the Jews to kill him actually got as far as their picking up stones to throw at him (cf. 8:59; 11:8). Jesus again reminds them of the evidence of his deeds. For which of them does he deserve to be stoned? For none of them, they tell him, but for blasphemy. The charge of blasphemy is put in its most succinct form —“You, being a man, make yourself God.” Here is one of the great ironies of the gospel. The one who was “God” (1:1) had become man (1:14) in an amazing act of loving condescension. Such is their failure in perspective through their moral blindness that they see everything the wrong way round.

Jesus answers their objections with a piece of rabbinic argument. If they look at the Scriptures they will see that the name “gods” could be applied to the judges of Israel because they were exercising a divinely appointed function. They accept the authority of the Scriptures which allow such a title. Why then object to the application of the title “Son of God” to one sent by the Father? The proof of it all is again his deeds. Their attitude to his words was of less importance than what they made of the evidence before their eyes. Again argument gives way to an abortive attempt at arrest (cf. 7:30,44; 8:20).

Jesus then retired briefly before the final conflict. Many people came to see him there and on meeting him confirmed that John, though no miracle-worker, had achieved his purpose in giving faithful evidence about Jesus. So

they believed in him (cf. 1:6-8). “Where the preaching of repentance has had success, there the preaching of reconciliation and gospel grace is most likely to be prosperous. Where John has been acceptable, Jesus will not be unacceptable” (M. Henry).

**Notes** 10:34: this would be a most unusual argument for any Christian to invent, because it does not distinguish Christ from other men clearly enough. He argues with them on their own terms. 10:36: “consecrated”; he in his own person fulfills the Feast of Dedication. This consecration will reach its climax in his death (17:19). 10:42: their faith must still be imperfect as he has not yet fully revealed himself through his death and resurrection.

**Meditation** John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true (10:41). The secret of spiritual success is not in the spectacular but in a consistent witness to Jesus Christ. Have we the humility to accept this rôle for ourselves?

## THE DEATH OF LAZARUS

### JOHN 11:1-16

When Jesus doesn't do what we ask immediately, can we still believe he loves us?

THE STAGE IS NOW set for the greatest of all Jesus' signs other than the resurrection itself. He has shown mastery over the natural order and over disease. If death had previously had a potential victim snatched from its jaws (4:46-54), now it must yield up a man who has been in its domain for four days. Here is the Prince of life in action as he goes to his death.

The last sign, like the first, takes place within a family circle and is specifically said to show the glory of God and of Christ (2:11; 11:4,40). Despite the urgent call of Mary and Martha and his special affection for the family, Jesus delayed visiting the sick Lazarus, for he saw the divine purpose in the whole incident. Eventually he told his disciples that he was going to Judea again. Despite the protests of the disciples about the dangers facing them in Judea, he insists that his work must be done at the right time. As they misunderstand his allusions he has to tell them outright that Lazarus has died and that the purpose of their visit was to raise him. Thomas sees only death ahead and urges his fellow-disciples to come and face it with Jesus.

**Notes** The historical character of this story has been more questioned than that of any other in the Gospel. The real problem is not whether Jesus could raise the dead (that was part of the Messianic claim—Luke 7:11-17,22) but why such a vivid demonstration of this power, which had such important

consequences, was not recorded in the other Gospels. It must be said that the vivid detail speaks strongly for the story's being factual. The simplest possible reason for its not being mentioned in Mark is that Peter was not present, but that is merely speculation. 11:1: Lazarus and his sisters are the only persons named in a miracle story in the Gospel apart from members of the Twelve. Lazarus means "God helps." Mary and Martha are mentioned in Luke 10:38-42, and the name Lazarus is used in a parable in Luke 16:19-31. 11:4: "not unto death"—death would not be the end of it. As an opportunity of glorifying God, cf. 9:3. Every affliction is an opportunity. 11:5f.: the reason for his delay is surprisingly his love for the family. His absence will be the means of their faith (11:15). 11:16: Thomas is quite prominent in the latter chapters of the Gospel as a man of action slightly bewildered by the events around him (14:5; 20:24,26,29; 21:2).

JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

## JOHN 11:17-27

Jesus understands and feels deeply for us in our sorrows.

JESUS ARRIVES ON the scene, not only too late to save Lazarus from dying, but also to find him already buried for four days. Many people from Jerusalem have come to console the sisters. The news then comes that Jesus is on the way. It is Martha, the active and aggressive sister, who goes out to meet him and apparently rebukes him for his slowness in coming. She and her sister do not have faith like that of the centurion, that a word spoken from a distance would suffice. They expected Jesus to come back with their messenger, and the fact that he did not do so must have seemed to them hard and inexplicable. Even so Martha's faith in him remains and she knows that he will be able to do something to help.

Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise again. This is taken by her as merely an orthodox statement of belief. She knows that he will in the end. Jesus then speaks to her the fifth of the "I am" sayings. He is the resurrection and the life—faith in him means in one way the overcoming of death and in another the avoiding of it. When he asks whether she believes this, her reply is a confession of faith in him as Christ and Son of God without any reference to his claim to raise the dead.

Martha and Mary both say the same—"if you had been here ...." But if he had, their faith would not have been tested, and neither they nor the other people with them would have seen the great sign of eternal life. God delays

for a purpose, and this is surely an encouragement to us in those trying times when his failure to intervene seems to us both endless and purposeless.

**Notes** 11:17: he would have been buried on the day he died. 11:18: this fact may be recorded in order to show that he was not far away from a still greater raising of the dead from which alone all other signs drew their significance. 11:19: there would be seven days of solemn mourning. “The Jews” are representative of the Judeans who are about to be given their last chance to believe. 11:21: even if there may be a note of reproach, it is more in sorrow than in anger, and her faith in him remains. 11:25f.: the relationship of physical and spiritual life and death has already been foreshadowed in 5:25-29. Here was the proof that the hour was not only coming but had actually arrived. Martha’s orthodox faith had to be turned into a living experience through seeing Christ in action. So has ours today.

JESUS WEEPS

JOHN 11:28-37

At the graveside of his friend Jesus was moved and he wept.

MARTHA MAY AT times have been a difficult person to live with (Luke 10:40), but she had a sense of responsibility. She went to Mary, and aware of her sensitive nature she called her quietly, saying that Jesus had specifically asked for her. She too had to be involved in the amazing event that was to happen. Mary went off, not, as the Jews supposed, to weep hopelessly for her dead brother, but to meet the Lord of life. Her words to Jesus are the same as Martha's. They both believed that he could have prevented the tragedy, and fail to understand why it was that he had not come when they had called for him.

Jesus is deeply affected by the sight of mourning which confronts him. When they take him to the tomb, he too weeps. To the Jews this is evidence of his love for Lazarus and some of them too wonder why he did not intervene sooner. But it seems that Jesus' weeping goes a good deal deeper than sympathy. There is an anger about it. This is probably, at the deepest level, anger against sin and death and the terrible hold which they have on the human race. Perhaps there was also anger at the unbelief or half-belief of those who could not see that he was able to fulfill his claims to raise the dead. His weeping, in any event, is not on the same level as theirs. It is his preparation for grappling with the power of death here and on the cross (Hebrews 2:14f.; cf. Hebrews 5:7-9).

**Notes** 11:28: “the Teacher” may have been the name by which he was known to the family. It is an inadequate description of him at this crisis. 11:32: Mary’s action is more impetuous than Martha’s. Jesus does not try to explain things to her but goes straight into action. 11:33: for his being troubled as he faced his passion, cf. 12:27; 13:21. Our redemption was achieved at tremendous cost to him. 11:34: the only occasion in the Gospel on which he asks for information. 11:36: it was not his weeping but his death which was to show his love, not only for Lazarus, but for the whole world.

JESUS RAISES LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD

JOHN 11:38-44

The raising of a man from the dead gives faith and hope to those who believe in Jesus.

JESUS IS INWARDLY stirred again as he prepares to wrestle with sin and death. He gives the simple order that the stone should be removed: Martha keeps her feet firmly on the ground. This is an impossible command. A putrefying body will give off an appalling stench after four days in a warm climate. Only the firm assurance of Jesus that faith is necessary and the glory of God is the object, causes them to obey.

Jesus then addresses a prayer to his Father, acknowledging his dependence in this particular action and thanking him that he has already heard. He adds words which emphasize his confidence that his Father always hears his prayers. He has said what he has in order that the crowd should see this, not as a display of wonder-working, but as the most impressive of his signs to show that he was sent by God to do God's work.

Action has been taken, prayer has been offered, now comes the word of life. There is no mystical formula but a straightforward command (cf. 5:8; Mark 5:41). So the dead hears the voice of the Son of God and hearing lives and comes forth from his tomb (5:25-29). The trappings of death are still all over him. Jesus tells them to untie them and release him. The liberation he brings is meant to be complete.

**Notes** 11:39: “Take away the stone”—this and the unwinding of the graveclothes needed human cooperation. In his own resurrection no human agency was involved (20:1-10). Further than that, of course, Lazarus had his natural body restored to him and, though we hear no more of him, after 12:10, in due course died again; Jesus was raised in his spiritual body, the mortal put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:54). 11:41f.: apart from the long prayer of chapter 17, there is only one other occasion in the Gospel when Jesus is clearly recorded as addressing his Father (12:27f.). However, it is quite probable that his words from the cross (19:28-30) were spoken primarily to his Father and not to men.

THE PLOT AGAINST JESUS

JOHN 11:45-57

A crisis would come soon—and for the Jewish leaders Lazarus' rising was the last straw.

SURELY THIS SUPREME and incontrovertible demonstration of Jesus' power will lead to his acceptance by those who have seen it and those who hear their evidence! Many who had come with Mary believed. But others, no doubt still bewildered, went to tell the Pharisees. They joined together with the chief priests to call a council. They do not now deny that Jesus is doing signs. The evidence is too strong for that. Nor, however, will they accept what the facts are shrieking at them, that this man is acting with the power of God, for he has been sent by God (cf. Mark 3:22).

There is no attempt now at theological assessment. They have already made up their minds and they are confirmed in their resolution now that such an obvious threat to their position is developing. There is such a danger of a popular uprising that it will lead to counter-action by the Romans and that will be the end of both temple and nation. It is the high priest, of all people, who with cynical expediency chooses the victim for sacrifice. In this masterpiece of dramatic irony he decides that one man should die that the people should live. He spoke far more than he could ever know, for that was the purpose of Jesus' mission, which stretched far beyond the confines of Palestine to all God's scattered children (3:16). Now the issue is settled and they will pursue him relentlessly to death.

The statement of Caiaphas, and the decision and subsequent action of the Council, illustrate what is frequently stated in Scripture—that God can take the evil that men do and weave it into a larger pattern which is for his glory and the good of other people. Caiaphas acted as a free agent, personally responsible for what he did. God, however, used his action without destroying his freedom, and turned evil into glory.

Jesus knew the situation clearly enough and withdrew to Ephraim. When the Passover came there was widespread speculation as to whether he would come to Jerusalem or not.

**Notes** 11:47: the chief priests, who were Sadducees, were thrown into alliance with their rivals the Pharisees through common opposition to Jesus. The priests now take the leading rôle and the Pharisees are only mentioned in 12:19,42. 11:48: ironically this is just what the Romans did do in AD 70. They thought of “*our* holy place” as if it belonged to them, not God (cf. Matthew 23:38). But Jesus made a new temple (2:19-22) and gathers the people of God on a new basis (3:16; 10:16). 11:49: the high priest was unwittingly exercising his power of prophecy, despite his arrogant claim to knowledge (cf. 7:47-49; 1 Corinthians 2:8). The office did not change annually—he was high priest that memorable year.

**To think over** “You meant evil ... but God meant ... good” (Genesis 50:20).

JESUS IS ANOINTED AT BETHANY

## JOHN 12:1-11

Martha was as busy as ever while Mary extravagantly and sensitively expressed her love for Jesus.

NOW THERE BEGIN the momentous events of the last week of the ministry of Jesus. While the ordinary people are divided and the Roman authorities have not yet been asked to show their hand, the Jewish leaders are inexorably committed to getting rid of him and well aware that they must take action at the time of the Passover festival.

Jesus still goes calmly on his way and enjoys a meal with Lazarus and his sisters. The domesticated Martha sees to the arrangements while Mary, in an act of extravagant devotion, anoints his feet with expensive ointment and wipes them with her hair. Sensitive people, whose capacity for grief and sorrow is great, have the compensation that they can also rise to great heights of love and devotion. Judas fails to see the point of such seeming waste. Far better use the money for charity, though his idea of charity seemed to be concerned more with himself than with the poor. But Mary had kept the ointment for this significant and unrepeatable moment, in preparation for the burial of Jesus. There would be many further opportunities of helping the poor, many of them inspired in fact by his death for mankind.

News soon got round that Jesus was after all in the vicinity, so the crowds turned out to see him. They were also interested in seeing the unusual phenomenon of a dead man who had come to life again. This living evidence

of the truth of his claims was winning supporters for Jesus, so the chief priests decided that he too must be got rid of.

**Notes** 12:1: the raising of Lazarus is emphasized again, as being a major cause of the crucifixion. 12:3: the story relates the same event as that recorded in Mark 14:3-9, but a different one from that in Luke 7:36-38. 12:6: it looks as if Judas had been made treasurer of the band because of financial ability, but his strength was also his weakness. 12:7: a very difficult construction. Most probably it means: "Let her alone (she has not sold it for the poor) that she may keep it for the day of my burial" (which she was here anticipating). 12:10: a natural reaction from Sadducees to remove a man whose very presence refuted their disbelief in resurrection (Mark 12:18).

**To ponder** If, as we have suggested, temptation frequently comes to us along the lines of our greatest gifts and sin is often the perversion of our ability, how can we ensure that God is in complete control of all our abilities?

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

JOHN 12:12-19

In spite of the growing opposition of the religious leaders, many more people now began to shout for Jesus.

A GREAT CROWD of the Jews had come out to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus. Now a great crowd of those who had come as pilgrims to the festival hear that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem and set out to meet him. They took with them branches of palm trees such as had been used to hail Simon Maccabaeus after his victory (1 Maccabees 13:51). They greeted him with words from Psalm 118, which was in use at the Passover, applying the words to him as the King of Israel. There is no doubt that they were giving him a Messianic welcome into the city. He could not now avoid being King as he had done before in Galilee (6:15).

But Jesus will not have Messiahship of the sort that they are looking for. He must come into Jerusalem but he does so, not on a regal charger, but on an ass, the beast of burden symbolizing peace. His interpretation of the incident was based on Zechariah 9.9 and was more far-reaching than theirs. For the passage was in a context of the Messiah's universal reign of peace and his liberating mission through the blood of the covenant. No wonder the disciples did not understand this until after the resurrection (cf. 2:22; 14:26). The excitement of Messianic expectation had spread from crowd to crowd until it seemed to the despairing Pharisees that the whole world had gone after him. They, like the high priest, were prophesying unwittingly.

**Notes** The story occurs in all four Gospels. There are some minor differences between the account in John and the others. 12:13: “Hosanna”—a Hebrew word meaning “save now.” It had the general force of “Hail!” 12:15: this is a free rendering of Zechariah 9:9. “Fear not” could be an echo of Isaiah 40:9.

THE REQUEST TO SEE JESUS

JOHN 12:20-26

Notice how these Gentiles or Greek-speaking Jews wanted to meet Jesus.

THE WORLD SEEMS to have gone after him in the Pharisees' eyes. And so it is because some of the pilgrims at the festival were Greeks. Whether these were Gentile proselytes or Greek-speaking Jews is not certain. What is important is that the mission of Jesus is shown to extend beyond the confines of Palestinian Judaism. And it is a Galilean with a Greek name—Philip—whom they approach with their request to see Jesus. The Judeans had had their chance to see him during his ministry, and these pilgrims seem to want the same privilege. He is soon to hide himself finally (12:36).

We are not told whether their request was granted. But Jesus sees it as an extremely significant occasion. Now was the hour of glorification. And glory was to come to the Son of Man through death. It was only in death that there lay the possibility of growth. It was only in the death of one man for the people that there lay the hope of the salvation of the whole world. What applies to the mission of Jesus applies also to the mission of his disciples. The willingness to lose our lives in the cause of Christ is the only true way of serving him. Nevertheless, we still find his teaching hard to understand and harder still to follow. Almost everything in “this world” conditions us to think that the man who “loses his life in this world” has lost it. We need to

remind ourselves of the grain of wheat—the simple, true fact of everyday life, which is also a most profound truth of spiritual life.

**Notes** 12:20: it is unlikely that these were Gentile “Godfearers” as they would probably not come up to Jerusalem for the festivals. The principles of the Gentile mission are firmly laid in the Gospel even if the Romans may be the only Gentiles with whom Jesus comes in contact. 12:23: “the Greeks” may be included in this as well as Philip and Andrew. “Glorified”: this term covered the whole redemptive action which Jesus was about to perform. In the divine paradox the cross was no less glorious than any other part of his work. 12:25: the paradox of redemption applies also to discipleship. Only in its death does the self discover what it is meant to be.

**For meditation** “To serve Jesus is to follow him, and he is going to death” (12:26, Barrett).

JESUS SPEAKS ABOUT HIS DEATH

JOHN 12:27-36

Even Jesus' disciples found it hard to take in his death.

AS JESUS ENTERS into the supreme crisis, not only in his own ministry but in the history of the world, he cries out to his Father for strength and guidance. However tempting it might be to try to avoid the horrors that lay ahead of him, he will not do it. He knows it is his hour at last. He knows that the purpose of it all is to glorify his Father's name. It is for that that he asks, and a heavenly voice assures him that his prayer has been and will be answered. As usual the bystanders misunderstand. They no more grasp the meaning of the heavenly voice than they have done the meaning of the words of Jesus.

If this had seemed a strange time to be speaking of glory, it is an equally unusual one to refer to judgment when it is not judgment of Jesus but judgment of the world and the devil which is meant. But paradox cannot be avoided and it is his exaltation in death that will be the means of life for all.

Still people do not understand. Still they do not know who this mysterious Son of Man is. So Jesus can only give them an urgent exhortation concerning the need to act while the light is there with them in his person. Faith in him will change their whole being. And with that final challenge he goes, hidden from them until he appears as a prisoner about to be put to death.

**Notes** 12:27: John does not describe the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. This passage shows that he is aware of the real moral struggle which Jesus had to undergo as he faced death for the sins of the world. 12:28: the nature of the heavenly voice is not clear. The crowd heard the sound without distinguishing the words (cf. Acts 9:7; 22:9). 12:31: for the cross as a victory over the devil, cf. Colossians 2:15. 12:32: the idea of being “lifted up” was important because of its double meaning (cf. 8:28; Genesis 40:20) and also because it specified death by crucifixion rather than by stoning or in any other way. 12:34: the passages in the Law referred to possibly include Psalm 89:4,29,36; Isaiah 9:7; Ezekiel 37:25.

THE UNBELIEF OF THE PEOPLE

JOHN 12:37-43

Many people rejected Jesus' claims because they wouldn't believe in him.

WE ARE NOW coming to the end of the "Book of Signs" and the evangelist gives us a brief summary of the lack of success of Jesus' mission and the reasons for that. Signs were meant to be an aid to faith so that men should have life. That is why the evangelist himself took the trouble to write them down (20:31). But for the majority of the people the signs did not have this effect. All sorts of excuses were made at various stages of the Gospel why men should not believe in Jesus. It was possible to question the evidence in one way or another, or to form *a priori* theological opinions that Jesus could not be a man of God, or simply to crush the suggestion from a position of ecclesiastical privilege.

But it would be wrong to look for the whole cause merely at the human level. The trouble went deeper than that. For this was a fulfillment of prophecy. In Isaiah 53:1 the fact of unbelief had been stated, and when the suffering servant of the Lord came, that had to be fulfilled. In Isaiah 6:10 the prophet went further and attributed unbelief to the action of God who blinded them.

Despite all this, there was not a clear-cut rejection of Jesus' claims. There were many secret believers who were anxious not to lose their position in Judaism, especially those of them who were among the authorities. They

come under the devastating condemnation that they preferred to be praised by men than by God.

**Notes** This brief review of the ministry by the evangelist is similar to the writer's assessment of the history of the northern kingdom of Israel in 2 Kings 17. 12:40: the apparent failure of the mission of Jesus was accounted for in the Synoptic Gospels also by the quotation from Isaiah 6:10 (cf. Mark 4:11f.; 8:17f.; also Acts 28:26f.). The sense of the fulfillment of the divine purpose is supposed to complement rather than override human moral responsibility (cf. Acts 2:23). 12:43: Nicodemus and Joseph became bolder later (19:38-42). Perhaps someone like Gamaliel was also a secret believer (Acts 5:34-39).

A SUMMARY OF JESUS' MESSAGE

JOHN 12:44-50

Notice here what Jesus says about himself, his authority and the purpose of his coming.

THE “BOOK OF Signs” finally closes with a summary of Jesus’ message, as if in a final presentation of it to an unbelieving or half-believing Judaism. Here we have, in concentrated form, themes which have been dealt with at greater length previously. Here there is faith and sight, the Son as the representative of the Father, light, judgment, authority and life.

For this reading it would be well to “re-cap” over “The Book of Signs” and see the way in which these themes have been developed previously.

12:44f. Believing in and seeing Jesus is the equivalent of believing in and seeing God: cf. 1:14-18; 6:27-29,35-40, 44-47. (Look forward also to 14:1-11.) It is not necessary to establish the fact of God’s existence before beginning to talk about Christ. We can begin the other way round—with the man, Jesus, with his life, his words and his actions. “God is Christlike and in him is no unChristlikeness at all” (Ramsey). This is why history is of such importance and Christian truth is unique. It is the truth that in the man Jesus, God himself was known, seen and heard.

12:46. Jesus is the Light of the World, and those who believe in him are delivered from darkness: cf. 1:4-9; 3:21; 8:12; 9:4f.; 11.9; 12:35f.

12:47f. Jesus did not come to judge the world but to save the world: cf. 3:14-18; 8:15; 10:9f. Nevertheless his word will judge those who reject him

and do not keep his sayings: cf. 3:19f.,34-36; 5:19-30,45-47; 8:26,31-51; 9:39-41. (Look forward also to 14:23f.)

12:49f. Jesus' words have been spoken not on his own authority but according to his Father's command: cf. 3:31-35; 5:19f.,30-37; 7:16-18; 8:26-29,39-47. (Look forward also to 14:10.) The Son's word, spoken according to the Father's command, gives life: cf. 1:4; 3:16f.,36; 4:46-54; 5:24-29; 6:35-40,47-58,63,68f.; 10:10,27f.; 11:25f.,43f.; 12:25. (Look forward also to 14:6,19; 17:2f.; 20:31.)

In view of the reference to Jesus' hiding himself in 12:36, there seems little doubt that this section was not supposed to have been spoken by Jesus at this time, but that it is a summary of his words by the evangelist in the way that 12:37-43 are a summary of the response to his works.

JESUS WASHES HIS DISCIPLES' FEET

## JOHN 13:1-11

Jesus now prepares his disciples for their future mission.

SO FAR JESUS has been putting his claims, by deed and word, before the people of God, whose response has been largely negative. Now the last appeal has been made to the Jews. The rest of the Gospel has been called "The Book of the Passion." The great sign is that of his death and resurrection. This is preceded by the discourses which explain it and its consequences. The teaching is now no longer given openly to the world but privately to his disciples.

The Feast of the Passover gives us the theological setting for what follows. The festival which commemorated the great act of redemption of the Old Covenant was to be the setting of the great act of redemption of the New. The hour, which Jesus or the evangelist had referred to earlier as not yet having arrived (2:4; 7:30; 8:20), has now come (12:23). Jesus must return via death to the Father. His mind was fully assured of his divine origin and destination. The necessary work of the traitor, inspired by the devil, was already in hand. In this context, where so many other emotions may have been present, his dominant characteristic is love. This is shown in a demonstration of humble service towards his disciples.

The foot-washing also had a symbolic meaning. Peter at first impetuously refuses to be washed and then asks to be washed all over! But Jesus explains

that when a man has once been made clean all over, then this is all that is necessary afterwards. All his disciples apart from Judas had been made clean.

**Notes** 13:1: NEB: “now he was to show the full extent of his love”—not only in the foot-washing—but in the cross. 13:2: for the devil and Judas, see 6:70f.; 13:27. “His own” are now the disciples rather than the Jews (1:11), but it is the member of the Twelve, who was probably the only Judean and who bore the very name of Judah, who was to betray him. 13:4: “laid aside”—the same word as is used for laying down his life (10:11,15,17f.). 13:7: the Spirit would enlighten them and show them that they needed to accept service from Christ before they could serve. 13:10: there is a once-for-all cleansing, symbolized by baptism and dependent upon the “baptism” of Christ in his death (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). There is also the need for daily cleansing and forgiveness. Some manuscripts, however, omit “except for his feet.”

SERVING ONE ANOTHER

JOHN 13:12-20

In Jesus' understanding, even a leader is a servant.

JESUS NOW TAKES his clothes again and resumes his place. The whole action suggests that it is, amongst other things, a vivid demonstration of his death, resurrection and exaltation. He laid aside his clothes as he lays down his life (10:11,15,17f.). He takes his clothes as he takes his life again (10:17f.), and he resumes his place as he returns to his Father (6:62; 13:1). The pattern is such as is described in Paul's great "Christological hymn" (Philippians 2:5-11).

It is not, however, the theological movement which he wishes to make explicit at this juncture. It is rather the moral and social consequences. They rightly put him in a place of authority and yet he had done a menial service for them. How much more then should they be willing to serve one another! There is not much in any of the Gospels which is specifically referred to as "an example," therefore all the more importance must be attached to this. Blessedness was promised to those who knew this—but on one important condition—that they did it. Jesus reaffirms that he knows that not everyone even of the Twelve will do this. The Scripture had to be fulfilled concerning the traitor, and his foreknowledge of this fact should help them to understand that he was the Messiah. Receiving them was receiving him, and was also receiving the Father.

**Notes** 13:13: Jesus is elsewhere called “Teacher” in 11:28 and “Rabbi” in 1:38,49; 3:2; 20:16. The idea of him as “Lord” is a prominent one in the Gospel and comes especially frequently in chapters 13 and 14. Rabbis could expect some acts of menial service from their disciples, and masters could demand them from their slaves. Here the rôles are strikingly reversed. 13:16: “he who is sent”—the Greek word *apostolos* (apostle) is used here only in the Gospel and in a non-technical sense. 13:18: “lifted his heel”—this either pictures a horse kicking back at a man or someone shaking the dust off his feet. 13:19: “I am he”—cf. 8:24. 13:20: this is what gives the work of the disciples such significance (cf. Matthew 10:40). Their mission from him is similar to his from the Father (20:21). For reaction to the Son being reaction to the Father, see 5:23; 8:19; 12:44f.; 14:7,9; 15:23.

**For meditation** The call to service (13:14ff.) is based on the fact that Christ first serves us, even to the point of dying for us. “Every disciple and every company of disciples need to learn that their first duty is to let Christ serve them” (Temple).

JESUS PREDICTS HIS BETRAYAL

JOHN 13:21-30

Betrayal and denial are a tragic response to Jesus' love for his disciples.

THERE HAVE BEEN a number of allusions in this chapter to the traitor. Now Jesus, in distress of spirit, confronts the disciples openly with this fact. He solemnly asserts that one of them would betray him. "One of us? Surely not! Who on earth could it be?" Peter is determined to find out, so he asks the beloved disciple to ask Jesus. Because of his position of closeness to the Lord (literally "in his bosom"—cf. 1:18) he is able to ask him. Jesus tells him that it is the person to whom he will give a morsel of bread. So Jesus hands it to Judas. As such an action showed that the recipient was an honored guest, this was in effect a last appeal to Judas as well as an indication to John of the identity of the traitor.

If there had been any chance of a change of heart from Judas, it now disappears. Satan takes possession of him. So Jesus bids him do his deed quickly, as the agony of the last struggle comes increasingly upon him. Apparently Judas was not suspected by the others, who simply thought Jesus was sending him on an errand. In an action full of tragic symbolism Judas went out from the room, from the circle of the disciples, from the presence of the Savior of the world (cf. 1 John 2:18f.). No wonder, as he turned his back on the Light of the World, it was night! (cf. 3:19). Divine love could go no

further. Pursued to the very end by the love of Christ and yet still free to choose, Judas is typical of every man.

**Notes** 13:21: while John does not record the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, he emphasizes as much as the other evangelists the tremendous pressure there was upon Jesus as he prepared himself to bear the sin of the world. 13:23: we assume that “the beloved disciple,” named here for the first time, is John. (See Introduction.) 13:26: it seems likely that Judas occupied the place of honor on the left of Jesus and that is why he was able to give him the morsel. This is, however, by no means sure. 13:29: this does not necessarily mean that the Passover had not begun, for the feast lasted for seven days.

JESUS PREDICTS PETER'S DENIAL

JOHN 13:31-38

Peter was no doubt sincere in what he said, but Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves.

WHEN THE GREEKS had asked to see him, Jesus had said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23), and his soul had been troubled as he considered what the "hour" would mean (12:27). At the supper he is troubled again (13:21) as he contemplates the betrayal, and when the traitor has gone out into the night he repeats in similar terms, "Now is the Son of Man glorified" (13:31). Each step that brings death nearer brings glory nearer also, for there is glory even in his death. What is glory for the Son of Man is glory also for God, for it is the final result of perfect obedience to his will.

Jesus now speaks, as he will do frequently in this discourse, of the fact that he must leave the disciples very soon and go to a sphere of existence which they will not be able to penetrate. If he is to be absent in body his presence may still be known in their midst. It will be demonstrated clearly to all men by the new Christian virtue of love. This was a love that was to spring out of his love for them (13:1,15,35).

Peter inevitably wishes to know where Jesus is going and to follow him even if it means laying down his life. Fine words and sincerely meant. But he does not know what lies ahead and Jesus, with sounder knowledge of coming events and of human nature, has to tell him sadly that he will deny him three times before morning.

**Notes** 13:33: “little children”—this is the only time this word is used in the Gospel, though it is used seven times in 1 John. A similar word is found in 21:5. “A little while”—cf. 14:19; 16:16-19. “As I said to the Jews”—see 7:33f.; 8:21. 13:34: “a new commandment.” This was not new in the sense that it had never been commanded previously, for the Law had told them to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). It was new in the sense that the love of God had been demonstrated by the sending of his Son (3:16) who had himself loved them right to the end (13:1). Their mutual love was to be a reflection of that, which gave it a new dynamic. 13:38: Peter’s failure to submit patiently to Christ and obey him, shown already in his attitude to the foot-washing, will have shameful consequences. So does ours!

JESUS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

## JOHN 14:1-7

Jesus does not claim to be a way to God, but the only way: to know  
Jesus is to know God.

IN THE FACE of the disturbed atmosphere among the disciples—his saying that he will leave them and his prediction of Peter’s denial—Jesus tells them not to be troubled. Such a situation was an occasion for faith in the Father and the Son. There were many places in heaven. His departure was in order to make them ready for his disciples. Nor did he intend to leave them for ever, for he would return and take them to himself so that their fellowship might be restored and continue.

When Jesus asserts that they know the way where he is going, Thomas protests that as they do not know the destination they cannot possibly know the route. This gives Jesus the chance to deliver another of the “I am” sayings. He himself is the way, the truth and the life. Because he is the truth and the life, he is the exclusive way to the Father. No one can reach the Father except through him. The bewilderment about the Father was due to their state of muddle about who Jesus was. To know him as what he really was would be to know the Father too (8:19).

**Notes** 14:2: “rooms”—the word means places to stop and remain in rather than progressive halts on a journey (cf. 14:23). The NEB renders as the KJV. “if it were not so I should have told you.” The difficulty with the RSV translation is that Jesus has not specifically been recorded as having told them

that he was going to prepare a place for them. 14:3: “I will come again”—the primary reference seems to be to the second coming or to his receiving each disciple at death. But the succeeding passages show a great emphasis on his coming through the resurrection and the Holy Spirit (14:18,28; 16:16,22). 14:6: “the way, the truth and the life”—in the context it is clear that the second and third words explain further what Jesus means by the first. He is the true way and the living way. “Life” is a word which occurs with particular frequency in the first twelve chapters, “truth” an almost equal number of times in chapters 1–12 and 13–21.

THE SON AND THE FATHER

JOHN 14:8-14

Even when Jesus told his friends he was the only way to God, they failed to understand.

EVEN AT THIS stage of the ministry the disciples are still baffled about many of the leading themes of Jesus' teaching and they still fail to understand the nature of his relationship to the Father. If Jesus talks darkly about knowing and seeing the Father, Philip is not satisfied. Let us have a proper revelation of God (a "theophany" such as Moses had had—Exodus 24:10). We shall see him with our own eyes. There will no longer be any doubt. We shall really be satisfied then.

Jesus sadly has to point out to Philip his failure to grasp who he is. The mutual indwelling of Father and Son was a basic thing which the disciples ought to have grasped. This was shown by his teaching which was not given simply on his own authority. It was also demonstrated by his miracles which were not the deeds of a mere man.

Having used his doing the works of God as evidence of his relationship to the Father, Jesus, no doubt to their great surprise, goes on to say that the disciples will do even greater deeds because of his return to the Father. The glorification of the Father in the Son was not to end with the earthly life of the Son. Through prayer it would be continued, and the scope of prayer is vast, limited only by the important condition that it should be in his name.

**Notes** 14:8: Philip is mentioned on four occasions in the Gospel (1:43-48; 6:5-7; 12:20-22). He seems to have been enthusiastic but uncomprehending. 14:9: to see Jesus is to see the Father (cf. 12:45). The same applies to honoring him (5:23), knowing him (8:19; 14:7), believing in him (12:44), receiving him (13:20) and hating him (15:23). This was due to their mutual indwelling. 14:12: “greater works” because more far-reaching in their scope throughout the world and to all men. 14:13: “in my name”—on my authority. It assumes obedience to his will, as he was obedient to the Father’s will, and a true desire for the glorification of Father and Son. The promise has never been withdrawn and if it were taken seriously the effects would be incalculable.

**Listening point** “I cannot think what we shall find to do in heaven,” mused Luther. “No work, no eating, no drinking, nothing to do. But I suppose there will be plenty to see.” “Yes,” said Melancthon. “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (14:8). “Why, of course,” responded Luther, “that sight will give us quite enough to do.”

THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

JOHN 14:15-24

Jesus now encourages the disciples by teaching them about  
the Holy Spirit.

MUCH OF WHAT Jesus says in the final discourse can only be understood in the light of the coming of the Holy Spirit. A new coming of the Spirit had been referred to by the evangelist in 7:39. Now Jesus devotes some time to explaining the personality of the Spirit, the nature of his coming and the work which he would do in the world.

The promise of the Spirit's coming is made in the context of the disciples' loving, and therefore obeying, their Master. The coming was to be in answer to the Son's prayer to the Father. The Spirit was described as the "Counsellor." He was to be there to stand by them and to help them. Despite the reality of the coming and the presence of the Spirit, the world at large would not recognize his presence or his existence. But the disciples would know from their experience.

Jesus now goes on to say that the Spirit's coming will be his own coming. As the days of his flesh come to an end the world will not be able to see him any longer. His disciples, however, will go on seeing him because his life will be in them through the Spirit. Only in the Spirit will they learn the mutual indwelling of Father and Son, and of themselves with him. But this is not religious experience without moral consequences. Love and obedience are necessary for the continued enjoyment of the love of Father and Son, and

for the reception of his revelation. There will be no fleeting visit. The man who loves and obeys will have the tremendous privilege of having Father and Son coming to make their home with him through the Spirit.

**Notes** 14:16: “Counsellor”—the Greek word is *parakletos*. It sometimes has the meaning of “advocate” (so NEB). Christ is described as the believer’s Paraclete or Advocate in 1 John 2:1. The Spirit is “another” because he continues what Christ has done. There may be some connection also with the idea of Christian *paraklésis* (“prophetic exhortation” to accept the Messianic salvation; see Barrett’s commentary ad loc.). 14:18: “desolate”—literally “orphans.” The word was used of disciples who had lost a teacher as well as of children who had lost a father.

PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU

## JOHN 14:25-31

Real peace is a gift from Jesus Christ to those who receive and trust him.

NOT ONLY WAS the presence and power of Jesus limited in the incarnation, his teaching also had to be restricted. There were such obvious limitations in the capacity of the disciples to understand. One of the functions of the Holy Spirit was therefore to be that of teaching them further and also reminding them of what Jesus had said. In the new situation after the resurrection, with the new aid of the Holy Spirit, they would be able to grasp his message and the meaning of his own person and mission in a new way. We too live in this privileged position.

In the midst of so much that was disturbing, he promised them peace. Not the superficial co-existence which the world allows at times. This peace would reach through to the troubled heart. There should be joy also from contemplation of the fact that he was returning to the Father. The greatness of the Father meant the exaltation of Christ and the fulfillment of the blessings which he had promised would come to them through the Holy Spirit.

It was necessary for Jesus to let them know where he was going, because they could easily have been confused (as in fact they were) by the impending crisis. Satan was about to have his hour. He had no power over Jesus. What was going to happen was done in obedience to the Father's command and was a demonstration to the world that he loved the Father.

**Notes** 14:26: for the teaching function of the Spirit see also 15:26; 16:13f. For the disciples' understanding later what they could not understand during the ministry see 2:22; 12:16; 13:7. 14:28: this does not imply any inferiority (see 10:30). The Father is the source and origin of everything and he is greater than the Son in the sense that Jesus' mission was one of obedience to his Father's will. It is a reference to the incarnate Jesus. 14:30: "ruler of this world," cf. 12:31. Whatever the rôle of Satan, the fact remains that in one sense Jesus' death was voluntary (10:18). 14:31: "Rise, let us go hence." The presence of these words at this stage has caused a number of scholars to suggest that chapters 15–16 should come before this point. It may be, however, that the words should be taken closely with the rest of the verse and are a moral exhortation to go and meet the advancing enemy.

## THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

### JOHN 15:1-11

The picture of the vine tells us that as we maintain a close personal link with Jesus, his life flows into ours.

MUTUAL INDWELLING AND mutual love have been the keynotes of chapter 14. They are now strikingly illustrated by the figure of the vine and the branches, which provides the last of the “I am” sayings and is further expounded in this chapter. Israel was frequently described in the Old Testament as a vine (Psalm 80:8; Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1) or as a vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7). The metaphor suggests something belonging to God and tended by him and expected in due course to yield fruit. This expectation was not fulfilled (Mark 12:1-9). Israel, however, had only been a prefiguration of the Messiah, who was the true, genuine, real vine. Christ must not be thought of here simply as an individual, for by faith his people belong to him and are united with him. Consequently, he is the vine and they are the branches (15:5).

The main thrust of the figure now ceases to be the relationship of the vine to the vinedresser and becomes the relationship of the vine to the branches. The branches must be fruitful and become increasingly so. Fruit-bearing is only possible through the close union of vine and branches. When that occurs things will happen. The close union depends upon love and obedience. Fruitfulness brings glory to the Father and joy to the disciples, as we should discover for ourselves.

**Notes** 15:1: the figure of the vine may have been suggested by the “fruit of the vine” at the Last Supper (Mark 14:25). 15:2: perhaps Judas and Peter are respectively in mind. 15:3: the disciples are in the position of having been pruned by the word of Jesus. 15:5: the metaphor is similar to the Pauline idea of “in Christ” and his metaphor of “the body of Christ” with its members. The fruit which is borne is first and foremost the fruit of Christian character (cf. Galatians 5:22-24). 15:7: another striking promise about the efficacy of prayer but the basic conditions must not be forgotten (cf. 14:13f.). 15:8: it is important that there should be concrete evidence of their discipleship of him (cf. 13:35). 15:9: the relationship of Father to Son is repeated in the relationship of Christ to the disciples also in the sphere of mission (20:21). 15:11: “my joy,” cf. “my peace” (14:27). For the fullness of joy, cf. 3:29; 16:24; 17:13—see also Psalm 16:11.

LOVE IS ALL-IMPORTANT

## JOHN 15:12-19

The new community of Christ's followers would be based on love.

ONCE AGAIN WE return to the all-important theme of love. The link between love for God and love for one's neighbor is so strong in John's Gospel that Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states: "Love to God and Christ takes second place after love to the brethren." There is some strong evidence for that rather surprising statement. But this love is no mere sentiment which can be worked up by a man at will or which comes irrationally upon him. Its source is the love of God shown in Christ and only those who have first meditated on, and responded to, that love are able to reflect it in their attitude to others. Jesus' love was proved by laying down his life. It was also proved by the way in which he treated his disciples as his friends, keeping them informed about what he was doing. His friendship to them was also shown by the fact that it was he who had chosen them, rather than the reverse.

If it was previously impossible to speak of light without mentioning darkness (1:4f. etc.), now it is impossible to mention love without in the end coming on to hatred. Men hated the light (3:20) and the "Book of Signs" showed how many of them came consequently to hate the One who was the Light of the World. Jesus acknowledged that the world hated him, though it could not hate his unbelieving brothers (7:7). But where his disciples are faithful, the hatred will spread to them (cf. 17:14). The reason for the hatred

was that he had picked them out from the world, and nobody likes a convert taken away from his own side.

**Notes** 15:12: “My commandment” is singular, perhaps summarizing all commandments (15:10). 15:13: there is no reason to suppose here that Jesus did not die for the whole world. It is his friends who specifically benefit from it and appreciate it. And it is by receiving his sacrifice for themselves that they become in a real sense his friends. 15:15: the contrast between servants and sons had been made in 8:35. Here it is servants and friends. The friends need to do his will just as much as servants, but because they have a different relationship and a fuller knowledge, it is done on a different footing. 15:16: the friends of Jesus are not marked off by natural attractiveness nor even by their own moral choice. His sovereign will initiates and maintains the relationship.

A SERVANT IS NOT GREATER THAN HIS MASTER

## JOHN 15:20-27

Don't be surprised if you are mocked or attacked at home, school, college or work for being a Christian! Jesus warned us!

THE NEW RELATIONSHIP which Christ offers to his disciples is such that it makes all the more inevitable that they will stand alongside him and share the world's reaction to him. They have been called friends, but there is still a proverb about servants which fits their case. "A servant is not greater than his master." There will be identification, at least to some extent, with his fate. While the note of warning predominates—that there will be persecution—there is also a note of encouragement—that some, at least, will keep their words. Yet the emphasis seems to be on the adverse reaction, which happens for his sake, through people's failure to know God (8:19,55; 16:3).

What is the root cause of sin? The Jews might have been able to make excuses for their sin had not the light come and shone in their midst, and had not the words and deeds of Jesus been witnessed by them. Their hatred of the light, their hatred of Jesus, was hatred of the Father. This is a hatred which fulfilled Scripture, being without any valid cause.

All this must be seen and understood in the light of the great new fact—the personal coming of the Holy Spirit. The Paraclete was to be sent by the Son from the Father. He was the Spirit of truth sent to combat the falsehood and unbelief in the world. It was one of the functions of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Jesus. It was also the task of an apostle to bear witness to

Jesus. They were qualified to do this because they had been with him from the beginning of the ministry (cf. Acts 1:21f.) and were consequently able to testify to the truth of the apostolic preaching (*kerygma*) about him. So we in our generation rely on this twofold witness: the historical witness of the apostles to the facts and their meaning, which by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is recorded in the New Testament, and the “existential” witness of the Holy Spirit at work in the world today.

**Notes** 15:20: see 13:16. 15:21: “on my account”—cf. Matthew 5:11; 10:22; Mark 13:13. 15:22: for the Law also as a revealer of sin, see Romans 7:7. For the guilt of unbelief, cf. 9:41. 15:25: “*their* law” which they profess to believe in (cf. 5:45-47). 15:26: there is no reason to suppose from this verse that the Spirit does not come from the glorified Son as well as from the Father (cf. 16:7).

**For prayer** See Philippians 1:12ff. as an example of 15:26f., and pray for Christians who are being persecuted today.

TO KEEP THEM FROM FALLING AWAY

## JOHN 16:1-7

Here Jesus continues to warn the disciples about the opposition they should expect, much of which comes from religious people.

JESUS HAD BEEN aware all along, not only of the presence of a traitor in the apostolic band, but also of the great weakness both in understanding and in character of those who sought to be loyal to him. This teaching, he tells them, was to keep them from falling away. There were going to be many temptations for them to do that. Excommunication from the synagogue could be a powerful pressure on them. But things would go much beyond that. The time was coming when religious bigots, no doubt convinced in themselves of the rightness of their attitude, would do their best to kill them and really believe that this was something which was for the service of God. This was an attitude well illustrated by Saul of Tarsus who was convinced that he ought to act in the way that he did (Acts 26:9-11). Jesus himself was threatened with death on grounds of God's honor (10:31-33) as well as of the welfare of God's people (11:50). The reason for persecution of the Christians will be theological—lack of knowledge of Father or Son.

Jesus emphasizes that he is telling them things now which they did not need to know before when he was with them. These things must be said because of his imminent departure. They had not asked where he was departing to, but the fact that he was going had become a source of sorrow for them instead of one of joy (14:28). Paradoxical as it may have seemed to

them it was for their benefit that he went. Without his departure the arrival of the Paraclete would be impossible. In view of what had already been said about the Holy Spirit, they should have realized how they (with all Christians who followed them) would be better off. So long as their love for Christ, their knowledge of him and their joy in him, were links to his physical life, they were vulnerable. Separation or death could destroy everything at a stroke. Now, “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39, cf. John 16:22).

**Notes** 16:2: cf. the threat of expulsion in 9:22. There was a Jewish saying that “everyone who sheds the blood of the godless is like one who brings an offering.” 16:4: cf. 13:19, where such information would help them to believe in him. 16:5: they had of course asked in 13:36 and 14:5 but they had become so involved in their own sorrow that they had not pursued the question further on this occasion. 16:7: ironically enough Caiaphas had seen the advantage of Jesus’ going away (it is the same Greek word in 11:50; 18:14).

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

JOHN 16:8-15

Jesus now expands upon the reasons why it will be advantageous to have the Holy Spirit.

THERE IS A great deal of concentrated teaching on the person and the work of the Spirit in these few verses. The first task of the Spirit is the threefold conviction of the world on the counts of sin, righteousness and judgment. This will be an exposure of the attitudes of the world in such a way as to touch the conscience of men. As the world cannot receive the Paraclete (14:17), it will, presumably, normally be effected through the witness of the apostles (15:26f.). Counsel for their defense becomes through them counsel for the prosecution of the world.

It is interesting to note the substance of these charges. The charge of sin was connected not with wrong actions but with unbelief. The people of Israel had long ago been condemned for stifling the national conscience. God had given them prophets and Nazirites to remind them of his truth by their words and by their deeds, but they made the Nazirites drink wine and told the prophets not to prophesy (Amos 2:11f.). God's people had done the same again in refusing to accept the words and deeds of Jesus (15:22-24). The Spirit would show them also that they had the wrong idea of righteousness. True righteousness was the divine vindication of the righteous life of Jesus through the resurrection and ascension. Likewise with judgment. Despite all that was to follow, they could not judge Jesus. It was the devil and those who

followed him who were judging and condemning themselves in the death of Christ.

In addition there was the teaching function of the Spirit. He would guide them into all the truth about Jesus. It would be his function to pass on to them all that Jesus wished to reveal, and so to bring glory to him.

**Note 16:13:** this does not mean that the Holy Spirit guided the apostles or the church into the fullness of truth about everything. It was a specific promise to those whose business it was to record, interpret and pass on the once-for-all events connected with Christ's ministry, death and resurrection. "The things that are to come" may be specifically the cross and resurrection, rather than a general power of prediction.

SORROW TURNED TO JOY

JOHN 16:16-24

The world's joy is short-lived; the Christian's joy lasts forever.

JESUS NOW TELLS his disciples about their not seeing him and then their seeing him again. This will be in a little while. The disciples are puzzled and do not know what he means by the expression. Interpreters of the Gospel since have not been in much better case! The question is whether the two references to "a little while" denote different periods of time. Some have suggested that within a few hours they would not see him because of his death. Then a few hours later they would see him again because of his resurrection. More probably, both instances of the phrase refer to the brief period between cross and resurrection which was a time of not seeing but of being about to see Jesus again.

Because of their difficulty in understanding, Jesus gives them a short parable. The time will be one of sorrow for them and of joy for the world, but their sorrow will be turned into joy. For it is like the anguish of childbirth. This time of crisis is sorrowful but soon turns into joy with the advent of new life. So their brief, temporary sorrow would turn into deep and permanent joy. Then they would start to ask the Father things in his name. If they asked they would receive and their joy would be full.

**Notes** 16:16: the seeing may not be altogether unconnected with the seeing of Christ in the end (1 John 3:2). Seeing him after the resurrection gives us a foretaste of the final vision. 16:17: the expression and reiteration of the doubt in this and in the next two verses suggest that some ambiguity may have been intended. 16:21: this is not merely an illustration of any sorrow giving way to joy. In the Old Testament the Messianic age was expected to be like childbirth, delivering God's people from their afflictions (Isaiah 26:16-20; 66:7-14). 16:23f.: there would be direct access to the Father, though prayer would be made in the name of Christ and on his authority, because of his effective work of reconciliation.

VICTORY OF THE WORLD

JOHN 16:25-33

More of Jesus' teaching would become clear after his resurrection and ascension.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF the ministry and the degree of understanding which the disciples have had have been such that Jesus has had to use a great deal of figurative language. The time would soon come when he would speak plainly of the Father. Not, of course, that it is possible to speak of divine truth without some use of human metaphor. But the possession of the Holy Spirit and the new degree of understanding which would come to the disciples would make much more direct teaching possible.

Jesus returns to the subject of prayer. After his exaltation, prayer would be made in his name. It would depend on his opening up of the way to the Father, but there would be no idea of the Son having to plead with an unwilling Father for the needs of his disciples. This would be unnecessary because of the Father's love for them. Their own love for and faith in Jesus were tokens that they were recipients of the Father's love. There was this close connection between attitudes to the Father and the Son because he himself had his origin and destination with the Father, only being in the world for a time.

The disciples profess now to see the plain truth. They say that they understand his supernatural knowledge and therefore his divine origin. But Jesus warns them that such belief will be tested soon. For they were about to

be scattered and to desert him. In the face of the assault of the world he offered them peace and the confidence that he had already won the victory. This would be, and still is, a proof of his claims.

**Notes** 16:28: this may be, in very summary form, the plain truth which Jesus tells them. The reply of the disciples seems to suggest it. 16:31: the implication is of a completely inadequate faith. 16:33: for the cross and resurrection as victory over the powers of the world, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:57; Colossians 2:15.

JESUS PRAYS FOR HIMSELF

JOHN 17:1-8

Jesus asks that his Father would be honored by his complete obedience. He longs to give eternal life to those his Father has given to him.

AFTER THE FINAL discourse with the disciples, Jesus now turns to speak to his Father. This is often called the “High-Priestly Prayer,” as Jesus, the great High Priest, consecrates himself to his coming death through which he will make atonement for the sin of the world (cf. 1:29). Yet there is a good deal more to the prayer than just this theme, for it deals with some of the great doctrines of the Gospel—the relationship of Father and Son (17:1-5), the relationship of the Son to the disciples and of the disciples to the world (17:6-19), and the relationship of the Son to later generations of believers and their relationship to the world (17:20-26).

The hour towards which the clock of destiny has been ticking throughout the ministry has now come. In the mind and will of Jesus his work is already finished (17:4). He has accepted the cross and taken it upon himself as the full and perfect expression of love. So now he asks his Father that it may be an occasion for the glory of both Father and Son (13:31f.). The object of the Son’s mission was to give eternal life in the knowledge of the Father and the Son. That mission had been accomplished and so had given glory to the Father. As it has been accomplished Jesus asks that he may now return to his

Father and the glory which he had before the incarnation, and which had been his from the beginning before the creation of the world.

The mission of Christ was partly to make the name or character of the Father known to his disciples. They belonged to the Father and were given to the Son and they had been faithful. Now they also had knowledge of the divine origin and authority of Jesus.

**Notes** 17:2: This is a strong reminder of the divine sovereignty. For the giving by the Father to the Son, cf. 3:35; 6:37-39; 10:27-29. The last passage also speaks of giving eternal life to the disciples. 17:3: this is the only attempt in the Gospel at a definition of one of its leading concepts—eternal life. It is shown to be a personal relationship with God based on the historical mission of the Son, to know whom is to know God (14:7). 17:4: complete obedience to the Father's will was a characteristic of the ministry (4:34) and was sealed in his death (19:30). 17:6: the manifestation of the name or character of God was necessary for a true knowledge of him which was not mere religious emotion.

JESUS PRAYS FOR HIS DISCIPLES

JOHN 17:9-19

We are all tempted to run away when things get tough, but Jesus wants us to live in this world.

HAVING DESCRIBED SOMETHING of what he has done for the disciples, Jesus now turns to praying for them. He clearly distinguishes them from the world, for they belong in a special way to the Father and the Son. Because Jesus is leaving the world, their position as his representatives is of special importance. So he prays that his Father will keep them united and faithful. The unity of the disciples should be such as the unity of the Father and the Son. He also prays that they may have joy such as he had and would have in his return to the Father.

The passing on to them of the word of God meant a calling of them out of the world. Their true allegiance was now elsewhere and they would therefore incur the hatred of the world. But he does not pray for their withdrawal from a hostile world but rather for them to be kept safe in the world from the attacks of the evil one. Just as Jesus himself had a heavenly origin and destination, so in a sense the disciples have too. But just as he had a mission to the world, so have they. And his consecration of himself was also a consecration of them for service.

**Notes** 17:9: this does not mean that “the world” is not still the object of God’s love for whose sake the Son came (3:16). In the writings of John “the world” means, not the created order as such, nor the gifts of God in nature and human life, but human life and society lived in disregard of God and under the power of evil. In the divine strategy the outreach to the world is always through the disciples (17:20f.). Almost all prayer in the New Testament is prayer for Christians, but it includes the request that they should be ready to take evangelistic opportunities (cf. Acts 4:29f.). 17:10: cf. the dependence of the love of Christians (15:9) and their mission (20:21) on the relationship of the Father and the Son. 17:12: “the son of perdition”— NEB, “the man who must be lost” (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3). In some sense he is almost an incarnation of Satan. 17:17,19: the consecration of the disciples for the service of God depends both on the truth of God’s word (maybe a reference to Jesus himself 1:1; 14:6) and on his consecration of himself. It is not a mere human effort at self-improvement.

JESUS PRAYS FOR FUTURE BELIEVERS

JOHN 17:20-26

Jesus prays that we might know the same sort of loving oneness that he had with the Father.

IF THE PRAYER had earlier been confined to the disciples as against the world (17:9), now it is extended to future generations of believers. The faith which they will have is expected to come through the word of the apostles. The prayer, for what will in due course become a very diverse company, is for their unity. It was to be a unity with its origin in the unity of Father and Son. It would be sustained by a continuing relationship to Father and Son and its object would be that the world should believe in the mission of the Son from the Father.

Even the glory which belonged to God is in some way passed on to the disciples to assist the perfection of unity and the demonstration to the world that they are recipients of God's love. So he prays that they may see his true glory. Because he has known the Father and they have known the mission of the Son, he has made the Father's name known to them and will continue to make it known. This revelation of the Father's character was to further their experience of the Father's love of the Son and deepen the Son's unity with them.

**Notes** 17:20: his own mission to the world was to evoke faith in response to his word (12:47f.). The apostles were to bring men to faith through the apostolic preaching (*kerygma*). 17:21: the reference is to a unity of will and purpose rather than one of organization. The dynamic relationship of Father and Son is the pattern. Mutual love and joint action are the best answer to this prayer, and when those are showing themselves, separate organizations will become irrelevant. It must never be forgotten that the object of church unity is the glory of God and the evangelization of the world rather than administrative tidiness or comfort for Christians. 17:24: the disciples cannot fully follow yet (13:33,36) but there would be a foretaste of his glory before the full enjoyment of it (cf. Ephesians 2:6). 17:26: “in them”—not only as individuals but in their midst also.

JESUS IS ARRESTED

## JOHN 18:1-11

Notice how Jesus responded to Judas' display of force. He was calm and in complete control.

AFTER THREE CHAPTERS of discourse and one of prayer, we come back now to action. But the Passion narrative in John, which we now begin to read, is different in emphasis from those of the other Gospels. Glory dominates. Even in the darkest moments there is triumph and victory. Jesus had warned his disciples about what was to happen, so that they would believe in him (13:19). He had summoned them to rise and go out to the conflict (14:31). Now, after setting the coming affliction in the context of the whole plan of God and consecrating himself and his disciples for this affliction and its consequences, he goes forth across the Kidron Valley to a garden. Judas, having been identified and sent off to do his deed quickly, had gone out into the night (13:21-30). With the inner knowledge that he had from having belonged to the Twelve, Judas takes a band of Roman troops and Jewish temple police, and goes there to find Jesus.

Because of his foreknowledge of what was to happen, Jesus takes the initiative by coming forward and asking them whom they are seeking. To the reply "Jesus of Nazareth" (his human designation) he replies, identifying himself, but in terms which probably carried overtones of his deity, "I am he" (cf. 6:20; 8:24,58)—a deduction supported by their immediate response in withdrawing and falling to the ground. When the question and answer are

repeated, Jesus tells them to let the disciples go. The impetuous Peter draws his sword and cuts off the right ear of the high priest's slave. But Jesus rebukes this worldly attempt to frustrate his drinking the cup of suffering given to him by his Father.

**Notes** 18:1: "a garden." John alone describes it as such and does not name it as Gethsemane. Perhaps we are meant to see a conflict between Satan (13:27) and the Son of Man, the second Adam. 18:3: religious and secular authorities combine against him. "A band" normally means a cohort of some 600 soldiers. However, it is not necessary to presume that a force of this size was used. Lanterns and torches were unnecessary to find the Light of the World (8:12) who was no longer hiding himself (12:36; 18:4). Weapons were unnecessary against One whose kingship was not of this world (18:36). 18:4: "seek" may mean seek to kill (5:18; 7:1, etc.). 18:5: Jesus is named as a Galilean (cf. 7:52). Judas represents his own people—Judah (1:11; 4:44). 18:6: this shows Jesus in command, willingly laying down his life (10:18). 18:8: he performs the part of the Good Shepherd and gives his life for the sheep (10:10-15).

PETER'S FIRST DENIAL

JOHN 18:12-18

How would you have responded to the servant-girl's question? How do you respond when people ask you about your faith?

DESPITE THE WILLINGNESS which Jesus has shown to be arrested, civil and religious authorities combine to seize him and bind him. They take him first to Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest. The evangelist reminds his readers of Caiaphas' attitude of cynical expediency to the execution of Jesus (11:49-52).

While Jesus goes alone as the prisoner, Simon Peter and another disciple follow. This disciple is known to the high priest so he manages to get into the court. Peter had stopped outside and has to be brought in by him. To a question from a maid whether he is one of Jesus' disciples the man of rock denies it. He then stands with the servants and officers trying to keep warm round a fire. He has denied the true light and stands with the enemies of his Master in the dark and in the cold.

**Notes** 18:13: Annas was high priest from AD 6–15. Other references to him in the New Testament are in Luke and Acts, and both in conjunction with Caiaphas (Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6). He may have been the power behind the throne. Caiaphas (mentioned also in Matthew 26:3,57) succeeded him after his deposition by the Romans and held the office until AD 36. There is some difficulty about this passage on the ground that there is no mention of a trial before Caiaphas (18:24,28) and Peter's denial comes into the examination before Annas. There is some very slight manuscript evidence for including 18:24 after "Annas" in 18:13, but it is not strong enough to accept. Others have suggested that 18:24 has

something of a pluperfect sense (as in KJV), stating that Annas *had* sent him to Caiaphas. If we take the text as it stands it may be that there is no mention of a trial before Caiaphas because, in one sense, Jesus has nothing to say to such cynicism as Caiaphas had expressed (cf. Herod in Luke 23.9). 18:15: it is natural to assume that this was the “beloved disciple,” but it is not certain. 18:17: “I am not”—contrast the dignified reply of Jesus in 18:5. 18:18: standing with them, as Judas had (18:5). How easily in our weakness we take the traitor’s place!

THE HIGH PRIEST QUESTIONS JESUS

JOHN 18:19-27

The high priest begins his examination of Jesus, not by asking him the basic questions about his origin and authority, but the more peripheral ones about his disciples and his teaching.

JESUS HAS NOTHING to add to what he has already said in his public ministry. While he gave special teaching to his disciples at the Last Supper, his ministry was an open one. His message has been proclaimed in synagogue and temple, places of public gathering. There is no point in his repeating it—his audience could tell them perfectly well.

Where argument fails, violence often takes over. An officer strikes him but Jesus reminds them that the point at issue is the truth of his teaching and such a point is not solved in this way. Annas then sends him bound to Caiaphas.

The scene switches back to Peter. Those with whom he has identified himself ask him if he does not in fact belong with the prisoner. For the second time he denies that he is a disciple. One of Malchus' relations then asks suspiciously whether he did not see Peter in the garden with Jesus. There is no glory here, only shame. For the third time Peter denies, and as Jesus predicted, the cock crows.

**Notes** 18:19: certain questions are put to Jesus but hardly pursued. The decisions have been made secretly (not openly) without giving him a fair trial (7:45-52). 18:20: Jesus' teaching has been done openly and to the world, though not in the way which his brothers had expected (7:3f.). The word "openly" could also mean plainly (16:29). But what was plain to his disciples would be hidden in meaning to the Jews, and even at this stage seems to have been lost on Peter. There is only one reference in the Gospel to his teaching in the synagogue (6:59). The main challenge to the Jews in their religious setting is made in the temple. 18:21: the blind man had questioned the need to repeat his evidence. There was no possibility here of their wishing to become his disciples (9:27).

JESUS BROUGHT BEFORE PILATE

## JOHN 18:28-40

Who was worse: the Jews or Pilate?

JESUS IS SENT from the religious leaders to the Roman governor; from the prejudiced judgment of his own people to the bewildered judgment of the world. With a supreme example of hypocrisy they refuse to run the risk of ritual defilement by entering Pilate's headquarters, though they are in the midst of defiling themselves morally (Isaiah 59:3). And in an amazing situation of irony they are preparing to eat the Passover without realizing that they are taking part in the putting to death of the true Passover Lamb in whose redemptive death the real significance of the festival is found.

To Pilate's tactful visit to them outside the praetorium and to his question about the charge which they brought, there is no reasoned answer. If he were not a criminal they would not have brought him. Pilate wishes them to judge him by their own law. But they say it is not lawful for them to put any man to death. They have determined that Jesus must die and die on a cross.

There is an inner stage as well as an outer. Inside the praetorium Pilate confronts Jesus and asks him the question that matters as far as the Roman authorities are concerned. Are you the King of the Jews, a revolutionary leader? When Jesus tries to find out whether this is a conclusion Pilate has reached for himself, Pilate asks in desperation what on earth he could know about it all. What is this all about? Jesus puts the whole idea of kingship on to a different footing. Kingship, as Pilate knows it, is not the point at issue, it is

truth. Outside Pilate has to face the demands of the Jews, inside he must face the claims of truth.

So Pilate, with a despairing rhetorical question about truth, goes out in the cause of truth to tell the Jews that Jesus is innocent. But he wants to find a way around the problem and so makes use of the Passover amnesty. He has misjudged public opinion. They call out, not for Jesus their “King” who was no threat to the Roman rule, but for a terrorist called Barabbas.

The way in which Jesus answered Pilate, and the things he did, are an example to all of us, and especially to Christians who are persecuted. Jesus renounced violent retaliation and even violent self-defense (18:36). His only weapons were supernatural and spiritual; so are ours (2 Corinthians 10:4).

**Notes** 18:28: defilement would come by going into the house of a Gentile from which the leavened bread had not been removed. 18:31: their own law was in fact against them in their opposition to Jesus (5:45-47, cf. 7:51). 18:31: it is uncertain whether the Jews had power to stone people at this time. 18:33: are you in all your weakness King of the Jews? 18:35: he feels quite out of it. The Gospel shows again and again that it is “the Jews,” “his own people” (1:11), who are against Jesus. 18:37: “Everyone who is of the truth” cf. 3:21.

HERE IS THE MAN

## JOHN 19:1-7

We can only wonder that Jesus loved us enough to suffer all this!

HAVING FAILED TO get rid of the responsibility for dealing with Jesus by means of an amnesty, Pilate now has him flogged. This may be an attempt to get Jesus to give evidence (cf. Acts 22:24), or an attempt to placate the Jews so that they would not go on asking for the death penalty (Luke 23:16,22). The soldiers then do their utmost to humiliate this so-called king by mockery. They dress him up in royal robes and proceed to call him “King of the Jews” and to strike him.

Pilate goes out again in the name of truth on the level at which he understands it, and tells the Jews that he finds no case against Jesus (cf. 18:38). Jesus then follows, a pitiful sight in his mock array, and Pilate offers him to their view telling them to look at the man. Here is this poor fellow, your deluded and rejected Messianic claimant, is what he means. But here is “the Man,” the Son of Man, the Second Adam, offering his perfect obedience for the life of the world (Romans 5:15,19; Philippians 2:6-8).

The religious leaders see him and howl for his crucifixion. Pilate is still concerned enough for the truth not to be willing to order the crucifixion. He has, however, given in sufficiently to the pressure of the Jews to offer them the opportunity of performing it. But they continue to call out for Pilate to act. The true charge now comes out. It is a charge of blasphemy, which under

Jewish law carried the death penalty (Leviticus 24:16). The “man” has made himself Son of God (cf. 10:33).

**Notes** 19:2: the crown was probably not so much an instrument of torture as a symbol of mockery. It was probably a “radiate crown” which was sometimes used as a sign of divinity. 19:3: see NEB —“Then time after time they came up to him.” 19:4: the Jews themselves had been unable to prove any moral charges against him (8:46). 19:6: the Jews could not crucify him, so this may have been a taunt by Pilate. He is anxious to make them responsible for the execution. But this is a “buck” which no man can pass.

JESUS SENTENCED TO CRUCIFIXION

JOHN 19:8-16

What was Pilate afraid of? Does fear of what others think or say keep us from acknowledging Jesus' authority over us?

AGAINST THE APPARENT hardness and moral unconcern of “the Jews,” Pilate is clearly set as a man who is trying to make up his mind, trying on the level at which he understands them to come to terms with the claims of the truth. So he is afraid. Partly afraid because the title “Son of God” was one that the Roman emperors claimed and this, therefore, had a smell of treason about it. Partly afraid no doubt because the “man” (19:5) showed so many signs of being more than an ordinary man.

Pilate therefore asks Jesus where he came from. This may be simply a matter concerned with jurisdiction (cf. Luke 23:5f.). But it is the all-important theological question (cf. 3:31; 8:23). Jesus does not reply to this direct question (cf. 8:25). Pilate then reminds the prisoner of his authority—power to release and power to crucify. But this is no absolute power. It comes delegated from above, not so much from Rome as from God (Romans 13:1-7) and Pilate has not realized that Jesus has power to lay down and take up his life (10:18). Pilate is in a way only doing his job, the real sinner is the one who handed Jesus over.

Pilate, endeavoring again to release Jesus, makes another attempt to follow the claims of the truth. But the Jews have another weapon—insecurity. They have acted to preserve their interests against the temporal power (11:48-

50). Now Pilate is reminded of his interests with the one who had on the earthly level given him power. This is sufficient to sway Pilate finally, for like most men he has his price. He brings Jesus out and sits down on the judgment seat. He then offers him to them again, this time as their king.

When they call for his crucifixion, Pilate asks incredulously, “Shall I crucify your king?” and receives the terrible reply, “We have no king but Caesar.” So do the people of God abandon their heritage. Nothing remains but to hand him over to them for crucifixion.

The decisive shout of the priests (19:15) marks the end of the continual conflict in John’s Gospel between light and darkness—the light and truth of Christ, and the darkness of the Jews. It is an ironic end. The Jews reject their King-Messiah, whom they cannot and will not recognize, by declaring their allegiance to an emperor and an army of occupation which they hate. It is always the same. To reject Christ as King involves accepting or declaring allegiance to some other master, who will turn out to be empty and unsatisfying at best, and a tyrant at worst.

**Notes** 19:11: the last phrase could refer either to Judas or to Caiaphas. Each represents Judaism as a whole with its claim to sight (9:41). 19:12: ironically, in the end Pilate was removed by Caesar. Just as ironically, the Romans ultimately came and destroyed the temple (11:48). 19:13: Gabbatha has recently been discovered. 19:14: the Day of Preparation might be the day before the Passover or the day before the Sabbath of Passover week. “The sixth hour”—John probably used the Roman (and modern) time system.

THE KING OF THE JEWS

JOHN 19:17-22

The struggle between the two ideas of kingship is ended with apparent victory for the rulers of this world.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN the two ideas of kingship is ended with apparent victory for the rulers of this world. The argument concerning the truth is over, with the One who is true falsely charged and sentenced, and the truth only shining out of the narrative unintentionally or ironically. The decision has been made on the human level and now comes the action.

Jesus went out carrying his own cross to Golgotha. There he was crucified with two others, who were possibly associates of Barabbas in his terrorist activity. So radically was Jesus misunderstood that they numbered the sinless One among the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12), they crucified One whose kingship was not of this world, and who abhorred the use of violence, between two violent criminals.

There must be a reason why a man should receive the sentence of crucifixion. Pilate, therefore, will have the last grim laugh. This is “The King of the Jews.” So the title goes up in the three important languages of the day. Aramaic (rather than Hebrew) was the language of the Jews, Greek and Latin the official languages of the empire. The message of the cross is proclaimed to his own people and to the world, of which he is the Savior (4:42). So far as Pilate is concerned he is Jesus of Nazareth, a description such as any of his subjects might have. To that is added, in scorn of the whole business, the title

of king. The Jews, who have just declared that they have no king but Caesar (19:15), naturally object. To show that he was a false Messianic pretender would hurt no one, as this did. But Pilate stands firm and the title, unwittingly given remains. So in the end did they take him by force to make him King (6:15).

**Notes** 19:17: “bearing his own cross.” It is possible to harmonize this with Mark 15:21. John is emphasizing that Jesus goes alone to accomplish the world’s salvation. (Cf. also Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice—Genesis 22:6.) “Golgotha”—the derivation of the name is uncertain and its location is not sure. 19:19: Pilate had already used this title five times. The Jews refuse to use it (cf. 19:12, a king). In a sense it is a more limited title than “the King of Israel” (1:49; 12:13); and all the more ironic for the way in which “the Jews” have been so opposed to him in the Gospel. He is still King whatever men’s response. 19:21: Jesus had, in fact, never said this.

THE DEATH OF JESUS

JOHN 19:23-30

Indecision, prejudice and indifference all played their part in putting Jesus to death, yet God was still fulfilling his loving plan for humanity.

TO THE SOLDIERS Jesus is just another criminal to be dealt with, a political one with no very noticeable difference at the moment. So they carry on and collect the “benefits” of the job—the prisoner’s clothing. His tunic, the undergarment worn next to the body, was seamless and indivisible, like that of the high priest (Exodus 28:31f.; Leviticus 21:10): there is no point then in trying to tear that. “Let’s toss for it,” they say. And so the soldiers, no doubt thinking of their good or bad luck in being on this “job,” commit themselves further to chance by gambling for the tunic. But there is no chance in the ways of God. This was to fulfill the Scripture, and in what a remarkable way, through the operation of those who did not know what they were doing, was Psalm 22 fulfilled in the Passion!

If the cross creates a false fellowship of gamblers trying to gain from the victim and from each other, it creates also a true fellowship of believers. Not only is there a group representative of the church gathered around, but from the cross the word is spoken which puts Jesus’ mother and the “beloved disciple” into a new relationship with each other.

The mission of Jesus had been concerned with accomplishing the work which the Father had given him to do (4:34). Here he knows that it has been

accomplished, fantastic as this must have seemed to those who stood by. So he cries out, “I thirst.” They come to meet his thirst on the physical level, so fulfilling the Scripture (Psalm 69:21). But his real thirst may be a spiritual one, for his Father (Psalm 42:2). He who offers the living water, so that men need never thirst again (4:13f.; 6:35), himself endures the agonies of thirst. He who offers the Spirit and life (7:39) gives up his own spirit in death. Salvation does come to us freely, but not cheaply. The last cry from the cross (19:30) was one of triumph, not of despair. He could die in peace. No one took his life. He gave it up freely, completing and perfecting his God-given mission.

**Notes** 19:24: some have contrasted the divisions (literally “tearings”) of the Jews (7:43; 9:16; 10:19) with the untorn tunic and have seen it to be symbolic of the unity of the church, but this seems rather remote. 19:25: the mother of Jesus had been dissociated from him in 2:4 because his hour had not yet come. Now it has come and she is associated with him. Our Christian witness is transformed when we can discern his time. 19:29: “hyssop” would not be a very suitable plant to hold up a wet sponge. A similar word means javelin: so NEB renders.

**For meditation** “The Cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough to it for some of its sparks to fall on us” (Stott).

JESUS' SIDE IS PIERCED

## JOHN 19:31-37

There's nothing we need add to what Jesus Christ did for us. We need only receive by faith the gift of forgiveness and new life.

SO THE HOUR has come, the work has been completed and Jesus has died. But that is not after all the end of the matter. For there are religious consequences for the Jews and for the disciples. The Jews have been busy with their Passover observances and while they go through with the removal of a Messianic pretender they do not intend to slip up in their religious observance (cf. 18:28). The Law had said that a hanged man's body should not remain all night upon the tree as that would defile the land (Deuteronomy 21:22f.). The Romans liked to leave the bodies on the crosses as a grim warning to potential troublemakers. Because the next day was the Sabbath of the Passover the Jews asked for the bodies to be taken away before nightfall.

The Romans could not, of course, remove the bodies until the victims were dead. In such cases, as an act of mercy, their legs were broken to hasten their death. This was done in the case of the two terrorists. When they came to Jesus they saw that he was dead already. So there was no need to break his legs, and one of the soldiers, probably just to check that he really was dead, thrust a lance into his side and there came out a flow of blood and water.

There was a witness of this and he gives true evidence for the faith of the readers. It was clearly something of importance. On the one hand, it was firm evidence of his death, particularly important as there were heretics who

denied that Jesus had ever died. On the other hand, water and blood are symbols in the Gospel. Water is applied for cleansing and new birth (3:5) and drunk for satisfaction (4:13f.). The blood of the Son of Man must be drunk so that men may live (6:53-56). By what the soldiers did not do and by what they did they fulfilled Scripture.

**Notes** 19:31: there is some doubt as to whether this means the day of preparation for the Passover or for the Sabbath. 19:34: Tasker, ad loc., quotes the medical evidence for what happened. Probably the two sacraments are in mind (cf. 1 John 5:6,8). But the point is, as Barrett put it, ad loc., that “the real death of Jesus was the real life of men.” 19:35: this does not seem to be the “beloved disciple.” 19:36: so revealing Jesus as the true Passover Lamb (1:29; cf. Exodus 12:46; Psalm 34:20). 19:37: quoting Zechariah 12:10, the whole context of which has bearing on the Passion.

## THE BURIAL OF JESUS

### JOHN 19:38-42

It's hard to be unmoved by the death of Jesus: what difference does it make to us today?

WHILE THE FACT of the burial of Jesus is mentioned as part of the apostolic preaching by Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3f.), it is referred to very little in the New Testament. As far as Paul is concerned it is probably only the link between death and resurrection which shows that both were real objective happenings. But John records a number of details about the burial which seem to have significance.

Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man and a member of the Sanhedrin, comes and asks Pilate to be allowed to take away the body of Jesus. No doubt due to his influential position he obtains permission. So he does what the Jews want, and avoids the defilement of the land. But he is also a secret disciple of Jesus, so that, despite his fear of the Jews, this is an act of courage and is done in order to honor Jesus. Nicodemus, who has not yet been described as a believer but who was at least an open-minded sympathizer (3:1; 7:50-52), joins with him. They take a huge quantity of spices and treat his body according to Jewish burial custom.

It is to a garden that they go with him, for it is here that the Second Adam must bring life where the first Adam has brought sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:21f.). It is a new tomb, perhaps prepared for the use of Joseph's family and now given to Jesus as no other can be prepared in time. Here, free from

corrupting influences, he is laid—the first to lie in the tomb and soon to be the first to rise from the dead to a new sphere of life (1 Corinthians 15:20). Despite the honor paid to Jesus by these two men, outwardly the victory belongs entirely to the Jews and to the forces of darkness. A dangerous pretender has been disposed of by the Romans, Barabbas has been freed and no one has even broken the Law!

**Notes** 19:39: the immense weight of spices seems to echo Psalm 45:8. 19:42: the NEB follows the Greek in making “Jesus” the last word of the chapter. “The future lies with him, and with the Father” (Fenton, ad loc.).

THE EMPTY TOMB

JOHN 20:1-10

It only took the open tomb and the empty graveclothes to convince the disciple that Jesus had risen.

THE HAND OF legalism may seem to have triumphed as the drama must wait for a day while the Sabbath is observed. But after the Sabbath rest comes a new week and with it a new era in the history of mankind. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early, while it was still in every sense dark (cf. 13:30; Luke 22:53), but while dawn was imminent. She sees that the stone, such as would normally be placed across the entrance of a tomb to keep it safe, has been taken away. She naturally assumes that someone or other has violated the tomb and taken away the body of Jesus.

With this news she runs off to Peter and the “beloved disciple.” The two of them then run as fast as they can to the tomb, and the beloved disciple, presumably the younger man, gets there first. He stoops to look into the tomb from the outside and sees the strange phenomenon of the graveclothes lying there. When Peter arrives he, as usual, is more impetuous and goes into the tomb. He sees the extra details—the different wrappings all lying in place. The boldness of Peter emboldens the “beloved disciple” also, so he goes in and sees the evidence more closely and believes what has happened. This has come as a surprise because of their failure to know the scriptural prediction that he should rise from the dead. So they go back home, thrilled no doubt but still mystified.

**Notes** 20:1: Mary Magdalene was presumably not alone (“we do not know,” 20:2), but is probably mentioned as the leader of the group of women and the one to whom the Lord appears personally (20:11-18). It is a forgiven sinner who makes the first discovery of the empty tomb and sees the first appearance of the risen Lord. 20:2: she probably thought of the enemies of Jesus, but the rifling of tombs was a fairly common crime. 20:7: Lazarus came out of the tomb with the wrappings still on him (11:44). This was resurrection of a different kind, in which the form of the body seems to have been changed, so that it could slip out of the graveclothes without disturbing them. No one removing the body would have left the wrappings. 20:8: this is the first true Christian faith in the Gospel, because it is faith in the risen Lord. For an adequate confession we have to wait until 20:28.

JESUS APPEARS TO MARY MAGDALENE

## JOHN 20:11-18

A face-to-face meeting with the risen Christ turned Mary's anguish into astonished joy.

IF IN A sense the “beloved disciple” has come to Christian faith because he believes in the resurrection, it is Mary who comes to the first full Christian experience because she meets the risen Lord. For the fact of the empty tomb and the encounter with the risen Christ are the twin bases of the Easter faith.

As the Lord had gone, there was no point in staying at the tomb as far as the men were concerned. But somehow they had not communicated this to Mary. She remains weeping at the tomb as it was the place with which her Lord had last been associated, and she did not now know where to look for him. Eventually she looks into the tomb and sees two angels. When they ask her why she is weeping she answers purely on the human plane. He has been moved from there and she does not know where they have put him.

Turning round she sees the risen Jesus but does not recognize him. To his question about the reason for her tears, she continues in the same vein of trying to discover where the dead Jesus is. Only the use of her name, no doubt in a familiar intonation, makes her realize that it is Jesus. Her apparent desire to cling to him is forbidden. He must ascend to his Father. She must go and tell his brothers about this. So she goes off to the disciples, his newly made brothers in the Christian family, and tells them that she has seen the Lord.

**Notes** 20:12: it may be that she needed the evidence of the angels which was not needed by Peter and the other disciple. 20:15: a very different kind of seeking from 18:4,7. 20:16: the Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name (10:3). It helps us to think of him using our names. “Rabboni” is an inadequate confession of faith (cf. 20:28). 20:17: she may have touched him (cf. 20:27). She was not to cling to his body in this state because his abiding presence after the ascension would be a spiritual one (14:18). “My Father and your Father”—they are brothers (cf.1:11) but his relationship to the Father is still unique (1:14).

## JESUS APPEARS TO HIS DISCIPLES

### JOHN 20:19-23

Jesus wanted his disciples to know both the fact of his physical resurrection and the experience of peace and joy!

THE DISCIPLES HAVE NOW heard of the empty tomb, which some of them at least have seen for themselves. They have also heard of the appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene. But they have not yet met the risen Lord for themselves. To them the experience of the Easter faith comes not at the tomb nor in the garden but in a room where doors are shut through fear of the Jews.

Jesus passes through closed doors and greets them with a message of peace, now filled with new and wonderful meaning for them (cf. 14:27). The evidence that he really is Jesus has to come not only from his words but also from his body. The marks of crucifixion are displayed to them. No wonder the disciples were filled with joy (16:20-22). Jesus then repeats his word of peace and commissions them for mission in his name. He breathes on them and imparts the Holy Spirit to them. Their mission and the gift of the Holy Spirit through which alone they could accomplish it (cf. Acts 1:8) are connected with the forgiveness and the retention of sins.

**Notes** 20:19: it is important to emphasize that this appearance to the representative body of the disciples was on the first day of the week, the first day of the new era. For fear of the Jews, cf. 7:13; 19:38. The emphasis here seems to be more on the power of Jesus in his “spiritual body” to pass through closed doors and yet be recognized, than on the disciples’ fear. But we can see how frightened

men were transformed in preparation for their fearless mission to the world. It is not certain whether only the Twelve (minus Thomas and Judas) were in the room. If this is so, then they are there as representatives of the church as a whole. 20:21: the mission of the disciples from the Son is derived from and parallel to the mission of the Son from the Father (cf. 17:18). 20:22: this is sometimes referred to as the “Johannine Pentecost.” Jesus can impart the indwelling Holy Spirit as soon as he has risen, though the full outward manifestation of the gift of the Spirit to the church must wait until the appearances are over. There is here a new creation (cf. Genesis 2:7). The Second Adam is a lifegiving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). 20:23: the forgiveness or retention of sins is the inevitable result of men’s reaction to the gospel. What happened in his ministry (9:39-41) will happen in them through the Holy Spirit (cf. 16:8-11).

JESUS APPEARS TO THOMAS

JOHN 20:24-31

Thomas' glorious exclamation is probably the climax to the whole Gospel!

FOR SOME REASON Thomas had not been present when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of Easter Day. When the disciples tell him of the resurrection experience in the simplest terms—"We have seen the Lord" (cf. 20:18)—Thomas asks for more detailed evidence by sight and by touch before he will be convinced.

A week later comes the answer for Thomas. Again Jesus passes through closed doors and again he gives them his greeting of peace. Then he invites Thomas to put the evidence for the resurrection to the test which he had wished to make for it. It seems that touch was not necessary, the evidence of sight was sufficient. Thomas cries out in adoring wonder, "My Lord and my God."

The Gospel has reached its climax. An adequate confession of faith has at last been made, Jesus is confessed not only as Lord (cf. Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13), but also as God (cf. 1:1). Thomas' faith has been based on sight. But Jesus is concerned about those who will believe in later generations and in different places (17:20). So he pronounces his last beatitude upon those who will not have the privilege of sight but who will exercise the gift of faith.

As the climax has been reached the evangelist rounds off his work. He reminds his readers that the signs recorded are only a selection of all that Jesus did, and that they are selected for a purpose—to induce a faith in Jesus as Christ and Son of God which will bring life.

**Notes** 20:24: Thomas, as shown earlier (11:16; 14:5), seems to have been loyal but to have lacked the perception of faith. 20:28: “My Lord” contains much fuller meaning than Mary’s expression of the same words in 20:13. Paradoxically, it is the doubter who in the end expresses his faith most completely. May our honest doubts find a similarly complete answer! 20:31: it is probably a present rather than an aorist. This would mean “hold the faith” (NEB) rather than “come to believe” (NEB margin). The gospel would therefore be intended for Christians as well as non-Christians.

SUCH A CATCH OF FISH

JOHN 21:1-8

What was the secret of the disciples' successful fishing in the morning?

THE GOSPEL PROPER ends with chapter 20. This chapter is a sort of appendix, the particular purpose of which is apparently to explain what Jesus had said about the destiny of the “beloved disciple” (21:23). It also has importance in showing the manner of Peter’s restoration to the service of Christ, and the future which awaited him. So the relationship between Peter and the “beloved disciple” is made clear. Both are represented as equal partners with complementary rôles—Peter as pastor and evangelist, and the beloved disciple as guarantor of the truth concerning Jesus (21:25). These two leaders were obviously the subject of widespread rumors (21:23).

There were a number of different appearances to the disciples by the risen Lord (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8) not all of which are recorded in the Gospels. As always, John has selected one which gets across an important point (20:30f.; 21:25). The disciples had apparently gone back to Galilee, uncertain of the way in which they were to carry out the apostolic commission (20:21). Seven of them are mentioned. Simon Peter decides to go fishing and the rest follow his lead.

Night was the best time for fishing, but a hard night’s toil yielded nothing. At daybreak Jesus, unrecognized, asked them from the shore whether they had any fish. When they said they had not he told them to cast their nets to

starboard. They made such a catch that they could not haul it in. The “beloved disciple” is the very first to discern who the stranger is. But it is Peter who acts first, putting on his clothes and plunging into the lake while the others struggled in with the boat and the catch. Both types of people are found in the church today. When they work together the cause of Christ prospers.

**Notes** 21:1: the Sea of Tiberias was the same as the Sea of Galilee. 21:2: Thomas is prominent in John, Nathanael is mentioned only by him. This is the only reference to the sons of Zebedee in the Gospel and it helps us to assume that John was the “beloved disciple.” But this is not certain, for it could possibly have been one of the two unnamed disciples. 21:6: Jesus probably saw a shoal of fish from the shore. It is not at all certain how far this story is meant to have symbolic significance with “fishing for men” being illustrated (cf. Luke 5:10f.). 21:7: “the Lord”—it is only after the resurrection that the disciples are recorded as referring to Jesus by this title in the third person.

## BREAKFAST ON THE SHORE

### JOHN 21:9-14

Jesus cares about our physical and psychological needs as well as our spiritual needs.

EVENTUALLY ALL THE disciples arrive, following Peter. They find that Jesus has already been at work. He has made a fire upon the shore and has cooked some fish and provided some bread. Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish which they themselves have caught and Peter goes back to the boat and hauls the net ashore. In it there were 153 fish but the net was not torn.

Jesus then asks them to have breakfast with him. There is about him a numinous quality which stops them from asking who he is, but, in fact, they knew without having to ask that it was the Lord. In any event he can cope with shyness. He came and took and distributed both bread and fish as he had done to them and the five thousand beside the same lake before (6:11). It was in a meal, which must have reminded them of meals which they had shared with him, as well as of the feeding miracle, that he revealed himself. Luke too shows that “He was known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:28-35). So in this informal fashion was Jesus revealed to them for the third time after he was raised from the dead.

**Notes** 21:10: it is not clear why Jesus asked them to bring their fish when he had already prepared some for them to eat. It appears that their fish was not used on this occasion. 21:11: this number has long exercised the ingenuity of commentators. It may simply be that they counted up and this happened to be

the total. But many have seen it to be symbolic. Some suggest that it represents the 153 different species of fish known to ancient naturalists, or that, as factorial seventeen, it symbolizes perfection (as ten and seven were numbers indicating completeness). In either case this would be taken as referring to the complete apostolic mission to all men which would be carried out by the church without the nets breaking. However, the primary meaning of the whole chapter must undoubtedly be sought on the plain literal level. 21:12: “Who are you ?”—this was the question the Jews had put to him in unbelief (8:25). 21:13: while it would be wrong to see this as a celebration of the Holy Communion, our doctrine of the Lord’s Supper should include the idea of eating together with the risen Jesus in our midst.

JESUS AND PETER  
JOHN 21:15-19

Do you love Jesus more than anyone or anything else?

SIMON PETER HAS been the leader of the band of the disciples. He has not always believed first (20:8) nor perceived first (21:7), but he has usually acted first. And through being in a prominent position it is he who has denied his Master three times. He has already hastened ashore to meet Jesus and it is clear that he wishes to put right his denial. First they eat the meal of fellowship and then Jesus takes the initiative in restoring Peter.

Three times Peter had denied that he knew Jesus (18:15-27), and now three times Jesus asks him if he loves him. It was only in reply to Peter's threefold assurance that he did love him that Jesus gave him the threefold commission to feed his lambs and his sheep. At the third question Peter is upset, but Jesus reminds him as he had done before (13:6-10) of his need for submission. When he was young he had the independence and opportunities of youth. When he was old things would happen to him against his will.

This was a prediction of a martyr's death, in which he would glorify God as his Master had done before him (12:23-26). This was to be his destiny; it was for God's glory, it was the way Jesus had gone. So the command comes, and echoes down the centuries, "Follow me."

**Notes** 21:15-17: despite NEB margin, most scholars do not now try to distinguish between the two words used for “love” in these verses. John often uses synonyms and there is no reason to suppose that he is recording reference to love at two levels—the word used by Jesus in 21:15f. referring to Christian love, and the word used by Peter in 21:15f. and by both of them in 21:17 to human affection. Likewise there seems to be no real distinction between “feed” (21:15,17) and “tend” (21:16), nor between “lambs” (21:15) and “sheep” (21:16f.). It was to this pastoral ministry that Peter, in fact, devoted himself (1 Peter 5:1-5). “More than these” refers to the other disciples (cf. Mark 14:29), rather than to his love of the trappings of the fisherman’s life. Peter has learnt enough humility not to make the comparison in reply. 21:18: this is important early evidence for the crucifixion of Peter.

JESUS AND THE OTHER DISCIPLE

JOHN 21:20-25

Peter wanted to know what Jesus had in store for another Christian—a natural curiosity!

IT IS ALWAYS interesting to know what is going to happen to other people too. Human nature being what it is, we enjoy comparisons with others so that we can exult in our own virtue or grumble about our own misfortunes. Sometimes we wish to find out about others from sheer curiosity. Whatever the motive, Peter wants to know what is to happen to the “beloved disciple.” Jesus answered that that is none of Peter’s business, but puts it in such a way that he seems to predict that that disciple would not die before the second coming of Christ. The writer wishes to make it quite plain that Jesus did not say that but only “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

The book ends with the assertion that it is this disciple who is bearing witness to all this and has written this, and that it is known that his evidence is true. And in a charming concluding sentence the writer adds that if all the deeds of Jesus were recorded the world would not be large enough to hold all the books which should be written.

**Notes** 21:20: it is not clear why such a long description is given of the “beloved disciple.” It may be to contrast this incident with the other (13:21-30), when it seemed of considerable importance to both Peter and the “beloved disciple” to know who was going to be the traitor. 21:22: perhaps this was

deliberately expressed as the most different thing that could possibly happen to him, without any necessary implication that it would. 21:23: it is possibly necessary to state this because the “beloved disciple” has recently died. If this is so, he is the witness behind the Gospel and the one responsible for its writing. Chapter 21 (or at least the last two verses) would then be edited by the disciples of the “beloved disciple” (“we” in 21:24).

**A final thought** While chapter 21 may be something of a postscript to the Gospel, it is a most appropriate one. The transformation of an individual by Christ, through a personal encounter involving faith in him, is what the whole Gospel is about.

INTRODUCTION  
ACTS  
RALPH P. MARTIN

Name

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS speak of the books of the New Testament as the “Gospel and Apostle.” By this description they mean our Gospels and the epistles which form the bulk of the New Testament literature. These are understandable groupings, but one further term is needed to explain how the church came into being, and how the facts of the gospel history are to be connected to their inspired interpretation in the apostolic letters. This “bridge” book which links the two chief parts together is the Acts of the Apostles.

Purpose

The main purposes of the book of Acts, apart from the obvious provision of a history of the Christian church in its formative years of growth and development, are as follows:

1. The first aim of the book is to provide a chronicle of the mighty and triumphant progress of the gospel through the then known world. This theme is clearly spelled out in Acts 1:8 and pursued in each chapter of

the book. It does not pretend to be a history of all the apostles, nor of the early church in all its parts up to the author's time, nor is it a series of biographical sketches. History and biography are included to serve a larger purpose—namely, to show the universal spread of the Christian faith which was begun and maintained by the Holy Spirit.

Certain emphases are given to spotlight the chief features of the gospel's advance: the work of Stephen, who first made articulate (in his speech, chapter 7) the worldwide scope of the message; the actual Gentile message (in chapter 13), with its antecedents in the conversion of the Ethiopian (chapter 8); the conversion of Saul (chapter 9), and the conversion of Cornelius (chapter 10); and the work of Paul, whose missionary task is implicit in his conversion-call (9:15).

2. Another purpose is that which is stated by the author at the frontispiece of his book (1:1-4). In both his Gospel and Acts, Luke proposed to supply for Theophilus an accurate and progressive summary of the origins of the church and its faith, about which he had already received as an interested inquirer some information. Theophilus is evidently neither a proper name nor a fictitious title (meaning "a man dear to God"), but a roundabout way of addressing a representative member of the intelligent middle-class public at Rome whom Luke wished to win over to a less prejudiced and more favorable opinion of Christianity (so F.F. Bruce).
3. There is an apologetic intention in this writing which aimed at defending the Christian cause against charges which were popularly brought against it in the latter half of the first century. Luke wants, in this historical narration, to demonstrate that a variety of officials, mainly Roman, bore goodwill to Paul and his friends, and that where they were appealed to and had to settle a dispute between Christians and Jews, there was no substance in the charges levelled at the followers of Jesus. Moreover, Roman military officials show a consistent attitude of interest

and sympathy to the Christian message whenever it is presented to them. These factors prove—so Acts demonstrates—that Christianity is politically free from suspicion by the Roman authorities, and this political “innocence” would mean much to a man such as “Theophilus.”

### Dating

No certainty is possible in arriving at a precise date for the book of Acts, but certain historical factors make it likely that it was first published in the middle of the 60s of the first century. Two events of history in that period are decisively important for the understanding of the church’s life in the world: the persecution of Christians at Rome by Nero (AD 64), and the outbreak of the Jewish war in AD 66, which led to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The first fact shows that Rome was beginning to be fearful of the church’s influence—a fear enhanced by the overt rebellion of the Jews in Palestine. This would be the opportune time for some statement from a Christian writer that showed that believers in Jesus, unlike the Jews, were not disloyal to the empire. The Acts provides just such a clear statement.

The omission of Paul’s martyrdom in AD 66–68 may be taken to indicate that Luke did not know of it when he wrote; and this may fix the date of the book as *after* AD 64 and *before* AD 66–68.

### Writer

Early church tradition associates the author of both Gospel and Acts with Luke, the doctor of Colossians 4:14, and the “companion of Paul” (Irenaeus). The attestation which couples Luke’s name with the book of Acts is both early (the first mention is given in the anti-Marcionite prologue to the third

Gospel, c. AD 160–180) and widespread (including the Church Fathers from Irenaeus to Jerome).

The evidence from Acts itself amply endorses this tradition, and there are clear indications that the author was the same as the man who composed the third Gospel and was an associate of Paul.

### Historical Accuracy

Provided we do not ask from the book what it was never intended to give—viz. a comprehensive and detailed account of the social origins of Christianity—we may have every confidence in the author’s painstaking interest in securing a reliable record. Indeed, this is exactly the claim he makes for himself (Luke 1:3, RSV margin); and scholars like E. Meyer, Sir William Ramsay, F.F. Bruce and E.M. Blaiklock have pointed to Luke’s competence and accuracy in correctly reporting the proper official terms by which Roman governmental personnel were known in the first-century world. Thus *proconsul* and *procurator* are carefully distinguished, and this accurate usage suggests that Luke had first-hand knowledge and was concerned to make a careful investigation of his facts.

### Helps

There are books on Acts to suit every need and taste. Historical allusions and much background material are given in E.M. Blaiklock’s Tyndale Commentary (IVF/Eerdmans) and (with more devotional emphasis) William Barclay’s *Daily Study Bible*. Larger works are those by F.F. Bruce (New London/International Commentary), and C.S.C. Williams (Black’s New Testament Commentaries). An older commentary by J.A. Findlay has been used in our notes, to much profit.

**Note** An occasional reference to the “Western text” of Acts in the pages which follow draws attention to this interesting fifth-century Greek manuscript (*Codex Bezae*) which represents the Western tradition. It has a number of unusual additions, some of them highly imaginative and colorful and possibly authentic.

## JESUS TAKEN UP TO HEAVEN

### ACTS 1:1-14

Notice the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples.

VERSES 1-5 CONNECT Luke's account of how the good news was brought from Jerusalem to Rome with his earlier record of how the good news began, set out in his Gospel. The climax of that record was Jesus' resurrection and appearance to his apostles (1:3), followed by a warning and a promise (1:4-5). Is this "baptism with the Holy Spirit" the same as that referred to in 1 Corinthians 12:13—ie marking our entry into the fellowship of the church?

1:6-11. The apostles are still bemuddled over the meaning of the kingdom (1:3) and the nature of their task (1:6-7); and thoughts of an earthly reign fill their minds (see Mark 10:35-45). Jesus directs them to their immediate responsibility (1:8; what is it? Does it fulfill Isaiah 43:10?). They must leave the future in God's hands, and attend to what he commissions them to be and do. This missionary task depends upon:

1. The Lord's ascension (John 16:5-11; Ephesians 4:8-13);
2. The consequent gift and empowering of the Spirit (Acts 2:33 makes this clear, doesn't it?); and
3. The sovereign purpose of God for his Son in his world (Psalm 2:6-8)—a purpose to be completed at his return (1:11).

1:12-14 show how the apostles interpreted the command to wait (1:4). What was their chief occupation? The upper room, often identified with the scene of the Last Supper, was to be a hallowed spot, and not least because Jesus had bound these men and women together in love and deep friendship. Even a former tax collector and a nationalist Zealot lost their traditional hatred for each other (1:13, who are they?)

**Notes** 1:4: “while staying with them” is literally “sharing a meal with them”; cf. Luke 24:41-43; John 21:12-14; Acts 10:41, one of the many proofs of his true resurrection. 1:8: the ground plan of the entire book. 1:9: the cloud is an Old Testament sign of God’s presence. He is received into his immediate presence (John 17:11,24). Questions of how far is “up” are beside the point if God is omnipresent. The ascension is the withdrawal of Jesus from our earth-bound vision, but not from our world (Matthew 28:20). 1:12: 1,000 yards is the extent of such a journey. 1:14: the women are those who were last at the cross (Mark 15:40,47) and first at the tomb (Mark 16:1-2).

## JUDAS' SUCCESSOR

# ACTS 1:15-26

The disciples prayed for guidance: it was important to have God's man for the job.

VERSES 15-22 GIVE the substance of Peter's statement, addressed to the first problem which faced the infant community. What anticipations can you find of Peter's leadership, in the Gospels? See Matthew 16:17-19; Mark 16:7. The defection of Judas is described in Matthew 27:3-10 and should be read in the light of:

1. his privileged position (1:17);
2. the fulfillment of Scripture (1:16,20, quoting Psalm 69:25; 109:8);
3. his infamous (1:16) yet self-willed treachery (1:25); and
4. the problem of a successor, created by his death (1:20b).

This much is clear, but the character of Judas remains an enigma and a warning to us; and Scripture refuses to satisfy our curiosity as to his motivation, or to resolve the tension between divine foreknowledge (John 6:70-71; 13:18; 17:12) and human responsibility (Mark 14:10; John 13:27; 19:11).

1:23-26. Before the matter of a twelfth apostle is settled, some qualifications of the candidates are mentioned (1:21-22). What are they? Two are important:

1. They must be well-known members of the apostolic band, associated with them during the ministry of Jesus.
2. They must be witnesses to (RSV) his resurrection.

Why are these features necessary? Cf. Luke 1:2; 1 Corinthians 9:1. Barsabbas and Matthias are nominated; and after prayer for God's guidance, the latter is chosen by the ancient practice of lot-casting (1:26). Was this the right method of making a selection? What is the significance of the fact that the use of the lot is never repeated after Pentecost, and that Matthias is never heard of again in Acts?

**Notes** 1:17: the terms which Peter uses are intended to show a parallel with the election of Matthias. "Judas was numbered with us": God later added to the eleven (making again twelve of them). Judas was allotted a share in the apostles' ministry: his successor was chosen by lot. 1:25: perhaps the saddest and most revealing verdict on Judas. He "turned aside, to go to his own place"—ie the place he had chosen for himself. And God confirmed him in that dreadful choice. "Then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction" (Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*).

THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST

ACTS 2:1-13

When Jesus went back to his Father, he left behind a little group of ordinary people with the impossible job of making him known worldwide. But he also gave them the promise of power.

VERSES 1-4. ORIGINALLY a festival marking the beginning of the wheat harvest in ancient Israel (Exodus 34:22), the Feast of Weeks was so called because it fell on the fiftieth day after Passover (see Leviticus 23:15ff. for the calculation). Hence the term “Pentecost,” which means “fiftieth” in Greek. It is interesting that the later Jews celebrated the giving of the Law at Sinai at this festival, and thought of the voice of God sounding in every nation under heaven. Is this in the background of 2:6-8?

The disciples were gathered possibly in the temple precincts or in the upper room when the promise of 1:4,8 was made good. There were two outward manifestations of the Spirit’s presence and power (2:2-3)—notice the guarded language, half concealing exactly what occurred. But the consequentials were unmistakable in Spirit-inspired utterances (2:4). Christianity lives by the communication of the truth of God to men by men.

2:5-11. What was it that arrested attention among the motley crowd assembled in Jerusalem for the feast? Was it the universality of the Christians’ message, each man hearing a language he could understand, although the hearers came from many parts of the ancient world of the Jewish dispersion and the speakers were Galileans who were noted for their guttural

accent (Mark 14:70)? If so, Pentecost witnesses the reversal of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Otherwise, was it the remarkable speech of the disciples which expressed with rapture “the mighty works of God” (2:11)? This Pentecostal *glossolalia* is apparently different from the spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 14 (which is to be used in private and public worship, and with caution and restraint).

PETER'S MESSAGE

ACTS 2:14-28

Certain Old Testament promises stated that one day the Jews would know God's power again. Peter claims this was coming to pass.

VERSES 14-21. THE secret of early Christian testimony to "the mighty works of God" (2:11) is the Spirit, giving them an exuberance and confidence which was mistaken for drunkenness (2:13; cf. Ephesians 5:18). And the Holy Spirit's presence and power are traced to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (2:16): "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel." This citation from the Old Testament underlines a number of basic apostolic convictions:

1. The church is living in a new era of God's dealings with men, following directly upon the cross and triumph of Jesus. These are "the last days" (2:17; Hebrews 1:1-2 is the best commentary on this phrase);
2. The work of the Holy Spirit, restricted in the Old Testament to special persons, is now enlarged to include *all* believers in Jesus as the Messiah (2:17-18);
3. The Messianic age is often referred to in Jewish literature as the time of God's "salvation" (2:21). Peter goes on to declare that that promised time has arrived. The age-to-come has come! See 1 Corinthians 10:11.

2:22-28. Peter goes to the heart of the matter by showing how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have inaugurated this new chapter in God's relations with the world. We must mark again some vital emphases of Christian conviction:

1. Jesus' ministry was that of "a Man appointed by God"—ie Messianic (2:22);
2. His death at the hands of the Romans was no accident, but part of God's age-old plan (2:23);
3. Peter's reference to Psalm 16:25-28 illustrates again the use of Old Testament "testimonies"—ie Scripture passages which point to the Age of the Messiah, now begun. Paul will use the same thought in a later sermon (13:33ff.).

**Notes** 2:15: "third hour" = 9 a.m.; and on that day a fast was observed until mid-morning. 2:17: the promised Spirit comes on all, irrespective of class and sex (Galatians 3:14,28; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). 2:21: the key word is "saved," but given here a richer meaning than in Joel 2:28ff. 2:22: a reference to Jesus' Galilean ministry, evidently known in Jerusalem. 2:24: read "snares set by death."

**To think over** What criterion decides the literal (2:27) and non-literal (2:19-20) fulfillment of prophecy?

## PETER'S CONCLUSION

### ACTS 2:29-36

It should have been obvious from Jesus' life that he was no ordinary person, but the greatest miracle was to follow: God raised him from the dead!

WE MAY TAKE these verses as a single unit. They form the third and concluding part of Peter's Pentecostal address, and follow the earlier pattern—namely, a personal address (2:14,22) to his hearers (2:29: "Brethren"); a statement of Christian conviction (2:29-33); and an Old Testament quotation which buttresses that affirmation (2:34-35). Note the extra feature in this final section (2:36).

The allusion to Psalm 16 is now explained. Though written by David, it cannot refer only to him because he died (2:29: note the somber finality of "and was buried"—a phrase which belongs also to the earliest Christian creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3ff.). His psalm, however, expresses the confidence that this will not happen to God's anointed King, whom David typified. The only possible conclusion, then, is that David was speaking prophetically of the Messiah (2:30-31). He died—but, when men had done their worst, was vindicated by God in the resurrection.

Three proofs are supplied of the reality of his resurrection here:

1. Only a bodily resurrection of the Messiah can make sense of prophetic Scripture;

2. The apostles themselves are living witnesses to his personal victory over death (see especially the strong statement of Acts 10:41 in the light of 2:32);
3. Only the exaltation of the living Christ can satisfactorily explain the phenomena which his hearers have seen and heard (2:33). John 14:16; 16:7 should now be read.

The mention of the Lord's exaltation requires justification; and Peter finds this in Psalm 110:1. The dialogue is between God (in his Old Testament name, the Lord =Yahweh) and his anointed. David prefigured the Messiah (so all Jews and Christians believe; 2 Samuel 7:12-14), but David never ascended to heaven. He must, therefore, again have been speaking of the Messiah, "great David's greater Son" (2:34-35).

The conclusion is irresistible (2:36). As Jesus of Nazareth alone fulfills both Psalms, he is the true Messiah who is now installed in the place of honor. His Messiahship, once concealed, is now displayed; and his title to worship, as Lord, is proved (Romans 1:3-4; Philippians 2:9-11).

### **Meditation**

The head that once was crowned with thorns  
Is crowned with glory now.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

ACTS 2:37-47

What can we learn about church life here?

VERSES 37-42. ON that day about 3,000 persons entered the fellowship of the church through the gateway of repentance, forgiveness and faith, expressed outwardly by baptism and inwardly by the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3). St. Augustine, in a memorable phrase, described this day as the church's *dies natalis*, or birthday. Those who were thus introduced to the saving benefits of the gospel remained in close association (2:42). Conversion was for them no flash in the pan, or ephemeral, emotional upsurge of religious excitement. Having begun the Christian life, they continued—and doubtless made good progress. Which of the Pauline churches does this remind you of? So unlike the Galatian Christians (Galatians 1:6; 3:3-4; 5:7).

2:43-47 are verses which paint a cameo picture of the first Christian fellowship. Note who the leaders were (2:43). And how the “common life in the body of Christ” was expressed, both in social responsibility (2:44-45) and spiritual exercises (2:46). It is a travesty to set these against each other as mutually exclusive. Right at the beginning of the gospel age, in a church fellowship which had come straight from the Lord's hands, there was a “holy worldliness” and a “sacred worship” in the temple. Both were important—and still are today! Let us notice too the spirit which prevailed (2:47a) and the

popularity of the young movement (2:47b), with “a conquering new-born joy” suffusing it all.

**Notes** 2:38: baptism “in the Name of Jesus Christ” means a calling on his Name (Acts 22:16) or, possibly, a claiming of the new believers for him who henceforth “possessed” them as their Lord (Acts 10:48). Faith in Christ is implicit in both meanings, leading to forgiveness and incorporation into the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). 2:39: allusions are made to Isaiah 57:19 and Joel 2:32 to stress the inclusiveness of the appeal. The Gentiles will eventually be evangelized. 2:42: four aspects of church life are mentioned: “teaching—a ministry of instruction; “fellowship”—like our church or parochial meeting; “breaking of bread”—a common meal, called later the *agape* (1 Corinthians 11:20-21,33-34; Jude 12), with which was joined a remembrance of the Lord in his death; “the prayers”—the definite article shows that believers observed the temple worship. 2:46: the common meal again, practiced in the people’s homes.

THE CRIPPLED BEGGAR IS HEALED

ACTS 3:1-10

Peter and John were a disappointment to the lame man at first, but  
God had more to give.

ACTS 2:43 SPEAKS of the apostles' "wonders and signs," wrought in proof of the divine reality of the Christians' claim to be the people of God. This section gives one illustration of what is meant and contains a directory of evangelistic "method" which all Christians may profitably study. Luke's purpose, however, in recording the incident, is to indicate the important consequences which followed, leading to a rupture of the church with Judaism, as Jesus had foreseen (Mark 2:21-22).

The scene is laid at the Nicanor Gate of the Jerusalem temple, specially noted for its magnificence. Hence the title, Beautiful Gate. The impotent beggar is a picture of dire need, whose only virtue is an awareness of his sad condition. Peter's response is twofold, in what he said (3:4,6) and, no less important, in what he did (3:7). The action of the gospel matches the word of the gospel; and this is ever the pattern of meaningful evangelism.

The need is met (3:7) as the Name of Jesus Christ is invoked to release the power which attended his healing ministry in Galilee. So it is seen that the once crucified Jesus is alive, not only as an affirmation of faith or a statement of personal testimony (given in 2:32), but as a dynamic force at work in this world and effective in transforming the lives of those who call upon him. Similarly, the apostolic message which may have seemed to be so much talk

is invested with a new significance. Peter speaks “in the name of Jesus Christ”—and miracles happen. Cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:5, where the miracle-working accompaniment of Paul’s preaching was more in terms of a dedicated group of men than spectacular happenings as in this story. But is the “age of miracles” past?

**Note** 3:1: the Jews observed two hours of daily prayer. The “evening” one was at 3 p.m. 3:2: the Jewish historian Josephus describes this temple gate as one that “far exceeded in value those gates that were plated with silver and set in gold.” 3:6: what could not be bought with money is freely offered. The same phrase in 1 Peter 1:18, however, may point to a deeper meaning. Judaism was powerless to meet the beggar’s case; the gospel is able. 3:8: a fulfillment of Isaiah 35:6 and a sign that the Messianic age has arrived, according to Matthew 11:4-6. 3:10: there was no mistaking the identity, and so no possibility of explaining away the miracle.

THE MIRACLE IS ATTRIBUTED TO JESUS' NAME

## ACTS 3:11-16

The power of Jesus and faith in him brought the man's healing.

THE SEQUEL TO “a notable sign” (4:16) gives Peter a chance to improve the occasion with a speech which, in this passage, explains the reason for this event. Disclaiming all personal kudos (3:12), he attributes all the glory to God. More specifically, the grounds of the miracle are:

1. God's purpose in glorifying his servant Jesus (3:13);
2. the efficacy of Jesus' name, when invoked by his people and trusted by those in need; and
3. the presence of human faith (3:16, RSV is certainly helpful here, in what is at best a difficult verse).

This short section is rich in its teaching on God and his purposes in Christ. There is no disparity between God's revelation in both Old Testament and New Testament—he is still “the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob” to the New Testament writers as to our Lord (Mark 12:26). The person of Jesus is described in terms of Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant (Isaiah 52:13–53:12), once humiliated but now exalted (Isaiah 52:13 in the Greek Old Testament uses the same word as 3:13). His other titles bear witness to his blameless character, and have parallels in Old Testament and in the Inter-Testamental literature which expected a Deliverer for Israel. A more obscure

title is “the Author of life” (3:15) which is found again in Hebrews 2:10, which may suggest his eternal existence (as in John 5:26) or his ability to grant eternal life to his people (as in 1 John 5:11-12). Either way it is an expressive term, betraying a high estimate of his person; and in a paradox shows the wonder of his resurrection victory. “You killed him”—although he was the pioneer of life: “but God brought him back from death” (3:15). And he is still at work in healing the lame man.

**Notes** 3:11: Solomon’s colonnade lay to the east of the outer court, or court of the Gentiles, of the temple. 3:12: “stare,” a different word from that in 3:4. 3:13: a liturgical description of God, current in temple and synagogue worship. Possibly Peter had been reminded of it during the service. 3:13: “Servant,” admittedly the Greek word could mean “child” (as RSV margin), but the reference to Isaiah 52–53 seems clear. 3:16: a verse which in its obscurity shows that it is a translation from Peter’s original Aramaic language. “Prince of life” in 3:15 can equally mean in Aramaic “Prince of salvation,” which includes both bodily health and spiritual renewal.

PETER ADDRESSES HIS JEWISH HEARERS

ACTS 3:17-26

It is a simple rule that if we want to know God's blessing, we must repent and turn to him.

PETER ADDRESSES HIS Jewish hearers as:

1. those responsible, through their human leaders, for the Messiah's death (3:17); and
2. men who could be forgiven, because they acted in ignorance, if they reversed their attitude to Jesus (3:19), and could be included in the scope of God's saving purpose for Israel (3:20), declared first to their forefather Abraham (3:25-26).

Old Testament prophecy is again appealed to in order to show that the cross was part of a divine plan (3:18), and also that God's offer in sending Israel's Messiah, likened in 3:22 to a second Moses, is not to be trifled with (3:23). Indeed it is not simply that there are individual prophecies of his coming: the entire fabric of Old Testament Scripture is a preparation for the events which have recently taken place, Peter declares (3:24).

God's redeeming purpose began with Abraham whose family is blessed in succeeding generations (3:25). Ultimately, as Paul shows in Galatians, this promise will embrace the Gentiles (Galatians 3:6-9,29). But both apostles agree that the offer of Messianic salvation is sent "to the Jew first" (Romans

1:16: 3:26). This fact stamps all missionary work among the Jewish people with an importance which is unique.

**Notes** 3:17: a reference to Luke 23:34 seems intended. Who else “acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13)? 3:19-20: “times of refreshing” and the “establishing (of) all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets” go together, and relate to the full joys of the Messianic era, to be consummated at the return of Christ (3:20). 3:22: John’s Gospel enshrines references to this aspect of the Messianic hope, current among the Samaritans who awaited a “restorer” (John 4:19,25,29). 3:26: The verb speaks of Jesus’ mission, not his resurrection. He is God’s Servant as in Isaiah’s prophecy. Just possibly he may be likened to Isaac (3:25) whose “binding” (Genesis 22) was understood by the rabbis as atoning for sin.

PETER AND JOHN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

ACTS 4:1-12

If we are going to be saved, then it can only be through Jesus Christ.

SUCH AN OFFER as 3:26 contains seemed too good to be true. It gave the Jews a “second chance” and opened the door to God’s Messianic salvation. Many entered in (4:4). But the Jewish leaders were disturbed (4:2). Note what it was in the apostles’ preaching which upset them most (4:2). The Athenians found this also hard to accept (17:32); and it is still a rock of offense to modern minds.

The description, “a good deed,” is not boastfully made, for Peter’s explanation makes it clear that the risen Jesus is the Agent of healing (clearly in 4:10). Peter has thrown down the challenge to the Jewish religious leaders in an unmistakable way: Jesus is the Christ, and the Author of Messianic blessedness. The “good time coming,” yearned for by prophets and seers, has come in him. By his death and resurrection God has visited his people with his grace; and has reversed the verdict of those who cried, “Away with him” (Luke 23:18), prompted by the evil designs and accusations of their leaders (Mark 15:11). Peter’s vivid illustration of this reversal (4:11) would not be lost on those who remembered Jesus’ own teaching (Mark 12:10f.).

**Notes** 4:1: “captain of the temple” means probably a police official in charge of the soldiers who guarded the outer court and prevented Gentiles from crossing into the sacred (inner) enclosure. The Sadducees formed a Jewish party of aristocratic priestly leaders. They held a commanding place in the

temple's hierarchy and also in the governing body of legislature, the Sanhedrin. Conservative in belief, they objected to the doctrine of the resurrection (see Mark 12:18). Hence their twofold opposition to the apostolic ministry in the temple courts. 4:6: Annas was in fact the ex-high priest, but he continued to exert a considerable influence through his son-in-law Caiaphas (Luke 3:2). An important manuscript tradition (the Western text) gives Jonathan for John here. If this is correct, it refers to Jonathan, Annas' son, who succeeded Caiaphas as high priest in AD 36. Alexander is otherwise unknown to us. 4:7: the two terms "power" (Gk. *dynamis*) and "name" characterize the Church's early days. The apostles were powerful in word and work because they invoked a mighty Name (4:12: "name" carries its biblical sense of "revealed character," the person known to others. Cf. Exodus 34:5ff.). 4:11: the "stoneship" of Christ derives from Psalm 118:22 and is found in Romans 9:33; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6-7.

“ENCHANTED BUT NOT CHANGED”

## ACTS 4:13-22

The apostles had to put God and his truth before people’s opinions,  
and at the risk of further punishment.

ONE OF OSWALD Chambers’ studies is entitled “Enchanted but not changed”: the same description applies here. The leaders were impressed by:

1. the apostles’ boldness of speech, which they could not explain in view of their lack of rabbinical training; and
2. their likeness to Jesus himself who was for them no figure of the past but a personal presence whose spirit they had caught. He also had no formal rabbinical education (John 7:15).

But that was as far as it went. Reduced to silence by the incontrovertible evidence standing by (Luke’s gentle irony), yet unwilling to accept the logical consequence of the miracle and its significance (4:16) they rather tamely tried to quash the whole matter by muzzling the apostles (4:18). Men with a crusading and missionary zeal like Peter’s and John’s will never go meekly home and forget all about it! So they press home the unwelcome logic of 4:19-20. And further threats do not move them, either (4:21).

Of particular significance is 4:13. The Greek word means “forthright public speech”; for such a gift Paul prayed in Colossians 4:3-4 and Ephesians 6:19-20. Many a Christian preacher may very well emulate this, especially

when the temptation to compromise or water down the truth of God is strong. Commentators draw the parallel with Mark 14:67. “A servant-maid of Caiaphas recognizes Peter has been with Jesus because of his overwrought condition; her master comes to the same conclusion for a precisely opposite reason” (Findlay).

**Notes** 4:16: the miracle was common knowledge in the city and no one could deny it. At a deeper level, the failure of the authorities to challenge the apostles’ preaching of Jesus’ bodily resurrection is of tremendous interest. “The silence of the Jews is as significant as the speech of the Christians.” Why did they not produce the remains of his buried corpse, and silence the apostles for ever? The alleged mythical origins of Christianity as a slowly growing legend, wrapped in obscurity, and a hole-in-the-corner affair are frankly incredible. See Acts 26:26; 2 Peter 1:16. 4:17: how did Luke know what the Council said? The answer may lie in Acts 6:7; or 26:10; or through Gamaliel to Saul of Tarsus, 22:3. 4:19: “listen to” has the common Old Testament meaning of “obey” (see Deuteronomy 6:4). Socrates gave an almost identical reply to his accusers. The freedom of the conscience is a foundation-stone of all morality. The tragedy is that over-zealous religious folk often deny it to those from whom they differ. 4:22: his age shows that he was a responsible witness (cf. John 9:21).

THE PRAYER OF THE BELIEVERS

ACTS 4:23-31

Instead of keeping quiet, the apostles asked for further strength and courage.

THE CHURCH WHICH meets us in the pages of the New Testament is a worshiping and witnessing community of believing men and women. The passage in these verses gives a notable example of corporate prayer, offered by the church as it welcomed back the apostles from their interrogation by the Jewish Council (4:23). The same verb, translated “reported,” is found at 14:27 at the close of the first missionary journey. What was the church’s reaction then?

Three thoughts are suggested by the record of this earnest petition:

1. Its scriptural language (4:24-26) both in the invocation of God as Creator of the world and (therefore) in control of human destiny, and in the citation of Psalm 2. The fulfillment of this ancient text is seen in the recent events which had brought Jesus to his cross (4:27), and incidentally stirred up the hostility of the authorities to the first preaching of the message. Yet Christians took comfort from the fact that all these events were under divine control (4:28). There may be incidents in the church’s struggle and hardships; but there are no accidents. Romans 8:28 is still the great sheet-anchor of faith.

2. The specific request which the church voiced (4:29-30) is related to the need of the hour. Some people find difficulty in justifying this type of prayer by suggesting that God is not interested in our trivial needs. Paul, however, found no such objection: see Philippians 4:6.
3. A spectacular consequence followed (4:31) as the Hearer of prayer answered the need with the Holy Spirit's presence and strengthening power. The very thing they asked for (4:29) God gave—as Jesus had promised (John 14:13-14).

**Notes** 4:23: Christian footsteps knew the way back to their friends. 4:24: to the RSV refs. add Nehemiah 9:6; Isaiah 42:5; Jeremiah 32:17 (especially). 4:25: Psalm 2 was one of the Messianic passages in current use (especially Psalm 2:7). It is quoted again at the Lord's baptism (Mark 1:11) in conjunction with Isaiah 42:1—a "servant" passage. 4:27,30 also connect Jesus with the Servant of God. His "Christhood" (4:27: "thou didst anoint") is that of God's obedient Servant and royal Son, destined to have universal dominion.

THE BELIEVERS SHARE THEIR POSSESSIONS

ACTS 4:32-37

Again we're told that the group—now numbering several thousand—really cared for one another.

THIS IS ANOTHER summary of what life was like for the earliest Christian company. Body, mind and spirit were involved. For the first, there was a pooling of material resources. Was this a good thing, do you suppose, involving as it did the liquidation of capital assets (4:34,37)? And was it the cause of the poverty of the Jerusalem church in later years (Acts 11:29: 2 Corinthians 8:9)? Luke is content simply to report the facts as a proof of Christian concern for the well-being of all, at least for the immediate future, and as a lesson in generosity.

The unanimity of the church is marvelously portrayed in the words “of one heart and soul” (4:32), fulfilling Jeremiah 32:39. And this oneness of mind is the more striking in view of the growth of the church. The term “company” is literally “the multitude” (RV), an evidence of the rapid expansion of the gospel’s influence.

On a spiritual level, 4:33 testifies to the effectiveness of their ministry. Note again the central doctrine in the preaching and witnessing. Is it prominent in the church’s proclamation today?

Joseph or Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, is picked out for special mention. He is related to John Mark (Colossians 4:10); and Acts 12:12 may indicate the family connection in Jerusalem where he owned some land. He

sold this estate and, turning the asset into money, brought the purchase-price as a gift to the common fund. By this introduction the way is prepared for the later part which he will play in the missionary outreach of the church (Acts 9:27; 13:2).

Looking back over this section, we may ask one or two questions, to which no settled answer is possible, but which provoke our thinking. Was it an expectation of the Lord's near return which motivated the selling of land and houses—and perhaps therefore the teaching to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:6-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:1ff.) was a needed corrective? What were the specific aids to Christian unity which these believers used? Fellowship in prayer and service; an agreed gospel message and apostolic teaching; a common meal, at which their unity was symbolically expressed (1 Corinthians 10:17)? *How* did the apostles give their testimony (4:33)?

**Note** 4:36: Barnabas' name means strictly speaking "son of Nebo" = son of the prophet. The Greek term for "prophecy," however, includes encouragement (1 Corinthians 14:3).

## ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

### ACTS 5:1-11

The frightening results are a reminder to them, and to us, that sin is serious and that you can't play around with God.

JUST AS THE idyllic setting of the first man was destroyed by sin's presence, and its effect in Cain's crime, so the fair beauty of the church's life was spoiled by unworthy members. Their sin lay not in keeping back part of their proceeds (as 5:4 makes clear), but in trying to deceive others (and God!) that they were in fact more generous than they were. They pretended to give all—the full price of their property—but they had kept back a portion for their own use (5:2,8). Their sin was one of vain pretension and hypocrisy; their unholy motive was discerned by Peter (5:4) whose stern verdict (5:4b) had a startling effect (5:5). Peter is no less severe with Sapphira, although he does give her a chance to confess and put things right (5:8).

“To our minds the whole tone of the story seems un-Christian.” So one commentator passes his judgment of this passage, while others find it “frankly repulsive.” How would you justify Peter's severe actions? Indeed, how would any of us escape, if our hidden motives and secret sins were laid bare and openly punished (Psalm 130:3)?

Certain features should be kept in mind in interpreting this passage:

1. Peculiar significance attaches to this sin because it is the *first* recorded offense in the “new creation”;

2. These early days of church history were charged with a vivid awareness of God's presence. Ananias and Sapphira really *believed* what Peter said; and reaped an immediate harvest of their deed (Galatians 6:7);
3. Paul's teaching is that there is something worse than physical death which may be a chastening experience to bring the soul to its true repentance (1 Corinthians 5:5; 11:30-32; 1 Timothy 1:20);
4. Church discipline meant far more in the early church than it does to us today. It may be significant that the word "church" occurs for the first time in Acts at verse 11.

**Notes** 5:3: this explains the gravity of Ananias' act (cf. 5:4,9). 5:6: these young men may have been public buriers (like undertakers' assistants today). Cf. Ezekiel 39:12-16.

## MIRACULOUS POWERS

### ACTS 5:12-21a

Some people respected the believers but were frightened of joining them; others reduced the whole thing to magic. Most important, many believed.

VERSES 12-16. GOD accredited the apostles as his true servants by accompanying gifts of power and healing miracles. Paul later claimed the same credentials (Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:12). Some suggest that these miraculous powers served a limited function (ie to accredit the apostolic gospel) and were then withdrawn, as B.B. Warfield taught. For others, they are an available accompaniment of the gospel preaching in every age.

5:13 is a puzzle, as it stands; and it is not easy to connect the popularity of the young movement with the statement that “none of the rest dared join them.” The last verb may carry the sense, “meddle, interfere”; and some scholars wish, with a slight alteration, to read “Levites” for “the rest”: “but no one of the Levites dared to interfere with them” by preventing them from holding their meetings in the temple courts. But the text may mean simply that, in spite of the believers’ popularity with the people, those who were attracted to them hesitated to join them because of the judgment-power on insincere motives and hidden sins (exemplified in the case of Ananias and Sapphira). But it must be conceded that verse 14 hardly reads as a natural sequel to this thought.

5:15. Peter's healing shadow is not a piece of superstition or magic. Luke doesn't actually say that the apostle's shadow healed, but that the people associated with it the presence of a man of God and, therefore, God's presence. Cf. 19:12.

5:17-21 report another outburst of opposition from official Jewry. The Sadducees (as at 4:1-2) are again the active fomenters of trouble. Why was it that this Jewish party was stirred to hostility?

**Notes** 5:12: see 3:11 for this part of the temple: a spot hallowed by Jesus' earlier ministry (John 10:23). 5:14: cf. 2:47. 5:15: "pallets," like the one used in the story of Mark 2:4ff. 5:17: the phrase sums up the composition (along with the Pharisees, in 5:34) of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish legislature. 5:19: angelic deliverance of this sort will be more fully described in 12:7ff. Paul, too, was released from prison in remarkable circumstances (16:25ff.). 5:20: "life" and "salvation" both translate the same Aramaic word.

**To think over** Do we remember in prayer enough those imprisoned contemporary Christian leaders for whom there is no supernatural release?

WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN

## ACTS 5:21b-32

Faced with opposition, Peter and the others did not soften what they had to say.

VERSES 21B-26. THE Sanhedrin had evidently expected a full arraignment of the apostles, and a summons to bring them out for trial was issued (5:21). To the dismay of their foes and captors, the apostles had disappeared and could not be traced anywhere—until it became all too apparent that they had not fled into safe hiding, nor slunk away in abject fear, but were to be found and heard in a public place (5:25). There is gentle irony here, as Luke records the reactions of those concerned.

5:27-32 give both the command to desist from preaching and the reply that Peter's conscience found this injunction intolerable. The accusation which the high priest makes reminds us of what the Jews said in Matthew 27:25, and shows how widespread the gospel's influence was spreading, much to the consternation of the Jewish leaders who saw their own place being undermined. We may recall a similar fear about the effect of Jesus' ministry (John 11:48).

The brave response of Peter, again spokesman for the rest, in the face of such a threat, is quite in character—that is, in line with the new Peter, who has shed his pre-Easter cowardice and has received a baptism of the Spirit's courage and strength. He repeats his earlier affirmation of loyalty to God

(4:19) and proceeds to give the urgent reason why his voice cannot be silenced.

5:30. “Raised” refers to the sending of Jesus to Israel (as in 3:26); the resurrection is mentioned in the next verse. “A tree” = the cross of Calvary is meant, but the implication is clear. Jesus died under a curse (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:13) voluntarily assumed for the sake of sinners, as Peter was later to teach (1 Peter 2:24).

The story of Jesus is told again in its impressive simplicity: “God sent him to Israel as their Messiah; the Jewish leaders rejected him and engineered his crucifixion; God stepped in, and reversed this judgment of condemnation by raising him from the dead and installing him as a life-giving Savior; we are the eyewitnesses of these facts under the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit.” How succinct and compelling is this statement! Note the effect it had.

**Notes** 5:21b: the “and” explains what follows. Translate “the council, that is, all the senate.” 5:28: the high priest refrains from saying whose name it is. 5:31: see on 3:15. Cf. Luke 24:47f. which includes the note of witness (in 5:32). The apostles were fulfilling their commission to the letter.

THE ADVICE OF GAMALIEL

ACTS 5:33-42

If we try to crush what God has planned, we are taking on God himself.

AT PENTECOST THE reaction to Peter's gospel call was penitent acceptance; here it is enraged hatred and refusal. The gospel is ever a divider of people (see 2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

The intervention and speech of Gamaliel offers an interesting sidelight. Its first effect was to save the apostles from their fate (5:33). Gamaliel was a Pharisaic member of the council, and greatly esteemed. He belonged to the liberal wing of his party, as a disciple of Rabbi Hillel and was the teacher of Saul of Tarsus (22:3), who quite probably supplied Luke with the information here recorded.

His policy speech is typically Pharisaic in temper and content. It picks up the leading point in their theology—that God rules the world by a wise providence which is over all. “Everything is in the hand of heaven, except the fear of heaven,” the rabbis taught. That is, all is under divine control, but man is required to obey God and leave the issues with him.

Two notable uprisings had already proved abortive, Gamaliel reminded them. Let the new movement work itself out; if it is not of God, it is bound to fail, as did the Messianic rebellions of Theudas and Judas the Galilean. If God is really in it, no human opposition can break it. Is this really a valid

argument (a) to test early Christianity and (b) to test later movements in the history of the church?

5:38. The counsel is “wait and see,” but at least one of Gamaliel’s students was not willing to accept this restraint. See 8:3.

**Notes** 5:36: there was a rebel named Theudas whose disaffection against Rome was crushed in AD 44–46, according to Josephus. But this is an impossible identification, for at the time of Gamaliel’s speech it had not happened. The name Theudas was common, and it is likely that an earlier (pre-AD 6, when Judas of Galilee was defeated, 5:37) uprising is referred to. 5:37: the census in this verse occurred in AD 6–7, but is not the one mentioned in Luke 2:2, which was before 4 BC. 5:41: “the name,” almost a substitute word for their Christian principles and faith, as in 3 John 7.

**To think over** How may we know where loyalty to civil and religious authority ceases in obedience to a higher allegiance? See Romans 13:1f.; 1 Peter 2:12-17.

## THE CHOOSING OF THE SEVEN MEN

### ACTS 6:1-7

Two of the men chosen for this mundane task became effective evangelists. By laying hands on them, the apostles set them apart for the job.

TODAY'S VERSES SKETCH the background to an important innovation in the early church. Within the Jerusalem community where (a) a pooling of material resources was practiced (2:44f.; 4:34f.) and (b) the influx of new converts was a notable feature (5:14; 6:7), dissension arose over precisely these two developments, as 6:1 makes plain. The church, moreover, was divided on a cultural and linguistic basis, one side holding fast to its Palestinian tradition and speaking Aramaic, the other side being more open to the influences of Greek culture and using that language. Hence the two terms, "Hebrews" and "Hellenists." In later years this difference of emphasis hardened into clear opposition. The Hebrew Christians were fearful that a denial of the Law would lead to a relaxed morality; the more liberal Hellenistic Jewish believers saw the opportunities for missionary expansion, and under Stephen and Paul caught the vision of a worldwide Christian church, reaching out to all nations.

6:2. The duties of the seven men are given as "serving tables." This is usually taken to mean some financial work in connection with the common fund. But it may be that they were to have responsibility for the agape-meal (see note on 2:46) or love-feast, which also meant the task of sharing out the

food to the poor (6:1). Of the seven in verse 5, two are more renowned for their preaching ministry. Which two? Notice the exemplary spiritual qualification needed.

The matter of the allotment of funds to needy widows was immediately attended to by the apostles. They gave the Hellenists a share in the administration, for, to judge from their names (6:5), all seven men belonged to that wing of the fellowship. They were commissioned with the full blessing of the Twelve (6:6).

**Notes** 6:5: all have Greek-sounding names; one of them was not a born Jew, namely Nicolaus, a proselyte = a convert to Judaism. 6:6: the people chose and appointed the men, often called “deacons” (in view of the description in 1 Timothy 3:8-13); the apostles confirmed the choice by a solemn rite of ordination, after the Jewish pattern of “setting apart.”

STEPHEN IS SEIZED

## ACTS 6:8–7:1

When God is at work, we must expect the devil to spread lies about his workers.

THE MOST PROMINENT member of the “seven” who were appointed to represent the Hellenists was Stephen. He is a key figure in early Christian history, chiefly because of the powerful grasp that he had of the universal character of the gospel which went beyond all national and racial boundaries. For that reason, his speech is reported in detail.

In these verses Stephen is introduced. His personal “charm” (6:8) and effective ministry (6:8) are mentioned. He stood in a true apostolic succession (cf. the wording here with 5:12). His opponents, drawn from a synagogue which called itself “a meeting-place for Freedmen” and who represented Hellenistic Jews from the world of the Dispersion, challenged him to debate. When they failed to answer him by fair means, they resorted to foul (6:11-12). Moses (6:11) came to stand for all that was holiest and most valued in rabbinic religion. Hence to deny him was to strike at the divine authority and validity of the entire Jewish system. This was a radical attack on Judaism, which the earlier apostles had not made (cf. Peter’s observance of the temple worship).

The indictment was the same as that which was brought against Jesus: a remarkable fact, and one further proof of the continuity of the witness against

Judaism, begun by the Lord and maintained by his servants who had grasped the inner meaning of his mission (Mark 2:21-22).

But false witnesses sometimes correctly hint at the truth. It is quite likely that he had spoken out against the sacrificial system, the venerable place of the temple and the final authority of the Law—to judge from his later speech in chapter 7. He certainly made it clear that God’s ultimate word was to be found in Jesus, not Moses (6:14). That was a blasphemous remark in any Jew’s ears (6:11).

**Notes** 6:8: “grace” in Luke can often mean “graciousness” (Luke 4:22). 6:9: the place names indicate the original homes of men who had either received their civil freedom and citizenship or inherited it from their fathers. Saul of Tarsus is a notable instance of such a case (22:28). 6:10: cf. Luke 21:15. 6:14: Stephen had evidently perceived the inner significance of the Lord’s promise (in John 2:19-21), and the thought of a new temple (Ephesians 2:20f.; 1 Peter 2:5). 6:15: his face, no less than Moses’ (Exodus 34:29f.), shone with a heavenly glow.

## STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

### ACTS 7:2-29

It may not seem that Stephen was saying much in this long account of history, but he was laying the foundation for his words at the end.

WHAT STEPHEN SAID to the Jewish council is sometimes called his defense (ie an answer to the legal charges brought against him); but it is clearly more of an *apology*—that is, a statement of the teaching which had led to his arrest and prosecution. And as his doctrine touched the vital questions of Judaism's validity and his own "blasphemy" against God, his address turns out to be an *apologia* for his own life.

There are three chief ideas which his lengthy re-telling of the Old Testament story is designed to emphasize:

1. the Jewish people, throughout their long history, have been inveterately rebellious against God and his accredited messengers;
2. God does not live in, nor does he desire, a material and fixed shrine. His presence is not confined to sacred sites, but accompanies his people, who are to be always a "pilgrim church" on earth; and
3. as a subsidiary theme, the Jewish people have not only rebelled against God and their leaders, they have consistently rejected the saviors whom God sent to them—the outstanding proof of this trait is to be seen in their recent rejection of their Messiah.

In Egypt Joseph was God's answer to the threat of patriarchal extinction; but he suffered much indignity at the hands of his brothers (7:9). Moses, too, in a later period appeared as a heaven-sent deliverer, but he met opposition and misunderstanding (7:23ff.).

So far Stephen has been patiently laying the foundations of his argument. Later, he will draw some unwelcome conclusions, as far as his hearers are involved.

**Notes** 7:2: the call to Abraham, given in verse 3, is placed *before* his removal to Haran. Genesis 11:31ff. give it *after* his arrival there; but Genesis 15:7 shows that God was responsible for his leaving Ur, and this implies some communication with the patriarch. 7:6: "aliens"—a theme throughout the speech" (F.F. Bruce). Cf. Hebrews 11:8-16. 7:14: the Hebrew text of Genesis 46:27; Exodus 1:5; Deuteronomy 10:22 gives the number as seventy; but the Septuagint reads seventy-five. 7:20: an addition to the Old Testament account found in Philo. 7:22: again, extra-biblical sources (Josephus, Philo) comment on the wisdom and accomplishments of Moses in Egypt. Stephen shows acquaintance with these traditions.

STEPHEN'S SPEECH ON ISRAEL'S HISTORY

ACTS 7:30-53

Even in a hostile and threatening situation, Stephen didn't move from what he knew to be the truth.

STEPHEN'S RECITAL OF Israel's history continues. The purpose of the long paragraph on Moses' call by God and his unique place as both deliverer (7:30-36) and lawgiver (7:37-38) is simply to show that Moses, of all Israel's national figures, enjoyed divine appointment and authority. But, in spite of these clear signs of attestation from God, he met with opposition and disbelief. Notice the asides which Stephen cleverly inserts (7:25,35,39).

A further indication of the failure of the Jewish nation, even when blessed with such an outstanding man of God as Moses, is given in the positive act of idolatry and apostasy which they committed (7:40-41,53). It was bad enough that they rebelled against Moses; it was far worse that they lapsed into flagrant idol worship and astrology (7:42).

At the same time as they practiced a heathen worship, they imagined that God could be localized in a man-made shrine (built by Solomon, 7:47), and, further, they contrived to placate God by a multitude of sacrifices. Both these errors indicate bad religion, as the eighth-century prophets in Israel were quick to expose. But this prophetic protest went unheeded.

Stephen found the same hard core of resistance in his hearers; and his impassioned peroration (7:51-53) drove home the personal application in the

light of the ample evidence. What precise points in his speech made them so angry (7:54)?

**Notes** 7:34: with God's summons to send him to Pharaoh, Moses is thus uniquely qualified (7:35) and his later exploits demonstrated his authority from God (7:36). 7:37: see 3:22. 7:39: Stephen indicts the *motive* which inspired the worship of the golden calf. 7:42: cf. Romans 1:24,26,28 for this fearful sentence. 7:42-43 are quoted from a Greek translation of Amos 5:25ff. This explains the difference in wording from our English version. 7:44: God's intention is expressed in the making of a mobile tent (suitable for a pilgrim people); the permanent structure of Solomon's temple was a second-best, for reasons given in Isaiah 66:1f. 7:51: as the unfaithful Jews did, according to Isaiah 63:10. 7:52: cf. Matthew 23:29-37. "The Righteous One" is a name for the Messiah (3:14).

THE STONING OF STEPHEN

ACTS 7:54–8:1a

Even while they were furious at being charged by their prisoner,  
Stephen passed on to them this glimpse of Christ in glory.

A COLORLESS NEUTRALITY was impossible in view of the forthright declarations in Stephen's speech. The violent language of 7:54 makes it clear that he had touched his hearers on a tender spot and they reacted by cutting short his sermon in an outburst of rage.

Stephen's vision (7:55) is full of meaning, and gives the key to his whole thought. He sees the exalted Jesus as victorious Son of Man, destined like the celestial figure of Daniel 7:13ff. to possess world-dominion, and worthy of worship. Here is the clear statement of Stephen's Christology: he "saw that the Messiah was on the throne of the Universe" (W. Manson), and so by implication the Head of a worldwide church. His characteristic name for Jesus is "Lord," which has the same implication, and he calls upon him in prayer (so confessing his place within the Godhead).

Note the one final "blasphemy"—from their point of view—which called forth the murderous spite of 7:57-58.

Stephen died, like his Master, with a prayer of committal and forgiveness on his lips (Luke 23:34,46). His death was probably more a lynching than a judicial execution for blasphemy; there was no trial, and Jewish law had an elaborate arrangement to safeguard the guilty person, accused of blasphemy and therefore condemned to death by stoning, if he should recant or if a

witness for the defense should suddenly appear on the scene. Then the stoning must be stopped. It seems clear that no such precautions were made for Stephen's benefit and he fell victim to the mob violence of an uncontrolled crowd. The most impressionable person in this sordid scene seems to have been Saul, who both looked after the witnesses' clothes—these witnesses for the prosecution were to carry out the sentence, according to Leviticus 24:14; Deuteronomy 17:7 (cf. John 8:7)—and, by his complicity, agreed with the rough “justice” meted out. He never forgot this awful sight (Acts 22:20), and his personal involvement in such violence (1 Timothy 1:13). Yet this martyrdom may have been the turning point in his life, as Augustine believed: “If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Saul.”

**Notes** 7:59-60: the links with Luke's Passion story are important. He has captured the spirit of the dying Jesus, who rises to greet the first Christian martyr. Contrast 2 Chronicles 24:22.

## THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

### ACTS 8:1b-8

God used trouble and persecution to open up the next phase of his plan: he wants all people everywhere to hear the good news.

AS A DIRECT consequence of Stephen's speech and its sequel, an anti-Christian outbreak scattered the Jerusalem church. Why were the apostles exempt from this (8:1c)?

Some slight relief comes in the record of the kindly action of some Jews (or Jewish-Christians, 8:2) who buried Stephen, thus showing their abhorrence of this deed. By stark contrast, Saul felt no such regret—or, if he did, he silenced the voice of conscience by redoubling his efforts against the church (8:3).

8:4-8 take the reader into Samaria, the scene of Christian activity under the ministry of Philip, one of the "seven" (6:5). Again it is the Hellenistic-Christian representative who blazes a trail of evangelism outside Judea, and it is a further step in the onward and outward march of Christ's kingdom, according to the programme of 1:8.

"A city of Samaria" was probably Gitta, where, according to an early Christian (Justin Martyr, who was a native of Samaria), Simon Magus (8:9) was born. Some features of evangelism in such a situation are recorded: the proclamation of the message which centered in the Messiah (8:5); the evidential accompaniment of signs (8:6-7) both in exorcism of foul spirits and in bodily healings—note that these two aspects seem to be distinguished;

and an upsurge of spiritual “joy,” as a direct gift of the Holy Spirit according to Romans 14:17; 15:13; Galatians 5:22.

**Consider** how far these features are to be expected today in the church’s evangelistic work. Are they in fact found in your church?

**Notes** 8:1: persecution leads to further expansion on the principle that (a) “the blood of the martyrs is seed” (Tertullian); and (b) dispersed Christians share their faith over a wider area. The Greek verb in 8:4 is the farmer’s word for sowing seed across a field. Collect some of the New Testament passages on the theme of sowing and reaping, like Mark 4; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Galatians 6:7-10; 2 Timothy 2:6. 8:2: “devout men” is a term usually associated with Jews (as 2:5; Luke 2:25), but occasionally it is used of Jewish-Christians (22:12). 8:3: “laid waste,” lit. “ravage” or even “savage”—the lexicon gives it in regard to a wild beast’s tearing at a carcass. There are four references in the epistles to Saul’s persecuting zeal. Can you discover them? One is given in the previous portion.

SIMON THE SORCEROR

ACTS 8:9-24

Simon was a fraud who hadn't grasped that the gospel was free and had to be accepted as a gift.

VERSES 9-13 CONCENTRATE on one special case among the multitudes (8:6) who showed interest in Philip's preaching and healing. Simon had already acquired a reputation before Philip appeared (8:10-11), and quite likely saw his popularity about to wane and his livelihood to be in danger by his competitor's success. He therefore suggested an alliance, and feigned belief (8:12-13; but 8:21 is clear on his motive) even to the extent of openly identifying himself with the Christian cause.

8:14-24 show how Simon fared when the apostles came to visit Samaria. Note the purpose of their coming. And what followed in regard to those Samaritans who had professed faith in Christ. Were they believers *before* Peter and John laid hands on them?

The clash between Peter and Simon well illustrates the spiritual gift of percipience which the apostle had (see 5:3-4). Simon betrays his secret motive in a request for the Holy Spirit's power as though it were like a piece of magic (8:19). He wanted the power to enhance his own reputation as a wonder-worker. Peter tartly refuses, and speaks right to the point (8:20-23). Verse 23 means in modern language: "I see you are still an unconverted reprobate" (J.A. Findlay)—so much for his earlier profession of belief and his acceptance of baptism! Simon's reaction is vague (8:24), but probably it

means a weak plea to escape punishment, like King Saul's (1 Samuel 24:16; 26:21).

**Notes** 8:9: Simon the magician plays an important rôle in early Christian literature as the father of heresy. 8:10: means that he regarded himself as the unique agent of "the supreme God" (probably a syncretistic name for God in some Oriental-Greek religions). 8:13: was he sincere, or (as suggested above) a charlatan? Lucian was later to write about such bogus "believers" who traded upon simple Christians and made an easy living that way. 8:14: John had been to Samaria before (cf. Luke 9:54). 8:15: for other sequences of believing, baptizing and receiving the Spirit, see Acts 10:44ff.; 19:5f.; Ephesians 1:13. 8:16: "it"—RSV needs correction here. The Holy Spirit is a Person. 8:17: this has been called a Samaritan "Pentecost" (by G.W.H. Lampe), and apostolic authorization is thus given to a new phase of the church's outreach as "a new nucleus of the missionary Church has been established" (Lampe).

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

ACTS 8:25-40

Making Christ known to others isn't the haphazard thing we sometimes make it! God has his plan and we fit into it.

THE CHURCH'S LEADERS leave Samaria (8:25) once their mission is achieved. Philip, however, received a direct summons to keep a lonely rendezvous on the Gaza road (8:26). The other party in the interview was a well-connected courtier, an official in the service of the Candace (a hereditary title borne by Ethiopian queens; "Ethiopia" = Nubia). At Jerusalem, where, probably as a "God-fearer" (see comment on 10:2f.), he had worshiped Israel's God, he had also acquired a scroll of the book of Isaiah in Greek. The ensuing conversation proceeds by the method of question and answer. Note the three queries which the Ethiopian expresses (8:31,34,36). The evangelist's answers are straightforward and of immediate help (a lesson here for all Christian counselors today). Philip becomes the interpreter of Scripture, the evangelist with a single text (8:35), and the baptizer of a new convert (8:38).

The Spirit of God who first directed Philip's footsteps (8:26: here called "an angel of the Lord") and gave him accurate guidance to the place of human need (8:29) now separates the two men (8:39). Why?

**Notes** 8:26: "desert" may refer to Gaza, in which case the road ran from Jerusalem to Old Gaza, destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 BC and in ruins at that time. 8:27: Ethiopia is not the modern Abyssinia, but North Sudan. 8:32-33: a citation from the Suffering Servant poems in Isaiah, interpreted

by Philip as fulfilled in Jesus' life and death, following the example of Jesus' own application of these passages to his ministry (eg Mark 10:45). 8:35: "opened his mouth"—rabbinical idiom for a lecture on Scripture. 8:36: some instruction on faith and baptism is clearly implied, leading to the eunuch's request. 8:37 is relegated to the RSV margin as an addition of the Western text. It represents, however, an early baptismal procedure of interrogation and response of faith. Notice the "creed" which the eunuch confessed. 8:39: the same Western text adds a reference to the Holy Spirit's coming on the new believer. 8:40: in a walking trance, Philip came to himself at Azotus—was it a spiritual elation which upheld him?

**Meditation** Consider Philip as "the evangelist" (21:8).

## THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

### ACTS 9:1-9

Paul saw the truth for the first time in his life.

SAUL OF TARSUS, briefly introduced at 7:58, now re-appears in what is a turning-point in the narrative of Acts. Indeed, what this section describes is the turning-point in the life of this man, destined to become the dominant character in the remainder of Luke's history as the divinely chosen apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:16). The Lord's intention in 9:15 is the key to what is written in today's portion. And it is indisputable that "What happened on the Damascus road is the most important event in the history of Christianity from Pentecost to our own day" (F.F. Bruce).

The right of extradition was given to the high priest by the Roman authorities; and Saul had already shown promise as an able persecutor of the Christians (8:3).

The encounter with the living Christ is told with a simplicity and naturalness of any reported conversation (9:4-6) but the circumstance of both the vision and the voice are altogether remarkable. Which Old Testament prophet(s) received a heavenly summons by what they saw of God's glory and what they heard from the heavenly throne?

The "light from heaven" (9:3) outshone the noon sun (22:6; 26:13) and is a frequent Old Testament symbol of the divine presence. The voice (9:4) has a counterpart in the rabbinic *bath qol* (lit. the daughter of voice) by which when God speaks in heaven an echo of his voice is heard on earth. The

supernaturalness of what Saul saw and heard is clear. His companions were arrested (9:7), but only Saul was able to understand the *meaning* of what the voice said (9:7 is expanded in 22:9) and whom the vision represented. Moreover, only he was affected by the excess of light (22:11).

Not much was revealed at that time to the future apostle (9:6); but he was “a new man in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:17) from that moment. In that brief encounter his past life flashed before him—a thought he could never efface (1 Timothy 1:12-14); and his terrible crime of wounding the Christ in his people appeared in a heinous light—which again he always remembered (1 Corinthians 8:12). Above all, this was his moment with the living Lord who called him by name (John 10:3,14) and was answered “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (9:6 in KJV which translates an inferior text, but the thought is found in 22:10).

ANANIAS AND SAUL

ACTS 9:10-19a

Ananias is naturally fearful, but he so trusts the Lord that he can lovingly address his enemy as a Christian brother.

EVERYTHING WE LEARN about Ananias, the Jewish-Christian disciple (22:12), is commendable and edifying. He is human enough to express incredulity that such a notorious arch-enemy as Saul should have been converted (9:13-14), but believing enough to go without hesitation and fear (9:17) upon the Lord's errand, and charitable enough to greet his former persecutor as "Brother Saul," a word which would have stuck in the throat of any lesser man than Ananias. Ananias goes down in history as the first Christian influence on a newly awakened Saul by what he said (9:17) and what he did (9:12,18; 22:14-16)—the first-in-line of men and women to whom Paul later paid tribute as his predecessors in the faith (Romans 16:7). The formative influences we receive in the first days of our Christian life greatly influence our subsequent future. Hence the exacting rôle of Ananias which he performed admirably. Two visions, one conveying instructions to Ananias of what he was to do, and the other making known to the blinded Saul the person he was to expect, brought the two men together. Moreover, Saul would be recognized by what he was doing in Judas' house. Note what it was (9:11).

Saul's future destiny is carefully described in 9:15, which strikes the notes which the later record will amplify: he will fulfill a ministry, like that of

Isaiah's elect Servant, and bring the news of salvation to the Gentiles (13:47, quoting Isaiah 49:6), but the price to be paid will be costly (9:16). Colossians 1:24 and his ultimate martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:6 looks forward to this) tell us something of that cost.

**Note** 9:12: the "laying on of hands" was a Jewish rite with many meanings. Here the sense is one of solemn ordination or setting apart for God's service (as Jewish rabbis were ordained). The gift of the Holy Spirit (9:17) is associated with this commissioning, but the Head of the Church alone can impart this, as 26:16 and Ephesians 4:7 make clear. In any case Ananias was no priest! He seems to have administered the baptism (22:16).

## SAUL IN DAMASCUS

### ACTS 9:19b-25

“Are you a converted Jew?” a Hebrew-Christian was once asked.  
“No,” he replied, “I am a completed Jew.” So Paul preached.

VERSES 19B-25 SHOW how seriously Paul took his new vocation as a man “saved to serve.” Mark the word “immediately” (9:20). Where does the record of Galatians 1:15ff. fit in to this period? The answer is supplied in 2 Corinthians 11:32. See below.

The preaching of the Christian apostle is set in the synagogue, which may be a little surprising. Yet Saul was a Jewish rabbi, albeit now converted to the Messiah, and entitled to address the assembled congregation at their worship. Saul’s first opportunities came in this way, during his first missionary tour (13:14ff.). The rift came at 18:4-7. Some idea of what Saul said in these messages is given in 9:20,22: Jesus as Son of God (in the sense of Psalm 2:7; the enthroned Messianic King, and Romans 1:3-4: a pre-Pauline confessional formula) and the true Messiah of Israel who fulfilled the prophecies.

9:23-25 describe the first of the many hazards to which his life was exposed. Perhaps we should insert before these verses a departure for “Arabia,” inhabited by the Nabatean Arabs. Their leader was Aretas, who heard something of his ministry in his kingdom as Saul preached to the Nabateans (Galatians 1:17). When he returned to Damascus, Aretas’ ethnarch was instructed to seize him with the help of evilly disposed Jews in the city (9:23). But Saul too had his helpers, called “his disciples,” since his powers

of leadership were already being felt, who assisted his escape through a hole in the city wall (2 Corinthians 11:33).

**Note** 9:21: titles for early Christian believers are interesting. Those “who called on this Name” (cf. 9:14) means men and women devoted to the worship and service of Jesus as their God. The exact expression comes from the Old Testament—eg Genesis 21:33 –and lasted on into the Pauline church vocabulary (1 Corinthians 1:2). The title “saints” (9:13), meaning “dedicated to God’s service,” is mainly employed in describing the Jerusalem community (Romans 15:26).

## SAUL IN JERUSALEM

### ACTS 9:26-31

Saul went back to his old friends to share the good news with them, only to discover they didn't want to be friends any more.

VERSES 26-30. THIS short paragraph is full of men and movement. Saul, the Jerusalem disciples and their leaders, the apostles, Barnabas and Hellenistic Jews are mentioned; and from the parallel account in Galatians 1:18-24 we can identify the apostles as Peter and James the Lord's brother.

Saul removes from Damascus to Jerusalem (9:26) where he meets a natural suspicion on the part of those who only recently had cause to fear his bitter persecution (8:3; 9:21). How could they trust his motives? He finds an advocate in Barnabas (9:27), who disarms all criticism on the score that:

1. Saul had met the risen Lord who spoke to him—observe the naturalness of this conversion-description.
2. He had “won his spurs” in his bold witnessing for Christ at Damascus. Saul could never turn back now.

His further movements at Jerusalem are recorded. “The words ‘coming in and going out’ at Jerusalem do not mean that he visited places outside the city, but that he moved about freely and fearlessly in and out of houses in the city” (McNeile-Williams); and continued an intrepid ministry of forthright proclamation. His approach to the Greek-speaking Jews, however, met with

some opposition. Like Stephen before him, he found himself embroiled in religious controversy (the bitterest sort of controversy!) (9:29: “disputed” is the same verb as in 6:9). Not for the first time (9:23), his life was threatened. Again, Christian friends came to his aid, and conducted him to Caesarea, the Mediterranean sea-town. Thence he sailed to his home city of Tarsus in Cilicia (Galatians 1:21). I wonder what his family and their friends would have made of him at this time, as he did according to Mark 5:19. 9:31: Paul leaves the stage at this point, later to re-enter at 11:25. Peter comes back into the chief rôle; and the transition is marked by this summary of the (Palestinian) church’s progress and expanding influence.

**Notes** 9:27: the plural “apostles” is not in conflict with the two names of Galatians 1:18f.; and “the churches of Judaea which were in Christ” describe (as in 1 Thessalonians 2:14) Jewish-Christians *outside* the holy city to which at that time Saul was personally unknown. 9:29: Hellenists are Jews of the Greek-speaking world (RV, Grecian Jews), like Saul himself. (See Acts 6:1 and comment.)

AENEAS AND TABITHA

## ACTS 9:32-43

Jesus was alive and was active in his church.

SAUL'S CONVERSION AND its aftermath has been a significant interlude to Luke's history. Now the historian returns to one of his central themes, namely, to chronicle the progress of the gospel as it embraced the non-Jewish world. Peter's adventures, continued in chapters 10, 11 and 12, point forward to the subsequent Gentile mission. Indeed, the rather vague phrase "Peter went here and there among them all" (9:32) may look back to 8:25, where Peter and his companions are last mentioned.

Bedridden Aeneas may have belonged to the Christian group at Lydda, perhaps formed following the evangelistic work of Philip in 8:40 in those parts. In words which are reminiscent of the healing stories in the Gospels (eg Mark 2:11) Peter bids the paralyzed man get up and "get yourself something to eat" (9:34; this translation, preferred by some translators, then re-echoes Mark 5:43). Can we see here an attention to a patient's needs agreeable to the professional interest of Luke "the dear doctor" (Colossians 4:14)?

9:36-43. Joppa was originally a Philistine city, and populated in New Testament times by Greeks. Peter's message and ministry are reaching out with a remarkable breadth of sympathy and concern; and we may ponder the fact that he is willing to lodge with Simon, a tanner—ie one engaged in a ceremonially unclean and defiling occupation from the Jewish point of view.

Tabitha's name is similar to the call "talitha" (in Mark 5:41) as two forms of the same name, meaning "my gazelle"; but this coincidence is not significant, even though the Lord's raising of Jairus' daughter and Peter's ministrations follow a similar pattern. What points of correspondence can you spot? The disciple has caught his Master's spirit.

**Notes** 9:37: washing was a Jewish practice as a rite of purification. 9:39: a touching scene, especially if we give full value to the verb's true meaning: they showed *on themselves* the coats and garments which Dorcas had made—a Petrine memory, passed on to Luke. 9:41: Peter's helping hand is again outstretched (3:7).

AN ANGEL APPEARS TO CORNELIUS

ACTS 10:1-8

Notice how Cornelius responds to the vision with prompt obedience.

CORNELIUS' STATUS is referred to in a few verses in this chapter—10:2,4,22,35. What sort of picture can you build up of this man's character from these descriptions?

From a professional standpoint he was a Roman centurion and a Gentile (10:1), but a Gentile who was attracted to the Jewish faith and way of life, although not a fully committed proselyte. Persuaded by Jewish monotheism (belief in one, righteous God) and morality, he is known by the technical term of "God-fearer" (10:2), and this for him was no empty profession, as an angel, and his servants, and Peter, all confirm. What an excellent set of character references he had!

Cornelius is chosen for the signal honor of receiving the gospel and its benefits at the hands of Peter as the latter exercises the "power of the keys." See Matthew 16:19. He is the first-fruits of the great Roman world to be led to faith in Christ under the apostolic ministry and his conversion is a notable watershed in the book of Acts, as 11:17-18 recognize.

**Notes** 10:1: "Italian Cohort"—a company of 600 men. There is evidence that *Cohors II Italica* was stationed in Syria in AD 60–70, and Caesarea was the military headquarters of Roman government in Palestine. 10:2: these are the marks of Jewish piety, characteristic of a "God-fearer" (see too in 13:16,26; 16:14; 18:7). 10:3: at 3 p.m. the vision came, but probably it was too late for the men to set

off for Joppa, some thirty miles away, that day. So they left on the next day (10:9) and arrived at noon.  
10:4: almsgiving is likened to a Levitical sacrifice (Leviticus 2:2,9,16; cf. Psalm 141:2; Hebrews 13:15f.; Philippians 4:18). 10:6: Simon lived by the seaside where he (a) used seawater for his trade, and (b) caused no ceremonial (nor social!) offense to the Jews who abhorred that odorous trade.

PETER'S VISION  
ACTS 10:9-16

Little did Peter know that when he went on the roof for prayer, he was at a decisive turning point in the church's history.

CORNELIUS' VISION AT Caesarea has its counterpart in Peter's vision at Joppa to which the messengers have been sent. While they are making the thirty-mile journey Peter is made ready to receive the request they bring by a special revelation in the form of a symbolic vision.

The noon hour (10:9) probably indicates the second period of prayer in the Jewish habit of prayer three times daily (see Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10). The heavenly vision consisted of a large object resembling a sheet (a ship's sail?) let down from above and holding a menagerie of the animal kingdom. The point to notice is that clean and unclean animals, according to the levitical rule (Leviticus 11), jostled together indiscriminately; and the divine command of verse 13 makes no discrimination. This accounts for Peter's horrified disavowal (10:14) and the answer to his objection (10:15: which verse in the Gospel of Mark does this call to mind? Perhaps Peter is responsible for the editorial note which is what Mark 7:19b really is, as RSV makes clear). Lest he should mistake the meaning or imagine that he was dreaming, the vision is renewed three times (10:16).

But what is the meaning? Clearly it has to do with the cancellation of the Jewish food-laws which allow some diets and forbid certain others. That in itself was revolutionary enough, as the debate between the Lord and the

Pharisees (in Mark 7:1-23) illustrates. But there is a deeper sense which Peter was later to grasp more fully. As a Jew he would at the time of the vision regard the Gentile people as religiously “defiled” (the description in Galatians 2:15 is an apt summary of Jewish mentality and exclusiveness) and so beyond the reach of friendship. And to have a meal with a Gentile would be unthinkable, for meal-time was a solemn and sacred occasion, begun in a prayer of blessing over food and continued by religious conversation. The abolishing of the ancient dietary laws is a token from God that there is no barrier to keep the Jews and Gentiles apart any longer. As Paul put it, the middle wall of partition has been broken down in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

**Notes** 10:10: literally, “he experienced an ecstasy.” 10:11: “four corners,” obviously metaphorical. 10:12: see Genesis 6:20. 10:14: it is a foolhardy man who contradicts the Lord. Do we ever try?

PETER AND CORNELIUS

ACTS 10:17-33

The second half of verse 33 would be a good motto text for a Christian meeting. If we always went to church with that attitude, our services would be transformed!

NOTICE THAT THE angelic visitor's message is attributed to the Holy Spirit (10:19-20) who spoke to his servant both in the trance-vision (10:10ff.) and through the inward monition of his own reflection (10:17, inward perplexity) required Peter to "ponder the vision" (10:19).

Peter's hospitality—an important virtue in early Christianity—delayed the departure until the following day (10:23a).

10:23b-29. The time-notices are not easy to follow; and it is possible that "the next day" of verse 23 is the same as "the following day" of verse 24, if the journey of thirty miles took the same time as that of the early messengers. The Western text in 10:30 reads, "It is *three* days ago." Otherwise, if we read "four days ago," the reckoning is inclusive or the return trip for the messengers took longer.

In this way Peter the Christian apostle and Cornelius the Gentile inquirer were brought together. Why did the latter prostrate himself and do homage (10:25)? What steps had he taken to ensure a good reception of the message from God which Peter was to bring (10:24,27,33)? The courtesy and modesty of 10:33 should be particularly noted. (Are these excellent qualities found in us in our correspondence and conversation with other believers?) "Did ever a

preacher of the Gospel have a more promising audience than this?” (F.F. Bruce).

**Notes** 10:20: the key phrase is “without hesitation” (cf. similar words in 10:29). This is explained by 10:28. Peter as a Jew might well hesitate before accepting the invitation to visit a Gentile, and object to eating under his roof. Such an act would lead to a ceremonial defilement. But the vision of 10:9-16 had changed all this. 10:25: cf. Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9. 10:28: Jewish rules virtually forbade loyal Jews from accepting Gentile hospitality, chiefly because of the fear that the food provided might not be *kosher* (ie ritually slaughtered, with the blood drained away) and perhaps harmful, if it had previously been used in idol-worship. 1 Corinthians 8 may be compared.

PETER'S SERMON

ACTS 10:34-48

What things sometimes hold us back from obeying Christ's command to make him known?

THIS MEMORABLE SERMON is important for a variety of good reasons:

1. It represents the *first* offer of the gospel to the Gentile world, and so paves the way for a full-scale Gentile mission.
2. It gives an outline of what the early Christians believed about the significance of Jesus' ministry, death and triumph. Not by accident, therefore, it contains a ground-plan (in 10:37-40) of the later Gospel of St. Mark, which Christian tradition has associated with Peter's preaching. "Peter related, Mark wrote" (Jerome).
3. Addressed to a Gentile congregation (10:35), it received the approbation of God in a way which few sermons do. The preacher's voice was silenced by a gracious interposition (10:44) and a remarkable outpouring of the Holy Spirit (10:45).

The main point to grasp lies in the phrase "even on the Gentiles." In an apt phrase, this has been called the Gentile Pentecost, and shows the fulfillment of what Peter had hinted at in 2:39. Work out the steps by which God prepared the church for this decisive turning-point.

The structure of the sermon is worthy of close study. Peter begins by declaring that recent events have shown that there is no “most favored nation” clause in God’s covenant with his people. The Old Testament prophets had taught the same, with a doctrine of the remnant (the faithful Israelites within the larger group of the nation) and a universalistic outlook which comprehended the Gentiles within the scope of God’s mercy and care. (There is no conflict between Israel’s election and God’s mercy to the nations; precisely *through* his elect people his love was intended to reach out to the Gentiles. Israel was elect for the sake of humankind.)

The terminal points of Jesus’ ministry are John’s baptism (10:37) and the witnesses to the empty tomb (10:41). He was the Messiah (10:38), marked out as God’s saving Agent in his life, death and vindication by God. The apostles are the accredited witnesses to all this (10:39,41), and the commissioned representatives of the gospel message (10:42) whose offer fulfills the promise of the Old Testament (10:43). Turn up *one* Old Testament promise of forgiveness, now made good in the gospel.

The effect of the preacher’s words is notable. Peter compares it to his own experience on the day of Pentecost (10:47; cf. 11:15-17). These Gentiles gave evidence by the use of “tongues” (10:46), and received Christian baptism (not administered by Peter, however, 10:48) as initiation into the visible fellowship of the church. No mention of circumcision is made.

**Think over** Go through Peter’s sermon again and compare it with what the Apostles’ Creed says of our Lord Jesus Christ.

PETER'S REPORT TO THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM

ACTS 11:1-18

Are we big enough to learn new lessons that God wants to teach us?

THE GOOD WORK of Peter's ministry now comes under fire! Note who its critics are (11:2). And what charge they bring against him (11:3).

The tenets of these critics are given in 15:1. Hence their name. But at this stage their accusation is that Peter broke the ritual rules and ate with Gentiles. The issue over circumcision came later, and was raised as a bulwark against the prospect of a predominantly Gentile church once the mission to the Gentiles got under way (11:20-21) so auspiciously.

The apostle's defense occupies the next section, and goes over the same ground as in chapter 10. Why has Luke taken obvious pains to repeat the details of this incident? Certainly this account, in Peter's own words, has a vividness and color all its own. Pick out some of the interesting additions and personal turns of phrase which Peter's own account gives: for example, "it came down to me" (11:5); "looking at it closely" (11:6); and verse 14. From verse 15a it seems that Peter was only getting started with his sermon when God's intervention took him and his congregation by surprise! 11:17 implies that the Twelve became full believers and Christians only at Pentecost—ie when they grasped the saving significance of the cross and the risen Lord. The defense concludes on a note which could hardly be controverted. God himself had borne witness to the rightness of his servant's action (11:17), and

any refusal to accept the response as genuine and in line with his will would be tantamount to opposing him.

In the face of such irrefutable logic, the Jewish-Christians accepted the conclusion of verse 18. Probably they did this with sincerity, but a more serious and sustained criticism was bound to arise once the evangelization of the Gentiles and their acceptance as church members without circumcision was made the rule rather than the exception. The Judaizers here were prepared to receive Cornelius and his group as an exceptional and isolated case; they were utterly opposed—as later history records—to the Pauline principle of a church in which *all* distinctions of race were abolished (Galatians 3:27-29). What is the bearing of all this on issues of civil rights and prejudice in the modern world?

**Notes** 11:6 adds a fourth group to the list of 10:12. 11:18: an admission that Peter was right—for the moment.

## THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH

### ACTS 11:19-30

“Christian” was probably originally a nickname: these people were always telling others about Christ and saying that they belonged to him.

THIS IS A short section, but packed with dynamite. It carries forward to the next crucial stage the widening expansion of the church’s outreach. At Antioch an unprecedented step was taken (11:20). Members of Stephen’s school, who had caught and preserved his spirit and who represented the wide sympathies of Hellenistic Judaism, began an evangelistic approach to rank outsiders. Cornelius had been a God-fearer (ie interested in the Jewish faith) before his conversion; the Greeks whom these men appealed to were completely untouched by Jewish influences. Yet they made a dramatic response to the proclamation of Jesus as Lord (11:21). Consider the significance of this title at this juncture (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:2-3).

The Jerusalem headquarters wanted to keep this movement under surveillance; and Barnabas was sent to Antioch, a city destined to become the springboard for the full-dress mission to the Gentile world (13:1).

It is not surprising that this city played such an important rôle in early Christianity. Situated near the coast of Syria, it was the capital of the Roman province. Its earlier history was shaped by Greek influences, yet it had received a great influx of Jewish population during the centuries of its life. It was thus the cosmopolitan center of the Syrian world, a meeting-place of east

and west. Greek culture and Jewish faith met and intermingled in a busy commercial emporium, and provided just the right conditions for the rise and growth of a Hellenistic Christian church (11:24b).

11:27-30 provide an interlude, chiefly to explain how it was that the churches came to contribute to the relief of the poverty-afflicted mother church in Jerusalem. The famine in Judea is dated by Josephus between AD 44–48. The missionary apostles of Antioch are delegated to bring the gift to Jerusalem (11:30)—a visit probably to be equated with that of Galatians 2:1ff. if the letter to the Galatians is the first of the Pauline letters to be written.

**Notes** 11:19 picks up the reference in 8:4. The mention of Stephen's name is important in showing a continuance of his posthumous influence. 11:20: "preaching Jesus as Lord" (so Romans 10:9). 11:21: "turned to the Lord"—a characteristic description of Gentile conversions (15:19; Galatians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). 11:23: the gospel's effect upon human lives was *visible*! 11:26: first mention of "Christians"—"partisans of Christ," as pagans viewed them (26:28; 1 Peter 4:16).

PETER'S MIRACULOUS DELIVERANCE FROM PRISON

ACTS 12:1-11

The church put everything they'd got into praying. God never ignores that kind of prayer!

THE NEXT INCIDENT of the onward sweep of the gospel which the reader expects is the kind of episode which chapter 13 narrates—namely, the first missionary journey of St. Paul. But one indication that the events of 11:22-30 occupied a longer time than the text at first suggests may be that Luke places next a full account of Peter's adventures. At all events, our attention is switched from Paul to Peter.

“Herod the king” (12:1) is Herod Agrippa I, who found a friend in the Roman emperor Caligula who gave him the control of territory which belonged to the former's uncle Philip (Luke 3:1), adding to it the district of Abilene governed by Lysanias. In AD 37 Herod received the kingdom, and thereafter acquired the domain of Herod Antipas, the territories of Galilee and Perea. In AD 41 he received the control of Judea; and this is the period indicated by the chronological note of verse 1: “about that time.”

Two Christian leaders fell foul of Herod's violent pogroms: James was killed (fulfilling Mark 10:39), Peter was arrested with a view to a later execution after the seven-day period of the Passover festival (12:3). Herod's malevolent design is darkly hinted in verses 4 and 6, where “to bring him out” implies an intended execution.

Peter's case seemed to be hopeless (notice the emphasis on "prison," "soldiers," "chains," "sentries" guarding the door in verses 4-6). But the Christians' secret weapon was being silently and secretly forged. What was it (12:5)?

Deliverance came in the form of a supernaturally timed visitor's arrival (12:7). No barred doors prevented his entry; no guard impeded him and the bewildered Peter as they threaded their way through the gaol (12:10); no key was needed to open the last gate to freedom (12:10b).

**Notes** 12:3: Passover lasted from Nisan 14 to Nisan 21 (Exodus 12:18). Luke uses the term Passover (12:4) for the entire festival season, as in his Gospel (22:1,7). 12:5: "earnest prayer"—this description is found in Luke 22:44, lit. "in a stretched-out manner." Prayer meant hard work for these devoted believers (Colossians 4:12). 12:7: "angel" and "messenger" are the same Greek term. Whichever translation is preferred, the deliverance was miraculous at every point.

A TESTIMONY TO THE LORD'S POWER

ACTS 12:12-17

God hears and answers prayer in spite of the littleness of our faith!

THE BEWILDERMENT OF Peter was quickly dispelled as he came to himself (12:11) and took stock of his position (12:12: the same verb for his awareness is used again at 14:6). The address he sought out is evidently (as a fourth-century tradition confirms) the place where the Last Supper was held and the gift of the Spirit was awaited (1:13-14); and this was the scene of the church at prayer (12:5).

Some lifelike touches make this one of the most gripping narratives in the New Testament. Each subsequent action is true to experience; the recognition of his Galilean accent; the disbelief with which her announcement was greeted; the attempt at rationalization (“it can’t be Peter himself; it must be his guardian angel, impersonating his voice,” 12:15); and at length, as he kept on knocking, the decision to find out who it was by the simplest method—to open the gate! Then Peter came in, and with a characteristic gesture of the hand damped down the hubbub of excitement. (“If only you’ll be quiet, I’ll explain and tell you all about it.”) What followed was a thrilling testimony to the Lord’s grace and power—and an indirect rebuke to those who had met for specific prayer (12:5) and who wouldn’t believe that the answer they sought was to be found outside the door, waiting to come in. The epistle of James has something to say on this topic (1:6-8).

Peter then departed for “another place,” but no one knows exactly where. He is back in Jerusalem at chapter 15, but at that time James, the Lord’s brother, holds a commanding position in the church there. Perhaps he had filled the gap of leadership when Peter was in prison. Hence verse 17b.

**Notes** 12:12: John Mark is the author of the Gospel which bears his name and is the man of Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13 as well as Acts 13:5. 12:15: the idea of a guardian angel is found in Matthew 18:10; Hebrews 1:14, and goes back to Genesis 48:16. 12:17: no mention of the other apostles. They had left Jerusalem, as is possibly implied in 11:30.

## THE DEATH OF HEROD

### ACTS 12:18-25

You can't stop God working out his plans—as Herod proved to his cost.

NOT UNNATURALLY THERE was an immediate sequel to the news of Peter's escape from prison. His guards suffered as a result of Herod's displeasure (12:19). But Herod himself was soon to meet a fateful end: 12:20-23 are a piece of secular history which is also recorded by Josephus in *Antiquities*, Book 19. Both accounts agree that he suffered a divine sentence of judgment on the score of his pride. In fact, both records are complementary, and throw light on each other.

It appears that the "appointed day" in Caesarea on which the people of Tyre and Sidon were to make a representation to the king (12:20-21) was a festival in honor of the emperor, possibly the emperor's birthday (August 1). Both historians describe how Herod was greeted as a god (12:22), and Josephus adds: "he did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery." His story goes on: he saw an owl, which he recognized as a messenger of evil tidings, and a pang of grief pierced his heart. Luke attributes this to a divine action (12:23), and his terrifying phrase, "he was eaten by worms and died," corresponds to the description which Josephus gives of violent abdominal pains which led to his eventual death five days later. The date is about AD 44.

By vivid contrast “the word of God grew and multiplied” (12:24)—a reminder that earthly tyrants come and go, but even their cruel animosity is powerless to arrest the onward progress of the cause of God and his church. In the bitter days of Julian the apostate, a scoffer asked a Christian, “What is your Carpenter doing now?” His quiet reply was: “Making a coffin for your emperor.”

12:25 poses a difficulty, the RSV and RSV margin giving two different versions of the direction in which Barnabas and Saul moved. As the story left them last at Jerusalem (11:30), the RSV reads more naturally, but it translates a corrected text. As a third possibility the phrase “at Jerusalem” might be taken with what follows rather than with what precedes. Translate, then: “Barnabas and Saul returned (to Antioch), having completed their task in Jerusalem.”

**Meditation** Philippians 1:28-29.

## THE CHURCH BREAKS BARRIERS

### ACTS 13:1-12

This is the first recorded act of planned overseas missionary work; note that the Lord did the planning.

THE NEB HEADS this chapter and new section: The Church Breaks Barriers. This is an accurate summary of the new phase of missionary activity begun by the church at Antioch.

13:1-3 describe how the new impetus was given. Note what the church's preoccupation was when the Spirit's summons came (13:2) and why these two men were chosen. How were they commissioned (13:3)?

The names in 13:1 are full of interest and embrace diverse racial and social groups. "Niger" means "dark," and Symeon is possibly to be equated with Simon of Cyrene (Luke 23:26). Lucius is not to be equated, however, with the evangelist Luke, nor with the Lucius of Romans 16:21. Manaen had been well placed in Herod's entourage as the prince's companion.

The first missionary tour is then detailed. From Seleucia, the port of Antioch, they came to Salamis, the chief town of Cyprus. Christian witness was made in the Jewish synagogues, mainly (so we may judge from 13:15) by seizing the opportunity which came to give a sermon to the assembled congregation in each place. Cf. Luke 4:15-30. John (Mark's) assistance suggests that he was a catechetical teacher, engaged in follow-up work (13:5).

The encounter with Elymas at Paphos is a reminder that the gospel of Christ had many rivals in the ancient religious world. The lure of magic—which included such things as astrology, fortune-telling, healing and exorcism—was very powerful, and magicians practiced their art all over the Roman world. Magical ideas invaded Judaism, chiefly from Chaldean sources and Elymas was known also by a Jewish name (13:6).

Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul, shows a remarkable openness to the Christian message (13:7). This obviously displeased the magician, who had the wit to see that if his master became a believer in God his services would quickly be dispensed with. Hence his obstruction (13:8) which, in turn, met with a forthright statement from Paul (his Roman name is now used, as he comes to the fore, cf. verse 13, and takes precedence over Barnabas).

**Notes** 13:2: a precious sidelight on early Christian worship, which included a worshiping of Jesus as Lord. 13:5: RSV disguises the presence of a technical expression here: John was their attendant (same word in Luke 1:2).

IN ANTIOCH IN PISIDIA

## ACTS 13:13-41

The message of the good news of Jesus is for us (13:26).

FROM THIS POINT in the book of Acts the name of “Paul” replaces the birth name “Saul” (cf. 13:9) except in those few passages which tell again the story of his conversion (eg 22:7). The reason for this is that missionary activity moved on to Gentile territory where the apostle’s Roman *cognomen* was more suitable. Moreover, for the first time, we read of “Paul and his company” (13:13). Barnabas has slipped into second place (contrast 12:25; 13:2 and 13:43). Was this prominence now given to Paul the cause of Mark’s defection (13:13b), as he saw his cousin (Colossians 4:10) passed over? More probably, it was that Mark never envisaged such an extensive penetration of Gentile country, as Paul and the party pressed on into Asia Minor.

The first goal of Paul’s journey beyond the Taurus mountains was Antioch in Pisidia (13:14). Paul selects a place of strategic importance as a center and base of apostolic ministry—Pisidian Antioch was a Roman colony. He makes full use of the synagogue as a sounding-board from which his message may go out.

Jewish worship gave opportunity for any qualified visitor to expound the Scriptures in the form of a “homily.” Hence the invitation of 13:15. The apostle’s sermon is an appeal to God’s revelation under the old covenant. “The law and the prophets” (13:15; Romans 3:21) were his source of authority—at least as a preparation for, and witness to, the coming Christ of

God. In this sermon his chief point rests with David (13:22), who prefigures his greater Son, Israel's Messiah (13:23).

The gospel facts (13:27-32) cover the same details which are given in Peter's earlier addresses (2:22ff.; 3:13f.; 10:37-41), and the prophecies of Psalms 2 and 16 are again laid under tribute (13:33,35). Two prophecies are new. Which?

At the heart of his message lies the characteristic Pauline emphasis on (a) the resurrection of Jesus as God's vindication of him, and (b) the provision of righteousness by faith, which meets the demands of the Law. 13:30 and 13:39 are pivotal and the Romans epistle is the later elaboration of these vital themes.

**Notes** 13:21: King Saul doesn't often figure in Old Testament testimonies to Jesus. Did the speaker have a personal interest, coming from the same tribe (Philippians 3:5)? 13:26: an appeal to born Jews and "God-fearers." 13:32: a favorite Pauline expression (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 9:16).

**Ponder** Neglect of spiritual truth is not always due to ignorance. Sometimes we can know it too well (13:27).

GOOD NEWS TO BE SHARED

## ACTS 13:42-52

We must come to Christ on his terms—not our own.

VERSE 32: “GOOD news” is meant to be shared. Many Jews and proselytes were won over and were encouraged to persevere (13:43). To judge from the next paragraph, they came back the next week with a great crowd of interested Gentiles (13:44-45). Did Paul see in this sequence a divine confirmation that this was Israel’s destiny and mission—to be a light for the Gentiles (13:47)? National Israel—the Jewish people of old, represented in their synagogue officers of 13:45—had failed to seize this opportunity; the task therefore fell to the Christian apostles to accept the vocation of the servant and as “elect for the sake of mankind” to reach out to the distant peoples. So “we turn to the Gentiles” (13:46). This solemn announcement sounded the death-knell of Jewish exclusiveness and selfish particularism which said, “What we have as a special privilege we want to keep to ourselves.” It equally proved to be a manifesto and charter of Christian liberty and a promise of a worldwide church. No longer could the Christian movement be thought of as a sect within Judaism—whatever misunderstanding their enemies might have, Acts 24:5 shows that this is what the Jews would like to have believed about the church—but, having burst the cocoon, the missionary church showed itself to be no inert chrysalis, but a living creature, ready to fly to earth’s extremities with a message and a ministry to all (13:47). Small wonder that the Gentiles, regarded by official

Judaism as beyond the pale and hopeless (Ephesians 2:1-3 picks up this sorry plight, but doesn't stop there), were overjoyed to receive the news of their salvation through Israel's Savior.

Note that in 13:43 a follow-up ministry is intended, as at 11:23. 13:46: "necessary" because of a priority stated in 3:26; Romans 1:16; 11:11ff., which Paul adhered to. But he refused to stay with obdurate Israel; he moved on to attend, in his own apostolic labors, to Israel's mission to the nations in the light of (a) his own call as apostle to the Gentiles (22:21), and (b) the Servant prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, with its primary application to Jesus but carried on by his people.

**Notes** 13:43: these converts are the God-fearers of 13:26 (see comment on 10:2). 13:51: a symbolic action for a decisive break with human indifference (Mark 6:11).

IN ICONIUM  
ACTS 14:1-7

Here is trust ... and trouble.

FROM ANTIOCH THE apostles moved on to Iconium, now called Konia, and a junction of several routes. Commentators draw attention to the Greek phrase (in 14:1) rendered “together.” This should be translated “in the same way” with a backward glance at the apostolic procedure at Antioch. There the two apostles used the Jewish synagogue as a springboard for their evangelism; so too, in like manner, in spite of the declaration of 13:46, they began their work at Iconium by visiting the Jewish assembly. A tiny word in 14:1, translated “so,” speaks volumes of the way they conducted themselves. Their manner of life had a powerful effect in conjunction with the truth of their words.

Opposition also was encountered (14:2). Who were the “devil’s advocates”? Which church in Asia Minor at a later time met this animosity from the Jews? (See Revelation 2:8-11; and note the martyrdom of Polycarp which tells of Jewish opposition and evil designs in fomenting trouble for the Christians in the same place.) And in which other city did Paul feel encouraged to stay on because there was opposition to the work of the gospel (as 14:3-4 imply)? (See 18:6-11; 1 Corinthians 16:8.)

A critical point was evidently reached when Paul learned of a concerted effort put in hand to attack him and his company (14:5-6). Then the principle of Matthew 10:23 was invoked and they took refuge in Lystra and Derbe, where fresh scope for evangelization was given (14:7).

**Notes** 14:2: this disaffection was possibly caused by Jews who came on to Iconium from Antioch. Paul ignored their hostility (14:3), but felt it wise to move on when the local Gentile inhabitants seemed adamant in their resistance, even to the point of mob-violence (as verse 5 implies). 14:6: Lystra and Derbe, with the Phrygian city of Iconium, most probably (on Sir William Ramsay's view) represent the churches of Galatia to which the epistle of that name was written.

**Study** Pick out some verses from Galatians which speak of the founding of the church in the teeth of hardship and opposition (eg Galatians 3:4) and with accompanying "signs and wonders" (eg Galatians 3:5).

IN LYSTRA AND DERBE

## ACTS 14:8-18

Are we like Paul and Barnabas in tailoring what we say to match our audience?

BOTH PARTS OF Paul's ministry at Lystra are full of interest. His action in healing the crippled man recalls Peter's work at the temple gate (3:1-10). Both apostles evidently had a presence which commanded attention and drew out the earnest hopes of the needy invalids they encountered (note the double reference to intense longing—3:5 and 14:9—which was matched by a direct look from the apostles).

The behavior of the crowd (14:11-13) was typical of the people of Lycaonia whose district, so tradition reported, had once upon a time been favored by a visit from Zeus (the king of the Greek gods) and Hermes (his messenger). Recent archaeological finds in that area of Asia Minor have shown that the cults of Zeus and Hermes flourished in the third century AD and go back earlier. In fact the priests of Zeus (cf. 14:13) are referred to in the inscription unearthed by W.M. Calder of Manchester in 1922.

The statement in 14:11 is at first not understood by Paul and Barnabas because of its strange language which they did not know; only when the Lystrans began to give them divine honors (14:13) did they realize the purport of it all. Hence their horrified rejection of what the people intended to do (14:14).

A further point of interest is Paul's speech (14:15-18). This brief and impromptu statement is the first opportunity Paul had to address a Gentile audience and it is important to observe the features of the Christian message which it highlights. It cannot be complete in itself and was probably never finished, for Paul had still to mention the distinctive elements such as the cross and resurrection of Jesus, when he was stopped (14:18). The verses, therefore, contain a preamble to the gospel, and lay the foundation for it in a concise summary of "natural theology." What are the chief points which he makes (14:15-17)?

**Notes** 14:9: how could this man's "faith to be made well" be evident to Paul? Was it a look in his eyes or any expression on his face? 14:14: a sign of mourning: here it is expressive of disgust that the Lystrans should have regarded them as gods come to earth. Such actions were idolatry (14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9), which is inexcusable in view of God's creatorship (14:15), past forbearance (14:16), and general revelation in Nature (Romans 1:19-23).

**Study** Continue a comparison between Paul's experience with these people in Galatia and the letter he later wrote to them. For instance, see Galatians 4:14 (in the light of the name of Hermes given to him); 1:6; 3:1 (the Galatians' fickleness); 6:17 (cf. 14:19).

## RETURN TO ANTIOCH IN SYRIA

### ACTS 14:19-28

Preaching and making disciples go hand in hand.

EXPERIENCES AT LYSTRA left a permanent mark on Paul's mind (2 Timothy 3:1 1)—and his body, if Galatians 6:17 is interpreted as the scars of his suffering in missionary service. Not for the last time did he face imminent death (14:19-20); and this successful attempt at rescue, as the disciples formed a ring around him, permitted him to escape and, undeterred, to press on to the next town, Derbe.

Preaching and making disciples go hand in hand, according to the missionary manifesto of Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15 (KJV). The divine order and intention is that converts should become disciples. So it happened at Derbe (14:21).

“Tribulations” sounds an ominous note for the church in every age and place and there is no legitimate short-cut to avoid them.

14:19. Paul's stoning is part of his apostolic hardships recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:25. Note the sudden change in the Galatians—from enthusiastic hero-worship to a bitter attack on Paul's person. 14:22: a pastoral follow-up is indicated in the verbs (cf. 18:23 and 11:23; destiny). “Suffering, then, is the badge of the true Christian... Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's

sake” ... “Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ” (Bonhoeffer).

Further pastoral provision was made in the appointment of a simple church leadership (14:23). What was the prime responsibility of these “elders” (see 20:28; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7)?

14:24-28 complete the story of the missionary circuit. Paul and his party return to the place from which they were valedicted (14:26; 13:43). The key-verb is “must”—not an optional vocation which may be bypassed. Similarly, 2 Timothy 2:3; 3:12; Revelation 7:14.

14:23. “Elders” represent an oversight of the local congregation, as at Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and Philippi (Philippians 1:1). Other functions are given in Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17. 14:27: indeed an “open door” (Revelation 3:8). Where else did Paul use this metaphor for a ready scope for the gospel?

**Think over** Look back over Paul’s provision for the new converts—in 14:22-23. Are we sufficiently attentive to such needs?

CAN GENTILE BELIEVERS BE ADMITTED TO THE CHURCH?

## ACTS 15:1-5

Most people were thrilled with what was happening among the Gentiles, but some argued it couldn't be done that way.

THE IMMEDIATE OCCASION of the council was the success which attended Paul's missionary journey. Jews and Jewish proselytes had been won, but, more significantly, the gospel had made a noticeable inroad into pagan territory and (chiefly in Galatia) a ready welcome to the message had been received. So much so that Paul had introduced a rudimentary church organization for the maintaining of congregational life and growth (14:22-23). News of this had reached the Jerusalem church, where alarm was felt. Why?

The "dissension and debate" centered on the admissibility of Gentile believers to the church. Cornelius was clearly a special case, and at all events he was half-way to becoming a Jew before his conversion to Christ. The issue was whether Gentile converts were to be welcomed *en masse* the moment they were converted—or to be gradually introduced to full Christian standing by receiving the imposition of certain Jewish rites and rituals. Note the chief qualification which the strict Jewish Christians were insisting upon (15:1).

The danger of a divided church, split into two factions and with two headquarters, at Jerusalem and at Antioch, was present. So to settle the question (15:2) a consultation was arranged. The precise relation between this visit (15:2) and an earlier one (11:30) in the light of Galatians 2:1-10 is much canvassed. The simplest solution is that the Galatians 2 visit is the same as

that of 11:30, and that the letter to the Galatians was written before this council in AD 49. This explains why there is no reference to the decree in Galatians. It is less easy to account for its omission from 1 Corinthians. Probably Paul accepted it in principle, but based his appeal to the Corinthians on other grounds (1 Corinthians 8; cf. Romans 14:1–15:6).

Clearly Paul and Barnabas stood for a liberal attitude, which Paul strenuously argues for in his Galatian epistle, while at the opposite end of the scale was a rigid policy of turning Gentile converts into good Jews before according them a full Christian status. Who were the spokesmen for this line (15:5)?

**Notes** 15:3: Paul evidently enlisted much sympathy, including Luke's. 15:5: this restriction was intolerable, and a betrayal of the gospel of God's free grace, according to Paul's (earlier) letter to Galatia. Why?

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

ACTS 15:6-12

Both Jews and non-Jews get right with God by faith—not by rules.

MUCH DEBATE EVIDENTLY led nowhere (15:7) and Peter's statement was intended to cut through the knot by an assertion that the grace of the Lord Jesus was the sole requirement for salvation (15:11).

His rehearsal of God's dealings with him served to underscore the important points of conviction:

1. God himself had taken the initiative in the choosing and calling of Cornelius (15:7).
2. The proof of his pleasure was the giving of the Holy Spirit in the same way and on the same basis as the blessing of Pentecost which inaugurated the Christian era (15:8-9).
3. As there was no distinction in the gift of Messianic grace, there must be no "extra" necessity which would obscure the gracious way in which God chooses to act (15:9,11).
4. In any case, to insist on a Jewish prescription is an invitation to bondage from which Christ has set us free (15:10). Which verse in Galatians, with its ringing tones of freedom in Christ, does this echo?

Peter had profited from the rebuke administered by Paul at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21). At that earlier time he had vacillated by, at first,

welcoming the Gentiles as brothers and sharers in a common table but later, when put under pressure, he had “played the Pharisee” (Galatians 2:12a) by a deliberate withdrawal and refusal to share fellowship. Note his motivation then (Galatians 2:12b). And its effect on others. What exactly was at stake in Antioch?

**Notes** 15:7: “early days”—the Cornelius episode happened some ten years before. The divine “choice” recalls the election of Abraham (Nehemiah 9:7); Cornelius is the firstfruits of a new people of God. 15:9: “cleansed,” as in 10:15; 11:9. 15:10: “a yoke upon the neck” re-echoes a familiar Jewish phrase (“to take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven”) for accepting the Jewish religion. Peter here reflects the attitude of Galilean Jews to the burdensome regulations of Pharisaism. Jesus too offered release from this heavy “yoke” (Matthew 11:29-30; cf. Matthew 23:4; Luke 11:46). 15:11: a clear statement of free grace, unencumbered by any “works,” of which Paul would not have been ashamed.

**Meditation** In a day when theological discussion and debate get more and more complicated, let us ponder the apostolic declaration (15:11) with its note of (a) impressive simplicity—“the grace of the Lord Jesus”; (b) triumphant certainty—“we believe ... that we shall be saved”; and (c) unconfined universality—“we ... as ... they.”

JAMES' SPEECH

ACTS 15:13-21

James was a fairly conservative Jewish Christian who might have been expected to oppose what was going on. But he pointed out this was what God intended.

IT IS JAMES' turn to contribute to the discussion. He expresses cordial acceptance of Peter's statement (15:14: Symeon is Peter's first name, John 1:40-42) by discovering a scriptural precedent for the thought that God intended to include the Gentiles in the assembling of his people. This is part of the missionary message of the Old Testament.

The quotation from Amos 9:11f. is taken from the Greek Old Testament and makes two points:

1. The rebuilding of David's dwelling (15:16 in James's speech) speaks of God's covenant of restoration with Israel after the exile. This is now fulfilled in the Messiah's coming to his people.
2. 15:17 relates to "the rest of men"—ie the Gentiles who are called by God's Name—and the promise is that they too find a place within the fold of God's people.
3. The upshot is the statement of verse 19, which is a clear counter-statement of the Judaizing proposals of verses 1 and 5.

One consideration of a practical nature required some attention, however. Exactly what this is depends upon how we construe 15:20-21—the text of the so-called “apostolic decree.” In the RSV there are four items of “prohibited practices,” all of them having to do with practices which mean much to orthodox Jews—viz. idolatry, immorality, eating meat from animals which had been improperly (by rabbinic standards) slaughtered—ie by being strangled, and from animals which still retained the blood. If these prohibitions were imposed on Gentile believers, the intention will have been to make possible table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. If the latter would accept this code, the former would not be scandalized.

The difficulty with this reconstruction is that in Paul’s dealings with Gentile churches (at Rome and Corinth) he refuses to legislate in this formal way and leaves the question of “unclean foods” to be settled by considerations of conscience (see IVF *New Bible Dictionary*, “Idols, meat offered to”). The RSV margin, which adopts the “Western text,” may, therefore, be preferred. Then, with the omission of a reference to what is strangled, the remaining *three* items may be taken as parts of an ethical code, viz. idolatry, adultery (probably by marriage within the prohibited degrees of Leviticus 18), and bloodshed (= murder). Paul would have had no scruple about accepting such elementary moral regulations for Gentile believers, whereas his “fight for Galatia,” already won, is not likely to have been thrown away by his tamely accepting some ceremonial rules (on the RSV text reading). Therefore we may prefer the RSV margin; and church practice in the second century confirms this.

THE LETTER TO THE GENTILE BELIEVERS

ACTS 15:22-35

We should sometimes be ready to limit what we do, rather than unnecessarily upsetting our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A DELEGATION OF four men is appointed to carry this letter containing the terms of the “apostolic decree” from Jerusalem to Antioch. It was at Antioch that Christian fellowship between the two branches of the church had been disrupted by the arrival of certain Jerusalem teachers (called Judaizers) who, claiming to speak with James’s authority, insisted on a separation of Jewish Christians from uncircumcized Gentile believers, and brought pressure to bear upon Peter (Galatians 2:11ff.). It was therefore necessary that:

1. These Judaizers should be checked (15:24).
2. Paul and Barnabas who had put matters right at Antioch should be vindicated by the general assembly (15:25-26).
3. Some independent evidence of the assembly’s decision should be provided, lest the Antiochians should imagine that Paul was inventing all this. Two impartial witnesses are commended (15:27).
4. It was further required that the terms of Christian moral practices should be spelled out clearly, so that the high moral tone of the church (which was quickly becoming the spiritual home of Gentiles who had been converted to Christ from a world of licence, immorality and self-indulgence) should be preserved (15:28-29).

The guidance of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged in this epoch-making decision (15:28).

How was the decree received (15:31)? Further explanations were given by the two accredited delegates, who had a spiritual gift of prophecy (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:3).

**Notes** 15:22: Judas Barsabbas—was he brother to Joseph Barsabbas (1:23)? Silas (or Silvanus) is first introduced. He played an important part in the Pauline and Petrine correspondence (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Peter 5:12). 15:24: “unsettling your minds”—a military term for plundering a town. 15:26: “risked”—the Greek verb is the same as in Galatians 2:20; Romans 4:25; 8:32. Perhaps we should translate: “men who have dedicated their lives.” But the RSV thought recurs in Philippians 2:30. 15:33: “in peace” = with the good wishes of the congregation, and in prospect of Silas’ return to Antioch (15:40; 15:34 in the margin simply confuses).

AN UNEDIFYING EPISODE

ACTS 15:36-41

God can repair relationships and give us a second chance if we let him.

SIX VERSES WHICH offer a fascinating study in early church personalities! Paul and Barnabas both agreed that it was opportune to re-visit the churches of Galatia (15:36); but that was as far as the *entente* went. Both men had different opinions of John Mark, who had accompanied them on the earlier journey, but had retired somewhat unceremoniously (13:13) at what proved to be only the outset of the tour. The result was a distressing situation—Luke calls it by a strong name, an altercation (Greek, *paroxysmos*, 15:39) which could only be settled by the two men going their several ways.

Who was right? Probably both men were right—up to a point. Paul, no mean judge of men, saw that Mark's character at that time was not suited to the strains and stresses of another missionary journey (considering the importance of this venture in the light of the council's ruling and the need to press onwards resolutely into the heart of the Greco-Roman world with the gospel). Barnabas, on the other hand, was prepared to overlook one lapse in the hope of a stronger character yet to emerge, and perhaps the axiom "blood's thicker than water" controlled his decision to give his relative a second chance.

At all events, two happier notes are struck in the later story. First, by a division of labor, *two* missionary parties set out and so more territory was

evangelized. Secondly, “all’s well that ends well,” and the final chapter in Mark’s story is that of a recovery. “Failure is not final” (E.M. Blaiklock)—see 2 Timothy 4:11, with its glowing tribute to Mark’s usefulness at the last; 1 Peter 5:13 for Peter’s special interest; and, of course, the Gospel of Mark –

The saint who first found grace to pen  
The Life which was the light of men.

**Notes** 15:37-38: the commentators draw attention to a subtle change in the tenses here. Barnabas wanted to decide *to take* (aorist, implying a single action), but Paul foresaw the risk of having *to take* Mark as a continual partner (present tense)—and liable at any moment to desert them. 15:40: Silas was admirably qualified as a Jerusalem Christian and a Roman citizen (16:7ff.).

**To think over** “An unedifying episode.” Yes, but are there no redeeming features?

A DISCIPLE NAMED TIMOTHY

ACTS 16:1-5

Paul was prepared to circumcise Timothy, despite his usual principle, so that God's work might not suffer.

PAUL RECEIVED SOME compensation for the indignity he suffered on his first visit to Lystra (14:19-20). At least one convert had gone on in the life of the Spirit—and so was ready for the touch of God upon him. He was Timothy. Notice some points of special commendation:

1. His progress since his conversion is perhaps indicated in the name “disciple” (16:1)—ie learner and student in the school of Christ. He had matured to that extent. Who, elsewhere in the New Testament, had failed to grow in the Christian life (Hebrews 5:11-14)?
2. 16:2 is an important feature to be observed in any young person who feels the call of God to full-time service. Timothy had a good reputation, and was *persona grata* with the leaders of the neighboring churches. The reason for this character reference is given in 1 Timothy 4:12.
3. The will of God was made known to Timothy by the agency of Paul, who addressed to him the summons to divine service (16:3a). The apostle must have been able to perceive in him the makings of a real man of God; and he was not disappointed.

Two subsequent developments confirmed the correctness and wisdom of Paul's choice. First, Paul was able to send Timothy more than once as his personal representative—and almost as an extension of his own personality—to the churches (1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-24; 1 Thessalonians 3:2). And, at the last hour of his life, Paul requested Timothy's presence (2 Timothy 4:9,21).

The mention of Timothy's circumcision comes as a surprise in view of the apostolic decree (referred to again in 16:4). But there were evidently special circumstances to be respected—viz. Timothy was a half-Jew already (16:1), and Paul simply “regularized his status” (F.F. Bruce) in having him circumcized. Besides, the question of salvation was not in view here, as in the Galatian churches at the time of the (earlier) Judaizing controversy. Then, the avoidance of circumcision was a prime requirement (Galatians 5:2,11). Does 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 bear upon this distinction?

**Notes** 16:1: mixed marriages, then as now, create a problem, and not least for the children. In Jewish eyes Timothy would be regarded as illegitimate—hence Paul's desire to remove the stigma by this minor surgical operation. And this would be important if Timothy's future ministry were to be acceptable to the Jews for whose salvation Paul still yearned (Romans 9:3; 10:1). On Timothy's Jewish ancestry, see 2 Timothy 1:5.

PAUL'S VISION

ACTS 16:6-10

It was so important for Paul and his friends to be in the right place that the Spirit even stopped them preaching in areas that seemed promising.

THERE ARE SOME points of particular interest in this passage:

1. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is seen here in both restraining (16:6-7) and constraining the Christian missionaries. The verbs used indicate clearly the Spirit's personality and his intimate association with the person of Jesus (especially 16:7: a unique description, but it is hinted at in John 14:16).
2. Guidance came in the form of a human voice, heard in Paul's night-time vision. The circumstances of this encounter with the Macedonian "man" whom Sir William Ramsay suggested was Luke himself, and the clear direction given in the call to cross over the Aegean Sea led Paul to the firm conviction that this was the guidance he sought. In fact, he needed such guidance, because the way ahead was blocked. Why?
3. At this point in the narrative the literary form changes, and 16:10 introduces a new, unheard-of feature in Luke's history. Can you spot it?

Few sections of the Bible hold such useful teaching on the theme of guidance. Re-read the passage in the light of the following suggestions:

1. We may confidently expect a guided life as the children of God. He will direct us *away* from the second-best, if we are faced with a choice.
2. He may lead us through some fellow-believer, some “man of Macedonia” whose word comes to our prepared and responsive minds; but we must cultivate a sensitivity to *hear*.
3. When circumstances combine to indicate a course of action, we are expected to use a God-given faculty of common sense and perception (16:10).

**Notes** 16:6: the “South Galatian” view interprets this phrase as meaning the region of *Phrygia Galatica*, evangelized by Paul on his earlier journey (13:14ff.) and inhabited by the readers addressed in the epistle to the Galatians. Paul was checked from turning west towards Ephesus (16:6) and north-eastward into Bithynia (16:7). 16:9: the first extended “we” section, indicating the presence of Luke. 16:10: the verb normally means “to put together” (cf. our colloquial “putting two and two together”—ie concluding).

IN PHILIPPI  
ACTS 16:11-24

What does this passage teach us about making Christ known?

PHILIPPI HAD TWO claims to fame (16:12). What were they? A more illustrious and enduring claim was begun on the day of Paul's arrival, for this city was honored as the first "European" city to hear and to receive the good news of God. Perhaps this thought lies behind Philippians 1:5; 4:15. Two notable conversions are described:

1. 16:13-15. Lydia hailed from Thyatira, a center of the dyeing trade in Asia Minor. She was evidently on business in Philippi, and had some attachment to the Jewish faith as a God-fearer.

Her conviction illustrates what the theologians call "prevenient grace"—ie that God took the initiative, "went before," in her readiness to hear the word by predisposing her to give a ready acceptance to the Savior's call (16:14b). Notice her confession of faith in baptism and her gracious, if firm, offer of hospitality. Perhaps Paul was unwilling to accept the hospitality, but she had her way (16:15b) as the first convert in Europe. If Lydia is an example to follow, which other woman of Thyatira gives a warning to avoid (Revelation 2:8-20)?

2. 16:16-24 remind us that the world of Paul's day was peopled by men and women who made a living out of religious humbug and chicanery.

The girl fortune-teller found release from her spiritual bondage “in the Name of Jesus Christ” (16:18).

On a quickly invented charge Paul and Silas fell victim to her masters’ annoyance at the loss of their profits, the crowd’s venom, and the magistrates’ indifference to elementary justice. Even the jailer seemed hostile, as he placed his prisoners’ legs in the torturing stocks. But their deliverance—and his too—was shortly to appear!

**Notes** 16:12: “a Roman colony”—see Philippians 1:27; 3:20 for the use Paul makes of this fact. 16:13: a prayer-meeting in the open air. 16:17: the girl perceives that these are “holy men” offering a spiritual message. 16:20: Luke is accurate with his term for the magistrates, *praetores duoviri*.

## THREE MIRACLES IN PHILIPPI

### ACTS 16:25-34

Joy in suffering, like boldness in speaking, is another sure sign of Christianity in Acts.

THREE MIRACLES DISTURBED the citizens of Philippi during the day and night when they presumed to place the Christian preachers in their local jail:

1. The first miracle is in the realm of the human spirit, which, renewed and fortified by Christ, rises above the grim and painful experiences of the prisoners' cell and the instrument of torture, and finds a song of praise to God (16:25). Paul and his companion took their adverse circumstances as a challenge to faith (Romans 8:28), a clarion call to victory (Romans 5:17; 2 Corinthians 2:14) and a springboard for witness (16:25b). Many a man would have cursed his luck, renounced his gods, and tried to bribe the jailer; Paul found a better outlet for his pent-up feelings (Philippians 4:6-7).
2. The earthquake came at the right time and for precisely the required purpose—to release the prisoners from their chains and to open the cell doors, but not to destroy life. Moreover, the supernatural disturbance struck terror into the jailer's heart, giving him a salutary fear and anxious concern for "salvation" (16:30).
3. Terror betrays a bad conscience, which in turn stems from disharmony with God because of sin. Therefore, all need is comprehended in man's

first requirement—to know God as Savior, which stamps Christ’s gospel as uniquely suited to that need (16:31). Here is the miracle of grace, as the jailer passes from death to life (Colossians 1:13-14), with his family, from the solitude of alienation and fear into the joyous family of God (16:33-34).

The apostles’ “joy in suffering,” the phenomenon wholly from God, and the wonder of the simple gospel—these marked out the establishment of the Philippian church as God’s “good work” (Philippians 1:6). Is there anywhere a nobler work?

**Notes** 16:25: an Old Testament psalm or a Christian canticle. 16:26: the moorings of the prisoners’ fetters fixed to the wall became loose (Ramsay). 16:27: suicide would vindicate his military honor, and avoid the reproach of having failed in his duty. 16:30: perhaps he had heard the slave-girl’s cry (16:17). 16:33: note the two uses of water. Sacrament and service go together.

THE RELEASE OF PAUL AND SILAS

ACTS 16:35-40

Paul was prepared to use his official status when it suited the preaching of the gospel.

WHY DID THE magistrates change their minds and send the policeman to discharge the prisoners (16:35)? And why did Paul refuse to accept his freedom in this way (16:37)? Was it a fit of pique which made him disgruntled? Or a desire to see justice done by demanding a full apology? Or (more likely) an insistence on an official release and admission of error so that there would be no recurrence of this kind of hindrance to his missionary labors?

Anyhow, he acted clearly within his civil rights and got what he demanded even to the full apology and regret that they had blundered into beating and imprisoning Roman citizens whose case had not been investigated (16:37).

There are some pointers here to aid our thinking about the Christian's civil and social responsibility. Notice how Paul and Silas stand for their civic rights (Romans 13:1ff.), yet, once they have attained their aim, they comply with lawful authority and refuse to be an "oddball" or social misfit (1 Peter 2:13-17).

**Notes** 16:35: the accurate terminology is again to be seen. The “praetors” send their “lictors” (lit. rod-bearers) who carried as a badge of office bundles of rods bound together round an axe. 16:37: Paul uses the technical term “uncondemned” (*re incognita*, “without investigating the case”)—a monstrous crime against Roman citizens, though not without precedent. Paul and Silas (16:37: “us”) may have claimed their exemption from punishment on the previous day, but have been shouted down by the mob (16:22). 16:39: a noticeable change of face from 16:35. 16:40: Lydia’s home was possibly the church’s meeting-place, and housed a virile and affectionate company of believers to whom Paul became specially attached. Read his letter to the Philippians, detecting its warm, pastoral tones.

**Think over** “One cannot help feeling that this is the best story Luke has given us so far” (Findlay). Do you agree?

IN THESSALONICA

## ACTS 17:1-9

Here's the same pattern of ready response and outright opposition.

THE APOSTOLIC BAND (minus Luke, who evidently stayed on at Philippi to consolidate the work there; the “we-narrative” abruptly breaks off at 16:17) moved southward, calling at Amphipolis (thirty miles from Philippi) and Apollonia (twenty-seven miles further on) *en route* to Thessalonica (another thirty-five miles). The excellent Roman roads—this one was the useful *via Egnatia*—made travel both safe and speedy, and both factors were of incalculable importance for the spread of the gospel message in the early days of the church.

At Thessalonica a three weeks' ministry at the local Jewish meeting-place (17:2) gave Paul a chance to set out the scriptural basis of his message. Note the three chief emphases he made (17:3). The reaction was true to previous experience. Some were convinced and won over to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord; this response angered the Jews, who raised the rabble against the visiting missionaries on the handy charge that they preached a subversive message which called for disloyalty to Rome (17:6-7). The evidence for this accusation was the proclamation of the Kingship of Jesus, which the Jews interpreted in a malicious way to mean that the Christian preachers were political agitators, offering a rival emperor to Caesar. The authorities, however, were not easily taken in by this specious allegation, but did investigate the claim. Jason, at whose house the apostles were lodging, was

required to give an assurance that his guests were not seditiously-minded (17:9); and to make sure, Jason agreed that the apostles should be “bound over” and prevented from speaking in Thessalonica. This explains their immediate departure for Beroea (17:10).

**Notes** 17:2: RSV margin gives “Sabbaths” as an alternative translation. On successive Sabbath days Paul was the invited preacher. Perhaps the three themes (of 17:3) were handled on these consecutive Sabbaths. 17:4: the adherence of some influential women reminds us that Christian ladies play a significant part in early church life. Which names come to mind? Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia ... turn up Romans 16 for many more. 17:5: the “loafers” (lit. those who hang about the market-place). 17:5: Paul was not there when Jason’s house was attacked.

**Meditation** “These men have turned the world upside down” (17:6). Christian preaching is not a sedative, but social and spiritual dynamite.

IN BEROEA

## ACTS 17:10-15

You couldn't have had a more attentive congregation that are a great example.

WE HAVE PAUL'S later comment on the turn of events which made him rather suddenly have to quit Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:18). Possibly he would not have accepted the dismissal so tamely, but Jason had given his word to the magistrates (17:9) and he would abide by that.

So he came to Beroea, sixty miles away. Here the previous pattern of his ministry was repeated. His preaching was evidently conducted in no "take-it-or-leave-it" manner, for it encouraged people to investigate the Scriptures for themselves. Not surprisingly, when this happens, "many of them ... believed" (17:12). Truth, personally sought out and discovered by us, is always more vital and dear than thoughts which are handed to us "on a plate."

Meanwhile, the infant church at Thessalonica was facing much hardship (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14; 3:3) and yet it did not cease its witness to the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:8). A later reference in that letter implies that persecution had caused the premature death of some believers (1 Thessalonians 4:13) and the Jewish leaders, determined to crush every outcropping of the church, moved on to Beroea (17:13).

Paul had to face fresh opposition from the Thessalonian Jews, and felt it wise to travel on to Athens, using Silas and Timothy as his delegates to encourage the believers in the place he had been forced to flee (17:15). So

much is clear, but it is very likely (from 1 Thessalonians) that Paul had to meet another kind of insinuation. Perhaps he had been accused of cowardice and running away from danger, or of double-dealing, by staying at Thessalonica only long enough to get a money-gift from Philippi, and then quickly moving on, hoping to collect more subscriptions from rich ladies *en route*. So he seeks to vindicate his character and to account for his actions in the Thessalonian letters. And, to make matters worse, he couldn't come in person to Thessalonica while the promise and pledge given by Jason was still in force. So he sent two men as his personal representatives.

**Notes** 17:11: “noble”—in their attitude to the message? Yet Paul never hints at a defect in Thessalonica. The Greek can mean “more generous”: can it refer to their support of the missionaries by gifts? Hence the defense (in 1 Thessalonians 2:5,9-10) of being disinterested and above-board. 17:14: cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:1ff.

PAUL COMES TO THE AREOPAGUS

ACTS 17:16-21

Athens had been the intellectual center of the ancient world but was now in a mess spiritually.

THE APOSTLE'S FIRST reaction to what he saw at Athens led to a public ministry of disputation, both in the Jewish synagogue and in the market-place. No record is given of his appreciation of the city's objects of beauty; what fastened itself on his mind was its senseless idolatry (17:16)—a judgment called forth by the excessive religiosity of the Athenians (17:22) and their custom of dedicating shrines to a variety of deities (17:23).

There are two settings of his encounter with the philosophers who met him. In the market-place they overheard his preaching, which they couldn't understand. To their ears he kept on referring to "Jesus and the resurrection" (17:18), which they probably misconstrued as an allusion to two deities: Jesus and his consort *Anastasis* (the Greek word for resurrection). Others seemed to have dismissed him with the disdainful term "babbler" (lit. seed-picker, a slang expression for a worthless person who picked up scraps of food in the markets). But some wished to hear more.

The two groups in 17:18 held beliefs which Paul touches upon in his sermon, viz. the Epicurean notion that God is all-sufficient in himself; and the Stoic doctrine that he gives life to all (cf. 17:25). The word "preacher" means "herald" and was a technical expression in the Greek mystery religions. A different term is used at Romans 10:14.

The second scene is the Areopagus (17:19), a venue for the Athenian court and a meeting-point for religious discussion and debate. Luke evidently had a pretty poor opinion of the value of what usually went on there (17:21); and his verdict was not unshared.

**Notes** 17:16: Athens, the cultural center of the Greco-Roman world, renowned for the sculpture of Pheidias. But Paul's spirit was provoked by its idols. The verb occurs in the Old Testament for God's anger at Israel's apostasy (Deuteronomy 9:18; Psalm 106:29). 17:19-20: "new teaching," "strange things"; cf. the reaction to our Lord's ministry (Mark 1:27; Luke 5:26), but for different reasons. Why? 17:21: Demosthenes, the Greek orator, had accused his fellow-Athenians of "going round and asking, Is anything new being said?" This is a human trait in every age, based on the false assumption that the latest vogue is the best. Theologians are not exempt.

WHO IS GOD?

## ACTS 17:22-34

Although Paul used language they would understand, he really told them about the God of the Bible—without quoting it once!

PAUL'S APOLOGETIC OR defense of the faith before the Athenians is a classic statement of "natural theology." An earlier and shorter specimen was given at 14:15-17. It aims at laying a foundation on which the special revelation of the gospel may be built; but no foundation is ever complete in itself and requires a superstructure to explain its *raison d'être*. Paul, taking his text from an altar reared to an "unknown god" (17:23) proceeds to state the answer to the basic question of all theology, "Who is God?"

1. He is Maker, Lord of heaven and earth (17:24).
2. He is Spirit, unimprisoned in any earthly temple (17:25,29; John 4:24).
3. He is self-existent, in whom all creation lives (17:25). This answers the children's insistent question, "Who made God?"
4. He is Creator of men, whose span of life and dwelling-place on earth are determined by him (17:26). If the last phrase of 17:26 refers to territorial ambitions, then God is seen as Lord of history, concerned with the rise and fall of national powers.
5. Moreover, he is the source and goal of man's spiritual life (17:27-28).

Two final attributes (17:30-31) are logically connected with this list. As God is One and almighty, with no visible image, all idolatry stands under his judgment since he is a righteous Lord who summons men to repentance. As Lord of history and of the Universe, it is his design to bring the world to its consummation at the final day of reckoning. The proof of this final judgment has been given in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Paul's hearers would follow him in the preliminary stages of his case, but mention of repentance (which implies sin), judgment (which involves moral responsibility), and the resurrection and return of Jesus (which ran counter to all Greek ideas of immortality and union with God) was too much for most of them. Some derided (17:32); some deferred (17:32); only a few decided for the Pauline gospel (17:34). Had Paul failed in this situation?

**Notes** 17:23: there is independent evidence of altars at Athens "to unknown gods" set up in time of civic distress, and as a feature of man's incurable religiosity (17:22). Paul accepts this as a fact of experience (17:27), confirmed by man's being created by God in his image (17:28). 17:28: a quotation from Aratus, and an allusion to a line in Cleanthes—both Stoic poets. Aratus hailed from Paul's place of origin. 17:30: cf Romans 3:25f.

**Meditation** Universal kinship with Adam (17:26) and the world's future judgment by the last Adam (17:31)—these are the terminal points of the sermon, and of Christian doctrine today.

IN CORINTH  
ACTS 18:1-4

Some oppose the gospel, especially if it contradicts their views or disrupts their lives. This is why suffering was so much a part of the early church.

WHEN HE LATER reflected on his ministry in this part of southern Greece, Paul later wrote of “the household of Stephanas” as the first converts in Achaia (1 Corinthians 16:15)—and Stephanas was a Corinthian. This suggests that no church—certainly no thriving community—was left in Athens after his departure.

Some scholars infer that, on reflection, Paul regretted the philosophical and cultural approach which he made to the Athenians, and that 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 was written out of a new resolve henceforth to focus his preaching on “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” We may doubt this inference, but it does seem clear that, in direct contrast to a somewhat barren ministry in Athens, the initial response at Corinth was a tremendous encouragement to him. In fact, from his letters, the evidence is that the church at Corinth turned out to be his main pastoral concern.

The exigencies of the situation at Corinth also may have contributed to his desire to proclaim the “simple gospel” in full reliance on the Holy Spirit. For Corinth was a flourishing seaport, notorious for its moral laxity and crude ways, the “Vanity Fair” of the Roman empire. The verb in Greek “to corinthianize” means “to go to the dogs”!

In such an unpromising setting Paul directed his ministry to both Jews and Greeks (18:4), and found support in two friends, husband and wife, who had been forced out of Italy by an imperial edict aimed at the Jews (c. AD 49–50). Jewish rabbis were taught a trade, so it is not surprising to read this reference to Paul's craftsmanship (18:3).

**Notes** 18:2: these two Christians play a significant, if secondary, rôle in the New Testament literature. Paul was later to owe much to them (Romans 16:3-4; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). The decree of Claudius is that mentioned by the historian Suetonius. 18:3: the trade was that of leather-working. Paul's occupation to support his ministry is well attested (cf. 20:34; 1 Corinthians 9:12,15; 2 Corinthians 11:7ff.; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8).

“GO ON SPEAKING”

## ACTS 18:5-11

How did Paul respond to opposition?

WE MAY PICK out a number of features of Paul’s labors at Corinth:

1. His evangelism. 18:5 reads, “Paul was engrossed in this preaching of the word” (Moffatt) once Silas and Timothy arrived. Probably their coming and work freed him from the necessity of dividing his time between preaching and his craft, and made a full-time ministry possible.
2. His decision, following on the hardened attitude of the Jews (18:6-7), to divert his energies into the channel of a mission to the Gentiles (18:8) and to set up a rival meeting-place next door to the synagogue. Would this arrangement have been approved by modern missionary policy-makers? But Crispus’ conversion seems to have been a direct fruit of this bold venture, to be followed by that of many Corinthians.
3. His encouragement (18:9-10). In spite of some success and the strength of Christian fellowship in the work, Paul grew depressed, and needed the heartening reminder and caution of a night-time vision. The message is precisely suited to his immediate situation: “Stop being afraid, and go on speaking.” A special promise of the Lord’s protecting hand implies that his life was in some peril and the assurance that his work was not to be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58) must have breathed fresh courage into

his jaded spirit. (Compare 1 Kings 19:18.) The effect on Paul was notable (18:11).

**Notes** 18:5: perhaps Silas and Timothy brought him gifts from the Macedonian churches (2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15) and this made possible a full-time ministry. 18:6: “he shook out his garments”—an act of protest (cf. Nehemiah 5:13). For the following phrase, see Matthew 27:25. 18:7: Ramsay identifies this man with Gaius (Romans 16:23). What we do know is that he was a Roman citizen and a God-fearer. 18:8: Paul refers to this conversion in 1 Corinthians 1:14 (baptism following conversion) and Gaius (?Titius Justus) is mentioned there also. 18:9: notice the translation above, which brings out the Greek tenses. Something of Paul’s fear is reflected in 1 Corinthians 2:3. For the church as God’s people, see 1 Peter 2:9-10.

## THE RETURN TO ANTIOCH

### ACTS 18:12-23

God does prepare some people to listen, while others reject what we have to say. Paul concentrated on those who wanted to hear.

VERSES 12-17 GIVE details of the kind of opposition which Paul met at Corinth (18:10), and his policy of setting up a rival center next door to the Jewish synagogue led, not unnaturally, to this “united attack” on him. He was hauled before the tribunal of Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia in AD 51. In his capacity as local magistrate, Gallio heard the charge (18:13), but did not stay for the defendant’s reply (18:14). He just couldn’t be bothered, as verse 17 implies, even when a flagrant injustice was done before his eyes.

18:18-23. Paul’s itinerary took him from Corinth via Ephesus to Antioch, and then back to Galatia to re-visit the churches in that province. At Ephesus he parted company with Aquila and his wife (18:26; and in 1 Corinthians 16:19, written from Ephesus, he conveys a greeting from them to their friends at Corinth). The allusion to a vow (18:18) is interesting. Based on Numbers 6:1-21, the custom of taking a Nazirite vow was followed by a man before setting out on a dangerous journey. The traveler would vow not to cut his hair until the trip was completed; then he would shear his head at a ceremony of thanksgiving in the Jerusalem temple (21:23-24). It was Paul’s intention, once his hair was cut at Cenchreae, not to have it cut again until he reached Jerusalem in safety. Then the hair would be offered as a token of thankfulness for “journeying mercies.” Probably we may understand a visit to

Jerusalem in the phrase “went up” (18:22). This is Luke’s ending of the second missionary tour, the final stage being told with breathless rapidity.

**Notes** 18:12: Gallio was the brother of the famous philosopher Seneca, who in turn was a tutor of Nero. 18:13: it is not certain what this accusation means; whose law is Paul supposedly contravening, Jewish or Roman? Gallio replies that on both counts Paul is no criminal, as far as he can see. He clears Paul of breaking a Roman law, and professes no interest in the domestic issue of Jewish affairs. 18:17: Sosthenes may be the same as in 1 Corinthians 1:1. If so, he too (like Crispus, 18:8) may have then been converted, and the Jews show their anger at losing *two* leaders to the Christian cause. But it may have been *Greeks* who gave Sosthenes a beating, taking advantage of Gallio’s unconcern (so the Western text). 18:22f.: “in these two verses and 19:1 is compressed a journey of 1,500 miles” (F.F. Bruce).

APOLLOS, PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

ACTS 18:24-28

Apollos must have been a humble man to listen to Aquila and Priscilla.

APOLLOS' GIFTS WERE considerable:

1. "learning," by which we are probably to understand a gift of public speaking—ie eloquence (18:24);
2. a close acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures, which he used in a ministry to the synagogues (18:26); and
3. an ardor (18:25) which drove him to share with others the knowledge he had of Jesus.

Something of the infectiousness of his zeal is hinted at in this memorable description: "fervent in spirit," or perhaps, "bubbling over with enthusiasm" (cf. Romans 12:11 for the same phrase). Yet he possessed a commendable trait which must have endeared him to all; his humility and teachableness which did not refuse to accept fuller instruction of "the way of God" (18:26). The maxim of Proverbs 9:9 sums it up.

Following this "course of instruction" which Priscilla and Aquila (note the order of names) gave him at Ephesus, there was an increase in Apollos' influence as he crossed over the Aegean Sea to southern Greece. Here he was welcomed, and exercised a two-sided ministry. He stimulated and

strengthened the believers (18:27), probably at Corinth (where unhappily his name became associated with a clique in the church, 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4,22). Incidentally Paul pays a warm tribute to his work at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6: “Apollos watered” the spiritual shoots and slips planted by the apostle). Then, he conducted a public campaign of “Christian evidences” against the denials and contradictions of the Jews (18:28).

**Notes** 18:24: Apollos’ culture derived from the advantage of living at Alexandria, the Sorbonne of the ancient world, famed for its library and letters. Apollos’ knowledge of the Old Testament would be that of the Septuagint version, and his religious experience seems to have been that of a pre-Pentecostal nature. Possibly he was a member of a group which venerated John the Baptist, although recognizing the existence of Jesus’ Messiahship and an experimental knowledge of the Holy Spirit (see on chapter 19). This explains the effectiveness of his later ministry, based on his ready aptitude to learn (18:28). 18:27: a “letter of commendation” is meant, like those referred to in 2 Corinthians 3:1.

PAUL IN EPHESUS

ACTS 19:1-7

Paul speaks to “halfway” disciples.

THE FIRST VERSE takes up the story of Paul where 18:23 left off, and brings him to Ephesus. His work there falls into the following categories:

1. as apostle (19:1-7);
2. as apologist (19:8-10);
3. as miracle-worker (19:11-20).

The disciples who professed to be ignorant of the Holy Spirit (19:2) must have been Gentiles if we take their statement in a precisely literal way, for all Jews would recall the Old Testament teaching of Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 63:10, etc. These men were believers (19:2) and had been baptized as disciples of John the Baptist (19:3). Possibly the description “disciples” (19:1) is meant to fit this case, as in Matthew 14:12, though it is just conceivable that they were disciples of Apollos, whose earlier life as an incomplete believer seems to have matched theirs (18:25). At all events we are clearly meant to see here:

1. An exceptional circumstance of a small (hence the number is given, 19:7) group of men who had believed in Christ (as the coming One, heralded by John) and had received a pre-Pentecostal baptism in

anticipation of the Messiah's coming. Their Christian knowledge and experience therefore, while sincere and genuine, was defective.

2. A transition from the anticipatory baptism of John (and Apollos?) to the fulfillment—baptism which is the norm in the gospel age. In Ephesians 1:13 Paul states explicitly the accepted sequence, with the same aorist participle in the Greek (“having believed”) to be construed as coincident in time with the action of the chief verb. So, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit at the time of your believing?” corresponds exactly to the Pauline teaching: “At the time of your believing you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” No interval is envisaged, and the possibility of believing without the sealing of the Spirit is not entertained. This is why the Ephesian disciples are an exceptional case.
3. A polemic against remaining content with John's baptism and a pre-Pentecostal faith and experience. The men were encouraged to submit to Christian baptism, which was followed by apostolic ordination and the gift of “tongues” (19:6).

**Notes** 19:1: the wording implies that Paul's attention was drawn to these men and their needs. Hence his query (19:2). 19:2-3: the intimate connection between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit is plain (2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13). John's baptism is described in 1:5; 11:16; 13:24f., 18-25, and John's Gospel, 3:23ff. A Johannine movement persisted in the later centuries.

PAUL'S APOSTOLIC MEETING

ACTS 19:8-20

Here we see the impact of the good news on a famous pagan city and the surrounding district.

PAUL'S EPHESIAN MINISTRY took on some features which are now familiar from our earlier readings. A ministry in the Jewish synagogue met with opposition and defamation (19:8-9), which obliged him to continue on neutral ground. The lecture-hall of Tyrannus is the new meeting-point, made available to Paul during the hot afternoon hours from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. (a credible addition, supplied by the Western text, printed in RSV margin) when the room would be unused. The townspeople would then be enjoying their midday siesta, while Paul and his devoted followers met to present Christ's claims to any who cared to come.

Paul gained some notoriety as a worker of miracles (19:11). This reputation induced some itinerant Jewish magicians to capitalize on his success, and to try their hand at using the name of Jesus as a formula of exorcism (19:13).

The spiritual power released by the apostolic ministry had other beneficial effects (19:18-20), with a notable display of the gospel's effectiveness to counter and overcome false religion. No price was too high to obtain release from the tyranny of bad religion and crippling superstition which plagued the first-century world of Hellenistic people—and still grips modern humanity in spite of its technocracy and sophistication.

**Notes** 19:8: “the kingdom of God”: not a very common theme in the epistles, but we may refer to 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Romans 14:17, and Colossians 1:13. 19:9: “the Way,” as at 9:2, a name for the early believers who were committed to the way of life ruled by Jesus Christ. Tyrannus was evidently a professional lecturer who hired out his room during its unused hours. 19:9,11 tell us that he had a very full day! 19:12: these garments are described in trade terms and refer to items which Paul used in his manual work. 19:13: a surviving papyrus has a list of such exorcisms, including “I beseech you by Jesus the God of the Hebrews.” 19:14: possibly “high priest” was a pretentious claim Sceva made for himself, not to be taken too seriously.

## THE RIOT IN EPHESUS

### ACTS 19:21-41

Think of some of the things that would change if the good news really touched our country.

VERSES 21-22 ARE an intimation of Paul's future plans, including the expression of his desire, which henceforward runs like a thread through the rest of the book of Acts, to visit the imperial city, Rome.

The evidence for opposition here is partly factual (like the story here of the riot in the amphitheater), and partly inferential (eg the hints of a terrible danger to his life in 1 Corinthians 15:32; 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 and, probably, Philippians 1:30; 2:17).

Paul's preaching (19:26), as in the report of his Athenian sermon (17:24,29), was seen as a danger to the silversmiths and a second occasion of Demetrius' protest may very well have been a period of social anarchy and unrest, following the assassination of Junius Silanus in AD 54. The murder of this proconsul of Asia at the instigation of Agrippina may possibly have been carried out by two men who afterwards stayed on in Asia to oversee the imperial business until a successor to Silanus was appointed. G.S. Duncan makes this interesting suggestion in his book on *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*, and so explains (a) the reference to proconsuls (plural) in 19:38; and (b) Paul's grave danger in which his Roman citizenship failed to protect him from the venom of the mob and the authorities.

In God's providence, however, the apostle was able to call upon local influential friends (19:31). A moderating voice was raised by the Ephesian "town-clerk" (19:35-40). Luke did not fail to note the irony of the situation (19:32), though it may have been an ugly scene for a time until reason prevailed (19:41).

**Notes** 19:25,27: "business is business" was Demetrius' ruling motto. 19:29: the Ephesian theater has been excavated; it seated 25,000 persons in its day. Gaius may not have been a Macedonian (so the textual authorities grant) in view of 20:4, where he is called a man of Derbe. Possibly, however, there were two men of this common name. See comment on the later verse. 19:32: the Greek word translated "assembly" is the regular word for "church" (so 19:41). 19:35: the image of Artemis was supposed to have fallen (like a meteorite?) from the sky.

THROUGH MACEDONIA AND GREECE

## ACTS 20:1-6

Are we as keen as Paul to share Jesus with those who have never heard?

FROM EPHESUS PAUL'S journeys took him to Macedonia and then to southern Greece. Later as he faced opposition he decided to return northwards and to sail from Neapolis, the port of Philippi (20:6), across the Aegean to Troas on his long trip to Jerusalem (20:3: "set sail for Syria").

In a section which deals with Paul's uneventful travels we shall do well to dig a little below the surface, for this was an important period in his life. His visit to Macedonia (20:1) evidently was the same as that spoken of in 2 Corinthians 2:12 when he halted at Troas where he had arranged to meet Titus. This was a critical period in his apostolic service, for he had been insulted at Corinth (2 Corinthians 2:5) and had written a "severe letter" to rebuke a factious minority in the church which had opposed his authority. But this letter was not composed easily, as 2 Corinthians 2:4 makes clear. At Troas he was anxious to receive news of the letter's effect.

Indeed, so concerned was he and sorry that Titus had failed to rendezvous with him at Troas that he crossed over into Macedonia (2 Corinthians 7:5-13). There good news awaited him as Titus arrived with the report that the Corinthian disturbance was over and the church had voted confidence in him. From Macedonia he wrote 2 Corinthians, therefore, and followed it up with a

visit (20:2), when he composed the epistle to the Romans, which was sent out from Corinth.

The return trip, through Macedonia to Troas, brought him a further stage on his eastward journey. It was a slow journey (compare 20:6 with 16:11-12), and meant a hurried “stop-over” at Miletus instead of a diversionary visit to Ephesus (20:16). Why was he in a hurry (20:16)?

**Notes** 20:4: the names of Paul’s travel companions are interesting. Sopater may be the same as Sosipater of Romans 16:21. Aristarchus was mentioned earlier at 19:29, while Gaius may be the Macedonian of that verse if we accept (with NEB) the variant reading “the Doberian” instead of “Derbacan” (NEB margin). Doberus was a Macedonian town, near Philippi. Tychicus is well known in the later imprisonment epistles as Paul’s courier; and Trophimus recurs as the sick man of 2 Timothy 4:20. 20:6: Passover days numbered a week, and probably a date in April AD 57 is intended.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AT WORSHIP

ACTS 20:7-16

In New Testament times, the church didn't mind how long a sermon lasted.

VERSES 7-12 ARE a description of the New Testament church at worship, and help to fill a gap in our knowledge of what went on when the early believers met in congregational assembly. Significant aspects:

1. The day is “the first day of the week”—ie our Sunday (if, as is likely, Luke is using the Roman, not Jewish, calculation of the days of the week; cf. NEB). This day became known as the Lord's day (Revelation 1:10) in commemoration of his resurrection (Luke 24:1; John 20:19,26) and in contrast to the Jewish Sabbath. Another feature of the Christians' holy day is given in 1 Corinthians 16:2.
2. The time of this gathering at Troas is evidently evening—“he prolonged his speech until midnight” (20:7).
3. The purpose is set out in the technical expression “to break bread” (20:7)—ie to share a common meal which was held in order to observe a solemn remembrance of the Lord's death. The sense of this expression is given clearly in 20:11 and 1 Corinthians 10:16 and at this early stage of development, Christians observed a common meal (the *agape* or love-feast) in the framework of which there was a communion service (the

Eucharist). This pattern seems clear from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, and other Christian writings.

4. In the context of this assembly Paul gave a “sermon” which was interrupted by Eutychus’ unfortunate accident. An inland trip to Ephesus was not made because Paul had his eye on the calendar (20:16).

**Notes** 20:7: “the morrow” refers to a new day, begun at “day-break” (20:11). Luke is therefore using the Roman system of reckoning, whose day was from midnight to midnight; not the Jewish, from sunset to sunset. 20:8: “lights” were torches which gave off heavy fumes. It is not surprising then that one young man nodded off (20:9) and fell down. 20:10: Paul acts like Elijah (1 Kings 17:17ff.) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:34f.). 20:10: his “soul” (in Old Testament sense of life’s vital principle, *nephesh*) was still alive, although he was unconscious and concussed.

PAUL'S FAREWELL SPEECH TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

ACTS 20:17-27

Read through these verses slowly, and think of the way Paul had given everything he had to them.

OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE contact with the Ephesian churches was not altogether lost; and if Paul couldn't come to them, they or their leaders would travel to meet him at Miletus. Ministers and church leaders should find special relevance and challenge in these words. This passage covers the first half of Paul's address, the only example of its kind in Acts as a speech delivered by him to a Christian community. "Almost certainly Luke heard it himself, and may even have taken shorthand notes" (F.F. Bruce). Certainly it carries all the marks of a Pauline composition.

20:18-21 are mainly in the past, and relate Paul's type of ministry in Asia. This would be well known to his hearers, who, as "elders" (20:17) or "overseers" (20:28) would have special reason to be grateful for his "all-round" (20:20-21), if personally costly (20:19), ministry. "The plots of the Jews" (20:19) remind us of some far more serious danger to his life than Luke has recorded, as we observed earlier.

20:22-27 are in the form of an announcement of what the future holds. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, fully alive to the perils which beset him (20:22-23). In fact, he does not anticipate a return to Ephesus (20:25). His life is forfeit, yet expendable if only the divine purpose for which he was called

and chosen may be realized (20:24). What was that purpose (9:15; 26:16-18,22)? Was it achieved (2 Timothy 4:6-8)?

**Notes** 20:17: the “elders” are apparently to be equated with “guardians” (Gk. *episkopoi*, KJV “overseers,” 20:28), although the former may be the name of an office, the latter a function. 20:19: cf. 1 Corinthians 15:32; 2 Corinthians 1:8-10; 11:23. 20:20: relevant to the pastoral office: “in public,” and privately in the people’s homes. Equally the two themes (20:21) still need strong emphasis. 20:22: “under the constraint of the (Holy) Spirit.” 20:23: by inward monition or through the guidance of prophets like Agabus (21:11). 20:24-25: testifying to the gospel and preaching the kingdom—are one and the same activity. 20:26: like Ezekiel’s watchman (Ezekiel 33:1-6).

**Meditation** Consider Paul’s sincere sense of duty toward his ministerial tasks.

## EXHORTATION AND EXAMPLE

# ACTS 20:28-38

What do we learn about Christian leadership here?

VERSES 28-35 ARE the concluding part of this pastoral charge, in which exhortation and example meet and mingle. Paul's encouragements are given in such verses as 20:28,31,35. He holds himself up as a model to emulate in verses like 20:31,33-34. The call to vigilance and faithfulness is made all the more insistent and urgent because of the attacks of heretical teachers (20:29-30) whose influence in the later church became only too apparent (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-3; Jude; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 4:1-6; Revelation 2:2 in particular). The saddest warning is given in the announcement that these men will arise "from among your own selves"—ie they will be apostate teachers who desert the church's faith and introduce some distortion of Christian doctrine and ethics. Can you think of some modern counterpart to this "false teaching"?

20:28. The church as a flock (John 10) has a natural complement of its leaders as "overseers" (*episkopoi*) whose job it is to tend it and to protect it from marauding wolves (20:29). The Holy Spirit appoints such pastoral leaders over the church, purchased (as Israel of old, Psalm 74:2; Exodus 15:16) by the blood of God's only Son (RSV margin gives the best sense in the light of Jesus' relationship to God as his well-beloved, cf. Genesis 22:2; Romans 8:32).

20:36-38. The elders escorted him to the quayside—the place of many tender farewells.

**Notes** 20:29: heretical leaders are often likened to wolves (Matthew 7:15). 20:33: Samuel made a similar protest of disinterested concern (1 Samuel 12:3). 20:34: “these hands”—one can almost see Paul point to his toil-worn hands as he spoke. The two words are in an emphatic place in the sentence. 20:35: a saying of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels, but evidently widely known. This suggests that a collection of his teaching was already in circulation among the churches.

**Thought** The elders are to be built up (20:32) so that they may defend and tend the flock. The measure of one is the key to the other.

FROM MILETUS TO TYRE

## ACTS 21:1-14

How ready are we to accept God's will even though we know it will be hard for us?

VERSES 1-6 NARRATE a further stage in the apostolic sea voyage from Miletus to Tyre. On route they called at various ports of call (21:1-3) until they reached Tyre on the Syrian coast. There a lengthy process of unloading the ship's cargo meant some delay (21:4), but Paul redeemed the time by making the acquaintance of Christian friends at Tyre. The church was formed there probably as a result of the missionary dispersal of 11:19.

A warning came to Paul, possibly by some inspired utterance in the church assembly, that he should not proceed to Jerusalem (21:4b); but he recognized some higher constraint (20:22) impelling him onwards. The cameo picture (21:5-6) is a most touching scene, filled with tenderness and pathos. The final parting came as the two groups of Christians went their own ways: "*we* went on board the ship ... *they* returned home." Many a missionary's valediction today is like this!

21:7-14 take up again the theme of prophetic warnings given to Paul. This time it is Agabus—a noted prophet in the Judean churches (11:27-28). Both Paul's companions and the Caesarean church sensed the imminent danger, and Paul's refusal to follow their advice was not made lightly or in a foolhardy manner (21:13). Like his Master, he was answerable to the divine will of which he had an assurance (Luke 13:31-33). The church eventually

accepted his firm persuasion (21:14) of God's will with a note of concurrence.

**Notes** 21:1: lit. "we tore ourselves away from them." 21:7: the sea voyage ended at Ptolemais, the Roman port of Palestine, and thence Paul proceeded to Caesarea by road. 21:8: Philip and his family had settled at Caesarea (8:40). His unmarried daughters had the spiritual gift of 1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:3. 21:10: if we translate the time-phrase literally, with J.A. Findlay, it will mean "we stayed there more days (than we intended)." Perhaps it was congenial company or profitable discussion which detained the Pauline party; certainly Luke would benefit from the extra "stop-over" by assembling materials for his literary works. 21:11: Agabus performs a symbolic action, like that of Old Testament prophets, to lend extra force to his spoken message. 21:13: lit. "bleaching my heart by pounding it like a washerwoman" (Findlay)—a vivid metaphor in Paul's verb.

PAUL ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM

ACTS 21:15-26

Paul's personal rule was never to offend others unnecessarily. He was not being insincere, but sensitive to the attitudes of other believers.

JAMES, THE LORD'S brother and leader of the Jerusalem church, gave the apostolic travelers a cautious welcome (21:18ff.). Their response to Paul's celebration of the gospel and its success among the Gentile peoples (21:19) matched his enthusiasm with a sobering reflection that his ministry had been a source of embarrassment, partly based on a false report (21:21) and partly caused by the logical conclusion of Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith alone.

"What then is to be done?" was a natural question, demanding some action (21:22) to allay Jewish suspicions that Paul was advocating a wholesale rejection of the Jewish law and its relevance to Jews who became Christians. Underlying the fear of the Jewish party was undoubtedly a healthy regard for moral standards, and the insinuation that the Pauline message led inevitably to antinomianism—ie a casting-off of all moral restraints in the interests of a supposed freedom and championing of divine grace (as in Romans 6:1ff.; Galatians 5:13)—which dogged Paul all his life.

In fact, Paul had never quarreled with the use of the Law for Jewish believers (see Romans 2:25; 3:1ff.,31; 7:12) and had never renounced his Jewish heritage (1 Corinthians 7:18; 9:20; 2 Corinthians 11:21ff.). It was an attempt to shackle Gentile converts with the Law which called forth his

loudest protest, as in Galatians, which was written directly to a Gentile-Christian church in a controversial situation.

The evidence for his deep loyalty to his ancestry was provided by his acceptance of a Nazirite vow, both for himself and four men whose expenses—eight pigeons and two lambs in all (referred to in 21:24)—he paid. He is reminded of the earlier apostolic decree, made binding on the Gentile churches and since this code (see on Acts 15) did not infringe Gentile liberty in Christ, he was willing to comply (21:26).

**Notes** 21:16: Mnason is called “an early disciple”—ie a foundation-member of the church since its beginnings. 21:19: “he related ... the things God had done among the Gentiles”—as on a previous occasion (15:3f.,12). 21:20: a true report of what was said, but was the statement exaggerated? 21:21: “the customs” are ethical standards. Hence the suggestion that Paul was leading people astray. 21:23: Paul had taken such a vow earlier (18:18). He had no need to purify himself from defilement (21:24), but conceded the point (21:26) out of deference to the elders. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 is well illustrated.

**Thought** Two powerful ideas dominate Paul’s thinking and action: the freedom of the gospel, and the unity of the church. Consider these in the light of today.

PAUL IS ARRESTED

## ACTS 21:27-39

Paul began the day a free man and ended it a prisoner—but at least he was alive.

THERE IS AN indirect element of pathos in today's passage. Paul was arrested (21:33), and as far as the story in Acts goes, he was never again a free man! 21:27-32 therefore tell of the apostle's last days of freedom.

21:27-32. Paul's fulfillment of the vow in company with four Jewish Christians (23-24) was done openly—to serve as a notification of his ancestral loyalty. But he paid a heavy price for such notoriety. Certain Asian Jews spotted Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, in his company, and drew the conclusion that Paul had taken him into the most sacred and restricted part of the temple. This was a serious breach, hence the outcry (21:28). The gates were shut (by the temple police chief presumably, 21:30c: he is referred to at 4:1) to prevent further trouble and the Roman tribune took Paul into protective custody (21:32-33).

21:33-39. The fury of the crowd is seen both in their uncontrolled demonstration (21:34) and their determination to get at Paul, who was carried into the safety of the barracks on the backs of Roman soldiers (21:35).

Claudius Lysias (23:26) was the tribune's name. He thought that he had carried off a notable prisoner (21:38) and before the incident closed, Paul was given a chance to speak to the angry mob. But to no avail (22:22-23).

**Notes** 21:27: the seven days of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:9f.) are meant. 21:28: the Romans honored Jewish scruples about the sanctity of the temple; a “middle wall of partition” (Ephesians 2:14) separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of Women and the Inner Court to which no Gentile could come. The penalty was death. Asian Jews had already proved (20:19) that they meant business in their enmity to the apostle of the Gentiles. 21:38: “the Egyptian” was evidently a man with a police record and wanted for his part in a Jerusalem uprising, quelled by Roman soldiers in AD 54 (Josephus tells us the story, and Klausner identified him with a false prophet named Ben Stada). He led the “Assassins” (lit. dagger-men). 21:39: Paul speaks up, giving his identity.

PAUL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ACTS 21:40–22:21

When the Lord tells you to do something, don't argue!

PAUL'S SPEECH FROM the steps (21:40) was given to a quietened audience. The reason for this dramatic change which turned a restless, turbulent mob into a subdued body of listeners is found at 21:40 and 22:2. Speaking in Aramaic, Paul, with great tact, gained his audience's attention while he presented his "apology" (22:1) for his faith in Christ Jesus.

It falls into three parts:

1. His conduct before conversion (22:3-5);
2. The circumstances of his conversion (22:6-14);
3. His commission at conversion (22:15-21).

Paul adopts a frankly autobiographical pose, recalling his past life in the same way as in Galatians 1:13-17; Philippians 3:4-11 and 1 Timothy 1:12-16. Confining our attention to the record in Acts, we note how Paul's pre-Christian life was seen from different points of view. The revered Jewish teacher Gamaliel (cf. 5:34) no doubt saw in Saul of Tarsus an apt pupil, known for his zeal (22:3; Romans 10:2 puts this ardor in its true light). The early Christians saw in him a notorious enemy and persecutor, greatly to be feared, and the embodiment of undying hatred (22:4-5). Paul's own estimate of his former way of life is contained in the hints of (a) his diligence as

Gamaliel's pupil, and (b) his all-consuming zeal for what he then believed to be God's honor.

22:6-21. The circumstances of Paul's conversion are set in three different scenes:

1. On the road (22:6-11), where the living Jesus met him, captured his will and claimed him as his servant. Note the new features recorded here, supplementary to the account in 9:3-9.
2. In the house (22:12-16), identified earlier as Judas' home in Straight Street (9:11).
3. In the temple (22:17-21).

From this revealing piece of autobiography we can see the tremendous impression Stephen's martyrdom made on him (22:20), and Paul's appointment as apostle to the Gentile world was confirmed (22:21; Galatians 2:7-9).

**Notes** 22:14 "the Just One" = the Messiah (3:14). 22:15: his witness was grounded in personal experience, which no one could deny to him (cf. 26:16). 22:16: Paul's baptism followed his conversion, imparting an assurance of forgiveness as he called on his name (2:21,38).

PAUL AS A ROMAN CITIZEN

ACTS 22:22-29

Here's another situation where Paul was prepared to use his worldly status.

THE TRANCE-VISION in the temple is of some importance both in its immediate impact on Paul (perhaps 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 refers to the experience; more likely 1 Corinthians 9:1 seems to indicate this occasion, when he saw the Lord) and its bearing on his future service. The commissioning word was "I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). The Roman tribune, evidently mystified over a speech (in a language foreign to him) which produced such a violent result (22:23), determined to get at the root of the matter, even if it meant torture (22:24-25). Paul appealed to his civil rights, and used his Roman citizenship to extricate himself from further indignity and suffering. He had no love of pain for its own sake—contrast with some of the later martyrs (eg Ignatius) who took positive delight in their prospective sufferings.

The issue of 22:26-29 turns on Paul's possession of Roman citizenship, gained by inheritance from his parents (21:28). This automatically exempted him from such torture as the tribune intended to apply—a cruel method of "third degree" to extract a confession of guilt (22:24). The Roman soldier was amazed that a man like Paul could have afforded to buy his citizenship (22:27-28) but accepted the explanation that he gave.

**Notes** 22:23: the offending thought was that Paul was claiming a divine commission to offer God's salvation *directly* to the Gentiles, ie without requiring them to become Jews first or to become subservient to Jews (as in Isaiah 61:5). Throwing dust into the air, along with tearing clothes, is a sign of horror at blasphemy (Job 2:12). 22:25: as at 16:38, Paul reminds the Romans of his right to a fair trial. The flagrant mistake was that they had dared to bind him "uncondemned"—*re incognita*: without investigating his case—and were ready to flog him (from which he was, even if guilty, exempt). 22:28: the Venerable Bede preserves an interesting reading: "It is easy to say you are a Roman citizen: I know how much it cost me!" In other words, the tribune speaks ironically, and marvels that such an undistinguished fellow as Paul could be a Roman. But appearances are often deceptive.

BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

## ACTS 22:30–23:10

Paul used his privileges to confound his enemies.

THE ROMAN TRIBUNE'S curiosity was further stimulated by the remarkable prisoner he had taken into custody. He was a man who knew his privilege as a Roman citizen to a trial (22:25,29), and at the same time had acquired a reputation as a trouble-maker among his own people (22:30). The simplest procedure, Claudius Lysias thought, was to bring accusers and accused together. So Paul was placed before the Jewish Sanhedrin (23:1).

Evidently Paul's protest divided the council, and Sir William Ramsay even suggests that, at 23:6, the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin walked across to take their place by the prisoner's side, as if to associate themselves with him. At all events two things stand out in the sequel:

1. Paul henceforth addresses the Pharisees by appealing to a doctrine which they and he as a Christian shared—the resurrection of the dead (denied by Sadducees, the high-priestly party, Acts 4:1-2; Mark 12:18, etc.), and in response he gains the approval of this part of the Jewish legislature (23:9).
2. In the subsequent outworking of his relations with the Jewish leaders, his main enemies are the Sadducees (23:14).

**Notes** 23:1: see 26:9; Philippians 3:6. 23:2: Ananias is known to history as an unscrupulous ecclesiastical politician who held office and wielded influence for a long time. He was finally assassinated in AD 66 by the nationalist terrorists referred to in 21:38. 23:3,5: Paul's retort seems to mean, "I couldn't recognize the high priest in the outrageous behavior and speech of such a man as that!" The quotation from Exodus 22:28, however, is half-apologetic. 23:3 reflects Matthew 23:27, which confirms the view given above. The high priest may have worn the clothes of his office, but his spirit was *not* that of God's servant and leader of the people. 23:9: the Pharisees show, as at earlier times, a readiness to accept the message (5:34-40; 15:5; 21:20). The Sadducees, as at the trial and condemnation of Jesus, are the inveterate enemies.

A PLOT TO KILL PAUL

ACTS 23:11-22

God always gets his way but often uses ordinary people to bring it about.

VERSE 11. PAUL must have wondered what the issue would be. His life seemed to hang on a fragile thread, with three serious attempts made upon it in two days (21:31; 22:22; 23:10). “often near death” (2 Corinthians 11:23) was no poetic expression! The Lord’s encouragement was, therefore, timely and to the point.

23:12-15 give the “inside” story of a plot to put Paul out of the way once and for good. Fanatical Jews had made this compact to kill him. They had taken an oath on the matter (23:14), and sought the ready co-operation of the religious authority (23:15).

23:16-22. The conspiracy was discovered by Paul’s nephew—one of the rare sidelights on his family connections. The following scene, set in the Roman garrison-house, is a drama of suspense and mystery, with hurried exchanges of information, quick decisions and sworn secrecy (23:22). The name of God doesn’t appear in the swift-flowing narrative; no moral is drawn from the drama, and the characters act and speak like “men of the world” who might be found in any modern spy tale. The Bible doesn’t moralize unnecessarily, nor is it tediously “pious” (as though every character in its story is constantly talking about religion). Yet the undertone of divine providence runs throughout; and God is *there*, if unseen and unrecognized, in

the plans and counter-plans of enemies and friends. Of which Old Testament book does all this remind you?

**Notes** 23:11: “take courage”—the Greek word is that used of Jesus’ concern for his disciples’ needs, in the Gospels (eg Mark 6:50). Paul’s own desire to visit Rome (19:21; Romans 1:10-11) blends with the Lord’s will for his servant. Such a combination has irresistible force (Psalm 37:4-5). 23:12: abstinence from food and drink was a mark of earnestness in carrying out a purpose. Evil men can be thoroughgoing in their designs and often display a zeal which shames the Christian’s half-heartedness (see, for illustration, Luke 16:1-9). 23:18: “Paul the prisoner”—a state in which he later rejoiced to be (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Colossians 1:24).

**Thought** “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). The irony is that the assassins whom Ananias abetted (23:14-16) ten years later claimed him as a victim.

PAUL IS SENT TO GOVERNOR FELIX

## ACTS 23:23-35

God was looking after his servant Paul, even though it was in strange ways.

THE COUNTER-PLAN, DEVISED to foil the conspiracy of murder, was to abduct Paul by night from Jerusalem to Caesarea (23:23-24). A formidable bodyguard of foot soldiers, cavalry and light-armed troops was detailed to escort the prisoner on the way to Felix, the Roman procurator at Caesarea, the headquarters of Roman authority in Palestine.

Lysias wrote a covering letter (23:26-30). The commentators, impressed by the realistic style of writing, wonder if Luke had actually seen a copy of this letter. Certainly it bears the imprint of what a Roman official may well say in such circumstances, including a touch of embellishment (23:27) designed to enhance *his* own reputation for prompt and decisive action. Strictly, Lysias did not learn of Paul's Roman status until later than the time of the arrest, and his motive in rescuing Paul was hardly that of verse 27! He tactfully omits an incident which had clearly embarrassed him (22:24-26)!

The apostle was ushered into the presence of Felix, whose predecessor in the governor's office—Pilate—is well known. Felix's term began in AD 52, and was marked with uprisings and fierce countermeasures. As a result of one such commotion and its harsh treatment by Felix (24:27), he was recalled. A contemporary historian sums up his character: "he exercised the power of a

king with the mind of a slave.” Luke is more kindly in his record (especially 24:22-23), but picks out some basic flaws in his character (24:26-27).

**Notes** 23:23: about 9:30 p.m. From the size of the escort, it is clear that Lysias was taking no more chances. Contrast Ezra 8:22. 23:24: the plural “mounts” (horses or mules) implies that Paul had his friends, including Luke, with him—cf. 24:23. 23:26: a title of respect, also given to Luke’s first reader (Luke 1:3). 23:34: a similar question, put for purposes of identification, was asked concerning the Lord at his trial (Luke 23:6-7). 23:35: Paul spent two years at the official residence of the governor, built by Herod the Great, hence the name.

**To think over** Letter-writing is a revelation of character. How does Lysias’ character shine through his letter to Felix?

## THE CASE AGAINST PAUL

### ACTS 24:1-9

The charges against Paul couldn't have been more false. When people want to destroy the truth, they often stoop to lies.

IN TODAY'S READING we see Paul through the eyes of his enemies (particularly 24:5), and learn something of how the earliest Christians had to contend with misrepresentation and implacable hate.

“The speech of Tertullus is a delightful parody of the oratory of the second-rate Greek hired pleader; Luke must have enjoyed writing it. It begins with a high-flown compliment, and then quite suddenly subsides into the baldest colloquialism, as if the poor creature could not keep it up” (Findlay).

Tertullus's rhetoric leads him into:

1. culpable exaggeration (24:2, “much peace” is sharply contradicted by the series of uprisings and punitive retaliations which had disgraced Felix's tenure of office);
2. a distortion of the facts (24:5, which tried to denigrate Paul by making him no better than a Messianic revolutionary, like the man of 21:38, whom Felix, aided by Jews, had put down); and
3. a perverted sense of justice (24:7, which is relegated to the RSV margin, but which many editors believe to be authentic).

Clearly something more needs to be added to explain the reason for Paul's "arrest" by the Jews. Notice the slant which Tertullus gives to the recent events, silently glossing over any thought that the Jews were ready to lynch their enemy, and putting the blame for "violence" on Lysias' head (24:7). His hint ("we would have judged him according to our law," 24:6) may suggest that there was no need for Felix to bother himself overmuch with this case—let him just release Paul, for them to deal with!

**Notes** 24:4: "briefly"—at least one redeeming feature of the speech, and he kept to his promise. 24:5: a threefold charge is brought against Paul. He is accused of being (a) a troublesome pest—ie a seditious agitator against the Roman authority; this was designed to get Felix's interest; (b) a ringleader of Nazarenes—ie a heretical Jewish sect, based on the teaching of an executed false prophet; (c) an attempted violator of the temple, whose claim to sanctity the Romans respected. How much was (a) true? (b) false? (c) distorted? 24:7: cf. John 18:31.

**Thought** Read again the account of Paul's encounter with the Jews (21:27ff.). Both Claudius Lysias (23:26ff.) and Tertullus (24:2ff.) have given their own different versions of it. Shall we turn this thought into prayer for all who influence public opinion in our newspapers, radio and TV, that *facts* may be clearly distinguished from *comment*.

PAUL'S DEFENSE BEFORE FELIX

ACTS 24:10-21

Because of what Christ had done for him, Paul could face the resurrection and judgment without fear.

THE DEFENSE WHICH Paul makes before the governor's tribunal deals point by point with the accusations leveled against him. The main intention, however, is to show that he is innocent of all political charges, and that the real issue between him and the Jews is a theological one (24:20-21). We may take up the individual rebuttals he makes to the list of accusations which faced him:

1. Paul's visit to Jerusalem was a recent happening and the facts of the case should be known to all (24:11).
2. He denied all responsibility as a trouble-maker at that time. He was going about his lawful occupations (24:12,18).
3. In any case, the men who confronted him at Felix's palace were not the same as the real assailants (24:13,18b,19: "Jews from Asia" were the disturbers of the peace).
4. The nub of the dispute between Paul and the Jews who supported Tertullus' castigation (24:5,9) was found in a conflicting interpretation of Scripture (24:14-15) and a debate over theology (24:21).

The implication which Paul intended is clear: he himself had a clear conscience over the charges of supposed agitation (24:16) and the matter

before the governor had no political significance. The “one thing” was a domestic affair which ought to be settled peacefully.

In the course of this brief statement Paul has indirectly made his position clear. He was and always had been—a loyal Israelite (24:14) with a faith built on the Old Testament revelation which, as prophetic Scripture, looks beyond itself to the fulfillment of divine promises. Part of that faith is an expectation of resurrection (24:15,21)—a Pharisaic tenet also. From this belief it is an easy step to the central Christian article of faith: the resurrection of Jesus, which validated his Messiahship as Israel’s King and Savior. Paul is no iconoclast, with a relish for acting irresponsibly and upturning his ancestral beliefs (24:16). In fact, the opposite is true. He had come to Jerusalem with money for Jewish-Christians, as a token of charitable concern and a proof of unity among the one people of God (24:17).

**Notes** 24:14: non-Christians may call them a “sect” (ie Heterodox party within the Jewish fold), but the correct title was “the Way,” 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:22). The qualification “God of our fathers” is important. Like Moses (Exodus 3:13) and the prophets of Israel (Hosea 12:9,13; 13:4-5; Amos 2:10, etc.) Paul harks back to God’s earlier revelation, at the same time pointing forward to its future consummation. 24:17: the collection for the saints occupied much of his time and attention (2 Corinthians 8–9; Romans 15:25ff.).

PAUL BEFORE FELIX AND DRUSILLA

ACTS 24:22-27

Felix was a mixture of religious curiosity and greed, but he got more than he bargained for with Paul. The things Paul spoke about were what Felix needed to know.

VERSE 22. APPARENTLY Lysias never came, or else this was Felix's way of postponing proceedings and the verdict indefinitely. Paul had no redress and no choice but to hope for a discharge. When this became unlikely, he played a trump card (25:11).

Felix was in no mind to settle the dispute there and then, and deferred the case (24:22-23). One notable interview which brought the two men together is described (24:24-25). Felix's intention was clear; he wanted to hear the Christian missionary speak on a vital theme. (What could have been more congenial to Paul than to expound "faith in Christ Jesus"?) Paul, however, refused to fawn on his distinguished audience and to ingratiate himself with those who had the power to set him free. The trio of "justice" (better "righteousness," in the sense of Romans 1-4, as a divine standard by which human life is tested and condemned and a divine offer in the gospel), "self-control" and "future judgment" was hardly calculated to make the preacher popular. It formed "the very subjects that Felix and Drusilla most needed to hear about" (F.F. Bruce), but not what they wanted to be reminded of, as is apparent from their known characters at that time. Small wonder, then, that Felix was terrified, and cut short the interview on that occasion. Paul,

however, was given further opportunities (24:26b), but evidently without making much of a deep impression upon this interested dilettante. At least, he saw no injustice in holding in detention a blameless man (24:27). So much for his religious interest!

**Notes** 24:23: the Roman term for this detention *libera custodia* (“free custody”) shows that it was not irksome, but Paul must have wondered why, in God’s providence, his active ministry was curtailed. 24:24: Drusilla had been enticed away from her husband, Aziz, by Felix and persuaded to join his harem as his third, polygamous wife. 24:26: Paul’s financial state gives the mark of some affluence at this time of his life (implied in 21:24 and 28:30).

**Meditation** (a) Two men’s consciences are dramatically sounded: Paul’s (24:16) and Felix’s (24:25). (b) “When I have some spare time I’ll send for you” (24:25). Does “spare-time religion” ever satisfy?

THE TRIAL BEFORE FESTUS

ACTS 25:1-12

As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to have his case heard by the highest court, the emperor himself. Once he'd made that appeal, the local authorities had to see he reached Rome.

FESTUS SUCCEEDED TO the office of procurator at Caesarea in AD 58. Little is known of him—in fact, virtually nothing apart from what Luke and the Jewish historian Josephus tell us.

Paul's fortunes seem to be unchanged. The Roman authorities were unwilling to decide his case; one motive for such tardiness is given in 24:27. The next scene is fraught with momentous consequences. A second deputation of Jews, sent from Jerusalem, had nothing new to say and repeated the unfounded charges as on the former occasion (25:7). Paul simply denied any complicity (25:8). Then came the decision-laden question. "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem?" (25:9). The prisoner was clearly at the crossroads. If he said yes, he would play himself nicely into the hands of his accusers, perhaps admitting that there was a case to answer and that they were competent to act in this matter. Besides, his safety was involved, and he must have known something of the attempt which was planned on his life (25:3). On the other side, to refuse now might alienate Festus and lose the protection of Roman custody.

Paul gave a deliberate reply, probably using the technical phrase to which he was entitled as a citizen of the empire: *Caesarem appello*—"I appeal to

Caesar” (25:11). This exercise of his privilege at once quashed all local proceedings, and transferred his case to the imperial court of Nero in Rome, as Festus perceived (25:12). So, in a roundabout way, the divine purpose was strangely carried forward (23:11).

**Notes** 25:3,9: Festus, having been asked this favor, grants it. His motto seems to have been “Anything for a quiet life.” Considerations of justice and fair play don’t seem to have weighed much. Herod Agrippa is more forthright (26:31). 25:8: “against Caesar”; this shows that the Jews were accusing him of a political offense. 25:11: a final plea of innocence, implying that there were no charges to answer. The appeal to Caesar indicates that Paul had despaired of any justice at such a crooked court where a plaintiff’s “favor” influences the presiding judge on the tribunal seat (25:3,9).

**Pray** for all who make and administer our laws.

PAUL BEFORE AGRIPPA AND BERNICE

ACTS 25:13-27

Do we always take the opportunities God gives us to speak about our beliefs?

VERSES 13-22: AGRIPPA visits Festus. Herod Agrippa II was a political figure, important as a tetrarch of some districts in north Palestine, and also as the secular head of the Jewish church who appointed the high priesthood. He was a character of some influence, therefore.

A state visit of Herod, along with his sister Bernice, gave Festus a chance to mention Paul's case (25:13-14). This was not to re-try him (which was now beyond his power, since Paul had appealed directly to the emperor), but simply to get Herod's views and thereby to have information for the dossier to be sent to the imperial court. One cardinal Christian truth had penetrated into his mind (25:19), which proves that the general debate over the resurrection of the dead (24:15,21) turned upon the case of *one* particular resurrection—viz. that of the Messiah. This special application of a principle was more than the Pharisees could allow or believe but at least the pagan Roman had the wit to see what Paul was continually talking about.

25:23-27. Luke was evidently in close touch with these proceedings, as his detailed descriptions show (25:23).

**Notes** 25:13: Herod Agrippa and Bernice were related, but rumor darkly hinted at their immoral ways. 25:19: “superstition”: the Greek word may carry a neutral sense, “religion,” as well as a derogatory one, as RSV gives. Festus, perhaps unwittingly, goes to the heart of the matter. The tenses of the verbs he uses are interesting: one Jesus *who has been dead* (for some time), whom Paul *was repeatedly saying* to be alive. 25:26: “examined”—ie by this inquiry. This would provide information to send off to “my Lord” = the emperor, concerning the prisoner.

**Exercise** Look back over the previous chapters, and notice the fundamental importance of the resurrection of Jesus both as a central affirmation of faith and a living experience in the early Christians’ fellowship and service.

PAUL'S DEFENSE

ACTS 26:1-18

Spiritually blind and enslaved, we are given light and freedom, the slate wiped clean, and a place in God's family—all when we trust in Christ.

AFTER A BRIEF introduction (26:2-3), designed to pay deference to “King Agrippa,” whose Jewish ancestry would give him a special sympathy with Paul's case, the apostle opens up his “defense” in the three main sections of our portion.

1. The story of his past life (26:4-11). This may be summed up as “sincere, but wrong,” with verse 9 as its epitome. Yet, in a strange way, the Christians were simply announcing in the Messiah's resurrection (26:8) a special application of a tenet cherished by all good Pharisees (26:6-7).
2. The crisis of his conversion (26:12-15). His encounter with the living Lord was indeed a crisis—ie a judgment upon his past life and a new beginning, memorably stated in 2 Corinthians 4:6; 5:17 as a new creation. In the darkness of his ignorance and folly, the light of God had shone (26:13); and the real meaning of his persecuting zeal was made known (26:14-15), for in attacking his people, Saul was wounding Christ himself—a fearful possibility which he never forgot (1 Corinthians 8:11-13) and which very probably became the basis of his

teaching on the church as Christ's body (see 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 5:23,29-30).

3. The terms of his commission (26:16-18). The account of what was said to him is here given in its fullest detail, and repays close study. The life-work of the future apostle to the Gentiles is admirably sketched, from the initial experience of personal knowledge of Christ (26:16, "in which you have seen me") to the establishing of Pauline churches (26:18: "those who are sanctified," 1 Corinthians 1:2, etc.). Notice the effect of gospel ministry, which includes conversion, deliverance, forgiveness and a place in the new society of Christ's people (26:18). All these benefits recur in Paul's writings.

**Notes** 26:2-3: intended to put the speaker *en rapport* with his hearer, but not the flattery of 24:2ff. 26:4: Paul's essentially Jewish upbringing and training in Jerusalem is important, as W.C. van Unnik has shown, to dispel the notion that Paul took over a Greek mystery religion and turned it into his version of Christianity! 26:7: "observe that Paul knew nothing of the fiction of the 'lost' tribes" (Bruce). 26:10: does this mean that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin—and therefore at one time a married man? 26:14: note the addition to 9:4 of a proverbial line, reminding us that his zeal masked a disquieted conscience.

**Meditation** Try to match the parts of 26:18 with the teaching of the epistles (eg Colossians 1:12-14).

AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS AND CONVICTIONS

ACTS 26:19-32

If only our friends, family and neighbors would believe in Christ too!

WHEN THE FACTS are examined—Paul concluded—there is nothing anti-Jewish in the message he brought; rather, it complements and brings to fulfillment the Old Testament hope of a Messiah, humiliated yet vindicated and the author of God’s blessings to all people, both the Jewish people and the Gentile races (26:22-23).

Festus was plainly out of his depth. Much study, the Preacher remarked, is a weariness of the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12); the Roman governor pronounced it a danger to sanity (26:24). Paul repelled that charge, insisting that his Christian knowledge and experience were based on the opposite of “madness”—viz. soberness, the possession of a right mind (see 2 Corinthians 5:13 for the contrast). There is nothing irrational in Christianity in the sense of claims which are contrary to reason (cf. 26:8), although there is much that is *above* human reason, and may be known only by faith.

The interchange of conversation between Paul and Agrippa (26:26-29) is full of interest. The Christian preacher confidently appeals to what is public knowledge—thereby incidentally dispelling the latter-day idea that Christianity is wrapped in the mists of obscurity and legend, and presses home the appeal (26:27). Agrippa eases himself off the horns of such a dilemma with a facetious retort: “In short, you are trying to persuade me to play the Christian.” Paul picks up the king’s words: “The short and the long

of it is—I wish that you and all who hear me today could *become* (as opposed to ‘play a part’) as I am—but not as a prisoner!”

**Notes** 26:19: the vision is that mentioned in 22:17f. which (as implied in 26:16-18) assured him of his call to be a missionary to the Gentiles. 26:22: Paul appeals, as elsewhere (Romans 3:21), to the united witness of the two major sections of the Jewish Scriptures. 26:23: cf. Luke 24:25ff.,44. His resurrection is spoken of as a “first instalment” (1 Corinthians 15:20), guaranteeing that of all his people (2 Timothy 1:10). 26:24: Festus speaks angrily with a loud voice; Paul’s reply is restrained. 26:28: the best parallel is 1 Kings 21:7: “Is it like this that you play a king’s part in Israel?”

**To ponder** Four characters are here: Bernice, Herod Agrippa, Festus and Paul. How do they come out of this exchange of views and convictions?

PAUL SAILS FOR ROME

ACTS 27:1-12

Paul was an experienced sailor, so he knew what he was talking about.  
But it looks as if the Lord was also guiding Paul's insight.

COMMENTATORS PRAISE THE vividness and accuracy of this narrative which describes Paul's sea voyage from Palestine to Italy; it is "one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship." In this way Paul's long-cherished ambition to get to Rome is made good, though in circumstances (27:1) which he did not relish. And by this long journey the divine promise was realized (23:11).

Paul had traveling companions all the way; one of them is named (27:2) and at least one other was in the party—Luke the narrator (27:2; "we put to sea").

The Roman centurion Julius showed consideration to the Christian prisoner he had in custody, even to the extent of permitting him to make contact with his fellow-believers at Sidon. We should probably, however, understand 27:3 to mean: "allowed his friends to visit him" on board before they disembarked.

Having trans-shipped at Myra, the party sailed on a corn-ship bound for Italy. The next stage of the voyage was slow and difficult, owing to unfavorable winds and the need to negotiate dangerous coastal rocks.

At Fair Havens (27:8) Paul came forward with a suggestion. The inference is that the ship's captain should have anchored in the security of

Fair Havens bay during the stormy season. Instead, with Paul's advice ignored (27:11), the decision of the ship's personnel was to sail on, hoping at all events to get to Phoenice (or Phoenix) and to winter there (27:12).

**Notes** 27:1: here is evidence of the presence of this cohort in Syria in first-century ad. 27:2: Aristarchus is found later as a companion of Paul's at Rome (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24), and we may suppose that he traveled with him all the way. 27:9: "the fast" is the Day of Atonement, to be dated about the 5th October in that year. Ancient sailors regarded the 14th September as the beginning of a two-month period when all navigation was hazardous, so it was particularly risky to venture out of harbor in mid-October. Paul was overruled by the various officials—the helmsman and owner (27:11)—whose decision influenced the centurion.

THE STORM AT SEA

ACTS 27:13-32

Sometimes we must trust God's promises even though we can't see how they're going to work out.

VERSES 13-20. THE sailors were deceived into thinking that a gentle southerly wind was a good augury (27:13). The ship put out from Fair Havens and coasted along the shore of Crete, only suddenly to be struck by the fearsome Euraquilo—a fierce north-easterly gale which, sweeping down from Mount Ida in Crete, quickly had the vessel out of control (27:15). The danger was that the strong waves would overwhelm the ship or smash her structure (hence the measure which was taken of undergirding the ship, 27:17); or else she would be driven helplessly on to the Syrtis, a dreadful whirlpool and quicksands off the North African coast.

27:21-26. Paul's commanding position is evident. Not for the first time he had faced the perils of the storm (2 Corinthians 11:26); and out of his past experience and present faith he speaks words of: (a) cheer (27:22); (b) explanation, giving grounds for his confidence and courage (27:23); and (c) testimony (27:25). One man's presence and faith made all the difference.

27:27-32. After two weeks of drifting at the mercy of the elements, the first signs were recognized that Paul's promise (27:26) was true. The sailors sensed that they were nearing shore as they took soundings (27:28) and possibly heard the sound of breakers on the shore. Anchors were dropped to brake the vessel (27:29) and Paul again showed his leadership in preventing a

party of sailors from saving their own skins at the expense of the rest (27:30-32).

**Notes** 27:17: the measures included passing a cable round the ship several times, pulling it taut, to ease the strain and prevent the timbers working loose and the seams opening (Findlay). 27:18: as in the scene of Jonah 1:5. 27:21: perhaps the food was sodden—or the mariners were seasick! Paul's remarks are a mild "I told you so." 27:24: cf. Genesis 18:26 for the principle that good men protect the community (Genesis 19:22).

## SHIPWRECKED

### ACTS 27:33-44

Were they going to make it through the surf? It seemed impossible, but God had promised, and they all managed to reach land safely.

THE APOSTLE'S LEADERSHIP is again seen, and among a crew and passenger list of 276 men he stands out as a man of practical faith and sturdy common-sense (27:34). The angelic vision (27:23) and the divine promise of safety (27:24) were food enough for him, and he was prepared to act upon the assurance which had come to him (27:34b). With his splendid example to encourage them (27:35), the rest of the ship's complement took fresh heart (27:36).

The shipwreck scene is dramatically painted in the remaining verses of the chapter (27:39-44). The sailors severed the cables and left the anchors in the sea, at the same time unleashing the steering-paddles, and hoisting the foresail to catch a wind, they drove the ship on to the shore (27:40).

The beaching operation worked. The ship struck a spit of land which jutted out where the two seas met (27:41, RSV margin), and the prow became embedded in the sandbank of the promontory, while the stern was broken up by the force of the sea (27:41).

The soldiers' plan to kill off the prisoners lest they should escape in the confusion of the shipwreck was thwarted—for Paul's sake, to whom everyone owed a great deal. We can only guess by what method—swimming,

clutching a plank or holding part of the ship's spar—Paul and Luke reached land.

**Notes** 27:34: the Greek term, elsewhere rendered “salvation,” here means physical well-being (as in Philippians 1:19). The next sentence is an Old Testament proverb (1 Samuel 14:45; 2 Samuel 14:11; 1 Kings 1:52; cf. Luke 21:18). 27:35: an acknowledgment of God’s goodness in providing food, though the Western text adds that Paul shared this meal with “us” (presumably Luke and Aristarchus) and understands it as a sacramental meal (so Ramsay). 27:37: RSV margin gives smaller numbers, but the figure of 276 is only half the complement of a ship on which Josephus traveled to Rome, so there is no inherent difficulty in the larger figure. 27:44: the Greek *may* mean “some on the backs of members of the crew”—a vivid touch!

IN MALTA  
ACTS 28:1-6

The storm hadn't stopped Paul reaching Rome and neither would a snake.

THE ISLAND ON which the storm-tossed sailors found refuge was Malta—a Phoenician word which, by a strange coincidence, means “escape.” It has been suggested that Luke was aware of this correspondence when he wrote 28:1: “We recognized that the island deserved its name.” Rain and cold added to the miseries of their experiences on board ship and then in the water; so the warmth of a fire (28:2) was especially appreciated, as the historian records.

The incident of the viper's sudden appearance from among the brushwood which Paul was helping to gather for the fire well illustrates popular opinion on the island. The first reaction was to see in the event a judgment on Paul the prisoner, recognized as such possibly by his dress, or perhaps by the chain he was still wearing. The viper, however, was shaken off his hand and as no ill-effect followed the Maltese changed their tune, and hailed him as a divinity, like the people of Lystra (14:11-12). Such is the fickleness of human opinion which oscillates with great ease between the two extremes of branding Paul a murderer and then of greeting him as a god come to earth. “The sudden reversal of opinion about Paul may be compared and contrasted with the attitude of the Lycaonians in 14:11ff., who first acclaimed him as a god, and later nearly stoned him to death” (Bruce).

**Notes** 28:2: “natives”: lit. barbarians, but not in the sense of uncivilized (which Maltese were not), but meaning “not speaking Greek.” Their dialect was Phoenician, which sounded to Greek ears as *bar-bar*, a cacophony of strange words! None the less, Luke pays tribute to their hospitable welcome. 28:4: there is an ancient tale of a murderer who escaped from a storm at sea and was shipwrecked on the North African coast, where he died from a viper’s sting. Cf. Amos 5:19. “Justice”—the Maltese natives associated Paul’s predicament, with a snake hanging on to his hand, as a piece of Nemesis which had at length caught up with him. The narrative does not specifically state that Paul was bitten, but their reaction certainly suggests this.

**Thought** “Hospitality is variously regarded as a ‘fine art’, a joyous privilege, an unwelcome necessity, or an opportunity for display. The New Testament writers emphasize its importance as a Christian grace and as a species of evangelistic service” (C.R. Erdman). Consider Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:2; and 1 Peter 4:9.

FROM MALTA TO ROME

## ACTS 28:7-16

Even Paul needed encouragement, and he found it among his friends.

VERSES 7-10. “ONE good turn deserves another.” On the one side, Publius extended to the apostle some friendly hospitality which lasted three days (28:7), and, on the other hand, he received the added happiness of seeing his father cured of gastric fever and dysentery, following the visit and prayer of Paul (28:8).

Paul’s healing ministry became widely known, and sick folk throughout the island saw a chance to be healed by this Christian leader whom the ocean had washed up on to their beach. They showed their gratitude by the offer of gifts and ship’s stores (28:10).

Luke doesn’t comment on any deeper spiritual significance of these incidents: did Paul preach the gospel as he exercised a ministry of prayer and healing? Were any Maltese won for Christ? Did the apostolic party leave behind a Christian community? The record is silent but we may surely believe that here was an evangelistic opportunity too good to be missed.

28:11-16. The Roman writer Pliny informs us that the winter season when the seas were closed for navigable traffic ended on February 7th; and we may infer that the three months’ stay on the island ended about that time of the year (28:11). The ship in which they resumed their journey was another Alexandrian grain-ship which bore as a figurehead the “Heavenly Twins” (Castor and Pollux, the patron saints of navigators in the ancient world).

The course led them at last to Puteoli in the Bay of Naples. In this flourishing seaport a Christian fellowship was contacted, and Paul and his company had a week with them. The last “leg” of the long journey brought them via the Appian Way to within sight of the imperial city.

**Notes** 28:7: “chief man of the island”—Luke’s accuracy is confirmed by inscriptions which show that this was the title of the Roman governor. Paul’s citizenship would be his passport to the governor’s residence. 28:10 could mean “paid us handsome fees” for the medical treatment received, as Luke the “dear doctor” (Colossians 4:14) may have observed. 28:15: Christian fellowship meant much to Paul, and he was obviously touched by this “welcome party” which came forty-three miles to greet him.

ROME AT LAST!

## ACTS 28:17-30

We leave Paul speaking to those who would listen, awaiting his trial and making Christ known to everyone.

ROME AT LAST! The narrative moves to its zenith, as Bengel observed in his commentary written in the mid-eighteenth century: “The victory of the Word of God: Paul at Rome, the climax of the Gospel, the conclusion of Acts.” Paul’s attempt to put himself in the clear with Jewish leaders at Rome failed, although he was able to:

1. make plain the reason for his being in Rome as a prisoner (28:17-20);  
and
2. testify, at a conference called for the purpose, concerning “the hope of Israel” (28:20) and the central theme of the gospel message (28:23).

As on so many previous occasions, his preaching divided men into two camps (28:24; cf: 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15-16). As the unconvinced Jews left in total disarray (28:25,29, RSV margin), Paul clinched his point with a quotation from the Old Testament and with a hint of his teaching, amplified and worked out in Romans 9:11, that the Gentiles have received mercy because of the disobedience of Israel (Romans 11:30)—another leading motif in the preceding record of how the gospel was brought from Jerusalem to Rome.

“They will listen” (28:28): this is the final thrust of the Pauline testimony. Israel’s salvation, rejected by her national representatives and leaders, is now offered to the Gentiles, and nothing can stop the onward march of God’s truth to the “uttermost part of the earth” (1:8, KJV). Paul’s “free custody” (as the Romans called it, 28:30-31) gave him opportunity to do the work of an evangelist among an audience which had free access to his hired room, which was his prison-cell, and the closing words “quite openly and unhindered” stress both his personal confidence (cf. Philippians 1:20 for the same expression, “with full courage”) and the unrestricted scope he enjoyed to proclaim the message of Christ.

These two elements—the preacher’s boldness and an all-embracing proclamation—are interwoven in the fabric of the history of Acts as it speaks of the good news: “it began at Jerusalem; it finishes at Rome. Here, O Church, is your model. It is your duty to keep it and to guard your deposit” (Bengel).

**Trace** the way (a) Israel refused the gospel offer in Luke’s story; and (b) the Gentiles received it.

# THE TEACHING OF THE LETTERS & REVELATION

DONALD GUTHRIE AND PIETER LALLEMAN

THE CREATORSHIP OF God is an aspect carried into the New Testament from the Old Testament. Not only is this everywhere assumed (see Revelation 4:11), but the New Testament specifically states that God in Christ upholds all things (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). A remarkable feature of the New Testament teaching on creation is the way in which Jesus Christ is linked with God in creative activity.

Building on the Old Testament, the authors of the New Testament have yet more to say about God: 1 John highlights that he is light and love (1:5-7; 4:7-21) and Revelation, the book which uses the title “almighty” more than any other, emphasizes his sovereignty (esp. chapter 4). Paul praises his plan of salvation (Romans 8:33-36; Ephesians 3:20-21) and Jude uses similar words (24-25). And it is again 1 John which emphasizes that believers are children of God and hence each other’s sisters and brothers, which implies the requirement to love one another (2:9-11; 3:1; 5:1-3).

In Paul’s letters, the main subjects can be summed up under the great themes of justification, redemption, reconciliation and sanctification. The atonement is central in the doctrine of justification, as the key passage, Romans 3:21-31, shows. In this passage Paul describes the death of Jesus as a propitiation which God had provided to enable sinful humanity to approach him. The condition of acceptance is not human efforts (which Paul calls “works of the law”), but God’s gracious provision which is received by faith.

This is closely linked to the doctrine of redemption. Here again the act of Jesus in redeeming humanity is linked to his work on the cross (see Ephesians 1:7). It is worth noting that this Pauline theme also recurs in 1 Peter (see 1:18-19). Believers are no longer their own, but belong to God who has redeemed them. Although he had been delivered from the power of sin, the apostle still saw himself as a slave—but now to Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1).

It is perhaps reconciliation which looms largest in Paul's thought. He saw himself as a minister of reconciliation to those who had become alienated from God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21), a reconciliation which had somehow been brought about by Jesus becoming a curse for us (see Paul's equally mysterious statement about Christ becoming a curse for us in Galatians 3:13). The New Testament does not claim to explain fully the mission of Jesus. There is at the heart of it what Paul calls a "mystery" (see Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9).

Paul's doctrine of sanctification may be summed up as his teaching about the application of Christ's work. Indeed his practical advice is integral to this doctrine. He conceived of the Christian life as the working out of that salvation which Jesus had obtained (Philippians 2:12). The new life is essentially a life in the Spirit and for this reason Paul has much to say about the activity of the Spirit in the life of the believer (see especially Romans 8). The ethical teaching of the apostle is rich in down-to-earth, practical advice which is nevertheless based on his understanding of the saving work of Christ.

The other books of the New Testament are equally strong in practical advice. The letter of James concentrates on this aspect and does not mention the atoning work of Christ. But the intensely practical advice assumes a basis of right relationship with God. Although works are brought into the discussion on justification, faith is not excluded and the works are the works of mercy which are regarded as the natural outcome of the faith (see James

2:18). In the letter to the Hebrews, in which approach to God is the main theme, the necessity for the sacrificial work of Christ is seen throughout. His sacrifice is, moreover, distinguished from all others because it was offered “once for all ” (Hebrews 9:26). The outcome of Christ’s work is clearly seen in Hebrews 10:19-39, where again the objective work of Christ has a practical effect in the life of the believer. The consummation of the mission of Jesus is portrayed in the book of Revelation, in which he is seen as the triumphant slain lamb who puts all his enemies under his feet (esp. chapters 5 and 19).

In the Pauline letters the work of the Spirit is strongly emphasized, for apart from the Spirit no one can believe (Romans 8:9), nor can they produce fruit in their lives (Galatians 5:22). Moreover, the Spirit gives special gifts to believers (1 Corinthians 12:4-31), and believers are exhorted to seek the fullness of the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). It was through the Spirit that Jesus offered himself (Hebrews 9:14), and through the Spirit that John received his revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 4:2). It would be true to say that the teaching of the New Testament would be unintelligible apart from the work of the Spirit.

The Pauline letters provide much information about local churches concerned with a diversity of problems. 2 John warns a local church against false teaching whereas 1 John was written to a church which had been left split by such false teaching (1 John 2:18-19). 1 Peter and Revelation give guidance to Christians who suffer for their faith whereas Hebrews is written to believers who are losing heart and are about to forget how unique Jesus is. The anonymous author of Hebrews describes Jesus as one who is very close to us humans (Hebrews 2) but also as the great high priest (Hebrews 7–8) who made the perfect sacrifice once for all (Hebrews 9). But some letters were sent to churches which were simply doing well (Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians). Beautiful and eloquent metaphors are used to describe the churches such as body of Christ (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27),

temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; Ephesians 2:19-22), bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-30; Revelation 19:7; 21:9) and building under construction (1 Corinthians 3:9-15; 1 Peter 2:4-5).

At an early stage some pattern for the ministry is apparent. A system of elders operated from the earliest journeys of Paul and existed still earlier in the Judean churches. Overseers were elders with specific functions (Titus 1:5-9). An order of deacons was also established as 1 Timothy 3:8 shows. There is some evidence also for deaconesses (Romans 16:1), women in other leading roles (Romans 16:6-7, cf. Acts 18:24-26) and “official widows” (1 Timothy 5:9-10).

The New Testament speaks of two ordinances of the early church: baptism, which followed confession of faith, and the Lord’s Supper. Little is known of the worship patterns of the early Christians, but it is certain that Scripture reading and hymns formed part of their services (see 1 Timothy 4:13; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Revelation contains many hymns sung in heaven which may reflect the worship on earth. In practical matters a communal system was tried in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-47; 4:31-37), but there is no evidence for it elsewhere. Paul organized a collection scheme among the Gentiles for the relief of poverty-stricken Christians in Judea (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). The Christian communities took seriously their social responsibilities towards their less fortunate brethren (James 2:14-17; 3 John 5-8)

Various events must precede Christ’s second coming (see 2 Thessalonians 2), but the consummation will be marked by ultimate victory (see the whole theme of the book of Revelation). All enemies will be put under the feet of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:25; Philippians 2:10). This picture of the final triumph of Christ is a great encouragement to those who are persecuted for their faith. Revelation 21:1-22:5 is an attempt to picture the new heavens and new earth which will emerge from his decisive intervention. The New

Testament presents the future hope as a relevant factor for present living, since it has a purifying effect (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; 2 Peter 3:11-14; 1 John 3:3).

INTRODUCTION  
ROMANS  
E.M. BLAIKLOCK

THE AUTHORSHIP OF the Letter to the Romans can be certainly attributed to Paul. The place and date of writing can be determined with some certainty from internal evidence. Paul had not yet been to Rome (1:11,13,15), where a mixed church of unknown origin (Acts 28:15) was already functioning, but he intended to pay a visit, after a forthcoming journey to Jerusalem, to where he intended to carry contributions from Macedonia and Achaia (15:23-32). This intention was in his mind during his residence in Corinth (Acts 19:21). Ten years of vigorous evangelism were over, and he planned a major new move after the visit to Jerusalem to which he looked forward with justifiable apprehension. He made this journey, and he made it from Corinth (Acts 24:17). When he wrote to Rome, Timothy, Sosipater, Gaius and Erastus were with him (16:21,23). Gaius was, at least for part of his Corinthian residence, his host (1 Corinthians 1:14). Erastus was a Corinthian, perhaps a prominent figure in the city (16:23; 2 Timothy 4:20), and had served Paul in Macedonia (Acts 19:22). In Acts 20:4 we read that Timothy, Sosipater (Sopater) and Gaius were with Paul in Corinth. Phoebe, who appears to have carried the letter to Rome, and who may have also been hostess to Paul, lived in the marine suburb of Corinth, Cenchreae (16:1). Set these biographical data in order, and it appears that the letter was written in the winter of AD 56–57:

This said, the great document may be left to tell its own story, of Christian truth and its mighty exponent.

## PAUL'S VOCATION AND CREDENTIALS

### ROMANS 1:1-4

As we begin this letter, we start to understand who wrote it.

PAUL WAS NO waster of words. Every ancient letter began with a note of the one who sent it, and a clear statement of the person or persons to whom it was addressed. The discovery in the twentieth century of the thousands of papyrus letters, which the arid sands of Egypt have preserved, has revealed that the New Testament letters conform to the pattern of those of their time. The deep matters of the faith required nothing more than the common forms of communication and the simplicities of daily communication in which to express themselves. They need no more today. Christ can find demonstration in our conversation, in the normal conduct of our lives and our activities. The common bush can be “aflake with God.”

Paul passes promptly to his credentials. He is a servant of Jesus Christ, not his own, but “bought with a price,” and bound in wondrous servitude to the King of kings. It was an ancient and honorable title. Moses had carried it (Joshua 1:1f.), and so had the prophets (Jeremiah 7:25). It implied a dedication to the doing of a master's will. The beautiful story of Abraham's servant on his mission to Haran is a perfect illustration (Genesis 24:1-66). And like Abraham's servant Paul was a special messenger, an “apostle,” one sent to fulfill a particular task. The purpose and the vocation are emphasized in the closing words of the first verse. It was Paul's conviction that he was “set apart” for the gospel of God, not merely by the formal commissioning of

his fellow Christians (Acts 13:2), but in the long-laid plan of God himself (Galatians 1:15). In both contexts the same Greek verb is used.

Then, in swift economy of words, Paul proceeds to state the essential facts of the good news of God. He is apparently addressing in the Roman church a group of Jews and their converts. He can rely on an Old Testament background. Hence the emphasis in two verses on the Lord's earthly royalty, his power and divine Sonship, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and sealed by the resurrection. The incarnation without the resurrection is meaningless. The two basic doctrines of the faith move together. Paul never wavered from this position. And without God revealed in Christ (John 1:18), a Christ risen from the dead, there is no Christianity.

**Meditation** 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.

“ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS”

## ROMANS 1:5-8

Paul begins to unpack big words: obedience, faith, grace, peace ...

GRACE, THE FREE unmerited favor of God, was the gift to all Christians. Apostleship was limited to those fitted for a special task. This clear distinction should be observed. In writing to the Corinthians Paul devotes a whole chapter to the division of labor and variety of vocation in the church (1 Corinthians 12). Intrusion into another's sphere of service breeds frustration and ineffectiveness, and at the same time leaves the proper task undone.

Paul's task was to summon people to “the obedience of faith.” The phrase “of faith” shows that obedience consists in faith (Acts 6:7). To believe, and to commit the life to that belief, is to obey. God asks no more, no less, and in the act is involved both trust and the disciplined living which demonstrates the trust.

Now comes (1:7) the salvation, warm in its wording. “Called to be saints” means saints because of his calling. This fact is no warrant for the tactless claim to sainthood which a watching and listening world will interpret in other than biblical terms. The coinage of speech can become debased, and the term “saint” cannot be presumptuously used by any Christian, true though it is that God in his grace calls Christians this.

“Grace and peace,” the second the fruit in mind and heart of a proper understanding of the former, sum up Paul's wish for the Christians of Rome. In the words are combined an echo of the common greeting of Greek to

Greek, and the still common greeting of Israeli to Israeli —“*Shalom*”—“Peace.” Paul moves into his wider sphere of witness in his very salutation.

And Jesus Christ—Jesus the Messiah—finds its fifth mention in eight verses. There is no Christianity without the Christ of the New Testament, no deluded and defeated dreams from Galilee, put viciously to death by collaborating priests and occupying authorities, but the risen Son of God, from all time envisaged.

**Meditation** John 1:14-18.

“AND SO TO ROME”

## ROMANS 1:9-12

Is the Christian life all receiving?

PAUL WAS WRITING his letter to Rome, probably in Corinth, where he spent three winter months at the end of AD 56 and the beginning of 57 (Acts 20:3). The Italian peninsula did not seem far away. Many years before a grand plan had taken shape in his mind, no less than a strategic attack on the Roman empire. Cyprus had prompted the thought. He had first put it into motion when, to the annoyance of the junior member of the party, he had abandoned the sea-port, and made for Antioch of Pisidia, the bastion of Roman power in central Asia Minor (Acts 13:13f.).

Nine years had passed since that adventure in evangelism, and Paul had seen the fulfillment of much of that which he had set out to do. Christian churches, “cells” of witness, were planted in the great centers of power, religion, learning and trade, in the eastern half of the empire. He wrote from Corinth, the nodal point of central Mediterranean communications. There were Christians in Athens, the intellectual hub of the world. There was an active church in Philippi, old fortress of northern Greece. Ephesus, religious center of Asia, and proconsular seat, had its witness. Paul hoped to see the message thus placed radiate down the roads and trade routes, permeating the vast power-system for Christ.

It was a magnificently imaginative idea. There remained the central core of the empire, Rome itself, and the western bastion, Spain, which was to

provide Rome with emperors, as it had already provided men of accomplishment and letters—Seneca, for example, philosopher and tutor of the emperor, and Lucan, the decade’s best known poet. Spain was Paul’s next objective, with Rome en route. Paul was not to know the painful and circuitous route by which he was to come to Rome (15:24-28). The pilgrimage to Jerusalem, on which he had set his heart, lay ahead, and against all opposition and advice he set out on that path—a fruitless errand, if the brief account be read rightly, but one which God turned to good, for all that tumult in Jerusalem and prison in Caesarea lay in the way.

Observe in 1:11f. that Paul speaks humbly of gaining blessing and comfort in Rome, as well as giving it. Students in class, and congregations in a church, should remember that there is a two-way communication in spiritual things, a giving as well as a getting. And could this (an awesome thought) be also true of God and us? Is this why he made us free?

**Exercise** Trace the pattern of Paul’s churches on a map.

A GOSPEL OF WHICH TO BE PROUD

## ROMANS 1:13-17

Who needs saving—and why?

PAUL OWED, HE said, a debt “both to Greeks and barbarians.” Here the word *barbarians* refers to those who simply did not speak Greek. The word implied no cultural inferiority. The Greeks called the Persians and the Romans “barbarian,” while acknowledging the superiority of both, the former in material culture, the latter in political power. The “natives” of Acts 28:2, (“barbarous people,” KJV) are in the Greek text *barbaroi*. Paul was referring to the Phoenician-speaking Maltese. In the present text the word means those who did not share completely in the Mediterranean civilization. He found such people at Lystra (Acts 14:11). He probably met others in Illyricum (15:19). “Greeks” would include Romans, for Greek was their second tongue. Paul sensed an obligation to those of his own culture and those outside it. He felt a passion for souls.

In 1:16f. Paul writes of the gospel which is to be the theme of his letter. He had preached it proudly in two continents. It brought “salvation.” In the mind’s depths, for all the materialism and self-delusion which obscures reality, people are still conscious of a need for a hand reaching down. Death may be a less present and pressing reality than in previous ages. Medicine has postponed it and softened its impact. It is nevertheless true that the whole approach to life would be spoiled, and society gravely injured if all thought

of another life and of ultimate justice were stamped out from the human consciousness.

Sin still presses on mind and body for all the words used to take away its sting. Frustration and despair are still real. A sense of helplessness before forces beyond control is still a reality. Hell can be a present experience for those enslaved to evil. Christ gives purpose, “life more abundantly,” a sense of being real, clean, useful—Christ saves.

THE REALITY OF GOD'S REVELATION IN CREATION

ROMANS 1:18-21

Paul is clear that we can begin to find our way to God by looking at the world around us.

PAUL INSISTS THAT, apart from the Bible and God's self-revelation in Christ, God has revealed himself to those with minds open to receive him, in the works of his creation. The wonder of the world, the evidence of law, order, and purpose interwoven with all nature, are evidence enough of an Intelligence behind the visible world. The first verse of John's Gospel says as much: "In the beginning was a Mind which expressed itself..."

Furthermore, if it is clear in the world around us that Mind came before matter, it is also clear that the planning Mind seen in created things also demanded obedience to certain laws. The human body can be abused, the laws of its operation disregarded and pain follows. The land which provides our sustenance, the air we breathe, the waters upon which all life depends, are given to humanity on fixed conditions. There are laws to be observed, the selfish flouting of which—as the world is learning to its cost—brings inevitable retribution. Dust bowls, dead lakes, polluted waterways, chemical-ridden produce, smog-laden air, all carry death and pain. The planet itself could be rendered uninhabitable by its rebellious inhabitants. God put human beings in a garden, "to serve it," (Genesis 2:15), literally translated, and it is part of human reverence for the Creator to treat his creation reverently.

Paul speaks truth. Not only is the goodness of God revealed in nature, as he told the people of Lystra (Acts 14:15-17), but as truly, the wrath of God. So, too, in human experience.

The “wrath of God,” God’s inevitable reaction against rebellion and sin, is a reality, as everyone who is willing to see can see, written into life and history. Apart, therefore, from the ultimate revelation of God, which Paul was urgent to preach, humanity, he maintains, had the elements of truth before them. Given the desire, it was possible to find God.

## THE FOLLY OF IDOLATRY

### ROMANS 1:22-25

In the human quest for God, something went tragically wrong.

WE HAVE ALREADY mentioned Paul's excursion into God's revelation in creation at Lystra. He also touched on the theme before a much more intellectual audience at Athens (Acts 17:22-31), and a remark reported by Luke from that address has significance here. God, Paul maintained to the philosophers, set people in a context of order and purpose, "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him" (Acts 17:27).

In the quest, something went awry. In arrogance and selfishness humanity sought a deity to tame and to serve them, instead of a Being to whom they could give themselves in worship and surrender. We made God in our own image, as the psalmist chided: "You thought that I was one like yourself" (Psalm 50:21). The beauty of Greek art could not conceal the fact that the lovely statues of Apollo, Zeus and Athene were only Greeks as the Greeks saw themselves in their moments of self-exaltation, while the myths and legends which surrounded them told of caprice, sensuality, cruelty and pride.

Idols were the result of this perversion in the human quest for God, and they revealed the point Paul makes, the human self-willed misreading of the evidence which God had set before us. And idols were everywhere. It is difficult for modern Christians to grasp the pervasive nature of the paganism with which our spiritual ancestors had to deal. Many pages in Tertullian

reveal vividly the practical difficulties which at every turn confronted Christians in the ancient world. “Why, even the streets and the market-places,” he writes, “the baths and the taverns and our very dwelling-places, are not altogether free from idols. Satan and his angels have filled the whole world.”

It was worse than this. Conscientious Christians had to absent themselves from public festivals. They opened with pagan adoration and sacrifice to an idol. Their membership of a trade guild, and in consequence their commercial standing and goodwill, involved the awkwardness of “sitting at meat in the idol’s temple.” Even their shopping raised the problem of meat which had been sacrificed to idols. And still worse, people become like the object of their worship, especially if it is a projection of their own evil. This is the sense of the climax in 1:25.

**Meditation** We shall be like him.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

ROMANS 1:26-32

Paul vividly describes sinful human behavior.

PAUL WAS WRITING during the rule of the young profligate Nero when Roman society had sunk in hideous vice. We now have again on the stage nudity and open sexuality which scandalized the more sober writers of Nero's day. At about the same time as Paul, the Roman satirist Petronius wrote a piece of fiction which has partly survived. It concerns the base doings of three Greek scamps in the sea-ports of Campania, and is dark confirmation of all Paul here writes. Anyone who seeks evidence in support of the apostle's grim description can read Petronius' *Satiricon*, Seneca's *Letters*, Juvenal's *Satires*, Tacitus' historical works, and Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*. Paul was writing to those who lived in Rome, some of them "of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22), who had all this before their eyes.

The close of this chapter is a warning to all peoples and all ages. To read it in our own permissive society is to encounter a challenge to be strong in faith, determined in our commitment to God, urgent in our evangelism. Paul is describing a society which had abandoned God. He is diagnosing the malady from which Rome was to die, for no great nation has ever yet been destroyed by an enemy from outside which has not already destroyed itself by corruption inside. Such sin carries its own penalty, its own condemnation. The time is here when Christians must show, as they were called upon to do in Rome, by word, act and manner of life, their difference.

The last verse expresses ultimate rebellion. Sin falls under four heads. First stands fleshly sin, so obvious, so disreputable and also, at times, so pitiable. Secondly comes spiritual sin, pride, vanity, lust for power and the like, respectable, yet treacherous, too often well concealed. Thirdly follows diabolical sin in which evil becomes an object of love for its own sake, sin's judgment on itself, the final fruit of unrepentant wickedness. Finally comes blasphemy, that conscious hostility to God which the Bible defines in its final consummation as the "sin unto death," and which finds no repentance because it is never committed until all desire for repentance has been willfully rejected.

“ALL HAVE SINNED”

## ROMANS 2:1-4

What do we see if we honestly look into our own heart?

IN THE FOLLOWING chapter Paul makes one of the great evangelical statements of Scripture: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). Christianity maintains that at some point of time man, self-conscious and free, set his will in opposition to God’s will, and that ever since then the rest of humanity has followed suit. Nor can individual people shift the burden of that responsibility on to history, heredity or environment.

We are all, in our more candid moments, conscious of the fact that we bend more easily to ill than good, that we seek with greater ease the good of self than the good of others, that even our virtues are based more on fear of punishment than on love of good, and that pride, self-assertion, arrogance, the very element and essential of all sin, mingles itself like a pervading poison with all our pretence and practice of good. In short, to apply a famous dictum, if there were no doctrine of the fall and of original sin, “it would be necessary to invent one.”

Paul finds it necessary, before proceeding to this assertion, to meet an objection. He has described in vivid terms the moral breakdown in contemporary society, but he is also conscious of a counter-argument, and pictures himself in debate with an objector. There were, firstly, good pagans. We have mentioned Seneca, destined like many Christians to die at Nero’s hands. He wrote at the same time as Paul was writing, and his attitude to

moral evil was so uncompromising that Tertullian spoke of him as “often one of us.” But Seneca, for all his goodness, illustrates Paul’s point. His tutelage of the youthful Nero led him into horrifying compromises which betrayed all his aspirations, and revealed his dire need.

Secondly came the Jew, confident in his election, certain of his righteousness, proud of the Law. Paul will soon proceed to show what the Law really signified, and the hollowness of all Jewish pride.

PAUL AND JAMES

## ROMANS 2:5-10

How deeply has the influence of Christ affected our thinking?

THE LAST VERSE of the previous reading spoke of a tremendous responsibility. Humanity can presume upon the grace of God, and imagine that his love is mere indulgence. The first verse of this reading expresses in awesome terms how heavy a load such trifling with eternal things is upon the human soul. To treat the grace and kindness of God lightly is to encounter the inevitable severity of God's hostility to sin.

Paul proceeds to insist upon certain principles. First, God will "render to every man according to his works" (2:6). This verse must be steadfastly borne in mind by those who study the great doctrine of this letter—justification by faith. There is no contradiction between Paul and James. To Paul, it was no faith which did not result in deeds, conduct and character.

The next two verses open the theme of God's impartiality. There is no covenant of indulgence for those who had known God best; indeed responsibility is deepened. For Paul, a rabbi and a Pharisee, such a notion was revolutionary, and emphasizes the transformation which Christ had brought to his mind. In the strength of God's Spirit a whole way of thought, a lifelong pattern of conviction, had been broken. When Peter was summoned to Cornelius' home in Caesarea, the same conviction gripped him and filled him with wonder (Acts 10:34f.). And for us who read their words the wonder is that Christ could command such obedience and induce such change. It

prompts us to ask how deep the transforming influence of the indwelling Christ has penetrated into our prejudices, our modes of thinking.

The “self-seeking” of 2:8 are the rebellious. This is the essence of sin, for humanity has chosen sin in open and self-willed rebellion against God.

We often fail to recognize the arrogant nature of sin.

GOD'S IMPARTIALITY  
ROMANS 2:11-16

Which is more important: listening or doing?

VERSE 11 FORMS a text which is expanded in the remainder of the passage. It is a theme which we could wish had been more fully developed, but Paul was content to make his main point, and that was that the mere possession of the Law conveyed no special privilege. In fact it sharpened responsibility.

2:13 contains echoes of a rabbinical debate of the sort beloved by the scribes. Some quoted: "If you will diligently listen ..." (Exodus 15:26) as a proof that doing was less important than hearing. Paul generally was reflecting the nobler view of the school to which he belonged, the Pharisees. "Not learning, but doing is the Leader," runs one Pharisaic commentary. The interest which emerges from marking Paul's words is his intimacy with the forms and language of current theological debate.

There is also apparent to anyone familiar with Greek thought another clear indication of the same versatile scholar's complete familiarity with Greek thought. This is a phenomenon which is notable in 1 Corinthians 1-4, a passage of sustained irony which could not have been written by anyone unfamiliar with Plato and the Stoics.

Paul's knowledge of the Stoics, the noblest school of philosophy active in the world at the time, was clear in his address to the Athenian court. It is as obvious here. The Stoics had much to say on a law naturally written in the heart, and were the first Greeks to use the term "conscience" in Paul's sense.

And it was four centuries since Aristotle had written in his *Ethics*: “The truly educated man will behave as if he had a law within himself.”

Paul was aware of such ideas and the passage is further evidence of his familiarity with the patterns of thinking in the world to which he brought the gospel. An example lies therein. Paul’s famous word to the Corinthians, written six or seven years before (1 Corinthians 1:18-31), implied no abandonment of all available means of communication with his contemporaries.

WHAT OF EXAMPLE?

## ROMANS 2:17-21

How discerning are we really?

THIS PASSAGE IS ironical. Human pride, the most elusive and persistent of human vices, can turn into a boast even the grace which should humble and the privilege which should inspire lowly gratitude. It transforms the standing with God which the sinner has done nothing to merit or to win into a claim to excellence.

In 2:18 the grounds of the Jews' pathetic boasting was reviewed. They knew the will of God and "approved what is excellent." Discernment and perception are needed if we are to judge right and wrong (see also Romans 12:2; Philippians 1:9-10). The meaning is literally "testing out things which differ." It referred, in common Greek use, to auditing and scrutinizing the accounts and conduct of office. The Jews had the Law, which prescribed for them the clean and the unclean. It was a fact that, as no other nation, they had a notion of the holiness of God. It was true that they were, or could have been, "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children ...". Such enlightenment should have made their nation what it was from all time designed to be—a missionary people. Isaiah had glimpsed and preached that truth. It was part of the promise to Abraham (Isaiah 45:22; 52:10; Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). It was a privilege and a responsibility. To corrupt it into a theme for pride was a terrible sin.

THE EXAMPLE OF ISRAEL

## ROMANS 2:22-26

Do our lives really show our faith?

AMONG THE GREATER characters of Israel there was always a realization that the honor of their God was in their hands. Note the significant phrase in the story of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13:7-9)—“the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.” It was this which made strife in the camp of Abraham serious. Observe, too, Ezra’s remark (Ezra 8:22). He had boasted of his God.

And now Paul in 2:24 quotes the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) rendering of Isaiah 52:5. In the prophetic passage it is the degradation and misery of Israel which forms the basis for the Gentiles’ scorn. What sort of God, they said, so abandons his people? This is more than once the theme of Old Testament prayer.

Paul gives the words another twist. Like people, like God. If Jews have a reputation for vice, then the Gentiles’ response will inevitably be that their God is contemptible. There was some reason in the assumption. People become like the object of their worship, and if people create an object of worship out of their own mind, that deity inevitably reflects its origin, and courts rejection. Paul is writing, no doubt, with some knowledge of Roman Jewry.

This was stern language. Of what use the Law if the Law was flouted by its advocates? Nor is this irrelevant to those set free from the Law in Christ. Christ is dishonored if those who do not acknowledge him walk more

righteously than those who do. As John wrote many years later: “The one who professes to abide in him should walk as he walked” (1 John 2:6). There is a debt of love, a binding obligation, and doctrine is tested by its fruit. So we prove the validity of religious experience. Unless that experience involves a reorientation of the will, a setting of the affections in the direction of the moral excellence revealed perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ, it is no true experience of God, but stirring of the emotions that is sham, self-exalting and futile.

OUTWARD SIGN OR INWARD REALITY

## ROMANS 2:27-29

Is our faith external or internal?

PAUL IS SAYING in the technical language of Judaism, that Gentiles, if they observe the moral law as conscience reveals it to them, win the favor of God, but that Jews, in spite of, indeed because of, the physical sign in their body, fall under condemnation if they fail to keep the Law which has been divinely given them.

It is a moot question how far the highly specialized language of the Judaistic debate should be kept in translation. A.S. Way's little-known translation concludes the passage well: "He is the Jew who is so in his secret soul; and his is the true circumcision—that of the heart, consisting in the Spirit's presence, not in observance of the written letter. Men may have no praise for such a man—God has."

The argument appears remote from today and its ways of thinking. In the particular form in which we find it, it is remote. But consider two points. First, imagine its impact in the Roman Jewish community. A Jew, Paul points out, can be a transgressor of the Law, in spite of his possession of the Law, and the physical mark of the covenant in his body. He has an outward sign which does not vary as may the condition of his heart. That sign can be a reminder, a challenge, an encouragement, and so an undoubted blessing and an advantage, and therefore a responsibility.

Secondly, even though this argument may be remote from everyday thought with its symbolic language and strange imagery, the principle applies to the church. No outward formality, no ritual of worship, no religious attitudes or practice of church observance, no form or ceremony, no membership of organization or system, no right of birth, nothing devised by human beings, can replace the true experience of Christ in rebirth and salvation, genuine commitment to him, and continued practice of his presence.

## THE JEW'S ADVANTAGE

### ROMANS 3:1-4

So what differences does being a Jew make?

THIS PASSAGE IS a brief preview of chapters 9–11: Paul seems to pause at his last conclusion, wondering whether he has hit his compatriots too hard. Some might imagine that he had concluded that the Jew had no special privilege whatsoever, and that the sign of the covenant had no significance apart from a change in the heart.

In fact, that statement comes very near the truth. But Paul was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:4-6), and also remembered, perhaps, a word of Christ (John 4:22). On both counts he felt impelled to say a word of encouragement. The first question literally runs: “What has the Jew over the rest?” It continues: “What help is the sign in his body?”

He sums it up in 3:2: The Jews have the records of God’s own self-revelation. Why then “To begin with”? Paul has in mind the whole rabbinical argument of the three later chapters (9–11), and the list of advantages abruptly cut short in this verse could be completed from 9:4f. To be the guardians of God’s revelation of his person and his plan for humanity was an immense privilege.

Then Paul remembers the thread of his earlier argument. The Jews had much at God’s hand, but they used it badly. They were given commandments, not privileges. Special choice involves a special duty. Some, to be sure, failed to see this. They did not believe (3:3). Paul is treading

carefully. It was a remnant only who believed, and the Old Testament is witness to this fact. And now it was “the remnant” again, who had grasped the truth that Christ fulfilled, concluded and gave significance to the Law.

Did the vote of “some,” even of a majority, invalidate truth? God forbid. This is the gist of Paul’s argument. The verdict of the multitude is no expression of basic truth—neither in time past nor now. God works through minorities. It is a truth worth remembering when alone or when a tiny band faces overwhelming odds. It is worth remembering in society at large. It is worth considering in the context of history, when so many compromise with secular thought. To belong to “the Few” is a privilege.

A THEOLOGICAL QUIBBLE

ROMANS 3:5-8

“Why should people be condemned for their sin?”

IT HAS BEEN remarked before that anyone sensitive to the ways of Greek thought recognizes in Paul’s writing, in many subtle ways, his Greek outlook, which complements his equally obvious Jewish insights. The imaginary debate with a Jewish objector which is the key to this passage is typical of some of the writings of popular Stoicism.

The objections brought up by the supposed antagonist appear in this passage at their most obscure, but the argument Paul deals with is one which was not uncommonly advanced against his own doctrine of salvation by grace, and he was very sensitive to it.

It was simply this: if a man sins, his sin is a foil to God’s righteousness, the contrast setting God’s holiness in higher relief, just as darkness would not be known without light, and pleasure is made more comprehensible by pain. Therefore, the destructive conclusion follows, if a man’s sin enhances the glory of God, why should he be condemned for it?

The gap in the logic is obvious. If God could take joy in another’s sin, because he was exalted by it, it would follow that God was imperfect himself. The whole argument is absurd, and Paul is almost apologetic in advancing it (3:5): “I speak in a human way,” that is: “This is common argument.”

But although the logic seems absurd, and the drift of the argument almost blasphemous, is not the same sin apparent in more than one sphere of modern

theological thought? By one means or another, by diminishing human responsibility or by misrepresenting God, sinful humanity seeks to avoid the admission of their sin. The modern theologian, compromising with permissiveness, murmuring excuses about situation ethics, speculating on God's involvement in the world, and avoiding the Bible's outright condemnation of sin, has no cause to be impatient with his ancient counterpart.

ALL EQUAL IN SIN  
ROMANS 3:9-12

Paul shows what we can learn from the Old Testament.

AS THE IMAGINARY discussion continues, Paul returns to the equal condemnation under which both Jew and Gentile stand. Both are “under the power of sin” (3:9). The Greek phrase simply says “under sin.” It occurs again at the end of 7:14, and in Galatians 3:22. It occurs in Ephesians 1:22: “under his feet,” and in 1 Peter 5:6. In all such contexts it implies subjection, reduction to impotence and bondage. In both Christ’s teaching and Paul’s, sin is a bondage and a slavery (John 8:34). Rank and station are a mockery among slaves. Hence the equality of Jew and Gentile, sharers of a common tyranny.

Paul then proceeds to a chain of quotations. Two or three points of interest emerge. First, note Paul’s identity with the manner and form of scribal and rabbinical debate. In the interplay of theological argument during the Passion week between the Lord and those who thought to discredit him, Old Testament texts were used in this way. See, for example, Matthew 22:42-44 and John 10:34-36: The latter context is striking. The Lord’s use of a text, while not entirely unrelated to the original setting of the word, was considerably adapted. Adopting the rabbis’ line of argument, he struck them down with an Old Testament phrase.

When quoting Old Testament Scriptures it was not the practice to give particular attention to all aspects of the context. This is the second point to

note. Paul's quotation in 3:10-12 is from Psalm 14:1-3, where nothing attaches the words peculiarly to Jews. This, however, was not an illegitimate use of Old Testament quotation. It was an accepted use of sacred texts, and must not be judged by unfamiliar standards of argument. A Jew would regard a quotation as authoritative irrespective of context. It must also be noted that Paul was himself writing what was to be Scripture. His use is sanctioned by divine authority.

The Old Testament formed the mental background of the Jews to whom Paul primarily wrote. Christ's conversation with Nicodemus can be properly understood only if it is realized that the learned rabbi knew by heart Ezekiel 36:26-37:10: The letter to the Hebrews reveals the same intellectual background in those addressed.

For us, in the third place, there is a solemn warning not to treat the Old Testament with less than the reverence it claims. We have here another illustration of how inextricably woven is the Old with the New.

THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS

ROMANS 3:13-18

Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament to show all have sinned.

VERSE 13 IS an exact quotation of Psalm 5:9, as it appears in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. The original appears to be directed by David against the rebels in his kingdom, if Psalms 3–6 are correctly ascribed to the time of the monarch's retreat before Absalom.

3:14 is a freely quoted version, of Psalm 10:7, of unknown reference, while 3:15-17 are selectively extracted from Isaiah 59:7f. It is interesting to observe the workings of the human mind that has been taught to think and be expressed within the framework of Old Testament language and thought. It is important always to remember, in reading Paul's letters, the letter to the Hebrews, Peter's five addresses in the opening chapters of the Acts, and also much of what Jesus Christ himself said, that the communication presupposed such habits of thought and expression, and such a frame of reference.

The purpose of this chain of Old Testament quotations is to establish, by appeal to the very oracles of which the Jews were the custodians (3:2), the sinfulness of Jewry, and the power of such quotation in the argument is beyond doubt. Nor must it be supposed, easily though the words of the Old Testament came to his lips, that Paul's quotation was haphazard.

First, he establishes by quotation the charge of universal sin (3:10f.). He proceeds to reinforce it (3:12), and to illustrate the rebellion of the heart by

the malevolent utterances of the lips, words fraught with death and corruption, tongues dedicated to deceit, and malice that kills in their words (3:13). Their speech betrayed the noble functions of speech, calling down harm, and giving expression to the bitterness of the godless personality which sought such self-revelation (3:14).

It is word and deed which betrays the soul's condition. Words are the revelation of thought, and what lays hold upon the mind turns inevitably into action (3:15). The world's violence begins in the mind. And the evil in society at large is only the collective outcome, the total individual wickedness. Ruin and misery are inevitable results (3:16). Peace vanishes, in the life of individuals and society (17), and all because people fail to "stand in awe, and sin not" (3:18 and Psalm 4:4, KJV). A devastating build-up of quotations, in fact.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

### ROMANS 3:19-20

How is the Law useful?

THESE TWO VERSES round off a section of the letter which began at 1:18. We shall take them in turn. 3:19: Paul has been quoting from the Psalms and Isaiah. His reference to “the Law” obviously refers to these passages. It follows that he is using the term in a special sense. The Law is referred to some seventy times in the letter, and is used in four different senses (ie the Pentateuch, 3:21, where it is distinguished from the prophets; a principle, 3:27; 7:21,23,25; 8:2; the law of God, 2:17ff.,23ff.; and in the present passage, where it obviously refers to the Old Testament in its entirety). The meaning of this verse is that, if those who have God’s revelation are condemned by that very revelation, how can anyone else claim righteousness?

Verse 20 brings a daunting thought. Of what use is the Law? The question opens up a whole important facet of Pauline and Christian thinking. The Jews believed they were just in God’s eyes if they kept the Law. That was the position of the rich young man who came to Christ with a vital question (Luke 18:18-27). His shallow thinking imagined that he had actually kept the Law, until Christ’s probing showed how imperfect he was. The disciples’ question and Christ’s obscure answer were a foreshadowing of what Paul is to make clear in this letter—the true purpose of the Law, the dilemma of conviction of sin, and God’s remedy—justification by faith.

Paul had pondered long over the meaning of it all. As a Pharisee he had dedicated his life to the keeping of the Law (Philippians 3:4-6), and yet had no peace nor satisfaction (the theme closes chapter 7). But the Law was not without purpose, impossible though it was meticulously to keep it. In a flash of revelation Paul saw the truth. The Law revealed man to himself, showed him the righteousness of God, and how far short he fell of its demands, set before him the nature and the seriousness of sin, and therefore, by immediate implication, his dire need of a Savior. The first necessity if a man is to come as a penitent to God must be a deep realization of his natural helplessness. This, Paul saw, was the prime function of the Law.

## UNIVERSAL CONDEMNATION

### ROMANS 3:21-25a

Paul has painted a dark picture of human sin. He is now ready to describe the wonderful way in which sinners are put right with God.

THE WAY IS NOW clear for the great affirmation. It has been demonstrated that Jew and Gentile alike stand condemned, and that the only advantage the Jews had was the clear proof of their need by the impact of the Law and the revelation of divine demands implicit in it. Nor, says Paul, was this unfamiliar to the Old Testament, in both the Pentateuch and the Prophets, if they had been properly read and understood (3:21). This is important. Paul implies that the legalistic Judaism, from which he was set free by his conversion, was not a true development of the Old Testament, but a sterile perversion of it.

There was another tradition, traceable to Abraham, who later is to provide a striking illustration of the theme (chapter 4), and also prominent in the message of the prophets, who in no way saw the Law as the final revelation of God (Isaiah 1:1-18). Paul was abundantly right. The theme of the New Testament emerges again and again in the Old Testament (Isaiah 51:16f.). Therefore the heresy of Marcion in the second century, calling on the church to abandon the Old Testament; therefore the need today to reaffirm the unity of the Bible. Paul was preaching no new version of God's revelation. He was calling Jewry back to their real heritage, from the blind road into which Pharisaism had led it.

God's righteousness is shown to be unattainable by the Law. To fall short of his glory is to betray the prime function of our being, to demonstrate the marring of the divine image in which we were created. Therefore a clear definition of sin (3:23). See Psalm 4:4 and Isaiah 43:7 for the germ of Paul's thought in his comprehensive statement.

Justification (3:24) is, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, "an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight." This is through "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Redemption, in the meaning of the Greek word, is the act of buying a slave out of bondage to set him free. A ransom, in other words, is paid, just as Israel was redeemed from bondage in Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:8) and in Babylon (Isaiah 51:11). See also Galatians 3:23-27. Our justification rests on the fact that God, of his own free grace, has intervened to rescue his people from bondage to sin. It follows that the redeemed are those who accept emancipation. It follows, too, that they must believe to do so.

## THE SACRIFICE

# ROMANS 3:25b-27

Paul comes to the heart of the gospel as he explains the meaning of Christ's death.

LET'S GO BACK to the beginning of 3:25 from the previous study. Some versions have "expiation," other versions have "propitiation", which derives from a verb which most commonly means to "expiate" a sin, that is, by some act of ritual or sacrifice, by some payment or satisfaction given, to annul the guilt incurred by the commission of a sin. In the Old Testament the formalities by which the priesthood or the people were cleansed from defilement are described as "making propitiation" or "making atonement."

In the present passage Christ is set forth as the means by which moral guilt may be annulled, and that is obviously an act which God alone could determine and perform. This is why some versions avoid the term "propitiation." The word suggests the placating of an angry God, and although God's implacable opposition to evil in all its forms may properly be described as "wrath," that is not the whole theological picture. Paul here means that God "puts forward" the means by which the guilt of sin may be removed and he does this through Christ.

It was "by his blood" because Christ had to die to make such atonement possible, the last, complete and all-satisfying sacrifice. Again the Old Testament is drawn into union with the New Testament. And yet again, how could such sacrifice be effective in its operation unless those for whom it was

made regarded it as such and received it? Faith is that act of receiving and commitment by which God's means of grace is laid hold of in gratitude and appropriated into the life. Where grace meets faith, there is redemption.

We have passed through three word pictures:

1. God justifies: he takes the part of a judge who sets the prisoner free, absolving him from guilt.
2. God redeems: he pays the slave's ransom and liberates him.
3. God cleanses: he takes the place of the priest who makes sacrifice.

To those trained in the imagery of the Old Testament, each metaphor was vivid and complete.

In this way, God can redeem without loss of righteousness (3:25-26), without betrayal of principle, without ceasing to be himself. He is "faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9, KJV). God remains God, without lessening his holiness in the slightest. The judge is not unjust; the emancipator pays the full price; the sacrifice is complete.

PAUL'S CONCLUSION  
ROMANS 3:28-31

Do Jews and Gentiles then have different ways of coming to God?

A BETTER RENDERING of the opening phrase “For we hold that” might be “Therefore we conclude ...” (3:28, KJV). The words ring out with the confidence of the writer. Such firm conclusions were worked out in the anguish of soul in the years of retreat and searching which followed the shattering event of the Damascus Road.

There cannot be two distinct religious systems, one based on the Law and applicable to a chosen people, and the other based on faith, and available for the other division of humanity, as the Jew conceived humanity. Paul is anticipating and closing a desperate breach in his line of argument which his continually present and imaginary Jewish objector might be likely to make.

Why? There were those of his race who imagined a monopoly on God. Paul's view of God was based on the old covenant and Abraham, in this closely woven letter, is never far from his thinking. “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” implied a religion far wider than one race, and presupposed a God who was God of all humanity. Jew and Gentile could, by the same argument, have only one way of salvation.

Paul knew very well, from his own agonizing experience, how difficult it was for his fellow Jews to throw off the deep preoccupations of a narrow belief which had penetrated from childhood all their thinking, their whole personality, their complete view of God and God's world. He drives his

argument about salvation by faith with ruthless honesty and urgency to its only possible conclusion but he passes on the same comforting thoughts which had come to his aid when he found himself thrust to his vast reappraisal of all he had believed.

Quite clearly the Lord's word, contained in the oral tradition, was in his mind. He came, he said, not to annul the Law, but to fulfill it. Therefore the closing verse of this chapter, and the conclusion of a main line of the whole argument of the letter. The Law only finds meaning if it is bound to the ultimate revelation of God's long-standing purpose. Two further lines of proof are to follow, one in chapter 4 and another in chapters 6 to 8: the just demands of the Law, by no means made void, are met only in believers.

ABRAHAM, FATHER OF THE FAITHFUL

## ROMANS 4:1-4

Paul now gives an example of faith in action.

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT Paul writes in this chapter, it would be helpful to read Genesis chapters 12–25 and Hebrews 11:8-19 as background in a study of one of the great men of the Old Testament:

“By faith Abraham ...” Four thousand years ago Ur of the Chaldees was a sea-port on the Persian Gulf, where people first learned to sail the open waters. It was the London or New York of that distant age. The dhows sailed east to the Indus valley ports, and to Sri Lanka, and the talk of sailors in the Euphrates valley town made one person, Abraham, a citizen of Ur, aware of a great world across the waters. And down the Fertile Crescent, which made a route for the caravans up the river and round into Syria and Egypt, came the traders with stories of magnificence beside the Nile, and of the ships which came from Crete, and who told of other races, other cities, other ways. It was a varied story of human activity, with one common element for the man of Ur who listened, questioned and thought. The whole world, east, west, north, south, was lamentably lost in grotesque views of God, and soul-destroying superstition. The cruel cult of human sacrifice, the slaughter of babies, or the sacred prostitution, which he saw in Ur, were common practices. Or there were worse. In Egypt they worshiped the bull, the cat, the ram, the crocodile. In Crete there were bloody rites of bull-fighting. Abraham had become aware

of nobler truth, that God was one, that God cared for humanity, and prompted the human mind who reached for him. He had heard a voice and listened.

This is how an amazing project took shape. Abraham was the first missionary, the first person with an ardent desire to share a saving truth with his fellows. He was aware, as perhaps no one else was, of the vastness of the world. It was obvious that one person alone could not influence the multitude of mankind from farthest east to farthest west. But a nation, dedicated to the truth, might do what one person could hardly do. And so the magnificent plan which took Abraham out from his homeland to found a nation in the clean desert—by faith. Therefore the call which came, to a heart concerned and prepared to listen and obey. “Abraham believed ...’

NOT BY WORKS

## ROMANS 4:5-8

Paul drives his point home: salvation is by faith not works.

IT WAS A bold affirmation at the end of chapter 3 when Paul claimed that the Law and the Prophets contained the root of his doctrine that salvation was by faith. It was natural enough that the great father of the Hebrew people (Matthew 3:9) should be quoted as a test case. Paul is glad to examine the great story in that context, and does so in both this passage and the letter to the Galatians. That is why not only the story of Abraham in Genesis, but also Galatians 3, should be read in connection with these readings.

Paul's point has been that deeds do not win a saving merit, even if those deeds be the observance of the Law. It is rather faith, a simple trust which takes God at his word, which justifies. To the Jew of Paul's day brought up on the Law, this was revolutionary. Paul replies that, on the contrary, the most honored figure in their history is the prime and perfect illustration.

Abraham had recognized the voice of God in the mighty conviction that held him. God was one, and God must be made known. It seemed impossible, in view of his childlessness, that he could become a great nation, that he could father the children implied in the "stars of heaven" and the "sand which is on the sea shore" (Genesis 22:17). More, did not his trust endure as the years went by, and an heir seemed impossible, did he not continue to believe when it appeared that the heir, at last apparent, was to be removed from him by his own hand?

Some rabbinical thought had seen this rebuff to their legalism, and had argued that Abraham was chosen because he was the most righteous man available. There is no evidence for this. Abraham was fallible. He moved ahead of God in the matter of Hagar. Earlier he had abandoned Palestine for Egypt. He had lied to Pharaoh.

It must have been faith which counted, as the great word to Abraham said (Genesis 15:6). And more than a millennium later, Paul repeats, the great king and psalmist confirmed the truth. Therefore Psalm 32:1f. which are a reaching for New Testament truth.

AN OBJECTION ANSWERED

ROMANS 4:9-12

Paul continues to explore the importance of Abraham's faith.

IT SHOULD BE understood that Paul is still imagining a debate with a keen-minded Jew such as he must often have held in the synagogues and with the rabbis (Acts 17:2; 28:23). The person he is discussing matters with concedes his point about Abraham. Very well, Abraham was justified by faith, but is he not the father of the Jews (John 8:33), and does not that suggest that the dispensation of such grace is for the privileged nation only? Paul replies with a typical rabbinical argument. In writing to the Galatians he points out that the covenant with Abraham was 430 years earlier in history than the giving of the Law, and therefore took precedence over the Mosaic code (Galatians 3:17). Similarly, here he points out that the rite of circumcision, the national "sign in the flesh" of the Jewish people, was instituted (Genesis 17:10ff.) after the covenant, in fact fourteen years later. The argument for a Jew would be strong. The objector is brought back to the same point of refutation in a carefully constructed argument. 4:1-8 correspond to 3:27f. and 4:9-12 to 3:29-31.

Two further points might have been raised. The covenant with Abraham had international reference (Genesis 12:3). Also this was the implication of the change of name (Genesis 17:5) from Abram, which seems to mean "exalted father," to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." That multitude, too, if the dual figure of speech is to be pressed, is of earthly and

heavenly progeny (Genesis 22:17), not only the Hebrew people who have penetrated all nations, and the Semite descendants of Ishmael, but also a spiritual posterity, those who, by faith, become the children of the father of the faithful.

It is moving to see the sweep of history which began with the obedience of one person who had a God-given vision, and pursued it in faith, one person like any other person, stumbling, rising, failing but carrying on. There is no calculating the end of one act of trust, sacrifice and godly endeavor.

**Meditation** John 11:40.

THE PROMISE REALIZED THROUGH FAITH

ROMANS 4:13-16

Paul presses home his point about the Law.

PAUL INSISTS AGAIN on the global nature of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). If Abraham's covenanted heritage was to be confined to his own nationals, then its geographical limits were closely defined (Genesis 15:18-21 in specific terms, and in more general terms at Genesis 13:14f., see Joshua 1:24). The Old Testament, however, contains the hint of a wider posterity, which the New Testament takes up and claims (Hebrews 11:10, and notice Paul's point at Galatians 3:16 and 3:29 where he claims Christ, and therefore Christ's people, as the true posterity of the patriarch).

This covenant, he has shown, rested on faith. If the Law, given over four centuries later (Galatians 3:17), is to be the permanent way of salvation, a covenant is annulled twice over. First, what was universal is decisively confined to one nation, and secondly and more seriously, "faith is null and void" (4:14). A new principle is introduced. To inherit the promise people must keep the Law, and since to keep it is impossible, the race, which had known God's grace in the promise to Abraham, and had learned from him to move out in trust, passes under the shadow of wrath.

In 4:15, Paul digresses a little to develop this argument. He is to return to it later, and it has a place in the letter to the Galatian wanderers. He is always a little anxious lest he should appear to say that the Law was an unnecessary intrusion. The debates with the rabbis had shown him how necessary it was to

make this point. The Law had its place and purpose. It did not negate the promise to Abraham. It prepared the way for the consummation of that promise, by closely defining sin. It could not cure. It could not save. Grace all along had been the way.

ABRAHAM DID NOT WAVER

## ROMANS 4:17-21

What is true faith?

A PAPYRUS SCRAP from Egypt once provided a vivid translation of the word variously rendered “substance” and “assurance” in Hebrews 11:1, which runs: “Now faith is the title-deeds to the things we hope for ...”

Abraham had God’s word that he should have a vast posterity. Circumstances seemed to make such an event physically impossible. His trust was tested to the limit—and so he hoped when hope seemed against all probability (4:18). He believed that at the touch of God’s creative hand, the death which was creeping through his body could create life. Perhaps Paul has another “new creation” in mind, that of which he wrote to Ephesus (Ephesians 2:1,5).

Abraham weighed all these factors. His story shows his active consideration of such adverse circumstances. He must have been conscious of the tug of doubt. His mistake over Hagar reveals as much. He was tested and knew that he was being tested. But “no distrust made him waver ...” (4:20). He conquered doubt, in other words, for that phrase does not claim that no qualms plagued his mind, keen in its intelligence. And in the victory gained, he strengthened his faith, the aim and purpose of such testing. It “gives glory to God” (4:20) to trust him in this way, and the reward is power infused into one’s faith—to the point where faith becomes something near to knowledge, a blessed paradox (2 Timothy 1:12).

FOR US ALSO

## ROMANS 4:22-25

Paul concludes this part of his discussion of faith by emphasizing the importance of Christ's death and resurrection.

PAUL SUMS UP. James Denney may be quoted in his comment on this paragraph. He points out that it is not arbitrarily that "faith is reckoned as righteousness." Faith, he continues, "is the spiritual attitude of a man who is conscious that in himself he has no strength, and no hope of a future, and who nevertheless casts himself upon, and lives by, the word of God which assures him of a future." This is the necessarily and eternally right attitude of all souls to God. "Now," says Denney, "this was the attitude of Abraham to God, and it is the attitude of all sinners who believe in God through Christ; and to him and all alike it is reckoned by God for righteousness. The gospel does not subvert the religious order under which Abraham lived; it illustrates, extends and confirms it." (*Expositor's Greek Testament*, 2:621)

Fittingly, the chapter ends with an affirmation of that faith in Christ which Paul was expounding (4:24f.), in a rhythmical statement which may have been a credal formula for Christians, and especially Jewish Christians. It is couched in the poetic form of Hebrew parallelism, so apparent in the Psalms (eg "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"). There is no theological separation between Christ's death and his resurrection, as though atonement for sin and justification for the sinner were separate divine processes. Paul

always associated the death of the Lord with his rising again. He knew Christ as the risen One who had died, and ever lived for our justification.

In 4:25 “delivered for our offenses,” we are reminded of Isaiah 53 where the same verb is used twice in the Septuagint version (Isaiah 53:6,12). That chapter concludes (Isaiah 53:12): “because of their sins he was delivered up.” This is the phrase Paul echoes, for he commonly has the Greek version of the Old Testament in mind. As Denney concludes: “It was the greatest display of power ever made to man when God raised Christ from the dead ... The only right attitude of any human being in presence of this power is utter self-renunciation, utter abandonment of self to God. This is faith, and it is this which is imputed to men in all ages, and under all dispensations, for righteousness.”

THE NEW LIFE

## ROMANS 5:1-5

Paul now describes the great blessings of justification.

A NEW SECTION of the letter opens here, and runs on to 8:39. Verses 1-11 anticipate the theme of the whole section.

Peace is the firstfruit of our justification. The rebellion is over. Reconciliation (Colossians 1:20) is won. As Christians, we are no longer at odds with the whole constitution of the universe. We have accepted God's will. We have set out to become the person God intended us to be. Peace is declared, and part of it is intended to be that peace of mind and heart which has always been humanity's elusive quest (John 14:1,27). Such is the affirmation of 5:1.

By the same process God is available to us; his power is ours to claim. Nothing alienates or stands between, "so that if he were suddenly to reveal himself we should still know exactly where we stand, and should not have to shrink away from his presence" (1 John 2:28, JBP). The glory of God, from which humanity fell disastrously short (3:23), is held before us as a goal to reach for, a standing to be won by grace. Such is the hope of 5:2.

Therefore victory comes over anything life can do. It was difficult to follow Christ in Rome. It is difficult today. No easy course is charted. There is persecution, unpopularity, loneliness. But if faith stands firm, there is the assurance that no experience is meaningless, that everything committed to God's creative hands can turn to good (8:28), and that the fruit of adversity is

endurance. Endurance is no passive quality, no crouching under the shield as the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (Shakespeare) rain down. The shield could be a weapon of offense in the ancient armory, and so, too, is the shield of faith. Endurance is active. It is one of the noblest human qualities. Such is the challenge of 5:3. Character: the buffeting of the wind makes the tree strong; sturdiness does not form in a hothouse. If we want to be strong, we must face storms of life. Christ did, and Christians are called to be like him. Such is the prospect of 5:4.

This is no vain hope, for God, now ours to have and to hold, fills life with his presence. His Holy Spirit indwells and sanctifies. His new-given life seeps outwards from the surrendered heart to color thought, word and deed, and to make us like him. Such is the great promise of 5:5.

WHAT KIND OF LOVE?

## ROMANS 5:6-8

These verses show clearly how much God loves us.

IT IS PAUL'S way to break into a lyrical passage of praise. We see some passages in his letters: 1 Corinthians 13, the immortal poem on Christian love, is one such flight of language. These verses are in the same style.

The love of God holds the wonder of the writers of the New Testament. Look at 1 John 3:1 and 1 Peter 1:3f. And similarly these three verses. It was "at the right time" that Christ died, no unexpected tragedy, no chance crime, turned by the human imagination into theological propositions. At the proper time, determined by the Providence of God, Christ died.

"The Good Man," whom Plato had imagined four centuries before in Athens, appeared on earth, and people did to him as Plato had anticipated they would in a quite uncanny prophecy: "The Good Man will be scourged, thrown into chains ... and after enduring every pain he will be crucified" (Plato, *Republic* 361 E). See also Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53.

In 5:7 the Greek text uses a definite article: "for the good man one will dare even to die." It is another of those almost unconscious turns of language by which Paul demonstrates his complete familiarity with the common patterns of Greek thought. The Stoics talked of "the Wise Man," and Greek philosophical debate was prone to such idealizations. Paul was using the language of his day. One so ideally good would be worth dying for.

But, Paul continues, it was not for such a one, but for *us*—poor specimens of the human race that Christ chose to die. It was for “the ungodly,” “sinners.” Christ’s death for such creatures assures us, therefore, of God’s love. It went far beyond where the greatest human love would dare to go (5:7). This, then, is how God reveals his love, “presents it,” as the opening verb of 5:8 literally says, in its final and unmistakable demonstration.

It is for us to choose whether to accept or to reject, and in such choice fervently, sincerely, frankly made, lies health for the soul. Christians do not claim perfection, but believing as we do that Christ chose to die to reveal to us the truth about our desperate evil and God’s love, we personally accept that sacrifice as our own. Here lies for us reconciliation with our God, a knowledge of forgiveness, and a spring of happiness, assurance and character.

CHRIST'S DEATH LINKED WITH HIS RESURRECTION

ROMANS 5:9-11

Writing boldly and intensely, Paul enlarges our vision.

THE ARGUMENT RUNS step by step like this. The initial problem is the greatest. How can sinners be reconciled to a righteous God? How can a holy God demonstrate his love for rebels, and give them divine righteousness? How that major difficulty can be overcome has been explained in 3:21-30. God has “put forward” Christ to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. His death was the demonstration, and by faith in Christ crucified, humanity is brought near to God.

If such grace was shown us while we were still sinners, then much more, with that transaction done, can we trust the living Christ to preserve us, not only from the temptations which come to us in life, but also from final judgment. He died on the cross, but he also rose from the dead. He lives while we live, in us, available, implicated, involved, and he will be present at the awesome encounter in another life when we meet God.

This is a thought to which Paul will return, for example in the triumphant words of chapter 8. Note how intimately Christ's death is linked with his resurrection. Without a living Christ there can be no assurance, just as without the dying Christ there could be no salvation.

Assurance, in a word, comes from acceptance of the fact of Christ's atoning death as the basis of our salvation, and the consciousness of union with an indwelling risen Christ as a continuing experience.

5:11 speaks of “boasting” or “rejoicing” in God. Such boasting is not “excluded” (see 3:27). See also Psalm 34:2; 44:8; 2 Corinthians 11:17.

CHRIST AND ADAM

## ROMANS 5:12-14

Paul writes about the devastating effects of Adam's sin on the whole human race.

PAUSE NOW, AS Paul does, to take stock. The relation of Christ to the human race has been expounded in the argument from 3:21 to 5:11, The first eleven verses of this chapter sum up the whole of this passage, and 5:11 is a summary of the rest. "Therefore" can refer to the larger passage, or to either of the summaries. Paul might have ended 5:14 with a sharper reference to 5:12, and said: "so also by one Man righteousness entered into the world, and life by righteousness." This is what he virtually says. He is contrasting Adam and Christ. In the former the human race finds a unity in the flesh, and in the sin and death to which sin is heir. In Christ the human race could find unity again, a unity in the spirit, and in righteousness and life to which the spirit by faith can be the heir (1 Corinthians 15:21f.,45-49).

The argument is theologically less potent in modern thought than in ancient and Jewish thought. The involvement of group and family in the sin of the individual was demonstrated grimly in the tale of Achan (Joshua 7). On the other hand there is truth which might even find genetic confirmation in the argument. Adam admitted a force of death into the world of humanity. The fatal principle gained entry into the world, and it was impossible to exclude it save by an extraordinary act. The communicability of sin, in our close-knit society, is demonstrable. As John Donne said centuries ago: "No

man is an island, entire of himself.” And do we have any need to prove or to demonstrate the indissoluble link between sin and death?

**Thought** How much do we contribute this day to the world’s total of good or evil?

## HUMANITY'S RESTORATION

### ROMANS 5:15-17

Paul writes about the wonder of amazing grace.

HOW IS THE image of God, in which humanity was originally created, restored? The Christian answer, as we have already seen, is: humanity stands under condemnation, and there must be no avoiding that fact in fruitless tribute to human pride. Humanity, too, is conscious of moral freedom, and unless the universe is a vast and incredible mockery, is free and responsible. The will of God has been revealed to humanity, and there is not one who has wholly made that will their own. Humanity stands condemned before God, and to deny the fact makes chaos of God's righteousness.

Nor, the doctrine continues, is divine holiness an obscure conception to be brushed aside in the name of grace. God's condemnation of sin, his wrath repelling sin and abiding upon it, are not the notions of ignorance, fear and primitive demonologies. They accompany the loftiest views of the deity, justice and righteousness. They stand or fall with the Christian conception of sin and command no less an authority than Christ himself. They are implicit in the whole New Testament, whose writers insist that God's condemnation of his creatures is a serious thing dealt with in bitter seriousness by Christ.

Christianity says quite simply that God's condemnation for sinful humanity is removed "in Christ." How? The modern mind, anxious for formulae, empirical proof and illustrative analogy, is not content with mere dogma. How can the death of Christ, who was put to death under the rule of

Tiberius, by the procurator Pontius Pilate, alter our relationship with God centuries later? Some, confronted with the dilemma, would answer merely with the determination of Galileo, “Nevertheless, it does.” And, in fact, it is common human experience that the gospel works. From Paul on the Damascus Road to Augustine in the Gardens of Milan, to Bunyan, Newton, Moody and Spurgeon, dramatic conversion and the revolution of human character have been common in human experience. To analyze the phenomenon of conversion, to unravel the psychological processes involved, neither explains the fact away nor invalidates its theology. In all history, only the Christian gospel, with its doctrine of redemption, has brought about constant, widespread and far-reaching changes in human lives.

It can be shown in a myriad case histories that Christ has redeemed from fear of death and the dread of God those who in simple faith have accepted his work as being personally significant; that the power of such faith has been a deep fountain of social good and untold personal happiness; that the very image of God has been seen in clear and unmistakable lineaments in all nations who have accepted the forgiveness which the Christian gospel offers in Christ and his finished work.

THE BLESSED CONTRAST

ROMANS 5:18-21

Paul concludes his contrast between the effects of the work of Adam and the work of Christ.

THE CONCLUSION, THEN, is: “As through one offense the result for all men was condemnation, so also through one righteous act the result for all men is justification and life.” The comparison or contrast between Christ and Adam is closed, but the Law intruded into the situation (5:20). Sin, Paul means, preceded the Law. The condemnation which fell on sin was earlier than the Mosaic Code. The Law came to sharpen the realization of sin. See Galatians 3:19ff. and the expansion of this concept in 7:7ff. of this letter. The Law made the realization of need, along with the conviction of sin, sharper, but it followed that grace was simultaneously more vividly laid hold of as God’s embracing and sufficient answer and remedy. Paul’s own sense of triumph and gratitude rises to its climax as the chapter ends, and the close is almost a doxology.

The skill with which Paul puts the Law in its proper place should be noted. He has not lost sight of his Jewish audience, nor of the imaginary objector, who will appear again in the opening verses of chapter 6. He will not discuss the Law summarily. Nor is it his place to deal with it as sovereignly as Christ did. He merely concentrates on showing, both in the context of Adam and of Abraham, that before and without the Law, the

elements of the situation and the essentials of the problem were the same. Paul was deeply concerned with history.

In 5:18: “condemnation for all men ... life for all men” refer to “all in Adam” and “all in Christ” respectively. Paul uses a vivid word in 5:20 which literally might run: “the Law came sideways in ...,” usefully interrupting a moving flow of history. The reference is to the historic giving of the Law. Once it was given, sin was apparent, no longer hidden, but defined, diagnosed and “multiplied.” Grace became a dire necessity, an urgent need. Hence the vital linking of the Testaments.

**Meditation** In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “The last words of Mr. Honest were, Grace reigns. So he left the world.”

THE NEW LIFE

## ROMANS 6:1-4

“So if God forgives sin, then why don’t I sin all the more?” Read this passage to discover Paul’s response.

SINGLEMINDEDLY PAUL HAS pursued his argument of sin and grace. The sharper the conviction of sin, the deeper the realization of grace, has been his argument. And now the imagined objector steps in subtly or perversely: “If that is so, the more we sin, the greater the grace given in forgiveness.” A temptation for the theologian is the verbal quibble. Exploring the infinite with finite words, forgetting the living, present reality of God in formulating propositions about him, people have been reduced to strange dilemmas.

Paul knew that he would face such quibbles in Rome. He had, no doubt, already met them elsewhere. That is the background to this passage, the swift refutation, and the great statement about union with a living Christ. Baptism is presented as a symbol of death and burial. In the catacombs both fonts and baptistries are to be found, and the mode of baptism would appear to have been dictated by the amount of water available.

On the other hand, the Jew knew only baptism by immersion. Such was John’s baptism in the Jordan. At Masada a baptistry has been discovered and, to the gratification of orthodox Jewry, the rock-hewn tank holds precisely the amount defined by rabbinical regulations as enough completely to cover someone. Such was the baptism a Gentile convert to Judaism knew. This is

the background of Paul's use of the figure and the ritual for the Christian's "burial with Christ," and his resurrection to a new mode of life.

This passage shows us that a person who has been put right with God cannot be isolated from Christ, who is his life. Such a person cannot be considered apart from their possession in Christ of a new possibility, a new power, a new and glorious call to living holiness. (Text adapted from Handley Moule, *Expositor's Bible*, 5.556.)

RISEN WITH CHRIST  
ROMANS 6:5-10

Paul continues his argument on the newness of life as a Christian

UNION WITH CHRIST at one point, in his death, means union with him in the whole sequence of events which followed—his resurrection and his exaltation. Victorious living, and our immortality, is implicit in this reality. To imagine that sinners could accept the gift of grace, and then continue living their old life, would betray an error of such a fundamental nature as to call into doubt their whole affirmation of acceptance.

He who has “died with Christ” is set free from a slavery (6:6); but is released, as death in all cases releases, from all bonds and obligations (6:7). The new life in Christ will be the same life which Christ himself lives, a life inaccessible to death. Something between thirty and forty years were to pass before John closed the canon of the New Testament with his Gospel and the first of his three letters which accompanied it. Over that period Paul’s doctrine of union with Christ, which appears in more than one form and context in his writings, had been taught and experienced in the church. Perhaps that is one reason why John so stresses “eternal life” in his writings. “Eternal life” is the life of this passage, that mode of living which Christ, risen from the dead, experiences, and which is shared by those “in him.”

The new life in Christ gripped the imagination of the early church, and one of the commonest graffiti in the catacombs beneath Rome, so haunted by the early Christians of the city to which Paul addressed his words, is the

phrase “in Christ,” scratched on wall and sepulcher in Latin and in Greek. “Remain in me,” said Jesus in the last hours before his death, and that last talk with his disciples should be studied alongside this passage. Remaining (abiding) in Christ is “that continuous act by which we set aside all that which we might derive from ourselves, to draw all resources from Christ by faith” (Godet, adapted). It is all “by faith.”

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FAITH

ROMANS 6:11-13

How is this teaching to work out in practice? The new life in Christ is real, but must be realized.

LOOK AT EACH verse in turn.

6:11. “Reckon [ie consider] yourselves...”. Different translations try to render a Greek present imperative, which implies a process, a continuing action, a repeated endeavor and obedience. The whole psychology of victorious living, of vital Christian faith, is here. We must lay hold of our potential, working out our salvation. Christians, conscious of the thrust of evil in the heart, a tug of worldly temptation, the drag and pull of old unregenerate ways of thought, speech and action, must respond by the declaration: “In Christ I am dead to this.” So, too, seeing that the life in Christ is not repression but sublimation, when an urge to good, a movement of God’s indwelling Spirit prompts to righteous action, to Christlikeness, to creative living, we must similarly respond with the declaration: “So be it, Lord. Let me so live, so speak, so think.” The result is growth in grace, the replacement of old ways, responses, reactions, by new and godly things.

6:12. For, in truth, a tyranny is broken. The verse may be rendered: “For never let sin reign as king in this mortal frame, so that you should obey sin in all its urges.” The onetime slave and subject has been liberated. He has a new Lord, and should serve him, not the old, discredited, defeated despot.

6:13. Our bodies, in truth are now God's temple (2 Corinthians 6:16), not mere tools and weapons (the Greek word means both) of a ruthless overlord, who cares nothing for the victims of his tyranny. We become new people in Christ, real, alive, vital, not the unloved and unregarded instruments of evil.

It is by faith that as Christians we lay hold of our privilege. It is a defect of faith that leaves us still serving a tyranny that has been broken. Christ died that we might be free. He lives to keep us free.

**Meditation**

“Bringing all my burdens,  
Sorrow, sin and care,  
At thy feet I lay them  
*and I leave them there.*”

THE NEW ALLEGIANCE  
ROMANS 6:14-18

Who are we serving?

THE PASSAGE REPEATS with new urgency what has just been said. Paul is going to expand this thought in the next two chapters but at this point the old difficulty of 3:8 and 6:1 comes to his mind again. It must have been a favorite objection in the hands of legalistic Jews. Therefore, this final repudiation:

6:14 sums up, using again the imagery of 5:12, “For sin shall not be your overlord. For you are under grace not under law.”

6:15. Are we then to sin because we are no longer ruled by regulations, but are bound instead by our debt of love to a pardoning and redeeming God? Banish the very thought!

6:16. Is it not simple and obvious truth, set in an immortal context of words by Jesus himself, that no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24)? A slave, in ancient law, was the exclusive property of one master, and his one essential function was simple obedience. There are two masters for humanity—sin or Christ. We can choose. One slavery is a heavy burden and its end is death. The other’s yoke is easy (Matthew 11:30), and its end is life and righteousness. The Greek word translated “either” is an emotive form common enough in Plato, but found only here in the New Testament. It is as though Paul says: “of course there can only be the two alternatives.”

6:17f. Now follows a turn of style which is often characteristic of Paul. It is part of the warmth of his character and to be observed in such passages as

Philippians 2:1-18. Paul makes a statement of profound theological truth and ends with the hearty assurance that those whom he addresses know its truth in personal experience, and have chosen obedience and Christ. See also the severe words of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 followed by the warm confidence of 1 Corinthians 6:11.

The practical challenge which emerges is that both God and sin need servants and tools. God works through people, and sin curses the world through those in whom it dwells.

THE WAGES OF SIN  
ROMANS 6:19-23

Paul continues to write about the Christian's new status and destiny.

OF COURSE, SAYS Paul half apologetically, in face of the implied thought that Christian living itself is a form of slavery, "I am simply using a human figure of speech to get my meaning across to you" (5:19). In fact, trained as he was in Greek rhetoric, he had been carried on by the neat contrast he was developing between the two masters and the two allegiances. He returns to the point to forestall an objection. Christianity is true freedom, not slavery. See also 3:5 and Galatians 3:15 for other examples of Paul's apology for such a point of style. He was too good a scholar to treat an illustration of truth, or an illuminating analogy, as if it was an expression of truth itself.

Led on by his careful parallelism, Paul proceeds to develop the thought that in all states of life there is a bondage and a liberty. Bound like slaves "to immorality and lawlessness," the pagan was at liberty in relation to righteousness, ie freed from the duty to do right (6:20).

What advantage lay in such a damning freedom? None, but only horrifying recompense. With a sharp contrast between "then" and "now" (6:21-22), Paul appeals to the fruits, the results of the contrasted attitudes. Shame and death lay on the one side. Sanctification and life lay on the other. Humanity is free to choose.

"Sanctification" (6:22) merits deeper study than a brief note can give it. Paul, in fact, is returning to the thought which appeared at the opening of the

chapter: “reckoning ourselves dead to sin and alive to righteousness.” It is the process by which the indwelling Christ takes over a life, filling, purifying and transforming it into his own likeness. There is battle enough, as Paul is to show at the end of chapter 7, but the movement is begun as soon as a sinner in faith repudiates sin’s tyranny, and accepts the lordship of Christ. Such is the “free gift”—no “wage,” but a gracious gift (6:23).

THE BONDAGE OF THE LAW

ROMANS 7:1-4

Paul takes an illustration from marriage ...

THE SUBJECT OF chapter 6 is continued, under a new illustration. In the earlier passage the slavery was that of sin. Here the slavery is that of the Law. Very boldly, in view of the fact that he is addressing the Jews who must have formed a large element in the Roman Christian congregation, Paul stresses the nature and limitations of the Law.

He points out that law of any sort is master of a person only during life. Death cancels all contracts. A woman, bound by the legal contract of the marriage bond, is free to marry if that bond and contract are broken by her husband's death. The illustration is only a rough analogy, for in its application it is the bonded person who himself "dies to the Law" in sharing mystically the death of Christ.

As Christians we must reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to the righteousness which is ours in Christ, so similarly we are to consider ourselves released from the Law by a form of death, the death we share with Christ, just as in Christ we share Christ's new life—and death annuls all legal obligation.

To the Gentile and to the modern Christian the argument seems unnecessarily elaborate. To the Jew it was vital. The Law, since the exile, had meant everything. It had been the cement of their nation. And it had bulked largely in the experience of the previous two centuries, during which,

growing beyond its wholesome function as conservator of Jewry and Judaism, it had overwhelmed all Jewish life. Paul knew the strength of the Law in personal experience. He also knew its power to daunt and to condemn. He is soon to speak about that in terms of theology and personal experience. He had also known a vast emancipation, and is urgent to share the liberty he had found with all who would listen to him. The Galatian church had demonstrated how difficult it was for Christians, who had truly believed in Christ, to cast off the tyranny of the outmoded Law. The letter to the Hebrews touched the same theme.

**Meditation** Philippians 3:4-10.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

### ROMANS 7:5-10

What was the function of the Law?

PAUL WAS VIVIDLY aware that this line of argument contained a peril. He was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews,” as he told the Philippians and he was not ready to deny the whole heritage of his race. Moreover, the Old Testament, the authority of which he would not have questioned for a moment, represented the Law as a gift of God, as a part of a covenant. And he had the authority of the Lord himself for such an attitude. The Sermon on the Mount goes beyond the Law, and Jesus in Matthew chapter 23, in his denunciation of Pharisaic legalism, speaks with scorn of human elaboration of the divine code, but neither in the Sermon on the Mount, nor in any contest with the scribes, did Christ sweep the Law aside as irrelevant, faulty, manmade or contemptible.

It was essential that Paul should integrate the Testaments, that he should assert the Christian’s freedom in Christ and yet show a true and valuable function for the Law. It was a brilliant stroke of theological insight to bring about this combination and, for the evangelism he had before him, it was a first essential. It was to be Paul’s greatest contribution to biblical theology.

What then was the function of the Law? It defined sin. The very prohibition revealed the nature of sin. A terrible phenomenon of our present affluent age is the permissive society and situation ethics, conditions marked by the discrediting, abandonment and denigration of absolute standards. The result is a wide failure to apprehend, appreciate and feel the gravity of sin.

There must be Law. Without absolute demands there can be no definition of sin, no challenge to it. In this sense, as Paul says, the Law brought sin into being. It located and named it.

But Law can do no more. It can convict and condemn. It cannot save. It can quicken conscience, but cannot lessen its pangs. It is only the trusted servant, as Paul told the Galatians, who cannot educate the child but can bring him to the one who can. The Law is divinely given, essential—but stops short and provokes despair, unless it is fulfilled in Christ, unless it hands over its slain victim to his resurrecting strength.

THE LAW IS GOOD

## ROMANS 7:11-14

Paul digs more deeply into sin and the Law.

THE LAW WAS a way of life. If someone could only keep it absolutely, they might need no Savior. It was the spiritual tragedy of the rich young man who came to Christ that he thought that he had actually kept the Law (Mark 10:17-22). And yet that same inquirer was troubled in heart and felt that he lacked the eternal life which is the gift of God's grace. Paul realized that fact sharply. The Law was what exposed him to condemnation and spelt out the sentence of death.

In 7:11 there is an acute piece of psychological insight which adds a facet of truth to this fact. Such is fallen human nature that the very definition of sin prompts to sin. The Law, says Paul, deceived me. Genesis 3:13 provides an illustration. The prohibition becomes a challenge, provokes rebellion, suggests defiance. And always, as in Eden, there is the lurking thought of possible impunity. The Tempter turned the prohibition, intended only for Adam's good, into a force for destruction, mingling it with a lie.

It is the eternal nature of sin that it takes that which is good and transforms it into evil. If you test that thought in all areas of human folly and wrongdoing it will be seen to be true. The Law was good, but it was made by sin into a bridgehead of evil. But this raises the problem of 7:7 in a new form. Paul repels the thought that a good thing was made a source of death for him. It was part of God's intention that sin might appear sin, shown in its true

nature, for if sin turns a good gift into a curse, could anything more sharply awaken a desire for deliverance?

At the close of 7:11 we seem to hear Paul's own testimony of his confrontation with the Law. He seems to be telling us how, in his early maturity, he had ridden smoothly along the stream of morality and reputation for piety, until he had struck the rock of the commandment: "You shall not covet," with its implication of selfish ambition, and arrogant desire. Then, as though from an ambush, sin arose and made the strong and self-reliant one aware of the effects of his weakness and sin. He discovered the Law, and with it death. He was struck down on the road of life, convicted of sin by what he had professed with pride to follow and observe, and conscious of his desperate need. The passion of Paul's first persecution of the Christians found its deep roots here. He was a desperate man battling against the urgent pressure of the devastating truth.

THE CONFLICT WITHIN  
ROMANS 7:15-20

Paul writes about the inner battle in his life.

THIS PASSAGE LOOKS like a confession of defeat, but it takes an extraordinary Christian to deny being aware of the inner strife which Paul admits. This must be an utterance of his Christian experience, no mere recollection of unregenerate days. It requires a true Christian to acclaim the excellence of God's demands, and strive to make them real in life's experience. It is God's prompting in the heart which fires this deep desire for holiness, and this profound dissatisfaction with all achievement. It is absurd mechanically to interpret the moving words of a great and noble soul, to note that no specific reference is made in them to the Holy Spirit, and therefore to assign the confession to a section of life unblessed by God's presence. It is the Holy Spirit which prompts the mood described, and the Holy Spirit which sanctions the confession itself.

Paul discovered that life was a battle, and that human nature slips easily towards evil. Those who teach otherwise deceive those they teach. The New Testament sets no limits to our victory over sin and our corrupt self, but it can lead to nothing but frustration, disappointment and despair to suggest to those who accept Christ that sinless perfection lies within easy reach and to give the impression that flawless virtue is the immediate mark and ready attainment of those who follow him.

“The picture is true for the whole course of Christian life here on earth, for there is never an hour of that life when the man who ‘says he has no sin’ does not ‘deceive himself’ (1 John 1:8). And if that sin is but simple defect, a ‘falling short of the glory of God’, if it is only that mysterious tendency which, felt or not, hourly needs a divine counteraction, still, that man ‘has sin,’ and must long for a final freedom” (Handley Moule, adapted).

THE PULL OF THE FLESH

## ROMANS 7:21-25

Do you share Paul's experience of this inner struggle?

IN THESE WORDS there “is a groan of shame and pain from a man who could not be thus tortured if he were not born again. Yet it is also an avowal—as if to assure himself that deliverance is intended and is at hand—that the tyrant is an alien to him as he is a man regenerate ...” (Handley Moule, *Expositor's Bible*, 5:563-567).

The exclamation of thanksgiving in 7:25 shows that the deliverance he longs for is no postponed and promised consummation, to be granted only in another life. It is part of present experience. The military metaphors of 7:23 show that the battle is on, and no battle is static. All conflict moves towards victory or defeat. Christians are at war, but need not doubt the outcome. We are certain to win. The day will bring its test of strength and will, its wounds and toil, but each day should bring victory closer. Our Ally is at hand, involved in the conflict ...

We should be grateful to Paul for this confession. It is too commonly our experience for us not to recognize in it the fight we daily fight. This letter is no mere textbook of theology. It is, like the Psalms, a record of the soul.

## NO CONDEMNATION

### ROMANS 8:1-4

As a warm pastor, Paul reminds us that as Christians we have a new status.

THE CHAPTER FALLS into three divisions, of which the first, which speaks of the Spirit as the principle of righteousness and life, covers verses 1-11. The opening verses are one of the great triumphant passages to which Paul sometimes rises.

The negative in 8:1 is emphatic. “There is therefore now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus ...” The Holy Spirit pervades the chapter. To be “in Christ Jesus” means to be indwelt by God, to have God’s power available to the outreach of faith, to be set free, and under no bond of broken slavery.

“To walk ... according to the flesh” means to live the life of the pagan world, to be the puppet and plaything of undisciplined sinful desires and to know the frustrated helplessness and pain of those who know that the fruit of such living is unhappiness and defeat, but who see no hope of deliverance. The “works of the flesh” are listed in Galatians 5:19-21.

Count how many times the word “Spirit,” the opposite of “flesh,” occurs in this chapter. To “walk ... according to the Spirit” is to catch the vision of God’s liberating power (8:2), made real and visible in Jesus Christ, God’s demonstration of himself to humanity (8:3). Christ gave humanity a fresh start. In Adam all sinned. This was the contention that initiated this train of

reasoning earlier in this letter. Christ broke the spell. Like a new creation, a second Adam, he faced the same conditions, confronted the same temptations, but obeyed God perfectly. So humanity could be set free of Adam's corrupted race, and made one with Christ, in whom doom and defeat fell on sin. Humanity was given a new start, the past canceled, its slavery broken. It remained only to realize that life, and lay hold of the privilege. This is what Paul means by "liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:13).

**Meditation** The fulfillment of prophecy in Paul's doctrine. See Ezekiel 36:25–37:14 and Jeremiah 31:33f. (Jesus referred to both passages in his conversation with Nicodemus—John 3.)

THE EXACT OPPOSITES

## ROMANS 8:5-8

Where is your life headed?

THERE ARE TWO kinds of life, the life which ends in death, introverted, self-centered, seeking its satisfaction in the pursuit and fulfillment of the passing and ephemeral desires of the body. Opposed to it, and as different as life is from death (Ephesians 2:1-6), is the “eternal life” about which John, writing thirty to forty years later, speaks. That life seeks God’s will, is outward-going, free, and is conscious of God’s presence and help. Such a life is available to all who will lay hold of it in faith.

Jesus told a story of a fool (Luke 12:15-23). The man was a farmer, no evil monster. In a difficult land, he had made farming pay. There is no suggestion that he had won wealth by any means other than hard work. But he mistook his body for his soul. He thought life needed only a heap of wheat and farm produce. He thought he could control the future. He illustrates 8:6: he was typical of those who live according to the flesh. Such a life is, as Shakespeare made Macbeth describe it, “a brief candle”: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more; it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing.”

This is not the life “in Christ.” Paul exhausts metaphor in his attempt to make clear and challenging the difference. Look also at Colossians 3:1-4:

“You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God, and when Christ, who has become our very being, shall appear, then you shall share his glory.”

Read, too, Philippians 3:12-16, where Paul makes it quite clear that the life “in Christ,” the life “according to the Spirit,” is no effortless or sudden transformation. It is attained by growing and continually exercised faith, by remaining in Christ. ‘He must go on increasing, and I must go on decreasing,’ said John the Baptist, expressing a continual process (John 3:30). Our “brief candle” merges its flicker with the unquenchable “Light of the World.”

RISEN WITH CHRIST  
ROMANS 8:9-11

How much do you know of Christ's resurrection power?

NOTICE HOW VITAL the resurrection is in Paul's teaching. To believe in the historic fact of the resurrection is essential for a Christian faith. The name Christian cannot properly be given to anyone who denies the deep truth of that event. To be sure it is, as these verses show, a mystical experience, part of living "in Christ." But that experience loses all meaning if Christ is not truly risen. It is the apprehension of the fact, the realization that he did indeed conquer death, which makes possible the basic affirmation: "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas was the last of the apostles' band to see the risen Christ, and he was not one to risk life on a false report, mistake, hallucination or fabrication. Remembering the census documents of the eastern provinces, where identification is often made by reference to permanent scars, he said: "Unless I put my finger into the print of the nails, and my hand into the spear wound in his side, I will not believe." Such were Christ's identifying scars, and such demonstration Christ offered the doubter. "My Lord," cried the broken man, "and my God!" "Blessed," said Christ, "are those who have not seen and yet believe."

"Hath he marks to lead me to him?" asks Stephen of Saba in the hymn he built round Thomas' experience. He has, indeed, his marks, marks on all history, marks on countless transformed lives, and he still calls for Thomas'

affirmation. Reason is not set aside in making it. Once it is made, life can never be the same again. Such commitment involves all of life, penetrates the whole person.

In Greece at Easter, the cry goes up: “Christ is risen,” and for forty days no other greeting of welcome or farewell is used, only the one triumphant proclamation. In this way, Greek Christians signify that no activity of life, no movement of the mind, no plan of work, no project of pleasure, in fact, no pain, no joy, no sorrow, no speech, no thought, lies outside the scope of an all-embracing faith. And unless Christ has risen there is no Christianity, all hope is cut at its root, the foundation of all goodness is sapped. The indwelling Spirit is that of the One who raised Jesus from the dead (8:11), and so immortality is also assured.

THE INDWELLING PRESENCE

ROMANS 8:12-17

Paul reminds his readers of the essential role of the Holy Spirit.

THE THEME CONTINUALLY returns to the Christian's intimations of immortality. It is because the eternal Spirit of God (the Spirit of the Son) lives in Christians that our survival is assured. It is because as Christians we are one with the risen Lord that we will share in that resurrection.

Other implications follow. If God's Spirit lives in Christians, the mind of God should be discerned by Christians, and God's guidance should be our common experience. This guidance does not suspend or override our judgment and reason but informs both, leading to sanctified discernment between right and wrong. Guidance, in a thousand situations, needs no more than that clear knowledge. At that point God's way becomes obvious.

We therefore return to the thought that has been implicit in much of what Paul has already written—that life for Christians is a process of renewal, a moving towards reality. First comes by faith the knowledge that God himself has penetrated the very person, the "heart," in biblical imagery. Then comes the realization of that continuing fact, deeper daily commitment to all that it implies of present wisdom, embracing love, and increasing power—until at last we become like him, lost in him, and yet, paradoxically, more ourselves, our true selves that God intended us to become, more alive than ever we could have been lost in death. Such is the redemption of the personality.

Inevitably the body dies, but the body is not all. It is the end, the goal, which counts in all that has to do with humanity, whom God made in his image.

We should pause here to mark the triumphant point Paul now reaches in his developing argument. By adoption the child of God is made absolutely and completely a member of God's family: the sharer of its privileges, the partaker in its life.

**To ponder** choose one privilege or responsibility to meditate on in these verses.

RAVAGED WORLD

## ROMANS 8:18-21

Paul calls us to look seriously at the created world around us.

AFTER WRITING ABOUT adoption, Paul abruptly brings the subject back to earth, for humanity, after all, sure though our heritage may be, lives here on earth, this dying planet, this polluted world. The adopted children of God must endure, in a spoiled and alien environment, all kinds of testing until God claims his own.

The argument then begins to tangle with a piece of extraordinary insight. That the very planet suffered with humanity is implicit in the Old Testament (Genesis 3:17; Isaiah 11:9). Paul pictures the ravaged globe, and the suffering of its humbler creatures finding pause and healing in God's consummation of his creative and redeeming project.

We need to make peace with nature, politicians remind us, but no true peace can be made with nature, except by those who make their peace with God. How menacingly demonstrable is the truth that humanity involved the planet in our fall and ruin. Our mastery of nature shares the bend and twist which sin has given to all of our other God-given qualities. In the hands of a rebellious creature it has become a force of destruction. C.S. Lewis pictured the Un-man in *Perelandra* walking through the newly created Paradise, and tearing open the colored frogs, ripping leaf and flower from the trees, destroying, sadistically, instinctively. In exact proportion to our so-called "progress," the human race has become a devouring force before whose

onslaught nature has wilted. During three to ten centuries nature can build an inch of fertile topsoil. During one reckless century we have used up all nature's stored resources over vital areas of the world's surface. Greedy farming and selfish exploitation have taken no thought for the future. So we have bared hills, choked streams, dustbowls, famine, disaster, polluted air, fouled rivers and dead lakes, as nature answers back. "The whole creation has been groaning in travail" because of humanity.

Why, when all else forms a scheme that is harmonious, does humanity give the impression of disharmony? We need look no further than the penetrating explanation behind the Genesis story. Humanity fell, and from our fall came our pain, toil and exile.

## HOPE

### ROMANS 8:22-25

Our lives may be difficult but hope can transform our outlook.

THE THEME OF the previous study overflows into 8:22: the hope for all creation lies in Christ. 8:19-22 speak of the sighing of the world under the feet of its rebel occupants. In 8:23-25 comes the yearning hope of Christians themselves. A third section follows which will form the next note, 8:26f., which tell the rich truth of the Spirit's intercession.

The "firstfruits of the Spirit," the deposit of God's presence, only sharpens the hope of full liberation, making Christians at times feel as foreigners in a foreign land, citizens of heaven exiled on earth. (See also 1 Corinthians 15:53-58; 2 Corinthians 5:2; Philippians 3:21 for the line of thought, and, for the same teaching about the Spirit under a different figure of speech, 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14.)

The theme of hope then takes over. Hope is inherent in our salvation. At times, in the stress of circumstance, hope is all we have. Faith inspires it. The alternative is despair, and despair is rampant around us. Without Christ what hope is there for humanity? Without a return to Christ what solution is there for the mounting problems of society?

Where there is no hope, there can be no endeavor, and when denied hope, the vital energies of civilization decay. Whatever enlarges hope exalts courage and endurance (8:25), and strengthens humanity to face difficulty and testing. If we undermine hope by undermining faith, then the human

spirit will wither. Faith and hope inspire love (1 Corinthians 13:13). If both decay, love dies, and if love dies the world dies, submerged in selfishness and hate. And what hope can there be if death is finally supreme—despairing death for humanity and the universe?

THE REALITY OF PRAYER

ROMANS 8:26-27

Paul writes about the vital resource and refuge of prayer.

PRAYER IS THE life-blood of faith. Jesus prayed, sometimes through the night in times of spiritual crisis, and no one can be truly Christian who does not, by the instinctive uplifting of the heart, seek God's help in times of stress, difficulty and temptation.

But, in the light of these verses, let two deep truths be realized. First, if the Spirit lives in the Christian, and that has been this chapter's insistent theme, then God's mind mingles with ours in our prayers. Secondly, note that, clear and coherent, and specific as we should be in our prayers, we cannot, being ignorant of the future, know precisely what we should properly pray. God answers prayer, and that is the experience of all Christians, not always in accordance with our garbled requests, but in ways that are infinitely more subtle, more rewarding and wise. Sometimes, in times of stress, failure and strife, there is nothing else to do but submit in surrender, commit whatever it is, or whatever has happened, to the eternal wisdom and love, and to leave God himself to phrase petitions that we could only phrase if we knew all, and could foresee all.

God by his Spirit lives in us; our prayer not only expresses our relationship with our heavenly Father but also releases faith that has been born by his presence in our hearts. We can humbly yet confidently know he

listens because we know the lifting of our hearts can only happen as a result of God's prompting.

**Meditation** "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day."  
(Abraham Lincoln)

THE PLAN AND ITS AUTHOR

ROMANS 8:28-30

Do you really believe that in all things God works for the good of those who love him?

THERE ARE TWO themes here, as follows:

1. God's plan. It is logical to believe that, if our lives are committed to the guidance and government of perfect love, then love, which is God (1 John 4:8), will desire our ultimate and perfect happiness. And if our lives are controlled by perfect wisdom, then God, who knows all things and makes no mistakes, can plan and perfect our happiness. The only limiting factor is our will. How completely can we or do we commit our lives to God who, in perfect love and perfect wisdom, can secure our ultimate happiness and usefulness? It also follows that any experience committed to God, whether it is pain or pleasure, good or evil, can be woven into the pattern for good. Nothing, even failure and sin, is exempt from God's transforming generous goodness if it is, in complete faith, surrendered to his creative hands.
2. Predestination. Let's admit we cannot fully understand this theme. Theologians, from Augustine to Calvin and today, have tried to combine logically the facts of God's foreknowledge and human freedom. It cannot be done without leaving natural questionings about ultimate love and justice which cannot be shrugged off. Rather than emphasizing that

“in the course of justice none of us would see salvation,” that “because grace is grace none of us is entitled to it,” that “no one can demand that God should give an account of the principles on which he gives his grace ...” it may be more helpful to consider this passage practically as an expression of a mature facet of Christian experience. When Christians look back over the course of their life, even though they are conscious that they have decided of their own free will again and again at vital moments of crisis or encounter, there is all along the solemn conviction that God was at work. How the blend of human and divine is brought about no one knows or will know this side of heaven, but to look at the passage as lyric testimony leaves the mind at peace and praising, not crushed and daunted by somber thoughts of God.

CERTAIN VICTORY

## ROMANS 8:31-34

Paul shows how God paid the ultimate price to redeem humanity.

THE LYRIC MOOD continues as Paul exults in God's gracious plan. With a clear reference to the story of Abraham's ultimate demonstration of faithfulness (8:32; Genesis 22:16), Paul speaks of God's tremendous demonstration of his care for humanity. At the cross of Christ, God finally revealed his nature. He was "in Christ reconciling the world to himself." If he could suffer in this way to convince and save, how true must the opening words of the chapter be! There can be "no condemnation" in time or eternity, if God has gone to this length to redeem.

Who alone could condemn? Only Christ, who lived the human life to qualify beyond all disputation for the role of judge, and through whom in consequence, God will indeed judge all at the end of time. But notice, for those who trust him, Christ does not sit as judge but as intercessor.

It is interesting to see Paul's mind, in the fervor of this grand passage, working within the context of Scripture and the oral tradition of the yet unwritten words of Christ. See also Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

Here then is Christian security, the last ground of assurance, essential to peace and confidence. It is Jesus Christ, "at God's right hand," with the atoning death a fact of history, and pleading his people's cause. The imagery is that of a royal court, but the word picture is vivid and complete. "Bold we

approach the eternal throne...” (Charles Wesley). See also Hebrews 7:25; 9:24; 1 John 2:1f.

TRIUMPHANT ENDING

ROMANS 8:35-39

Are you feeling insecure? Read this passage, take its message to heart and your life will be changed.

WE COME TO Paul's powerful poetry in his conclusion. The physical trials listed in 8:35 are those of Paul's own experience. Look at other autobiographical passages: 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:24-27; 12:10.

8:36. The mention of the "sword" suggests to Paul, steeped as he is in the Old Testament, the words of Psalm 44:22, which is quoted exactly as it stands in the Greek Bible, the Septuagint. But note the transformation. The psalmist, in bleak despair, complains to God. He could understand how people could suffer for sin, or for abandonment of God, but not "for God's sake," for faithfulness and truth. Paul understood. To suffer for Christ's sake was to enter into the fellowship of his sufferings, and to be honored by the blessed partnership (5:2; 2 Corinthians 1:5; Colossians 1:24).

8:37. The word well rendered "more than conquerors" was perhaps a poetic coinage of Paul's. The Christian is pictured as no battered and exhausted victor, but as a confident, triumphant conqueror.

8:38. The opening verb is that of 2 Timothy 1:12: "I ... am persuaded ..." Then come the powerful alternatives. Life is often more difficult to face than death. Christ conquered death. He also conquered life, and our life is hidden with him (John 8:51; 10:28; 11:25; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:5; Hebrews 2:14f.). "Angels ... principalities ... powers" are probably the spiritual forces against

which Christians war (Ephesians 6:12). These hostile powers which lie behind the material universe have already been defeated by Christ (Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:22). The remaining alternatives, “things present ... things to come,” are understandable in the experience of everyone.

8:39. Summing up, Paul repeats 8:35. He has spoken about the dimensions of time (8:38). Rhetorically he adds the dimensions of space, and then grasps the very universe. Nothing—no, nothing—can separate the children of God from their Father.

**Meditation** “Thou wilt keep him in peace, PEACE ...” [Isaiah 26:3—literally] “... the future all unknown—Jesus we know, and he is on the throne.”

THE JEWS  
ROMANS 9:1-5

What place, then, do the Jews have in God's purposes?

A POSITIVE EXPOSITION of the gospel has occupied the first eight chapters of the letter, and concluded on a high note of faith. This chapter introduces a new theme. It has been reasonably suggested that chapters 9–11 form a distinct unit because they are, in fact, an address which Paul often gave to synagogue congregations wholly composed of Jews. Yet there is a connection with what goes before. Paul finds it necessary to answer a question which would puzzle many of his readers. How was this new message of righteousness and salvation apart from the Law consistent with the privileged position of the Jewish nation? Had God rejected them? Was he inconsistent?

This section therefore is intimately woven into the structure of the letter. Paul had himself passed through an agonizing reappraisal of all that Judaism meant to him, and all Christians of Jewish birth and upbringing had similarly to reassess a lifetime of belief and thinking. They had to realize that their cherished heritage was not an end in itself but a means to an end, not final and complete, but a preparation destined to find consummation, completion and submersion in a fuller revelation.

The bulk of Jewry found the adjustment impossible. There was therefore a grim dilemma of daunting enormity for all who treasured Judaism. As a result came the passionate attempts to absorb Christianity and make it a reforming sect of Judaism. The Messiah, as was expected, came from the Jews, but, if

Paul preached Christ's message rightly, the Messiah brought condemnation, not redemption, to the mass of the "chosen people." In short, the Jews protested, if the Christian church represented the consummation of God's plan for the world, then God appeared to deny all that he had owned and to have broken the ancient covenant with Israel.

This, to any devout Jew, would have seemed impossible. It followed that Paul's preaching must be rejected as mistaken or perverse. Paul had passed through the stress of this dilemma. He had seen with God's own clarity that there was no contradiction. Since his first audience everywhere was Jewish, it was essential for him to speak convincingly of this difficult theme. The next three chapters are his argument.

9:1-5 show how he loved his blinded compatriots. Then, in 9:6-29 Paul asserts the sovereignty of God. The Jew had no special claim on God. In 9:30-10:21 Paul boldly declares that the Jews' rejection by God is the result of their own willful stubbornness. In chapter 11 he shows how the gathering in of the Gentiles made the ancient promise real.

TRUE ISRAEL  
ROMANS 9:6-9

If we are Christ's, we are also Abraham's descendants.

IS THEN GOD'S plan defeated, if those who, as a people, gave Christ to the world, have rejected him? Not at all. Paul appeals to all the range of history. Embedded in the events of the earliest covenant is a principle of choice. "Abraham's children," the race of the promise, were those of one line, that of Isaac. Ishmael was equally a son of Abraham, but had no part in the lineage of the covenant (Genesis 21:12). The real descent was not as man, but as God ordained it (Genesis 18:10-14), with the accompaniment of special overruling, and in a context of miracle.

It was therefore established, even in the time of the patriarch, that a selected line was that which should carry Abraham's name. It was not merely physical descent that should be the determining factor. The word (9:6) in virtue of which Isaac was born was a word of "promise" (9:8f.). He was "born from above," and there is no other way of becoming "a child of God" (9:8) except by such a process. Galatians 4:28 calls Christians "children of promise," like Isaac. It therefore follows that the privilege of such sonship is open to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Notice the bold reasoning by which Paul attaches the right of the Gentile to salvation to the most ancient covenant of the Jew. If we are Christ's, we are also Abraham's descendants.

It had, in fact, been implicit in the whole situation. Abraham, on the great historic occasion, had been instructed to observe the sands of the surrounding

desert as a picture of his descendants. He had been told to consider the stars of heaven, although it is only comparatively recently that mankind has known that their multitude is comparable with the desert's sand. Here, in poetic imagery, is the suggestion of a twin posterity: earthly and heavenly.

The climate of thought has changed. We see no difficulty in the theme of Abraham's descendants. A "chosen people," in the narrow Jewish sense, would be our stumbling block. Paul's careful argument demonstrates the different historical situation in which his evangelism was set. Those scholars who maintain that the Roman church to which Paul wrote was synagogue-based, and partially Jewish are probably correct. Paul's argument would seem logical to them. At least it fell within the pattern of their common inquiry.

And from that thought emerges another. God is ready to meet us on the level of our preoccupations, to move within the framework of our thoughts. And that should be the endeavor of our own evangelism—to meet men and women where they think or understand, however perverse sometimes such habits of thinking may appear to us.

FURTHER ILLUSTRATION

ROMANS 9:10-13

Paul moves his argument forward one generation in the story of the patriarchs.

IN A FURTHER movement of argument which would appear relevant to the Jews, to whom he is writing, Paul moves forward one generation in the story of the patriarchs. Paul pictures his Jewish opponent observing that Ishmael was discarded because it was in observance of a pagan custom that Abraham took Hagar, and that Hagar was a slave and an alien. He was therefore illegitimate, and could not rank in privilege with Sarah's son. But "we are Abraham's seed and were never enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33-39).

In answer Paul points to Isaac's children, where no distinction of paternal fault or conduct, no difference of racial background, could be alleged. The two children, Esau and Jacob, were twins. Before there could be any visible grounds of choice between them on the basis of conduct, it was pronounced that the elder by a few minutes should serve the younger. God, in his sovereign will, rejected Esau. (Paul has in mind the opening verses of Malachi.)

Note very carefully that God is speaking of Esau and Jacob in relation to the heritage, the carrying on of the covenanted line of God's people. He is not discussing the eternal salvation or condemnation of individual people in accordance with an absolute decree of God exercised without relation to their will or works, and resting solely upon an inscrutable and incomprehensible

will. His object is to exclude the idea that humanity has claims against God, and, after Paul's own characteristically intense manner of argument, he pursues it singlemindedly.

He presses home the fact that the visible exclusion of a great mass of contemporary Jewry from the kingdom of their own Messiah was no breach of faith on the part of God towards Abraham's offspring. Always, his purpose has run through an inner group—the remnant. Paul pauses before the opaque veil of God's will. “He knows that only righteousness and love are behind it; but he knows that it is a veil, and that in front of it man's thought must cease and be silent” (Handley Moule).

ELECTION IN ITS CONTEXT

ROMANS 9:14-16

God is just because no one deserves to be saved.

WE HAVE POINTED out that it was a habit of Paul in argument to pursue one end with ruthless logic. Consequently, to take a verse or a section of an argument out of its context may be to distort truth. Scripture must be taken as a whole, and statement balanced and conditioned by statement.

Now, if Paul's words are considered without these precautions he would appear to be saying that God can do exactly what he wishes and no one can question his justice and, secondly, that people can desire salvation with the passion and purpose of one who runs to win a race but be denied it because, without shred of explanation, God has decreed otherwise.

This cannot be true. First, although God is all-powerful, he cannot act in any way contrary to his nature. He is perfect love and he cannot act otherwise than in love. He is ultimate justice and cannot do other than justly. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" said Abraham in a phrase of great insight. He is perfect wisdom, and cannot do other than wisely.

Secondly, consider the breadth and balance of Jesus' statements. Recognizing the work of his Father, he states a complementary truth: "... him who comes to me I will not [under any circumstances] reject" (John 6:37). (The parenthesis attempts to do justice to the emphatic Greek negatives.) His invitation goes to all who will respond: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened ..." (Matthew 11:28).

Thirdly, if we look ahead to Paul's later argument in 11:25-32, "we will see that God's grace is much wider than anyone dared hope; what he desired was not their doom but their salvation" (adapted from F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentary on Romans*).

**To think over** Think about God's mercy, that he does not desire the death of a sinner. God loves the world and he wants us to tell the world of his love. Who can you share the good news of Jesus with today?

THE CASE OF PHARAOH  
ROMANS 9:17-20

God permitted Pharaoh to pursue his disastrous course to demonstrate that God cannot be defied with impunity.

SEEN AS HUMAN history, it was apparent that the ruler of Egypt was a tyrant, who repeatedly and randomly changed his policy, and fought with dogged and arrogant persistence against justice and human rights, and also against fearsome natural phenomena, which he was assured demonstrated the power and urgency of God pressing upon him. He was clearly a self-willed, evil and obstinate man determined to deny justice to a race of trampled slaves. (You may find it helpful to look at Exodus chapters 4–14.)

When the Bible says that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart,” it does not mean that here was a human being who might have surrendered and done righteously, if God had not deliberately frustrated his desire for good and headed his unfortunate victim in the direction of evil. It would violate the nature of God, and make him like a sinful man if God could be imagined forcing a human soul to do evil, or in any way blocking a desire to do good.

Pharaoh willed it all. What then does the strange phrase mean? It means that God initiated and set in motion those moral and psychological laws which Pharaoh refused to recognize. One of those laws is that, when a mind sets itself with determination to do evil, the very choice makes it more easy to do evil. When, in rebellious self-will, someone places themselves in opposition to God, each moment’s persistence promotes the death of

conscience, and makes the road to retreat and to penitence longer and more difficult. Hebrew thought does not distinguish the intermediate steps. God created the laws of the mind. Therefore, said the Jew, God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”

God permitted Pharaoh, a prominent and historic example of defiant sin, to pursue his disastrous course, in order to demonstrate to Egyptian and Jew alike that God cannot be defied with impunity. Pharaoh willed it. God sentenced him to go on his chosen course of wickedness, and used him as a warning beacon at its ending. Grim is the fate of the person to whom God says: “Your will be done.”

“THE OBJECTS OF HIS WRATH”

## ROMANS 9:21-24

Paul uses the imagery of the pot from Jeremiah.

PAUL TAKES HIS imagery of the pot from Jeremiah 18:1-6. It is another example of his habit of driving the argument along one line to one specific conclusion. He is asserting with vigor that the gulf between divine and human intelligence is so vast that it is absurd to argue with him. It is the thought of Psalm 2:2-4.

On the other hand, a human being is not a lifeless pot, and Paul would have been the first to stress the fact that one for whom Christ died was not dead clay. Human beings are born to question and to seek, and God is ready in the course of time to supply answers. Pots are not made in their creator's image, and it is precisely because humanity has been made in God's divine image that we do, and may, question God. Job and Jeremiah call aloud for the justification of God's ways to humanity. Read the psalms, and the psalm Christ quoted (22:1).

The passage cannot mean that God creates human beings capable of suffering in order to make them suffer, and to punish them for what eludes their control. Such a God is not the God of either Old Testament or New Testament. On the other hand, God can reject or choose humanity or nation for this or that piece of work in the ordered scheme of history, and this is the thought uppermost in Paul's mind as he wrestles with the problem of Israel's rejection, and their strange hostility to their Messiah.

There is also the defiant answering back of rebellion and disobedience, distinct from the questioning of faithful bewilderment. Nor does this conclude the argument. Paul shows God's will exercised in such a way that no reproach, however presumptuous, can be urged against it. Moreover, is not the fact that God withholds adverse action, asserted in 9:22f., sufficient indication that, even in this context of argument, Paul looks upon "the objects of his wrath" as responsible beings who need time to repent, and that, in turn, implies the capability of repentance?

## THE REMNANT

# ROMANS 9:25-29

Paul quotes from the Old Testament to pursue his argument.

THE CONTINUATION IN these verses of the previous study shows how completely the theme of Israel's rejection, and Israel's disobedience, dominated Paul's mind. Interwoven with that appears the thought that it was the wideness, not the narrowness, of God's mercy which was prominent in his mind, for was not the fulfillment of two prophecies of Hosea visible before their eyes? The despised, and too often hated, Gentiles were the recipients of God's favor (Hosea 2:23; 1:10; 1 Peter 2:10).

He pursues the same line of thought into the prophecy of Isaiah. The prophet foresaw dire days of trouble falling upon his land, and such decimation of his people that only "a remnant" would survive to carry on the national task and the divine tradition. He touched in this statement a principle of divine action, which we have already noticed, almost a principle of history—that it is "the Few" who bring salvation (Isaiah chapters 7–8; 10:21f.).

Historically, that catastrophe and its associated triumph came to pass. Israel was ravaged. A remnant only were able to rebuild the land and rescue and preserve the national heritage. And so, Paul saw, it was happening again. A remnant only had open eyes. Only a few recognized God's coming in Christ. Notice the subtlety of Paul's argument, and compare it with the controversial tactics of Christ himself in his confrontation with scribes and

Pharisees. Such was the reverence paid to the text of Scripture that an oracle quoted from a prophetic authority was considered sufficient answer.

In neither Christ's case, nor Paul's, of course, was this form of repudiation without relevance. In the prophets, notably in Isaiah, the global nature of the Messiah's role, and the Gentile part in a world theocracy, were clearly foreseen. We have already noted the hint of a spiritual offspring for Abraham in the imagery of the stars. Note, too, the role of the New Testament in enlarging the earlier application of an Old Testament passage. In both the Hosea quotations the immediate application of the words is to the restoration of the ten tribes to their covenanted blessing. Paul sees, and extracts, a wider significance of the principle involved, the inclusion of all the rebels of humanity in the same circle of his goodness. The word is living, and in its interpretation meaning is not confined to one significance, one area of truth and challenge.

JEWS AND GENTILES  
ROMANS 9:30-33

Righteousness freely offered and received by faith in Jesus is a stumbling block to the Jews.

HOW STRANGE THE paradox! The prepared and gifted children of promise and covenant fail to grasp the consummation of all their history, the final significance of all their God had done for them, while those who are remote from the plan which worked out through Israel's history see, in a burst of sudden glory, the meaning of Christ, and enter into his salvation. It left Paul shocked and crushed but thrilled. But the explanation lay close to hand. Israel lacked faith. The Gentiles who accepted Christ had faith. It was as simple as that.

So this closely woven chapter concludes. It is the attempt of a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" to explain that which was a fearful problem for those of his race who were attracted to Christ, but who felt that the bypassing of Israel was tantamount to a breaking of ancient and sacred covenants. We have seen the main points now of Paul's solution: (1) The Jews thought that absolute obedience to the Law set them right with God; (2) Paul, in his own living experience, had found the Law impossible to keep; (3) the Law, therefore, being undoubtedly of God, had another function. It was incomplete, a preparation for Christ; (4) Christ saved by faith, a gift of grace which the Law could not grant; (5) and if Christ forgave in this way, it followed that Gentiles who received him, though they had lacked the preparation and advantage of

the Jews, were received in Christ; (6) it also followed that the Jews who rejected Christ were lost, and had no claim on God whatever. Therefore, the terrible dilemma.

So Christ became a stumbling block for the Jews. He was the foundation stone of God's new structure (Matthew 21:42; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14; 28:16; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-8). The New Testament was fond of elaborating the image. What was intended to be the basis and understanding of salvation became a barrier in the path, a "rock of offense" (9:33) to those who refused to place it in the proper position.

The closing words are a precious promise. Those who stand firm upon the foundation "other than which no one can lay" will not find their confidence ill-founded. The raging flood of the passage from Isaiah will pass by, thick with the world's chaos, but they will remain firm.

PAUL'S LOVE FOR ISRAEL

ROMANS 10:1-4

Paul very much wants the Jews to be saved.

THIS IS THE beginning of the second section of Paul's "Synagogue Sermon." He has demonstrated that Israel has no claim, and right, to special treatment. Their whole history, rightly conceived, showed God acting towards humanity on principles quite foreign to those to which they clung with such fervor. He is now about to show that this grave and fundamental error was made in self-will, but before launching on this indictment he feels compelled, in anguish of heart, to cry aloud his concern and love for his people. (Look back to again 9:30-33, which might logically have been included in this chapter.)

Notice that he speaks of the Jews in the third person, an indication that he regards the Roman Christian community ("brothers") as a people apart, and not entirely Jewish in their ethnic content. The nature of his argument, so preoccupied with the imagined righteousness of the Law, and the assumption of a full and detailed knowledge of the covenants, is surely proof that the church in Rome was not, as some contend, on the strength of this third person pronoun, completely Gentile.

But the deepest interest of these verses is their biographical content. They reveal the Christlikeness of Paul. Like Jesus, he "weeps over Jerusalem." He has said stern things about the Jews. He is about to say more, and to press home with insistence the charge of willful rebellion. But he does it with yearning, not anger. He pleads; he does not denounce. Read Ezekiel 3:14-21.

Commissioned to speak grim words to the exiles of Israel, the prophet went “in bitterness in the heat of his spirit” to the labor camp on the great Kebar irrigation canal. And “the hand of the Lord” fell upon him, and he “sat where they sat” (KJV) for seven days. Having shared the misery of those to whom he was to minister, he was finally allowed to speak, and did so, with no less regard for truth, but deeper understanding. Paul had already “sat where they sat” (Philippians 3:4-6), and it is out of that fellowship of blindness, in the sharp memory of his Pharisaic sin, that he speaks the words of this letter. It is a model for preachers. Let there be none of the hard denunciation of sinners which speaks of self-righteousness, but rather the indictment of sin, in all and through all, the compelling love of Christ.

RIGHTEOUSNESS NOT TO BE ACHIEVED

## ROMANS 10:5-8

God's righteousness is near you—receive it!

PAUL'S ARGUMENT NOW turns to the quotation of authoritative texts of Scripture, such as we have seen him do before, and which is surely evidence that he was addressing a congregation familiar both with this use of Scripture and the Old Testament. Furthermore, the clause-by-clause exposition of the second passage, which Paul quotes, is in the style of some of the commentaries in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It may be that neither quotation seems at first reading to support Paul's argument. It seems therefore to follow that the Christian church was already familiar with the new interpretation of the verses concerned. This appears to be especially the case with the second passage, which, on the face of it, seems to bear something of the same meaning as the first. Paul turns it into an allegory of Christ, so briefly as to leave the impression that his hearers must have heard the interpretation before.

Consider the two passages: Leviticus 18:5. Moses was the author of the Law. He states that the person who performs its statutes shall live by them. That is precisely what the bewildered Jew said he was doing. But Paul has gone to tremendous pains to prove that such self-confidence was based on a defective view of performance, and a lamentably faulty view of sin. To keep the Law, and to "live" by doing so, was the aim of every true Israelite. But even before Christ came, it must have been an endeavor conscious of its

inadequacy, with calling on God to help, lift and forgive. Paul is aiming his words rather at the Pharisee and legalist who claimed perfection and full achievement. “Keep the Law and live.” “But the Law cannot be kept” (Galatians 3:10-12).

Deuteronomy 30:11-14. Paul is not so much quoting this eloquent passage as basing upon its words a free interpretation which makes them a prophecy of Christ. The passage, in fact, meant that the Law was near and practicable, but always assumed a context of repentance and awareness of sin, and indeed, in the remote ancient setting, a remedy of ritual and sacrifice. Paul sets the passage in the context of his own argument, and his wider conviction that the Law only finds its explanation in Christ, that the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are one, and not to be separated.

Righteousness, to sum up, has not to be achieved but received.

THE GOSPEL

## ROMANS 10:9-11

Paul offers the good news to everyone.

THE QUOTATION IN 10:8 from Deuteronomy contained the words “mouth” and “heart.” This suggested a great gospel verse. “Mouth” came first in the Old Testament quotation, and that would seem to be the only reason for placing confession before belief in the passage before us.

10:9. Notice the content of the confession. The lordship of Christ, and the resurrection which established and confirmed it, are an integral part, and it goes very much against language and history, not only theology, to call anyone a Christian who refuses to accept the fact of the resurrection, not as a philosophical principle or a “salvation myth,” but as an authenticated event (1 Corinthians 15:1-19). Paul nowhere connects the lordship of Christ only with his incarnation. On the basis of a mutually integrated faith and confession a believer is “saved.” The death of Christ, and the atonement it signified, is contained in the resurrection, an event impossible without preceding death.

10:10. The parallelism characteristic of Hebrew is continued, but “heart” and “mouth” are now reversed in order. The heart, where the great transaction takes place, means the core of the personality, the true self, stripped of all its accidental physical accompaniments; it is the person as God sees it, which will one day stand before him. “Righteousness” is the gift of such faith, and righteousness planted in the “heart” must permeate the whole person, and work itself out in thought, word and deed.

10:11. Isaiah 28:16 is quoted. Neither in the Hebrew nor in the Greek version, from which Paul commonly quoted, does the word “everyone” occur. Paul adds it logically enough, however, and his argument about the universality of salvation turns upon it. The verse contains no reference to the Law. Those who believe, in the center of their being, that Christ is Lord, divine and living, and believe it with sincerity and strength enough to confess it—in baptism, in public life, in the face of hostile challenge, in all life’s social contexts—are Christians. No one else is. Nor will such a faith betray them. They will know testing, experience trial, endure pain “for his name.” If their faith is real, they will never know disillusionment with the One in whom they have believed.

ALL ONE IN HIM

## ROMANS 10:12-15

The opportunity to call on the name of the Lord must be given to everyone.

VERSES 12-13. CHAPTER 3 has already dealt with this truth. The world's vast problems of race find solution here. And consider the tremendous adjustment which the Jew, in Christ, was called upon to make, and which Paul had made. He was not speaking mere theory, beyond the orbit of his personal experience.

Note the natural ease with which Christ is called by the title given to Jehovah (Acts 10:36; Philippians 2:10f.). For the imagery of wealth see Ephesians 3:8. It is a plain fact of common Christian experience that the gift of Christ is something for which many would pay anything: peace. The phrase "calls upon the name of the Lord" (see 1 Corinthians 1:2), is a borrowed phrase (Joel 2:32), but, by the fact of quoting such a text, it is implied that there is no distinction between Christ and God (Acts 9:14,21; 22:16; 2 Timothy 2:22).

10:14. 'Everyone' of 10:13 leads to this digression. "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved"—it therefore follows that the opportunity to call on the name must be put in reach of everyone.

10:15. Paul's quotation from Isaiah 52:7, produced in his own paraphrase rather than literally, suggests that the closing chapters of the prophecy, which, in their historic context speak of deliverance from exile, were already

finding a place in the Christian exegesis of the Old Testament as a prophecy of the liberating message of Christ. The interesting point for us is the rapidity with which the Old Testament was absorbed into the thinking of the church.

**Meditation** “No other name” (Acts 4:12).

ISRAEL'S RESPONSIBILITY

ROMANS 10:16-21

We read more about God's offer of salvation.

PAUL QUOTES ISAIAH 52 in 10:16. His mind slips to Isaiah 53, the next chapter in the prophet. His thought moved naturally within the circle of the Old Testament. The quotation which suggested itself also coincided with an objection which arose from his use of Isaiah's oracles as a preview of the gospel. Will all who hear believe? Is preaching the truth a guarantee of its acceptance? By no means. This, too, is prophesied. John quotes the same passage, no doubt with Paul in mind (John 12:38).

10:17. The same quotation caused Paul's mind to flash back to the words of 10:14. Here was "hearing" and the proclaimed word, also in the ancient prophet. It is fascinating to watch his well-stored mind in action. Notice you cannot come to faith except by hearing God's word.

10:18. Similarly Paul's mind goes to Psalm 19:4. Paul refers, of course, to the revelation of God in nature, his earlier theme in the letter, and the natural theology he developed on different levels in his speech to the Anatolian peasants of Lystra, and to the philosophers of the Athens Areopagus. But Paul may also have had in mind the extent to which the message of Christ had been preached through the synagogues of the Dispersion. His information was complete. Ours is meager. If it were not for the story of the ministry of Apollos, we would have no inkling of the existence of Christianity in Alexandria. If it were not for the Nazareth decree, which is reliably dated at

about AD 49, we would not know that Christianity probably reached Rome in Claudius' day. See Colossians 1:6,23.

10:19. As for Jewish unbelief, there is the testimony of Moses "in whom they trusted" (Deuteronomy 32:21). The church regarded this testimony as extremely significant. Notice Deuteronomy 32:5 reflected in Philippians 2:15; the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:43 (omitted from the Hebrew and most English texts) quoted in Hebrews 1:6.

10:20-21. If this was Moses, Isaiah goes further. Paul ranges his battery of texts against the hostile Jewish opposition with devastating force. The sum of such argument is that, if God has been found and worshiped where conditions seemed so adverse, how inexcusable was Israel for not comprehending their opportunity. The very prophecies should have opened Jewish eyes to the possibility of Israel's supplanting. God's arms outstretched (10:21) were moving testimony in Paul's mind to the tragedy of rejected love, which he, by revelation, saw historically consummated in Christ.

THE REMNANT AGAIN

## ROMANS 11:1-4

Has God finished with the Jews, then?

CHAPTER 9 STRESSED that God is sovereign. Chapter 10 underlined the fact that Israel had sinned. Both themes were pursued with Paul's habitual single-mindedness. In the present chapter he gathers up various matters bypassed in the major drive of his argument. The first is the question: "Is Israel as a whole rejected?"

Paul first stresses the fact that he, who claims Christ's salvation, he who is the author of the indictment, is himself an Israelite, and has not repudiated his nationhood. He begins with a form of Greek question which suggests a negative answer, and immediately answers it vigorously. "I say then, God has not rejected his people, has he? Do not let that thought cross your mind."

Paul then proceeds to his characteristic Old Testament illustration. Read again the story of Elijah in 1 Kings chapters 18–19: The worship of the Phoenician sun god had flooded the land. Promoted by Jezebel with drive and persecution it seemed supreme. Jezebel was the seal of a trade alliance, and there is no doubt that Ahab's Israel derived immense wealth from business conducted with the busy pagans on the coast. The oil and wheat of Israel, says Ezekiel, went down to Tyre. The wealth of the world flowed back. Ahab was rich. But prosperity is not always good for a nation. With Tyrian goods came Tyrian gods. With Jezebel came Baal. It is possible, therefore, that the choice on Mount Carmel involved more than theology. When the people

chose Jehovah they possibly precipitated an economic depression. A break with Jezebel was a break with Tyre.

Swept to decision by Elijah, the people nevertheless chose Jehovah, and streamed home with never a thought of the man who had led them back to God. It broke Elijah. How real, he must have asked, was such a reversal of loyalty? They had rejected Baal. Were they “truly God’s”? After his months of tension, disappointed beyond endurance, and under dire threat, he fled in brokenhearted despair. It was then (1 Kings 19:18) that the idea of the remnant was born. Prophecy laid hold of it (Amos 9:8-10; Micah 2:12; 5:3; Zephaniah 3:12f.; Jeremiah 23:3). Paul saw it operating again.

THE CHOSEN  
ROMANS 11:5-6

Paul again emphasizes the importance of grace.

FROM THE THOUGHT that the remnant is the true Israel, two conclusions, consistent with Paul's whole argument, emerge:

1. Race alone is not the basis of the choice. If the remnant who, in prophetic times, and in Paul's own day, represent the true Israelites (John 1:47), it follows that to be a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" is no final guarantee of God's acceptance. It is by faith in Christ, not the works of the Law. A person is saved, not because their parents were at peace with God, not on the basis of race, family or nation, but because of a personal and individual decision. The principle applied, to their consternation, to the Jews. It applies still. It is curious how the old heresy extends. No church or nation is saved collectively.
2. It also follows that, since the Jews found themselves under the same dispensation of grace as all other peoples, then members of those other races, the Gentiles, could become part of the "chosen people" by following the same path to salvation. The notion of a "chosen people," in fact, has passed through a complete transformation. It is a spiritual idea, not an ethnic one.

Both of these conclusions are, as has been seen in the earlier movement of the argument, consistent with the doctrine which Paul has preached. But in the process he has answered the first question of the chapter. "Has God rejected his people?" Not at all. A remnant, as through all time, has accepted him, and that remnant has become his people, reinforced, as the prophets had also foretold, by additions to their number from the mass of humanity, who found the pathway of faith to Christ's salvation.

Note a final thought emerging from the thought of the "seven thousand." There was no aggregate salvation. There was no organism involved, no group personality, no predetermined number. The seven thousand had not "bowed the knee to Baal." Their total was the sum of individual choices, each confessor was a human personality, individually choosing not to submit to the evil which flooded the land.

## THE JUDGMENT OF HARDNESS

### ROMANS 11:7-12

The stumbling of the Jews is part of God's plan to allow salvation to come to the Gentiles.

PAUL CANNOT QUENCH the question which breaks through again. Why, with their many advantages, did Israel react like this? He searches the prophets, and disturbing but illuminating messages come to his mind. Look at Isaiah 6:9f.; 29:10: These were words which haunted the first Jewish Christians, faced with the enormity of their compatriots' apostasy. All four evangelists quote the words (Matthew 13:14f.; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26f.). Some special coming of God must have caused it. A numbness or a torpor has fallen upon them, not in arbitrary fashion, but as a divine judgment on their rebellion. God has said to them: "Your will be done," and as Pharaoh's heart was hardened, so it has tragically come to those blessed and gloriously endowed, but who still persisted in denying the purpose of their calling and willfully continued in their sin.

Psalm 69:22f. is quoted to similar effect. It was another Old Testament passage which came with special force to the early Christians (Psalm 69:21, see Matthew 27:48; Psalm 69:9, see John 2:17; Psalm 69:4, see John 15:25). And, again from the same psalm, Paul uses the imagery of blindness which recurs in 11:10 in our passage.

This, however, is not the end of the argument. "Out of the eater came something to eat," as Samson's riddle had it, and out of Israel's tragedy

comes, by God's transforming strength, the salvation of the Gentiles. Then Paul indulges a great hope. What of the glad day when a "chosen people," Jews and Gentiles combined, the new Israel, should stand together "in Christ"! He is confident that Israel's blindness must be a temporary phenomenon. He was witness of the ingathering of the Gentiles. Then, surely, would come the harvest of the Jews.

A WARNING TO THE GENTILES

ROMANS 11:13-16

Were there some in Rome who spoke with contempt of the Jews and who had misconceived their heritage?

ALMOST ABRUPTLY PAUL turns to the Gentiles among his hearers. It is possible to feel here the first whiff of antisemitism which has left, in some places, and at certain times, a dark stain on the church. Were there some in Rome who spoke with contempt of the Jews who had so misconceived their heritage and had done their Messiah to death? Paul himself has just spoken with tenderness and love of his erring people. He has just expressed the lively hope that, in the course of history, Jew and Gentile will be seen together in the fold of Christ. Perhaps he turns to the next phase of his argument because he has at times been conscious of a sense of impatience among his Gentile hearers at the “stiff-necked” race (11:13).

Israel’s failure, he points out, has been the Gentiles’ opportunity. Frequently in Paul’s own ministry of the gospel, he had turned to the Gentiles only after the Jews refused to hear him (Acts 13:46-48; 18:6; 28:25-28). And he makes the strange confession that some of the zeal which infused his own ministry was the consciousness that it might “make his fellow Jews jealous” (11:14).

Besides, speaking as a devout Jew, he tells his Gentile hearers to have respect for history. Alluding to the ritual consecration of the dough in the process of bread-making (Numbers 15:17-21), he points out that the race was

one of old renown and ancient dealings with God. They were still, for all their individual rebellion, under the glow of God's past favor. He still remembered the consecration of their beginnings. Or, does the figure imply that the first Christians were Jews, and does Paul suggest that the firstfruits were typical of wider dedication? It is difficult to be dogmatic here in the light of his earlier insistence that the race as a whole had willfully rebelled. But does not the use of such an argument imply that, whatever the constitution of the Christian community in Rome, it was composed of people uncommonly well taught in the Jewish Scriptures?

The last word to the critical Gentiles reinforces this figure by another: what was the Gentile Christian but a twig on a tree whose roots ran deep into Old Testament history?

THE GRAFTED OLIVE  
ROMANS 11:17-21

How are Gentiles to respond to being included?

THE FACT THAT grafting was believed to rejuvenate a dying olive tree explains the much misunderstood figure which Paul uses here. He speaks of Israel as a dying tree, and of the global church as a graft on it. When an olive tree produced badly, a slip of wild olive was grafted, and this was supposed to give new vigor to the tree. Dead branches were lopped off and the ancient stock, it was thought, would find expression and new life from and through the engrafted branch, and resume its fruitfulness. So, rightly interpreted, Paul's figure becomes a striking picture of Israel and the church, the succession of the covenants and the role of Judaism.

This is the best explanation of Paul's figure, even though it may be true that the practice is not followed today. Columella, the old soldier of Nero's day, who wrote books on agriculture in Nero's time, is authority for the practice. It fits the scene exactly.

Paul has not lost sight of his warning to the Gentiles against a presumptuous attitude towards those they superseded. The Gentiles are supposed to respond to the imagery of 11:16 with the thought that, far from setting themselves against the root which nourished them, they should think rather of the dead branches stripped by the cultivator to give them room and space to grow (11:18f.). "Fine," says Paul ironically ("That is true," 11:20, misses the irony). The words of 11:19 are not disputed, but may it be

remembered that the arguments and reproaches leveled with some vigor against the Jews in earlier pages of the letter can be simply reversed. The standing of the Gentiles, as of the Jews, depended on faith, and it is part of a religion which is based on faith in unmerited grace that it excludes all boasting (3:27). The Jews were native branches proper to the tree, but were lopped off. Shall not the Gentile graftings at least be as readily pruned?

**Thought** Where boasting ends, dignity can begin.

THE GREAT TRADITION  
ROMANS 11:22-24

Paul continues his incisive message to the Gentiles.

PAUL HAS FELT deeply constrained to frame a warning to the Gentile Christians. The Jews, throughout the world, had many enemies. Thirty years before Christ was born, Horace, the Roman poet and satirist, had a word of contempt for them. The book of Esther tells of a threatened pogrom. Alexandria was bitterly divided between Jews and Gentiles. There was a real danger, now that Jewry had put its Messiah to death, that Christians would be tempted to channel society's dislike of the dispersed race into its own form of hostility and contempt.

Look then, Paul says, at both the kindness and severity of God. The second word picks up the metaphor of 11:17—the broken off branches. It is a word found nowhere else in the New Testament, though, in a couple of contexts, secular Greek writers similarly use it in contrast with “kindness.” It is *apotomia*, which basically means “cutting off.” Compare Proverbs 29:1 where the metaphor is as violent: “will suddenly be broken ...”

How complete is the coverage of the Bible! Paul warned the Gentiles out of his love and agony of mind for his own erring race. And if the Gentiles had remembered, the antisemitism which has too often in history found a root in organized Christianity would have been cut at the root. Hatred for Jews, which marred the medieval church, would have been replaced by Paul's own yearning and pity, with incalculable results in Jewish evangelism.

There is another aspect of this theme as relevant to the problems of today. The debt of Christianity to the Judaism from which it sprang is part of the figure of the olive tree and the branches, both natural and ingrafted. Nowhere in the New Testament is the Old Testament dismissed as irrelevant or disregarded. It is quoted innumerable times, and it is only a loose attitude towards the authority of the documents of Christianity itself which is prepared to diminish the authority of the Jewish Scriptures. The Testaments go together and Judaism cannot but be regarded by Christians as the seed-bed of their own faith. No book in the New Testament better illustrates this than the letter to the Romans.

PAUL'S LAST HOPE  
ROMANS 11:25-29

All Israel will be saved.

ON THE STRENGTH of a great word from Isaiah 59:20f., Paul was convinced that the present rebellious attitude of Jewry to the Christian revelation was not final. His mind sought passionately for an explanation of a situation so shocking. True, the Jews were self-willed and had, by their own act, rejected Christ, but why had God allowed it?

The explanation came to him as a revelation from God. "I want you," he said, "to understand a mystery." The word "mystery" occurs once only in the Gospels (Mark 4:11 and the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke); John never uses the word, but Paul uses it twenty-two times. It is used to describe the Christian revelation as a whole (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9; Colossians 2:2) and to describe some special aspect of the Christian revelation (Ephesians 3:3; 1 Corinthians 15:51; and the present passage). Paul claims, in a word, that God had revealed to him that the Jews had been, by God's set purpose, permitted to go their self-willed way, in order to clear the ground for the surge of the Gentiles into the church. At a certain point, he was sure, this would stir the Jews to divine jealousy, so that they would return to the Lord.

Great difficulties have surrounded Paul's prediction: "all Israel shall be saved." Perhaps the bearer of the letter was entrusted with supplementary explanation. On the face of it "all Israel" means all Israelites, and leaves

unstated whether that universal expression means all Israelites through all their history, or all Israelites alive at some historic moment of illumination and reconciliation. If Paul meant this, he contradicted his doctrine of salvation by faith, which is the deep contention of this letter. He has claimed, however, a special revelation from God, and therefore he could not thus contradict himself.

Difficult though the interpretation is on the face of the words, Paul must have meant the “new Israel,” the sum total of the redeemed. This is the one interpretation which conserves his consistency, safeguards his authority and preserves the argument from the incongruous conclusion that Israel is, after all, not responsible, is a specially favored people and will be necessarily all saved. This interpretation must be ventured if the doctrine of the whole letter is to hold together. If 11:26 is regarded as a reference to a spiritual Israel, the pattern of argument works neatly to a conclusion.

THE POETRY OF FAITH  
ROMANS 11:30-36

Praise God, the source, director and goal of all things!

PAUL'S DEEP THEOLOGY here turns to poetic praise and adoration. God's last purpose for humanity has been set out powerfully. He intends mercy for Jews and Gentiles alike. Human rebellion itself is to submit to God's vast plan, for it has been shown that God has permitted all people, Jews and Gentiles, to fall into a common disobedience, in order that both, reduced to a common humility and conviction of sin, may turn in penitence to the acceptance of his grace (11:32).

We need not linger over the meaning of "mercy upon all" (11:32). Paul has been accused of universalism at this point, but that reproach would again involve him in self-contradiction. His words mean no more than that God's mercy is equally available to all.

The truth more properly considered here is the fact, demonstrated in our spiritual experience, that no situation is beyond the transforming power of God. In our personal lives, it is found true that anything, good or evil, triumph or disaster, success or failure, loss or gain, all things, committed in utter faith to God, can be transformed into blessing. This is one of the basic truths of Calvary. And what is experimentally true in personal experience is also true in the wider context of universal history. In this we begin to gain a glimpse of a final consummation in which sin, the fall, pain, and all the haunting inexplicable realities, will be at last drawn into a final superbly

satisfying pattern of blessing. And so the God who directs, also permits, and in the end commands all things to serve him. But how important it is for the modern mind to think of both a directive and a permissive will, if God, in the context of such Providence, is to be rightly understood. For final encouragement in concluding reading these difficult chapters, turn to Peter's remark in 2 Peter 3:15f.

THE APPLICATION  
ROMANS 12:1-2

How are we to respond to all that Paul has written before?

PAUL IS ALWAYS determined that behavior should not be lost in doctrine. He would have agreed with one of the commentators, F.B. Meyer, who said: “Some weave a veil of doctrine which screens the Saviour from their eyes. It is emblazoned with creeds, definitions and orthodox statements of truth. It is not Christ, but doctrines about Christ which inspire them. The death of Christ rather than the Christ who died; the resurrection rather than the risen One; the priesthood rather than the Priest. The correctness of our notions about the Saviour may even cause us to miss the Saviour himself.”

12:1. Paul has already touched on this obligation (6:12f.). A faith which does not penetrate and enliven the activities of the body in all its actions and common tasks was not in Paul’s view a faith at all. “Holy” has the basic meaning “set apart for divine use.” The Christian is consecrated to God, and this, the verse concludes, is the purpose for which we were created and redeemed.

12:2, literal translated: “Stop trying to adapt yourself to the age we live in, but continue the transformation which began with your mind’s renewal, so that you may test out for yourselves the will of God, that, namely, what is good, well-pleasing to him, and perfect.”

This is a crowded sentence of the sort Paul often wrote. He is eager to drive home the truth that surrender to Christ involves rebirth, the passage

from death to life. The Christian life is not a sudden and miraculous transformation, but a process aided and advanced by the active and dedicated will: note “be transformed” and “transform yourselves.” There is no need to choose one and exclude the other. They blend, and in the blending a truth is underlined, the fact that God promotes our transformation, but in active partnership with the Christian. In this way, we “work out our own salvation” (Philippians 2:12).

“The age we live in ...” Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, which shared Corinth’s reputation for evil. There is a strong urge in everyone to “do as Rome as Rome does,” but as Christians we must guard our lifestyle, never conforming to the godless society in which we live.

THE BODY OF CHRIST  
ROMANS 12:3-5

Paul illustrates the diversity and unity of the church.

VERSE 3. WE are to have a proper recognition of the gifts we have. The second half of the verse is better translated: “but to cultivate a balanced soundness of mind, according as God has given to every one faith as a measure.” There is no suggestion that God metes out a varied capacity for faith. Faith may be given for the asking, and, like God’s Spirit in John’s phrase (John 3:34), is “without limit [or: measure].” Faith is the measure, the measuring instrument (Revelation 21:15), by which a person can assess their Christian soundness of mind. According to a person’s faith, so will that person judge themselves and their attitudes, testimony and vocation.

12:4. The metaphor of the body is developed in 1 Corinthians 12, and appears again in Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 4:15f. The idea is found in Plato, another indication of Paul’s wide reading, and may reflect conversations with Luke, the physician. The body is healthy when all its parts cooperate, each in its proper sphere. The less visible parts, as pathology demonstrates, are as vital to full health, indeed, to life, as the more visible parts. Microscopic malfunctions produce tragic diseases. So it is with the church too.

12:5. For the sake of each, and for the sake of all, we are to find, by the judgment and discernment that faith can temper and control (12:3), the proper function allotted to us, to perform that function with zest and smooth

efficiency, and not to hanker after a role and place for which we were not intended. The dependence of all is upon Christ.

“Balanced soundness of mind” is the key to such correctness of Christian conduct. It is reason, sanctified by the indwelling Christ, and cooperating with faith, which shapes the awareness of the part we are to play and helps us to play it well with no thought of envy or regret. Each of us is equally significant. For example, the widow of Zarephath, the child with loaves and fish, Simon of Cyrene, and the woman who gave her small copper coins, did not realize how important was the part each played.

Note it is equally damaging for a healthy member of the body to remain inactive, as for any member to usurp a role for which nature did not design it. Both faults cripple the body of Christ.

FUNCTIONS VARY

## ROMANS 12:6-8

What is your gift? Are you using it?

VERSE 6. PROPHECY is that informed exposition of Christian truth which was of prime importance in the church before the New Testament was complete. Prophecy differed from teaching by its possessing a special and historically transient sense of functioning under guidance and inspiration. It consequently needed control by reason and by faith. A balanced faith could preserve a person with “prophetic” gifts from the temptation to exaggerate or distort. Let the “prophet,” Paul says, deliver the full truth as their apprehension of Christ provides the insight. May such a person keep their faith strong and whole, their personal commitment to Christ complete, and in such humble integrity speak out and the result will be building up the body of Christ.

12:7. “If our gift is service, let us exercise it in its proper sphere, and likewise if our gift is teaching.” This translation leaves open, as the Greek word allows, the question which has bothered some whether such service is given within the sphere of the Christian community, or in society at large. Within the church the tasks which confront those called to serve (and who is not?) are many. Problems of family, housing, the aged, the difficulties of mothers, widows, orphans, the lonely, the sick, the poor, and other tasks of mutual aid, are too often neglected because too many fail to take seriously a call to a Christian function in practical service.

And what about teaching? Neglect of thought and study is a widespread source of weakness. No ministry prospers which neglects the teaching function. A well-taught congregation is a stable community. Teaching, too, functions on many levels. It demands much and too few pay the price.

12:8. Encouragement flows from an ardent personality. It is something added to prophecy and teaching. But it must be natural, not forced. Unerringly Paul touches the fault which pursues each virtue. Let the rich be liberal, but without ulterior motives. “May leaders lead with zeal,” never asking their followers to do what they hesitate to do themselves. Let those who show mercy not spoil their service with mournfulness or artificial heartiness.

Notice how “balanced soundness of mind” keeps every virtue and activity sweet. Each gift can be spoiled by its own inherent exaggeration, or the spoiling interference of self.

THE CHRISTIAN'S GRACES

ROMANS 12:9-13

Be genuine; be loving.

VERSE 9. THE second and third commands go closely with the first. True Christian love depends on a genuine appreciation of spiritual values. In complete sincerity, it neither condones evil nor overlooks good. To “hate what is evil” without “holding fast to what is good” produces a critical, self-righteous attitude. The reverse process produces the sentimentalist, soft, emotional, indulgent. Christian love avoids both extremes.

12:10. The “honor” mentioned relates to the respect to be given to each other by members of a cultivated society. Paul refers to this social grace in 13:7. The two commands balance. Mutual love is not intended to produce a deadening egalitarianism, in which rank is unrecognized and worth unhonored. Rank and status, in such a society, breeds no self-esteem, and produces no servility. An eagerness in each to recognize another’s worth is a surer road to communal happiness and easy fellowship than a general jealousy of all who stand out from the mass.

12:11. The word translated “zeal” occurs twelve times in the New Testament, and it conveys the idea of earnestness and keenness. To hold such an attitude a Christian must be ardent and dedicated. Apollos is the model (Acts 18:25).

12:12. The three commands are related. Paul was no pessimist. Hope receives his blessing. Did anyone have a braver hope than he did: he aimed to

conquer an empire for Christ? True hope is not tense and anxious. It can only rightly claim the name when it produces patience in times of stress. And patience sustains itself by steadfast prayer. Christian optimism is no willful blindness to grim facts. The dark side of life must be faced, but from facing it comes discipline in prayer, and waiting on God.

12:13. Note again Paul's striving for balanced conduct. Paul begs the Roman Christians, some of them slaves, to bear each other's needs. But he wants no closed and introverted society. The word "hospitality" means literally "love of strangers." A Christian closing of the ranks can be forbidding to outsiders. The correct way is to have an open heart to the world at large. "Pursue hospitality," he says, implying active search for opportunities in this matter of outreaching friendliness.

LOVE IN ACTION

## ROMANS 12:14-17

As Christians, we are not to retaliate.

THE CURSE REFERRED to in verse 14 is the formal threat of divine vengeance, an Eastern practice. Psalm 137, for example, envisages a harassed group, meeting, as Jews did when in exile, by the river (Acts 16:13), and menaced by a hostile Babylonian crowd. The small threatened group may have saved their lives by the act of calling on their foes the evil their foes had inflicted on them. The psalm is a cameo drama, and is not to be judged out of context. The precept forbids the Christian such forms of self-defense.

12:15. To laugh with those who are happy is easy. To weep in true fellowship with the distressed puts a stronger strain upon love and sincerity (John 11:35f.). Pity is best taught by fellowship in trouble, and pity is a Christlike virtue. And nothing but Christ's pity suffices for the tragedy of those who are self-tormented.

12:16. The Christlike sympathy of the last verse calls for understanding, and understanding is never found in the self-centered, because it grows from the habit of considering another's point of view. Paul is asking for the likemindedness he commended to the Philippians (2:2; 4:2). Selfish personal ambition wrecks such fellowship. Therefore, the second command. There must, of course, be leadership, and Paul set some in charge of the churches he founded. Nor were they to be denied respect and deference. But that is not to promote the active quest for dignity and office in those not called to it. True

eminence, however, is not self-conscious. It moves easily among all ranks. The New Testament condemns conceit uncompromisingly. Conceit is the child of pride, and pride is a fundamental sin.

12:17. “Repay no one evil for evil. Practice good before all.” The commands follow naturally. Paul suggests by the verb he uses that the return blow might well have been deserved. But a policy of “tit for tat” is not Christian. Moreover, there is no time or occasion for such petty vengefulness if the preoccupation of life is the active doing of good.

THE WAY TO TREAT ENEMIES

ROMANS 12:18-21

Doing good is much more effective than taking revenge.

VERSE 18. “ALL” again ends the verse, and it is moving to remember that Paul addressed his letter to a church which numbered imperial slaves among its members. It was difficult for those who lay under the burden of slavery and its vast injustices not to harbor resentment, and resentment so often results in acts of hostility. Live at peace, Paul says, “as far as you can,” recognizing that strife is sometimes not of the victim’s own making.

12:19. “Leave room for God’s wrath,” says Paul. Let the wronged do nothing, only stand out of the way. God needs a clear field, uncluttered by human efforts, to accelerate the working of the moral law. “Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Isaiah 37:7). Serenity is healthy, elusive though it may be. It lives within, and not in circumstances. The key to it is a submissive will. The Italian poet Petrarch listed five enemies of peace: anger, ambition, avarice, envy and pride. Paul has dealt with them all. Read Isaiah 26:3 and then the closing verses of Isaiah chapter 54.

12:20. Beware, nevertheless, of a passive attitude. Paul tells the Romans not only to abstain from active retaliation, but also to seek to do good to those who harm them. This, in fact, could have been an effective form of evangelism. The last words are frequently misquoted. They come from Proverbs 25:21-22 and speak of the pain of shame and self-reproach, which provoke conviction of sin and a search for salvation. To see kindness to the

undeserving and the hostile as a subtle form of vengeance is not to take Paul correctly. He regards such goodness as a testimony, and a method of Christian witness.

12:21. The last words sum up the chapter. Paul wants no ethical vacuum. He wants constructive activity. Evil can never overcome evil. Two wrongs have never made a right. Evils only breed and perpetuate their kind. Good, on the other hand, neutralizes and replaces.

Here, then, is Christian character. Such are the people fashioned by God's grace. This is salvation in action, the "abundant life" of Christ's promise (John 10:10).

## CHRISTIAN CITIZENSHIP

### ROMANS 13:1-5

Paul urges respect for the authorities.

IT IS IMPORTANT to see Christian society in the first century in proper perspective. The Roman empire, running to the Rhine, the Danube, and the Black Sea, and bounded to the west by the Atlantic, and to the south and east by the great deserts, had given the Mediterranean world a stable peace. The Roman Peace was the social and political framework within which the Christian church reached its first international form.

Roman history, written from the standpoint of the aristocratic writers of the capital, inevitably concentrated on Rome itself, on the vices and doings of the court and the prince, ignoring the proletariat, and the provinces. It is historic fact that, during the rule of the youthful Nero, whose vice and profligacy became legendary, the provinces enjoyed such quietness and stability that “Nero’s Five Years” became legendary for just administration throughout the Roman world.

Paul had learned in Gallio’s court, and he was to learn again in Jerusalem, that Roman discipline and justice, though it was sometimes rough, and though it could be corrupt in such vicious hands as those of Felix, was a protection and a shield. Moreover, the Jews were restless throughout the world. The mood of the empire’s most difficult people was warming up towards the Jewish revolt of AD 66, and that event had worldwide repercussions. As Paul found when trying to travel from Corinth to

Jerusalem, and again in Jerusalem itself, a collaborating Jew such as he, with his assumption of Roman citizenship, was in acute danger.

He was also hopeful that the fabric of the empire could be Christianized, and he did not wish the church to become branded as a dissident, rebellious group. A decade later Rome drove the church into this position, but hope of partnership still lived when Paul was writing. The empire, too, was sensitive about organizations within its body. That is the background to these words, repeated in 1 Timothy 2:1f. and Titus 3:1, and echoed in 1 Peter 3:13-17.

Paul's own growing awareness of the power and usefulness of the empire in his program of evangelism may be traced in Acts. It was first formed in Cyprus, reached a climax in Philippi, and may be illustrated from Corinth, Ephesus and Jerusalem.

DEBT OF LOVE

## ROMANS 13:6-10

“Love fulfills the Law”: how would acting on this change your life?

THE TAXES LEVIED by both imperial and local government were many, but generally administered and collected with greater justice under the empire than under the earlier republic. But whatever they were, taxes were an obligation, and it is a practical application of Paul’s previous appeal to obedient citizenship that all obligations should be met.

Christian tradition was firmly established long before the four Gospels were written. More than once Paul speaks of having handed on “what he had received” (1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3). There was a body of apostolic information, carefully conserved and diligently transmitted. Mark’s Gospel is the written account of what Peter gave his young convert. In this chapter it is possible to watch Paul’s mind ranging over the account received, and recalling the memorable reply concerning the tribute money (Matthew 22:21).

The recollection takes his mind to the incident recorded in Matthew 22:35-40, and he echoes the tradition yet to be recorded. Perhaps he also remembers the story of the rich youth, who professed to have kept all the commandments, because the order in which the commandments are listed reflects Luke 18:20, and not the Exodus 20 order. It is interesting to see his thought moving over a firm, clear body of tradition.

There is a debt of love which each person owes to all humanity. If someone honestly endeavors to discharge this debt, they will naturally not harm their neighbor, so need no prohibitions to hedge their path. Sexual sin, for all the weak romanticizing which surrounds it, does not result from love, but from too little love, from introverted selfishness. Love never destroys, so does not harm another's life, never deprives and so inhibits stealing. Love rejoices in another's advantage. and so does not covet. This theme is superbly expressed in 1 John. It was the preoccupation of the last of the apostles, what he finally and most vividly remembered of the One with whom he had walked sixty years before.

CLOTHED IN CHRIST  
ROMANS 13:11-14

Paul gets practical: are we ready for the return of Christ?

VERSE 11. NO difficulty should be felt in the apostle's expectation of Christ's coming. How could it be otherwise? We know nothing of the future, and the New Testament gives no clue to the date of history's consummation, except that it follows an age of mounting sin and accelerating apostasy. What of today? For the first time, faced by the accumulating heritage of human sin and folly, scientists have become frequent prophets of doom.

13:12. The "works of darkness" are deeds which shun the light of day, and so are not Christian (John 3:20f.). The Christian's life is not a sleep but a battle. For "the armor of light" see the full development of the image in Ephesians 6.

13:13. Note the vices which Paul chooses to stress. Reveling is the improper noise of the drunken and the selfish, the creation of disturbance common enough in the overcrowded environment of today's urban civilization, as it was in Paul's similarly city-ridden world. Christians should conduct themselves with dignity, quietness and thought for the tranquility of others. Drunkenness is foolish and disgusting in anyone. Christians should avoid excessive consumption of alcohol, if they are to follow with any care Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8. Alcoholism claims from five to ten per cent of social drinkers, causes untold crime and countless accidents. Christians may argue for "moderate drinking" on no grounds of sincerity.

The third vice was immorality, familiar to our present society. Purity was scorned then and it is scorned again. The fourth word is “shamelessness,” the flouting of virtue. “Quarreling” is the opposite of love. It is based on self-assertion. “Jealousy” is similarly love’s negation, because it thrives on self-esteem.

13:14. This is the famous verse of Augustine’s conversion. He tells of it in his *Confessions*. The metaphor is that of clothing oneself in the moral disposition and character of Christ, not taking the armor of the earlier figure but rather garments which are our most visible feature.

THE WEAKER BROTHER OR SISTER

ROMANS 14:1-6

How should we respond to other Christians who differ from us on relatively minor issues?

THE SUDDEN RAISING of the matter of “the one who is weak in faith” is a little puzzling. The unliberated Christian was a common problem. In Colossae, in the Lycus valley, the legalism which was a mark of the type Paul has in mind, had attached itself to strange doctrines and elaborate superstitions, and called down the apostle’s vigorous denunciation. In Galatia the deviant Christians had cluttered their faith with elements from a discarded Judaism. In Rome, as in Corinth, the group whose inadequacies Paul recognized seems not to have been coherent or powerful. They are weaker brothers and sisters, and are not addressed directly. They are mentioned because they constitute a real problem for the Christian community.

We have already quoted 1 Corinthians chapter 8. In the course of the argument of that letter, Paul saw that his own liberty was curtailed in love because its full exercise might cause misunderstanding among those who did not share his insight into the meaning of the freedom he had found in Christ. Likewise here. He tells the community at large not to argue with “the weak in faith,” but receive that person, presumably in the spirit of Christian love and understanding which has been a theme of the last two chapters. The weak, in such fellowship, could become strong.

Who were these “weaklings”? We have suggested that the Roman church was a mixed body. There would be Jews who had recognized Christ, and with them Gentile proselytes, who had first turned to Judaism from the vice and paganism of their world, and then had moved on to Christ. Thirdly, there would be Gentile converts who had come to Christ directly. It may, indeed, have been difficult for converted Jews and proselytes to grasp in full significance that it was all of faith. No prohibitions and taboos based on law and regulation now existed. It was now a matter of faith, and after that of love. It was a weakness of faith not to move to freedom.

“NO MAN IS AN ISLAND”

## ROMANS 14:7-12

In the light of our standing before God as judge, who are we to judge our brother or sister?

PAUL NOW TURNS from the particular to a universal truth. Distilled from the words that were no doubt directed towards a special problem reported from Rome comes this great passage which touches the heart of our humanity, and our deep responsibility. It is a fact that we are part of a body. This is one of the slender threads which bind this chapter, and this penetrating utterance, to what went before in the letter.

Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, wrote about Thomas Arnold, Rugby's headmaster: "He taught us that, in this wonderful world, no boy can tell which of his actions is indifferent and which not. He taught us that, by a thoughtless word or look, we may lead astray a brother for whom Christ died. He taught us that a boy's only safety and only wisdom lies in bringing the whole life into obedience to him who made us for himself and redeemed us with his own precious blood." This, too, is the theme of the Bible: "she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). Read again 1 Corinthians 8:13; 9:12, and Isaiah 53:6: Christ was "involved in humanity." Christian hermits, trying to escape such involvement, betray a trust.

For this we shall give account. Consider 14:10,12. Who are we answerable to? There will be a time and place where we shall face ourselves

and God, where every word and action shall be seen undistorted and in its true light. We shall one day stand in the full blaze of truth, and that overwhelming fact should be part always of our thinking. In the light of all this, who are we to judge our brother or sister, we who know so little of ourselves, let alone the perplexities of another person? It is only “the gold, silver, the precious stones” which we have built on the foundation of our salvation which will survive that scrutiny.

OUR DEBT OF TOLERANCE

## ROMANS 14:13-23

We are to pursue those things that make for peace and mutual upbuilding.

AN ARAB PROVERB says “We owe the world a debt of tolerance.” Paul’s continued insistence on this issue seems to indicate that he is answering a specific inquiry. In both the letters to Corinth and to Philippi there is indication that replies are being made to queries and comments sent to him. We would understand what he writes better if the letters written to him had been also preserved.

The point he makes, with some urgency, is that even when a person is right in a certain view, their conviction must not be thrust on others without regard to their feelings. There are ways of persuasion, and gentleness is not compromise. This is not to be taken as an excuse for blurred thinking on matters of moral and ethical importance, nor to suggest that it is wrong to hold the firmest convictions. Paul only pleads for discernment over what is vital and what is not, and for the tolerance which respects another’s earnest scruples.

The reference to a “stumbling block” in 14:13 (see also 14:21) reveals how deep this problem goes, and at the same time Paul’s spiritual insight. Suppose the example of the “liberated” Christian, perhaps a powerful personality, who leads a weaker brother to adopt a practice which his conscience condemns. The one who so acts has suffered damage. An

occasion for stumbling has been put in his path. Paul knew what Christ had said on moral defilement; it is not in things but in the heart (Mark 7:20-23). He is not in any sense superseding Christ's words but applying them in the Lord's name to a special situation. Align 14:17 with Matthew 5:6,9,12 and 6:33.

In the light of this challenging statement on Christian responsibility what would the Christian answer be to Cain's question: "Am I my brother's keeper?"? It is a question to be answered before the judgment seat (14:10).

ONE IN CHRIST

## ROMANS 15:1-13

Think about Paul's suggestions for life in the church—are you putting them into practice?

THIS SECTION DEALS, in the main, with truths and counsel underlined earlier in the letter. As we read through the letter, and draw near to the mind and heart of the writer, it is possible in these two concluding chapters to sense Paul's relaxed mood. A tense and difficult theological exposition has come to an end. He has written chapter after chapter of vigorous and fervent reasoning which has engaged all his powers. It was doubtless a relief to turn to simpler, if not unimportant questions, the peace of the church, its principles of fellowship, and finally the personal greetings which always closed an ancient letter.

With the notion of the Christian community as a functioning body still in his mind, Paul begs the Roman Christians to help one another. The strong are to bear with the weak. A church should be marked by mutual understanding and concern. Such is the spirit of Christ (15:3).

Harmony was the apostle's deep concern. He pleads for it here, and shows that it grows round Christ. Those actively at one with him are naturally at one with each other (15:5). So is God honored before people (15:6). Disharmony shatters testimony.

15:7-8 hint at a source of possible division. We have seen that a rift between the attitudes of Jewish and Gentile Christians could have been the

occasion of the impatience criticized in chapter 14. With some delicacy Paul now hints to the Jews that the Gentiles, who had joined them in the Christian community, deserved a welcome (15:8). Indeed, they were a fulfillment of prophecy (15:8-12; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10).

From the last quotation, anxious not to press his point, but to allow the ancient Scriptures to carry their own persuasion to the minds of those who revered them, he picked up the word “hope” and added a verse to it (15:13).

APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

## ROMANS 15:14-21

From this point on, Paul writes in a personal way.

IT IS OFTEN assumed, perhaps because of the disagreement with Barnabas over Mark (Acts 15:39), or because of his bold confrontation of Peter (Galatians 2:11), that Paul was stern, intense and rigid. The impression is quite wrong. Paul was loving, gentle and tactful. He wrote the letter to Philippi because he felt conscience bound to rebuke two women dissidents. He spent three chapters of the letter to the Philippians speaking of unity, exalting Christ and gently encouraging the church, and only then did he mention Euodia and Syntyche, quickly following the necessary rebuke with words of commendation.

The Roman church clearly needed the most careful instruction in matters vital to the Christian faith. Its Jewish element in particular required a deeper appreciation of the role and the limitations of Judaism. It is also clear that the place of the Gentiles was not secure. Paul has faithfully discharged his duty of instruction, and he now turns with warmth to comfort those who may have found his uncompromising teaching daunting and failed to see the compassion and concern with which he spoke to them.

He reminds them, too, of his God-given office. He was the apostle to the Gentiles, and planned soon to preach in the capital of the empire. He had long worked to that purpose. In a great arc of territory from Antioch of Syria and Cyprus to Illyricum, at the western end of the Egnatian Way, he had sought

to plant his Christian cells in the chief cities of the Mediterranean world—Antioch of Pisidia, bastion of Roman power in central Asia Minor, Ephesus, the great religious center and proconsular seat, Philippi, strategic key to northern Greece, Corinth, crossroads of central Mediterranean trade, Athens, intellectual capital of the world—and Rome remained. The sheer scope of such evangelism is overwhelming. If we set it beside our feeble exploitation of the vast facilities for communication at the church's disposal available to us now, may we pray, even as Christ commanded, that more reapers be sent out into the ready harvest. And who, if not those who pray?

“MAN PROPOSES, GOD DISPOSES”

## ROMANS 15:22-33

Paul writes about his plans to visit Rome.

THE PASSAGE IS moving and autobiographical. In pursuing his bold plan of winning the empire for Christ, Paul had set Spain in his program of evangelism. It was a sure instinct. Spain gave Rome much. The bulk of the meager remains of Latin literature which have survived from the fifties and the sixties of the first century was the work of Spaniards. Seneca, Nero's tutor and prime minister, his nephew Lucan, the epic poet, and several others prominent in Rome's contemporary cultural life, came from Spain. Spain was also to provide three emperors, including Trajan and Hadrian.

We do not know whether Paul ever reached the great western peninsula. If he did not, the plan was wrecked by his visit to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was home to the stubborn Pharisaic wing of the Christian church. Paul, who had been a Pharisee, yearned to win them. He knew they looked suspiciously at his Gentile evangelism, and his scheme was to demonstrate Gentile love by carrying to Jerusalem a large sum of money, contributed by the Christians of the empire, to relieve poverty in the Jerusalem community.

The poverty was no doubt real and may have come about to some extent because of the short-lived experiments in Christian community living recorded in the first chapters of Acts. Jerusalem was tense amidst the growing terrorism of the countryside and the deepening opposition to Roman rule. The empire sought to hold the turbulent province with a meager garrison of 3,000,

based at Caesarea. Government by the procurator was weak and inadequately armed. Paul knew that he risked his life (15:30,32). He persisted in his project, as Luke frankly narrates, against all advice. He failed to win the dissidents. The journey led to his arrest and imprisonment. God overruled and brought him nevertheless to Rome. Precious documents of the New Testament, the “prison epistles,” no less than Luke’s two books, for which the research was undertaken while Paul was in protective custody at Caesarea, arose from what, on the face of it, was a catastrophe. Read the story and assess Paul’s mood and his expectations in Acts chapters 21–23.

**To ponder** What can we learn from Paul’s desire to serve others and his request for prayer?

## GREETINGS AND COMMENDATIONS

### ROMANS 16:1-6

Paul warmly greets his friends in Rome.

THIS CHAPTER IS of more interest than might at first be apparent. These verses introduce some of the personalities of the early church, give some insight into its social structure and reveal with what facility people moved about through the Mediterranean world. People today may move in such countries with greater speed.

Phoebe was a “deaconess” of Corinth, probably a rich woman, who lived on the seaboard of Corinth’s eastern port. If deaconess is not too technical a term, Phoebe was the first on record to hold the office. Paul may have written the letter in her home, and she may have undertaken to carry it to Rome.

Prisca, or more familiarly, Priscilla, and her husband Aquila, were a much-traveled pair. They were also Paul’s hosts at Corinth. They had been expelled from Rome in AD 49 when Claudius legislated against the Jews, and opened a cloth or tentmaking business in Corinth (Acts 18:2,18,24-26; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). The references show that this earnest couple fostered churches both in Corinth and Ephesus. Now they are back in Rome. Aquila had come from Pontus. They illustrate the home-based nature of the early church (Philemon 2), and also the vital nature of a joint testimony by a husband and wife of like mind.

**Consider** We see a feature of the first century which marks our own habits of travel, immigration and change of residence, all of which were used to spread the gospel. Are we harnessing such aspects of modern life in our own time?

A ROLL OF HONOR

## ROMANS 16:7-16

Paul often describes those people actively serving Christ as “in Christ,” “in the Lord” or “in the Lord’s service.”

THIS CHAPTER MENTIONS twenty-six Christians in Rome by name, several of them women. Notice the affection and generosity of Paul’s references to them. Some had known Christ before he did. Others had shared Paul’s imprisonment. Thirteen of the names occur in documents or inscriptions relating to Caesar’s vast community of slaves, freedmen and clients. These names, of course, are not uncommon, and the reference may not be to the same individuals. Paul, however, does speak in Philippians 4:22 of Christians in Caesar’s household, and in 16:11 he refers to Christians in the family of Narcissus, the notorious freedman of Claudius. It is likely that Aristobulus was the grandson of Herod the Great. Claudius, who, in his foreign policy, imitated Augustus, had close relations with the Herodian house, and it is known that Aristobulus was educated in Rome. His household may have been absorbed into that of Claudius at Aristobulus’ death, but would retain a distinctive identity. It is evident that the imperial household was deeply infiltrated by Christianity. The leaven was working upwards. It was to reach the top.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa mean “dainty and delicate.” Paul jokes slyly when he speaks of how they “labored to exhaustion” for Christ (such is the force of this verb, 16:12). Is Rufus, to whom Mark, probably writing in

Rome, appears to refer (Mark 15:21), the brother of Alexander, and son of Simon, who carried the cross? Had they emigrated from Libya (see Acts 11:20)? And was Nereus the chamberlain of Domitilla, and part of a story of aristocratic Christianity?

FINAL WARNING

ROMANS 16:17-27

Paul warns the church against false teachers.

WITH SOME ABRUPTNESS, in the midst of the final greetings, comes a warning. The perennial peril of the church is faction, which often emerges when some exhibitionist, or aspirant for power, thrusts on the congregation, in the guise of conviction, and sometimes under the name of God, their own special teaching (16:17f.). Paul had met them in his Galatian churches, at Corinth and Colossae. He feared their intrusion at Philippi (Philippians 3:18f.) and at Rome. Someone who sets out, in selfish propagation of their own ideas, to disturb the peace of the church, bears a heavy responsibility.

The burden of guilt on those who clutter the path to Christ is as heavy (16:17). Those who “by fair and flattering words deceive the hearts of the simple-minded” have been known in all ages. Paul’s stern warning is relevant today. He was sure that the church at Rome could deal with this intrusion on their unanimity and peace. He hints that such abuses are best nipped in the bud. Perhaps the potential division which has emerged once or twice in this letter was beginning to crystallize round certain personalities, and Paul may have tactfully thought it wiser to defer the warning to a context that was remote from his earlier reference to the doctrinal or radical division.

Paul’s circle send their greetings. Perhaps they may be identified (see Acts 13:1; 17:5-9; 20:4; 1 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 2:19f.).

As we leave one of the great documents of Christianity we come finally to Paul's expression of praise (16:25-27). All the leading ideas of the letter may be discovered as interwoven in it.

INTRODUCTION

# I CORINTHIANS

RALPH P. MARTIN

## The church at Corinth

IN THE MIDDLE of the first century, Corinth was a city of great importance. It had reached eminence at a much earlier date, owing to its commercial and maritime advantage as a seaport on the isthmus between central Greece and the Peloponnesus, but had been destroyed by the Romans about 200 years before Paul's first visit (Acts chapter 18). After lying in ruins for about a century, it was reconstructed by Julius Caesar in 44 BC and populated as a Roman colony.

In the first century AD the city was heavily populated (200,000 freedmen, 400,000 slaves have been estimated), and its place as a political and commercial center is gauged from the fact that the Romans made it the capital city of the senatorial province of Achaia in southern Greece.

However, the reputation of Corinth for moral corruption is also well known. The "Corinthian life" became synonymous with luxury and licentiousness. At the same time, its pretensions to philosophy and literary culture made the phrase "Corinthian words" a token of polished and cultivated speech.

In this city of busy commercial life and social entertainment Paul spent a year and a half or more during his second missionary journey (Acts

18:11,18), having arrived in the city probably in the winter of AD 50–51. He found a welcome in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, with whom he carried on his trade of tentmaking as well as conducting some evangelistic ministry (Acts 18:4-18).

### Problems at Corinth

The converts won to Christ seem to have belonged to the lower strata of society (1:26-29), but not exclusively so (1:16; 11:17-34; Romans 16:23). They were not free from the prevailing tendency to intellectual pride (1:18-20; 3:18-19; 8:1); and added to this was a proneness to sensual sin, equally characteristic of their native city (5:1-11; 6:15-18; 11:21). The most glaring defect of the church's life, however, must have been that of party divisions (1:12; 3:3; 11:18f.) represented by their allegiance to apostolic names, and their bickering which drew them to the civil courts to settle their quarrels (6:1,6). They even carried their wrangling to the Lord's table (11:17ff.). They did all this claiming as their watchwords "knowledge" (8:1) and "liberty" (6:12; 8:9; 10:23) but were blissfully unaware of the serious moral crisis which was blowing up (5:1ff.). Rather, they were exulting in the largesse of spiritual gifts with which they had been endowed (1:5; 14:12), although they needed careful instruction as to their meaning and use (12:1; 14:37).

### Paul and Corinth

Of all the churches that Paul founded as a "skilled master-builder" (3:10), none caused him more concern than the community at Corinth. "Anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28) was no idle phrase when he reflected on his dealings with the Corinthian saints. He claimed a special relationship

to them (3:10; 4:15; 9:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:2; 12:14-15), and maintained a shepherdlike care in every situation.

Details of the precise number of letters that he wrote to them and the various visits he paid to Corinth are a complicated business which the textbooks try to sort out. A possible sequence is:

- Corinthians A (now lost) written because Paul heard of serious problems. See 1 Corinthians 5:9.
- Corinthians B (our 1 Corinthians) written partly in response to questions sent to Paul by the church (1 Corinthians 7:1).
- Corinthians C (now lost), which was a sharp telling-off because the church hadn't changed (see 2 Corinthians 7:5-12).
- Corinthians D (our 2 Corinthians) written to encourage them after news came that the church had reformed.

The immediate occasion of 1 Corinthians is more straightforward. Various reports had reached Paul of the troubles at Corinth (1:11). The church members themselves had written requesting guidance on specific matters of doctrine, custom and procedure, and were not loath to offer their own views at the same time (7:1; 8:1), while professing to remain loyal to Paul's earlier, oral teaching (11:2). Moreover, the coming of some of the church leaders (16:17) doubtless filled in some of the background of the tangled situation at Corinth. The letter before us is a reply to, and an inspired commentary on, just this situation. It was written at Ephesus (16:19) about AD 55.

DEAR CORINTHIANS ...

## I CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

Paul greets his friends warmly at the beginning of his letter.

ANCIENT LETTERS WHICH have survived, mainly as papyri, from the first-century world of Graeco-Roman civilization follow a fairly set pattern. The writer gives his name, addresses those to whom he is writing and offers a greeting. There is also a frequent reference to thanksgiving to the gods and a prayer for the recipients' good health and safety.

The apostle Paul took over much of this pattern, but filled it with a new, Christian content. Notice the distinctive Christian elements in the opening verses:

1. 1:1 reveals his privileged position, shared by only a limited number in the early church, of apostleship and unique in the sense that he alone was called to be God's special messenger to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Romans 15:15-18; 1 Timothy 2:7).
2. Those he is writing to in 1:2 are the people of God in southern Greece, the chief city of which was Corinth. With Israel, God's elect and holy people, they are included in one covenant of grace, but distinguished as those who call on the name of Jesus as Lord just as Old Testament saints called on the name of Yahweh their God in worship (eg Genesis 4:26; 21:33). As a local part of the universal church, the church at Corinth is

made to feel it is part of the spiritual family with all other believers (as in 1 Peter 1:1-2).

3. The specific Christian blessings of grace and peace are called down in the apostolic prayer. It is not accidental that this order is preserved throughout the New Testament. We may enjoy peace with God and the gift of his peace only on the ground of his gracious act of redemption in Christ (Romans 5:1-2).
4. Thanksgiving for Paul takes the form of praise to God for the enrichments which the Corinthian believers have known (1:4-5); indeed, they are deficient in no spiritual gift-by-grace (Greek *charisma*). But as Paul chides them later (14:12), with all their preoccupation with these gifts they must be sure of a right motive. What is it(12:31)?

In case any of them had imagined that they had received all that God had to offer, a gentle reminder follows (1:8), namely that Christians are still pilgrims on the road to God's fullness. They await their completed redemption (Romans 8:23-25) at the Lord's triumph-day. Then God's faithfulness which has already called them to the state of grace will promote them to the state of glory (1:9).

## A DIFFICULT CHURCH

# I CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

Paul writes about a problem in the church and shows them a greater priority.

OUTWARDLY THE CHURCH at Corinth seemed to be in a good healthy condition (1:5-7), but there was one glaring defect. What was it (1:10)?

Reports had reached Paul from at least two sources that there were divisions and rival groups in the church. One source is specified (1:11); the other may be inferred from the arrival of certain church members who, no doubt, gave him a first-hand account (16:17). Later, when Paul has to speak plainly to them on a specific matter of morals (5:1), he will again refer to these reports.

The trouble-spot on which Paul now concentrates is the party spirit which disfigured the life and witness of the church (1:12). Apparently four factions were using the authority of eminent names to engage in a competition of unholy rivalry.

Paul's reply to this situation is important, both for a theological understanding of the nature of the church, and also for our present-day concern for Christian unity.

His argument is closely knit and powerful. As there is only one Christ, there can be only one church, made up of those who claim allegiance to him as Lord, which in turn is confessed in baptism (1:13). All believers were baptized into his name (Romans 6:3ff.; Galatians 3:27) and so they are called

to be members of one body (Romans 12:5; Colossians 3:11,15). This simple fact of one Lord, one body, excludes all concepts of party allegiance and selfish rivalry that suggest that human names are more important than the head of the church, and that there can be several “bodies,” all professing allegiance to the same head. Paul will show the illogicality of this later (3:21; 12:12ff.).

Because baptism was being used in this perverse way Paul disclaims an undue emphasis on the ceremony (1:17). The supporting argument is that there is a third factor in the series: one Lord, one church and one gospel which binds together all those who are Christ’s.

GOD'S WISDOM AND POWER

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

How do people respond to the good news of Jesus Christ?

THE MISSIONARY TASK assigned to Paul was not to gather converts who claimed a special attachment to his name. Rather, it was the Christ who encountered and summoned him that gave him a gospel to declare (1:17).

The content of that message is now powerfully opened up and its effect on those who come within earshot of it is clearly shown (1:18-25). Three types of reaction may be distinguished:

1. To those “who are being saved” (note the present tense) the cross represents the essence of divine power, leading to salvation (Romans 1:16). The association of power with the humiliation and ignominy of death on a Roman gibbet—a death reserved for the most degraded and despised in Roman society—may seem surprising and, at first sight, to hold together mutually contradictory ideas (see 2 Corinthians 13:4). But Paul goes on to explain that in the weakness of God, suffering initial defeat at the hands of evildoers, divine wisdom is displayed and the heart of God revealed (1:25). Tacitly to be understood is the conviction that God raised him from defeat and death, and so vindicated his own honor (Acts 2:23-24).

As the humble, suffering Christ portrays God's strength in weakness, so it is with those who belong to him. As Christians, they are despised

and written off as insignificant members of a sophisticated society (1:26-28). But this choice and calling, irrespective of their social status, also reflects the wisdom of God. For what purpose (1:29)? Those who have found in Christ the secret of life's purpose and God's plan realize that it is God's initiative and power which have led them to this blessedness—and so they give him their thanks for undeserved mercies (1:31).

2. “But they have not all heeded the gospel” (Romans 10:16). The preaching of the cross, then as now, divides people into the stark categories of those who respond and those who reject. The Jewish people, with their insistent clamor for “signs”—as seen in the ministry of Jesus from its beginning to its close—refuse to believe that a crucified man can be their Messiah, for Deuteronomy 21:23 proves that he must be under a divine curse. Paul's reply is given in Galatians 3:13. The curse he assumed was for our sakes.
3. The Greeks find the cross a laughing-stock (1:22-23) because it contradicted their ideas of divine wisdom—indeed, it taught the exact opposite of their principle that the gods cannot and do not suffer mortal pain. They remain aloof and untouched by human misery. The Christian answer lies in a God who entered our life at every level—and tasted death (Hebrews 2:9) at its bitterest (Mark 15:34).

PREACHING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

Paul gives his personal testimony about his coming to them.

THE EQUIVALENT OF the Jews' insistence on credentials (eg Mark 11:27-33; John 4:48; 6:30; 7:15) was the Greeks' love of impressive public speaking. To them the height of learning was the presentation of a well-ordered and persuasively uttered speech on some noble, and preferably new, theme (Acts 17:21).

It is not to be wondered at therefore that Paul's preaching in Athens should be dismissed as the weird pronouncements of a babbler (Acts 17:18-20). And Paul himself possibly felt that little good had been accomplished at Athens as he moved on to Corinth. But it would be wrong to infer that he viewed his Athenian "experiment" as a dismal failure and that 2:1-5 were written out of a new resolve to abandon completely a more philosophical approach.

The present paragraph must stand on its own feet as representing the declared aim of Paul at every phase of his ministry; but at Corinth it was brought home to him with special intensity that his ministry was to offer a straightforward presentation of the cross (2:2), decked out with no human embellishments and conveyed with no reliance on rhetorical persuasion (2:4).

In fact, his bearing and public proclamation were the opposite of the qualities which marked the accomplished Greek orator and debater. He chose no high-sounding terms (2:1), and resorted to no clever notions to dazzle his

hearers into acceptance (2:4). His sole reliance was on the Spirit who gives an unaccountable authority to the Christian preacher who recognizes his own weakness and the sufficiency of God's help. But there was another motivating factor in Paul's self-chosen aim. What was it (2:5)? People who can be won over simply by forceful rhetoric can be lost when a more persuasive pleader comes along with a glib tongue and an engaging manner. Isn't this one reason for the success of many present-day false cults, with their salesmanlike approach and easy flow of language?

WISDOM THAT COMES FROM THE SPIRIT

## I CORINTHIANS 2:6-16

The real wisdom of God can only be understood by those who are  
spiritually alive.

THE SCRIPTURAL TERM “wisdom” needs careful definition. Paul had been at pains to show that the apostolic preaching of the cross does not look to any human philosophy or merely human argument for its persuasiveness. Reliance of unredeemed and unilluminated humanity on their own supposed innate ability to know God is foredoomed (1:21). The “wisdom of this age” (2:6) is ephemeral and, in the realm of the spirit, worthless. So Paul draws his confidence from the assurance that his message is based on God’s truth, and announced in dependence on the Holy Spirit (2:4).

But there is a wisdom which is appropriate (2:6)—based on divine revelation, not human discovery (2:7) and communicated to people by the Spirit (2:10-12). And the same Spirit who imparts the true knowledge of God to the receptive mind must also be at work in conveying the gospel message in the language which the apostle uses (2:13)—an important observation, shedding light on the modern problems of communication.

How can unregenerate humanity ever appreciate the saving value of the cross and see their own need as desperate sinners whose only hope is in Christ crucified (2:2)? This is the starting-point in all considerations of evangelism, especially sharpened in our concern to reach the many people outside our Christian fellowships.

These verses lay down certain clear guidelines:

1. The bankruptcy of human wisdom, uninspired by divine revelation, is seen most clearly in the way Christ was rejected (2:8; John 1:11; Romans 10:2-4). The cross which people prepared for the Lord of glory is the supreme example of human perversity, opposition and rejection; yet behind the evil designs of the Jewish leaders and the callousness of the Roman authorities stand the satanic agencies of evil spirit forces, “the rulers of this age” (2:8). Who was their leader (2 Corinthians 4:4; John 14:30)?
2. “The natural person” (2:14), ie the person unrenewed by the Spirit and dead to God in sin (Ephesians 2:1; 4:17-18) can never, left to himself, penetrate the barrier which separates him from the world of God and his truth. He is doomed to remain in ignorance and darkness—unless the awakening Spirit comes to him, as 2:11b makes plain.
3. Yet there is always hope, which rests on the initiative of God (2:10) and the illumination that his Spirit imparts (2:12). What does the Spirit grant? What are “the gifts of the Spirit of God” (2:14) in this passage?

**Meditation** Job 28:28.

## QUARRELING INFANTS

# 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9

What are we like: children on a school playground or mature co-workers with God?

HUMANITY IS APPARENTLY divided into two camps: those who do not know God (Galatians 4:8), the “unspiritual” (ie lacking the Spirit’s regeneration) of 2:14; and those who have received the Spirit (2:12) and so who appreciate the apostle’s message (2:13). To them is given the inestimable gift of “the mind of Christ” (2:16). Does Philippians 2:5 help us to understand this phrase?

There is, however, a third group, “people of the flesh” (3:1) (Greek *sarkinoi*). The background here is Galatians 5:16-24, which pictures the internal conflict set up by the opposing forces, Spirit versus flesh. *Sarkinos*, then, means a Christian in whom the “flesh” (ie the old life-principle) still retains the upper hand and dominates their entire personality. Into this category the Corinthians put themselves, partly because of their spiritual immaturity (“babes in Christ”), but more reprehensibly because they cherished some worldly notions. They were “behaving in a merely human way” (3:3), not measuring up to the stature of redeemed maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:13-16). What was the mark of this stunted growth which characterized their childish and worldly ways (3:3-4)?

Paul returns to the earlier theme (1:10-16) and confronts a church split into rival parties and claiming allegiance to several of the apostles. They needed the reminder that these people whom they exalted were “servants of

Christ” (3:5) who, if they had accomplished anything of lasting worth in their ministry, owed it to the enabling of the Lord. Certainly, they should not be held to be in competition with one another, thought of as gathering followers and so (unwittingly) promoting jealousy and a party-spirit (3:3).

In Christian service the keynote is cooperative endeavor (3:6-9). Paul teaches with metaphors drawn from horticulture and the building trade. Apollos and he are like farmers whose duty it is to sow and to tend the young plants—in time a harvest will be their reward (Galatians 6:9; 2 Timothy 2:6). But only God can make the seed germinate and grow (3:7). Similarly, the apostles are construction workers, giving time and energy to the erecting of a building. But as the harvest field is God’s, so also is the finished building (3:9; Hebrews 3:4). The lesson should be obvious to this faction-ridden church: all God’s servants are useful; each has a particular job; but none is indispensable.

## REAL ACHIEVEMENTS

# 1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-23

Are our lives valuable for Christ or do we fritter away our time and energy in useless pursuits?

PAUL AS A townsman never seemed happy with agricultural illustrations (see Romans 11:17-24, where his use of the olive tree metaphor seems adapted to his own purpose contrary to nature!). It is not unexpected therefore that he prefers to drive home his point with the imagery of a building (3:10-15).

The argument is constructed in a logical fashion. Every building must have a solid foundation (3:11)—the church is secure at this point at least (Matthew 16:18; 21:42; Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14), as Jesus had himself emphasized (Matthew 7:24-27) and it was the unique privilege of the apostolic ministry to lay that foundation by their preaching and confession of Christ. In that sense the Corinthian church is Paul's work (9:1); and he was careful not to claim more than his rightful assignment as "a skilled master-builder" (Romans 15:20; 2 Corinthians 10:13-18).

The foundation has been well and truly laid, but he is anxious that the erecting of the building shall also be done competently and with the right materials (3:10b), because the final inspection will quickly show up any defect—and that Day of testing is certainly coming (3:13).

Various building materials are available. Some are suitable, others are not (3:12). The contrast is between what is durable (gold, silver, precious stones) and what is not (wood, hay, stubble), when the building catches fire (3:13).

Then, the fire will test the worth of the builder's effort—and if he has used useless materials, his work will be destroyed, although he doesn't forfeit his life in the fire (see 9:27).

One particular building next occupies the apostle's attention, namely God's sanctuary (3:16-17), for this is the application of the building metaphor and its teaching. 1 Peter 2:4-10 is the best commentary on these verses, with its reminder that the church is God's people as a worshiping community and his witness as a holy people in a fallen world.

3:18-23 bring together the varied themes of the previous discussion. Human wisdom is futile—a truth buttressed by two Old Testament quotations (3:19-20); even Christians lapse into worldly patterns of thought when they pin their hope on the people who are merely God's instruments (3:21); and so, far from claiming a party-allegiance, let the Corinthians recall the vastness of their heritage as God's people (3:23) in which the Messiah and his people are viewed as one entity which belongs to God (12:12). No inferior subordination within the Godhead should therefore be read into the closing phrase.

APOSTLES OF CHRIST

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-13

We receive all gifts as a sacred trust from God.

THE CORRECT DESIGNATION of the apostles is offered: they are stewards and servants, whose virtue lies in the way in which they fulfill their commission. The vital quality is trustworthiness, ie faithfulness to the commission that God assigns, whether as planters or waterers of the seed (3:6-8).

At Corinth there were those who, out of preference for Peter as an original member of the Twelve, or Apollos as an eloquent and gifted teacher of Alexandrian wisdom, disparaged Paul. In 2 Corinthians chapters 10–12 we see the specific charges they brought against him. For the present he disclaims any concern to be brought before the tribunal of their judgment (4:3-4). He is content to await the final Day (3:13) when the Lord will test openly his labors and motives (4:5).

Paul and Apollos were evidently being set in opposition as party leaders, but it is clear that many Corinthians were themselves setting up factions within the main parties (see 11:19). Whichever way the rivalry was being fostered, it is all reprehensible, for (Paul reiterates) no teachers or Christians have any virtue in themselves, and no gift they can claim to have is theirs independently of God (4:7). It is a salutary reminder that all our more gifted brothers and sisters hold their privileged ministry as a sacred trust from God!

4:8-13 are written in ironical vein, aimed at deflating the pride of the Corinthians who imagined that they didn't need any apostle! In a series of

powerful contrasts Paul sets out the price which he and his colleagues were paying for the apostolic ministry exercised on the churches' behalf. 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-29 should be read as close parallels. All these texts underline a key principle of Christian service: no gain without pain.

**Notes** 4:1: "the mysteries of God" = revelation of divine truth, once hidden, now disclosed in Christ and the Church. 4:3: see 1 John 3:20-21. 4:9: the illustration is that of gladiators in the arena, and 4:13 reflects the cruel Athenian practice of killing off certain criminals and good-for-nothings if a plague struck the city. 4:10: the report had reached Paul that because he suffered so shamefully, he couldn't be a true apostle. His reply is exactly the opposite: see 2 Corinthians 12:10-13.

“MY BELOVED CHILDREN ...”

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:14-21

Paul now turns to a direct and personal appeal.

PAUL’S LETTERS ARE real letters. There is a noticeable change of mood in the apostle’s writing in this paragraph. Previous sections have been severe and sternly ironical (4:8-13), now he takes up a wooing note and directs this tender appeal to them as “my beloved children” (4:14). There is a time for both approaches, and we need tact and wisdom to know which line is the more appropriate in any given situation.

The Corinthians are not only his harvest-field and building (3:9,14); they are his spiritual children of whom he is not ashamed to be called their father (4:15). Therefore the call to imitation, similar to the higher summons (Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 5:1).

So that there will be no misunderstanding of what his parental intentions and directives are, Paul is sending Timothy, his trusted lieutenant, to amplify and enforce his applied teaching (4:17).

Timothy’s visit is also to be a preparation for Paul’s own coming, of which he gives promise (4:18-19). He anticipates that both Timothy’s mission and his own projected visit will be challenged, knowing the arrogance and indiscipline to authority which there is at Corinth. So, if they will not be persuaded by a tender appeal, they must take the consequence of a stern warning (4:21). The choice is theirs.

**Notes** 4:14: Paul's letters often had a disturbing effect (2 Corinthians 2:9; 10:9-11), and on at least one occasion he regretted his severe reproach (2 Corinthians 7:8). 4:15: although the church had been helped by other teachers, it would never escape its indebtedness to its human founder. The father-son relationship is drawn from Jewish teaching: "Whoever teaches the son of his friend the law (of Moses), it is as if he had begotten him." 4:16: see 11:1; Galatians 4:12; 2 Thessalonians 3:7,9; Philippians 3:17. 4:17: "I am sending" is the sense. 4:18: "arrogant" is literally "puffed up," "swollen" (with pride)—the distinguishing mark of the Corinthian church (4:6,19; 5:2; 13:4). 4:20: one of the rare occurrences in Paul's writing of a term so characteristic of Jesus' preaching. The same contrast, "talk" versus effective action, is found in 1 Thessalonians 1:5. 4:21: a close parallel is seen in Job 37:13. God deals with his people either in discipline or in love, but always for our real good.

## IMMORALITY IN THE CHURCH

### 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5

Paul takes a stand against open persistent sin.

PAUL CAN HARDLY credit it, but reports have confirmed that the church at Corinth has lost all sense of moral responsibility and is actually condoning a glaring case of incest. Indeed, the matter is aggravated not only by a failure to deal with the offender (even the Gentile world condemned such) (5:1), but by the church's attitude of continued arrogance. This may imply that what to Paul should have been an occasion of discipline had been treated as a matter of some self-congratulation (5:2). This interpretation, if correct, would confirm the idea that some Corinthian Christians had accepted Gnostic teaching which sat loosely to moral standards, particularly in matters of sexual relations.

At all events, Paul knows what must be done. The "new morality" at Corinth must be strongly rejected (5:2b).

A church meeting is to be called when, with Paul's presence among the members, a solemn excommunication of the offender is to be carried out—a severe judgment on a severe moral transgression (5:3-4). Yet the spirit of the church's united act is not to be vindictive, but remedial (5:5). Expulsion from the church, which may seem to be unduly harsh and likely to arouse resentment, will (in the end) serve the higher end of the man's spiritual good (5:5b).

**Notes** 5:1: incest was forbidden by Roman law and the Levitical code (Leviticus 18:8). If the man's father were still living, adultery would be added to incest and so the case would be aggravated in its moral perversion. 5:2: the penalty for this immoral union, according to Jewish tradition in the Mishnah, was death by stoning. The Pauline prescription is less severe, namely excommunication from the church's fellowship. 5:5: the plain sense is the meaning given above, ie expulsion from the church to the domain of Satan outside, from which believers had been delivered (Colossians 1:13; Acts 26:18). But as this expelling was treated as serious, the shock may well have led to physical death: hence "destruction of the flesh," or at least to the suffering of physical consequences (as in Acts 5:1-11; 13:11; 1 Timothy 1:20).

**To think over** This proceeding may seem to have little compatibility with the spirit of the incident in John 8:1-11, but is there not a vital difference between a penitent and an arrogant sinner?

REMOVE THE YEAST

## 1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8

Paul sees removing the yeast (leaven) as an illustration of keeping purity in the church.

THIS PORTION GIVES important insight into the nature of the Christian life in Paul's teaching. The setting has already been fixed by the preceding incident, and Paul's rebuke (5:6) is well made. Not only had the church dealt in a lax way with a moral crime; by its attitude it also showed a grave ignorance of the real meaning of the Christian life.

The illustration Paul uses is drawn from the Passover in which unleavened bread played a significant role. Before the days of the feast, a ceremony was—and still is in the homes of faithful Jews—performed to search out and destroy all traces of yeast or any kind of fermenting material. In old editions of the Passover service-book a picture of an old man with a candle is sometimes placed as a frontispiece; and at the close of the search, on the eve of Passover, a solemn declaration is made that if any leaven has been inadvertently overlooked in the kitchen or house, it is pronounced null and void!

When Passover begins, in the Jewish calendar on Nisan 14, the use of leaven is forbidden and unleavened bread is the diet. A symbolic value was attached to this, for the rising of the dough is an apt picture of the swelling of pride, and the Jews must be reminded that they were a poor and servile

people when the Lord redeemed them from Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:6-11; 26:5-9).

Against this background the Corinthians are called to (1) clear out every trace of (moral) evil (5:7) by dealing with the presence of arrogant sin in their midst (5:13); (2) recall that they are the New Israel of God, summoned to be a holy people to the Lord and redeemed by the Paschal Lamb himself (typified by the lambs of Exodus 12:3-7); and (3) celebrate the Christian Passover (5:8) which lasts, not for seven to eight days as in the Jewish rite, but for a lifetime, because the entire Christian life is a festival of joy and gladness as we are continually reminded of the new life of freedom from sin's tyranny, to which God in Christ has called us (1 Peter 1:14-19). It is to a reaffirmation of this high calling that we are called every time we gather at the Lord's table and commemorate the new exodus and take the Passover "dishes" of bread and wine (11:23-26).

WHAT DOES PAUL MEAN BY “SEPARATION”?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-13

We continue to consider the theme of discipline and the treatment of evil practices.

SOME OF THE Corinthians were immoderately lax (5:2); others had misunderstood an earlier letter and had become inordinately rigid (5:10) by refusing any contact with the outside world.

Obviously Paul’s earlier instruction had been misapplied and what was intended as a call to discipline within the church had been taken as an invitation to the isolated life of a recluse by severing all association with people of the world (5:10). Paul shows how impossible this is except, perhaps, by setting up a monastic, self-contained community like the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But this withdrawal from society is never supported in the New Testament. The church is the light of the world, the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16), not a shut-off community, practicing a world-denying ethic and living only to itself.

The separation that Paul emphasized was in the matter of church discipline (5:11). Members of the church who try to profess the faith and to adopt pagan ways of life are to be severely dealt with (5:11-13). Even to welcome them at the Lord’s table, in their unrepentant frame of mind and manners, or possibly to any meal table, is an act of encouragement to them (2 John 10-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). Rather, they must be “judged,” ie shown their folly and firmly reminded of the high moral standards demanded

by the new covenant. Even one immoral man can spoil the fellowship by his influence (5:6) unless he is checked. The point is clinched by a reference to Deuteronomy 13:5. What is the relevance of this text?

## CHRISTIANS IN COURT

### 1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-11

Paul's now considers another misdemeanor at Corinth.

PAUL'S DISCUSSION ABOUT judgment and its exercise within the Christian fellowship leads him to consider another misdemeanor at Corinth. When there is a dispute between fellow-believers—and Paul accepts that the Christian society will contain members who get at loggerheads with one another—the issue should be settled in a way far from what was being adopted at Corinth. There the Christians had the audacity (6:1: the verb “dare” is a strong word) to have the case taken to litigation and tried by non-Christian magistrates.

The apostle had some plain words to speak about this procedure:

1. It is wrong in itself (6:6-7), because it shows on the one hand a lack of spiritual competence when a church cannot order its own life without turning to pagan legal tribunals (6:5) and, on the other, a spirit of controversy and standing up for one's rights, which quickly degenerates into actual injustice and a perverting of the right, so that someone with a grievance seeks more compensation than that to which strict justice entitles them (6:8). And all this involves fellow Christians.
2. Another reason for this improper method's condemnation is that it exhibits a worldly attitude. Christians will one day be the arbiters of the world's destiny (6:2), and this will require great spiritual discernment

(6:3). On the present showing the church at Corinth does not appear to be well qualified for this grand judicial office!

The final assize (6:2-3) leads Paul to consider those who exclude themselves from God's realm (6:9-10)—a throwback to 5:11, and a solemn reminder that whatever the Corinthians' character may have been in immoral society, now by rebirth and baptism and the sanctifying agency of the Spirit (6:11) they are new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:17-24), with old habits passed away.

**Notes** 6:1: Romans 13:1-8 certifies that the Roman law system was good—for its prescribed purpose. The trouble came when believers called in the authorities to settle internal frictions. 6:4: the tone may be ironical, and the verse refer to inferior people in the church. 6:5 probably supports this idea. 6:7: Matthew 5:39ff., see also 1 Peter 2:23. 6:9: sexual perversity is a sign of fallen nature in every age. 6:11: Acts 22:16 shows that baptism into Christ marked a clean break and a new start.

## FLEE SEXUAL IMMORALITY

# 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

Paul's writes about the right use of "the body".

THE PREVAILING ETHOS in the city of Corinth, infamous for its moral laxity and inimical to the Christian standards of purity and self-control, had infiltrated into church life and given rise to an ugly situation which required the reiteration of the basic Christian moral prescription: "flee from sexual immorality" (6:18).

Not only had some church members begun to indulge in immoral practices by misusing their bodies (leading to gluttony and sex outside marriage), they were claiming justification for their actions in the name of Christian liberty (6:12: the first part of each sentence is in quotation marks, cited from the Corinthians' letter to Paul). The apostle responds with a crystal-clear statement of Christian ethics and with some principles which are as relevant today as when he first expressed them.

The first point to be explained is the meaning in Paul's letters of "body." To us it is used of our physical frame, but Paul's usage is much more complex. The body stands for the real self, the whole person. This specific sense which Paul gives explains 6:18: union with a prostitute is an offense against the whole person—indeed against two people, the man and the woman (6:15), and so is a betrayal of Christian profession as well as a degradation of womanhood.

These verses give us Paul's authoritative teaching on the body:

1. The body has been redeemed, with a price paid for its purchase (6:20). As Christians, therefore, we are not our own, to please ourselves. Our whole being exists for God's glory whose image we reflect (11:7).
2. The body is sanctified by the Holy Spirit who lives in the believer as the presence of God (the Shekinah) filled the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8:11); it is to be treated with respect and dignity, never defiled or abused, since it is the Spirit's shrine (6:19).
3. The body is a member of Christ (6:15), ie it forms a part of his body, the church, of which he is the head, and is to be used in his service (Ephesians 1:23; 4:16; 5:30). Sexual irregularities cause damage to the integrity of the people involved, and so deform the body of Christ by perverting this union between Christ and his bride (6:16).
4. The body will be raised (6:14), which means that God has a purpose for the body, although as a spiritual body (15:44) but with some connection with the human life here in this world, in eternity—and we shall be judged then for what we do now (2 Corinthians 5:10).

**Meditation** Romans 12:1-2.

## CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16

Paul explains some of the implications of his teaching for Christian marriage.

OF ALL HUMAN relationships the association of man and woman in marriage is the closest and most personal. It is not surprising that first Paul should go on from his earlier discussion (6:15-16) to explain some of the deeper implications of Christian marriage, and secondly that the Corinthians themselves should have raised these fundamental questions in a letter of inquiry to him (7:1). The replies he gives fall into well-defined sections.

1. 7:1-7. It makes much better sense if we read the quotation at the end of 7:1 as a statement quoted from the Corinthians' letter; then 7:2 is Paul's comment. The apostle who wrote Ephesians 5:21-33 is not likely to have expressed a stark condemnation of conjugal union, implied in 7:1. The rest of the paragraph covers the same ground as the Ephesians passage, with mutual regard and responsibility in sexual relations spelled out in some detail. 1 Peter 3:7 completes the full Christian picture of God's intention for the married state.

It is important to try to read between the lines here. Evidently some Corinthians had taken the (Gnostic) view—later expressed in 1 Timothy 4:3—that marriage and marital unions were inherently evil and were abandoning all conjugal connections. Paul goes to the root of the matter

by his assertion that marriage is part of God's will for the human race, and like all his creation pronounced "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

2. 7:8-9 consider the case of those who do not or cannot marry. Celibacy is approved, whether for those who were unmarried or for those who had been married and had lost their partner by death. If, however, the celibate state imposes too great a mental and psychological strain, and marriage is possible, the latter course is preferable.
3. 7:10-11 contemplate a situation in which one partner is faced with the problem of a disagreement within Christian marriage. Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage (Mark 10:9-12) is appealed to as a directive. Divorce, on this ground, is not permitted.
4. 7:12-16 give apostolic commentary on the Lord's teaching, by way of application to specific instances of situations which Jesus' words never envisaged, ie one partner who becomes converted has to face the prospect of life with an unbelieving partner. Again, divorce is only contemplated if the non-Christian spouse desires it. Otherwise let the marriage continue, with the prospect of conversion always in view and a wholesome inheritance into which the children may enter (7:14). "Holy" is "brought within the sphere of God's grace."

STAY WHERE YOU WERE CALLED

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:17-24

When we become Christians, God generally wants us to remain where we are so we can witness to others around us.

THE APOSTLE'S RULING direction in the delicate concerns of husband-wife relationships, where one partner is a Christian and the other is not, is given in 7:15: "God has called you to live in peace," ie wholeness of life in which our personalities can, under his good will, develop and mature.

The same ruling applies in the next section (7:17-24). The discussion, however, has shifted, if momentarily, from marriage to social and racial distinctions.

Circumcision was a mark to which the Jewish people attached great importance (Romans 3:1). Paul's attitude was what he adopted to all religious ceremonial: it is useful if practiced with sincere motive and as a spiritual aid within the overall context of salvation by faith alone, by grace alone. So he can confess "Circumcision has value, if you obey the law" (Romans 2:25); and obedience implies another "circumcision" (Romans 2:29, already anticipated in Jeremiah 4:4; Philippians 3:3). In the light of this a physical sign in the flesh is of little value (7:19; Galatians 6:15)—but is a positive spiritual menace if trusted as an article of salvation. Therefore, his controversy with the Judaizers in Galatia.

Social status presents a more complex issue. Slavery was a commonplace part of the Graeco-Roman society in which the church was born. Paul raised

no standard of rebellion against this inhuman institution. We may ask why he did not—and find part of our answer in his letter to Philemon.

There were opportunities for a slave to gain freedom, chiefly by the payment of a sum of money deposited in a temple and transferred to the slave's owner. Paul encourages this process (7:21) and moves on to remind all, whether slaves or freed, that they are under the yoke of Christ and are his purchased property (7:23). Use your present lot—and hope for the best. This is his practical advice (7:24); and he himself exemplified it (Philippians 4:11-13).

THOSE WHO ARE NOT MARRIED

## I CORINTHIANS 7:25-40

Celibacy is again the subject of discussion.

WITH SOME APPARENT reluctance, Paul offers the advice which he has been requested to give as an apostle who possesses the Spirit (7:40), although he concedes that he has no command of the Lord to which he may appeal (7:25).

Certain governing principles are set out which make it beneficial not to enter on marriage. It is a moot point how far these conditions are still valid today—and we must always remember Paul’s own qualifications (7:28). Can you detect the principles?

1. The acute “time of stress” in which apostolic Christianity was being established (7:26), with no clear future, mainly because a clash with state (leading to persecution and death by martyrdom) could be discerned by any with eyes to see.
2. The uncertainty of society’s continued existence, bounded (as the church has always believed) by the prospect of the Lord’s return and the winding up of history (7:29,31).
3. The need to live as those who recognize themselves as pilgrims and strangers in the world (7:26-31; Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11), and so to be set free from the anxiety which comes with the ownership of property—and the domestic responsibility of a wife, children and home life (7:32-34). Again, Paul inserts a proviso, in no way wishing to hold his

converts back (7:35), but concerned only that they may “wait on the Lord without distraction.” A missionary situation required a stringent ethic; the question is how far, with the coming of Christian civilization and culture, these prescriptions remain valid.

We have assumed that normal marriage opportunities and arrangements are in Paul’s mind (as, eg in 7:27). The next section (7:36-38), however, envisages the problem confronting an engaged couple. 7:39 gives two ideals for Christian marriage: marriage is a life-long commitment and Christians should only marry Christians.

Two facts are clear from this chapter: celibacy and marriage are both natural, and a person must make his or her choice.

## FOOD FOR IDOLS

# 1 CORINTHIANS 8

We might need to give up some things that are all right for us to avoid hurting other Christians who don't share our attitude.

THE INTRODUCTORY PHRASE poses another query on which the church sought Paul's mind. He opens his reply by quoting a statement from the Corinthians' letter. The Christians were evidently asking which spiritual gift ranked highest. They preferred "knowledge"; Paul retorts that it is "love" which takes precedence, and later chapters will amplify 8:1-3.

The real issue before the Christians at Corinth, with their confidence in knowledge, had to do with food offered to idols.

The church was obviously in two minds over whether it was proper to eat food which had been formerly used in temple worship, only a portion of which was actually consumed in sacrifice, and which later was offered for sale in the butchers' shops. Was the Christian at liberty to use this meat, because, after all, idols were non-existent and couldn't contaminate the food? Or, should Christians refrain because idolatry cast a spell over food, so making it "unclean" and unfit for consumption by believers?

The apostle's answer is detailed and spread over two chapters (8 and 10). He begins by agreeing with the maxim that first there is only one God, so secondly no idol has any real existence (8:4-6). But this, to Paul, is not the whole story. Other factors enter in and modify this initial judgment: in these verses the considerations to be borne in mind are (1) we should respect the

conscience of “weaker brothers and sisters” for whom idolatry was a real problem and who did not share the enlightenment of those who possessed knowledge (8:1); (2) liberty must be balanced by our concern for others (8:9), for it was a serious offense to cause any fellow Christian to stumble; in fact, it was like striking a blow at Christ himself (8:12); and (3) the whole business of eating idol foods, or refraining, is a matter of personal indifference to Paul (8:8), and he is interested only in securing the well-being of other Christians who may be impeded in their spiritual growth (8:13). People are more important than food. So we might need to give up some things that are all right for us, to avoid hurting other Christians who don’t share our attitude.

**Notes** 8:5 reflects the polytheism of the ancient religious world. 8:12: Christ is affected by an offense against his people (Acts 9:4f.).

PAUL GIVES UP HIS RIGHTS

## 1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-18

Paul would rather put up with anything than put an obstacle in the way of the good news about Christ.

THE CONNECTION OF this section with the previous chapter is not easy to see, and a suggestion has been made that chapter 9 is part of a separate letter. But this proposal is unnecessary once we recall the two themes now taken up. First, in chapter 8 Paul has been showing the need of consideration of other people's needs; now he states that this has been the policy of his ministry, even to the point of refusing a right which properly belonged to him (9:12). Secondly, he is sensitive to the criticism which has been passed on him (9:1), because his behavior has evidently been questioned or misunderstood by his detractors. The argument against him would run: Paul doesn't claim his right of maintenance as an apostle because he is unsure of his true apostleship. He replies by asserting the qualifications that he has (9:1-2). What are they?

9:3-7. As an apostle whose labors have been fruitful in establishing the Corinthian community under God, he goes on to say that the privilege of financial support from the churches is his too (9:4); and for a married man, like Peter, an apostle may rightfully expect the help of the churches to enable his wife to accompany him on his journeys (9:5). There is Old Testament precedent for the rule that the Lord's servants do not look in vain to the Lord's people for their upkeep and support.

9:8-14. That Old Testament teaching extends to cover maintenance in the actual work of the ministry (9:9-11,14), and if the other apostolic leaders at Corinth had been given their rights, why should Paul's rights be called in question (9:12)?

Now comes the important turning point in his treatment. He has chosen voluntarily to renounce these rights (9:12). Why? At all costs he wishes to avoid the charge of unscrupulous dealing—a theme treated at length in 2 Corinthians chapters 10–12.

9:15-18. Preaching the gospel is for Paul like the effect of fire in Jeremiah's bones (Jeremiah 20:9); he preaches because he cannot help himself; a divine compulsion rests upon him (9:16), even if he wanted to quit (9:17). The conclusion is plain therefore. The work of God is its own reward, found in the joy of service to Christ and the privilege of being usable in his hands (9:18).

**Thought** Paul's reasoning in this section does not release us from our responsibility for the worthy upkeep of the ministry (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18).

PAUL, THE SOUL-WINNER

## 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-27

Paul explains his passion to see others won for Jesus Christ.

AS PAUL HAD cleared himself of the charge of uncertain motives in not securing financial support, so he moves on to show his deep concern always to make himself available to others, even to the point of adopting certain courses of action which would be unnatural to him. Again, we may ask, what is his motivation in all these renunciations and acceptances (9:22b,23)?

He offers two explanations. First in 9:19-23, he makes it clear that in his missionary service his aim is to gain the greatest possible number of converts: “by all means [to] save some” (9:22). The reason for this passage (9:20-22a) is probably to be sought in some criticism which had been leveled against him. His opponents—justifiably enough from their viewpoint—accused him of a confused attitude to the relation between Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes he observed the Law (Acts 21:24) as though he were a pious Jew; at other times he identified himself with the Gentiles to such an extent that a rumor could circulate that he had abandoned all his ancestral heritage (Acts 21:21). Understandably Paul was under a cloud of suspicion from all quarters: did he really know his own mind? Or had he no fixed principles?

The paragraph (9:20 ff.) offers a rationale of his missionary conduct. He felt himself genuinely freed from Mosaic obligations—but if nevertheless he sometimes observed the commandments of the Law it was for the purpose of

not offending Jews who were likely to become Christians, in conformity with the principle stated in 8:13.

9:24-27. In the second place, his evangelistic passion was so conscientious that he knew that when he had striven to make the gospel presentable to all, he was still left with his greatest problem himself. Christian workers and evangelists must keep a watchful eye on their own inner life, taking spiritual self-discipline as seriously as athletes observe strict rules of training, diet and self-control. Otherwise their hopes of being successful in the gospel's service are as futile as those of the unprepared entrant for the Isthmian Games held at Corinth. His great fear (9:27) is that after doing the preaching (as an art to be learned!), in God's eyes he should be disqualified, like a runner or boxer who gets disqualified and sees his efforts wasted.

**Meditation** 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7-8.

WARNINGS FROM ISRAEL'S HISTORY

## 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

Paul reminds us not to take spiritual privileges for granted.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, according to the New Testament, holds in tension a restful assurance and a healthy fear. On the one side, we have the confidence of Romans 8:28-39; Philippians 1:6, with a promise of eternal security; but in case this assurance should dull our moral senses and generate a careless attitude, we must recall the warnings of Hebrews 2:1; 10:4-9,26-39; 12:25; 2 Peter 1:10 and 1 Corinthians 9:27.

It is this salutary reflection on the need for personal discipline in his own life that prompts Paul to deal with the prevailing mood at Corinth. The core of his warning is that religious profession, expressed in the use of the sacraments, is “no safeguard for a careless life which takes liberties with itself” (Moffatt).

The quiet reminder which Paul gives is that the Old Testament people of God had their special moments of revelation when God came uniquely near; they enjoyed their “sacraments,” as they were “baptized into Moses” (10:2) and were sustained by the life-giving water from the rock (10:4). But as they turned aside to idolatry and away from the true God, they quickly met their fate (10:5-10).

Old Testament incidents of judgment in spite of privilege (eg Amos 3:1-2) do not belong simply to the storybook of the past, Paul warns (10:11): through them we are warned today (Hebrews 3:7-19). The call is one of self-

examination (10:12) and a turning away from all presumption and blind trust in religious ceremonial or any supposed “once for all” status, which makes the one who professes faith insensitive to the moral standards set by the gospel and demanded of God’s people in every age. Temptation to slackness will come, but no trial has power to overwhelm us while a way out is provided (10:13). But it is easier to find the “way out” if we refuse, in the first place, to pass through the “way in” to a compromising situation. Therefore 10:14 (see also 1 Timothy 6:11).

**Notes** 10:1-5: “It looks as though the Corinthians expected salvation to be automatically guaranteed to them because they had been baptized and because they shared in the Lord’s Supper” (Thrall). 10:6-10 give five examples of Israelite lapses. Can you spot them? (Numbers 11:4-6; Exodus 32:6; Numbers 25:1-9; 21:4-9; 16). The numerical discrepancy between Numbers 25:9 and 1 Corinthians 10:8 is not serious; both are round figures and we may mark Paul’s addition “in a single day.”

## IDOL WORSHIP AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

### 1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-22

We cannot say we belong to Christ and live as though we don't.

IDOL WORSHIP WAS another common feature of daily life in Corinth, and no Corinthian believers could close their eyes to what was going on all around them. This is the dilemma facing the church in pagan society: "On the one hand, they could not absolutely give up their family and friendly relations; the interests of the gospel did not allow them to do so. On the other hand, these relations were full of temptations ... Among the most thorny points in this order of questions were invitations to take part in idolatrous banquets. Now various questions might be raised on this subject. And first of all, is it allowable for a Christian to be present at a feast offered in the temple of an idol? Some, in the name of Christian liberty, answered: "Yes! ... All things are lawful for me" (6:12; 10:23). Others said: "No! For in such a region one subjects himself to the danger of malign and even diabolical influences" (Godet).

At an earlier place in the correspondence (8:4-13), Paul affirmed the truth of Christian liberty on the ground that idols are nonexistent and products of the human imagination (Romans 1:21-23 comes to a similar conclusion). Now, he presents another aspect of the case by asserting that behind the idol lurks a demonic influence (10:19-20), and it is this demonic power which is capable of contaminating, not food, but people. The terrible consequence is that Christians, by entering into liaison with the idolater at a temple feast,

may open the door to demonic influence on their lives, and this would lead to a compromise in the believers' discipleship as they have communion with Christ and his rival—a course which, in any case, is doomed to failure for the reason given in Matthew 6:24. (10:21: “cannot” here means that a consistency of profession is lost the moment the Corinthians acknowledge the claim of the demon on them.)

The Lord's table is not a pious act in memory of a past figure of history. Christians worship no dead Christ, but discover, as they commemorate the Supper, that the elements of bread and wine mean they share in the presence of Christ (10:16), communicated to a living faith which receives Christ at his table. There is, moreover, a horizontal reference in the church's fellowship meal (10:17), for in sharing in Christ's body and blood, believers realize their focus of unity as his body in the world—and this vocation commits them to his sole lordship, unshared by rival gods.

BELIEVERS' FREEDOM

1 CORINTHIANS 10:23–11:1

As Christians, we are to think about the choices we make.

THE BURNING QUESTION raised by the Corinthian correspondents still required further treatment. At the earlier place (8:10) the situation envisaged is an invitation to share a meal with an unbeliever at his god's temple. The worship of Serapis included a meal at the temple as the devotees gathered, and in a surviving papyrus letter an invitation to such an occasion is recorded: "Chaeremon invites you to dinner at the table of our lord Serapis in the Serapeum tomorrow the 15th at nine o'clock." Paul's answer to this problem is that eating such a sacrificial meal is tantamount to idolatry, and is forbidden.

But two other practical issues still remained. The practice of shopping in the market (10:25) and a social occasion of a meal in a private house (10:27) presented cases on which Paul's ruling was sought. His answers follow:

1. In the case of people shopping in a butcher's shop, they are not required to be anxious over the food's "past history," ie whether or not it has been formerly offered in a temple. Paul allows the Christian to accept it, because it is covered by the ordinance of Psalm 24:1, which declares all God's gifts to be good (1 Timothy 4:4-5).
2. In the case of an invitation to a nonsacrificial meal, the same allowance is granted, and Paul is sympathetic with the Corinthians who had

evidently made the point that such occasions were part and parcel of the social and business life of their city (equivalent to lunch engagements of modern business people). The only proviso is the action to be followed if attention is drawn to where the meat has come from. If this happens (10:28), the “eating is prohibited, not as in itself idolatrous, but because it places the eater in a false position, and confuses the conscience of others” (Robertson-Plummer, updated). Notice again Paul’s delicate concern for another’s well-being (10:24,29,32-33).

The last word on the subject is final in every sense (10:31), setting the highest standard possible, namely to live to the greater glory of God.

**Notes** 10:23: Paul is quoting from the Corinthians’ letter to him. 10:28: “offered in sacrifice”—the Greek term indicates part of pagan ritual (unlike the term in 8:1, which is capable of carrying a good or bad sense).

**To think over** On 10:32: “Christianity demands that your right shall not lead others astray, that it shall not do violence to that most sacred and delicate thing—a human conscience” (F.W. Robertson).

## HONORING GOD

# 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

Paul now turns to public worship.

TWO FURTHER COMPLICATIONS in the assembled congregation at Corinth needed a ruling which this section provides: first, the sense of proper order to be observed at public worship was much in debate; and secondly the liberation of women at Corinth created its own difficulty once it became customary for Christian women to share vocally in the congregational service. As a loyal Jew Paul takes his stand on the divine ordering laid down in Genesis (11:3,7; 1 Timothy 2:13-14); but as a Christian, priority in creation and in society is moderated by the reminders of mutual honor and interdependence (11:8,11-12). Ephesians 5:21-33 represents the full flowering of this teaching which the Christian church has been slow to receive and act on.

Paul has no qualms about the part which women may play in Christian worship. The functions of prayer and prophecy (defined in 14:3 as a rough equivalent of preaching) are fully granted; the sole proviso is the adopting of a proper head attire (11:5; the alternative of 11:6 is not always remembered!). But that alternative, offered in 11:6, is apparently withdrawn in 11:15, where a woman's hair is part of her femininity, and the possibility of her being shaven in order to avoid wearing a covering (11:6) is regarded as contrary to nature (11:15). Paul cuts short any extended discussion (11:16).

A note should be added to relate this passage to 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which seems to take away any feminine participation in public worship (see 14:34-

35). The prophetic gift may have included speaking in tongues (Acts 21:9) and that Corinthian women were abusing the gift; Paul is therefore warning against unseemly behavior in an assembly where public worship would quickly get out of hand—and the same restriction is imposed on the Ephesian community in 1 Timothy 2:8ff. There it is also a question of women taking office in the church as distinct from exercising a function (as in 1 Corinthians chapter 11). The former is forbidden, while the latter is permitted (with due safeguards of good order).

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

# 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-22

Paul criticizes snobbery at the Lord's table.

THE TROUBLE WITHIN the Corinthian church was not that the believers were avoiding congregational meetings for service and sacrament, but that they failed to understand and apply some elementary principles of Christian worship (11:17); therefore Paul's word of reproof comes.

Two criticisms are raised in this section. First, the lack of unity in the church had become most obvious at the very place where that unity should be most powerfully demonstrated (11:18). Paul can't put his finger exactly on the trouble-spot but fears the worst. 11:19 is ironical and looks back to earlier references (1:10 ff.; 3:3,21) which clearly indicate that the church was sharply divided into groups, and a jealous spirit prevailed. The rebuke of the apostle is the corollary of the truth (10:17) of the oneness of the church, which shows a single loaf at the fellowship meal. By this quarrelsome and divisive attitude the Corinthians were denying the unity of the church at the precise point at which its oneness as the body of Christ should be displayed and realized to the full.

The second feature of the Lord's Supper observance was no less serious. The outward form may be observed and the members may go through the motions associated with the cup of blessing and the breaking of the bread (10:16), but solemn worship employing holy things is worthless unless the spirit of the worshipers is right. Psalm 51:6-19 are a classic statement of this

requirement. Can you recall some of the prophets' condemnation of wickedness and worship (Isaiah 1:10-31; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8)?

11:20. "The Lord's Supper" is a comprehensive term, embracing a fellowship meal (the *agape* or love feast) in the framework of which a communion service was held. The grievous fault at Corinth was a sin of selfishness and greed (11:21). The rich members arrived early at the assembly (in a house, no doubt, 11:22) and began their meal; the poorer members, probably slaves whose duties detained them, came late only to find all the food consumed. The early arrivals had had a royal time—to the point of intoxication. No wonder Paul ridicules this situation in tones of astonished disgust (11:22)!

THE LORD'S SUPPER

I CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

The service is held to remember Christ's death.

THE SETTING OF the Lord's table service was (as 11:21-22 show) an ordinary meal, and this custom is found elsewhere, eg in the document known as the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* or *Didache* which describes the church in Syria in the decades AD 80–100. But gradually (for reasons not unrelated to the consequences which followed the procedure at Corinth) this combination of a meal and a sacrament was abandoned, and the solemn observance of the communion came to be practiced on its own.

These familiar words should be read alongside the Gospel accounts (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-19) and the differences noted. Substantially the sense is the same in all the accounts; it is the emphasis which varies. In Paul's account the chief emphases are:

1. 11:23 makes it plain that Paul was no innovator, but that he is transmitting to the Corinthians the substance of the holy rite which he himself received.
2. Both "bread" and "cup" form the main elements of the service, and are tokens of something greater, namely the body and blood of Christ. The sacrament consists not simply in bread, but broken bread; not in wine, but poured-out wine (10:16). The stress falls not on the elements (as though they held some magical virtue) but on the actions. Jesus' words

interpret his actions, and these acts are symbolic in line with the tradition of the Old Testament prophets' symbolic actions (eg Jeremiah chapters 27–28). Paul's statement further stresses the individual response needed ("for you," 11:24; "you drink it," 11:25).

3. His reference to the new covenant recalls Jeremiah 31:31ff., and is characteristically part of his inspired understanding of the gospel.
4. "In remembrance of me" is again Pauline; it is absent from Mark and the shorter text in Luke. Passover analogies help us to understand the phrase, as they throw light on the function of the elements. As the annual Paschal feast brought a re-living of Israel's redemption, so as Christians we "re-live" dynamically the events of our redeeming experience. We are there—in the upper room, at the cross and empty tomb. And with joyful expectation, we await the Lord's return (11:26).

PARTICIPATING IN LORD'S SUPPER REVERENTLY

1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-34

Sharing in the Lord's Supper is a precious privilege for believers.

THE VITAL PHRASE in this passage, which is the practical application of Paul's recital of the words of institution (11:23-26), is found in 11:29: "without discerning the body." Some fearful consequences are the result of a failure to heed this warning (11:27,30,32).

Some interpreters take the phrase to refer to the elements which represent the crucified body of the Lord; then the sin will be one of desecration or an ill-considered approach to the holy ordinance. Alternatively and preferably, "the body" may be a description of the church (as in 10:17; 12:12) which is closely linked with Christ. Then, Paul's criticism fastens on the Corinthians' lamentable disregard of their oneness in Christ, giving rise to the practices which so disfigured their fellowship meal: selfish interests (11:21); gluttony and drunkenness (11:21); and snobbery (11:22). By these malpractices, unworthy of their Christian profession and allegiance, the Christians were despising the church of God (11:22) by failing to discern the true nature of Christ's body in which there is no room for proud display and ill-tempered inconsideration of others. This attitude, so rife at Corinth, implies such an insensitive concern at the table that the meal was celebrated "in an unworthy manner" (11:27) and in a highminded spirit which received God's judgment (11:30-32). Paul's answer matches the need (11:33-34), that is, be considerate by making the occasion a true family action, and let the demands of hunger

be satisfied before you come to the assembly in order not to show up the poorer church members who brought only a little food or even nothing at all (11:22)!

**Thought** How should we prepare for the communion service?

A WARNING

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-3

Not every claim to religious experience is necessarily Christian.

THE CORINTHIAN BODY of believers were not slow in representing to Paul the special gifts they had received. He acknowledges this fact (1:4-5,7) and calls attention to the church's eager desire to excel in the gifts of the Spirit (12:31; 14:1,12).

To possess the Holy Spirit's gifts (*charismata* is the Greek term) is one thing; to set them in a right order of priority and to use them worthily is another. It is to this second matter that Paul now addresses his words (12:1).

The opening paragraph of 12:1-3 is important because it is the apostle's reminder that not every claim to religious experience is necessarily Christian. There are good spirits—the Holy Spirit is above all the gracious indwelling power of God in his children (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Corinthians 5:5; Romans 8:9-16) as he had already taught them in this letter (3:16; 6:19); and there are demonic spirits (again earlier references may be in his mind, 10:20-21). Where is this distinction most sharply drawn (1 John 4:1-6)? And what test of discrimination is there to be applied?

Paul recalls the preChristian life of his readers (12:2). They were led into error and practiced the worship of mute deities (Psalm 115:4-8) but often pagan divinities induced in their devotees a state of trance and religious rapture. Mystical experience in every age may be explained in various ways—from the sublime experience of the Christian mystic (2 Corinthians 12:2-4)

to the victim of the witch doctor's art, from the practitioner of psychological auto-suggestion, to drug addict. Clearly some criterion of genuineness is needed.

That this need was not an imaginary one is clear from 12:3. In a religious ecstasy some member of the congregation had uttered the oath "Jesus be damned!"—a cry which must have sounded as offensive to Paul as to us today. Worse still, he attributed it to the Spirit; but, Paul sharply retorts, this cannot be the case, for the Holy Spirit leads no one to utter an uncontrolled blasphemous remark. Rather, it is his ministry to inspire the earliest Christian confession of faith "Jesus is Lord," only by which salvation is known (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:9-11).

SPIRITUAL GIFTS: THEIR VARIETY AND UNITY

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11

Paul writes about the gifts of the Spirit.

THIS PASSAGE FOCUSES our attention on the four principles which Paul is concerned to underline and drive home.

1. The inclusive scope of his gifts-of-grace (*charismata*) is made clear at the outset. Notice the terms which run like a thread through Paul's treatment: "in every one" (12:6); "to each" (12:7); "all these" (believers who exercise some spiritual gift, 12:11). As every Christian as a believer and member of Christ's body is indwelt, baptized and watered by the Holy Spirit (12:12-13), so they receive some endowment which equips them for useful service within the fellowship.

It is this feature which stamps the Christian church as a unique social institution in the world; it is a community in which, ideally, every member has a part to play and a task to perform. Everyone in the church is important—irrespective of what social group they belong to (and the church at Corinth had different social groups—see those passages which speak of division, rivalries and snobbery based on wealth)—although no one is indispensable.

2. The rich variety of the Spirit's gifts is displayed by the phrase "varieties of gifts" (12:4), all of which are attributed to the same Spirit. All Christians have some gift, but not the same gift. 12:8-10 enumerate nine

specimen activities (12:6). This list, along with the others in the New Testament (Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:7-12), are probably representative rather than exhaustive.

3. In case the Corinthians imagined that the lack of some spectacular gift (tongues, healings, miracle-working?) was a sign of disfavor, the apostle reminds them that the Spirit's sovereign disposing (12:11) is the final rule. "As he wills" should sound the death-knell to jealousy and envy as Christians were evidently in fierce competition in desiring the more remarkable phenomena in their church life. The lesson is not lost today. It is tragic when we try to serve the Lord in a job for which we have no spiritual ability or aptitude.
4. The invariable purpose of the gifts is clearly spelled out: "for the common good" (12:7), ie for the well-being and growth of the entire community. See also 14:12 and especially Ephesians 4:12-16.

ALL BAPTIZED BY ONE SPIRIT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13

Whoever we are, it is the same Spirit that places us in the one body of Christ.

WE CONTINUE TO consider the masterly way in which Paul dealt with this faction-ridden, proud and independent church. These two verses sum up the significant part of Paul's doctrine of the church.

1. The unity of the church is a unity with diversity, as the analogy of the human body illustrates. The physical frame is composed of many parts, all with necessary functions, but we speak of a body as a single entity. So it is with the church, which is made up of many individuals, all with varying temperaments, personality and gifts, and yet in a very real sense they are not many but "one body in Christ" (Romans 12:4-5). Diversity of gifts (12:4ff.; Romans 12:6) does not destroy the oneness of the church; rather it transforms a drab entity into a living organism which pulsates with life: the common life in the body of Christ.
2. The regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin and the imparting of new life, leading to the saving confession of 12:3, includes the forming of this one body which is one in another sense. The Christian church, by definition of its nature and calling as the body of the Lord, can tolerate no divisions caused by accidents of race and social position (12:13). Which passages does this verse call to mind (Galatians

3:28; Colossians 3:11)? The gospel sacraments are a perpetual witness to this breaking down of barriers which divided the ancient world: baptism is into the one name (1 Corinthians 1:13ff.) and at the Lord's table all drink from one cup which is shared.

3. The most striking thought lies embedded in this most important section. "He calls the church Christ," commented Calvin, and so agrees here with ancient tradition which asserts such a closeness of bond between Christ and his people that they form "as it were one mystical person" (Aquinas), the "whole Christ," which is a corporate title embracing Jesus as the head and his ransomed people as necessary members. As a shepherd requires a flock, so the Messiah must have a messianic community, and it was this thought which arrested Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:4-5: "Why do you persecute me?" [not: "... my people"]) and this conviction of Christ-in-his-church never left him (1 Corinthians 8:12).

HARMONY IS ESSENTIAL

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:14-26

Think of the wide variety of people in your church and thank God for every one.

FOUR KEY ITEMS stand out in this section:

1. 12:14-16. Every Christian is a necessary member of the community. The use of analogy drawn from the interdependence of the human body is not new. Already in the Stoic philosopher Epictetus we meet the saying: “You are a citizen of the world and one of its limbs.” Paul’s treatment, however, is far more insistent on the impossibility of one member becoming amputated from the rest of the whole body—even if that organ, now personified, wanted to cut itself off. And certainly—and this is the apostle’s point driven home to the Corinthians’ predicament of mutual rivalries and jealousies—it is foolish for one member (the foot or the ear) to want to detach itself from the corporate whole because it is not some other member. Every part plays a necessary part in the harmonious functioning of the whole.
2. 12:17-22. Every Christian needs the help of every other Christian. Again, Paul’s insistence is double-edged. As in the human body, each part cannot function on its own and, at the same time, if it fails to do its job, the whole body feels the effect of this breakdown. Exactly so in the church. Individual believers are likened to “a single organ” (12:19) with

a specific part to play, but not in splendid isolation from the rest of the fellowship. And if that one member fails in their responsibilities, the entire family of God is affected. Romans 14:7 well illustrates the interrelation and reciprocal dependence which makes a “solo performance” type of Christian living unthinkable according to New Testament standards (Ephesians 4:25b, which may well be a motto to be held in constant review, both in our local congregations and ecumenical relationships).

3. 12:23-25. Particular respect should be shown to those members of the community who appear to be less important than the rest. The key thought is: “that there may be no discord in the body” (12:25), applied here to a situation in which social haughtiness and spiritual superiority were a prevalent malaise. Proud Corinthians, richly endowed with spiritual gifts and material possessions, were looking down on the poorer brothers and sisters as “inferior” (12:24), a word Paul picks up and throws back at these snobs with devastating effect!
4. 12:25-26. Every Christian is sympathetically involved in the prosperity or misfortune of their fellow Christians. Perhaps this is the one place in Scripture where “care” or “anxiety” (Greek *merimnan*: the same term is used negatively in Matthew 6:34; Philippians 4:6) is positively commanded as our duty: be anxious—about fellow Christians; when they are suffering, sympathize, and when they flourish, rejoice in the honor they have received (12:26).

## GIFTS FOR THE BODY

# 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-31

Although each believer has different gifts, each is equally a member of the body of Christ.

PAUL SUMS UP his teaching in a final verse (12:27), after he has drawn maximum content from the analogy of the human body. There is one body, into which all believers are baptized at conversion as they utter the Spirit-inspired confession (12:3,13). Christ is the head of this body (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18), and gathers the members into a true unity as his limbs and organs. So individual Christians are likened to the several parts of the body which, under the control of the head, represents “the whole Christ,” ie Christ’s agents in the world. A body’s health consists in its organs and cells functioning properly and in unison, so, with “each part ... working properly” (Ephesians 4:16), Christ’s body grows and matures. What is the pervasive atmosphere in which this development takes place (Ephesians 4:16)? Paul will turn to this theme as to “a still more excellent way” (12:31).

The New Testament church, from its inception, was an ordered society. It was, however, not hierarchical and institutional in the later sense of possessing rigid orders of a priesthood of ministry; but equally it was not a shapeless and loose association of freely consenting individuals who decided to form a church as a convenient social unit. There was, from the beginning, an ordered life and a rudimentary ministerial pattern, indicated in 12:28.

Much controversy has centered on the exact nature of the apostolic office and other various ministerial functions in the early church.

“Apostles” rank as the first in Paul’s list, for the reason supplied in Ephesians 2:20 (see also Revelation 21:14). They were the original founder members of the Christian society, with certain additional people (notably Paul) who claimed to have met the requirements of Acts 1:22 (see also 1 Corinthians 9:1; Galatians 1:1). The order of “prophets” (eg Agabus in Acts 11:27f.; 21:10) was concerned with a revelation of the divine will for the congregation (Acts 13:1), a function shared with “teachers”—and mainly of an itinerant character (Ephesians 4:11). The other people referred to (in 12:28) possessed a functional gift, exercised in the assembled worship of the church.

The point of the rhetorical questions (12:29-30) is that in each case the expected answer (clearly stated in the Greek) is No. Not all Christians can claim to possess the full range of the gifts: and there are some gifts (eg apostleship) which are unique and unrepeatable. But one “way” in which any gift is to be exercised is open to all.

PAUL'S "HYMN OF LOVE"

## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3

Paul writes that any gift is worthless unless it is accompanied by love.

THE PURPOSE OF this great chapter, Paul's "hymn of love," is often not fully appreciated. This purpose is to show that while the Corinthians were to be commended for seeking the greatest gifts of the Spirit (12:31; 14:12), any gift is worthless unless it is accompanied by love. Love (Greek *agape*) is not one of the gifts which a person may or may not have; it is the indispensable nature or attitude without which all the gifts combined are futile and misdirected. It is a question, therefore, of love plus whatever gift of the Holy Spirit we may have received. The grace-gift is always to be exercised under the control and directive of love.

These verses are intended to demonstrate the priority of love over all its rivals, and to enforce the lesson of "a still more excellent way." Four possibilities are considered; each makes a claim to be the hallmark of a devoted Christian life—and each is rejected as spurious and ineffectual, if love be absent.

1. The gift of moving eloquence and fluent tongues (languages) (13:1), granting the ability to stir people like a fanfare of trumpets, or the crashing of cymbals. There is here a possible side glance at the Apollos party (1:12) who took as their guide the eloquent preacher of Acts

18:24; Paul, by contrast, set his face against the misuse of rhetoric (1 Corinthians 2:1; 2 Corinthians 10:10).

2. The gift of intellectual expertise (13:2a) suggests the facility of persuasive and logical presentation (“prophecy” is defined in 14:3), along with a claim to possess some secret knowledge. Some Corinthians were not reluctant to place this intellectual ability at the top of their list (1 Corinthians 8:1)—but Paul quickly deflates the pride to which this gift can so easily lead (8:2).
3. The gift of a practical, working faith (13:2b) is, on the surface, most desirable (see Mark 11:23), for by faith in God great things are attempted and achieved. Yet the danger is one of exhibitionism and showmanship by which “faith” is paraded and publicly “demonstrated,” The warning of Matthew 7:22-23 is always needed.
4. The gift of a concern for humanity also seems commendable enough (12:3), and the philanthropist who gives their money and even their life is often a rebuke to professing believers. But the vital issue is always motive. Why do we respond to the claim of 1 John 3:17-18? Have we ever searched our motives when money and clothes are needed in some city stricken by earthquake? We may find a characterization of religion as asceticism which leads to martyrdom. Again, we applaud the sacrifice of the martyr—not a uniquely Christian trait. But the motive is once more the chief consideration and some early Christian martyrs didn’t always face the arena out of a pure love for Christ and his truth.

WHAT IS LOVE?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7

Paul writes about the great features and effects of love.

AFTER ESTABLISHING THE indispensable qualification of love in all our religious and humanitarian acts, Paul turns to set out the pattern of Christian *agape*, and describes its features.

There are two reasons why these verses should be read often.

First, love is a term in need of careful definition. Today it is a ragbag of a word, containing all manner of meanings. But as a Christian word, a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and an incentive to our daily living (Galatians 5:6), here is the inspired characterization. Secondly, these verses give a pen-portrait of Jesus Christ himself (1 Peter 2:21 tells us of the example of Christ), and what more vital spiritual exercise could there be than a contemplation of the Lord of love?

The paragraph has three divisions.

1. Positively, what love does (13:4a). Patience and kindness are natural partners, as elsewhere (Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12; 2 Corinthians 6:6), where the combined forces of these virtues are equally a fruit of the Spirit, a sign of election and a method of evangelism.
2. Negatively, what love does not do (13:4b-6). Christian *agape* as the basis of ethics contains a salutary abstinence-motif, warning the believer away from certain danger points. It is not afraid of pinpointing certain

vices as elements in the moral life to be shunned (against the notion of “situation ethics” for which there are no absolutes of right and wrong). Paul lists eight undesirable qualities in these verses: jealousy, conceit (literally “gives itself no airs”), pride (the damning sin at Corinth, 4:6,18-19; 5:2; 8:1), rudeness (whether as lack of good manners or indecency), selfishness, irritation (Acts 15:39 gives the same word), the unforgiving spirit (a commercial term is used: “keeps no register of wrongs”) and unrighteousness.

3. Inclusively, what love does all the time (13:7). The Greek word (*panta*) is translated as the object of the verbs, but it is better taken as an adverb of time: “continually.” So there is no limit to love’s endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: love can outlast anything.

Who can scale the heights set by this lyric? The secret is discovered in the indwelling Christ whose life shines out in the Christian’s attitudes and actions (Ephesians 3:17).

**Exercise** Henry Drummond counsels us to read this chapter every day for a month and to note its effect on our life.

## LOVE'S PERMANENCE

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

Our present experience is partial and points to a more complete state  
in the age to come.

THE THIRD PART of this New Testament “song of songs” stresses love’s permanence. The scene is set in the future: “When that which is perfect comes” (13:10) and the present order gives place to the life of the age to come. At present in “this age”—references to this phrase are worth reading (Galatians 1:4; 2 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 5:19; 2 Corinthians 4:4)—nothing can strictly be called perfect by reason of sin, sorrow and human finiteness. Therefore our experience, in all its facets, is “in part” (13:12) and is a pointer to a more complete state in the consummation (see Matthew 28:20).

Two points are made by the apostle as he bids us reflect on love’s continuance beyond this life into the new age.

First, love is in contrast with transient qualities (13:8). The gifts of prophecy, tongues, knowledge are all related to, because relevant to, this age. They have a value, and need to be cultivated. That is why we have the warnings of 14:1,20 (answering 13:11); but their value is conditioned by their need. In the coming era, prophecy (= preaching, 14:3) and knowledge will also be displaced, giving way to an encounter with God in Christ and a perfect face-to-face communion (13:12a) which will render the mediation of preaching and knowledge superfluous (13:12b). But love, because it is so much part of God’s own nature (1 John 4:7-12) will remain.

Secondly, love is the climax of the permanent qualities. Other Christian virtues will remain in conjunction with love. What are they (13:13)? Yet love takes the first place. In what sense is love the greatest? Reviewing the chapter, we may answer: (1) because it is the very soul of the other gifts (13:1-3); (2) because it is supreme by its own excellence and shines in its own light; and (3) because it is of the very essence of God (1 John 4:16).

The three virtues of 13:13 are mentioned together elsewhere (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Colossians 1:4-5; Ephesians 4:2-5; Romans 5:1-5; Galatians 5:5-6) and evidently formed a well-known threesome.

## PROPHECY AND TONGUES

### 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-5

In this chapter Paul sorts out the chaos that often occurred when the Corinthians met for worship.

“PUT LOVE FIRST” epitomizes Paul’s words of advice at the conclusion of his discussions on love’s preeminence and permanence. Once this is understood and done, believers should not be lazy or lacking in spiritual ambition, but seek to be the very best for God by using to the full whatever gift the Spirit has granted. Which gift does Paul place at the head of the list (14:1)?

In fact, there must have been some controversy within the church over the relative value of two types of public utterance: prophecy, and speaking in tongues. These are clearly distinguished in 14:2-3 and pride of place is given to prophetic speech on the ground that “the prophet, although inspired, speaks a comprehensible language and, without interpretation, can have a beneficial effect on the meeting” (Héring). The exact nature of this type of public speaking is spelled out in 14:3: it is a ministry which builds up (a favorite Pauline idea), and exhorts (see Romans 12 as a good example of this kind of utterance) and comforts, and an example of this ministry is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 and Revelation 3:7-13). Would it be fair to say that this nuance of New Testament ministry may be represented by the modern term “preaching” or the “ministry of the word”?

*Glossolalia*—speaking in a tongue—on the other hand, is a language phenomenon in which the speaker utters words which are not immediately

intelligible, and so exercises a ministry which needs a complementary gift of interpretation (13:4).

Some modern interpreters of this passage make the helpful distinction also between the use of a “tongue” as an exercise of private devotion (13:2,4) in which the communion of the soul with God is so intimate and profound that no earthly language can be the vehicle of its expressions (see Romans 8:26-27; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4), and Paul had known this experience (14:18); and the use of tongues as a part of public congregational worship. In the latter instance, the key phrase is “in church” (14:19,28), with its variants, “if the whole church assembles” (14:23), “when you come together” (14:26).

If we accept this distinction based on the place where the gift of tongues is exercised, the opening verses deal with their value in private fellowship with God. In the secret place of fellowship, such a practice has value and the believer is “built up” (14:4) as they fathom the depths of spiritual experience (1 Corinthians 2:10-12). But the corporate value is only made possible if the one who practices the gift of tongues can give an intelligible sense (14:13), whereas prophecy, which requires no translation, is more highly commended (14:5).

## BUILDING UP THE CHURCH

# 1 CORINTHIANS 14:6-12

To convey meaning, a sound must be clear and the hearer must be able to understand it.

IN PAUL'S CONSIDERATION of spiritual gifts, which extends over chapters 12–14, the most important direction he gives is contained in today's reading. At 14:12 he clearly indicates first that there was some dispute and uncertainty within the Corinthian assembly over the relative importance of the gifts in their diversity (12:4), and this lack of understanding had engendered a rivalry and zeal to lay claim to "best gifts"; and secondly that his instruction is an insistence that all shall be done for the "building up of the church." This healthy reminder points back to 12:7 where the manifestation of the Spirit is given "for the common good," ie for the benefit of the whole community of believers. The communal nature of the Christian life and spiritual experience is a principle written into Pauline understanding of the church, and we neglect it today at our peril.

The gift of tongues is a test case. Apparently this was a spiritual endowment on which the Corinthians (or some of them) placed great store, and the whole church was divided over the use of this gift. The gift of tongues was practiced in the public gatherings for worship and Paul's ruling on this matter was sought.

With characteristic generosity he puts himself in the place of the one who gives expression to this gift (14:6). Notice how he regards as most vital the

need to benefit others by the various components of Christian worship. Any benefit from the exercise of tongues can only come if there is accompanying interpretation, otherwise the gift has no value whatever (14:9). This is an indication that this gift is practiced in public assembly, in contrast with the situation of 14:24. Paul's commonsense attitude runs through this section, with illustrations drawn from ancient musical practices (14:7), military parades (14:8) and the art of communication by speech which is only effective if the language is understandable.

## SPIRITUAL WORSHIP

# 1 CORINTHIANS 14:13-19

Paul writes about using the gift of tongues in church worship.

HERE PAUL GIVES a contrast between a practice in which the mind is alert and active (obviously implied in the prophetic ministry of 14:3 and negatively in 14:14) and the use of a tongue which is the product of a spiritual upsurge requiring no mental effort. There is a further reason why the gift of tongues needs control, when it is used in congregational worship. Unless some intelligible interpretation is given (14:13), immature Christians, lacking this gift and the accompanying gifts of interpretation and discernment (for such gifts were not universally shared as 12:30 makes clear), will not be able to enter helpfully into the worship. In a specific instance, if they listen to what seems to them to be gibberish with no sensible meaning, they will not be able to confirm the truth of the prayer by an audible Amen (14:16) and they will not be built up in their Christian life (14:17). Therefore, Paul concludes, the usefulness of the gift of tongues in public assembly is limited, and is set over against the ministry of prophecy in which even five words which are readily intelligible are far more profitable than two thousand times that number of words which fall meaninglessly on uncomprehending ears.

14:18 refers to the earlier portion of the chapter when Paul is relating the gift to its private exercise. With this practice he finds no fault, because no interpretation is required; but “in church” a restraint must be placed on the gift of tongues.

TONGUES AND PROPHECY IN PUBLIC WORSHIP.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:20-25

Paul recalls to his readers an Old Testament passage.

THERE IS STILL another factor to be borne in mind. The exercise of the gift of tongues in an open service, to which not simply immature Christians are welcomed, but also complete outsiders who attend out of curiosity or concern, may have a detrimental effect. Paul calls for some serious consideration to be given to the subject (14:20) as interested non-Christians visit the Corinthians at their worship.

He recalls to them an Old Testament passage (Isaiah 28:11-12) in which God threatens to punish his rebellious people by foreign invaders (the Assyrians) whose strange language will mystify the Jewish nation (see Isaiah 36:11ff.). Because the Jewish kingdom remained obstinate to the prophet's pleading in God's name, they would be judged by first suffering a foreign invasion and secondly being hardened in their unbelief (Isaiah 6:9-13). In the Old Testament context these "strange tongues," spoken by Israel's enemies, confirmed unbelieving Israel in their unbelief and so acted detrimentally.

Paul now takes over this reference to Isaiah 28 (given in 14:22 as well as 14:21), and expresses the fear that the same effect may very well follow if an unbeliever (14:23) enters a Christian assembly in which there is an unrestrained use of tongues. Then, as on ancient Israel, the effect will be harmful, and the impression created will lead to the conclusion, "You are mad!" (14:23b). On the contrary, if the gift of prophecy is exercised, the

words spoken will not only be intelligible but a powerful convicting and converting agency (14:24-25), moving the non-Christian visitor to repentance by the clear signs of God's presence in his people. It is obvious where Paul's sympathies lie when it comes to setting the gifts of the Spirit in any order of priority and importance.

14:22 may be Paul's comment on the Isaiah passage and "tongues" and "prophecy" may be taken in their Old Testament sense of Assyrian foreign languages which confirmed (by God's judgment) Israel's apostasy, whereas Isaiah's prophetic ministry was useful to the remnant which believed (Isaiah 8:16). There is precedent for this Pauline use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 3:16-17.

ORDER IN WORSHIP

1 CORINTHIANS 14:26-33

The Holy Spirit brings order to unholy disorder.

THE CHURCH WHICH meets us in the pages of the New Testament is a worshiping community of believing men and women. No one, in the light of such texts as Acts 1:14; 2:42,46; 4:31; 5:12,42; 13:1-3; 20:7-12, is likely to dispute this statement, but two caveats need to be entered. First, we know less about New Testament worship than we would like to know, and it is temptingly easy to fill in the gaps of our knowledge by reading back into the period from the later history of the church. Secondly, we are almost exclusively dependent on 1 Corinthians for the information, and it may well be an unjustifiable assumption to believe that what was true at Corinth held good for the rest of Christendom in the early period or, even, for the other Pauline churches. Where else in the New Testament do we have references to tongues, or such explicit detail about the Lord's Supper procedure?

These verses give insight into the type of public worship which was practiced at Corinth. Clearly informality and a sharing of spiritual gifts were the chief features, with a movement to a more formal and stylized pattern of worship (which we read about in the later letters) already peeping through. This section may well represent a midway point between the spontaneity of 1 Thessalonians and the more structured developments in Ephesians.

A comparison of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22 and Ephesians 5:19ff. with its parallel in Colossians 3:16ff. is instructive and throws some light on the

verses in this study. Praise and singing (14:14-15,26) stand at the head of the list of church practices. Some reading of Scripture and its exposition is implied (as in Acts 20:7ff. and Colossians 3:16 = 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). At Corinth there was speaking in tongues (possibly hinted at in 1 Thessalonians 5:19) and its necessary adjunct, interpretation (14:27-28). Prophecy is encouraged, for reasons which run like a thread through these Corinthian chapters (14:31b)—can you fasten a label to them? And a final cautionary word is added (corresponding to 1 Thessalonians 5:21) that prophetic utterances must be tested (14:29), and the welfare of the whole church kept to the forefront. That is why there is a need to have some understanding about speaking in turn lest a babble of voices distract from and destroy the real intention, that is, intelligible communication and responsible reception of God's word to the congregation (14:31).

GOOD ORDER IN WORSHIP

1 CORINTHIANS 14:34-40

All parts of divine worship should be conducted in an orderly manner.

THE PRECISE PHRASE “keep silence in the church(es)” in 14:34 looks back to 14:28 and provides us with a necessary exegetical clue. In the light of 11:5ff. (interpreted by 14:3), Paul cannot mean that the women church worshipers are to take no vocal part in the service; and the prohibition on “speaking” (14:34b) must be seen in context.

Some commentators give to the verb the sense of “chatter,” as though the women were becoming a nuisance by their whispered or disturbing conversation; and Paul, in the interests of good order and discipline, advises their silence with the counter-suggestion that if they have questions to ask they should reserve their conversation until they get home (14:35).

Alternatively we may interpret “speak” as a reference to speaking in tongues, and Paul’s restraint is on the Corinthian women, who (in their city life) whilst enjoying a considerable measure of freedom according to the standards of the ancient world, were taking the further unwarranted liberty of speaking in tongues. It is to this silence (ie not to exercise the gift of tongues) that they are urged in these verses, for Paul can quickly perceive the danger of public worship getting out of hand (as in 11:17ff.), and especially where the women were concerned. The same may have been true later at Ephesus in view of 1 Timothy 2:8ff., especially 1 Timothy 2:11 which uses the same term as the present passage (14:34: “submission”). See also Ephesians 5:22

which, in one manuscript tradition, has the same verb in a passage which may again have a similar situation in mind. As a small point in support of the above view is Paul's use of the verb to speak (*lalein*) which is constantly employed in the phrase "to speak in a tongue," not the alternative verb "to say something" (*legein*, found in 14:34: "the law says"). And a final, clinching argument is supplied by the rhetorical question of 14:36. Evidently Corinthian believers—both men and women—were claiming possession of a private revelation as though God had exclusively spoken to them. He has to remind them that apostolic truth is shared throughout the church and no claim to a "secret doctrine" (a later Gnostic speciality!) can be entertained. Let them receive this as the Lord's command (14:37) and take his teaching to heart (14:39-40).

BACK TO BASICS

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

Jesus really rose from the dead.

THE CHURCH OF the New Testament era was a confessing church as well as a worshipping community. By “confessing” we mean the possessing of a body of authoritative doctrine which was the given, acknowledged and shared heritage of those who formed the early Christian church in the world of the Roman empire. Only on the assumption of a corpus of doctrine which was accepted as binding and authoritative can we explain first the Christian consciousness of the church’s being a distinct entity in the world over against the Jews and Gentiles (1 Corinthians 10:32), and secondly the church’s missionary zeal in proclaiming the gospel which was not offered as a tentative suggestion to be entertained along with other attractive possibilities but as God’s unique truth, demanding a full and unreserved commitment (Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 11:4f.). It is with this background that we should approach verses 1-2.

The main tenets of the apostolic creed are clearly spelled out in what many scholars today recognize as a crystallization of the church’s teaching on the person and work of Christ (15:3-5). Certain telltale marks in this passage stamp it as a credal formulary: (1) the fourfold “that” introduces each line of the creed (15:3-5); (2) the vocabulary is unusual, containing some rare words and expressions which Paul never again employs (eg “in accordance with the Scriptures”); and (3) that we are in touch with a Christian confession of faith

which takes us back to the earliest period is confirmed by Paul's preface (15:3). What he had received as part of the instruction he had learned in the first days of his discipleship he now transmits as a sacred tradition which is in line with general apostolic practice (15:11).

What were the chief points of their belief? The cross as an atonement for sins, the reality of Christ's death, shown by his burial; the real resurrection on the third day and the appearances of the living Lord as conqueror of death—these were the facts on which faith and salvation rested (15:1-2). All these events, rooted in history and confirmed by experience, were seen to be grounded in Old Testament Scripture (Romans 1:2-4). Which passages would be used?

Christ's appearing to his disciples included a revelation to Paul (15:8), so calling him to the apostolic office. Paul is here defending his position, and warding off an insinuation made at Corinth that he was not truly qualified (15:8). He admits the unlikelihood from a human point of view of his ever becoming a believer, but sees in God's grace the only explanation possible for such a transformed life (1 Timothy 1:12-17). And in that sense we can all share his conviction: by the grace of God we are what we are.

## RESURRECTION QUERIED

# 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19

Paul comments on the beliefs of some of the Corinthians who denied the resurrection.

PAUL'S CITATION OF the creed had a purpose in view. He is leading up to the theme which the remainder of the chapter will deal with: the resurrection of Christ and of his people.

We may reconstruct a little of the setting. Evidently there were those in the Corinthian assembly who held strange views about the life after death (15:12). This denial of the resurrection may have taken one of two forms. The current Greek notion (eg stated by the Athenians, Acts 17:18,32) was that human immortality depended on his divine soul which survived death by being released from its imprisoning receptacle, the body. After the dissolution of the body from which the real self escaped at death, that soul was either absorbed into the divine or lived on in a shadowy existence of the underworld, Hades. But any hope of resurrection was to the Greek mind unthinkable.

The other possibility (of which there is evidence in 2 Timothy 2:18 and later Gnostic literature) which some Corinthians may have embraced was the view that the resurrection had already taken place, and that no future hope awaited the church.

Paul faces the heresy at Corinth head on. He recalls the basic conviction of Christ's own resurrection as the true starting-point (15:13) and proceeds to

show that unless this particular resurrection really happened, no vital assertion of Christian truth can be certainly made—with the consequence that one (ie Christ's) resurrection proves that his people may confidently expect their resurrection in like manner (Philippians 3:20-21).

What is at stake if this assertion of a real resurrection (over against spiritual survival or a demythologized version) is denied? Paul gives three fateful consequences: (1) Christian faith, awakened by the preaching of the message of 15:3ff., is empty, for its content has evaporated (15:14,17); (2) moreover, our experience of sin's forgiveness is shown up as a piece of self-deception (15:17b), for we believe that his death did remove our guilt, but lack the vital proof that God accepted him as our substitute and Savior—only the resurrection can offer such a guarantee; and (3) the future hope is seriously jeopardized both personally (15:19) as well as for those who have died “in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life” (15:18).

RESURRECTION PROCLAIMED

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-28

“But” introduces Paul’s confident declaration of the truth of Christ’s resurrection.

A STIRRING AFFIRMATION rings out in 5:20 in contradiction of the hypothetical “if’s” (six in the preceding paragraph). Christ has been raised (a perfect tense, denoting a past event with continuing consequences), and logically this one fact overthrows all the doubts and denials previously entertained. Christian faith is solidly based and has definite content; Christian forgiveness is no will-o’-the-wisp of auto-suggestion, but a real experience, confirmed by God’s vindication of his Son, and Christian hope for the future takes on an anchorlike assurance (Hebrews 6:19-20), for his victory includes the ultimate home-gathering of those who are his (John 14:19), just as the first sheaf reaped from the harvest field and brought as an offering (Leviticus 23:10f.) was a token of the full ingathering and the completed harvest celebration.

Paul’s continuing discussion elaborates the third of the affirmations included in 15:20. He is concerned to demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus is bound up with the resurrection of all those who belong to him. If this understanding of the apostle’s is remembered, it will help us interpret rightly the problematic “all” in 15:22,28. No universalism is intended in this passage for the simple reason that Paul’s thought here is concerned to show the relation between Christ and those who formerly were “in Adam” (and so liable to Adam’s just deserts of death and separation from God) but who now

are found “in Christ” and, as such, receive the benefits of his redeeming work, which includes their union with him in his death and victory. The notion is that of the corporate Christ (as at 12:12), ie Christ and “those who belong to Christ” (15:23) viewed as a single entity.

So far, Paul’s thought has looked backwards to what happened to Christ when he was raised (15:20). Present and future are now taken up into his scheme, for his Easter triumph was the beginning of a present reign (15:25) to be consummated at his final acclamation when all his enemies are put under his feet in reality as they are now subject to him by right. The test case is death; once conquered by his victory (2 Timothy 1:10), death still is at work in the world but will finally be itself destroyed (Revelation 20:14). But Christ’s universal rule sets up no rivalry to God’s sovereignty (15:28). His reign as mediator now will be fulfilled in the perfected kingdom when God’s will, to which the Son is himself obedient (Hebrews 10:7; John 5:30; 6:38; 8:29), will be universally acknowledged—and that will include the acclamation “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11) and the summing up of all in Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

## THE EFFECTS OF DENYING THE RESURRECTION

### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29-34

Christians live, fight and die in the light of a certain resurrection.

TRUTH IS ALWAYS related to life, and Christian belief must have its counterpart in the influence it exerts on a Christian's behavior. Paul moves on, therefore, to point out some of the practical implications of what the denial of resurrection entails.

1. If there is no resurrection, the practice of baptism for the dead has no meaning (15:29). Precisely what that meaning was in the mind of both apostle and church is still a matter of some doubt; and many interpretations have been forthcoming. The most likely view is that members of the church at Corinth were receiving baptism on behalf of friends or relatives who had died before they could pass from the status of interested inquirers to that of full members of Christ's body. The baptism was thus a proxy-baptism. An alternative view sees in baptism a reference to martyrdom (see Mark 10:38ff.) and it is undeniable that a Christian's death for Christ's sake in the arena was in later history taken to be the equivalent of his baptism, if he had not been able to enter the fellowship by the regular procedure of initiation. In either case, the inference is pointed: why practice a custom or risk the possibility of martyrdom if either the deceased friends have no hope in death or the martyrs die in vain? And in no case does Paul give positive approval to

this Corinthian practice which may well have been an addition in their church life.

2. If there is no resurrection, Paul's apostolic risks which exposed him to mortal dangers are foolhardy acts (15:30,32)—a charge which his enemies in 2 Corinthians chapters 11–12 brought against him. His entire life was one of facing risks for Christ's sake; one notable instance at Ephesus (the reference may be metaphorical of the violence of human opposition) is again the subject of his correspondence in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 and is a commentary on this allusion to "fighting with wild beasts" (Acts 19:23-40 seems to belong to another occasion).
3. If there is no resurrection—and so no final judgment—Christians may as well adopt the pagan philosophy of "live for today" (although taken from Isaiah 22:13). But Paul would counter this with the solemn reminder of Romans 14:10-12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10.

HOW ARE THE DEAD RAISED?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-41

Paul makes some helpful comparisons to explain resurrection.

IN A SENSE the discussion up to this stage has been preliminary, although necessary. Against those who denied a resurrection hope, Paul argues first by asserting the central event of Jesus' resurrection in which his people are included, and secondly by showing the terrible consequences on Christian life and service of such a denial. But evidently there were Corinthians who, as converts to Christ from the Greek world, preferred a denial because they misunderstood what the term resurrection meant. They imagined it stood for a resuscitation of dead corpses and in a grossly materialistic fashion thought simply of resurrection-life as a prolongation of earthly conditions. Some clarification was needed, and Paul now gives it (15:35).

Two issues are involved. How is life out of death possible? What are the nature and qualities of the resurrection body?

The first question is answered simply by taking an illustration from the world of nature (15:36). A seed is planted in the earth where it "dies"—but its "death" is in order to bring about germination and new life which in time produces growth, full development and fruitfulness.

The second question is more elaborately discussed and is carried over into verse 49:

1. Still using the analogy of nature, Paul points to the obvious, that the fruit which is grown is not identical with the seed that is sown (15:37). It is the acorn which goes into the ground, but it is the oak tree which appears. No identity is envisaged, although the oak springs out of the acorn, and in that sense is related to it.
2. Every seed has its own special form, according to the divine will (15:38), a principle which goes back to Genesis 1:11. Moreover, in the kingdoms of animate matter as distinct from the world of vegetation, there are different types of body corresponding to the habitat of mankind, animals, fish and birds (15:39). Each species has a body suited to its environment.

The foundation of Paul's argument is firm. God is a God of order and purpose, with resources of infinite adaptability.

**Exercise** "How great thou art" is the creature's fitting response (Revelation 4:11).

PAUL'S CONTRASTS

1 CORINTHIANS 15:42-50

Adam was the natural life-giver of the human race. The last Adam, Jesus, is the life-giver of the new race of believers.

THE HINGE IN Paul's argument is 15:42, as it links the previous analogy with the subsequent reply which the question of 15:35 had raised.

The body, as we have seen from 6:12-20, is a key term in Paul's thought. Based on clear Old Testament teaching, he assumes that the body as part of God's created order is good; it is the vehicle of the human spirit, indeed it is the spirit in visible expression as representing a person's true self, but it is weighed down by natural limitations. Some of these restrictions are part of God's ordering of life (eg the body is weak, mortal and subject to decay, because like Adam's it will return as dust to the earth: Genesis 3:19 lies behind 15:47-48a). More seriously, it becomes an "instrument of unrighteousness" (Romans 6:13) because people, as sinners, use their bodies as the vehicle in which they break God's commands. This teaching lies in the background of 15:42ff. with its vivid portrayals of the finite and unredeemed nature of our "natural body": it is perishable, capable of dishonor (when we abuse our body), weak, physical (ie liable to dissolution in the grave)—and all because it is stamped with Adam's likeness (15:49a). Made in God's image, the man chose to live independently of his Creator, suffered the defacing of that image and passed on a twisted nature to his descendants

(Genesis 1:26-27 which goes with Genesis 2:7, in turn quoted in 15:45; Genesis 3:17-24; 5:3).

But with Christ's coming a new beginning was made. Sin's rule and its fateful chain of consequences were broken. As Paul explains this new chapter in humanity's story in this passage, the spiritual era has arrived (15:46) and those who are "in Christ" share all the benefits that his advent, obedience (reversing Adam's original disobedience), death and triumph have secured. Christians receive the blessings given by the last Adam as a life-giving Spirit (15:45) and share in the nature of the heavenly Man (15:48-49). And not least, in their final inheritance they receive a spiritual body like his (15:50), whose qualities form the counterpart of the first halves of 15:42-44. Philippians 3:21 sums it up, but the process of renewal has already begun (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:24), and at Christ's coming the transformation will be complete.

WHERE O DEATH IS YOUR VICTORY?

## 1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-58

Paul draws some conclusions from his teaching.

“CONFORMED TO THE image of his Son” (Romans 8:29) is the ultimate goal of God’s electing and saving purpose, so surely and securely to be accomplished that Paul can speak of it in a past tense as something already made good (Romans 8:30, see also the proviso in Romans 8:17). The details of this final working out of divine plans for the church are given in our passage.

1. The time of it is related to Christ’s return and glorification (2 Thessalonians 1:10), placed at some future date when the events of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 will occur. This matches Paul’s reference in Philippians 3:21. His appearing is described as instantaneous (15:52) with the trumpet call of Matthew 24:31 showing the calling together of God’s elect people; the holy dead will be raised and glorified; and the church of the end time on earth will be transformed and united with the church triumphant in the Lord’s presence.
2. Paul’s immediate interest in these verses concentrates on the surviving Christian generation of that time, and is expressed in the phrase “we shall ... be changed” (15:51), ie transformed by the assumption of a spiritual body (15:44). 15:53 amplifies this change by the thought of the “putting on” of immortality as a covering, so changing the believer’s earthly form. Where else does Paul use this imagery (2 Corinthians

5:24)? And that new life marks the transition from the old order of sin and death in Adam to the new age of which prophecy (Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14) had spoken. Both texts are adapted, however, to Paul's purpose. How?

3. The link between sin-law-death in Romans 5:12ff. explains the presence of these terms in 15:56-57. The logic in both passages is clear and incisive. A broken law requires the exaction of a penalty; this penalty is death; and death assumes its awful character, not as a biological necessity (Hebrews 9:27), but as the "sacrament of sin," (Denney). It is the outward and visible sign of a spiritual disgrace.

In a significant turning point, however, characterized by Paul's "but" (15:57; see also Romans 5:15), a fresh start is offered to humanity by the announcement of God's redeeming act in Christ. Hence, the last word is one of victory (three times repeated in three neighboring verses).

Paul now completes the thought. In light of God's action and the church's new life in the risen Christ, a call to perseverance and service rings out (15:58). Paul's teaching on salvation always has to be worked out; indeed without the presupposition of our standing in Christ, a summons to a changed life would be a counsel of despair and a call to barren moralism: eg Philippians 2:5-11 is followed by 2:12-13.

“NOW CONCERNING THE COLLECTION”

## 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1-4

Are our Sunday offerings regular, sacrificial and a real part of our worship?

A DOMINATING INFLUENCE on Paul’s missionary life and service was the fulfilling of a promise he had made at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:10). He recalls the promise, offering some guidance as to the way in which the money was to be gathered in so that there would not be any “last minute rush to get subscriptions in” (Moffatt) when he visits Corinth. Why did Paul give so much importance to this fund by which Gentile churches promised financial help to the “saints” at Jerusalem?

Once the money is brought in, plans are in train to send it to Jerusalem (16:3-4), and we know from Acts 24:17 that Paul did accompany these messengers whom the churches appointed to carry the gifts (2 Corinthians 8:23). The apostle has in mind the claim laid upon Jews of the Dispersion. Every male Jew over the age of twenty years was required to contribute towards the maintenance of the temple and its services. The money as a temple tax was collected at various centers and taken by responsible agents to the holy city.

16:2 is set in this context which sheds welcome light on the early Christian attitude to stewardship. Three principles may be detected.

1. There is clear evidence of Christian concern for those in distress, as we have seen in reference to the Jerusalem community (Acts 4:32-37), and the allusion to the churches of Galatia is best understood in the light of Galatians 6:10, where the encouragement to generous concern for the needy is given a sharper point and added practicality by the words, “especially to those who are of the household of faith” (ie the Jerusalem believers). Where else does this concern and aid for fellow believers become a test of our profession (1 John 3:17-18)?
2. Giving is advocated as a systematic and regular exercise by the setting aside of a part of one’s income in keeping with income. Some Christians adopt a principle of tithing, but the apostolic church knows little of this type of giving which may belong more to the Old Testament order.
3. What may seem to be a very mundane business—the duty of allocating a sum of money from the weekly budget—is set in a noble frame by the reference to “the first day of the week” (15:2). This is the church’s holy day, a day of fellowship in commemoration of the resurrection (Revelation 1:10) and of the supper meal (Acts 20:7).

## TRAVEL PLANS AND PERSONAL NEWS

# 1 CORINTHIANS 16:5-12

We must learn to seize open-door opportunities when God gives them.

VERSES 5-9 GIVE Paul's notice of intention to come to Corinth via Macedonia and his promise to stay with the church there for some time (16:7). This reads like a small unimportant detail. In fact, it turned out to be a major issue between the apostle and the Corinthians and a cause of great distress to both parties, because Paul had to revise his plans—and his opponents capitalized on this change by treating it as a breach of good faith and a token of his instability of character (see 2 Corinthians 1:15ff.).

He plans to stay on in Asia Minor until Whitsun, however, for a reason specially dear to his heart (15:8-9). What was it (see Colossians 4:3; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Revelation 3:8 for the imagery of an open door to mean an evangelistic opportunity)?

16:10-11 give a commendation of his assistant, Timothy, who is elsewhere associated with Paul and his mission almost as his “second self” (see 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:2). When Paul could not come himself, he sent Timothy as an extension of his own person (Philippians 2:19-24), and at Corinth he anticipates and fends off some criticism by his warm approval and commendation. “Some of the Corinthians were inclined to disregard the authority of Paul himself. They might well show even less respect to Timothy, who was younger in age and junior in status” (Thrall). The same idea underlies 1 Timothy 4:12 when Timothy had to stand on his own feet.

16:12 is an indication that, whatever the Apollos party at Corinth (1:12) might think, their leader and Paul were on cordial terms (4:6); and conversely if there were those at Corinth who labeled themselves as belonging to Paul, this notice that Apollos is encouraged to visit the church with their leader's approval is a blow to their undue exaltation of the apostle. Whatever rivalries existed at Corinth, there was none between the Christian leaders whose names were being bandied about in this way (3:21-22).

PAUL'S FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT

## 1 CORINTHIANS 16:13-24

As we conclude this letter, think, “Who will you encourage today?”

VERSES 13-14 OUGHT not to be ignored, because these commands are of timeless application, and the call, “let all you do be done in love” repeats some of the leading themes of Paul’s earlier discussion (8:1; 13; 14:1).

16:15-18 introduce us to some of the church members who had visited Paul and brought news of their church’s life and problems. Stephanas has already been referred to as the head of a believing household, baptized by Paul (1:16), and who had given a praiseworthy lead in laying themselves out to serve God’s people. He and his colleagues were evidently leaders in the church, and are commended as worthy of respect for the good order of the congregational life. Which other Christian communities needed to honor their leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17)?

Greetings are sent from the Asian churches—Paul is writing from Ephesus (16:8)—with special mention made of two prominent workers, husband and wife, who played an important role in early Christianity (Acts 18:2-3,26). Their home was Rome, but they were driven out by the imperial edict of AD 49 and had settled at Corinth and Ephesus. Paul owed much to them (Romans 16:3-4; 2 Timothy 4:19).

The description of “the church in their house” (16:19) puts us back into the first century and into the worshiping life of small groups of men and women who made up God’s church in its earliest days (see Philemon 2).

Unusual customs were practiced, eg the holy kiss (of peace) (16:20) as a sign of mutual affection among the worshipers (Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). In its context, the practice is mentioned as a call to a breaking down of all barriers within the divided Corinthian church.

Recent study of the New Testament has made much of the final paragraph (16:22-24), and related it to the assembling of the church for public worship during which Paul's letter would be read aloud (as in Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). The verses may be arranged in lines as a dialogue between the leader at the Lord's table and the congregation. Characteristic notes of a Communion service are sounded: mutual love having been established (16:20), the table is "hedged" by the dismissal of any who are not committed believers (16:22). The cry *Maranatha* ("Our Lord, come") is an invocation and prayer for the risen Lord's presence with his people at the meal, and the concluding grace is declared, to which Paul adds his own affectionate greeting (16:24).

INTRODUCTION

## 2 CORINTHIANS

RALPH P. MARTIN

THIS LETTER WAS written shortly after 1 Corinthians, and it seems clear that it was written in Macedonia after Paul had left Ephesus. If we seek a more precise dating and a more certain knowledge of the relation between the two Corinthian letters, we will soon find that we have entered a most difficult field of New Testament chronology. A possible sequence is noted in the introduction to 1 Corinthians.

A good starting place is 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. There Paul implies that the collection at Corinth for the poor believers in Jerusalem had not yet been started. But in 2 Corinthians 8:10; 9:2, he writes that the Corinthians began the collection “last year.” The relationship between the dates of the two letters to the Corinthians depends on this phrase.

Paul had sent Titus to Corinth while he himself proceeded to Troas (2 Corinthians 7:6; 12:18). Titus had gone to enforce the apostle’s views and bring back word to Paul concerning the effect produced by a letter which Paul had written in view of the crisis in the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 2:4f.; 7:8-13).

These were days of anxious strain (2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:5), and not finding Titus, Paul had left for Macedonia (2:13). There Titus met him and brought good news. He intimated that Paul’s “severe letter” (2:4) had done its work well, although Paul feared earlier that he might have written too severely (7:8). He rejoiced, however, that the crisis was over and the

separation between him and the church brought about by one prominent man's opposition to him at Corinth (2:5ff.) had passed. The occasion of 2 Corinthians is to be sought at this point.

Paul was greatly relieved, so this was not the time for dealing with Christian doctrine or church practice; the letter is more a pouring out of the man himself. However, important sections of this letter deal with doctrinal matters (eg 5:1-10, on the resurrection; 5:15-21, on reconciliation) and church practices (eg chapters 8–9 on Christian stewardship). We will best appreciate this letter if we read it as Paul's spirited defense against his attackers.

2 Corinthians is therefore a very human (though inspired) document, and opens a window into the inner life of the apostle. "The letter is an artless and unconsciously autobiographical description of the ways in which Paul was accustomed to meet slander and calumny, physical danger and bodily suffering, disloyalty and ingratitude, from those for whom he had given of his best, and disillusionment and disappointment that invaded his spirit from time to time" (R.H. Strachan).

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-7

Paul sees that his experience of God's comfort in suffering enables him to help others.

LETTERS IN THE first century usually began with a mention of the writer's name and then that of the addressee. The normal practice was to follow this with a line of greeting (as in Acts 15:23; 23:25-26). Paul follows this usual pattern, but inserts some extra items by:

1. linking Timothy's name with his own;
2. addressing the church of God (note the singular expression) in the district of southern Greece; and
3. turning the colorless "greeting" into a rich Christian salutation, calling down on his readers God's grace and peace.

The opening section breaks out into jubilant thanksgiving to God (1:3-4). What are the chief themes of praise? Two reasons are supplied for the apostle's outburst. The first (in 1:3-7) is in this study; the second is in the next (1:8-11).

Paul is glad that, in spite of the many troubles which have weighed on him, he has known the special strength of God (1:4). Suffering was his constant destiny as the apostle of the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:13; Colossians

1:24), and this was made known to him at the beginning of his Christian life (Acts 9:15-16).

There is a divine purpose in human suffering which is borne for the gospel's sake, by which the cause of Christ is advanced (Acts 14:22 and Colossians 1:24ff.). His afflicted servants are qualified to enter sympathetically into the experience of others whose pathway leads them through a vale of tears (1:4,6-7). So Paul the apostle is not one who lives a detached existence, untroubled by the hard knocks of life; and by the same token he is no aloof pastor, remote from the people to whom he ministers.

**Note** 1:3: "Father of mercies." The Father who gives mercy, who delights to hear his children's cry (Psalm 145:18-19). Notice the often-repeated word for "comfort" (literally, encouragement, strengthening) here—ten references in five verses.

**Thought** "Patiently endure ... sufferings." Not easy advice, but there are great rewards (1 Peter 2:19-21).

DEPENDING ON GOD

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11

Paul's severe suffering does not lead to despair but to trust and praise as he sees past and present deliverance as a promise for the future.

A SECOND REASON for Paul's thankfulness of spirit is given in this section: he had been rescued from the jaws of death! In relating the experience of a crisis in Asia which exposed him to mortal danger he makes it plain that it was only by God's mercy that he and his fellow missionaries had been saved (1:10), yet God works by the prayers of his people, and Paul does not forget this side of the story as well (1:11). Those who prayed for him are invited to share his gladness, and there is no finer stimulus to our prayers than when we hear from friends that they are rejoicing in an answer to our praying on their behalf.

The precise nature of "the affliction we experienced in Asia" is not easy to pinpoint. Some suggest that the phrase alludes to the riot in the Ephesian theater (Acts 19:23-41; that may have been a time of social anarchy which followed the assassination of the proconsul). 1 Corinthians 15:32, the famous description of "fighting with beasts at Ephesus," may refer to the same incident, or more likely to some other hazard to which his life was exposed. Other scholars found a clue in the phrase "the sentence of death" (1:9), which may be a technical term for a death sentence in a civil court. If this is the meaning, does it imply that Paul was arrested, tried and faced with the prospect of death? A hint of this may underlie certain verses in Philipians

(1:20ff.,30; 2:17; 3:11), if that letter belongs to the middle period of Paul's ministry, ie the time of his Ephesian ministry. Alternatively, it may be more simply believed that Paul suffered an acute illness which threatened his life. At all events, it was extremely serious and he was marvelously delivered by divine assistance and human prayer.

**Note** 1:11: a Greek word of fifteen letters is translated "you must help by prayer." There are three ideas in the verb:

1. prayer as work (Colossians 4:12-13);
2. prayer as cooperation, a ministry of assistance along with other Christians; and
3. prayer as undergirding support by which our weaker brothers and sisters are sustained in their service.

**Meditation** Paul's deadly affliction is unknown to us; but no extremity is too great for the God of resurrection (1:9): see Ephesians 1:19ff.

WAS PAUL UNTRUSTWORTHY?

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-18

How wrong it is to attribute false motives to others.

THE KEY PHRASE is in 1:17, which may be literally translated as: “When I therefore was thus intending (to change my plans), did I act with the fickleness (of which I am accused)?” The definite article here and before the “Yes” and “No” in the same verse “probably indicates that Paul is quoting what is being said about him at Corinth” (Tasker). The allegation of vacillation—blowing hot and cold at the same time—arose directly out of a change of Paul’s travel plans (1:15-16). In 1 Corinthians 16:5 he expressed the hope of visiting Corinth after he had passed through Macedonia. He hints now that this original idea will have to be modified, and a second visit, bringing a “double pleasure” (1:15) will not be possible in view of the atmosphere in the Corinthian church (see 2:1). This is the reason for the revised itinerary, which he explains in order to deny the criticism of indecision and a failure to keep his first promise brought by his opponents at Corinth. All this background is necessary to understand Paul’s indignant protest, “Do I make my plans like a worldly man?” (1:17).

The same background helps us to make sense of the earlier section (1:12-14), because Paul is leading up to a frank statement of his change of mind by declaring the motives which inspired all his dealings, his words and his letter-writing habits. Read these verses and see how carefully Paul goes down the list of activities which have presumably been misinterpreted at Corinth. Pick

out the terms he uses to show that his motives and actions have always been beyond reproach.

**Notes** 1:12: “the testimony of our conscience.” What other references to “conscience” can you trace in Paul’s speeches in Acts (eg 24:16) and the letters (eg 1 Timothy 1:19; 4:2)? 1:13: a subtle play on the Greek words “You don’t have to read between the lines in my letters: you can understand them.” Our problem in reading Paul’s letters today is that we know far less than we would like to know about the immediate circumstances in which they were written.

**Thought** “As surely as God is faithful ...” (1:18). The character of God as altogether faithful (1 Corinthians 19:13) was an unshakable rock on which Paul’s whole appeal and ministry rested (Romans 3:4). Is he not trustworthy for you today?

## CONFIDENCE IN GOD

# 2 CORINTHIANS 1:19-22

We can be confident because the Spirit within us assures us we really are God's children and Christ really is our Savior.

IT WAS BAD enough that Paul's enemies at Corinth had attacked his character as unreliable and shifty (1:17); it was worse when they go on to insinuate that his gospel is just as unreliable and unsure. The purpose of this passage is to answer that serious charge. How does Paul do it?

First, he defines clearly the person of Jesus Christ as the Son of God whom the early missionaries proclaimed. They offered no yes/no type of preaching, which leaves the hearer in doubt as to Christ's authority and ability to save, or is confusing to the point of thinking the gospel is irrelevant, but boldly declared that Christ is the answer to all human need (1:19).

Then, Christ has placed his seal of endorsement and fulfillment on the Old Testament prophecies and promises by declaring them to be valid and available to the believer (1:20). The only appropriate response which the Christian can make is a confident Amen, showing acceptance of God's promises for what they are worth—utterly confirmed by Christ Jesus.

Finally, the message of the apostle is no sham and fraud, because he has been specially appointed and gifted by God for his work. There is a seal upon his ministry, placed there by the Holy Spirit. What is it (1 Corinthians 9:1-2)? And the Christians at Corinth who also are sealed by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14) should be able to recognize a spiritual affinity with Paul and his

party and certainly ought never to doubt their integrity. “Are we then the men to say one thing and mean another?” (JBP) sums it up.

**Meditation** Think of some of the promises of God in the Old Testament which are given a fuller content in Christ, and of those promises which you have proved in your experience.

A COSTLY MINISTRY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:23–2:4

Paul explains his real reason why he did not come to Corinth.

THE REAL REASON for Paul's change of travel arrangements and non-appearance at Corinth is told in 1:23. He comes clean, even by uttering a mild oath in the spirit of Ruth 1:17; 1 Samuel 14:44; 2 Samuel 3:35; 1 Kings 2:23. He would not inflict upon them "another painful visit" (2:1). The plain sense of this text is that Paul had already paid a visit to Corinth which did cause him pain. This visit is not recorded in Acts, and is known only by inference.

Moreover, on the previous occasion to which he now looks back with sorrow, there was one person who was the ringleader of the opposition and who personally resisted him and made things very unhappy (2:2). We shall learn more about this man (now truly sorry for his misdemeanor) in 2:5-11.

Besides a painful visit which the apostle had paid, there was also a tearful letter he had written (2:3-4). Once more we are in the realm of conjecture and inference. Three possibilities are open to us as we try to locate the identity of this letter.

It may refer to the former letter, known as our 1 Corinthians, but this is unlikely, as that letter hardly fits the vivid description which Paul gives. A second possibility, which most modern critics hold, is that a portion of this "tearful letter" has been preserved in 2 Corinthians chapters 10–13. There are objections to this suggestion, not least that the character of the hypothetical

fragment is more warmly indignant and polemical than sorrowful. The most probable possibility is that the letter in question has not survived.

The letter whose tenor and tone we can guess from the descriptiveness of 2:4 had caused pain to the writer, but was intended for the Corinthians' good. This deeply moving passage shows the vital qualification of Christian ministers, "a heart pledged to his brethren in the love of Christ" (Denney).

RESTORING THE SINNER

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11

The penitent man is to be restored in love just as he was excluded in love.

STILL IN REFLECTIVE mood, Paul remarks on the outcome of the visit he previously made and the insult he had to bear. 2:5-11 deal with his attitude to the one who caused him pain, ie the man who had insulted him and stimulated trouble at Corinth. Once more we are faced with a problem of detection: who was this man, and was the insult directed against Paul personally?

We may dismiss the view that it was not Paul himself whose character was attacked but one of his associates (eg Timothy) as most improbable. Paul's use of the personal pronoun in 2:10 clinches the point.

Many older scholars find here an allusion to the case of the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5:1ff., but we have no proof that this man, although severely reproved for his sinful ways, ever bore animosity to Paul himself. Once the supposition of an intermediate visit to Corinth is made, it becomes a natural consequence that the cause of the painful visit should be traced to the actions of this offender on that occasion.

Whatever the immediate outburst of feeling against Paul may have been caused by, there is no doubt what the outcome was. Following the "severe letter" (see 7:8), the church had condemned the behavior of this man and imposed a disciplinary penalty. The stern measure adopted by the church had

moved the man to penitence, and Paul's purpose now in writing is to advocate a forgiving spirit and the restoration of the punished man, so that he is not driven to despair (2:7). If this undesired effect did follow, it would serve only Satan's interest, whose intentions are constantly to set Christians against Christians (Revelation 12:10). Forgiveness is now important: Paul has forgiven and holds no grudge. He calls upon the Corinthians to do likewise (2:10). Paul catches the spirit of Christ whose generosity he will later extol (10:1).

**Thought** On 2:11, "The greatest ruse of Satan is to make us believe that he does not exist" (Oberlin). Are we alive to what schemes sometimes (as here) he devised in unusual ways?

THE GOSPEL'S AROMA

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17

To those who responded to Paul's teaching and trusted Christ, the gospel was beautiful and fragrant.

AFTER THE UPROAR in Ephesus (Acts 19–20:1), 2:12-13 look back to Paul's travels. He turned northwest from that city and came to the seaport of Troas (Acts 20:5) where an evangelistic opportunity awaited him. The agitation which troubled his spirit at Troas and which impelled him to cross over the Aegean Sea into Macedonia in search of Titus is simply reported, with no further explanation. In fact, at this point, the storytelling breaks off and will not be resumed until 7:5. The intervening section forms one large digression on the theme of the gospel ministry, its methods and its people. 2:14 is an exclamation which prefaces the whole. Paul's ministry is distinguished in two ways:

1. It evokes a double reaction from the hearers. As we have seen many times in Acts, those who heard Christ's message could not sit on the fence and remain neutral once they had been confronted by Paul's presentation. Now he explains to us something of the nature of this "rejection or response" which he had known. To those who are destined to salvation the "word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18) is a perfume of Christ, offering life in him (2:16), but to those who stubbornly refuse Christ it smells only of death and doom. An awful responsibility

therefore rests on the hearer: “Take heed then how you hear” (Luke 8:18), as well as on the preacher. The rhetorical question (2:16) will be answered in 3:5.

2. The ministry of God’s servant is marked by sincerity (2:17; see also 1:12) in contrast to “many” who “made merchandise of the word,” a strange phrase probably referring to certain prevalent religious teachers who put their preaching on a commercial basis by the constant flourish of the collection box. Paul will have none of this (1 Corinthians 9:15-18), and mentions the only sort of accrediting worth having (2:17b).

**Notes** 2:16: there is an interesting use by the rabbis of the term “aroma” in reference to the law. They spoke of the Mosaic law as a medicine, either fatal (to the ungodly) or life-giving (to the righteous). In the case of the Israelites, the law as a vitalizing power counteracted the bad effects of the “evil impulse,”—what Paul calls “the flesh,”—but his secret of victory is discovered elsewhere (Galatians 5:16ff.). An extension of this background is that Jewish traders sometimes became missionaries by holding out the offer of a “medicine of life” (based on Psalm 34). Paul perhaps is using the very term (in 2:17, peddlers) which they employed.

LETTERS FROM CHRIST

## 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3

The believers in Corinth are themselves the proof of Paul's ministry.

IT IS A helpful clue to notice that Paul's thought in 2:17 is not only enlarged later in the letter (in chapters 11–12, where again he denies any mercenary motives in his gospel work), but follows on directly in 4:2. Chapter 3 is therefore likened to a separate explanation between two links in Paul's thought and has a theme all of its own. He explains with great verve the greatness of the gospel and its superiority to the Mosaic-Judaic order.

The introduction to the topic is found in this section. Paul, having stated the sincerity of his motives (2:17b), backtracks a little, because he finds this assertion something of a distasteful business (3:1). It is not easy for him continually to harp on the openness of his behavior and the purity of his motives, but the situation at Corinth required it (1:12). If any proof is needed of the truth of his apostleship (he is saying, 3:2-3) may it be found, not in letters of commendation such as his enemies were in the habit of using, but in the lives of those whom his preaching had influenced. Such a "letter" existed in the case of the Corinthians themselves. Their new life in Christ is written on "our hearts," but is really evident for all to see.

Christ is the author of this life-transforming work of grace. As his minister, Paul has led converts to him, and the marks of genuineness are not characters written on parchment with ink, but the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), not letters chiseled out of stone, but engraved on the human heart.

This second thought is drawn from the contrast between the law of God written by him on stone tablets and delivered to Moses (Exodus 31:18), and the promise in Jeremiah 31:33 that God would, in the future, put his law in the inner being and write it on human hearts. The day of that fulfillment, Paul declares, has now arrived.

We may pause to ask, “Why was this promise given? Was not the law sufficient?” The answer lies in Jeremiah 31:32: “They broke my covenant” (see also Hebrews 8:9). The covenant commitment entered into by Israel at God’s will and initiative had proved a failure because of Israel’s defection (see Isaiah 1:2; Hosea 6:7-8; Jeremiah 3:20) and so there was the need for, and promise of, a new covenant.

**Note** 3:1: “letters of introduction” were given to traveling Christians to certify their good standing as they visited the churches and sought hospitality (Acts 18:27).

**Thought** “You are a letter from Christ” (3:3). What message do others read in your life?

THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE

## 2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-6

Paul's claim to be a minister of a new covenant is startling.

TO FOLLOW THE rest of the chapter some introduction is needed, and we must come to grips with a startling phrase “ministers of a new covenant” (3:6), claimed by Paul, and no doubt giving a shock to Jewish Christians who would interpret this as a bold claim on the apostle's part to supersede Moses, the founder of Old Testament covenant religion. Indeed, that was precisely the claim that Paul made in this phrase.

If Paul were called upon to justify his vocation, he would first disclaim all personal worthiness (3:5), while secondly at the same time refuse to undervalue the high office and great qualifications that God had given to him and his fellow missionaries to the Gentiles (3:6).

The “new covenant” stands in direct contrast to “the old covenant” (3:14), the religion of Moses as interpreted by the Jewish rabbis. As Hebrews 8:13 declares, the mention of a new covenant renders obsolete what it replaces, and this means that a new dispensation has been inaugurated by the coming of Christ, in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31ff.

Three features marked out this promised new covenant from the old:

1. inwardness; no longer would God's law be inscribed on stone, but it would be inwardly impressed on human hearts (= minds, consciences, affections);

2. individualism: in contrast to the old order in which the priestly tribe acted representatively for the nation, and God was approached only indirectly, “they shall all know me” with no restriction imposed; and
3. a full forgiveness: under the Levitical system, forgiveness was provided for a limited number of offenses only. There was simply no provision made for sins committed deliberately. Only the gospel of the cross promises an adequate assurance that all sin is pardoned (1 John 1:9).

Of this new covenant, symbolized and signified in the cup at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:27-28) and ratified in the blood of Calvary (Hebrews 13:20), Paul was made a minister (3:6). The old covenant as a way of salvation is branded as out-of-date on account of its “weakness and uselessness” (Hebrews 7:18): features which by their inadequacies helped prepare the way for a new order which offers us what we need most of all—life in the Spirit.

**Thought** “The life of God in human souls”: does this sum up the faith of the New Testament gospel?

## CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

### 2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-11

Because no one could ever fully keep God's laws, the old way brought a sense of failure and guilt. But the new way spells life and hope.

WE ARE NOW prepared for a series of contrasts in which the old and the new covenant are discussed together. There are three lines of approach which the apostle takes; 3:7-11 take two of them.

First, the law set the standard, but offered no power to reach it. For that reason Paul does not mince his words: the law "kills" (3:6); it is "the dispensation of death" (3:7) which, in turn, leads to "condemnation" (3:9). These strong terms can only mean that the law set the target of a perfect standard; but people, who are sinfully weak, are unable to attain it.

Paul finds no fault with the law in itself (Romans 7:12,14), but discovers that the law mocked and taunted by calling him to an impossibly high level, but offering him no assistance or dynamic of attainment. In this way, what God intended as good is turned into a death-dealing instrument (Romans 7:13)—and the reason? Read Romans 8:3a.

Secondly, Paul goes on to teach that the law had an honorable purpose, but it was only temporary. The illustration of the law's "intermediate character" (as Galatians 3:16ff. describe it) is seen in the way in which the glory of both the law (3:7,11) and the lawgiver, Moses (3:7), was only a passing one. The background reference is clearly Exodus 34:29-35, which describes the splendor which shone from Moses' face when he returned from

fellowship with God. That radiance, however, faded in time and at length disappeared. From the lawgiver, Paul argues to what he represents, ie Judaism, whose glory, once historically a reality, is now fading away. Indeed, its day is over and its impermanence has given way to what has come to stay: the gospel (3:10-11).

All of this contrast adds up to one firm conclusion: the Christian ministry is meant, by divine intention, to supersede the old Judaic ceremonial order. The glory of God is to be sought now, not in the law or the temple or the priesthood, but in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6; Titus 2:13). John's introduction says the same (John 1:17).

A GLORIOUS MESSAGE

## 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18

The more we see the glory of Christ, the more we are changed and reflect the beauty and holiness of Christ.

HAVING TAKEN HIS readers this far, Paul is now ready for a third element in the distinction between the two covenants. The law was a sign of a barrier between God and the people of Israel, both in Moses' day and in Paul's. Why did the lawgiver place a veil over his radiant face (3:13; Exodus 34:33)? Part of the reason was to prevent the people's disappointment when they saw the glory fading, but Exodus 34:30 tells that "they were afraid to come near him," partly because of the "radiation" of his face (Exodus 34:29 reads literally that "the skin of his face sent out beams").

Paul finds in this circumstance a profound explanation, for the veil which Moses wore is no mere historical detail. It speaks of a barrier which still hides the truth from the Jewish reader of the Old Testament. When the Jews of Antioch, Ephesus or Corinth hear the law read in the Sabbath worship of the synagogue (3:14-15), they fail to perceive its true significance. They imagine that it is the final revelation of God, not (as Paul has shown) a preparation for them to receive Christ (Galatians 3:24). Therefore they remain hardened and blinded (4:3-4; Romans 11:25) in spite of their inestimable privileges as God's ancient people to whom the law was first entrusted (Romans 3:1-2; 9:4-5).

But whenever a Jew turns to the Lord, how different is the result as the veil is lifted and “Christ in all the Scriptures” is made known! The two on the Emmaus road show what can happen (Luke 24:27,32,44).

3:17-18 require a comment. The crux is the sentence “the Lord is the Spirit.” If we recall that 3:16 is taken originally from Exodus 34:34, though Paul is novel in the way he applies it, we are on the right track. Then 3:17 is a comment on the reference to Moses’ turning to God’s presence: “Now in the verse mentioned, the Lord whom Moses approached means for us the Spirit who leads a person to turn to Christ and confess his lordship” (1 Corinthians 12:3) is Paul’s meaning.

The work of the Holy Spirit is further described in 3:17-18: he brings the Jewish believer out of slavery to liberty and transforms all believers, Gentiles as well as Jews, into God’s pattern, namely the perfect man, Christ Jesus, as a progressive experience and by fellowship with the living God (Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19; Philippians 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

THE MOTIVES AND THE MESSAGE

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6

Find out why Paul can write “We do not lose heart” (4:6).

“THIS MINISTRY” LOOKS back to the contrast with the Mosaic order which is superseded in Christ. It is committed to “us”—notice the link in thought with 2:17b—in the amazing mercy of God, as the writer had proved in his own case (1 Timothy 1:12-14). As a consequence, the apostle can exercise the work God entrusted to him with confidence, never losing heart. What would tempt Paul to grow discouraged? If he relied solely on human resources or was foolhardy enough to practice “disgraceful, underhanded ways” in order to gain some cheap victories, and secure some quick conversions which evaporate as soon as they are gained (4:2)? Opposition from his Judaizing enemies who accused him of trying to do exactly this (Galatians 5:11)? The hardness of the human heart which remains strangely stubborn and resistant (4:3), in spite of love’s appeal?

Paul’s unlimited confidence rests on the following grounds: first, the sincerity of the messengers should be obvious to all (4:2); secondly, the gospel itself which is God’s truth shines in its own light, but with an appeal enforced by the character of the messengers who convey it (4:2b); thirdly, the failure of many to respond is not due to any lack of adequacy or relevance of the message (4:3-4). Rather, the reason lies in the satanic grip on the human mind and heart (4:4); and fourthly, the sublime message is “Jesus Christ as Lord” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3), by which it pleases God to

illuminate the spiritually responsive and bring people out of the darkness as impenetrable as primeval chaos (Genesis 1:2; Jeremiah 4:23) into the marvelous light of reconciled fellowship with himself by the same authoritative, sovereign power which dispelled the world's darkness and said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3; see 1 Peter 2:9).

Paul himself had known that "dark night of the soul" suddenly lifted by the radiant presence of God's glory in Jesus' face in his conversion experience (Galatians 1:15-16; Acts 9:3; 22:6,11; 26:13) and knew it as a reality in the lives of his Christian friends (see Philippians 1:6, where "good work" looks back to Genesis 1:31). Who else caught sight of the divine radiance in the person of Jesus (Acts 7:55)?

**Meditation** Think about some of the verses which speak of Christ as Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8; Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 1:1-4).

TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12

Do you feel weak? Then this passage is for you.

SUCH A MESSAGE as 4:5-6 describe may well, without exaggeration, be called a “treasure” whose value is in no way diminished by the cheap and disposable pots which carry it. This is how Paul saw himself—having no inherent worth except as a messenger and transmitter, or to use his metaphor, as an earthenware jar in which some precious commodity was carried. We can remember the vocation given him at his call (Acts 9:15, using the same word).

The purpose of the arrangement by which the truth of God is deposited in frail vessels is now made plain (4:7b). What is it? So far from being protected and preserved unharmed from the troubles of this life (as the Greek cults believed their “divine men” as the herald of the gods to be specially favored) Christ’s messengers are consigned to a life of humiliation and danger. And it is all in order to leave the unmistakable impression that the power of the message does not come from the ingenuity and skill of the pleaders but comes solely from the inherent truth of the message as God’s word.

“I die every day” (1 Corinthians 15:31) may be dismissed, at first glance, as simply Paul’s rhetoric. But the passage, in a series of eloquent contrasts (4:8-10) and memorable phrases, leads to the identical conclusion (4:11-12). Put in simple language, it requires as disciple we should share in Christ’s

humiliation in the confidence that we will also share in his triumphant risen life (4:14).

**Note** 4:10: “the dying of the Lord Jesus” is better, ie his attitude of self-renouncing, self-giving sympathy for, and help to, others—even to the death of the cross (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27). But for him death (uniquely sin-bearing) became the gateway to life, and so it will be for his faithful servants, even if it is death as martyrs (2 Timothy 2:11-13; 4:6-8).

THE CONFIDENCE OF THE MESSENGER

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-18

What does our continued weakness show us and others about the Christian life?

THE APOSTLE AND his fellow believers are closely knit in many ways, and Paul viewed his sufferings as having direct benefits to the churches (see Ephesians 3:1; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 2:10). By his life of hardship and exposure to mortal peril (1 Corinthians 15:30) he was securing the maintenance of the faith and so consolidating their Christian standing (4:12).

But the hope of ultimate vindication, when death will lead through resurrection to the last home gathering of the church, is not the apostle's exclusively. When the apostle is introduced to Christ's presence (4:14), those who are with him in Christ will share the victory too. That was his eager longing (Philippians 1:21-23; 3:10-11), although it was no escapist death wish which had settled on him. If God willed the continuance of his apostolic trials and labors, as he tells the Philippians (1:24), the result must be that "as God's grace reaches more and more people, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory" (4:15, NLT).

Meanwhile, no other proof of the "earthiness" of the apostle's physical frame is needed than the reminder of 4:16. His body, in its finite weakness, is constantly in the process of decay in the normal course of growing old. Added to this is the exposure he has known to all the risks and dangers described in 4:8-12, now euphemistically seen as "this slight momentary

affliction” (4:17)! But, parallel with that process and the endurance of unending risks, the real life of the spirit is being renewed and revitalized by the power of God.

Paul’s horizon is set on an eternal prospect (4:18), and spiritual insight enables him to see beyond the visible and tangible to the eternal realities of that world where God’s presence is the most real of realities. From such a perspective he will go on, in chapter 5, to consider the Christian hope.

**Thought** “We do not lose heart ... as we do not look” (4:16,18). Where are our eyes fixed today?

## THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

### 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5

Paul emphasizes his intense longing for his new resurrection body.

THE IMMEDIATE OCCASION for Paul's writing about the resurrection hope is found in the apostle's experience of danger at Ephesus (see on 1:8-11). But it links well with 4:16-18. The frailty of the human body reminds him of the believer's prospect of what lies beyond death, and that before long "the earthly tent we live in," ie his body, will be taken down in death and dissolution. Two parallel passages should be read with these verses: 1 Corinthians 15:42-57, and Philippians 3:20-21.

The verses in this study contain some important teaching on a difficult and mysterious subject:

1. The threefold contrast between the Christian's present body and their future "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44) is made. First, the present is likened to a tent; the new body will be a building, which implies permanence and stability (see this contrast in Hebrews 11:9-10). Secondly, the old is "of the earth" (1 Corinthians 15:47) with all the association of human weakness and defects (Genesis 3:19); the new body will be God's work in sovereign power, called into existence directly (contrast Genesis 2:7; Psalm 139:15). Thirdly, the present body is perishable, while the new will be "eternal in the heavens" (5:1).

2. In 5:2, Paul's "groaning" is related to his desire to receive his new body. But it is no death wish, as we saw earlier in 4:13-18. He is really yearning for the Lord's return, when the body of his future existence will be given (1 Corinthians 15:51ff.; Philippians 3:20-21).
3. The verb of 5:2-3 is a double compound which suggests that he longs to put on the resurrection form over the old body. On this view, the "groaning" is in trying to avoid the experience of death from which he naturally shrinks, ie to enter by death into the intermediate state, described as "being unclothed" (5:3-4), although consciously with Christ (Philippians 1:23).
4. The Holy Spirit is the divine assurance that what God has promised to do will be accomplished because he has already begun to do it. The first installment (1:22) guarantees the later fullness.

**Note** 5:1: the metaphor of a tent is drawn from Leviticus 23:42 (Feast of Tabernacles). Living in tents ("booths") was to remind the Israelites of their pilgrim life on the way to Canaan.

BY FAITH NOT BY SIGHT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10

Paul applies his thoughts on the future resurrection: we are to take every opportunity now to serve and please Christ.

PAUL CONTINUES TO write about the nature of the resurrection hope. His intense aspiration, expressed in the terms “to be clothed,” “to put on” (5:2,4), is later spelled out for us in the phrase “at home with the Lord” (5:8). Included in this eager longing is the prospect of receiving a glorified body, like his Lord’s (Philippians 3:20-21). From comparable Scriptures we know that the giving of the new, spiritual body is timed at the Lord’s return in glory, and this is implied in Romans 8:17.

There is a down-to-earth, practical application of this teaching, eg in 5:9, where the Christian’s ambition is stated in a memorable phrase, and Paul can never forget that our present life with all its practicalities and opportunities for service will one day be tested at the tribunal of Christ (5:10; Romans 14:10-12).

What phrase in this section is repeated twice? See 5:6,8, and notice the solid foundation on which Paul’s confidence is set. Encouragement in Christian living and service came to him as no emotional upsurge requiring some artificial stimulus, but as a logical deduction from a God-given fact which he received in faith. It is vitally important to get our priorities right from this passage, and 5:7 will be a most useful guide to any who are confused. Feelings are no spiritual barometer; they fluctuate and vary

according to all kinds of circumstances, such as the weather or relationships with other people, eg our employer or our mother-in-law. We depend on God's promised word—what he has spoken and given—as unchangeably sure, and on this fact of revelation faith is content to rest and draw from it strength and stability.

## MOTIVES FOR SERVICE

# 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-15

Paul suggests two motives for ministry in these verses.

TWO MOTIVES OF Paul's ministry are suggested in these verses. What are they (5:11,14)? Is there any conflict between them?

The apostle exercises his God-entrusted tasks of preaching and teaching in no offhand manner. He marvels at the high dignity and privilege of the work committed to him (5:11). The term "persuade" has a double flavor; we try to win people for Christ (as Luke 5:10), and we try to convince them of our own purity of motives. The second view—complementary to the first—is the point of the appeal in 5:12-13.

He is turning to the allegations which had been brought against him that his intentions were insincere—and, indeed, that he was out of his mind! The apostle's response to this insinuation, which was brought against Christ also (Mark 3:21), is to admit that he has known times and experiences of spiritual elation and ecstasy (see chapter 12) but he has never sought his own glory in these things, and all that has happened to him has ever been "for God," ie to lead to his glory. Can you think of Jesus' teaching which follows the same line (John 7:18f.)? Equally, in calm and "ordinary" moments of life he has always had the pastoral welfare of the Corinthians in view (5:13).

The basis of Paul's teaching on reconciliation is laid in 5:14. Its foundation is the conviction which places the highest value on the death of Jesus Christ. This conviction may be spelled out in certain propositions: "One

died for all, ie his people; and in him they all died—to sin and self; now they must all live for him.” The key terms are substitution, representation and renewal. “Christ’s death was the death of all, in the sense that he died the death they should have died; the penalty of their sins was borne by him; he died in their place; and that is why his love has such a compelling power over the believer, and engenders in him such undying gratitude” (Tasker). This sense of obligation leads to a new life in which self is dethroned and Christ becomes the new focal point (5:15).

A NEW CREATION

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-17

The Christian life is a life of newness.

THE LIFE OF the Christian who has received the benefit of the reconciliation brought about by Christ crucified is above all a life of newness.

First, for Paul, there came a new view of the person of Jesus Christ himself (5:16). Modern theology has placed a great deal of weight on this verse, and drawn some far-reaching conclusions. For example, it has been suggested that Paul no longer had any interest in the human Jesus of history, but fastened all his attention on, and pinned all his preaching to, the risen, exalted Christ; and in this way a wedge is driven between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Christ of Paul's faith. Obviously we cannot discuss the issue in full, but it is a matter of great importance, and New Testament Christianity as the evangelical sees it stands or falls by the continuity between the Jesus of the Gospels and the exalted Lord.

More likely, what Paul meant was that formerly he, as a Pharisee, saw in Jesus only a messianic pretender "from a human point of view"; now, as a Christian, he worships him as the Christ of God and Lord of the universe. This is the difference that the resurrection has made (Romans 1:3-4; Philippians 2:6-11; 2 Timothy 2:8).

Secondly, there is the newness that conversion to Christ brings (5:17). Notice Paul's favorite expression for being a Christian: one who is "in Christ" (12:2), who enjoys a faith-union with the living Lord and whose

whole life is intertwined with that of his Savior, so that there is no real difference between “in Christ” and “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). 1 Corinthians 6:17 is a fine statement of the close interrelationship. And by this union we are introduced to a new age, foretold by prophets and longed for as Israel’s hope of messianic blessing. So the old order has gone; the new era has dawned, with its accompanying benefits. What are they? Read Acts 2 and 3 again for the answer.

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-21

Paul writes of the glorious interchange of our sin and Christ's righteousness. How can we keep such a message to ourselves?

THIS IS CENTER and heartbeat of Paul's gospel with its thoughts of humanity's separation from God because of sin, and the work of God in Christ's death of putting away everything that meant separation on his side, so that he might come and preach peace to guilty sinners.

God entrusts to his servants "the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18), centered in the reconciling "word," or message (5:19). They are his ambassadors (5:20), calling on people to accept what God in Christ has done for their salvation. The core of the gospel is in 5:21. This was a divine act in which, by God's appointing, our condemnation came on the sinless Christ, that there might no longer be any condemnation for us. Christ's suffering was so great that he realized the full divine reaction against sin in the human race which he had become part of.

This is the doctrinal content of Paul's preaching of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18), but the objective work of God in Christ needs a subjective application to sinners; the intermediate link is the ministry of the word, and what is contained in 5:20 is the turning point.

It is important to grasp the sense of this verse. It is not so much that God calls on us to set aside our hostility to him and be at peace; rather the emphasis falls on objective atonement. He invites us to enter into the peace

with himself that he has made by the sacrifice of his Son. The reconciliation, on his side, is complete, for Christ's work is accomplished. The gospel call therefore is to receive the benefits of reconciliation and believe that God has at tremendous cost, through the death of his sinless Son who took the sinner's place and died under his curse, put away everything that on his part stood between you and peace (Romans 5:6-11).

TODAY IS THE DAY OF SALVATION

## 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-2

Paul urges his readers not to miss out on the full benefits of God's wonderful grace.

HAVING GIVEN A clear statement of reconciliation, Paul then offers a practical and positive application (6:1-2). This is a timely reminder to us today, whether as preachers or hearers, that it is not enough to hold correct doctrine, or even to preach it objectively: the gospel must be applied, ie brought home to men and women and presented in such a way that they realize they have a personal choice to make and a personal responsibility that may not be evaded.

Earlier (5:20) the apostle had spoken of his pleading, offered as though it were God himself who was making the appeal. 6:1-2 inform us what the content of this appeal was: it was "Do not let the grace that you have received from God be for nothing" (ncv). In this appeal Paul is conscious of cooperating with God who entrusts the task of evangelism to his servants (see 1 Corinthians 3:9). He is concerned to make sure his Corinthian friends grasp the full importance of salvation only by grace. How could this possibly happen? Which other congregation gave Paul concern because of this very danger?

The answer to the first question is along the following lines. If they imagined that they could make any contribution to their salvation (as the Galatian Christians were fondly supposing, egged on by the Judaizers), then grace loses its distinctive character as a gift offered freely and so would be

received “in vain,” ie to no effect. For if we can be our own savior, or can put forward a claim of merit in the hope that on that grounds God will be favorably disposed to us, we have no real and desperate need of God’s grace, and Paul’s readers—and all who read this—must take to heart James Denney’s pointed words: “The kingdom of heaven is not for the well-meaning; it is for the desperate!” Any other attitude to the gospel’s provision smacks of pride and self-sufficiency.

Moreover, this is no speculative issue. There is an urgency about it, as Paul clinches his point by quoting from the Old Testament. We, like the New Testament church, live in the gospel age of privilege: “the acceptable time, the day of salvation” is the present hour which will soon pass away (1 Corinthians 7:29). What are the destinations—death (Hebrews 9:27)? The end of the age (Matthew 13:24-50)? The taking away of God’s saving influence upon a human soul (Hebrews 3:12-19; 46,7; 12:17)?

PAUL'S DEFENSE

## 2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-10

In spite of his suffering and been misunderstood, Paul has had a proper attitude and has acted from good principles.

THESE VERSES ARE a remarkable defense as Paul lets us see the nature of his service for Christ and his fellows. No accusing finger may be justly pointed at him, charging him with insincerity or wrong motive (6:3-4a).

Nine trials are enumerated in three groups; and they are all hardships to which he has been exposed in fidelity to his calling. The first group are trials of a general character (“afflictions, hardships, calamities”)—how were these borne? Secondly, particular sufferings are described (beatings, imprisonments, tumults, ie results of mob violence). Can you recall some incidents in Acts? Thirdly, self-imposed duties are mentioned, as these were required in the service of the gospel (“labors,”—NEB has “overworked”—a malaise in the church, where too few attempt too much; “watching” is not a reference to religious vigil, but to sleepless nights; “hunger”).

Paul goes on to describe the spirit in which he faced these bitter experiences (6:6-8a). His character was often attacked unmercifully; he was even branded as a “deceiver” (6:8). Yet he insists that all about his character is “above board” in spite of the inevitable “dishonor” and “ill repute” which his opponents raked up as material to discredit him.

We can only guess at what they said, but it must have been something like this: “This Paul,” (as Demetrius, Acts 19:26, scornfully called him) “is really

a nobody and may be safely ignored (6:9); he is a foolhardy person who runs unnecessary risks which make him as good as dead already, and so of little value in the eyes and esteem of humanity (6:9b). His sufferings are a mark of God's displeasure (6:9c). He is of melancholy disposition (6:10), has no influence in the world where money talks and possessions count (6:10)."

In a series of expressive phrases Paul rejects the scurrilous verdicts of his enemies and gives an affirmation to every objection leveled at him. There is a place for a rebuttal of false allegation, we learn; but we must be as prepared as Paul was to face the close scrutiny of our motives and the worth of our Christian service.

CHRISTIAN DISTINCTIVENESS

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11–7:1

Although as Christians we still live in this evil world, we really do not belong here. Paul reminds us to be different.

FROM A PASSIONATE statement of the apostolic ministry in 6:3-10 we read of an even more intense expression of Paul's yearning over the Corinthian congregation. Read 6:11-13 and then 7:2, and you will see why many scholars hold that the intervening section, 6:14–7:1, forms a separate block, either as a digression in Paul's thought or an interpolation of a fragment of another letter from him.

7:11-13 are indeed an impressive revelation of Paul's inner feelings, which are continued in the same vein in 7:2: "Our mouth is open to you" sounds rather old-fashioned for the simple and frank confession "We've let ourselves go," in speaking without reserve or restraint. This is then matched by 7:2: "Open your hearts to us," that is, "don't be reserved, but let me know exactly how you feel, because of the mutual trust and regard we have for one another." There must have been a happy bond of understanding formerly existing between Paul and the Corinthians, and he doesn't want to lose it. In fact, this is something of an ideal which we should cherish today; and the Christian fellowship is fortunate where mutual respect and trust make it possible for a free, uninhibited exchange of views and convictions—and criticisms!

The digression of 6:14-18 turns on the contrast between Christian and pagan morality, with analogies drawn from the Old Testament. In this way Paul establishes the need for God's people not to compromise their high ethical standards, but maintain "the ideal of the Christian life. Here is something to be overcome and put away; something to be worked out and completed; a spiritual element or atmosphere—only the fear of God—in which these tasks can be accomplished" (Denney, updated).

**Notes** 6:15: Belial = the Hebrew form of an Aramaic word meaning "worthlessness, good-for-nothing," used in intertestamental literature for Satan. 6:16: see 1 Corinthians 3:16.

PAUL'S JOY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-8

Paul writes about the privileges of fellowship.

A RENEWED IMPASSIONED plea for a restoring of amicable relationships between the apostle and his people at Corinth is the subject of the first verses of this passage. On his part there is no strangeness or bitterness, and he is confident they will be fully reconciled to him. "I have great confidence in you" is a phrase found elsewhere in Paul's correspondence with the churches, as he appeals to their best intentions, and he does so with a directness of speech by using a Greek term (*parrhesia*) normally reserved for the forthright public proclamation of the gospel (eg Philippians 1:20; Ephesians 6:19). His character and conduct have been always for their good, and now he is rejoicing that they have acted on his advice, so he is filled with consolation and joy (7:4).

The mention of his present jubilation leads Paul to review the past and share further with his readers the record of events which have caused his gladness of spirit. 7:5 then looks back to 2:13 and relates to the historical sequence from Troas to Macedonia where eventually he was joined by Titus. In what state of mind was he then (7:5)? And how was he relieved (7:6)?

Titus came with uplifting news that the "severe letter" (2:4f.) had done its work (7:8-12). This, perhaps, was the chief cause of joy. Paul had had second thoughts on the severe tone he had been compelled to adopt in his writing (7:8). Now, in retrospect, he realizes that the momentary pang of conscience

had been worth it, for the sudden, sharp shock of that letter had called the church to repentance and moved it to take action in dissociating itself from the action of the wrongdoer and censuring him (7:7; see 2:6-11).

Titus had been the messenger of this news, so the weight resting on Paul's spirit was lifted (7:6). How often has this been true in Christian experience: a kindly word of encouragement, a sympathetic look, an understanding letter, or even a meaningful grip in a handshake—and our spirits have been revived by some Christian's thoughtful concern for us!

THE RIGHT KIND OF SORROW

## 2 CORINTHIANS 7:9-16

It is no good being sorry about our sins without doing anything about them. Real repentance puts things right.

MORE REASONS FOLLOW for Paul's encouragement when Titus met him in Macedonia (7:5-6). Not only had the church taken positive and courageous action, Paul's own estimate of the Corinthians themselves had also been vindicated, as 7:4,14 make clear. He had confessed to Titus that he believed, deep in his heart, that all would be well, and now he has not been put to shame, but rather what he said is "found to be true" (7:14).

Titus also rejoiced (7:13), and his joy spills over to Paul. The way in which Paul's delegate (commended in 8:23) had been received, and the prompt obedience the Corinthians had given to his words as the apostle's representative, had endeared them to Titus (7:15); and so both apostle and delegate rejoice together. The crisis at Corinth is over, and Paul is confident that all is well (7:16).

The distinction drawn in 7:9-10 between two kinds of sorrow. The first type, although short-lived and brought about by the "severe letter," was effective in leading to a true repentance which brought no regret (Hebrews 12:4-13). The other kind of sorrow is the kind that takes no account of God's disciplinary chastisement and is more like remorse and self-recrimination. Judas' action (Matthew 27:3) may be given as an illustration of a sorrow which produces only despair and death. One effect of the former "godly

grief” is that as far as the Corinthians were concerned, they did not “suffer loss” (7:9). Probably this means that Paul would not have visited the church if it had remained hardened, and that would have been to their detriment.

A GENEROUS CHURCH

## 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-7

Why should it be natural for Christians to give to others?

AT THIS POINT the second major part of the letter begins as Paul turns to consider the collection which he was raising in all the Gentile churches for the impoverished Jewish Christians in the mother church at Jerusalem. It is important to see the place of this collection in the life of the apostle's missionary work, for such an enterprise was first a fulfillment of his promise, made to Peter and James, to remember the poor at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:10), and secondly a testimony and practical evidence to the "saints" in Palestine of the love of the Gentile churches, expressed in a most realistic way. There was no finer way of demonstrating the unity of both Jewish and Gentile elements in the one church than this, and at the same time, no more powerful repudiation of the Judaizers who tried to insinuate that Paul was out of sympathy with the Jewish Christians and their leaders. See Romans 15:25-27.

The noble example of the Macedonian churches would be a well-chosen incentive to the Corinthians to "excel in this gracious work also" (8:7), which in turn is prompted by the divine grace (8:1).

The churches in Macedonia, of which Philippi is the best known, were renowned for their "wealth of generosity" (8:2), and it is good that we have independent witness of their generosity in the way in which they supported Paul's ministry as well as the fund (Philippians 1:5; 4:10-19). Nor was such generous giving made lightly, for the churches of Macedonia were, at that

time, in the grip of a financial squeeze (8:2), but this state of their economy did not restrict their sacrificial giving (8:3), even to the point of their imploring Paul to take the money! Does this attitude remind you of an Old Testament parallel, when God's people gave too much (Exodus 36:2-7)?

Paul had commissioned Titus (8:6) to act as his agent for the collection. He had already made some arrangement to collect the money, but with the trouble at Corinth, no doubt the matter was put in abeyance. Now that the air had cleared and good relations were restored, Titus will be encouraged to complete the matter.

**To think over** 8:4 contains the New Testament key term *koinonia*, normally translated “fellowship.” The word means “sharing”—but not simply of experiences and the gospel truths, but in a most down-to-earth way of material resources with others. Look at Acts 2:43-47; 4:34-37; 6:1; Romans 12:8; Galatians 6:10: Have we sufficient social concern for the needy today?

GENEROUS GIVING

## 2 CORINTHIANS 8:8-15

We say we love Jesus Christ; are we prepared to show it by what we give?

BY FOLLOWING THE Macedonian believers' wonderful example, Paul's readers would prove the authentic nature of their love (8:8), an arresting thought which can bring us up sharp. We say that we love Jesus Christ; are we prepared to show it by what we give?

But an even higher encouragement is given in the next verse, tacked on almost as an aside, yet so compelling in the picture it gives. It tells of the pre-existent Lord of glory, who became poor by choosing to accept our earthly life (Luke 9:58) and at length to give his all (Mark 10:45) for his people's eternal good. Let this example inspire the Corinthians, and all Christians, especially when they recall that by Jesus' self-chosen poverty they have entered into an inheritance of spiritual wealth. "For your sake" and "you" are intentionally emphatic. It was for them he laid his glory aside and gave himself to the terrible consequences of humiliation. Little wonder, then, that Paul with Philippians 2:5-11 in mind, will round off the discussion on Christian response in stewardship with 9:15!

Some principles of Christian giving follow (8:10-15). Three points should be underlined and taken to heart:

1. A willingness both to promise help and then to give it (8:11). Here is a necessity in Christian responsibility: not only to begin a good work, but also to finish it.
2. Opportunity, expressed in the phrase “according to what a person has” (8:12). This is obviously the determining factor in the amount of our giving, which is not to be measured by the quantity of the gift alone, but by the extent of the sacrifice involved (Mark 12:43-44).
3. By quoting from Exodus 16:18 in 8:15, Paul does not intend that the Jerusalem saints should be relieved by causing the Corinthians to be burdened (8:13). The golden rule is “equality,” ie fair shares for all. Let those who have share with those who do not have, so that both may be provided for.

HONESTY SEEN IN ACTION

## 2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24

The people to whom Paul give tasks are reliable and trustworthy.

AS COMPENSATION FOR a life of tireless journeys (2 Corinthians 11:26) and little opportunity to settle down in a particular place for any length of time (1 Corinthians 4:11), God gave Paul a great army of Christian coworkers and Christian friends who, like the Philippians, became his partners in the work of the gospel (Philippians 1:5,7).

This section mentions one familiar name, Titus (8:16), but it also makes allusion to two other people whose names are concealed from us (8:18,22). This is perhaps a good reminder that we know less about the personnel of the New Testament than we think we do. After all, there were Christians before Paul's arrival on the scene—a fact to which he pays grateful tribute (Romans 16:7)—and no doubt fine Christians contemporary with him.

The two colleagues are both attractively described and warmly commended (8:18-19 and 8:22-23). They are mentioned for the reason that they, along with Titus, are to be sent to Corinth as the churches' delegates for the administration of the relief fund. Paul has a particular purpose in view in selecting these three. What is it (8:20-21)? And it is important that these brothers should be of sterling character and integrity (8:22). Indeed, what higher accreditation could they have than in 8:23?

**Notes** 8:18: many guesses have been made: Luke's name as a suggested identity goes back to Origen and Jerome. A likely choice is Aristarchus who is called a Macedonian and a companion of Paul (8:19) in Acts 19:29; see also Acts 20:4; 27:2. But perhaps we should seek a more prominent figure. Then Apollos would be an admirable candidate in view of 8:18 (see Acts 18:26-28). 8:22: the second "brother" is even more obscurely referred to, and no guess as to his identity is profitable.

**Thought** Let us thank God for countless unnamed Christians, particularly ministers of the word who labor in obscurity.

## A GOOD REPUTATION

# 2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-5

Paul wants to see spontaneous giving, not grudging duty.

THIS CHAPTER, WHICH continues the theme of “the offering for the saints” (9:1) falls into two parts. 9:1-5 appeal to two motives in order to reinforce the spirit of love in the matter of the collection. Can you name them? Then, 9:6-15 go on further to urge Christian generosity, and Paul quotes the blessings which accompany such an attitude.

The introductory phrase of 9:1 is a literary device used to resume the writer’s counsel. In the opening section, the thought is governed by the contrast between the churches of Macedonia and the church at Corinth. Paul’s honor is at stake because he has set out the Corinthian community as a model of readiness to contribute, but their delay in completing the matter (caused, no doubt, by the upset within the church) seems to contradict this honor Paul has set on them. So now he calls on them to fulfill their task and, in so doing, to confirm the confidence he has in them. Above all, he wants the money to be forthcoming freely, and he picks out a number of expressive ways of getting home this truth (9:2,5), the last reference is particularly telling and incisive: he wants their gift to be made spontaneously, not given as a grudging duty.

Note 9:2-4: the two ways in which Paul drives home his appeal are given. They are imitation, with the Macedonians setting the standard, and shame, to

avoid the Corinthians' slackness in any way reflecting adversely on Paul's confidence in them or their own self-respect.

**Thought** What can you learn from Paul as a spiritual director and pastor, armed with that most necessary quality—tact and the right approach to a delicate situation?

ENCOURAGEMENT ON GIVING GENEROUSLY

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15

Our incentive to give is the gift to us of our Savior Jesus Christ.

“TO GIVE,” SAYS one ancient commentator, “is not to lose, but to sow seed.” And so it is the natural metaphor (9:6), drawn from horticulture, which is employed to apply the principle of generosity in giving. The key phrase lies in 9:7. God loves a cheerful giver. The Greek term, translated “cheerful,” gives us our English “hilarious”—a new slant on the spirit which should motivate us as we bring our gifts to God or take on some act of stewardship. The type of giving which Paul recommends is in contrast to that suggested by the adverbs “reluctantly” (literally, “out of sorrow,” sorry to part with the money!) and “under compulsion” (literally, “because of stern duty or necessity”).

True stewardship implies that we give because of love, and not simply because we cannot avoid it—for various social reasons. Love by its very definition cannot help but give, for it is love’s privilege to give and go on giving. The highest expression of such love is found in the New Testament teaching on God’s grace (9:8), and the greatest proof and demonstration of that love in action is focused in the gift beyond words of 9:15, Jesus Christ himself (Romans 5:6-11).

Notice the outworking of Christian giving in the intervening verses (9:9-14): first, it produces a rich harvest of thanksgiving to God (9:12) who is honored when his people take their discipleship seriously; secondly, the

almsgiving of the Corinthians produced spiritual fruit—it convincingly showed the Jerusalem church the true Christian standing of the Gentile brothers and sisters (9:13); thirdly, this recognition evoked from the Jewish Christians a spirit of intercessory prayer and a longing to be drawn to them because the grace of God so clearly rested on the Gentile groups (9:14).

Paul gives a picture here which so often filled his vision—a united, worldwide church of Christ, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:11-18), and discovered in this relationship, which broke down one of the toughest barriers in the ancient world (Colossians 3:11), a powerful confession of the reconciling gospel (9:13). For if the gospel does not unite Christians, how dare we expect that its message of reconciliation will be believed by the world?

PAUL DEFENDS HIS MINISTRY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-6

We read why Paul was effective when he preached the good news.

TO EVERYONE WHO reads through 2 Corinthians as a continuous piece of writing, as distinct from those who take only a small portion at a time, it becomes immediately clear that 10:1 opens a new section altogether. There is a distinct break at this point, which has been explained in a number of ways. The usual “critical” opinion is that chapters 10–13 form a separate letter and are to be identified with the “severe letter” of 2:4; 7:8, sent earlier to Corinth. But it should also be noted that there is a considerable body of scholarly opinion, both conservative and otherwise, that supports the integrity of the last four chapters in the sequence in which they fall in the letter as we have it.

On the latter view, Paul turns now to deal with the still headstrong and factious minority in the church. The whole section of four chapters may be called a statement of his apostolic authority which was the point at issue between himself and those who spoke ill of him who were upsetting the Corinthians. The great majority of believers in the church had been won back by his past visit and previous letter, but there was still a pocket of resistance; these chapters are addressed to them.

10:1-6 are an impassioned appeal to the Corinthians themselves. Paul states his own clear motives and sincerity by defending himself against the suspicion that he was acting “in worldly fashion” (10:2). He refutes this charge with a military metaphor (10:3-5).

He is still a human being, living in the world (10:3), and laden down with human infirmities, but he resolutely denies any false methods which he calls “weapons ... of the flesh.” His chosen weapons are of divine power, and demolish all arguments and plans which are simply human fantasies (10:4-5). This is a side glance at the Judaizers who appear to have taught that the “elements” (Galatians 4:8ff.) or the heavenly bodies should be worshiped (as in Colossians 2:16-18), as part of their attempt to reintroduce the Jewish legalistic system and impose it on the Corinthian converts. Paul knows of no rightful place for any ceremonial which comes between God and his people, and reliance on “knowledge” (Greek *gnosis*) has already (1 Corinthians 8) been branded as a mark of false teaching.

THE CONSISTENT SERVANT OF CHRIST

## 2 CORINTHIANS 10:7-11

Paul reminds his readers of his relationship with Christ and his authority from Christ.

“LOOK AT THE obvious facts” (10:7, NLT) is Paul’s head-on appeal and answer to his critics’ charge implied in 10:1: “My critics have said that I am feeble when I’m with you in person.”

The counter-argument is directed against his opponents who claimed a special position as Christ’s (10:7), and did not hesitate to criticize the apostle on the ground that he was inferior to them (10:10). They made out that they enjoyed a special place in the church as authoritative teachers and possessed a commanding presence. Moreover, they had one great advantage in their favor; they were at Corinth and able to influence the church there firsthand.

It also seems that they turned their presence at Corinth to their own purposes, for implicit in Paul’s paragraph is the thought that he was under fire because of his absence. The point on which they had fastened was that he preferred to stay at a safe distance and to conduct his defense by correspondence (10:9-10). This policy, they were suggesting, is a coward’s refuge, for it seemed to imply that Paul was a strong personality when he wrote his letters, but when he appeared on the scene, his personal presence was nowhere near as impressive. Perhaps his opponents were also harking back to his supposed indecisiveness of action (1:17) and failure to come to Corinth as he had promised (2:1). Now (they would explain to the

Corinthians and so capitalize on Paul's nonappearance) we know the real reason; he was afraid to come, and can only terrify people by letters written from a comfortable distance (10:9). How does he reply to this charge (10:11)?

**Notes** 10:7: no allusion to the "Christ party" of 1 Corinthians 1:12 should be read into this mention of "being Christ's." 10:10: Paul's letters were (and are) exactly this: see 2 Peter 3:16. The second part of the statement is what Paul strongly denies, if duplicity and "double talk" are insinuated. But we have it on his own confession that he was no eloquent preacher or captivating orator (1 Corinthians 2:3-4; 2 Corinthians 11:6), like Apollos (Acts 18:24). His message, however, was charged with a power no human rhetoric can command. To what source does he trace it?

PAUL'S BOASTING

## 2 CORINTHIANS 10:12-18

Paul has boasted only to distinguish himself from his opponents.

THE APOSTLE NOW takes the offensive and opens his defense by charging his enemies with a false set of values (10:12). At the same time, he makes it clear that he has not trespassed on the limits which God has set for his missionary service. He is, above all, the apostle to the Gentiles, a vocation spelled out to him at his conversion and call (Acts 9:15; 22:21) and accepted by the pillar apostles as part of the general agreement at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9). Indeed, the mission to the Gentiles is his special province which God himself gave him (10:13), and Corinth falls in that category as a nonJewish community.

This reference is clearly intended as a side look at the Jewish Christian proselytizers who were annoying a Gentile church and trying to impose the burden of Judaism and certain extraneous beliefs upon them. Paul replies that if any preacher is “off limits” at Corinth, it is not he himself, but the Judaizer who had gone beyond the limit assigned to him.

Paul most carefully justifies his integrity here (10:14), insisting that when he first came to Corinth he did so with clear conscience and intended in no way to “poach” on the missionary territory of other Christians (10:15-16; see Romans 15:20).

At Corinth he may justifiably claim to be the human founder of the church (1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted”). What right have the Judaizers to encroach on

his work (1 Corinthians 9:1; 2 Corinthians 3:2)? Their mandate does not operate at Corinth.

Yet the final arbiter in this matter of evangelistic “division of labor” and territorial association is no human committee, nor does an agreement, made between Christians, mean much unless it is the Lord who directs. True—and here is the relevance for modern missionary service—he expects his servants to honor their arrangements and not to act irresponsibly in defiance of agreements as to mission fields, but it is God’s work and whatever success is given comes from him to whom the credit and glory belong (10:17-18, quoting Jeremiah 9:24).

PAUL AND THE FALSE APOSTLES

## 2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-6

Paul wants to make sure his readers are not led astray from a pure devotion to Christ.

ONE OF THE difficulties we face as we read Paul's correspondence with the churches of his time is that we do not know the precise background of the expressions he uses. It's true that we have a good picture of the overall scene at Corinth, but some smaller details remain—and perhaps must always remain—obscure to us. The present chapter, along with chapter 12, is a good illustration of this difficulty.

Obviously, at places Paul is ironical (11:1,8,11). He finds it necessary, if distasteful, to explain why he is required to justify himself and put his actions in the clear. But it is necessary because of the close link that he claims with the church (11:2), likened here to the bride of Christ. Which other passages concerning the marriage dignity of the church come to mind?

Because he cares so much for Christ's people, he is most careful that they should not be led astray (11:3). How could this happen?

Some important verses sketch in the character of the people who are later severely reprimanded (11:13-15). Three descriptions of their work are given in 11:1-6:

1. Their most dangerous work was that of enticing the believers away from a singlehearted devotion to Christ, and in attempting this (see Mark

13:22) they were doing the devil's work for him, as the serpent did in Eden (11:3,14: both texts are based on Genesis 3:4,13). If this seems a staggering thought, recall Mark 8:33!

2. These people who were Paul's opponents are heretics, preaching a different gospel which centered in a different Jesus from the Person of the apostolic message (11:4). It's true that Paul introduces his statement with an "if," but "he is not likely to cherish real fears on the ground of imaginary suppositions" (Strachan), so "if" (11:4) really means "as is the case." It is difficult to be sure what this warning is intended to refer to. Was it a purely human Jesus whom the false teachers presented, or a heretical picture altogether, like the later Gnostics, who turned him into a sort of demigod? We cannot tell.
3. These people claimed the authority of the Jerusalem apostles, surnamed ironically "extra-special messengers" (JBP). They bolstered their opposition to Paul by appealing (perhaps on their own initiative) to Peter, James and John against him. But Paul knows of no such rivalry or inferiority (11:5-6).

PAUL OFFERS HIS SERVICES FREELY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 11:7-11

Paul writes that he preached the gospel without charging a payment.

THE “LITTLE FOOLISHNESS” of 11:1 is now explained. What agitates Paul’s mind and caused him a certain reluctance was his self-justification of his policy. He had refused to accept financial maintenance from the churches (11:7)

The implication of this is that he had been taken to task on this score, with the innuendo that he did not claim his (rightful) due because he knew in his heart that he had no apostolic standing and so no entitlement to it.

But Paul takes pains to go into the matter in some detail, although he has already made his position clear in 1 Corinthians 9. In effect, he repeats his same impartial concern to offer his services freely (11:7: “without cost to you”). He does this, not because of any inferiority complex or unwillingness to receive financial help. Indeed, he had already received and gratefully acknowledged help from the Macedonian churches (11:9), notably the Philippians who had sent regularly a gift (Philippians 4:15-19) to relieve his need.

The issue at Corinth—as at Thessalonica—turned on the interpretation which his enemies placed on his receiving money. Both at Corinth and in other places (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9) Paul intentionally did not exercise his prerogative, and not always for the same reason. Can you see the difference in this chapter from what he says to the Thessalonians?

A further point emerges in 11:11. Paul's refusal to accept sustenance at Corinth was being used in another way. His enemies were accusing him of being false and so honestly refusing the support; his friends were professing to be grieved that he took this line of action, which they interpreted as a sign that he had no regard for them and that they had fallen into disfavor. This is the reason for the heart cry, "God knows I do (love you)!"

WATCH OUT FOR COUNTERFEITS!

## 2 CORINTHIANS 11:12-15

We must test the claims that people make to see if they ring true.

REVERTING TO THE dispute which had produced this explanation of his attitude to financial support, Paul hits out at the false teachers who were troublemakers at Corinth. If they simply attacked him and sought to discredit his work, that would have been one thing; far more serious was their advocacy of a false gospel, by which they placed themselves under the judgment of Galatians 1:6-9.

They professed to be able to draw upon apostolic authority for their credentials. Paul warmly retorts: “These people are false apostles. They are deceitful workers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ” (11:13, NLT). In so doing they are imitating their leader, Satan, who himself masquerades as a messenger of God.

The lesson is clear: appearances are deceptive, and we should not be too readily impressed by the superficial attractiveness of teachers who claim to be heaven-sent messengers. The test is more rigorous and vital: what do they teach, and does their character conform to the message they bring—and are both doctrine and way of life consistent with God’s revelation? Do you recall Jesus’ teaching here (Matthew 7:15-23)? And the apostle’s no less stringent criteria (2 Timothy 3:14-17)? And the serious warnings of John (1 John 4:1-5; 2 John 7-11)?

11:14 raises an interesting point. Genesis 3 tells of the devil's use of the serpent who in turn enticed Eve by a specious promise and a piece of trickery (1 Timothy 2:14), but no mention is made of the devil's transformation into an angel of light. Paul here is evidently drawing upon a Jewish tradition which related how Satan once took the form of "an angel" and joined the other angels in praising God.

Paul again does not mince his words about those who practice a deceit which Satan has inspired. They are his agents at Corinth, and will share his fate (11:15; see Matthew 25:41,46).

PAUL BOASTS TO MAKE HIS POINT

## 2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-21a

Paul shows the folly of the believers who have given way to the boastful claims of the false apostles.

MORE IRONY PEEPS through at 11:16. Possibly, as on previous occasions in his running debate with the Judaizers, the term “fool” was one which formed the substance of a charge brought against him. And when we remember that he includes the little term “too” (11:16), it seems that the pattern of boasting had already been set by the Judaizing teachers themselves; why shouldn’t Paul then have his turn?

11:17 is a qualification which the writer feels he must insert to make sure his readers catch the spirit in which he is writing. He is not “boasting” “after the Lord” (ie as a Christian), but as a man who deliberately puts himself in the place of those whose claims he wants to expose.

The Judaizers have been conspicuously successful in the inroads they have made into the Corinthian assembly, and 11:20 is a surprising statement of the way in which they have been given hospitality. The Corinthians have shown a clear lack of discernment, almost naivety, in welcoming the false prophets with their grandiose claims and pretensions; will they (Paul is asking) extend the same attitude to him as he plays the role of a fool?

They have tolerated these people, allowing themselves to be ordered about, robbed of their money (see 2:17) and duped by these false teachers—even to the point of being insulted by them in a way which any Jew would

regard as a most humiliating experience—a slap in the face. Paul, in this sarcastic passage, now simply asks for a hearing as he will present his case. “What a pity we are not like that—you seem to prefer bullies” is his final thrust (11:21).

**Notes** 11:18: literally, “since many [of these people] make a proud claim of their flesh,” ie the marks of circumcision. Paul’s only hope lay in the exactly opposite direction (Galatians 6:12-15). 11:20: the Judaizers had brought them into slavery—a verb found elsewhere only at Galatians 2:4. On the contrary, Paul acknowledged another slavery (4:5).

PAUL'S SUFFERINGS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 11:21b-33

Paul records his sufferings for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

HAVING TAKEN UP his assumed position of foolishly boasting, Paul goes on to give a record of his past life of service for Christ's sake and the gospel's.

The true tests of apostleship, he asserts, are not in loud claims and unsupported pretensions. The acid test is found in that person's record of suffering, service and sympathy with others for their good. So Romans 15:15-19; 2 Timothy 2:10; 3:10-12.

Paul has a notable record of his trials and, in giving them, he tells us many things that we should never otherwise have known.

He begins by claiming a pure descent as a true Jew (11:22). Then he proceeds to show that he is a true "minister of Christ" (11:23) by listing a catalog of deprivations and sufferings. Added to the physical strain of a life of hardship (11:23-27) was a mental and spiritual liability also to be carried: "my anxiety for all the churches" (11:28), and no church gave him more anxiety than Corinth! Finally, he adds the ever-pressing and exacting responsibility of the "care of souls," watching for the opportunity to help another in distress, and entering sympathetically into their deep need (11:29).

As a postscript he rounds off with a personal account of the Damascus episode of Acts 9:25. Why is this event, in itself, trivial in contrast with the hair-raising experiences and dangers of 11:23-27, put last? One possible solution is that Paul's objectors had fastened on this incident, distorted it and

turned it into an accusation of a cowardly escape from Damascus. More likely, however, is the view that Paul singles out this experience for mention because it left upon his mind a lasting impression as the first trial after his conversion that he knew for the sake of his loyalty to Christ.

**Notes** 11:22: see Philippians 3:5. 11:23: Clement of Rome (ad 96) says that Paul was imprisoned seven times. 11:24: see Deuteronomy 25:3. 11:25: Acts 14:19; 16:22. 11:26: “danger from false brothers”—a particularly distressing experience (2 Timothy 4:10,14-16).

PAUL'S MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-6

Paul reveals his secret soul and writes modestly about his mystical experience.

THERE WAS ONE more charge which his accusers at Corinth had to level against his right to be called an apostle; and correspondingly one further need to “boast” (12:1) by way of self-justification. Those who criticized Paul no doubt taxed him with a deficient spiritual experience, insinuating that he was lacking in experiences of a “mystical” nature, “visions and revelations of the Lord.” By contrast, he was a dull, plain man, they asserted.

Paul therefore further unburdens his secret soul and permits himself to reveal his inner heart. The “man in Christ” (12:2) is Paul himself, although the whole narrative is written in a roundabout way. Why does he express himself like this?

He relates a datable experience in which he was transported in an ecstasy to the presence of God. “The third heaven,” 12:2, is a Jewish expression for the immediate presence of God. There he “heard” the indescribable words, which are his secret (12:4), for no human language can be adequate to convey the impression that such an immediacy of the divine presence meant to him. Such an elated spiritual experience may very well have proved an invaluable and unanswerable debating point, showing that his apostleship carried a credential which none of his rivals could challenge; but strangely Paul goes

on straightaway to renounce any confidence which he may have placed in such authorization (12:5-6).

He never makes mystical experience a ground of claiming apostolic authority. To his opponents such experiences would have been remarkable accomplishments, giving to their status and teaching an added authority and impressive kudos. Paul places no such value on ecstasy, nor does he imply that he was nearer to God then—when caught up into Paradise—than at other times under normal conditions. This is an important observation, which should set us on our guard against all forms of “mysticism” and exceptional experiences which are made the basis for some claim in a matter of Christian doctrine or practice. God may come to us or other believers in special ways, but all subjective experience must be tested by fixed objective standards. What are they?

PAUL'S "THORN IN THE FLESH"

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

How should we respond to weaknesses?

IF PAUL WILL not boast of his rapturous fellowship with the eternal God, he will speak freely of his weaknesses (12:5), and the two are closely related.

The "thorn in the flesh" (12:7) is a curious phrase with at least two meanings. It is clear that first it was inherently evil as Satan's emissary and secondly it came to him as an affliction. Some definite handicap which restricted Paul's missionary service is clearly in view, so much so that he prayed repeatedly for its removal. The answer which came was a paradoxical one: the thorn remained, but its sting was drawn, and its limiting purpose (so intended by Satan) was turned to good effect. The bad thing became a blessing. The positive value of the burden he was compelled still to carry had three aspects:

1. By this satanically inspired attack (see 2:11), God's purpose was achieved in keeping his servant in a humble dependence on him. "To keep me from becoming conceited" (12:7) is perhaps the key phrase, and Paul learned humility by enduring a crippling weakness which reminded him always of his frailty.
2. 12:9 teaches that by this denial he came to experience Christ's presence and power in a new way; in the hard school of discipline and suffering he learned lessons of trust and dependence on God's strength which

presumably he could never have known without the restricting presence of some weakness. As only those who confess ignorance can really be taught, so only those who know their need find in Christ the supply and fullness of God.

3. Some scholars have found in this reference an indication that Paul was a sick man, attacked often by malarial fever, and so have explained his short stay in the lowlands and unhealthy climate of Pamphylia (Acts 13:13) and his swift journey, beyond the Taurus mountains, to the more bracing regions of Galatia. Galatians 4:13-14 would confirm this view and illustrate the truth that illness, instead of closing a door on service for Christ, actually prompted Paul to venture and claim the Galatian towns for the gospel.

What exactly, then, was this “stake” in the flesh (an Old Testament expression, Numbers 33:55)? Apart from malaria, epilepsy or defective eyesight have been suggested, while a further interpretation of the phrase is a thorn “for the flesh,” ie to prick the apostle’s pride. No one knows for sure—a providential concealment, so that all who suffer for Christ may find their companion in Paul.

PAUL'S CONCERN FOR THE CORINTHIANS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-18

How do we respond when we are misunderstood? Learn from Paul.

IN 12:11-13 PAUL again reminds his readers that he has a distinct purpose in view, and his mood as much as the contents of the letter are both dictated by the situation at Corinth. They have compelled him to parade himself as though he were out of his mind with conceit and self-importance (12:11). He has bragged in order to show that the accusations leveled at him by those who were undermining the Corinthian community are without substance.

The verses 12:11-13 really give a résumé of his case against the Judaizers:

1. "He is nobody," they say. "Very well," Paul replies, "but I am not, on any showing, a bit inferior to the so-called 'super apostles' whose authority his enemies were laying claim to" (12:11).
2. "He is a plain, ordinary man, ungifted and undistinguished"; but Paul has a ready answer: "I have the signs to accredit me as an apostle: miracles, wonders and acts of power, and even something more convincing, the patience to cope with fractious people" (12:12)!
3. "He doesn't really care for you Corinthians. He has neglected the church," and Paul can say that this insult is without foundation and cannot be substantiated. Yet, ironically, only in one matter is it true: "I did not make myself a burden to you by taking your money [see 11:20]. Please forgive me for failing to sponge off you!" (12:13).

In 12:14-18, Paul turns to consider future relations with the Corinthian church (12:14), holding out the promise of a third visit. This implies, as we saw earlier, an intermediate visit, referred to in 2:1. Now, as he contemplates the future visit, he makes it clear that what he wants is not money but the wholehearted acceptance by the church of his authority, a submission to Christ and a confidence in himself, with a clearing of the air of all suspicious and mutual recriminations.

But perhaps the Corinthians still believe that he has deceived them with clever tricks (12:16). This insinuation maintains that Paul was astute enough not to take any money directly from them, but he shared in the proceeds for the collection which they gave to his agents, notably Titus. The answer to this is a reminder of the facts which relate to the mission of Titus and the unnamed brother of 12:18 (the same man as in 8:22?). This latter person would be a man well known to the Corinthians and who would be able to testify to Titus' honesty, and incidentally to Paul's too. His presence would guarantee the integrity of the other Christians involved in the collection scheme (see 8:6).

**To ponder** Paul's earlier teaching (8:21) expressed his own conviction to act always in a way above suspicion, especially in money matters. Can we say the same?

A CAUSE OF DEEP SORROW?

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:19-21

Has our Christian faith changed our lifestyle?

THE PREVIOUS SECTION took as its guide what Paul writes at 8:21: “for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man” (ESV). Both elements in this statement are important, but if it came to a question of priority, Paul makes it clear that so long as his motives are pure in the sight of God, that is the main concern (2 Timothy 2:15), and in the end it is the approval of God which counts, even if people misinterpret and misrepresent (12:19). After all, the apostle has nothing personally to gain as he seeks, above all, the wellbeing of the Corinthians.

This thought of the church’s growth in grace leads him to express the fear of its sorry state at the time of his writing his earlier letter (2:3-4; 7:8,12). 12:20-21 are the fullest description we have of the state of affairs that called for the “severe letter.” We have here a picture of a Christian congregation which contained people who have retained worldly ambition, and have not been cleansed from motives of self-seeking and moral laxity. Indeed, the word pictures conjured up by these verses make us think of professed Christians who practiced a sub-Christian morality, as sins of the spirit (12:20) and sins of the flesh (12:21) are regrettably joined to form a whole. Which group of sins is more detestable in the sight of God?

It is small wonder therefore that Paul has to write so severely to them, rebuking such un-Christian moods and practices as are listed. A large part of

his concern for the “upbuilding” (12:19; see 13:10) of the church requires the eliminating of these malpractices, and the rooting out of every wrong spirit which prompts them. His great fear (12:21) is that his stern words will be misunderstood, and his authority further defied, so that again he may be humiliated before them, and in place of a legitimate pride in his converts’ growth in holy living he will have only a cause of deep sorrow.

**Note** 12:20-21: for this list of vices compare Galatians 5:20f.; Romans 1:29ff. Corinth was infamous for such moral loose living, especially due to the cult of Aphrodite practiced there.

PAUL'S WARNING

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1-4

Paul tells his readers he is the representative of Christ, the Crucified One.

THE PROMISE AND prospect of a third impending visit (12:14) are renewed in 13:1. Paul has already issued a direct and strong warning, as an authoritative spokesperson of Christ (13:3), about the ethical laxity of the members who had sinned. He reiterates that warning (13:2) and tells them plainly that he will deal firmly with any repeated indiscipline and trifling with Christian moral standards. He is outspoken in his warning.

There is a veiled threat of some discipline (in 13:2-3) which he will exercise, not in his own right or name, but simply and solely because he is the genuine messenger of Christ, who seeks, as an overriding consideration, the highest welfare of the church (13:9).

Yet Paul's threat of a severe reprimand is tempered by some paradoxical thoughts (13:3b). He is weak in himself and seemingly powerless to remedy the menacing situation at Corinth, but clothed with an authority which derives from his status as Christ's apostle—almost his personal representative—Paul has the ability to cope firmly with this ugly problem and to bring to bear on it Christ's own power as head of his people. "The church is subject to Christ" (Ephesians 5:24), and to the apostle who represents Christ to the congregation. Yet (if we recall 1:24) this authority is exercised in no dictatorial or authoritarian way, as though Paul were simply imposing his

own personal whims and wishes on the church. It is an authority exercised in the spirit of the crucified One (13:4), which will bring the Corinthians to see the folly of their ways. In other words, it is love which subdues, by turning disobedience and hostility into a glad acceptance of God's will and a willing alignment of our selfish ends to his nobler purposes for our lives. It is the message of the cross applied to a difficult and delicate situation, created by a still rebellious minority at Corinth.

**Notes** 13:1: Paul is still under fire from a small group of discontented people who maintain their resistance to him. "But can they agree on the accusation they bring?" asks Paul, reminding them of Deuteronomy 19:15 (see Matthew 18:16). 13:2: a clear allusion to the second ("painful") visit.

**Meditation** "Crucified in weakness." Consider Bonhoeffer's comment on this phrase: "God in human form, not, as in other religions, in animal form—the monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying—nor yet in abstract form—the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc.—nor yet in the Greek divine-human or autonomous man, but man existing for others, and hence the Crucified."

PAUL'S CHALLENGE

## 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-10

The test of our faith is whether Christ lives in us and this will be seen in the presence of his holiness and love.

WE ARE LEFT in no doubt that Paul cherishes the church's highest good—their “restoration” (13:9), their “building up” (13:10), their stability as a Christian community with the Lord at the center (13:5). What are the ways to achieve these great aims?

1. Self-examination (13:5), which may be a painful process of self-analysis, dealing ruthlessly with the present condition and not refusing to face the unpleasant sight of our own sins and failures. But this leads to:
2. Repentance, ie a confession of our past evil ways as deserving God's judgment and a turning from them (12:21). Paul had no room for cheap grace or any easy way back to favor. Penitence and all that is involved in abandoning sinful practices and attitudes is an indispensable condition to restoration and renewed fellowship.
3. The apostle's prayers are also a force to be reckoned with (13:7-8), because he carries the burden of the church's good on his pastoral heart and longs to see them in a right relationship with the Lord and himself.
4. Threat, which Paul is not afraid to use (13:10), reminding his readers that he may have to deal severely with the offenders if they do not, in his

absence, set matters right. And he will have no scruples in claiming the God-given authority which he has, as apostle to the Gentiles, to ensure the church's highest wellbeing.

5. Optimism is a final factor, for Paul was irrepressibly hopeful for his churches. He has confidence that as the truth is mighty and it prevails (13:8) so, once the Corinthians perceive the truth of the appeal he makes, they will accept it and act upon it. So he expects that all will be put right in the end (13:9).

**Note** 13:5: "Jesus Christ is in you"—better, "among" you (as in Mark 10:43, which uses the same phrase). It is the church as a whole which is called to the test, not individuals, though, of course, the church is made up of individual members.

GOD'S BLESSING

## 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-14

In closing, Paul writes to the whole church, calling on them to agree with one another.

TWO FINAL SECTIONS round off Paul's appeal and contain his farewell greetings. 13:11-13 assure the Corinthian believers of his continuing interest, and call for harmony within a divided congregation. This reference to "agree with one another" and "live in peace" confirms the view taken earlier that chapters 10–13 are written to a minority group within the church which still remained unconvinced by Paul's earlier correspondence; therefore this final appeal for a coming together in mutual consent and unity within their ranks.

The divine blessing is promised (13:11b) to a fellowship whose reconciliation Paul fervently anticipates; the outward sign of this is expressed in the practice of the "holy kiss." Associated with early Christian worship as a mark of mutual affection (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14), this practice persisted into the later life of the church, and the references to it at the close of the New Testament letters give support to the belief that these letters were intended to be read out in public worship services (clearly in 1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16 and probably Revelation 1:3), and the reading was to be followed by the Lord's Supper. Then, the practice of the kiss would be an act of mutual affection and confidence, implying a putting away of all disagreements between the church members, in anticipation of a fresh realization of unity as they shared in a

common loaf and cup (so Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). But Acts 20:37 reminds us that this practice was simply a current demonstration of fraternal greeting.

The closing verse is the familiar apostolic blessing, and a clear statement of New Testament trinitarianism showing the relationships of the three Persons of the Trinity in connection with the world of humanity. Therefore the order is that of Christian experience, and “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” stands first. For it is by him, incarnate, crucified and triumphant, that we come to know the Father’s love (John 1:1-18; Romans 5:8-11; Hebrews 9:14) and to rejoice in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The last phrase may mean either that fellowship which he promotes between believers (Ephesians 4:3) or, more preferably, the Christian’s fellowship with him as a Person (John 14:17).

INTRODUCTION  
GALATIANS  
RALPH P. MARTIN

“THE EPISTLE TO the Galatians is spiritual dynamite, and it is therefore almost impossible to handle it without explosions.” History has confirmed this striking judgment of R.A. Cole, who goes on to illustrate the part this letter played in Luther’s spiritual awakening and John Wesley’s assurance of faith. There are three questions on which some guidance may be given.

Who were the Galatians?

This is no easy question to answer, because Galatia was a wide area of Asia Minor, embracing the modern country of Turkey. The term, as used in Acts 16:6; 18:23, refers to the southern part of the territory and included such place names as Antioch and Iconium, where Paul preached during his first missionary journey and where churches were then formed, according to Acts 14.

Another possibility is that the Galatians lived in the northern area as inhabitants of the imperial Roman province which was established in 25 BC. This “northern Galatia” view was the general opinion of the early church fathers, but leaves us in complete ignorance as to who the Galatian Christians were, because Acts contains no record of Paul’s penetration so far north.

A number of good reasons have persuaded scholars to locate the first readers in southern Galatia, and it is this view that is accepted here, although the matter is still debated. One apparently small point, the present author believes, tips the scale. Barnabas is spoken of (in 2:9,13) as though he were well known to these churches, and this fact ties in with the view that 4:13 refers to Paul's south Galatian mission when Barnabas was with him.

### When was the letter written?

Here again there is no complete certainty, and how we answer the question of the Galatians' identity in part affects our fixing a date to the letter.

Once a "south Galatian" destination is agreed, it becomes possible to suggest a dating as soon as possible after the first missionary journey (Acts 14); and before the Apostolic Council of AD 49 (Acts 15).

The alternative proposal, on the view that the events of Galatians 2 are the same as those recorded in Acts 15, is that the letter must then be dated at a later period of Paul's ministry, and the usually accepted view, on the ground of a community of ideas and a common terminology, is to put Galatians in the period of 2 Corinthians, ie between Acts 19:1–20:2.

The first-mentioned and earlier dating is, however, most attractive, and has the supreme merit of harmonizing the history of Acts and the chronological data which Paul supplies.

On this earlier dating, which makes the letter Paul's earliest composition in the New Testament canon, the following identifications may be suggested: 1:2 refers to the churches founded on the first missionary tour (Acts 13:1–14:21). Paul's second visit to the area is that of Acts 14:21-23 and the mention of a preaching of the gospel "at first" (Galatians 4:13) looks back to the early days of his evangelization.

The visit to Jerusalem, spoken of in 1:18, is that of Acts 9:26, and the consultation in 2:1ff. is the same as his visit in Acts 11:30. 2:2 speaks of a

private visit (so there is no explicit allusion in Acts), but the mention of a coming to the city in response to a “revelation” (2:2) fits in with Agabus’ prophecy (Acts 11:28).

On this endeavor to harmonize the cross-references, the letter is dated about AD 48 and was probably written from Syrian Antioch, en route to the Apostolic Conference of Acts 15.

### Who were the troublers of the Galatians?

The traditional view—and the most satisfactory—is that Paul’s opponents were Jewish-Christian emissaries from Jerusalem (2:12) who arrived on the scene, insisting that “by faith alone” was insufficient for full salvation. Paul’s gospel, they maintained, was only half the truth, and circumcision—the badge of a full Jew’s relationship within the covenant and a necessity for all male converts to Judaism from the pagan world—was necessary. Acts 15:1 gives a concise statement of their teaching and so the implication was clearly made, once Paul had moved on, that he had left behind only “half Christians” who still lacked a full status within God’s covenant.

Alongside this doctrinal controversy—and indeed as part of it—they conducted a smear campaign against Paul, alleging that he was no true apostle, was dependent on (and so inferior to) the Twelve. Moreover, he spoke with a double voice over circumcision, not requiring it in Galatia, but permitting it on occasion (Acts 16:3 may have had an earlier precedent) because he wanted some easy converts and so wished to avoid persecution (1:10; 5:11).

Paul’s response to these insinuations is warmly written around the twin themes of faith and freedom. With forthright indignation, because so much is at stake (1:7-9; 2:5; 4:11; 5:4,7), he refutes all charge of dependence on human authority, presses home the need of justification by grace alone without human merit-seeking or religious ceremonies and through faith as a

sinner's simple acceptance of all that God offers in Christ, and sets the law in its right perspective as a preparation for the gospel. Moreover, he declares, not only is the law's regime finished as a way to salvation; its prescriptions as obedience to an external code and the mechanical observance of religious institutions (4:10) are powerless to enable someone to gain the victory over sin's controlling power. The Holy Spirit's grace and power are needed for this, and he too is God's gracious gift (3:5; 5:18,25).

The sufficiency of Christ and his atoning work, and the dynamic of the Spirit: these are the leading themes of this letter and give it a timeless relevance as much needed in our present century as in first-century Galatia.

DON'T BE DIVERTED  
GALATIANS 1:1-9

It's not true that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you call yourself a Christian. We read here Paul's clear thoughts on what the gospel is.

RIGHT AT THE beginning of his letter, Paul strikes the characteristic note. He is, by God's own appointment, an apostle, charged with an authority which no one can dispute. This appointment came to him on the Damascus Road as he both encountered and was commissioned by the living Christ (Acts 9:5,15; 22:14; 26:16); therefore the reference to God "who raised him from the dead."

The gospel which Paul is commissioned to proclaim has a uniqueness which means that it can tolerate no rival (1:6-7), even though such a false "gospel" claimed a special revelation (1:8-9; see 2 Corinthians 11:4).

Two matters are important in this section. First, the content of Paul's gospel is clearly stated in 1:3-5. It begins with God's grace and ends in his glory, and at every intermediate point the initiative rests with him, and the sole human response required is faith in the accomplished fact of God's redemption in Jesus Christ. "Peace" may be ours because of what he did on the cross, when he freely gave himself because of our sins and so made possible a deliverance from the old order ("the present evil age") of sin and death, and an entrance into that new world of fellowship with God in the

church (Colossians 1:13), in which the powers of evil are broken (1 John 3:8).

Secondly, the background is the false teaching of the Judaizers who sought to impose Jewish ceremonial practices on the new converts as part of God's requirement for salvation. This "extra" (Acts 15:1) is strenuously rejected by Paul, and branded as "a different gospel, which is not an alternative one" (1:6-7). He writes urgently because of his amazement that the Galatians have been so easily impressed by these false teachers (1:6). They have received them with favor; he puts on them a fearful verdict (1:9), namely excommunication.

“LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO ME”

## GALATIANS 1:10-17

Paul writes about the great U-turn in his life.

VERSE 10 IS the first of the many personal utterances in this letter. Paul is on the defensive. He has been accused of offering a gospel which is incomplete and unheard-of. Now he repels the attack by taking his stand on the sincerity of his motives. Where else does he do this? (see 2 Corinthians 2:17).

1:11-17 are perhaps the clearest statement of where Paul's gospel came from, and it is set in the framework of his autobiography in miniature. His message is not earth-born, man-made, or the product of his own fertile imagination (1:11-12). Who gave it to him? Why, the same Person who changed his life and set it on a new course.

So Paul retells the story of his conversion (literally, a turning round). First, what he was before Christ met him, summed up in the phrase “my former life in Judaism” (1:13). See also Philippians 3:3-16 and 1 Timothy 1:13-16. That old life was marked by bigotry (1:13) which made him the church's enemy number one, singlemindedness to succeed as a Jew by really trying hard (1:14a), a zeal which made him an excellent pupil in rabbinical school, marked out for promotion (Acts 22:3).

This retelling of his preChristian ambition is broken into by one of Scripture's tremendous “buts” (1:15). Paul's life was from that point reoriented in a new direction as a result of God's choice (1:15), Christ's appearing to him and appointing him to his service (1:16). From then on he

was a changed man—a new man in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Saul had died; Paul was alive to God through Christ (Galatians 2:20; Romans 7:9; 8:13).

**Notes** 1:13: see Acts 8:3. 1:14: “traditions of my fathers”—these were the rabbis’ additions to the explanations of the Mosaic law, making life so hard for the average Jew, who gave up in despair. Saul accepted the challenge and was determined to excel. 1:15: Israel’s prophets traced God’s hand in their early preparation (Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5). 1:16: Paul’s mission in life was to preach (Ephesians 3:7-9) and to carry the gospel to the Gentiles (1 Timothy 2:7).

**Thought** Christians are those who have been “brought from death to life” (Romans 6:13).

EVIDENCE OF GOD'S GRACE  
GALATIANS 1:18-24

Do your life and reputation cause other people to praise God because of you?

YOU WILL FIND it helpful to begin this study at 1:17. The entire paragraph has one purpose: to show that Paul's ministry did not derive from any human authority, and (as an equally important consideration) that Paul did not act in opposition to the leaders of the Jerusalem churches. His conversion and his mission were, in fact, special cases and supreme instances of God's sovereignty in choosing those whom he wills, and appointing people to his service as he pleases.

So the recently converted Paul didn't ask permission to preach by going to Jerusalem (1:17) nor, at a later time, did he seek authorization for his ministry from the original apostles (1:19). Yet his early ministry was becoming widely known and appreciated, gladdening the hearts of Christians who saw in him a magnificent trophy of divine grace (1:23-24).

There were two exceptions, however. Following on his trip to "Arabia," a region inhabited by Nabatean Arabs, he came to Jerusalem via Damascus. At the capital he met Peter, from whom he gained certain information, and during these two weeks he doubtless learned much of Jesus' ministry which is reflected in his letters to the churches.

There is no conflict with what he had just written. Paul maintains his independence as to Christ's personal call and authorization as an apostle, but

he was ready to receive further enlightenment from those who had known the Lord “in the days of his flesh” (Hebrews 5:7; Acts 1:21). And who was better qualified to help him than Peter?

James (Jesus’ brother) was his second contact. Formerly an unbeliever (Mark 3:21; John 7:5), James had been convinced by Jesus’ risen authority (1 Corinthians 15:7) and, during Peter’s imprisonment, had assumed leadership in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17).

This record of the apostle’s movements is compressed and needs to be filled out from Acts, especially 9:19-25 and 2 Corinthians 11:32-33. In particular, note the part played by Barnabas (Acts 9:26-30) in vouching for Paul as a genuine believer and gaining for him an introduction to the church leaders.

The believers were thrilled at the news of Saul’s new-found salvation (1:24).

KEEPING THE TRUE GOSPEL

GALATIANS 2:1-5

There's always a subtle temptation to substitute a religion that depends on rules and good works for the true gospel.

PAUL CONTINUES TO recount the story of his dealings with the Jerusalem church. There are some difficult problems of identification posed by 2:1, for the natural question to ask is, which visit to Jerusalem in Acts matches the description given here? And, “after fourteen years” from when?

The most likely solution to what has been called one of the most complicated problems of New Testament criticism is: first, that this paragraph refers to the visit of Acts 11:30, and secondly that Paul is counting from the time of his conversion, which probably occurred in AD 33. This would bring us to the date AD 46 for the second Jerusalem visit.

But these are minor matters in comparison with the chief point that Paul is wishing to establish. Two short visits to the Jerusalem apostles could hardly have meant that he was seeking their permission to evangelize, and when the second interview took place, Paul had already gained considerable experience as an evangelist in Syria and Cilicia (1:21) and at Tarsus in particular (Acts 9:30; 11:25).

So far from being at odds with Peter and James—as his enemies had insinuated to the Galatians—Paul received their blessing. He brought with him a test case in the person of Titus (2:3). The latter's presence clearly sharpened the issue which lay at the heart of the debate: ought Gentile

Christians to be received into the church on equal terms with Jewish Christians, without the imposition of the rite of circumcision?

A careful reading of 2:3-5 does nothing to clear up an obvious ambiguity: was Titus circumcised, or not? If he was, the wording is at least clear that the surgical operation was not carried out due to “submission” (2:5), but rather out of deference to the tender susceptibilities of Jewish Christians in the capital city. Otherwise—and the view that Titus was not circumcised is to be preferred—Paul stood firm under pressure, refused to concede the need for Titus’ circumcision, and did so on the supremely vital ground that first, advocates of circumcision were insincere (2:4), and secondly, the truth of the gospel should be maintained at all costs (2:5). Only on this conclusion can we make sense of his later insistence in 4:8–5:12 that circumcision is an invitation to spiritual ruin.

AGREEMENT REACHED

## GALATIANS 2:6-10

The leaders' concern for evangelism did not blind them to their social responsibilities.

PAUL RECEIVED APPROVAL from the church leaders in Jerusalem, who endorsed his commission as apostle to the Gentiles—not that he placed much importance on that approval, hence his rather ironical allusions to the pillar apostles of 2:9, although he does grant that they (Peter, in particular) were those of high reputation, on account of their membership of the original apostolic band.

The certificate of approval he received was then all the more reason for the Galatians' refusal to listen to the lies which the Judaizers were putting out. Paul's apostleship bore all the marks of a God-given authority; Peter and the others had accepted it; a division of missionary territory had been agreed to, and Galatia came within the province of Paul, as one "entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised", and finally there had been a handshake all round, so sealing the agreement (2:9).

The only insistence which the Jerusalem leaders required was a matter on which Paul had no qualms (2:10), in fact he welcomed every opportunity to do the very thing which they were keen to press on him—to accept some measure of financial responsibility for the poverty-stricken Jewish believers at Jerusalem. Paul remained faithful to this vow right up to the end: see 1 Corinthians 16:1ff.; 2 Corinthians chapters 8–9; Romans 15:25ff.; Acts

24:17. He saw in this “collection for the saints” an admirable way of cementing Jewish and Gentile elements in the churches.

“There are varieties of service, but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:5). It is a happy Christian who has found their niche and serves the Lord faithfully and who recognizes the gifts and opportunities which God grants to others.

TRUTH MUST BE PRACTICED AS WELL AS PREACHED

## GALATIANS 2:11-13

The truth of the gospel was so crucial that Paul was prepared to have a public confrontation with Peter over it.

THE PREVIOUS SECTION ended on what was a happy note of general agreement and mutual acceptance, with the sense that in the church of God some have a specific vocation: Peter to preach to Jews, Paul to carry the good news to the Gentiles, and no one should refuse recognition of another's God-entrusted work. Unhappily then (as sometimes now) this simple solution broke down.

The issue came to a head at Antioch, and we have the sad picture of "Paul against Peter." The change of location, from Jerusalem to Antioch, may well explain the confrontation and the debate which followed, just as Christian cooperation in certain missionary areas is often sadly absent in situations where denominational loyalties are historically deep-seated.

The place of Antioch in early Christianity is important. It was "a bastion of Hellenism in the Syriac lands ... the inevitable meeting point of the two worlds" (Dix), and in the time of the Maccabees many of the Jews of Jerusalem showed their adoption of Greek ways by becoming honorary citizens of Antioch. It is easy to imagine, then, how a liberal, tolerant spirit prevailed there; and Peter (called here by his Aramaic name Cephas) at first fell in with the practice of sharing a common table with Christian Gentiles.

The arrival of a party of Judaizers, whose "platform" is succinctly stated in Acts 15:1, soon changed this happy association. Peter, motivated by fear

and unsure of his convictions, gave up table fellowship with his fellow believers on the ground that they were Gentiles and so (from the official rabbinic standpoint) “unclean” in themselves and “contaminating” to others. Nor did this action go unnoticed by others (2:13).

**Notes** 2:11: Paul took the initiative in openly rebuking Peter. The reason for this forthright decision will be seen later. 2:12: literally, “he cut himself off,” a possible pun = “he played the Pharisee,” who were self-styled “separated ones,” anxious to preserve their ritual purity. Paul may later (5:12) revert to this play on words.

RIGHT WITH GOD BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

## GALATIANS 2:14-17

Does Paul's teaching lead to moral laxity?

THE REASON FOR Paul's head-on collision with Peter is now given. The charge is clear: it was that his behavior was not in line with the truth of the gospel (2:14; see 2:5 for the same ruling principle).

The first part of Paul's criticism is clear, and it is aimed at showing up the shallowness of Peter's wavering. He had claimed to accept the equality of all believers in Christ—and his presence at table with uncircumcised Christians proved it. Why a sudden U-turn? Why give in to pressure from the party whom James had sent (2:12)? Where were Peter's convictions now?

Paul's answer shades off into a statement of the gospel of justification by faith in Christ (2:16), defined negatively as “not by human achievement.” In this context, “works” implies an acceptance of Jewish circumcision which is made the basis for a proud claim on God, as Ephesians 2:8-10 amplifies. Paul's argument rules out of court this attitude to God and his law, because first, no one has ever perfectly kept the law, not even the Jews to whom it was given (2:16), and secondly God has provided a way of acceptance with himself in Jesus Christ. The only hope therefore is an acceptance with God by faith in Christ (2:16).

2:17 is puzzling until we remember that its line of argument is directed against a false insinuation (stated emphatically in Romans 3:8; 6:1ff.) that Paul's gospel was an invitation to immoral living (the so-called “antinomian”

view that says because of grace Christians are released from being obliged to observe the moral law, from *anti* “against” + *nomos* “law”). The Jewish opponents were saying: let circumcision be adopted and enforced on Gentile believers as a proof of their break with old pagan ways of life. Paul opposes this suggestion. Justification by faith apart from the law means union with Christ (2:20). If this means an antinomian attitude, which throws off all moral restraint, then Christ is the responsible agent. But this is a caricature, and a complete perversion of what new life in Christ means (so Romans 6:6-23, which should be read as Paul’s devastatingly logical rebuttal of any attitude which leads to careless living and trifling with the moral demands of the gospel because [it is said] we are “not under law, but under grace”).

CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST  
GALATIANS 2:18-21

2:20 sets out the foundation facts of the Christian life. How true is it of your experience of Christ?

NOTICE PAUL'S COURTESY in his controversial stance against Peter's wavering and insincerity which had the adverse effect of leading others (notably Barnabas, 2:13) astray. For, clearly, when he says, "If I build up again those things which I tore down" (2:18), it is Peter who should be the speaker. The description fits Peter's action like a glove. It was he who had turned round completely, under pressure from the "false believers" (2:4) who represented James' party (2:12).

Paul places the capstone on his previous argument against these people. With the coming of Christ and the provision of God to meet the desperate human situation created by a sinner's inability to keep the law, the latter's regime as an instrument of salvation is over (2:19).

A new basis is laid for the divine-human relationship. The old self-life is condemned and put on the cross; there is, however, no canceling of personality, no call to asceticism and self-punishment. The dying of self is an invitation to a glorious new possibility: life in union by faith with a living Lord who now controls the believer and who lives out Christ's resurrection life (2:20). Only from the vantage point of this "dead to self—alive to God" experience can the cross be seen in its true light. Only as sinners throw themselves on the mercy of God shown on the cross as the sole ground of

their hope does the cross assume its real importance, for if there is any merit in human achievement—if there is any second way to God or sidedoor entrance into God’s awesome presence—then Christ’s death is “to no purpose” (2:21): he died for nothing.

**Note** 2:19-20: the tenses of the verbs are important: “I died to the law” is aorist, looking back to the grand renunciation of Paul’s Damascus road experience when he gave up all hope of self-justification (Philippians 3:7). “I have been crucified” is perfect, referring to a past action which has a continuing effect. “I live”: a present tense, for life in Christ is a moment-by-moment fellowship.

YOU'RE BEWITCHED!

## GALATIANS 3:1-5

It's all too easy to behave as if faith was enough for our initial acceptance by God but not enough for our continuing acceptance by him.

THE DISCUSSION NOW turns from the past episode at Antioch to the present situation in Galatia. Paul's clear demonstration that first there is no hope or value in seeking to get right with God by observance of the law, and secondly in any case, God has himself made full provision in the gospel, has come between, and so prepares for his impassioned appeal (3:1).

The issue of the Galatians' ready acceptance of a "different gospel" (1:6) is squarely set before them, and they are invited to draw their own conclusion. But Paul can only marvel that they have been so easily swayed. It was as though an evil spell had been put on them, and they had been mesmerized into a tame acceptance of the Judaizers' false message. If they had been in a "neutral" position of unconverted Gentiles, it would be hard to understand their ready acceptance of such a message, but in their most privileged case of having already had "Jesus Christ ... publicly portrayed as crucified" before their eyes, Paul can only recoil in horror before their unaccountable behavior! He challenges his readers to consider their past Christian experience, and does so along three lines:

First (3:2-5), how did they become Christians in the beginning? Was it because of an acceptance of what the law demanded or what the grace of God

gave to responsive faith? Paul touches here on the vital point of New Testament Christianity: salvation is ours, not by achieving, but by receiving (John 1:12).

Secondly, at their conversion, did they become only partial Christians, needing some supplement (3:3)? This is an obvious tilt at the Judaizers' innuendo that their experience, while good and satisfying up to a point, needed the addition of obedience to the law.

Thirdly, still pressing his hearers to consider what conversion means, Paul goes on (3:5): God who has given his Spirit in response to trustful acceptance (Ephesians 1:13-14) and who shows his clear presence in the church's life, works at every point as his people believe, irrespective of their being circumcised or not.

So, on every ground, religion based on law cannot explain Christian experience, both at its start and during its course.

LOOK AT ABRAHAM

## GALATIANS 3:6-9

Who are Abraham's true descendants?

PAUL SWITCHES TO a second line of attack. It is aimed directly at the Galatians, but the real opponents are those Jewish-Christians who have unsettled them (1:7; 5:12) and are therefore more blameworthy. A cautionary reminder to any who aspire to become Christian teachers, as James' letter (James 3:1) recalls!

The Jewish teachers had evidently made much of Abraham in their propaganda methods, offering the plausible argument: you Gentiles wish to inherit the blessings of righteousness which our forefather received; why then do you hesitate to follow his example and get circumcised? Paul meets this argument from Scripture by encountering the Judaizers on their own ground.

Abraham (he responds) did indeed receive divine approval, and God put him right with himself. But on what basis? The patriarch was, above all, a man of faith (3:6), and it is those who tread this pathway who find acceptance with God (3:7). Besides, as Paul elsewhere is at pains to elucidate (Romans 4:9-12), Abraham was set right with God before he practiced circumcision, so the Judaizers have given away their case by an appeal to the great example of Old Testament godliness.

One further scriptural quotation is needed to drive the last nail into the Judaizers' argument, already riddled with massive objections. Scripture itself is appealed to in God's first promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 18:18) who

was to be the ancestor, not of the Jews only, but of “all the nations.” The gospel promise, universal in its scope and transnational in its embrace, was already given in the call of Abraham, the first Jew and the founder of the race. How, then, could the Judaizers’ claim that the Gentiles must become Jews in order to be complete Christians ever be entertained? Paul’s logic must have been irresistible (3:9).

Read more about Abraham in Romans 4:1-25; Hebrews 6:13-15; 7:1ff.; 11:8-19; James 2:21.

LOOK AT JESUS CHRIST  
GALATIANS 3:10-14

Are you still trying to keep the law as a way of putting yourself right  
with God?

A THIRD, CLINCHING argument is introduced as a final repudiation of the claim that the gospel of grace is deficient and needs the “extra” observance of the law. Again from Scripture, Paul proceeds to show that legalistic religion, so far from being a required extra, lies under the judgment of God himself. The only exception to this verdict of condemnation would be if a man could be found who perfectly kept the law. But this possibility is excluded by the facts of sinful human nature and society, and endorses the solemn verdict of Deuteronomy 27:26 (quoted in 3:10). A later part of this letter (5:2-4; 6:13) will add in a further consideration, that anyone who embarks on the road to God by lawkeeping and ritual observance is on a slippery slope which (like unregenerate human nature) leads only and inevitably downwards and away from God.

So right relationship with God can never be achieved by legalism which is virtually self-trust. So much is “evident” (3:11) negatively. Positively, the same conclusion is reached from Habakkuk 2:4 (quoted in 3:11) which declares that we receive acceptance with God and a righteousness “from God” (Philippians 3:9) on the exercise of faith. Not that faith in itself saves; rather faith is the human attitude of being receptive that takes what God in his

grace holds out. And the end product is “life,” ie fellowship with God, made possible by our being accepted by him.

The law, in its original intention by God, served the same purpose, namely, to lead people to life (3:12, quoting Leviticus 18:15). The breakdown in this plan does not lie with the law (see Romans 7:10,12,14,16), but with fallen human nature which is not amenable to the law’s discipline and finds, in its perversity, obedience to be impossible. The result is clear: “the written code kills” (2 Corinthians 3:6), and puts human nature under the curse of a broken law.

Here is a knot which only God must untie, as Luther remarked. And the divine way of unraveling the tangle is classically set out in 3:13 (see also 2 Corinthians 5:21). The curse which rightfully belongs to a guilty race was voluntarily assumed by One who, although he stood outside it and was therefore blameless, chose to identify himself with our human misery and need—even to the point of being abandoned by God on the cross. Jesus Christ died a sinner’s death; he became a sinner by substitution, and so exhausted the claim of a broken law for those who, in faith-union with him, enter into the blessing that Abraham enjoyed in anticipation: favor with God (3:14).

GOD HAS NOT CHANGED HIS MIND

## GALATIANS 3:15-18

Paul says there has only ever been one way, that of promise.

THE APOSTLE'S ARGUMENT is brought to a triumphant conclusion in 3:14. Jesus Christ, by God's appointment, has taken the place of sinners and, having borne their sentence of condemnation, has secured the promise of their acquittal in the new age, which the early church knew to have begun already (2 Corinthians 5:17). What was the great sign that the age of messianic blessing had arrived? See Acts 2:16ff.,33; 3:25-26; 5:31-32. The unanimous answer was the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, so fulfilling Ezekiel 36:26-27.

At this stage Paul faces another objection. To be sure (it was argued by his opponents) God gave Abraham a promise which included his "offspring" (3:16), but we know that this refers to the Jewish people exclusively by the historical fact that God some centuries later than Abraham's time made a covenant by law with them; so (in a way) the Mosaic law supersedes the Abrahamic promise.

Paul's stout "No" to this line of discussion resounds in our paragraph. We may pick out his various counter replies:

The allusion to Abraham's "offspring" turns on the fact that the word is singular in number (in Genesis 12:7), and so must be taken in a collective sense (3:16). It is not a gathering of people (ie the Jews) who are in view, but the Messiah and his people, seen as a single entity (as in 1 Corinthians

12:12). What is being contradicted here is both the Jewish claim to be the true “sons of Abraham” and the view that Christ has innumerable “churches” that do not communicate with one another and cannot eat together.

The giving of the law at a later period does not invalidate the earlier promise made to Abraham (3:17), no more than a codicil added to a human will destroys the terms of the original testament once it has been ratified and sworn to (3:15). On a higher plane, God’s unconditional pledge to Abraham cannot be disturbed or canceled by any later and temporary plan, ie the law. That covenant stands and cannot be invalidated, and it is God’s promise to Abraham which the Gentile Christians have inherited, so bypassing the law’s requirements.

3:18 contains a hint of something Paul will elaborate at greater length in other places. Law and promise are not opposed to each other, but if it is claimed that the law makes the promise obsolete or that the promise has been canceled, then the element of God’s grace in both dispensations has been denied and the gospel has been subverted (clearly in Romans 9:6).

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW  
GALATIANS 3:19-22

The law shows us we are failures and so prepares us to accept God's offer in Christ.

THIS DISCUSSION OVER the promise and the law is bound to raise an obvious query: Why then was the law given (3:19). If, as Paul says, the promise stands and all that God purposed for Abraham and his descendants has been fulfilled in the church, why was the law given? And if you agree that God gave it, did he make a mistake in so doing?

Paul's theological discussion so far has apparently driven him to the point of denying any value to the honored law, and the Judaizers who are lurking in the shadows are ready to pounce on him for the kill. Now is their chance to discredit him to the Galatians as a false teacher!

But Paul is ready with an answer. Three reasons for the law's importance are supplied, and they are all intended to show that it had a place in the divine scheme, but that now its day is over.

First, the law came to give the definition of legal offense to human wrongdoing (3:19). The law sets up a landmark between right and wrong in God's eyes: when a person deliberately passes beyond the marker, he transgresses, ie he is shown to be an offender against God's law, and so his action takes on the character of sin. Read in Romans 7:7ff. how Paul takes this description of the law's function a step further.

Secondly, the historical circumstances of the giving of the law to Israel proved its inferiority. Various intermediaries were needed as the law was given from God via Moses via the angels to the people (3:19b-20; see also Acts 7:38,53; Hebrews 2:2, based on Deuteronomy 33:2), whereas the promise to Abraham was directly from God himself.

Thirdly, the success of the law as an agent of justification is impaired by human nature which is sinful in itself (as Martin Luther expressed it: “turned in upon itself” and turned away from obedience to God’s will) and so impotent. Law would be enough to save, if only human beings could keep it. But that’s precisely the trouble (Romans 8:2-4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11). No wonder then that “Scripture (probably Deuteronomy 27:26, mentioned in 3:10) has declared the whole world to be prisoners in subjection to sin” (3:22, NEB). Law, in these circumstances, is like a railway ticket to a soldier in a prisoner-of-war camp. He would use it if he could. The help we need must come from outside—from God.

THE NEW WAY

## GALATIANS 3:23-29

When we believe in Christ, we discover that all kinds of things happen. Find out more in this passage.

ONE MORE OBSERVATION about the law is to be made. Paul had earlier stressed that its function was a provisional one “till the offspring should come” (3:19), who is Christ and his reign of grace. The discussion now considers a further task of the old way. The law played the part of a guardian, keeping people as wards in the role of stern disciplinarian (3:23-24). But the guardian’s job lasted only until the child reached the age of maturity; then his responsibility came to an end. So “faith has come,” and we are called to live as mature members of God’s family (3:25).

Mention of God’s family leads to some vital statements whose relevance is as important today as in the time the letter was originally written.

3:26. We become God’s children in the fullest sense, that is, “in Christ Jesus,” through faith. His fatherhood extends to all in the limited sense that he created all people (Acts 17:28) and sustains the world by his providence and care (James 1:17). But entrance into his family is by adoption and grace, and on its human side by faith in the Son of God (John 1:12) who is the firstborn of many brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29).

3:27. Entrance upon the experience of adoption is by faith expressed in confession (Romans 10:9). So baptism became for the early church the rite of

initiation into a new society of those who shared a common parentage—with a family likeness (Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

3:28. In that new society the old barriers which kept the ancient world apart are overcome. Divisions of race, social position and sex are all transcended in Christ who unites all men and women in his church into an unbroken fellowship.

COMING OF AGE

## GALATIANS 4:1-7

Paul shows the great benefits gained for us by Christ's coming into the world.

PAUL'S EARLIER DISCUSSION was summed up in 3:28. He has shown that God's unconditional promise to Abraham has found its realization in the coming of Christ, the true "seed of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1), but Christ is not a solitary person; rather he is an inclusive personality who as "the corporate Christ" possesses a people who also are the rightful heirs of the promise (3:29).

The next paragraph naturally considers what heirship means. The contrast is a direct one between "slaves" and "sons" (4:7). The former word aptly describes the restrictions placed on an underage child, although it doesn't say anything about the cruelty and finality which slaves endured in the first-century world. Rather, Paul fastens on the single point of comparison: both a slave and a child are under the will of another person (4:1-2). In the case of men and women before their conversion, this lordship imposed a very real bondage (4:3).

Christ came to be a liberator (4:4). In God's good time, he took our nature and shared our human experiences, voluntarily placing himself in subjection to those foreign forces which tyrannized people in the first-century religious world ("the elemental spirits of the universe," 4:3). But the effect of this identification, made for our good, was a happy one, for by it we are set free

and welcomed into God's family (4:5) as his mature children, no longer under the care of a guardian and in the grip of fear.

Some of the characteristics of the new liberty that Jesus Christ brought are given in 4:5-7: adoption as his sons; the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; and our entry upon an inheritance—those are the great benefits secured to us by Christ's coming into the world as its redeemer.

**Notes** 4:3: Paul's term means either first or "basic moral principles" (JBP), a meaning paralleled in Hebrews 5:12 and referring to the imperfect apprehension of divine truth before Christ's coming, or "spiritual forces of the universe," cosmic powers in astrology which were identified with the stars and were thought to rule and enslave people's lives (Colossians 2:8,20). 4:9 tips the scales in favor of the latter view, and "if the Galatians had been pagans before conversion [as 4:8 makes obvious], then such astrological speculation would have formed part of their religious system" (Cole). 4:6: "Abba," literally, "dear father"—a child's name for his parent which Jesus both used and taught his disciples to use (Mark 14:32-39; Luke 11:2-4).

WHY GO BACK TO SLAVERY?

## GALATIANS 4:8-10

Paul describes what the Galatians were formerly enslaved to.

THE GALATIANS ARE now forcefully reminded of their natural state (4:8). It was a religious plight characterized partly by fear and partly by ignorance. And the two traits go together. Ignorance of the true God, who is self-revealed in nature and supremely in Christ (Acts 17:22-31; John 17:3), hands people over to all kinds of superstitious dread and uncertainty.

The Graeco-Roman world in which the Galatians lived was filled with forebodings and fears, chiefly on the ground that the stars were believed to be hostile powers and to hold human life in the clutches of determinism and fate—a belief that is still with us.

But Paul roundly condemns all such vain illusions: the elementary spirits which they tried to appease by various religious ceremonies (4:10, a reference to astronomical calculations which decided which “days” were “good” days for business or travel or marriage, and which “seasons” were favored by the gods as likely to produce fertile ground and bountiful harvest—are trounced as “weak and beggarly.” They are as senseless and ineffective as modern-day predictions of the horoscope, palmistry, occultism and similar mumbo-jumbo.

The decisive break with the old life came at the point of coming to know God (4:9), or rather (as Paul qualifies) becoming recognized by God, which in turn leads us to know him personally as Father (4:6) and to receive the seal of the Spirit as his inner witness (Romans 8:14-16). No longer is there cause

for fear; ignorance is dispelled and Christians enter on their inheritance as those whose life in this world enjoyed the blessing of 2 Corinthians 13:14. Notice the trinitarian reference in 4:4-7 and see also Hebrews 10:29; 1 Peter 1:2.

Paul can again only stand back in amazement that these Galatian believers should ever want to return to a form of slavery from which they have been so graciously set free!

**Thought** “If I’m not what I ought to be, thank God, I’m not what I used to be.” Consider the plight of those outside of Christ: 1 Corinthians 12:2; Colossians 1:21; Ephesians 2:1ff.; 4:22; 5:8; Titus 3:3; “Such were some of you” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

## GALATIANS 4:11-16

We can begin well with Christ, but we also need to continue that life  
with God's help.

“I AM AFRAID I have labored over you in vain”—these words come straight from Paul's pastoral heart as he grieves over his wayward children and is concerned for their highest welfare (1 Corinthians 4:15). We should observe that the earlier part of his discussion was general in character and tone (4:1-7); then, he turned directly to confront his readers with a change to a second person plural (4:8ff. “you”); now, he ends up by speaking to them at point-blank range (4:12).

This passionate plea recalls his first contact with the Galatian churches (4:13-14, which probably look back to Acts 14:1ff.). It was on that occasion that first they received him so warmly as a divine messenger, surnaming him Hermes, the messenger of the gods among the Greeks (Acts 14:12), and secondly they did not despise him on account of some bodily disfigurement from which he suffered (4:13-14). If 4:15 is connected with this bodily ailment, it would suggest that Paul was afflicted with some eye complaint or severe head pain (perhaps migraine) which upset his vision. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 is often taken as another description of this “thorn in the flesh.”

But the enthusiastic welcome the Galatians gave the apostle (4:15) and the way they received him as an inspired messenger of his Lord (4:14) reflect only the strangeness of their subsequent about-turn. Paul is concerned for

them; he seeks to win them back to the apostolic gospel. However, he fears that some plain speaking will be needed, so he runs the risk of turning them away from himself as their pastor and father-in-God (4:16). But it is a price that must be paid if the truth of the gospel is to continue (2:5,14).

THE EXAMPLE OF HAGAR AND SARAH

GALATIANS 4:17-25

Paul continues to contrast being a slave to the law and being a free child of God.

THE PERSONAL PLEA continues in 4:17-20 by including at least one explanatory circumstance. The reason for the Galatians' reversal is found in the troublemakers who have infiltrated the churches, spread poisonous doctrine for ignoble ends (4:17), quenched the Galatians "conquering newborn joy" in Christ (4:15) and stopped their growth in Christlikeness (4:19). No wonder Paul is saddened (4:11) and bewildered (4:20)!

Every element in the Judaizers' malicious work claimed a reply and a countermeasure. It is one thing to deplore false teaching in the church, but simply to express regret and sorrow that things have come to a sad condition is not enough. Action must be taken and that commits Christian teachers and leaders to preparing a case for the defense of the faith.

4:21-31 form (along with 5:1) a self-contained section in which Paul exposes the hollowness of much of the false doctrine and insinuations which the Judaizing preachers have brought with them, and most likely meets them on their own ground, that is, that of explaining the Scriptures (4:21).

4:22-25 invite us to consider Abraham's household in which two women, Hagar (Genesis 16:15) and Sarah (Genesis 21:2), lived uneasily together.

Paul's chief interest is with the two mothers and their children, Ishmael and Isaac (4:22-23). The plain sense is given in Genesis, but Paul finds a

deeper meaning by treating the account allegorically (4:24). Where else does he use this method of interpreting Scripture (see 1 Corinthians 9:8-10; 10:1ff.)?

The general pattern of identification is clear, although some details are obscure. The passage in this study takes up the one line of the story, namely the one that runs from Abraham by way of Hagar, a slave woman, through Ishmael her son to Sinai, with its lawgiving and consequent condemnation of the sinner. From that point it is a short step to the Jerusalem of the (unbelieving) Jews and the Judaizers (4:24-25). The conclusion that Paul has established is exactly relevant to the situation: there is slavery at every level.

**Notes** 4:23: see Romans 9:7-9. 4:24-25: these women represent two covenants; one is made at Mount Sinai, and produces only slavery for the offending lawbreaker. Now Sinai is a mountain in Arabia—from where the Arabs, the enemies of the Jews, originated—and it stands for the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children, ie the slavery of legalism.

SLAVE OR FREE?

## GALATIANS 4:26–5:1

We must resist any suggestions by those who want to make us slaves again to rigid adherence to the law.

IF THE LINE from Ishmael produces only slavery and misery, how different is the ancestral chain which begins with Isaac whose name is associated with the laughter of rejoicing (Genesis 18:12-15; 21:1-7). We therefore see the appropriateness of quoting Isaiah 54:1 in 4:27.

The reason for such gladness is now explained. From the same patriarch runs also the line of messianic promise (4:23), via Sarah and Isaac to “the Jerusalem above,” ie the heavenly Zion of Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 3:12; 21:2, which is now a present reality in the church. The primary reference in this term is to the kingdom of God, inaugurated by Christ and proclaimed by the church, but not to be identified with it. Rather, it is in the church now that the powers of the age to come are already being felt (Hebrews 6:5) and Christians receive a foretaste of what will be the final blessing of the fully established and perfected rule of God.

The line which Isaac began is one of liberty, which must not be surrendered (5:1), even though there are pressures to yield.

Paul’s conclusion has been reached by way of an intermediate stage in which he shows from the mutual disagreement and eventual hostility between Ishmael and Isaac that the two lines are irreconcilable (4:30). In the same way those who are “children of promise” (4:28,31) must expect to be

misunderstood and persecuted by those who cling to Jewish legalism. The hint should be obvious for the first readers to see and act upon: “The Galatians are to drive away Judaizing suggestions” (Grayston).

The section 4:21–5:1 has demonstrated the tension between freedom and slavery. Such a discussion was necessary in view of earlier references to what the Galatians were before conversion (4:3,8) and what is their present status as free children of God. Nothing can alter that, but liberty can be easily lost (Paul warns) by a false acceptance of the persuasions of those who wished to recall them to a state no better than the paganism they had been grateful to leave—the Judaizers’ insistence on the law which meant nothing short of a submission to a “yoke of slavery” (5:1; contrast Matthew 11:28-30; John 8:36).

WHAT MATTERS MOST  
GALATIANS 5:2-6

Paul sums up his argument between those who rely on the law and those who trust in Christ for salvation.

THE MENTION OF “circumcision” (5:2) focuses on the chief issue between Paul and the false believers of the Jewish-Christian party. Their slogan could be epitomized in the same word, according to Acts 15:1, and the ugly rumor according to Acts 21:21 was later to need some firm handling.

Paul makes the position crystal clear in language which reminds us of an earlier verse (2:21). In fact, in these verses of today’s reading much of the preceding argument is summed up. It can be helpful to reduce it to a series of statements:

1. If there is any saving value in religious ordinances (eg circumcision) apart from the cross of Christ, then Christ’s death has been superfluous. But if Christ’s atonement is all that the unique value of his person makes it, then it follows that no “extra” is required to make our salvation complete.
2. The moment we introduce the notion of independent ceremonies and give them a status (5:3), we have bolted the door to God’s kingdom on our side, because there is no possibility of sinners ever gaining merit in their own strength, and the implication, “he is bound to keep the whole

law” means that he is committed to an impossible standard. See 3:10; 5:4; 6:13.

3. Righteousness, if ever we are to gain an acceptance with the Most High, must come to us as a gift, received by faith which in turn is inspired by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3), and never to be strived for (5:5), and with that gift is the promise of final vindication at God’s tribunal.
4. Outward ceremonials are largely irrelevant; in fact they are a positive hindrance if we trust them as saving agencies. What matters most (5:6b)?

**Note** 5:4: literally, “you are made impotent,” ie your relation with Christ is completely severed. For the verb, see 3:17; 5:11; 1 Corinthians 1:28; 2 Timothy 1:10. The second verb is “you who try to be justified by the law.” They are attempting the impossible, in any case. The third verb has nothing to say on the vexed issue of “once saved, always saved.” It means that salvation by grace is utterly opposed to self-justification, and if someone attempts the latter course they have fallen out of the domain of God’s grace.

AS FOR THOSE TROUBLEMAKERS ...

## GALATIANS 5:7-12

How can our faith go wrong if we start keeping a list of regulations?

THE ESSENCE OF Paul's Christianity is found in 5:6b: faith expressing itself through love. The evidence of a faith union relationship with Christ is the way in which that fellowship works itself out in love—to God supremely, and to our neighbor no less importantly (Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 10:25-37). Which passage in Romans is Paul's commentary on Christ's teaching (Romans 13:8-10)?

The argument merges, as before, into a personal appeal, which alternates between outright pessimism (5:7-9) and unbounded optimism (5:10). Only on the gospel principles which have been expressed can, first, Paul's ministry with its incessant conflicts as the Judaizers dog his footsteps and, secondly, the meaning of the cross of Christ, be understood (5:11). If these mean anything worthwhile in the eyes of God and humanity, the Judaizers are like "troublers of Israel" (5:12)—see 1 Kings 18:17-18—and deserve the fate accorded to the prophets of the false god, Baal (1 Kings 18:40).

**Notes** 5:7: see 2:2; Philippians 2:16; 1 Corinthians 9:24-26; Hebrews 12:1: the New Testament often uses this metaphor taken from Greek games. 5:8: there was evidently one particular troublemaker whom Paul had in mind (see 5:10); and the use of the metaphor of yeast in a lump of dough is a reminder that one man's wrong influence spreads far beyond himself and his own circle, as at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:6) and in other churches (Titus 1:10-11; Hebrews 12:15). 5:11 qualifies 5:6:

circumcision for the Jew was part of his ancestral heritage (Romans 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:18-20), but it could be dangerous if a Jew clung to the rite as a hope of securing salvation (Romans 2:25-29). But Paul was missionary to the Gentile peoples, and it was a travesty of the grace of God to insist on the rite for them. Therefore the report that Paul's preaching was antircumcision, and therefore the virulence of the Jewish attack on him. But the stumbling-block of the cross, ie that salvation is offered in grace, to be received by faith, still had been insisted on (1 Corinthians 1:23). 5:12 "suggests that those who are so fond of surgical operations for religious motives should imitate the eunuch priests" (J.N. Sanders) and get themselves castrated. Paul doesn't mince his words.

DON'T ABUSE YOUR FREEDOM

## GALATIANS 5:13-15

True Christian freedom allows the opportunity to love and serve one another humbly.

HERE, ALMOST EVERY word gives room for pause, reflection, comment and application, as we seek to take God's word into our hearts (Psalm 119:11).

Up to this point in his running debate with the impressionable Galatian Christians, Paul has been making plain the danger of bad religion. He has done it by a series of contrasts: law versus promise; merit versus grace; and slavery versus liberty. But now it is time for him to say more exactly what Christian liberty really is, for it may be that, as in other places of early Christianity, there was a tendency to misunderstand and misapply the slogan "saved only by grace": see Romans 6:1ff.

Christian freedom is not license, and does not give us free rein to please ourselves (5:13). There is a valuable safeguard to prevent such a degeneration. What is it? 5:13b supplies the all-important direction, and the writer picks up the same word as he has used in earlier discussion and gives it a new twist: "Be slaves," not to any legalistic code or supposedly merit-earning ceremony such as circumcision, "to one another in the love you show in your mutual relationships." Through love serve one another.

In this way the spirit of the law is honored (5:14) as Christians put other people (especially those who have a claim on us) first in their consideration

and care. Evidently there was need to underline this teaching in a Christian assembly where all was far from harmony and brotherly love (5:15).

**Notes** 5:13: “opportunity” (ESV), is literally “a base of operations,” used in the military sense. The “flesh” in this verse means the self-life, still present in the believer and which struggles to reassert itself or, to continue the military metaphor, provides a launching-pad from which sin (as a missile) may be let loose, to hurt others. 5:14 quotes Leviticus 19:18 (see Romans 13:8-10) and asks the deceptively simple questions, “Who is my neighbor? What does it mean to ‘love’”? The answer to the first question is supplied in Luke 10:25-37: my neighbor is anyone in need, who lies across my path, or whom my helping hand can reach. A good substitute for “love,” a modern term with a wide range of meanings, would be “care.” “You shall care for your neighbor as you care for yourself.”

WHAT FREEDOM IS NOT  
GALATIANS 5:16-21

The gruesome list of sins shows what results from the free expression of self-centered human nature.

THE SELF-LIFE, CALLED in 5:13 “the flesh,” must not be allowed to dominate, but isn’t this a counsel of despair? How can we resist the pull of the old nature, which often feels as irresistible and relentless as the force of gravity?

Paul faces the issue squarely and offers no easy solution. Notice he does not deny the seductive power of the fallen nature in the Christian, nor does he teach that conversion automatically transfers us to some spiritual nirvana beyond the reach of temptation. The flesh is real, and provokes a very bitter conflict within the Christian’s life (5:17).

The “opposite number” in the conflict with the flesh is the Holy Spirit whose grace and power are the believer’s resources (5:16,18). Drawing on those resources will give us strength to counteract the downward pull of the flesh; submission to the leadership of the Spirit will provide reserves of spiritual energy by which the flesh can be curbed. Paul has a side glance here (5:18) at the Judaizers’ claim that the only way to moral victory was to put oneself under the restraint of the law—a prescription which Paul had tried for himself and found illusory and ineffective (Romans 7:13-23). The only hope offered to the “wretched man” (Romans 7:24) who cries out for deliverance is the hope which tells him to call in the resources of the Holy Spirit.

The “works of the flesh” present a fearsome catalog of vices, only too common in human society, whether ancient or modern. They may be subdivided: (1) inordinate human appetites given unbridled sway (5:19); (2) perverted religion (5:20, idolatry, sorcery); (3) antisocial behavior (5:20); followed by (4) some personal lapses (5:21, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like). They all spring from our lower nature which expresses itself sometimes in blatant crime (in 5:21, some texts add “murder”), sometimes in a perversion and abuse of a God-given instinct (sex misused in pornography, indecency and immorality; thirst getting out of hand in drunken bouts) and often in some deadly forms which we treat only too lightly (quarrels, fits of rage, selfishness).

WHAT FREEDOM LOOKS LIKE

## GALATIANS 5:22-26

None of us can afford to specialize in one part of the fruit of the Spirit at the expense of other parts.

THE DIFFERENT FRUIT of the Spirit are the virtues of Jesus. This is an appropriate comment on these verses which describe the quality of Christian life which is produced by a practiced “walking in the Spirit.”

The metaphor of “walking” (in 5:16,25) is drawn from the Old Testament (eg Genesis 17:1; Psalm 1) and comes to mean the practical application in daily behavior of a person’s fellowship with God. Can you think of the Old Testament “hero of faith” whose life story is summed up in such a sentence? See Genesis 5:24.

It is not surprising therefore that victory in the moral battle is shown by the growth of the Christlike qualities named in 5:22-23. The Holy Spirit’s activity produces such a harvest of moral qualities which cover a person’s threefold relationship. In a person’s relationship with God there are the members of the first group (love, joy, peace; see also 2 Corinthians 13:14). In relations with other people, the second trio of patience, kindness and goodness marks out the person whose public life before others is a commendation of that person’s profession. In one’s personal life is a happy blend of faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Here is a threefold scope of human activity which may well set the standard for our lives, and one which is attained by those whose conduct is shaped by the Spirit (5:25).

5:24 is a solemn reminder, however, that this ethical harvest may only be expected if the ground is well plowed over, with weeds removed and the soil cleared of impurities. That is why there is the call to a process of self-denial, which puts the lower nature on the cross with Christ (2:20) and leaves no room for the gratifying of improper desires, aspirations and ambitions which would take over the kingly control of Jesus in our lives. And what is true in our personal life (5:24) will soon have its effect on our social relationships (5:26).

HELPING, THINKING, SHARING

## GALATIANS 6:1-6

Paul writes about what a life that keeps in step with the Spirit (5:25) will be like in practical terms.

THE LIFE OF the Christian is never to be in splendid isolation. “The New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion” was advice given to John Wesley, and well heeded by him. This section has some relevant comments and criticism to offer as asking a number of searching questions.

1. How do we deal with a lapsed brother or sister? Leaders in a church clearly have a responsibility in discipline not to be shirked, but let them deal with the offender gently and without censoriousness (see also 1 Corinthians 10:12, which also picks up Christ’s teaching in Matthew 7:1-5). Above all, the responsible Christian should seek to understand a delicate situation with sympathy and personal interest (6:2).
2. How do Christian leaders exercise authority, without being open to the charge of an overbearing manner? When does authority become authoritarianism? The safeguards are found in 6:3-5. 6:4 is a call to self-examination, but no suggestion of pride in one’s own achievement is implied. The spirit is rather that of 1 Corinthians 10:24; Romans 14:13f.
3. Are we shouldering responsibility which God intended us to assume (6:5)? Note that the “load” of this verse represents a different Greek

word from that in 6:2, and here is probably a military expression. “Every man must ‘shoulder his own pack’” (JBP).

4. Are those fully engaged in Christ’s service being adequately supported by Christians who derive benefit from their ministry (6:6)? The first application is that of the duty which one being taught has to repay his teacher, but the relevance to payments to ministers today is obvious. The circumstances which made it unwise for Paul to accept money from certain churches and to prefer to maintain himself (Acts 18:1-3) must always be seen in context. At Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:8-9) and at Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:12-18) he intentionally relinquished his claim to maintenance because of the need to refute the charge that his motives were insincere, but he had no scruple about receiving gifts from Philippi (Philippians 4:10-19) and endorsed the principle of Luke 10:7 (see also 1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:18) for the elders appointed in the Galatian congregations (Acts 14:23).

SOWING AND REAPING  
GALATIANS 6:7-10

These verses make plain that to be spiritual is also to be practical.

THE MENTION OF the fruit of the Spirit (5:22) prompts Paul to continue this thought, introduced by a stern warning that the order and reliability which we observe in God's world of nature, with its law of seedtime and harvest (Genesis 8:22), are also part of God's moral world. Jesus said the same (Matthew 7:16-20). And earlier still, Hosea had warned the people of his day that sowing and reaping belong together (Hosea 8:7).

Another pair of contrasts which we have met in a previous passage recur too: the flesh and the Spirit (5:13-26). The background here is probably the rabbis' teaching that human behavior is governed by two impulses, one good, the other evil. These were found in a person's inner life, setting up a conflict (as in 5:17). Paul, the ex-rabbi, had discovered, however, the secret of victory in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 5:17; 7:25; 8:2-13) and the confidence which stems from that moral conquest: to sow in the field of the Spirit is to be assured of a harvest of eternal life. The thought of Romans 8:12-13 is similar.

"Sowing" stands not only for moral endeavor and preoccupation with those things which please God (Romans 8:6); it is equally a picture word for Christian service (as in 2 Corinthians 9:6-10) in which the great dissatisfaction is a tendency to grow fainthearted. Paul himself perhaps knew that discouragement first hand (2 Corinthians 4:1,16: how does he fight off

this despondency?). Having known something of the temptation and the way through, he writes an encouragement to the Galatian workers (6:9).

There are many calls on our interest, energy and finances. “Let us do good” (6:10) is an incentive which no Christian will fail to respond to, once a worthy cause is presented. But there has to be a priority. Who has first call on our stewardship of time and money?

**Note** 6:7: the strong admonition looks back to the proposal that the Christian may treat the high standards of morality with impunity (5:21). Possibly some Galatians had gone to the opposite extreme and argued that as they were free from the (Jewish) law, they were free to set aside all moral restraints.

PAUL'S FINAL WARNING AND REMINDER

GALATIANS 6:11-18

The ultimate test is not a religious ritual but whether a person has become a new creation.

THE APOSTLE NOW takes over from his assistant, a professional scribe whom he employed to write what he dictated, according to ancient letter-writing procedures (see Romans 16:22 for the name of one such writer). Sometimes Paul added only a final greeting and his signature (2 Thessalonians 3:17), but to these readers at Galatia what William Neil terms “a final salvo” is fired. The apostle wishes his errant church to be in no doubt as to the issues involved in their danger of “deserting him who called you ... and turning to a different gospel” (1:6).

These closing verses then are by way of summary, warning and reminder. The futility of any blind trust in religious ceremonial is reiterated; especially the Judaizers’ insistence on circumcision (6:12-13) comes in for a final condemnation. There is a subtle play on words here, chiefly on the term “flesh.” The Jewish-Christians were harping on about circumcision, ie a surgical operation to remove a piece of human flesh (6:12). Paul retorts, by inference, that this is something of deeper significance; it is a confidence in one’s own religious achievements which are to be renounced once and for all, at the foot of the cross (6:14; see also Philippians 3:2-11 for a full statement of this theme).

In any case, two things are clear. First, the important matter in the spiritual life is not an outward form or display, but a new spirit which derives from sharing in the risen life of Christ (6:15; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 6:17). And secondly the only bodily marks which interest Paul are those scars obtained in suffering for the gospel's sake (6:17). Memories of his treatment at Lystra (Acts 14:19) would no doubt be in his mind; indeed, they were as permanently impressed on him as the scars themselves, as his witness in later life recalled (2 Timothy 3:11).

**Note** 6:17: this verse has given rise to the notion of the stigmata (brands), so turning Paul into a mystic. But the plain sense is against this. The "marks of Jesus" are signs of his courageous service for Christ and the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 11:23-30). A slave was usually tattooed as a sign of his belonging to his master, and Paul is a slave (eg Romans 1:1) of Christ, whose service is perfect freedom.

INTRODUCTION  
EPHESIANS  
WILLIAM L. LANE

IN SPITE OF the traditional heading, not much is known about the people to whom Paul wrote the letter “To the Ephesians.” The letter was delivered to its destination in Asia Minor by Tychicus, who, in Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7, is named as Paul’s representative. Presumably the Colossian letter was delivered at the same time since Paul states in similar language in both letters that Tychicus will tell the readers about Paul’s current situation as a prisoner in Rome.

Paul had no personal contact with the community addressed in Ephesians; the tone of the letter is impersonal. He knows of his readers’ faith in the Lord Jesus and of their love toward other Christians (1:15; 4:21). He assumes they have heard of the special work God has given him to do for their sake (3:2). The community appears to have been exclusively Gentile (see 2:11f.; 3:1; 4:17ff., 25 ff.).

Based on what Paul says in Ephesians and Colossians, we can reconstruct the situation that gave rise to this letter. While Paul was in prison in Rome, the need became acute for new materials with which to instruct converts in Asia Minor. It is likely that the apostle had already gathered material that had been written previously in anticipation of this need.

An impetus to write these letters was when Epaphras arrived in Rome and told Paul of a threat to Christian truth in the Lycus Valley (an area about 100 miles east of Ephesus in western Turkey which included the cities of

Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis). In response, the apostle wrote Colossians. At the same time the letter that we know as Ephesians may have been sent to Laodicea and an extra copy left at Ephesus, the center of Roman rule in Asia Minor. This would explain a reference to the Laodicean letter in Colossians 4:16.

If this assumption is correct, Ephesians (like Colossians) was a letter addressed to Christians in the Lycus Valley region. Its specific destination was Laodicea and its purpose was to foster Christian maturity. The apostle intended that Ephesians would be read at Colossae as well, and the copy left at Ephesus provided assurance that Paul's directive would reach the greater part of the province.

The letter to the Ephesians was written in response to the newer religious philosophies sweeping the area—the mystery religions and incipient Gnosticism, which threatened to obscure the nature of salvation, the significance of the church and the cosmic dimensions of the sovereign plan of God.

### Similarities between Ephesians and Colossians

Ephesians and Colossians are more similar in content, language and style than any other two New Testament letters. About 70% of Colossians is shared by Ephesians, while approximately 50% of Ephesians finds its parallel in Colossians. It is striking that when the portions of Ephesians that are also found in Colossians are removed, there remain sections of Ephesians that are distinctive and can stand alone:

1:3-14 An expanded blessing consisting of a single sentence.

2:1-10 A confessional summary of the new life in Christ, also consisting of a single sentence.

3:14-21 A prayer that Paul's readers may understand the mystery of Christ.

4:1-16 An elaborate exhortation to unity supported by confession and Scripture.

5:8-14 An exhortation to walk in the light, concluding with a fragment of a hymn.

5:23-32 A theological explanation of the relationship between husband and wife, based on the mystical marriage of Christ.

6:10-17 An expanded exhortation to put on the armor of God.

These seven standalone sections show signs of careful preparation and had probably been penned before Ephesians was written. But they were integrated so well with the other portions of the letter that the only way we can recognize them as independent units is because we possess Colossians. It has been suggested that Paul had prepared these sections for instructing converts either prior to, or following, baptism. In their present context as part of Ephesians, they reminded the readers of the instruction they had received and the liturgy in which they had participated in order to encourage growth toward maturity.

THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

EPHESIANS 1:1-2

Paul introduces himself and greets the “saints.”

IN 1:1, PAUL introduces himself as an apostle, a word that comes from the Jewish and Christian concept of an ambassador who speaks and acts with the authority of the one who commissioned him. Paul was commissioned by God to represent Jesus Christ. Like those who were apostles before him, he has seen the risen Lord (Galatians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8) and has received a specific appointment to go to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15f.; 2:7-9). As the “apostle to the Gentiles” and having Christ’s authority, he does not hesitate to instruct people with whom he has had no previous contact.

It is generally agreed by textual critics that the words “in Ephesus” in 1:1 are not original. They were added to later manuscripts by someone who failed to see that this letter was written to people Paul did not know (see 1:15; 3:2; 4:21) and could not have been addressed to the community that Paul founded in Ephesus. The absence of a specific place name gives to the letter a universal quality. What Paul has to say has relevance to all the people of God who show loyalty to Jesus Christ. The apostle prays that they may experience the unfailing grace and dynamic peace of God, which is able to sustain them in the turmoil and tension of life. Already in the greeting of the letter, Paul points to the resources that encourage growth toward maturity in the individual and in the church.

GOD'S GLORIOUS PURPOSE

## EPHESIANS 1:3-10

“Before the foundation of the world,” God decided to send Jesus into the world to die for you. Amazing!

THINK OF EPHESIANS as a word of wisdom to the mature believer (see 4:12-14; 1 Corinthians 2:6-7) couched in the form of a prayer. The entire first half of the letter (1:3–3:21) and much of the apostle’s plea for worthy conduct in the second half is presented in the language of prayer. Within a framework of prayer (see 1:3,16; 3:14,21; 5:20; 6:18,23f.), Christ’s achievement on behalf of the church is confessed before God and humanity. When Ephesians is recognized as a word of wisdom in the form of prayer, its language and style are intelligible. The pastoral concern, the formal liturgical style and the involved sequence of thoughts of Ephesians find their exact parallel in other letters where Paul gives himself to prayer of adoration, confession and supplication (eg Romans 8:31-39; 11:33-36; 16:25-27; Philippians 1:6-11).

These qualities of pastoral concern, formal liturgical style and involved sequence of thoughts are evident throughout 1:3-14, which Paul wrote as a single sentence of carefully balanced clauses. This expanded blessing is a solemn review of the redemption of the triune God. It is possible to read this paragraph as a hymn in three stanzas of uneven length (1:3-6, 1:7-12 and 1:13-14), with each stanza concluding with a praise to God’s glorious grace. The theme of this hymn is God’s eternal purpose in history (1:9). The horizontal or historical phase is summarized in 1:3-8 (see also 3:4-6); the

vertical or ultimate phase of God's plan is presented in 1:9f.; the resulting phase, the creation of a fellowship of love, is expressed in 1:11-14 (see also 3:9-11).

When Paul thinks about what God has done for the church, he breaks out in joyful praise. Before God spoke the creative word that brought the world into being, he chose us to be a holy and blameless people (1:3f.). He determined that we should be his sons and that the church should be like a family (1:5). He made provision for the removal of our guilt and the enrichment of our lives through abundant grace (1:7f.). That provision is explained historically by Paul: God sent Jesus Christ into the world to overcome the distance between God and the world through Christ's death on the cross (1:7). What Christ did is also explained cosmically: the ultimate secret of God's will is that his Son should be the head of all things, both the earthly and the heavenly (1:9f.). Christ's work is seen in relationship to God's total purpose for the universe because Christ reintegrates all elements of the universe to God (1:10). There are many ways to interpret Paul's statement that all things in heaven and on earth are united in Christ, but the immediate context indicates that what is primarily in view is that Christ has overcome the alienation between people and God.

THE SEAL OF GOD

## EPHESIANS 1:11-14

The Holy Spirit is God's promise that over time he will make you more like Jesus.

ONE OF THE distinctive characteristics of Ephesians is its awareness of God's trinitarian nature. More emphatically than in his other letters, Paul is conscious that all three persons of the Godhead participate in the work of redemption. In the initial blessing, Paul says it is God the Father who determines to reconcile people to himself (1:3-6), redemption is accomplished by the Son (1:7-12) and the Holy Spirit applies redemption to our lives (1:13f.). Although the order in which Paul refers to the three Persons differs, over and over again he emphasizes the mutual cooperation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in reconciling people to God (See 2:4-10,13-18; 3:1-6,14-19; 4:1-6,30-5:2,15-20; 6:10-18).

1:11-14 conclude the remarkable sentence begun in verse 3 in which Paul reviews the redemption of the triune God (1:3-14). Until the end of verse 12 Paul consistently uses the first person plural ("we"/"us"). However, with 1:13, Paul abruptly begins to use the second person plural ("you"). This change makes sense when the entire passage is seen as a fragment of a baptismal charge to Gentile Christians. "We" who first hoped in the Messiah (1:12) are Jewish Christians like Paul who have come to faith; "you also" (1:13) refers to Gentiles who have responded to the word of preaching and become Christians. Thus Paul introduces here a key theme of Ephesians: that

God has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles through the cross of Christ (see 2:1-7,11-22; 3:6).

Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “pledge” or “guarantee” of our heritage (1:14; see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). The term denotes the first portion of a payment that will eventually be made in full. The Spirit’s presence with the believer is therefore God’s promise that he will perfect his work in the believer. The Spirit sets a seal upon the true child of God which assures them that they belong to God and that they are entitled to personal fellowship with God (see 2 Timothy 2:19). Even now, believers enjoy a rich foretaste of what they will experience fully in God’s presence when the Holy Spirit has completed his work in the Christian.

THE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST  
EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Christ is head of the church, but he also has sovereign authority over everything, including everything that is important to you.

PAUL DEPENDED ON what others told him for his knowledge of the Christian church in the Lycus Valley—the believers to whom he was writing. For instance Epaphras, who was responsible for bringing Christianity to the Lycus Valley, had told Paul about the church there (see Colossians 1:4,8). The faithfulness of his readers to Jesus Christ and to one another moved Paul to pray that they may have the spiritual insight to perceive the truth that is hidden in God and that can be unlocked only through the experience of life and through fellowship with him.

One by one, the apostle introduces the themes he will develop in the first half of this letter: first, the hope inspired by God's call (1:18; see also 2:1-10,12-18), secondly, the glory that belongs to the divine inheritance (1:18; see also 2:19-22; 3:1-6) and thirdly the surpassing magnitude of God's power (1:19; see also 3:7-21). Paul recognized that all that his readers possess in Christ depends on the initiative of God—not their own.

The magnitude of the power that God has made available to Christians was demonstrated by the resurrection of Christ—his victory over death—and by Christ's exaltation to a place of sovereign authority over everything we think is important. The way in which Christ's lordship over cosmic and earthly powers is made visible is through the church. In this first reference to

the church (1:22), it is evident that Paul is not speaking of local churches but of the universal church seen in an idealized perspective (see also 3:10; 4:16). In the letter to the Colossians Paul develops the concept of the headship of Christ, but in Ephesians the church as the full expression of Jesus Christ is more prominently in view.

In his letters Paul uses the metaphor of the body on three different levels: first, the church is like any human body (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27); secondly, the church is like the body of Christ offered up for us on the cross (1 Corinthians 10:16f.; 11:23-27) and thirdly the church is like the body of Christ risen (1:19-23). Although Paul uses the statement, “the Church is like a body,” in all these instances, the metaphor does not mean the same thing in every case. Only in Ephesians does Paul reflect on the church as the body of Christ, risen and exalted over all things (1:20-23). The exaltation of Christ is described in the highest terms (see 1:4f.,9f.,20-23; 3:11ff.). Christians are assured that God has given to the church a sovereign who is also head over all things. The church has authority to confront the powers that oppose God because its head is the Lord of all.

THE RICH MERCY OF GOD

## EPHESIANS 2:1-7

Paul explains that you were dead in your sin, but God made you alive and he will show you kindness.

THIS SECTION CAN be understood as a summary of the elementary facts of conversion that was taught in connection with baptism:

1. the state of humans before their conversion (2:1-3),
2. the means and results of salvation (2:4-7), and
3. the intention of the Christian life (2:8-10).

In 1:19 Paul spoke of the divine power that brought life to God's people. Now in 2:1-3 he returns to that point in order to emphasize the contrast between the condition of death in which his readers had formerly lived and the life which they now enjoy. The evil character of the past of both Gentiles and Jews is set out categorically. Paul indicated that both Jews and Gentiles are included by his use of the words "you" and "us" (2:2,5) and by the strong expression "we all" (2:3). Whether Gentile or Jew, the believer's past was marked by a condition of life-of-death, which means living life in a realm where the powers of death constantly have access to a person. The term also implies a total insensitivity to the claim of God and a willingness to adopt a course of life inspired by a spiritual power opposed to God—"the prince of the power of the air" (2:2; see also 5:6).

Paul's picture of the hopelessness of his readers' past serves to put into sharper focus the rich mercy of God's intervention. The contrast between 2:1-3 and 2:4-7 is emphasized by Paul's expression, "But God ...". For no other reason than his infinite love, God rescued us from spiritual death and gave us life in the same way he rescued Christ from physical death and gave him life in the resurrection. In 2:5 Paul finally introduces the verb on which the whole sentence depends: He "made us alive together with Christ." Paul's statement combines two thoughts: first, Jews and Gentiles, who were previously separated, have become united in this new experience of life. Secondly, together they are united with Christ in his experience of resurrection (2:5-6). The apostle's main emphasis, however, is not on the nature of the new life experienced in Christ, but on the immeasurable richness of God's mercy and kindness in giving this new life to us (2:4-5,7).

THE GRACE OF GOD  
EPHESIANS 2:8-10

Here is the heart of the gospel! You are saved by grace through faith.  
It is not of your own doing. This is really important!

WHILE TALKING ABOUT the magnitude of God's love in 2:4 and that God made us alive in (2:5), Paul declares in an emphatic parenthesis, "by grace you have been saved." These words, which are repeated in 2:8, express the heart of the gospel. They are at the center of Paul's theology.

The statement "by grace you have been saved" declares that the nature of God is to give freely because of his own love. God does not deal with people on the basis of their achievement but on the level of their deepest needs. He brings salvation as his gift to people and then he creates a disposition of trust and receptivity within them so that they may receive what he gives. Salvation is wholly God's achievement. All attempts to help ourselves by misguided efforts at human achievement merely foster a false sense of security in our own merit (see 2:9). Because salvation is a pure gift of God, nothing is required of us but the willingness to receive what he has given. Where that willingness does not exist, God brings it into existence by his gracious disposition toward us. Even our faith itself is a gift of God. "It is the gift of God" at the end of 2:8 explains the word "faith": "... through faith. And this [faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

The Christian is never a self-made person. Paul emphatically declares that we are God's "workmanship," using a term from which we derive the English

word *poem* (2:10). Just as in Romans 1:20 the universe is described as God's creative poem, the Christian is here presented as God's redemptive poem. In each instance the poem points beyond itself to the master poet whose eternal power, deity and grace are displayed through his craftsmanship.

The work of new creation (see also 2:15; 4:24) in making a new people crowns the creative activity of God, and he created this new people so that we might do good works. Once we as Christians have experienced the grace of God, we find that we devote ourselves to good actions because those actions express the essence of God's nature. Even then, all occasion for boasting is removed. The good works which Christians find to do are theirs because God has placed them for them to discover.

The grace of God, the gift of God and the good works of God are the elements which distinguish the new life in Christ from the realm of death in which Paul's readers had previously lived.

## EXCLUSION FROM PRIVILEGE

### EPHESIANS 2:11-12

Paul's readers were Gentiles, and the Jews thought they were better than the Gentiles.

GENTILES IN THE ancient world faced two challenges: first, their moral degradation invited the wrath of God (2:1-3; 5:6; remember, Paul is writing to Gentile believers), and secondly, their exclusion from the privileges that God gave to Israel kept them from a direct encounter with God, a situation Paul points out in 2:11-12.

Resuming the train of thought with which he had begun the chapter, Paul calls his Gentile readers to reflect on the contrast between their present experience in the church and their recent past. A deep hostility had separated them from the people of the synagogue—the Jews. Results of birth and training caused mutual disparagement. Priding themselves on the outward sign of the covenant, which declared them to be the people of God, the Jews had expressed their contempt for Gentiles by calling them “the uncircumcision” (2:11). This superficial and unspiritual way of regarding people was an indication that circumcision could be little more than a mark made by human hands, a work of the flesh.

Although the prejudice of the Jews against the Gentiles was not commendable, the fact was that before their experience of God's grace, Gentiles were without Christ, in whom God's grace found its most pointed expression (2:12).

As a consequence of their separation from God, the Gentiles were like people living outside the gates of a city-state. Not only did they lack the civic rights of the free citizen, they were not even resident foreigners within the city. Paul describes the former condition of his readers as excluded from citizenship and foreigners to God's covenants of promise. They possessed no hope of engaging the attention of the city's sovereign to give permission for them to enter the city. In fact, they did not even possess any real knowledge of him.

The picture Paul paints is one of utter abandonment to life in the world without the meaning that only a knowledge of God can supply.

## RECONCILIATION

### EPHESIANS 2:13-18

God not only reconciles us to himself, but he also breaks down the separation between groups of people.

IN 2:1 PAUL says his readers were dead in their trespasses and sins. In 2:12 he says they were separated from Christ. Both statements are followed by a significant “but.” 2:4-5 say, “But God ... made us alive.” 2:13 says, “But now ... you ... have been brought near.”

What follows in 2:14-18 is an account of the radical change of relationship for Gentiles that is achieved through the cross of Christ. The basic cause of hostility and separation from God is sin, but because of Christ’s death the sins of both Jews and Gentiles may be forgiven (1:7). And as both Jews and Gentiles are brought near to God, they are brought near to each other.

In the temple in Jerusalem was a physical example of the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and the exclusion of the Gentiles from the presence of God. Around the temple were various courts, with the outermost one being the Court of the Gentiles. In 1871 a pillar that had been part of the barrier between the Court of the Gentiles and the rest of the courts and the temple was discovered. An inscription in Greek and Latin prohibited the presence of any foreigner beyond the barrier on penalty of death (see also Acts 21:29f.). By his death, Christ in effect tore down that barrier, which separated people from each other (2:14f.); just as at his death the temple veil

that symbolized the separation of people from God was torn in two (Mark 15:38).

2:15-18 are based on an exposition of Isaiah 57:19: “‘Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will heal him.’” The terms “far” and “near” designate the Gentiles and Israel respectively (see also Acts 2:38f.). “The Lord” who by his declaration of peace brings about the creation of a third human race—neither Jew nor Gentile but Christian—is Jesus.

Some theologians today say that God through Christ has reconciled all the world to himself, and therefore our primary concern is not to seek to bring about the reconciliation of all people to Christ, but to proclaim that all have been reconciled already. This is a form of universalism that has had a great impact on contemporary thinking about evangelism and missions.

Paul, however, knows nothing of universal reconciliation. He says the one circumstance in which peace exists horizontally among people and vertically between people and God is the circumstance in which we stand before the cross of Christ. The gospel that centers on the death of Christ creates the situation in which people experience God’s peace. The verses in this section provide a graphic description of God’s new act in reconciling Jew and Gentile into one church (see also Colossians 2:13f.).

THE NEW TEMPLE

EPHESIANS 2:19-22

Paul uses three metaphors to describe the people of God: a city, a family and a temple.

THE RESULT OF Christ's reconciling action was the radical alteration of the status and position of the Gentiles. God has created one church of all people.

Paul brings his thoughts to a head by going back to the analogy in 2:12 of a person living outside the gates of a city-state. He assures his readers that the church is a community in which all possess the rank of free citizens (2:19). The terms "foreigners" and "strangers" are to be read in the light of 2:12. Paul means, specifically, that his readers are no longer strangers to the promises expressed in the divine covenants and they are no longer foreigners in the community made up of God's people.

He then changes the metaphor to one of his readers being members of the household of God. While the civic metaphor expressed the quality of privilege Gentiles share with Jews in Christ, the figure of the household permits a more intimate touch. Both Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father (2:18), and both were marked out as God's sons (1:5). Thus both together constitute the members of the divine household, which Paul elsewhere describes as "the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10).

Paul now uses a third metaphor: a temple. The transition from the figure of a household built upon a strong foundation to that of a temple in which God dwells appears at first to be abrupt. But in the ancient world a temple

was not a place for public worship, as a church building is today, but the actual dwelling place of a deity. God's own household is therefore the place where he dwells. Paul describes the church as a holy temple on earth built on a foundation of the word of God entrusted in a special way to the apostles and prophets (see also 3:5; 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28). As those commissioned to proclaim and interpret God's word, they have the primary responsibility for building up the community of faith. The chief cornerstone binds the parts of the building together and gives to the walls their lines. The whole structure rests on Christ (see also Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16; 1 Peter 2:5). His power shapes the building and guarantees its growth toward completeness. The Gentiles are like new tiers of stone that are rising upon the foundation as the building continues to be erected. In 2:21, Paul describes the building not by the general term for temple, but as the inner shrine where God reveals his glory.

Paul's point is that the living God displays his presence in the world through a living household created by the Holy Spirit.

GOD'S SURPRISE

EPHESIANS 3:1-6

Using the language of new (at the time) religious philosophies, Paul reveals the “mystery of Christ.”

PAUL USED WORDS with which his hearers were familiar to explain the person and work of Jesus Christ. When he arrived in Athens, for instance, he saw an altar “To the unknown god” and said that the unknown god was God, the Father of Jesus. The readers of Ephesians were aware of eastern mystery religions and Gnosticism, which taught that salvation came through having special knowledge of the secrets of the universe, and so Paul uses the vocabulary of these movements to describe the gospel as the hidden mystery of God.

The mystery, God’s secret that he has finally revealed through the apostles and prophets (3:3,5; see also 2:20), is that the gospel is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. People must stand before this mystery as young children who need to be instructed, for its meaning must be spiritually discerned (see 3:5, “by the Spirit”). There were hints of God’s gracious intention toward the Gentiles in the Old Testament, but the promises concerning the salvation of the Gentiles were always understood as if the Gentiles had to come to God through the Jews (see, eg Isaiah 2:2-4). It was believed that the promised Messiah and the redemption he brought belonged to Israel (Romans 9:5). The thought that the Messiah was for the Gentiles (3:8; Colossians 1:26f.) was something unimagined. Paul had been

commissioned by God to proclaim among the nations that Gentiles share the inheritance, the citizenship and the covenant promises that had belonged exclusively to Israel (3:6).

This Christian “mystery” was different from the mysteries of eastern mystery religions and Gnosticism in two important respects. First, the mystery of Christ must be publicly proclaimed so that it penetrates the world. Mysteries from Gnosticism and other religions depended on their being kept secret. They were alien to any public proclamation and an initiate was pledged to guard the secret revealed. Secondly, in pagan mysteries, “reconciliation” between a person and deity occurred by some cultic act, an ecstatic experience and the adoption of a particular ethic. In Christianity, reconciliation is accomplished through the word of preaching, faith and active love.

Paul points his readers to the church as the fellowship of those who have been surprised by joy as they have come to share in God’s open secret.

## THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

### EPHESIANS 3:7-13

The purpose of the church is not just to be a social gathering, but to reflect God's purpose of making believers alive in Christ and disarming evil powers.

PAUL'S LIFE AND mission was governed by his commission to be the "apostle to the Gentiles." He never lost a deep sense of privilege that God had allowed him to preach "the unsearchable riches" of the gospel. His comment that he was "the very least of all the saints" in 3:8 must be understood against the background of his persecution of the church before his conversion (see 1 Corinthians 15:9f.; 1 Timothy 1:12-16).

Paul's task is to make all understand the nature of God's plan to gather all things together in the church, which is a fellowship of those who share his secret that the gospel is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews (3:9-11). Paul appears to shift the emphasis from the person of Christ to the church in 3:9-10 when speaking of "the mystery." But it is only an apparent change.

Because the church is the body of Christ, the mystery of Christ is incorporated and made visible in the church. The church does not exist as an end in itself but to be the showcase in which God displays his wisdom to the world, and particularly to those powers of destruction that are opposed to his purposes. The church had been in existence only a few dozen years, but already it had made an impact on the realm of the hostile powers.

This extremely high concept of the church is consistent with God's eternal purpose, which found its expression in the cross of Christ. Through the cross, believers are made alive (1:7; 2:13-18) and rulers and authorities (Paul is probably referring to demonic rulers and authorities) are disarmed (Colossians 2:15). Believers being made alive and evil powers being disarmed are two effects of reconciliation that must be reflected in the church. Paul's language implies an entirely new concept of mission in which the church takes seriously its cosmic significance and finds in its access to Christ the resources sufficient for its task.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST  
EPHESIANS 3:14-19

The love of Christ, which Paul prays that his readers might know, “surpasses knowledge” and will fill them “with all the fullness of God.”

REFLECTION ON WHAT God has done for the Gentiles always had the effect of driving Paul to prayer (see 1:3-14, followed by 15-19; 2:11-22, followed by 3:1,14-19). He intended to begin the prayer in these verses in 3:1, but Paul was diverted by contemplation of the grace that God had given to him. His interrupted thought is resumed in 3:14. He prays with great intensity because of God’s magnificent plan, which he just considered.

Paul’s posture and his designation of God are unusual. In Judaism, where it was customary to stand for prayer (see Matthew 6:5; Luke 18:11,13), kneeling was a sign of deep emotion and earnestness (see also 1 Kings 8:54; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5). Paul regularly addressed his prayer to the Father (1:17; 2:18), but in this instance he reflects on what the description “Father” means in the context of God’s open secret that the gospel is for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. God is the Father of the whole universe. In the same way that the clans of Asia Minor called themselves by the name of their supposed ancestor, all races—earthly and heavenly—may trace their lineage to the Creator in whom the concept of fatherhood is seen in its perfection.

The content of Paul's prayer in these verses repeats the concerns of his prayer in 1:17-19—that the inward life of his readers may be transformed and strengthened. Here Paul also prays that they might have an intimate knowledge of the love of Christ, which is made possible through Christ's presence in and with believers (3:18f.). A true knowledge of God cannot be attained without the experience of love in the fellowship of the church (Paul emphasizes the words "with all the saints" by their position in the sentence). The love of which Paul is speaking is intensely practical. It comes to expression in the love a person shows to Christ and to other people for Christ's sake in their experience of sorrow, trial and suffering. To the extent that his readers know the love of Christ, Paul is confident they will attain the fulfillment that God intends for them and will find themselves in harmony with God's eternal purpose. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly in love.

GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND CHRIST

## EPHESIANS 3:20-21

Join Paul in a shout of glory to our majestic God.

JUST AS HE did when he wrote Romans and other letters, Paul brings the first main section of Ephesians to a close with an exclamation of praise to God. What prompts him to break out into praise is his reflection on God's power that is at work in the lives of believers. The apostle was concerned that his readers should know the immeasurable greatness of that power, and the last part of his first prayer (1:19-23) was directed specifically to this desire. In that prayer, he defined the dynamic that energizes the church as the power that raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to a place of sovereign authority at the Father's side and that is active in subduing every force that is hostile to God.

In his second prayer (3:16-19) Paul asked God to give his readers a blessing that transcends human understanding or expression. The source of Paul's confidence that his prayers will be answered in a manner that far exceeds his own expectations is his vision of the incomprehensible majesty of God. The God whom Paul served filled him with a sense of awe and wonder. Paul's own inability to exhaust the inexhaustible resources of God is emphasized by terms deliberately chosen: "immeasurable greatness" (1:19), "surpasses knowledge" (3:19), "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (1:20). Glory belongs to such a God, whose reality had so deeply impressed itself on his servant.

Paul has spoken clearly about the work of reconciliation that God has determined to accomplish through Christ. He has developed a high concept of the church as the pledge of that ultimate and perfect unity that God will achieve. His vision of what God will yet accomplish embraces the whole universe. The closing words of this doxology sound these themes once more: to God be glory, not only in the church where he has displayed his intention, but in that infinite realm of being of which Christ is the center (3:21).

The thunderous peal of glory unfragmented by space and uninterrupted by time is breathtaking.

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

### EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Unity in the church is important—not just so we can feel good about each other, but because the church’s unity is a picture of God’s purpose for the world.

THE PRIMARY THEME of Ephesians is that all things are moving toward unity, by which Paul means perfection (see 1:9-10). In developing this theme, Paul explained that God is Father over the whole universe (3:14-15) and seeks to reconcile the cosmos to himself (1:19-23; 2:20-22).

A secondary theme clarifies the church’s role in God’s eternal purpose. Paul makes two points. First, the church is to be an expression of the future, a promise of the ultimate and perfect unity which God will achieve. Therefore, it is imperative for there to be oneness within the church (4:1-6). Secondly, the church is the means by which God confronts those hostile powers that stand opposed to unity (3:10,20f.; 6:11f.).

A Christian is a person who has experienced and continues to experience what reconciliation to God means. The church must therefore be a dynamic expression of the reconciling power of Christ’s death and resurrection. It also must be the place where the separation and hostility of the world are broken down. The fact that within the church the walls of partition that separated Jew and Gentile have been removed already (2:14-16) shows that God is accomplishing his sovereign purpose within the church.

In the light of this fulfillment of God's purpose, Paul pleads with his readers to demonstrate humility, patience and love in their relationships with one another. Unity is the creation of the Spirit of God (see 2:18; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1), but unity must be recognized and guarded by believers (4:1-3).

Confession belongs at the heart of worship. The confession in the synagogue is summarized in the ancient words of the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The confession of the church in 4:4-6 forms a parallel to Israel's acknowledgment and expands the *Shema* to speak of the one Spirit, the one Lord, the one Father. The repeated emphasis on the word "one" in this confession strengthens the emotional impact of Paul's plea for unity in the church.

GROWING UP TOGETHER TO BE MATURE

## EPHESIANS 4:7-16

Christ has given the church the gifts it needs to carry out its ministry.

AS PAUL CONTEMPLATES the unity of the church, he never loses sight of the individuals that make up the church (4:7, “to each one of us”; 4:13, “until we all”). Each believer receives a particular measure of grace as Christ’s gift.

To emphasize his point that Christ is the giver of gifts to the church, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18, which pictures a victorious king ascending the mountain of the Lord followed by a long line of captives. Both the Hebrew and Greek text of Psalm 68:18 state that the king “receives” gifts from men, but Paul uses the Aramaic translation of the Old Testament, the translation that was used in the synagogue, which says “he gave gifts to men.”

4:9-10 are an example of early Christian exposition of the Old Testament in which an application is made to the life of the church. Paul interprets the meaning of “he ascended on high” and “he gave gifts to men.” The king is Christ, whose ascension (see 1:20-23) implies the necessity of his incarnation and death on the cross, where he disarmed the principalities (see 1 Corinthians 2:7-10; Colossians 2:15).

The gifts that Christ gives to the church are individuals who are dedicated to the tasks of ministry. Within the unity of the church it is necessary to have a diversity of gifts in order to achieve the corporate maturity that God intends. The purpose of Christ’s gifts is that each believer may be equipped to fulfill some aspect of ministry (4:12 should be read without a comma after

the first phrase: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry”), and no member of the church should be a mere spectator to its worship and involvement with mission. For the whole body to be mature, every believer is to participate. That is the goal Paul holds before his readers (4:13).

What Paul pleads for is a living and vibrant unity within the church, with Christ providing the dynamic for growth and harmony among the diverse members of his body. The marks of Christ’s presence in the church will be patience with one another in love (4:2), truthful speech with love (4:15) and mutual growth in love (4:16).

THE NEW CREATION  
EPHESIANS 4:17-24

It cannot get much clearer than this: do not give yourself to immorality, greed and impurity, but put on righteousness and holiness.

PAUL BEGAN THE second half of his letter by calling his readers to lead a life consistent with God's call to them to experience his grace. The implications of what a "worthy" life entails are described in 4:17-24. There must be a sharp break with the pagan past. In the sobering portrait Paul paints of the futility and depravity of life without God, we see its confusion, separation and callousness in the reckless exploitation of other people and in an endless and empty quest for meaning to life. This empty quest is demonstrated today in the existentialism found in contemporary literature and drama. Paul's readers experienced the emptiness that he describes in their recent past (see 2:1-3; 5:8). Paul tells them they must not act as if they were still trapped in a life where total abandonment to immorality makes them obsessed with the sordidness of a world separated from God.

Christians cannot act as they did before their conversion because they have come to understand the true meaning of life (4:20f.). To "learn" Christ is to listen to him until one becomes possessed by his mind and his will and regards life through his eyes (see 1 Corinthians 2:16; 2 Corinthians 10:5). This involves a radical renewal of one's personality by the Holy Spirit, so that the whole direction of a person's will is controlled by Christ. God created people to be like himself in righteousness and holiness (Genesis

1:26), but humanity desired to be “like God” in knowledge and freedom. The result was the debasement that Paul found displayed in the immorality of Gentile life.

The apostle calls his readers to live out their new selves in “true righteousness and holiness,” which the new creation makes possible.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO ONE ANOTHER

EPHESIANS 4:25-29

Paul gives some very specific warnings about how to treat one another in the body of Christ.

PAUL JUST SHOWED the sharp contrast between the old life of pagan futility and the new life of purposefulness in Christ. But he does not content himself with generalities. A series of warnings now clarifies specific areas of conduct in which believers have an obligation to behave responsibly toward one another. The context for what Paul has to say in this section is provided by life in the church: “We are members one of another” (4:25) and the believer’s speech is to be “good for building up ... that it may give grace to those who hear” (4:29). The sins of falsehood, anger, theft and inappropriate speech disrupt the fellowship that believers share and obscure the unity that God intends to accomplish through Christ.

The warning to abandon falsehood as a way of life (4:25) is reinforced by a quotation from Zechariah 8:16. Like the parts of the human body, Christians are related to one another and must be able to depend on one another. In 4:15, “speaking the truth” had been qualified by the words “in love” as the condition for reaching maturity in Christ.

Prolonging anger is always dangerous and must be restrained (4:26-27). When quarrels are allowed to continue beyond a day, the devil has an opportunity to make people bitter toward one another and to destroy the evidence of reconciliation brought about by Christ. An indication of a

person's Christian maturity is provided by the way in which they express their anger.

The third warning (4:28) does not imply the existence of professional thieves within the local congregation, but concerns parasites who were attempting to live at the expense of their neighbors. Such people should devote themselves to honest work so that they can assume their responsibility to support members of the fellowship in times of crisis.

The avoidance of worthless, or "corrupting," speech (4:29) is to be balanced by cultivating subjects in one's speaking that contribute to the spiritual development of other Christians.

Each of the warnings of this section may be understood as a commentary on 4:3. They clarify what is entailed in an eagerness "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

## IMITATING GOD

### EPHESIANS 4:30–5:2

Our actions don't just affect other people, but they can "grieve the Holy Spirit." Paul raises the bar: we are to be imitators of God himself!

THROUGHOUT THIS LETTER Paul has stressed the person and work of the Holy Spirit (see 1:13f.; 2:18; 3:5,16; 4:3). He now cautions his readers not to "grieve" the Holy Spirit of God (4:30). The background to his plea is provided by Isaiah 63:7-10, which recalls Israel's failure to appreciate the intimate way in which God had identified himself with them. They "rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit," and God became their enemy. Paul warns that his readers could repeat Israel's experience if they refuse the leading of the Spirit, specifically the concern of the Spirit to achieve unity within the church (4:3). The verses both before and after 4:30 focus on sins of speech, which express attitudes that set people against one another. Expressions of "bitterness," which Aristotle defined as a resentful spirit that refuses reconciliation, grieve the Spirit of God.

What is required of those who have experienced God's kindness (2:7) is a demonstration of qualities that owe their existence to the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f.). Harshness and an unwillingness to forgive an individual who has offended you are inconsistent with the experience of forgiveness by God (see 1:7). As children of God who have experienced adoption into God's family (1:6), we Christians are to take our example from him. Because God was kind

(2:7), we must be kind; because God was tenderhearted (2:4), we must be as well (4:32). The bold command to imitate God (5:1) occurs only here in the whole New Testament. A Christian is most like the Father when he translates God's love into practical action. The kind of love for which Paul pleads finds its supreme expression in the cross of Christ (5:2).

## A LIFE OF OBEDIENCE

### EPHESIANS 5:3-14

Let's admit that our culture glorifies sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness. Paul says these are to have no place in a believer's life.

PAUL HAS SAID that sins that promote discord, such as bitterness, harshness and an unwillingness to forgive, grieve the Holy Spirit. He now says the Holy Spirit can also be grieved by sins that corrupt and degrade human character.

Reckless abandonment to immorality was common in Greek society. While it was impossible to shield his readers from the grosser side of life, the apostle urges them not to dignify such baseness by making it a topic for conversation. Impurity, lust and flippant speech have the effect of dulling one's sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit, whose nature is holiness. The appropriate attitude of the Christian is one of thanksgiving, which sees and acknowledges the beauty in human love and the rightful enjoyment of sex as the gift of God (see 5:22-33). Paul solemnly warns that those who are guilty of sexual vice are no better than those who serve idols rather than God. The immoral and amoral person is not only excluded from the realm where God is sovereign, but is consigned to wrath (5:3-6).

To reinforce the absolute difference between the community of faith and the pagan environment in which they live, Paul uses the image of light and darkness. Those who have fellowship with God are committed to the moral life, which is defined in Galatians 5:22-23 as "the fruit of the Spirit." Here in Ephesians Paul contrasts the fruitfulness of life in fellowship with God

(called “light”) with the barrenness of the immoral life (called “darkness”). And just as light drives out darkness, a life of unquestionable purity and integrity, by its very existence, exposes the shallowness and ugliness of the life of sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness, which must be carefully hidden from view (5:7-13).

This section is brought to a close with an excerpt from an early Christian hymn (5:14) which refers to the Christian’s experience of death and resurrection and Christ’s shining on the believer, shattering the darkness of the pagan past.

BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

## EPHESIANS 5:15-21

When your life is controlled by the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with other believers, it will be characterized by joy, thanksgiving and giving consideration to others.

PAUL CONCLUDES HIS instructions to the entire congregation by once again demanding disciplined maturity. Since his readers have received wisdom from God (1:8), they should realize that a secular society imposes pressures that can erode Christian standards. His readers are to seize the opportunities God gives them to expose the sham of life without Christ. In this way every hour of the believer's life will be brought into relationship with God's redemptive purposes (5:15-16).

The vivid contrast between a life in fellowship with God and a life given over to the desires of the flesh heightens the demand for sound moral judgment (5:17). A strong Christian intelligence is required to discern on every occasion what God would have the believer do. Paul, therefore, encourages his readers to give first priority to perceiving and performing the will of God.

The apostle points out that drunkenness leads to the folly of uncontrolled actions, dissipation and the progressive mastery of a person's will by the drug of alcohol. In contrast, the control of the Holy Spirit, affirmed constantly and repeatedly, results in the Spirit's progressive mastery of one's life so that you become in tune with the will of God. 5:19-21 clarify Paul's command in 5:18

to be filled with the Spirit and provide three signs of the life controlled by the Spirit of God: joyful fellowship, sustained thanksgiving and mutual consideration.

The life of the Spirit shared by the fellowship of believers is exhilarating and releases believers to the freedom that exists wherever Christ is Lord.

## CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

### EPHESIANS 5:22-33

The principles Paul has been teaching are now applied to Christian marriage, which is to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church.

PAUL HAS SAID that it is necessary for all Christian relationships to maintain unity (4:3), to walk in love (5:2) and to be subject to the claims of one another (5:21). He now applies these principles to Christian marriage. The apostle supports marriage as a form of Christian obedience (notice how 5:22 echoes 5:21) and bases his teaching on Genesis 2:18-24, where marriage is disclosed as God's intention for man and woman. In 5:31 Paul quotes Genesis 2:24.

The distinctiveness of Ephesians 5 is that here Paul says the relationship between husband and wife should be a model of the relationship between Christ and the church. In Colossians 3:18 reverence for Christ provides the motivation for wives to respect their husbands as the head of the home. Paul makes the same appeal in Ephesians, but emphasizes it by also saying that a wife's submission to her husband should be a picture of the submission of the church to Christ, its head (5:22-24).

Just as the union of Christ and the church is made possible by Christ's giving himself in love on the cross, so the husband must in love renounce himself in order to benefit his wife. In this act of renunciation the husband is

consecrated. Because he consecrates his wife by bringing her to her true destiny, he may be regarded as her “savior” (5:23,25-27).

In this way, the Christian husband and wife reflect to the world the intimate relationship between Christ, the head, and the church, which is his body. With profound insight Paul describes the woman as her husband’s body (5:28-29), and it is through her that he is revealed to the world. This sheds light on the meaning of the church as the body of Christ. The church has the privilege of revealing her Lord to the world by making him visible. For that reason Paul sees a deeper implication in Genesis 2:24 than simply counsel having to do with marriage. He suggests that in their marital union the Christian couple is to come to a deeper understanding of the relationship of Christ and the church. And they are to declare that understanding to the world by their obedience to each other (5:31-33).

For the pagan world, in its sexual confusion (see 4:17-19; 5:3-6), the Christian couple is both a judgment and a promise. They represent a judgment because their fulfilling the will of God while living in the world calls into question all merely human solutions to the challenges of our sexual nature. They are a promise because their example in this age is a promise of the fulfillment of God’s purposes for man and woman in the age to come.

CHILDREN AND PARENTS

EPHESIANS 6:1-4

Mutual consideration extends even to parents and children. Here is how Paul says they are to relate in a Christian home.

A REMARKABLE QUALITY of Scripture is that it is written simply enough so that its commands can be understood by those to whom they are addressed. When God speaks to children, he speaks in simple words they can understand: “Obey your parents in the Lord” (6:1). In both Hebrew and Greek, the primary languages of the Bible, the verb “to obey” is a more intense form of the verb “to hear.” Obedience is a consequence of listening: children listening intently to their parents, and all of us listening intently to the voice of God.

Paul reminds us that these words to children are based on the fifth commandment, which tells us to honor our parents (6:2-3). Children should obey their parents because God has commanded it and because a Christian home commends it. Of all of the Ten Commandments, the fifth is the only one to which a promise is attached. Obedience to parents is rewarded by God’s approval and long life. Disobedience to parents is a mark of a reckless indifference to divine authority and invites the judgment of God (see Romans 1:30; 2 Timothy 3:2).

The obligations of a husband and wife to one another extends to their children as well. Children are to obey their parents, and parents are to be understanding and provide them with instruction (6:4). Paul assumes that the father has primary responsibility for discipline in the home, and he warns

against the exercise of an authority that does not show the sympathy and love that Christ inspires.

Paul's own conduct with a young church indicated that exhortation, encouragement and teaching were legitimate elements in "the discipline of the Lord" (see 1 Thessalonians 2:11). When the education of children is based on the admonition of the Lord, they should realize that the obedience they give to their parents is a picture of the respect they have for God.

## SLAVES OF CHRIST

### EPHESIANS 6:5-9

Finally, Paul says mutual consideration because of Christ's love for us extends even to the relationship between slaves and masters.

THE PRESENCE OF converted slaves within the churches of the Lycus Valley (Ephesus, Laodicea and Colossae) motivated Paul to explain the relationship of slaves and their masters from a distinctively Christian perspective. Part of Paul's reason for addressing this relationship at this time was the presence with him in Rome of Onesimus, the fugitive slave from Colossae (see Colossians 3:22–4:1,7-9). (For other Scripture discussing slaves, see 1 Corinthians 7:20-24; Colossians 3:22–4:1; Philemon; Titus 2:9-10.)

Paul gives a sense of dignity to the work of believing slaves when he tells them to obey their masters as an act of reverence for Christ. They are to regard themselves as “servants of Christ” who do the will of God instead of thinking of themselves as those from whom every vestige of individuality has been taken by their servitude. In the Old Testament the designation “servant of the Lord” was a title of honor reserved for the patriarchs, Moses, David and others who stood in a unique relationship with God.

Paul tells Christian slaves to recognize that they belong to that distinguished company when they perform their tasks as a service rendered to God and not because they are constrained to do so. Their attitude is to be characterized by a humility that stems from a keen sense of shortcoming (for “fear and trembling” see 1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:15; Philippians

2:12) and by a determination to serve Christ willingly. When we stand in heaven before the exalted Christ, his concern will not be whether our work was done as a slave or as a free person, but he will look at the spirit in which we did our work.

Christian masters are to reflect the generous attitude of their Lord. They are to recognize the intrinsic worth of their slaves and of good work and to reward it with fairness. Fair treatment will make it easier for slaves to give their masters ready obedience. The warning that the Lord will be impartial in his judgment is intended for both parties; slaves and masters will stand on the same footing in the judgment.

WARRIORS OF GOD

EPHESIANS 6:10-17

It's an overwhelming thought that Christians face the "schemes of the devil," but God gives us the strength and tools to withstand evil powers.

CONFLICT IN THE spiritual realm is a natural part of the Christian life. Many Christians today no longer have an awareness of the reality of the demonic world, but Paul's awesome description of the spiritual forces against which the church contends must be taken seriously. The apostle insists that our conflict is ultimately with Satan and his hosts (6:11-13). Christ alone has subdued the demonic powers (see 1:20-23) and consequently he gives the Christian strength for conflict with Satan (6:10).

Paul urges the believers to put on the whole armor of God (6:11,13), and he proceeds to describe its parts. While his description may owe something to the Roman soldiers he saw around him while he was confined, its primary inspiration is drawn from Isaiah 59:17, which describes God as arming himself in order to rescue his oppressed people (see also Isaiah 11:4; 52:7). The influence of this passage from Isaiah is evident in this passage in 6:14-15,17.

The purpose of the belt was to hold the clothes in place in order to prevent their interference with movement. Truthfulness or sincerity constitutes the belt of the Christian warrior and holds together the other qualities in life. The breastplate protected the heart, lungs and other vital organs of the body. Like

the divine warrior described by Isaiah, the believer protects himself by their integrity (6:14). An important part of the Roman soldier's equipment were the military boots designed for long marches over terrain of every description. God's warrior must be prepared to carry the gospel everywhere in response to the command of Christ (6:15).

After describing the clothes of the soldier, Paul speaks of his implements for battle. Faith is compared to an oblong shield, offering protection to the whole body. The unusual term Paul uses denotes a shield constructed of wood and covered with a thick hide. Arrows stuck in the hide, but they could not set it on fire even when they were loaded with flaming pitch.

When a believer experiences conflict, faith in Christ's presence is like that kind of shield because it offers total protection against all the insidious attacks of the demonic hosts (6:16). The helmet of salvation identifies the Christian as a warrior of God because the helmet bears the divine crest. Christians have the assurance of their salvation, which permits them to focus all their energies on the battle at hand. The weapon used is as spiritual as the warfare (see 2 Corinthians 10:3-6). They trust in the written word of God and in every form of Christian utterance that is prompted by the Spirit of God (see Mark 13:11). Because they are equipped in this way, Christians may fight courageously for Christ even against spiritual forces greater than themselves.

PRAYER IN THE SPIRIT

## EPHESIANS 6:18-20

What is your prayer life like?

CHRISTIAN MATURITY COMES through extensive exposure to the word of God (“the sword of the Spirit,” 6:17) and to prayer (Paul’s instruction to “pray in the Spirit” in 6:18). Paul urges his readers to pray for one another and for himself. To pray “in the Spirit” is to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit, who provides direction, assurance and comfort in the experience of prayer. In Romans 8:26-27 Paul acknowledged that frequently we do not know how to pray appropriately, but the Spirit helps conform our prayers to the will of God. Earnest intercession for others involves conflict with the demonic (6:12f.) because intense involvement with prayer reveals to us the secret of power with God and with people.

The apostle was conscious of his own need to be supported by prayer at this time. In a parallel passage (Colossians 4:24) he urged the Colossians to pray specifically that a significant opportunity for ministry may develop. Here in Ephesians he asks that his own mouth should be opened to expound fully and boldly the open secret of the gospel. His description of the gospel as a “mystery” resumes one of the main themes of the letter—the hidden purpose of God is that the gospel is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews and that God has graciously revealed this mystery through the apostles and prophets of Christ.

Paul designates himself an ambassador, commissioned to proclaim this message (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). Envoys vested with the honor and dignity of their kings were sent to Rome from all nations of the Graeco-Roman world. Paul says he too is an envoy, but an envoy in chains, true to the character of an apostle as one who is laden with gifts and with suffering in the world (2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-29). He has come to Rome not for his own personal glory, but to exalt Jesus Christ as his Lord and King.

AN UNDYING LOVE FOR CHRIST

## EPHESIANS 6:21-24

Paul closes his letter with a blessing of peace and “love with faith.”

PAUL CLOSES ALL his letters with a personal section, addressing specific believers. In this letter, however, he is writing to a church he has never visited and about which he has learned only through others (1:15). He is unable to identify any of his readers by name, so he conveys a general blessing on the entire congregation.

The first two verses are nearly identical to Colossians 4:7-9, where Paul tells the Colossians that in addition to the letter he is carrying, Tychicus will give a report on the apostle’s present circumstances—details of his imprisonment. He extends the same courtesy to the other churches of the Lycus Valley because he sees in his situation a ground for encouragement to other Christians. God has not abandoned him, but has given him a ministry in spite of adversities. He wants his readers to know the reality of God’s faithfulness to them as well.

The letter opened with a prayer for grace and peace (1:2). It is brought to a close with a blessing that sounds again the note of peace. “Peace be with you” were customary words people said when leaving each other. Paul expands this to include “love with faith.” His prayer is that the love of God may inform faith, and that faith may give direction to the expression of that love.

The appropriate response to God's love is an undying love for Jesus Christ, a love that Paul says should be incorruptible, suggesting a love that would not change or decay. This quality of love is never a human achievement, but owes its existence to the life of Christ within the believer. It belongs to that heavenly sphere in which God has blessed us (1:3).

Christians live on the earth, but they experience a quality of life and emotion that transcends the possibilities of unredeemed human nature. Paul prays that God's favor may remain with all who demonstrate a sustained incorruptible love for the Lord who loved us and died for us.

INTRODUCTION  
PHILIPPIANS  
WILLIAM L. LANE

THE ROMAN COLONY of Philippi was evangelized on the second missionary journey in response to a divine vision calling Paul and his group into Macedonia (Acts 16:6-40). Vigorous public efforts to spread the gospel throughout the city, and specifically among citizens of the colony, provoked hostility. Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned (see 1 Thessalonians 2:2). Nevertheless, there was a positive response to the gospel by such resident foreigners as Lydia and her household and by enfranchised citizens like the local jailer. The work was sufficiently advanced to merit leaving Luke at Philippi to provide leadership for the new church when Paul left the city. Note that the first “we” section in Acts ends at 16:17 with Luke at Philippi; the next one is introduced at 20:5-6 where Paul has rejoined Luke at Philippi.

Paul revisited Philippi twice before his imprisonments in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome (Acts 20:1-6; 2 Corinthians 2:12f.; 7:5f.). It is probable that when he returned to Macedonia in the last years of his life (see Titus 3:12) he again made his way to Philippi, fulfilling his intention to visit the church once more (Philippians 1:26; 2:24). Between these two points may be located Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

A WORD OF THANKSGIVING

## PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2

Paul greets his friends warmly.

PHILIPPIANS IS A deeply personal letter, written out of mature affection for a company of believers who had repeatedly encouraged Paul in his labors for Christ. It is essentially the apostle's word of thanksgiving, not simply for a gift received and services rendered, but also for the warm concern which the members of the church continued to show for him. Paul recognized that the church was anxious concerning two specific matters: they had heard that his circumstances as a prisoner had changed, and they had learned of the severe illness of Epaphroditus, the messenger by whom they had delivered their gift to Paul. To relieve their anxiety, Paul determined to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi, fully recovered, with a letter of commendation and assurance (2:25-30).

Paul felt a closer emotional bond with the Philippians than with any of his other churches. This is clear from the opening lines of the letter where, instead of asserting his apostleship, Paul contents himself with the designation "servant of Christ Jesus" (1:1). The term translated "overseers" in 1:1 refers to those having overall responsibility for the church. It commonly designated financial officers for townships and guilds in Greek texts, and the Philippian overseers had exercised this function in arranging for gifts to be sent both to Paul and to the poor in Jerusalem. The "deacons" are the pastoral leaders of the congregation who are designated by a title which stresses the

idea of service. From other churches Paul had been unwilling to accept for himself even the bare necessities of life (2 Corinthians 11:8-11), but he was confident that his integrity was unquestioned at Philippi. The prayer for grace and peace (1:2) springs from the gospel of reconciliation in which both he and the Philippians rejoiced.

JOY AND THANKSGIVING  
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

Paul prays, with confidence to God, for his friends.

THESE VERSES REVEAL the depth of the personal relationship which existed between Paul and the believers at Philippi. The apostle warmly acknowledges his readers' earnest participation in his work (1:3-5). As he thinks back to the early days of the mission, he thanks God continually for every member of the church.

Among the first members were Lydia and her household, and the burly Roman jailer who had fastened Paul's feet in the stocks (Acts 16:14-24). Paul refused to think long about the scars incurred from the beating with rods. God had brought deliverance to himself and to the jailer (Acts 16:25-34). How could he exclude this man from his prayer of thanksgiving and joy? It is clear that Paul was far more sensitive to the mercies of God than to human antagonism.

The apostle's thanksgiving is couched in intimate terms: "I hold you in my heart ... I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:4,7f.). The language is striking precisely because Philippi was almost exclusively Gentile in character. In a city of a quarter of a million inhabitants there could not be found ten Jewish men who were heads of families, the minimum for the establishment of a synagogue. In 3:5 Paul reminds the church of his Pharisaic background. No Pharisee would have embraced a Gentile with the affection Paul here expresses for his converts. This radical change of attitude

reflects the transformation of character and perspective which Paul experienced when confronted by Christ.

While Paul's confidence for the steadfastness of the believers rested on God (1:6), he prayed regularly that their love—for himself and for each other—might increase even more, equipping them to participate in the full harvest of righteousness which God calls for through Jesus Christ (1:9-11). One by one Paul touches on the themes developed throughout the letter: his thanksgiving and affection for the Philippians, his confidence in God's control of all circumstances, the necessity for an increase in love and Jesus Christ as the source of life and fruitfulness.

**Thought** Look again at 1:9-11. What would happen if our prayers were more like this?

## ANXIETY AND PRAYER

### PHILIPPIANS 1:12-14

Being in prison actually helped Paul's sharing of the gospel instead of hindering it.

THE ANXIETY OF the Philippians for Paul's welfare is understandable. His circumstances had changed. No longer was he allowed the relative freedom of living in his own hired house in Rome (Acts 28:16,23,30f.). He had recently come to trial in connection with his appeal to Caesar and was currently in prison awaiting the verdict. The decision, once reached, was beyond appeal; he would either be released or sentenced to death (1:7,13,16,19-26; 2:17). Paul was not deceived about the seriousness of the moment, nor was he unappreciative of his friends' concern (see 4:14). Yet the appropriate response to anxiety was—and remains—a quiet reliance on God expressed through prayer (1:19; 4:6).

Paul has peace of mind, for behind the troubles that have happened to him he can discern the hand and purpose of God. His altered circumstances had actually served to advance the gospel (1:12). During the course of his trial it had become known to the whole imperial guard (Caesar's elite troops) and to all associated with his case that his imprisonment was due to his bold witness for Christ, not for a criminal offense (1:13). Moreover, as a direct result of his defense of the gospel, local believers were proclaiming Christ with greater boldness (1:14). Their number included slaves and freedmen attached to the emperor's residence (4:22). In this turn of events Paul saw the affirmation of

the principle he had expressed earlier in a letter to Rome: “In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). He knew from his own experience that Christians do not live “under the circumstances” but above them!

WHAT MATTERS MOST  
PHILIPPIANS 1:15-18

Sadly, it is possible to be active as a Christian from the wrong motives.

IT IS ALWAYS difficult for Christians to face rebuff and mean attitudes prompted by jealousy and envy by those who belong to the family of faith. Paul was not spared this experience. He was aware that by giving a public account of his ministry in Rome he was entering on the decisive phase of his apostleship (Acts 19:21; 23:11; 27:24). His trek across Asia and Europe was like the path of a bleeding rabbit across newfallen snow. He might have thought that his imprisonment in the imperial city would win for him enthusiastic support and sympathy from the brothers and sisters in Rome. If this was his expectation, he was keenly disappointed.

Paul has just stated that his imprisonment has encouraged a great boldness for public testimony by the believers (1:14). He now acknowledges that there was a diversity of motives behind this new fervor for evangelistic outreach. Some saw in his imprisonment an opportunity to rub salt into his wounds. Paul traces their motivation to a spirit of envy and rivalry (1:15). His language suggests that these fellow believers had worshiped at the shrine of Eris, the goddess of discord, rather than at the altar of Christ. There was in their manner a crass selfishness which sought to direct glory to themselves, thinking that would afflict the apostle (1:17). In others, who had increased their concern to bear public witness to their faith, Paul saw goodwill (1:15)

and a spirit of love which affirmed their partnership with him (1:16; see also 1:5,7). Paul refused to be depressed by this evidence of disunity and immaturity in the church at Rome (1:18). He kept an attitude of being Christcentered and detached from attacks on his own person.

RECKLESS ABANDON

## PHILIPPIANS 1:19-26

Even in the midst of difficulty, to Paul life means Christ.

PAUL'S THOUGHT REVERTS to the anxious concern of the Philippians as they contemplate what it means for him to stand before Caesar's tribunal. What if the verdict should be the sentence of death? Paul answers directly, "I shall rejoice" (1:19). With a supreme confidence in God he affirms his trial will result in his vindication (see also Job 13:18).

It was natural for Paul to think of vindication at this time. He had exercised his right as a citizen to have his case heard in Rome and for two years had undergone house arrest while waiting for his trial (Acts 25:9-12; 26:32; 28:16-19,30f.). Nero's tribunal could exonerate him, confirming that Paul had not offended the temple or Caesar (Acts 25:8). Paul's confidence did not rest in the wisdom or the mercy of the emperor, but in God. For this reason he can speak of vindication (1:19) even when contemplating a sentence of death.

The faithful intercession of his friends and the unfailing presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ assure the apostle that he will face the court unashamed and present his witness for God with all openness (see also 1:7). Paul has no way of knowing how his trial will turn out (see 2:23). His one concern is that Christ shall be magnified through his bodily life (1:20). Paul is convinced that whether he is acquitted and enters on a new phase of ministry (1:22,25f.),

or falls prey to the executioner's ax, there will be a new advance of the gospel.

The ground of such apparent "reckless abandon" is expressed in Paul's triumphant affirmation that he lives his life only in Christ (see also Galatians 2:20). When seen in the perspective of union with Christ, death can only mean the gain of a life of completed fellowship with him (1:21). Paul was a profound thinker, whose thought provides the foundation for much Christian theology. But in this context he appears primarily as the fervent disciple of the crucified and risen Christ. For Paul, as for the Philippians, Christ is the giver and sustainer of life and the object of all his hopes. If he were given his own preference, he would collapse his earthly tent and seek the immediate presence of Christ (1:23). However, the fact that he was still alive was sufficient indication that his apostolic work was not yet complete. Paul, therefore, anticipates a reunion with the church which shall give them ample cause "to glory in Christ Jesus" (1:26). Then, too, Christ shall be magnified.

UNITED WE STAND

## PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

Paul issues a call to remain firm in the face of conflict.

DEEPLY SENSITIVE TO the power of language to stir deep feelings, Paul addresses the Philippians first as Roman citizens and then as Macedonians. Only to Philippi, proud of its colonial status which conferred Roman citizenship on large segments of the population, does the apostle write, “*Fulfill your responsibilities as citizens* who are worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). The italicized words render a verb which occurs infrequently in secular or biblical documents, but always refers to behavior regulated by a law of life. In this context, Paul envisages the entire church as citizens of heaven whose responsibilities are dictated by the central concerns of the gospel (see 3:20f.).

What follows is a call to remain firm in the face of conflict. This conflict may have been associated with emperor worship, for it is known that Philippi was one of the few Greek cities that possessed an order of Roman citizens pledged to the worship of the divine Augustus, while an inscription at the nearby port of Neapolis refers to a municipal magistrate from Philippi who functioned as a high priest of “the divine Claudius.” A flourishing imperial cult would bid for the allegiance of all members of the colony. In the face of such pressures, the Philippians must stand firm with an uncompromising loyalty to Jesus Christ.

The fact of Christians striving side by side, refusing to be frightened by their opponents (1:27-28), evokes the image of the phalanx, the most formidable military device in antiquity. A phalanx consisted of a group of highly disciplined spearmen formed into ranks which were close and deep. As long as the men of the phalanx did not break rank they were virtually invincible and struck terror into their enemies. With the phalanx Philip of Macedon had united the city states of Greece, while his son Alexander the Great had brought the mighty Persian empire to its knees. Philip had founded the city of Philippi, giving it his name. It is unlikely that the Philippians missed Paul's allusion to their glorious past. The same spirit of unity and valor which had infused the phalanx sent out to conquer the world must now be clearly seen by the members of the church as they fight for the faith of the gospel. Appealing to their pride as Macedonians and Romans, Paul calls for the Christians to remain firm so that they may be vindicated by God in a trial of faith similar in character to his own (1:29-30).

MINDING “THE ONE THING”

## PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Paul wants his readers to unite in unselfish love and humility.

PAUL HAS JUST appealed for unity on the ground that conflict makes harmony of purpose essential (1:27-30). He now sustains that appeal, urging unity for its own sake as a distinctive mark of the church of Jesus Christ. 2:1 indicates the reasonableness of Paul’s plea; 2:2 expresses the idea of unity in four different phrases; 2:3-4 illustrate the appeal concretely.

The apostle was confident of his access to the Philippians. He has already spoken of the encouragement he has experienced from Christ through them and of the mutual affection and respect which binds him and his friends (1:3-5,7f.,19f.,25f.). Now he appeals to the church to reconsider their relationship with him and to affirm that he has not misjudged them (2:1).

If they are really open to him and have shared with him the realities of Christian experience, let them now crown his joy by sharing a common attitude (2:2). The believers had not sufficiently grasped the character of church fellowship. The proud individualism of the Greek spirit had been brought into the assembly of faith and each one took with utmost seriousness their own interests (2:4).

Paul calls on the believers to climb down from their thrones and to mind “the one thing.” What is meant by this unusual expression becomes clear in 2:21, where Paul speaks of those who regard their own interests with greater seriousness than they do the interests of Jesus Christ. This was the situation at

Philippi which detracted from Paul's joy. To mind "the one thing" is to bring every thought into captivity to Jesus Christ (2:5; 2 Corinthians 10:5); it is to put the seriousness of "the one thing" above the seriousness with which we regard ourselves (2:3f.). This demands a life of love prompted by Jesus Christ and directed toward Jesus Christ, but shown in our relationships with one another.

That is why Paul speaks of the hindrances to Christian love: self-assertiveness, conceit and selfishness. He calls for a practical demonstration of humility which recognizes others as recipients of grace. Christian humility takes another brother or sister seriously and listens to their point of view as one listens to a superior. Only when people stand on the level ground of mutual respect do they stand together; only then do they recognize in their midst the one Lord to whom each one submits.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST  
PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

Christ's humility is the supreme illustration of humble service.

PAUL FINDS IN the humility demonstrated by Jesus Christ the supreme illustration of what he has been urging. "Let this attitude be yours which is appropriate to those who are in Christ Jesus" (2:5). What follows is a hymn in honor of Christ. Its relevance to what Paul has just been saying lies in the willingness of the Lord to climb down from his throne and to assume the position of a slave who placed the interests of others above his own (see 2:4).

The language of the hymn must have had a great emotional impact on those proud to belong to a Roman colony and possess Roman citizenship. It describes in vivid terms the humiliation of Jesus who assumed the form of a slave and in obedience to God suffered crucifixion, one of the forms of death reserved by Roman law for slaves condemned to die (2:6-8). Although executed in a way that filled every citizen with horror, he was vindicated by God (2:9-11). The last lines of the hymn describe an enthronement in which the church is caught up to share in Christ's triumph. The confession forced from all of the cosmic powers which tyrannize life is none other than that made by believers in baptism, "Jesus Christ is Lord." Urged to acknowledge that Caesar is Lord by the officials of the imperial cult, the church is called by God to live and suffer under the lordship of Christ.

The hymn presents dramatically the redemption on which Paul's moral instructions ultimately depend. The confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord," leads

believers back to their baptism and calls on them to affirm submission to Christ and the others in the fellowship they acknowledged on that occasion. Humility and obedience have real meaning if Christ is Lord.

FEAR AND TREMBLING  
PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

Living the Christian life does not depend solely on us. We are in a unique partnership with God.

PAUL HAS JUST reminded the church that the foundation for all that he has been saying to them about responsible relationships is the humility and obedience to God as shown by Jesus (2:6-8). He now resumes the urgent appeal of 2:1-5. He does so in the firm confidence that his readers are “in Christ Jesus” (2:5) and that they acknowledge the lordship of Christ (2:11). This is made amply clear in the term of address, “beloved.”

The apostle now shows the consequences of their being “in Christ Jesus.” They are to “work out (cultivate, carry out to the goal, and fully complete)” (Amplified Bible) their salvation with “fear and trembling.” Though Paul is absent from the flock (2:12; 1:27), God is present, achieving the fulfillment of his good pleasure (2:13; 1:6). The contrast in the passage, then, is not so much between Christians who work (2:12) and God who works (2:13), as between Paul who is absent (2:12) and God who is present (2:13).

By his word order, Paul indicates that the emphatic words in 2:12 are “fear and trembling.” On each occasion that Paul has brought these words together they are decisive (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:15; Ephesians 6:5). From the parallel contexts it is clear that this expression refers to a basic humility in relationship to others. What Paul here demands of the church is the same humility he called for in 2:3, the same willingness to see something

from another's point of view. All who are in Christ Jesus stand in that vital relationship through grace. The humbling of one person in the presence of another is the work of God who plants within the believer the disposition to approach another person in humility (2:13). The one who approaches another within the congregation with fear and trembling acknowledges that he or she has submitted their own life to the power of God and that all vindication proceeds only from God (1:28).

CHILDREN OF GOD

## PHILIPPIANS 2:14-18

Paul encourages his friends to obey God's commands cheerfully,  
without complaining.

A SUSTAINED CONCERN for humility (see 2:3-12) leads Paul to instruct the believers concerning their responsibility to live in the world as those who have acknowledged the lordship of Christ. The attitudes against which he warns—grumbling and questioning (2:14)—are those which arise from a failure to have the humility appropriate to those who are in Christ. Grumbling or murmuring was the scandal of the wilderness generation (see Exodus 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Numbers 14:2,29; 16:41). Moses had to say about Israel, “they are a perverse and crooked generation” (Deuteronomy 32:5). Paul now turns this around. The Gentile church at Philippi can be blameless and innocent children of God because they follow the path of humility marked out by Jesus Christ (2:15; see 1:10; 2:7f.). This news is “the word of life” to which the believers are to hold fast (2:16). The world is filled with self-centered people who seek their own glory; this is the character of a “crooked and perverse generation.” If the Philippians will order their lives in accordance with Jesus’ humility, Paul will be proud to present them as his “joy and crown” (4:1) when he appears before his Lord on the Day of Christ. The Christians are to live as lights in the world (echoing Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:14-16).

The thought of appearing before Christ brings the apostle back to the real possibility that he will be sentenced to death. He does not shrink from this prospect. He places his death vividly before the eyes of his readers by alluding to a pagan practice which could be observed in Philippi and elsewhere, the custom of pouring a cup of red wine over the sacrifice upon the altar (2:17). The Philippians, as priests, offer their faith to God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation which had shed Paul's blood at Philippi and imprisoned him at Rome. If he is to be put to death, his blood would be the drink offering, consecrating the service of his friends to God. The thought of crowning his service to God through his death was meaningful to Paul (the same thought comes in 2 Timothy 4:6), and provides for him a new ground of joy.

ORIENTED TO THE INTERESTS OF CHRIST

## PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24

The church needs young adults like Timothy who will learn the costly discipline of Christian leadership. Where do you fit into this?

PAUL DEEPLY APPRECIATED the concern which the Philippians had expressed over the outcome of his trial. While he has found an appropriate ground for rejoicing, whether the result be acquittal or the sentence of death (1:19-26; 2:17f.), he is sensitive to the extent with which his friends have shared his sufferings. To put them at ease, he announces that he will send Timothy to Philippi as soon as a verdict is forthcoming (2:23). He adds affectionately that he will be as cheered by news of them as they will be by Timothy's report (2:19).

Timothy had been associated with Paul from the beginning of the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3). He had been commended to the apostle by the Christians both in Lystra and Iconium, and perhaps by prophetic utterance as well (see 1 Timothy 4:14). With the possible exception of Luke, he proved to be Paul's closest companion, working with him in Macedonia, Achaia, Asia and Rome. In several of Paul's letters, Timothy's name is associated with Paul's in the greeting (2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon). While Paul was thoroughly aware of a certain timidity and reticence in Timothy's nature (1 Corinthians 16:11; 1 Timothy 4:12; 2 Timothy 1:7f.), he did not hesitate to entrust to him important missions to Macedonia, Corinth, Ephesus and elsewhere. The apostle's references to his

younger companion are full of affection (see 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-22; 2 Timothy 1:4f.; 4:9,11,13,21).

While Paul is not yet ready to send Timothy, it is clear that he has no other associate in Rome to whom he is willing to entrust this mission (2:20f.). All of the others around him lack the essential quality of a genuine concern for the welfare of the churches. The problem is that they suffer from the same shortsightedness which afflicted many of the Philippians; they allowed their own interests to overshadow the concerns of Jesus Christ (compare 2:21 with 2:4). Paul had no such misgivings concerning Timothy. The readers had firsthand knowledge of the quality of his service for Christ, because he had been actively engaged in the mission to Philippi. Paul would send him as soon as he could see his own situation more clearly, and if possible, he himself will come before long (2:24f.; see also 1:25f.).

GOD'S GAMBLER

## PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30

Paul writes about Epaphroditus as a further example of humble loving service.

THE CHRISTIANS AT Philippi prepared generous gifts for the apostle Paul and commissioned one member of the congregation, Epaphroditus, to deliver them to Rome. The description of him as “your messenger and minister to my need” (2:25) suggests that the church expected their delegate to remain in Rome, caring for the apostle’s personal needs. Now that he was returning to Philippi, Paul is careful to commend him highly for his labor, and to rule out any suspicion that he had failed to fulfill the expectations of the church.

Paul had learned from Epaphroditus about the anxious concern of the Philippians for his welfare, and of the state of affairs within the congregation. He readily acknowledges Epaphroditus’ faithfulness in delivering the gifts (4:18), and in maintaining through his presence the partnership which the Philippians shared with the apostle (1:5,7; 2:25,30).

Paul assumes personal responsibility for sending the messenger to Philippi. The church is solemnly instructed to receive him with all joy and honor. He returns to the congregation not as a shirker from duty but as a wounded soldier who has been honorably discharged after commendable service (2:29-30).

Paul makes a delicate play on the name “Epaphroditus” in 2:30. The name suggests that pagan parents had devoted their son to the service of Aphrodite,

the goddess of love. But she was also the patroness of gamblers. Appian and Plutarch inform us that Roman soldiers and the Greeks generally called the highest cast of the dice “Epaphroditus.” The term spoke of one blessed with gambler’s luck in the throw of the dice because the divine hand was behind it. Alert to this background, Paul says Epaphroditus gambled with his life, but won because God was with him and merciful to him.

The term “risking” in 2:30 is rare, but occurs in an inscription from the Black Sea: “to the ends of the earth witness was borne to him that in the interest of friendship he exposed himself to dangers by his aid in (legal) strife, (taking his client’s cases) even up to the emperors.” The inscription reminds us of this little-known servant of God who assisted Paul and gambled his life to complete what was lacking in the service of the Philippians to the apostle.

## A NEW DISRUPTION

# PHILIPPIANS 3:1-7

Paul describes the Jewish privileges he rejected for the sake of Christ.

THE SOMEWHAT TURBULENT opening of chapter 3 comes as an unexpected surprise. An abrupt change in tone and subject is apparent in the lack of transition between 3:1 and 3:2. The probable explanation for the break in thought is that Paul was interrupted in the course of dictating his letter. Before returning to this task he received reports of the renewed activity of the Judaizers, those who were attempting to put Christians back under the law as a requirement to salvation and who were boasting in their Jewish pedigree. With biting sarcasm Paul applies to them the description they applied to all Gentiles, “the dogs.” They are evildoers whose goal is the mutilation of the flesh, contrary to the Roman laws governing the colony of Philippi (3:2; see also Acts 16:21). In contrast, the Gentile Christians of Philippi constitute the true circumcision which God desires (see Deuteronomy 10:16), since they acknowledge that the ground of their confidence is God alone (3:3).

Paul shows that “according to the flesh” he has more of which to boast than any Judaizer, though to him this is “foolishness” (see 2 Corinthians 11:19,21,23). Among his inherited advantages, Paul lists circumcision (the seal of the covenant), direct Israelite descent, a rich tribal heritage and parents who were concerned to maintain the language and traditions of Judaism. For his part, he had demonstrated an earnest piety and fanatical zeal, patterning his life after the patriarch Phinehas (see Numbers 25:6-13; Psalm 106:30f.).

By choice he joined the Pharisees, and his strict observance of the law would demand the verdict “blameless” in any human court.

But if Paul had once regarded these advantages as “gain” he now categorized them as “loss” (3:7). He does not look on them as something indifferent or unimportant but sees them as detriment, as impediments which stood in the way of his coming to faith in Christ. They had given to him a false sense of security and had prevented him from sensing God’s indictment on his goodness (see Isaiah 64:6). This is what Paul—and every Christian who contemplates the former objects of devotion and way of life—is forced to recognize for the sake of Christ.

VITAL UNION WITH CHRIST  
PHILIPPIANS 3:8-11

Paul writes about the immense privilege of knowing Jesus Christ personally.

THE UNION OF the Christian with Christ lies at the heart of Paul's godliness. What this involves is made clear by the present section. Paul has experienced a radical change of values. He now realizes not merely the worthlessness of what he used to value, but also the loss which he suffered through a false sense of security. For him the knowledge of Christ surpasses all other things, and for the love of Christ he has suffered the loss of "all things," specifically, his "goodness" in which he had boasted (3:4-6). This radical reassessment of his values was a direct result of the irresistible intervention of Christ in his life when the Lord attached Paul to himself. From that moment on, Paul was aware of being entirely bound to Christ. The fanatical persecutor of the church (3:6) became the devoted disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ who now acknowledges that the one thing worth possessing is the knowledge of Christ (3:8-10).

The knowledge to which Paul refers is not intellectual but personal, intimate and practical. It flows from the vital union of the believer with Christ in which the life of Christ is given to the Christian through the Holy Spirit. Paul can speak of Christ in the believer or of the believer's life in Christ to express this reality.

Two consequences which flow from this union are brought home to the Philippians. First, one who knows Christ in this manner has abandoned all efforts to establish their own righteousness or to achieve the status of “blamelessness” (see 3:6). Such a person is content to receive a righteousness which God gives only to those who have surrendered to God’s judgment on their goodness (3:9). This collapse of self-confidence is the essence of faith from a human point of view; it is an expression of confidence in the achievement of Jesus Christ alone.

Secondly, the intense desire to know Christ which flows from this union demands an identification with Christ in his resurrection and sufferings (3:10). The order in which Paul states these aspects of Christ’s experience is remarkable. We are to experience the power of his resurrection in order to participate in the sufferings which were laid upon Christ (see also 1 Corinthians 15:30f.; 2 Corinthians 4:10,16). Paradoxically, this preparation for sharing the experience of Christ’s death, which is achieved through the instilling of the power of his resurrection, leads full circle back to the experience of resurrection power itself (3:11). This is the mystery and the glory of life in Christ.

THE DEDICATION OF A RACER  
PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

Are we preoccupied with our past, or do we, with Paul, constantly reach ahead to follow Christ?

THIS SECTION CONTINUES to develop the line of thought set out in 3:7-11: the apostle thinks of himself as a contestant in the stadium (see also 2:16; 1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7f.). He is a “runner” who speeds toward the goal with outstretched, but empty, hands. Although he knows himself to be thoroughly committed to the race, he has not yet attained anything. He therefore strains every muscle to the demands of the course and sprints toward the prize which is still before him. What sustains the apostle in a life of unbroken “running” is the divine constraint in the call of Christ (3:12). On the road to Damascus the exalted Lord laid hold of Paul and made himself known to his athlete as “Lord” (Acts 9:3-6,17). He filled Paul with the power of his resurrection and enrolled him in the fellowship of his sufferings (see also Acts 9:15f.). Paul is content with that. He finds within himself a new kind of zeal. Formerly he had persecuted the church (3:6); now he pursues the fulfillment of God’s plan for his life (3:12) and the prize of the resurrection, “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:14; see also 3:10).

The suggestion that Paul had not yet attained anything provokes in his readers (and us) a protest. Is he not the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles? Do not his knowledge, his work, his clear successes, indicate he has already reached many goals? Paul remains firm: “Not that I have already obtained

this” (3:12). With resolute will Paul refuses to look back on the part of the course which now lies behind him (3:13). To speak now of achievements would be to return to the attitude of 3:4-6, which Paul has renounced. He will rely on a new surge of strength, and race on toward the goal in the confidence that responding to the call of Christ carries its own prize (3:14). Jesus Christ is not only the beginning of his life, but also its present reality and its future goal.

Having begun with a threefold “beware” (3:2), Paul now urges the Philippians to consider the relevance for their lives of what he has said in 3:4-14. In the conditions of existence under which Paul lives and labors they are to see the conditions which govern their own existence (3:15). A man becomes conformed to Christ, not as in the Greek culture by a dedication ceremony, but by work, struggle and suffering. While there may be different opinions regarding the details of what this involves, Paul is confident that both he and his readers are on a path which has, in principle, taken the direction marked out in 3:4-14. He urges them to continue in that same direction.

A HEAVENWARD PERSPECTIVE

## PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21

As Christian pilgrims in this world, we can confidently say, "The best is yet to be!"

HAVING SET OUT Jesus Christ as the supreme object of Christian longing, Paul now makes himself a secondary example to the church (3:17; see also 4:9). He calls the church to follow him in considering as loss all that the flesh finds as a reason for boasting (3:4-7), in refusing a righteousness of their own (3:9), in forgetting what is behind and racing on toward the goal (3:13f.). In pointing to what the believers may see in him, Paul is in fact pointing toward Christ, toward the evidence of the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (3:9f.). There is no presumptuousness in commending such an example to the church.

The urgency which attaches itself to Paul's plea arises from the threat to faith posed by those who pretend to march under the banner of faith (3:13,19). Paul is referring once again to the Judaizers who prompted his heated outburst in 3:2. The cross of Christ stands radically opposed to all religious and ethical presumption which seeks to achieve by works what can only be given through faith. The enemies of the cross of Christ are all those who resist the grace of God and refuse to walk the way of "loss" described in 3:4-14. In their insistence on circumcision, Paul sees a frontal attack on the sufficiency of the cross of Christ and an affront to the wisdom of God. Despising the cross, despising faith and its righteousness, they will

experience destruction (3:19). The phrases which follow in 3:19 allude to circumcision and a reliance on the flesh (see also 3:2f.).

In contrast to the “enemies of the cross” who set their minds on “earthly things” Christians have been constituted a citizenship in heaven (3:20f.). The metaphor came readily to Paul’s mind since he had seen Jewish communities in many of the larger cities of Asia. His point is that Christians are not citizens of this world, but resident foreigners in the world, and their confidence rests, not in the world’s wisdom, but in the wisdom of God. With patience they await the triumphant return of their Sovereign, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will radically transform the body, not by the marks of circumcision but by “the power of his resurrection” (see also 3:10f.).

**Thought** There is power available in Christ to live a life worthy of imitation.

A DELICATE PASTORAL PROBLEM

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-3

Nothing else is written about Euodia and Syntyche apart from what is written here. What might history's one-sentence verdict be on our lives?

WHILE CONFLICT MAKES unity essential, unity is important for its own sake as evidence of a common attitude that binds the church together in Christ. This was very much on Paul's mind. He had experienced disunity in the church at Rome (1:15-17). Now a flagrant instance of disaffection threatened the unity of the church at Philippi. With this in view Paul prayed for an increase of love and the approval of what is excellent, that the church may be found blameless at Christ's coming (1:9f.). He expected Christians to "stand firm in one spirit ... contending side by side" for the gospel (1:27). He urged a demonstration of "the same attitude" (2:2). This precise language recurs in 4:1-3, where the apostle makes a pointed personal appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. With the warmest affection Paul greets the church and urges them to "stand firm thus in the Lord" (4:1). He appeals to the two women to "agree in the Lord" (4:2).

Paul's method in dealing with this delicate congregational problem is worthy of notice. Delaying until the last moment to name the two women, the apostle prepared for this appeal by a sensitive use of language in chapter 2. His appeal to avoid selfishness or conceit, but to regard others in genuine humility (2:3), finds supreme illustration in Christ Jesus who refused to grasp

equality with God, but assumed the form of a slave, and in deep humility became obedient to death (2:6-8). The plea to extend one's concern beyond one's own interests to those of others (2:4) finds support in the example of Timothy, a man "genuinely anxious for your welfare" (2:20-23), and Epaphroditus, who risked his life to serve Paul on behalf of the Philippians (2:29f.). Paul's point is clear: selfish vying for personal rights and honors is inconsistent with advancing the cause of Christ. Finally, Paul requests a close friend to reconcile the two women (4:3). At each point the reason for the appeal is the rightness of such conduct "in the Lord" (4:1f.). Paul could not ignore the breach of unity within the congregation, but his manner of confronting those involved exhibits Christian concern and tactfulness.

JOY, GENTLENESS, THANKSGIVING

## PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Worry pulls us about in different directions. Prayer sets us thinking in one direction.

PAUL WAS GROWING old. The sufferings he had endured had certainly taken their toll (see 2 Corinthians 4:8ff.; 6:4f.; 11:23ff.). Yet, for all that, he had not lost his sense of the vibrancy of life. As he dictates this letter the words “joy” and “rejoice” come to his lips repeatedly (see 1:4,18; 2:17f.; 3:1; 4:4,10). They express a bold, defiant “nevertheless” to all of the disappointments and hardships of the Christian life. The command, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4) sounds a keynote to the entire letter. Christians can rejoice at all times and under all circumstances precisely because the source of their joy is “the Lord.”

“Gentleness” or “reasonableness” (4:5) was a quality well regarded by many in the imperial period, as shown by the inscriptions. It speaks of a gentleness which arises out of strength rather than weakness, a fairmindedness which refuses to harbor resentment but extends love and understanding toward another. In the Greek Psalter used at Philippi the term was used to express God’s readiness to forgive (Psalm 86:5). We can have this kind of gentleness, Paul states, because “the Lord is at hand.” The words constituted a greeting which Christians exchanged with one another. Here they are a sober reminder that this was no time to quarrel because someone

had failed to recognize one's worth. Euodia and Syntyche needed to understand this!

The final two verses resume the theme of 1:12-26 and 2:17-31. The anxiety to which Paul refers (4:6) is specifically the concern for Paul in the face of trouble and uncertainty which the Philippians had expressed through Epaphroditus. The appropriate response to anxiety is a quiet reliance on God expressed through prayer with thanksgiving. The ground of thanksgiving is the certain knowledge that God is aware of our needs even before we express them (see also 4:19). He knows that the song of praise will push anxiety from the heart. The anxious heart is the unguarded heart, but the divine response to thanksgiving is the peace which God possesses, which anchors the heart securely in Jesus Christ.

**Thought** Gentleness is strength held back.

THE CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD

PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9

What do you fill your mind with?

IF THE PHILIPPIANS had a heavenly citizenship (3:20), it was also true that they were resident foreigners in the world. Since their conversion to Christ they had found the world to be an arena of conflict and suffering (1:29). It posed a threat to life and provoked anxiety (2:27,30; 4:6). Its people justified the description “crooked and perverse” (2:15). There was another side to reality in the world, however, to which Paul directs their attention in 4:8. The term “whatever” must not be watered down or limited to aspects of thought and life which are distinctively Christian. Paul commands the believers to recognize everything that is humanly true and good in contemporary society as a focal point for thoughtful consideration. Elements of truth, purity, beauty and moral excellence in culture provide control and direction even for the pagan. They are to be appreciated as expressions of God’s common grace by which he restrains chaos and enriches human life. When the world knows what is good, the Christian must know it as well. Paul therefore commands, “Think about these things.”

Complementing God’s common grace is the deposit of Christian truth given to the church as an expression of his special grace. Paul defines this deposit in terms of the tradition which the Philippians had received from his teaching ministry and had seen embodied in his personal ministry (4:9). The world frequently knows what is good but fails to do what is good. What the

Philippians have learned from Paul is that knowledge of the good demands performance of the good, because only then is this a knowledge of God. When the apostle commands, “Do these things,” he is echoing his earlier call to “hold true to what we have attained” (3:16) and to imitate his example (3:17). These constitute the conditions under which Christians may walk with the God of peace in the world.

**Thought** Consider what you watch on television and the internet in the light of these verses.

SUFFICIENCY THROUGH CHRIST

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

Have you learned the secret of being content in any situation you are in—in abundance or need?

THE LETTER DRAWS to a conclusion as it had opened, with a further acknowledgement of the gifts he has received from Epaphroditus (4:18f.), and an expression of deep affection for the believers at Philippi. Here, perhaps more than elsewhere, the letter has many small touches which convey Paul's involvement with the life of this church and his meaningful use of language drawn from a pagan environment but bridled for the service of Christ.

Paul has great joy that the deep feelings of the Philippians for him have "blossomed" once more (4:10). The reason for his joy is that they had found an opportunity to help him make an offering to God (4:18)! He cannot regard their gifts as supplying something necessary which he lacked because he has not been aware of any need (4:11-12). Employing language which his readers would appreciate, Paul states that he has attained what the philosophers have been seeking. He is "self-sufficient," refusing to be led astray either by wealth or by poverty. Changing the wording, Paul asserts he has been "initiated into the mystery" of facing every condition of existence—to be full or to be hungry, to have abundance or nothing. These appeals to familiar thoughts in any great Greek city have a certain playfulness to them. But the apostle quickly qualifies his affirmations by a reference to Christ which has

no parallel among the philosophers or those initiated in the mysteries: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (4:13). Paul’s self-sufficiency is not Stoic apathy or cynical resolution to the realities of human life but a firm reliance on the Lord who always takes thought for his needs (see also 4:19). The joy, confidence and sufficiency which he experiences flow from his vital union with Jesus Christ and enable the apostle to rise above all outward circumstances.

A GENEROUS OFFERING TO GOD

## PHILIPPIANS 4:14-20

Do we really believe God will supply all our needs (but not our personal whims)?

FROM THE ACCOUNT in Acts chapter 16 one might judge that the church in Philippi consisted of a few women, the Roman jailer and his family, and some few others. Such an initial impression is undoubtedly mistaken. The work had been sufficiently advanced to justify leaving Luke at Philippi to provide pastoral leadership to the young church. Continued hostility on the part of significant elements in the city failed to intimidate the believers. In the weeks which followed they twice contributed to the support of Paul and his companions in Thessalonica (4:15f.). When the apostle moved on to Corinth they sent aid to him again (2 Corinthians 11:8-9). While Paul commends all the churches of Macedonia for their eager support of the collection on behalf of the impoverished believers in Jerusalem, what he says of them to the Corinthians was true preeminently of the Christians at Philippi (2 Corinthians 8:2-5). Their generosity repeatedly refreshed Paul and sealed their participation in his labors for the gospel (4:15; see also 1:5). Paul can rejoice in their partnership with him precisely because a gift brings superabundant blessing to the giver (4:10,14-17,19).

Paul again introduces the language of accounting (“partnership ... giving and receiving,” 4:15), as in 3:7. Now with respect to their latest contribution he exclaims, “I have received full payment, and more” (4:18). The words “I

have received full payment” translate a single Greek term found hundreds of times on commercial papyri to indicate that an obligation has been met in full. The commercial language is quickly overshadowed, however, by the adoption of words referring to sacrifice. Paul has lifted up before God the gifts offered to him as a peace offering intended for the Lord. He recognized that the affection directed toward him was ultimately directed toward God. The acceptance of the offering will be verified in the gracious response of God, who will meet every need of the Christians in that same generous manner that Paul’s needs have always been met (4:19).

Paul has not once used the word “thanks” in expressing his thanksgiving. Rather he treats the gifts as something especially gratifying because they represent an offering well-pleasing to God. In spite of the restraint, Paul emerges as a man of affection who was able to win and hold the affection of others.

CHRISTIAN GREETINGS  
PHILIPPIANS 4:21-23

How close is your fellowship with other Christians?

THE LETTER DRAWS to a close with the conveyance of greetings and a final blessing. Paul asks for his greeting to be extended to each member of the community (4:21). His use of the term “saint” in the singular is unique. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is customary to use the plural, as does Paul in 4:22 (“all the saints”). What is even more striking is Paul’s command to greet each Christian “in Christ Jesus.” Even greetings must reflect the sphere of life in which Christians move; they should breathe the spirit of Christ. The affection for one another expressed in the exchange of greetings between Paul and his friends is rooted in the vital union which they share in Christ. The implication is that strained relationships, like those between Euodia and Syntyche, can be improved only as the relationship between each believer and their Lord is strengthened.

To his own greeting Paul adds the greeting of certain brothers and sisters who are with him. Presumably this designates those who were associated with leadership in the church at Rome, including Timothy, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus surnamed Justus, Luke and Demas (see Colossians 4:10f.,14). Finally, the entire church at Rome sends its greetings as well, including members of “Caesar’s household.” One of the certain tokens of the advance of the gospel of which Paul had assured the Philippians (1:12) was that a number of slaves and freedmen attached to the imperial residence had come

to faith. Whether their conversion was a direct result of the removal of Paul from the house he rented to a cell in the praetorium is uncertain, but the apostle has had contact with them and takes special pleasure in conveying their greeting. He then adds in his own hand the prayer for grace (4:23).

INTRODUCTION  
COLOSSIANS  
WILLIAM L. LANE

THE FIRST CENTURY AD was an age of syncretism. The essence of syncretism is the tendency to identify deities, rites, observances and interpretations of one people or region with those of another. People did not hesitate to alter or modify their religious orientation by adopting elements of belief or expressions of piety originally quite foreign or distinct from their own. Judged from the religious and social perspective of the Roman world, Christianity represented merely another new cult. Particularly in Asia Minor attempts were made to accommodate its truth to Greek religious philosophy. Faced with this threat of syncretism, a primary concern of the apostle Paul became the integrity of the gospel. This is expressed pointedly in Colossians, which was written at a time of crisis when the nature of salvation was being obscured by false teaching.

## CHRISTIANITY IN THE LYCUS VALLEY

# COLOSSIANS 1:1-2

How faithful are you?

THE LETTER TO the Colossians was sent from Rome to the Lycus Valley in the old Phrygian region of Asia Minor. To speak of the Lycus Valley is to think of three centers whose fortunes were largely intertwined: Laodicea and Hierapolis, both important and wealthy cities, and the more ancient town of Colossae whose former glory was now eclipsed by its neighbors (see 2:1; 4:13,16). Probably Colossae was the smallest center to which Paul wrote a letter.

The apostle's earlier letters are addressed formally "to the church ..." or "to the churches" (see 1 and 2 Thessalonians; Galatians). In Colossians, the address is to the saints and brothers and sisters. This can hardly be accidental. In each instance Paul is writing to churches where he was personally unknown (see 2:1). The naming of those Paul is writing to as "saints [God's holy people] and faithful brothers and sisters" permits a more personal and less official greeting to a people with whom Paul had become acquainted only through oral report (1:4,9). The absence of personal contact between Paul and the church also explains the qualification of the term "apostle" with the important phrase "by the will of God." Paul intends to instruct the believers concerning the character of Christian truth and the salvation they enjoy. The opening lines establish both his authority to do so and his openness to his readers.

THE MINISTRY OF EPAPHRAS

## COLOSSIANS 1:3-8

The gospel of God is powerful and life-changing.

THE MAN RESPONSIBLE for bringing Christianity to the Lycus Valley was Epaphras, a native of Colossae (4:12). Not only had the Colossians first heard the gospel from him (1:6-7), but he had labored diligently at Laodicea and Hierapolis as well (4:13). His own initial contact with the Christian message probably can be traced to the time of Paul's extended Ephesian ministry. As a direct result of his daily teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, Luke reports, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). This wide extension of the gospel may have taken place as Paul's disciples were instructed by him and then returned to evangelize their own native towns.

This supposition explains why Paul writes of Epaphras that "he is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf" (1:7). Epaphras had preached the gospel at Colossae as Paul's representative. It also explains Paul's dependence on Epaphras for his information concerning the Christians of the Lycus Valley (see 1:4,8f.; 2:1) and the apostle's assumption of authority over a church with which he had little personal acquaintance. While Paul was unable to visit all the congregations established during the course of his Ephesian ministry he had a vital interest in them. On this understanding the church at Colossae was established in the period AD 52-55.

Perhaps five years after the founding of the church, Epaphras sought out Paul in Rome to inform him of developments within the congregation. Although the work had advanced (1:6), a type of teaching had been introduced which, if unchecked, could only obscure the character of salvation and reduce Christianity to an unwholesome asceticism. To judge from the relative mildness of Paul's response (in contrast to the tone assumed in Galatians), the error had not yet subverted the gospel.

Apart from the letter written in anguish to the Galatians, all Paul's letters begin with a word of thanksgiving (1:3-5). Here the specific ground of thanksgiving is the trio of Christian virtues: faith, love and hope. Paul had been informed by Epaphras concerning the faith of the Colossians and the love they had for other believers. The third element is introduced by Paul himself because it has direct bearing on what he wishes to say to the church. An adequate basis for hope is found in the gospel, which Paul defines as "the word of truth" (1:5), anticipating his characterization of the false teaching as "human tradition" and "empty deceit" (2:8). The growth of the gospel among those who have received it, and its penetration into the whole world (1:6), offer proof of its truth and sufficiency to satisfy the deepest yearning of the human heart.

**Thought** When Christians proclaim the good news of Christ without reserve, who can say how far that proclamation will spread?

ENTRANCE ALREADY

## COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

When you live in a kingdom flooded with light, in which God's own Son is Ruler, joy and thankfulness are always possible.

THE BURDEN OF Paul's prayer was that his readers might know the riches they possessed through the gospel, and might wait with patience and joy until their life which is hidden with Christ appears with him (see 3:1). One by one the apostle touches on the beliefs that the false teachers had taken and used as a goad toward rigorism in the life of believers: "filled with the knowledge of his will," "all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9), "a life worthy of the Lord," "fully pleasing to him," "increasing in the knowledge of God" (1:10). Paul's desire for the church is not less, but he also prayed that they might experience *joy* and *thanksgiving* (1:11-12), two emphases which were conspicuously absent from the negative restrictions the congregation had begun to accept. In contrast to submission to ascetic practices in order to qualify for visions (see 2:18), Paul urges joyful thanksgiving to the Father "who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (1:12; see also 1:5). In contrast to rigid self-discipline as the means of attaining perfection during one's lifetime (see 2:17), Paul delights in the God who has already "transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (1:13). The apostle's image is satisfying, for in the classical writers the verb signifies the removal of whole communities from one district to another.

Formerly the Colossians were enslaved in the land of darkness. But God rescued them and transplanted them into a kingdom which is flooded with light. The king is God's dear Son who forgave their sins and confirmed their freedom (1:14). In this way, before coming to any explicit reference to the Colossian error, Paul indicates that Christians have already experienced what the false teachers had argued was available only through a life of rigorous self-denial. Believers do not have to struggle to gain entrance to their inheritance; God has already graciously provided that entrance through his Son.

**Thought** Do you have the courage to pray like this for other people?

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST  
COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

Is Christ first in everything in our lives?

TO INTRODUCE THE heart of his teaching about Jesus Christ, Paul employs the language of worship. He draws on the fragments of a hymn that may have been familiar to Christians of the Lycus Valley. The hymn consists of two stanzas built in a parallel way:

Strophe 1 (1:15-18a)

*He is the image* of the invisible God,  
*the firstborn* of all creation;  
*for in him* all things were created.

Strophe 2 (1:18b-20)

*He is the beginning*,  
*the firstborn* from the dead ...  
*for in him* all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

The first stanza reflects on Jesus' relationship to God and the world; the second reflects on his relationship to salvation.

The parallel statements may be viewed as propositions acknowledged in the worship of the church, to which Paul adds his own commentary. First, Christ is the image of God before people: Christ reveals the Father. The

contrast is between Christ who is seen and God who is unseen, even in the visions of the false teachers. The opening line of the hymn therefore anticipates Paul's strong statement on the incarnation (2:9). Second, Christ is described as the Lord of all creation. The term "firstborn" stresses uniqueness rather than priority in time (see also Psalm 89:27). Jesus is the "firstborn" because he is the agent of creation and the heir of creation. The relationship of the Son to all created existence is that of the Lord to subjects. The stress in the first stanza therefore falls on the sovereignty of Christ.

In the second stanza Paul is concerned to establish the relationship of the Son to the church. The relationship is that of head over the body (1:18). In 1:18, "head" means properly "leader." The statements that follow speak of Christ's preeminence and of his sovereign act of reconciliation (1:18,20). Paul sets before the Colossians the primacy of Christ over the whole church. The false teachers, in joining to the gospel an insistence on human devices for achieving an advanced spirituality, have failed to submit to Christ as head. They have substituted their wisdom for his. As a result they were in danger of becoming truncated, "not holding fast to the head," and so losing the life that he supplies. What is required is a return to worship in which the church, in humble adoration, acknowledges that Jesus Christ is supreme "in everything" (1:18).

CHRIST THE RECONCILER  
COLOSSIANS 1:21-23

Do you believe Christ can meet the separated and lonely parts of your personality, and link them with a holy God in joyful reconciliation?

PAUL HAS JUST affirmed that Jesus Christ is the agent of God's magnificent work of creation. The orders of angels of which the false teachers spoke—thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities—owed their existence to him (1:16). As the keystone to all created existence, Christ alone prevents the return of all things to a state of chaos (1:17). The apostle then directed the gaze of his readers to a moment beyond time when Christ will have achieved the reconciliation of all things to himself (1:20). But Paul does not allow his readers to become lost in the depths of reflection. He points them concretely to Golgotha and the shed blood of Jesus, the Lord of life. Nothing less than this is the cost of the reconciliation he has achieved.

In the verses which immediately follow, Paul moves from the language of worship to the worshipping community itself (1:21f.). The cosmic achievement of Christ found its practical outworking in the Lycus Valley in the reconciliation of the Colossians. The object of Christ's reconciling action "on earth" (1:20) were people who knew in themselves a profound sense of separation from God and from one another (1:21). Their evil deeds merely intensified the hostility they expressed through their style of life. Modern existential humanity feels penetrated by Paul's language precisely because this is their experience. The violence of the language which follows, locating

the moment and point of reconciliation in “his body of flesh by his death” (1:22), is calculated to point beyond doctrine to the reality of death on the cross (1:20).

The purpose of Christ’s reconciling action is to achieve a new creation (see 3:10), in which people who once were “separated” may know the bold approach to God of those who are “holy”; those who were “hostile in mind” may know in their relationships to others a blamelessness, and those who practiced “evil deeds” may be scrutinized by God and people and pronounced “irreproachable.” All of this, Paul affirms, Christ will achieve. But it is the responsibility of the Colossians to be rooted in faith, not shifting from that hope of the gospel for which Paul had thanked God (1:3,5) to some lesser hope offered by local teachers (1:23).

SUFFERING IN SERVICE

COLOSSIANS 1:24-28

Suffering endured for Jesus is the easiest kind to bear, since he shares the burden with you.

WHEN PAUL DICTATED the letter to the Colossians he was in chains (4:10,18), yet he found an occasion of joy in the sufferings he endured since he was bearing in his flesh the “afflictions of Christ” (1:24). The apostle took seriously that the afflictions were really Christ’s because they were ultimately directed against him. Every time he had scourged a Christian it was as if he had laid the lash on the back of Christ (Acts 9:4). Now he is whipped, imprisoned and exhibited as a spectacle, and Paul rejoices that he may bear these indignities on behalf of his Lord; he completes what is lacking in the suffering to which he has been appointed as an apostle (Acts 9:16). He participates in “the beginning of sufferings” (Matthew 24:8) which must precede the triumphant return of the Lord. Since the entire church will share in this triumph, Paul’s sufferings are “for your sake” and for the benefit of the church at large. The term “afflictions of Christ” is never associated with the redemption of Jesus on the cross. It speaks, rather, of those sufferings which Paul bears because he represents and serves Jesus Christ.

Paul was specifically the apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15f.; 2:7-9). He rejoiced that the message with which he was entrusted was one which centered in hope: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27; see also 1:5,23). He labels this news a “mystery,” aware that the false teachers were offering

mysteries of their own to those who would listen. But Paul quickly qualifies this term as a secret which has been revealed by God to the entire church. It is the open secret that God has chosen to dwell in the hearts of Gentiles, who had no claim on him, through Jesus Christ, the source and goal of all hope. In contrast to spiritual advance for the few urged by the false teachers (2:16-18), the intention of Christ and of his minister is that everyone may be presented to God irreproachable and mature (1:28; see also 4:12).

CHRIST, THE WISDOM OF GOD  
COLOSSIANS 1:29–2:3

Paul opens his heart to unite and encourage his readers.

THE GREEK TERM from which the word “asceticism” comes refers primarily to training or exercise appropriate to an athlete. The derived meaning is the discipline that is necessary for engagement in a spiritual contest (see Acts 24:16). In contrast to the false asceticism promoted by slogans at Colossae (2:21), Paul displays the true “asceticism” of the athlete of God. Though confined to a cell, he engages in an arena existence (1:24,29; 2:1; see also 4:12f.). Prayer, thought and wrestling with issues consume his energies on behalf of all the churches, but particularly those in which he has not been directly involved. The specific mention of Laodicea (2:1) anticipates the apostle’s command to send his letter to that community (4:16). Apparently the errors at Colossae had penetrated the church at Laodicea.

The purposes which move Paul to his exceptional labors are expressed in terms that echo the prayer of 1:9f. (2:2-3). The condition for realizing this goal is the unity of the church. It is as believers are “knit together in love” that God is pleased to unveil still more of his open secret. In 1:27 Paul had defined “the mystery of God” as Christ in the midst of the Gentiles achieving the fruit of his reconciling action on the cross. Here he defines that mystery as “Christ,” the embodiment of “the wisdom of God.” In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (especially Proverbs 8:22ff.), God’s wisdom was personified and it had four qualities:

1. Wisdom was with God in the beginning and functioned as creator (see Colossians 1:16).
2. Wisdom sustains the creation, acting on God's behalf on the earth (see 1:17).
3. Wisdom reveals God to people (see 1:15).
4. Wisdom reconciles people and makes them friends with God (see 1:20).

Paul did not hesitate to designate Jesus as “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24,30) and to interpret his functions in these categories (Colossians 1:15-20). Now, with a view to the speculations of the Colossian teachers, he reminds his readers that the true source of wisdom and knowledge is a deeper personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. If there is a secret to be known, it will be known only through a knowledge of him.

GROWTH IN CHRIST  
COLOSSIANS 2:4-7

There is an immense difference between a passive faith and an active rest in Christ.

THE APOSTLE HAD just pointed to the infinite treasures of the truth of God available to the believer in Christ (2:3). His purpose in doing so was to prevent anyone from deceiving the Colossians into thinking that something beyond their life in Christ was necessary to complete their salvation. For the first time in the letter Paul makes a direct allusion to the false teaching. He labels it a delusion couched in plausible, fine-sounding arguments (2:4). The new doctrine was supported by appeals to its plausibility; the apostle exposes it as false. They would be led astray from the truth by false reasoning.

What prompts Paul to warn the believers of deception is his own feeling for them. He is with them “in spirit” and rejoices in the steadfastness of their faith in Christ (2:5). If the military terminology may be pressed, the apostle envisages the Christians as soldiers arranged in orderly formation prepared to support an unbroken front of faith. They had received Christ Jesus as Lord through the apostolic teaching which Epaphras had faithfully proclaimed. Now Paul pleads for them to live their lives as those who were united with Christ through faith and who derive their own life from his (2:6). This thought is expanded by means of the mixed metaphors of a living organism sending its roots into the subsoil, and a building nearing completion as it rises from an indestructible foundation (2:7). The first metaphor suggests that faith

must be living, sustained by the life of Christ himself; the second, that faith must experience growth toward perfection. Faith is thought of as an active principle which establishes the Christian in his relationship to Christ. Paul's response to the plausible, fine-sounding arguments is an appeal for continued growth in the Christian life experienced through the word of truth conveyed in the apostolic tradition (see 1:5f.), and abundant thanksgiving.

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST'S DEATH

COLOSSIANS 2:8-15

Have you participated in both Christ's death and his triumph?

THIS PARAGRAPH IS one of the most important in the whole letter. After a warning not to be captured by false tradition (2:8), it offers to the readers an incisive statement of the importance of Christ's death for them (2:9-14), and affirms the cosmic extent of his triumph (2:15).

Paul's warning resumes the interrupted thought of 2:4 and vividly depicts the danger which the church is in danger of falling into; the false teachers are slave-raiders who would carry the believers off physically (2:8).

"Philosophy" is probably the designation used by the advocates of the new teaching to commend their distinctive emphases. In the first century the term denotes a way of life rather than intellectual pursuit, and is frequently similar to the term "salvation." Paul uses the word derogatorily, describing the teaching it embraced as "empty deceit," the product of human cleverness and demonic inspiration (see 2:20; Galatians 6:3,9). It reflected on cosmic powers hostile to Christ and entailed enslavement rather than freedom.

What was promised in the offer of "philosophy" was "fullness of life" (see 2:10). The Colossians already enjoyed this in Christ (2:9-10)! What the believers needed was not new teaching but a return to the tradition (see 2:6-7). Paul therefore echoes the great hymn in honor to Christ which he had introduced in 1:15ff. Because the totality of the Godhead lives in Christ as it

was embodied in him at the incarnation (2:9), there is no reason to seek God or power of life elsewhere.

The completion sought by the Colossians is already their possession “in him” (2:10). It is probable that the local teachers urged circumcision as a preliminary rite to the visions which constituted perfection (2:11,17f.). Paul insists that believers have already experienced enrollment in the covenant fellowship through the circumcision of Christ, a description of Christ’s death (2:11; see also 1:22; 2:15). He lists three benefits which come to believers from Christ’s death: the removal of spiritual separation (symbolized by literal uncircumcision, Ephesians 2:11f.); the enjoyment of the resurrection life of Christ; and the forgiveness of trespasses (2:13).

What this forgiveness entailed for Christ, the apostle makes vividly clear through the image of a statement of indebtedness personally signed by the debtor (see also Philemon 19). We had clearly failed to fulfill our obligation to God and deserved the penalty of death. But Christ assumed our debt and discharged it by his death; he canceled our signature on the bond by nailing it to his cross (2:14), and triumphed completely. Participation with Christ in his triumph is incompatible with submission to a teaching which owes its inspiration to the defeated cosmic powers.

THE FALSE TEACHING  
COLOSSIANS 2:16-19

We need to watch out for contemporary substitutes that may tempt us away from genuine renewal in Christ.

THE SOLE SOURCE for reconstructing the false teaching found at Colossae is Paul's letter. Certain aspects of the error may be readily identified. From Judaism came an insistence on circumcision (2:11), legal ordinances (2:14), food and drink regulations, and observances of the festival calendar (2:16). The rigorous asceticism which found expression in the regulations of 2:21 may or may not be Jewish in origin. The designation "philosophy" (2:8) and the use of catchwords like "knowledge" (*gnosis*), "wisdom" and "mystery" suggest a syncretistic religious outlook. There were important colonies of Jews both at Laodicea and Hierapolis. That they had been penetrated by religious syncretism is suggested by inscriptions and rabbinic statements calling into question the character of Phrygian Judaism.

The key to understanding the precise nature of what was being taught at Colossae lies in the interpretation of Paul's difficult reference to "self-abasement" (humility), "the worship of angels" and "visions" (2:18). In early Christian literature the term "humility" could have special reference to fasting; this is appropriate to 2:16-23 where there is reference to food and drink. Understood in a comprehensive sense, the word refers to all the elements of rigorous self-discipline implied in 2:16-23. Visionary exaltation, encouraged by fasting and severity to the body, was widely known in the

Greek world. Fasting and the heavenly journey by which the seer is given entrance into the sphere of the angels is a common theme in Jewish apocryphal literature and in certain Gnostic texts. What was seen upon entrance into heaven was the worship performed by the angels. Without exception, the works which speak of visionary entrance into the heavenly sphere describe the highest office of angels and humans as the adoration of God. Accordingly, 2:18 speaks of fasting and rigorous self-discipline in order to experience a vision of the heavenly sphere. “The worship of angels” does not mean the veneration of angelic creatures by people but rather the worship directed toward God by the angels. This vision of the heavenly liturgy and its accompanying glory was designated “a shadow of what is to come” (2:17). By rigorous asceticism, the false teachers contended, people could receive in their lifetime a vision of the angelic service into which they would enter—a vision others would see only after death. It was this prospect which appeared so attractive.

At the heart of the Colossian error was ignorance of the redemption Christ had achieved. It was felt that the Christian could enter into the inheritance of the saints only by a grim struggle. As Christ put off the body (1:22; 2:11), the Colossians sought to subdue their bodies with severity. As Christ assumed his place far above all rule and authority (1:16-18; 2:10), they sought to enter the heavenly sphere. In short, they lacked assurance that in and with Christ they themselves had experienced a full deliverance and were being renewed in knowledge after the image of God (see 1:13; 2:10-12; 3:1,10). Instead, they had to earn the divine vision through ascetic discipline. The error did not spring from a false view of the person of Christ but from a false view of the present salvation provided through him. But it led to a truncated existence, cutting an individual off from the life-giving presence of Christ (2:19).

THE NEW LEGALISM

COLOSSIANS 2:20-23

Do we live a rule-book Christianity?

HAVING EXPOSED THE worship and doctrines of the false teachers, the apostle now turns to their practical demands. These resulted in a new type of legalism, against which Paul directs the same basic criticisms urged against legalism in Galatians. In Christ we have died to legalism. The Christian is to exalt Christ and be controlled by him as he expresses his will within the life of the believer, not by regulations imposed from outside.

Paul's argument begins with the fundamental truth that believers have been identified with the Christ who in his death triumphed over the powers hostile to God (2:20; see also 2:15). Why, then, should they seek to live as if they were still enslaved to these powers? Rules and regulations belong to the structures of the world. So long as a person has no life beyond this structure they are subjected to rules prescribed for them. But in Christ the church has been transferred to a sphere of freedom (see 1:13) in which the old restrictions are recognized as useless. Paul mockingly repeats the slogans of the local teachers (2:21). These counsels were offered as the means of attaining a higher state of holiness. Yet they all refer to things which waste away through use (2:22) and bind human beings to the sphere of ordinary existence. Paul directs three telling criticisms against the new legalism:

1. The ascetic practices urged to reach entrance into heaven were mere human devices arbitrarily imposed (2:22; see also Isaiah 29:13).
2. It entails a loss of liberty in so far as those who accept the regulations submit to bondage to their fellowmen.
3. It amounts to little more than a solemn pretense (2:23).

Approaches like fasting and rigorous discipline of the body had the appearance of wisdom, but involved submission to a piety which had its origin in the human will. The proud claim of visions (2:18) indicates that these practices encouraged conceit, blinding the Colossians to the truth that only God must redeem and mature them. In this light, the prohibitions and spiritual disciplines adopted at Colossae were actually a subtle form of fleshly indulgence (2:23). Christians are free to use the world precisely because Christ has freed them from the world.

LIFE IN A RISEN LORD

## COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

Do we set our sights on heavenly patterns of behavior since heaven is our destination?

PAUL HAD SUFFICIENTLY exposed the fallacies of the new teaching at Colossae (2:4-23). The task now before him is to display the character of the hope set before the believers (see also 1:5), and the obligations which such a prospect imposes. In contrast to the negative approach to Christian existence urged by the false teachers, Paul points to the reality of life in a risen Lord. He had earlier said that in baptism a person is united with Christ in his death and his resurrection (2:12). He now returns to that affirmation as an encouragement for believers to act in accordance with the position they enjoy. Since you have experienced resurrection life, he writes, let your concerns be those of the risen and exalted Christ (3:1). Paul's point is supported by spatial imagery.

The false teachers, in spite of their concern for heavenly visions (2:18), were really concerned with the lower sphere of the world (2:20). Christians, on the other hand, through their union with Christ, already belong to that heavenly sphere where the Lord now lives and reigns. When Paul says, "Seek the things that are above" (3:1f.), it is probable that he again echoes a catchphrase of the false teachers. But here it is an appeal for believers to conform their whole will and attitudes to the heavenly world to which they now belong through Christ.

Consistent with his emphasis on baptism as a death to the old style of life, Paul now speaks of the new heavenly life which is hidden “with Christ in God.” The life of Christ which distinguishes Christians from others is a profound reality (see Galatians 2:20). Its full character has not yet been unveiled, but Paul’s language in 3:3f. suggests that it is a “concentric” life. It is a life which draws its existence from the very center of all reality as opposed to the “eccentric” life of a person who has no vital relationship with Christ. When Christ returns to celebrate his triumph (see 2:19), his people will share his glory (3:4). They will appear in their true character as those whose life has become one with Christ’s life (see also Philippians 3:20f.; 1 John 3:2). Throughout this section, and the appeals which follow, the perspective is controlled by the thought of the full life which belongs to all who are in Christ.

ERASING THE MARKS OF THE OLD LIFE

COLOSSIANS 3:5-11

We are to discard our old ways of behaving. Why?

BAPTISM MARKED A critical moment in the life of a Christian in which they affirmed they had died with respect to their former way of life. Since they had received a Lord, all excuses for disobedience were removed. Paul now builds on this understanding. The action of Christ in removing us from the sphere of death into life (1:13f.; 2:9-14) demands a response in believers. We are to consign to the sphere of death the marks of the old life (3:5,8f.). Paul's statement "You have died" to the old way of life (2:11f.; Romans 6:3-11), finds its counterpart in the instruction, "Put to death" those signs of the old life which attempt to reassert themselves. The listing of two series of five vices, climaxed by one more 3:5,8,9, [to which correspond five virtues crowned by love, 3:12-14]), may reflect an early catechism which converts were expected to learn.

Immorality and crude self-centeredness indicate that the governing motive of life is pleasure and a pampering of the flesh. Equating this disposition with idolatry (3:5) stems from the enthronement of self in the place of authority which belongs to God alone. Self-deification inevitably dulls ethical sensitivity and always invites the wrath of God (3:6; Romans 1:18ff.). The rescue of people from this degraded condition was the remarkable accomplishment of the Christian mission.

The second list of vices (3:8f.) are those which find expression through speech. Because they display an attitude of bitterness toward others, they are expressions of that self-centeredness which Paul has just denounced.

The basis for Paul's appeal is the radical transformation of character experienced by every believer. The apostle compares it to the changing of clothes. When a Christian enthrones Jesus Christ as Lord of their life, they exchange the rags of unrighteousness for the robes of Christ's righteousness (3:9f.; see also Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27). The knowledge which Christians now need is not some secret insight like that offered by the false teachers, but a knowledge which depends only on the inward renewal of their nature by God. This drastic renewal Paul sees as a new creation in which arbitrary distinctions of a racial, religious, cultural or social nature, which set one person over against another, are done away (3:11). When Christ is given preeminence (1:18) people must recognize that no basis exists for anyone to exalt themselves above another or to exploit another for their own advantage.

THE MARKS OF THE NEW LIFE

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

We need to reaffirm the renewal of our nature every day in constant commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, if the freshness of our devotion is to be preserved.

THE REMOVAL OF the marks of the old life leaves a vacuum which must be filled. Paul urges that his readers display the signs of their new life in Christ. He had just said that in Christ there exists no distinction between Greek and Jew (3:11). Now the apostle applies to the Colossians terms which in the Old Testament were reserved for Israel alone (see also Exodus 19:5f.); through Christ they have been set apart from the world as God's beloved children (3:12). They are to demonstrate by their lives that they belong to the new family of faith. Having shed the rags of pagan slavery, they are to put on the robes of splendor which belong to sons alone (see also Luke 15:15,21f.). The qualities which Paul commends are the opposites to the signs of bitterness listed in 3:8. They reflect Christ's life in us by which our attitude toward others is conformed to his own. If as Christians we are to make Jesus Christ visible in the world, we must treat others as Christ treated them (3:13). What the Colossians had been forgiven is sufficiently indicated by 3:5-7. The qualities of generosity which Paul lists are to be crowned by a love which knows what it is to say "No" to oneself in order to be able to say "Yes" to another person. Paul describes love as the girdle which holds in place the

garments of the new life (3:14). Love makes it possible for people to share genuine fellowship in Christ.

The achievement of unity within the larger fellowship of the church is the concern of 3:15-17. Paul was a realist who knew that occasions of friction arise inevitably whenever people meet in close fellowship, whether in families, places of work or in churches. God's provision for harmony in the church is the grace of Christ experienced, first in reconciliation to God, but reaffirmed as Christ is allowed to arbitrate all disputes and differences (3:15). A keen awareness of the presence of Christ tends to reduce personal bias to the small dimensions it deserves. The presence of Christ becomes vocal in the word of Christ expressed through the tradition (2:6f.) and the worship of the community (3:16). When Christ's word controls one's thinking, dependence on the Lord Jesus will be reflected in all that is said and done (3:17). The result of an intimate union with Christ is the possession of his mind and outlook prompting a sustained spirit of thanksgiving.

## THE ORDERING OF THE HOUSEHOLD

### COLOSSIANS 3:18-21

Is Jesus Lord in all our relationships?

AT THE TIME Paul dictated Colossians he had with him Onesimus, the runaway Colossian slave. Paul had been wrestling with the whole question of the relationship of Christian masters and slaves. Now he turns abruptly to what has been called the “household code” (3:18–4:1; see also Ephesians 5:22ff.; 1 Peter 2:18ff.), a set of instructions concerning the ordering of life in the family as a whole. The first section of the code treats the relationship of husbands and wives and of parents and children, since these are foundational to family life.

The distinctly Christian contribution to the ordering of family life was the emphasis on mutual responsibilities. Even in Judaism, where family relationships were given a significance not found elsewhere in ancient times, it tended to be assumed that husbands and fathers had rights to be exercised, while wives and children had duties to be performed. In emphasizing that all members of the household had rights and duties, Paul develops a conception of family life which is implicit in Jesus’ teaching concerning marriage (see Mark 10:2-16).

Wives are instructed to fulfill their appropriate duties in the Christian home. The new freedom in Christ did not permit the neglect of household tasks or responsibilities toward their husbands. Husbands are commanded to provide that climate of loving support which makes it possible for their wives

to fulfill their obligations happily. Aware of the conventions of Greek marriage, Paul warns against surliness and discontent, which can ruin Christian marriage, and turns husbands and wives against each other (3:18f.).

The mutual relationship of husbands and wives finds its complement in parents and children. God set before Israel the commandment to honor father and mother; he now reaffirms that this is his will in the new life (3:20). The responsibility of Christian fathers is understanding in the use of their authority. Paul's statement recognizes that firm discipline is necessary, but cautions against nagging and fault-finding. The purpose of discipline is not to irritate but to encourage willing obedience by sons and daughters. Children must know they live in a home where they are recognized to be individuals in their own right whom God loves and cares for.

RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM

COLOSSIANS 3:22–4:1

What can we apply in these verses to our view of our work?

THE ECONOMY OF the Roman empire was sustained on slavery. Not merely the lowest, most degrading tasks, but all forms of manual labor were considered beneath the dignity of a citizen and proper only to slaves. Moreover, by Roman law, and also in the common view, slaves were given no recognized existence. They were not people, but property, having neither rights nor legal recourse against harsh and brutal treatment.

Since many of the early converts to Christianity were slaves, and others owned slaves, it was necessary for Paul to clarify his position on slavery. The apostle deals with the situation as it then existed. He argues that a Christian may serve God in any social status. External circumstances are unimportant. While Christian slaves should avail themselves of opportunities for release, even if they remain unliberated they may know the dignity of being the Lord's freedmen (1 Corinthians 7:20-24).

In the second section of the household code nearly twice the amount of space is assigned to the relationship of slaves and masters as compared with the directions to the free members of the household. The reason for this is not merely the immediate problem of Onesimus but the greater complexity of the issues involved. The apostle is aware of the sense of injustice which the condition of slavery provoked. What he does is to set the relationship of slaves and masters in a Christian perspective which shatters traditional

conceptions. Though conscious of the inequities between slaves and their masters, Paul orders the slaves to obey wholeheartedly as an act of reverence to the Lord. When it is love for Christ which impels slaves to work heartily, Paul offers the encouragement that they share in the inheritance of the saints (see 1:13), and are citizens of a kingdom which refuses to distinguish between people in terms of slavery and freedom (3:11,22-24). He also warns that a condition of slavery offers no excuse for disobedience. Moral responsibility extends to slaves as well as to all other people (3:25). By insisting on this fact, Paul succeeds in restoring a sense of stature to those who were degraded in their own eyes by their condition.

The responsibility of masters is to treat all their slaves with equal fairness. No room is allowed for favoritism or for action based on a mere whim or a flare of temper. The reminder that they also have a Master is a sober warning that God will hold them responsible for the way they have treated their slaves. The acknowledgement of a Master in heaven provides a safeguard against dishonest service from slaves, and against abuse of power by their owners.

AN APPROACH TO MATURITY

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

How grateful are you to God for the reality of life in Christ? How do you express that gratitude in your relationships with others?

THERE IS AN intimate connection between 3:16f. and 4:2-6 in the structure of Paul's thought. In 3:16 the apostle began to instruct the Colossians concerning their responsibility to one another and to Christ in worship and daily experience. The thought of mutual responsibility, however, provided an appropriate context for Paul to digress on the household code (3:18–4:1). He then returns abruptly to his interrupted appeal to the church as a whole (4:2-6). When 3:16f. and 4:2-6 are read together, it is clear that the apostle is speaking about an approach to Christian maturity. The centrality of the word of Christ in worship (3:16), a dependence on Christ in word and action (3:17), a constant reliance on earnest prayer to God (4:2-4), and wise behavior in the world (4:4f.) are all the dispositions which must be cultivated. What binds the points of this program together is the stress on thanksgiving as the keynote of the Christian life (read again 3:16-17; 4:2; see also 1:12; 2:7; 3:15).

Paul did not hesitate to appeal for prayer for himself and for those with him (especially Timothy and Epaphras, 1:1,7; 4:12-13). He does not request deliverance from danger or hardship but a significant advancement for the truth of Christ (4:3f.). At the time the churches of the Lycus Valley were founded, Paul had used the image of the open door (1 Corinthians 16:9). He

now returns to that picture, aware that even in prison God has already opened doors before him (Philippians 1:12-14; 4:22; Philemon 10). To share the good news was so crucially important to Paul that he refused to trust in his own ability to speak clearly and incisively. The church is to pray that God will assist him to proclaim the truth appropriately.

Paul expected all believers to share a sense of obligation to those not yet reached by Christ. His plea for wise Christian behavior (4:5) arises from an awareness that the witness of Christians can be attractive and effective in winning people for Christ. Employing a common Greek metaphor for sparkling conversation (4:6), Paul points to the importance of thoughtfulness in communicating with others. The “grace” which is to characterize our speech is the grace of God; the “salt” with which our conversation is to be “seasoned” is a sense of wonder at what God has done. What Paul expects is thoughtful conversation which prepares an individual to consider seriously Christian truth. Pious platitudes are not sufficient; what is required is tactful, yet candid, speech and a willingness to listen to searching questions and to answer them honestly.

THE MESSENGERS TO COLOSSAE

COLOSSIANS 4:7-9

This passage tells us about Paul's two faithful friends. How faithful are we?

FOR THE FIRST time Paul now refers to Tychicus, who carried the three letters to the Lycus Valley (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon), and to Onesimus who accompanied him. Tychicus was a native of Asia Minor who had accompanied Paul on the journey to Jerusalem to deliver to the church the generous gifts of money collected among the Gentile congregations (Acts 20:4). After Paul was arrested, he apparently accompanied him to Caesarea and then to Rome. On this occasion Paul commissioned him to serve as his delegate to oversee the return of Onesimus and to implement the instructions of the three letters. On a later occasion Paul sent him to Ephesus for an unspecified task (2 Timothy 4:12). The apostle's affection for Tychicus is reflected in the titles of honor by which he is introduced (4:7). Paul asked him to inform the church about his personal circumstances and to encourage them as he would have done. The oral report undoubtedly concerned Epaphras as well as Paul, since the Colossians would be anxious to know why their pastor had not returned.

The reference to Onesimus (4:9) prepares the church to receive this former runaway slave, who is commended for his faithfulness to God and to Paul. The letter to Philemon deals more specifically with him, and is addressed to at least a portion of the Colossian church (see Philemon 2, "the

church in your house,” and Philemon 25, where “your” is plural). Here Paul makes no attempt to cover the complex issues involved, but refers to Onesimus as a Christian of honorable standing. The church is assured that he will also have a report to give, presumably concerning the remarkable circumstances by which he had made his way to Rome, found the apostle and came to faith. While those circumstances are no longer known, they provided the answers to the many questions that the presence of Onesimus prompted, and bore significant witness to the gracious concern of God even for a runaway slave.

PAUL'S FRIENDS IN ROME

COLOSSIANS 4:10-14

Among his Gentile friends, Paul especially honors Epaphras. Why (see verses 12-13)?

AT THE CONCLUSION of a letter, Paul often conveys the greetings of friends who are with him. The names mentioned here may have become familiar in the Lycus Valley during the period of Paul's extended stay at Ephesus (about 100 miles away). Aristarchus was from Thessalonica; like Tychicus, he had accompanied the apostle to Jerusalem with the collection and then, apparently, had voluntarily shared house arrest in Rome (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 28:30f.). The reference to John Mark of Jerusalem is surprising since Paul's unwillingness to take Mark on his second missionary journey had caused a serious break with Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40). This is the first indication that Paul had become fully reconciled to the younger man (see also 2 Timothy 4:11). Jesus, surnamed Justus, is mentioned only here. His Aramaic name was actually Joshua, but in Greek society he would be called by his surname. The complaint that these three are the only Jewish Christians who have been a comfort to the apostle echoes Paul's report of a divisive spirit by many in the church at Rome (Philippians 1:15f.).

Among his Gentile friends the place of honor is given to Epaphras. Paul emphasizes his faithfulness to Christ and his earnest concern for the Colossians that the church would stand firmly against false teaching. The reference to the efforts he had exerted for the Christians of the Lycus Valley

is obscure. A plausible suggestion is that he had come to Rome to raise money for the churches in a time of crisis. If Paul is alluding to the great earthquake which did so much damage in Asia Minor about this time, Epaphras had come to Rome to enlist the support of wealthy Christians for families who had lost everything in that disaster.

Luke was one of Paul's most constant associates from the time of the second missionary journey (see the "we" sections in Acts 16:10-16; 20:6–21:17; 27:1–28:16) until the time of his death (2 Timothy 4:11). That he was a physician explains this long and close relationship. The apostle's ill health was aggravated by the conditions of imprisonment. The company of a doctor whom he could trust, and with whom he shared deep fellowship, was a great encouragement to Paul. With Luke, Paul mentions Demas (see also Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:10), who later proved faithless when association with Paul endangered his life.

GREETINGS TO FRIENDS

COLOSSIANS 4:15-18

Paul concludes his letter with warm greetings and he is not too proud to ask for prayer for himself.

PAUL NOW GREETs those whom he knew in Colossae and the neighboring towns. His contacts in the valley may date to the period of the third missionary journey when he traveled through Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:23), the hinterland of Ephesus (Acts 19:1), on his way to the metropolis. The most natural route for him to have taken from Syria would have been through the Cilician gates to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch, Apamea, Colossae and Laodicea in the Lycus Valley, and down the Maeander to Ephesus. If this conjecture is accurate, it would indicate that Paul had personal contact with the Lycus region even though he had not conducted a mission there. The fact that he knows the members of Philemon's household in Colossae (Philemon 1f.) and Nympha in Laodicea (4:15) supports this proposal. Nympha was a lady of sufficient wealth to possess a home large enough to have gatherings of the young church. (For other references to house churches see Acts 12:12; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 2.)

The reference to a Laodicean letter (4:16) has led to some suggestions. As early as the middle of the second century Marcion identified Ephesians as the letter to the church at Laodicea. The extensive parallel with Colossians lends support to that identification. Moreover, the praise of the congregation in

Ephesians 1:15 and the statement of purpose for sending Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21f.) would be more appropriate in a letter addressed to a single community than in a circular letter. Alternate suggestions are that Philemon is the letter to which Paul refers or that reference is made to a letter sent to Laodicea by Epaphras, who had remained in prison with Paul.

Archippus was a member of Philemon's household—presumably his son (Philemon 2). The undefined nature of his ministry invites thought. It is reasonable to suppose that when Epaphras left the Lycus Valley he entrusted the pastoral supervision of his churches to another man. If that man were Archippus, to whom he now sends a word of encouragement through Paul, the indirect manner in which the apostle addresses Archippus would be explained. The entire church is urged to encourage him to fulfill the temporary appointment he has received (4:17).

The final greeting in Paul's hand (see also 2 Thessalonians 3:17) is combined with a touching allusion to his own circumstances as he asks to be remembered in prayer. The blessing occurs in a briefer form than elsewhere in Paul's letters: "Grace be with you."

INTRODUCTION

# 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

WILLIAM L. LANE

THE DYNAMICS OF the Gentile mission to a cosmopolitan center and the problems which emerged with the establishment of a church are illustrated by the two letters to the Thessalonians. The first letter clarifies the meaning of commitment to Jesus Christ for people among whom idolatry had been common and to whom immorality had been a way of life. The second letter deals with a misunderstanding that had created a crisis in the church. With these documents—possibly our earliest Pauline correspondence—the use of letters emerges as an invaluable support in the mission to the Gentiles.

THANKFUL REMEMBRANCE

## 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-3

Commitment to Christ must be demonstrated every day.

THESSALONICA WAS THE most important and populous center in Macedonia in the first century. Situated on the inmost bay of the Thermaic Gulf, it was the chief seaport of the district and the seat of the provincial government. It was a free city, boasting a popular assembly for the transaction of public business and civil magistrates elected by the people (Acts 17:6,8). The presence of an established Jewish community with a synagogue was especially attractive to Paul, who arrived in Thessalonica in AD 49 or 50: During his stay in the city he made the synagogue the focus of his mission but met with only moderate success (Acts 17:1-4). The real thrust of the mission occurred in the market and on the streets where a number of Gentiles unreached by the synagogue were persuaded to abandon idolatry and to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus (1:9f.).

In 1 Thessalonians the writer is clearly Paul (note the emphatic use of the first person singular in 2:18; 3:5; 5:27; see also 3:1, “alone”). Yet he associates with himself, as the senders of the letter, Silvanus (the Roman form of Silas; see also Acts 17:4,10) and Timothy, and makes use of the first person plural (“we”, “our”, “us”) throughout. More is involved in this than the mere acknowledgment of the part played by Paul’s companions in the evangelization of Macedonia and the establishment of the church at Thessalonica. The apostle is acting on the ancient law of testimony which

demanded that the truthfulness of a statement be established by the agreement of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). Silas and Timothy stand with Paul as witnesses to the truth content of what he has written both in the first and second letters to the church. Both letters were addressed from Corinth where the three missionaries had found a good reception of the gospel.

The association of grace and peace in the initial greeting (1:1) reflects the core of the ancient high priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24-26). Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians have displayed a trio of Christian virtues in their lives: faith, love and hope (1:3; see also 5:8). They had rightly seen that a personal relationship of trust and loyalty to Christ was inseparable from action. The result was an active faith in ordinary affairs, an involvement in the more costly service of love in missionary labor and an endurance of hardship inspired by Christian hope. We agree with Calvin who saw in 1:3 “a short definition of true Christianity.”

## THE POWER OF THE WORD

# 1 THESSALONIANS 1:4-10

Paul describes the church at Thessalonica as a great example ... of  
what?

PAUL ADDRESSES THE Thessalonians warmly as “brothers [and sisters] loved by God” (1:4). He found in the fruitfulness of their lives an adequate proof that God loved them. The heart of God’s election is his sovereign decision to choose a people, making them especially his own. Formerly this had meant Israel almost exclusively (see Deuteronomy 7:6-11; Amos 3:1f.). A startling consequence of the obedience of Christ was the inclusion of the Gentiles in the community of God’s chosen ones. Paul was called to proclaim this profound news among the nations (Acts 9:4-6,15f.; Galatians 1:11-16; Romans 15:8-22; Ephesians 3:1-13). The response to the word proclaimed at Thessalonica provided clear evidence that God had chosen them. Wherever Paul proclaimed the gospel he knew God would prepare a people to receive it as the word of truth. He regarded preaching, therefore, with utmost seriousness.

The power of the gospel to compel conviction and transform broken lives deeply impressed the apostle (1:5,7). He recognized that the Holy Spirit, who convinced people that what they were hearing was “the gospel of God” (2:2,8f.), was the source of that power. Preachers were common in the ancient world. Stoic and Cynic philosophers grappled with the basic questions of life and ethics. Teachers of many schools proclaimed eloquently

the way to wealth, fame and happiness. There were many competitors for people's allegiance. Paul constantly thanked God that his message was received at Thessalonica not as "a human word but ... as the word of God" (2:13). Both in proclamation and in the daily life of the community, God's word was characterized by a power which distinguished it from all human cleverness and deception. That power explains the joy of believers in spite of affliction (1:6) and their radiant testimony to their experience with the gospel (1:8). Although they were newly converted, they had already caught the vision of evangelism and missionary outreach (1:7-8).

Their testimony echoes the preaching which had undergirded the mission to Thessalonica. Paul had urged "faith in God" (1:8). The futility of serving dead idols was exposed in the presentation of the "living and true God" (1:9; see also Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-29). The heart of Paul's message was Jesus as Son of God and Savior (1:10). That he was Son of God was demonstrated with power through his resurrection (see Acts 17:30f.; Romans 1:4). Though now in heaven, he will return in sovereign triumph. The Thessalonians firmly believed that he was the sole Savior from the wrath invited by the idolatry and immorality of pagan society. Their commitment was not to a principle or a system of thought but to the person of Jesus in whom God's gracious favor found its greatest expression.

APPROVED BY GOD

## 1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-8

Is God's approval of your life more important to you than any other consideration?

IN 1:5 PAUL writes, "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." These next paragraphs provide a commentary on this verse. They recall the circumstances under which the Thessalonians first heard the gospel and the treatment they had received from the evangelists. A note of protest may be detected in much that occurs here. Paul, apparently, is responding to slanderous charges impugning his integrity, urged by the same Jewish leaders who had earlier disrupted his work (Acts 17:5-8,13). His defense is an appeal to what the Thessalonians themselves can verify: "you yourselves know" (2:1); "as you know" (2:2,5); "you remember" (2:9); "you are witnesses" (2:10); "for you know" (2:11)). They know that he was no imposter.

The success of the mission (1:8; 2:1), in spite of sustained opposition, was due in large part to the apostle's sheer courage inspired by God. The beating and imprisonment suffered at Philippi (Acts 16:12ff.) and the violence with which the Jews of Thessalonica attacked him (Acts 17:5-8) were sufficient to dissuade someone with merely human resolution (2:2). Paul persisted in the mission for one reason: God had entrusted him with the gospel and he must please God (2:4).

The approval of God was more important to Paul than the success of the mission, but the success of the mission offered the necessary proof that the apostle's message was true, his motives were pure and his approach was sincere. His appeal cannot spring from "error," for what he proclaims is the gospel of God; he cannot be guilty of "uncleanness," for he has been approved by God; he cannot present his message "with guile," for he speaks to please God who sifts the heart (2:3-4).

Paul had refused to resort to flattery, as some teachers did, or to seek his own gain or glory (2:5-6). On the contrary, he had exhibited that quality of tender affection experienced by a mother as she nourishes her child at her breast. It was an act of obedience to God to share the gospel with the Thessalonians. It became an act of love when the apostle and his company gave themselves completely to the young church (2:7-8). Paul was a disciplined man of authority. He was also a man of deep affection (2:8). In this paragraph you see a pastor who has found sufficient reason to endure suffering (2:2) and the impugning of his integrity (2:3,5f.).

## AN HONEST CONSCIENCE

# I THESSALONIANS 2:9-12

Your credentials as a Christian should include a vibrant faith in Christ and irreproachable behavior before God and other people.

ALTHOUGH THERE WERE many itinerant preachers and soothsayers in the ancient world who found marketplace “evangelism” a lucrative trade, Paul and his party could not be numbered among them. He had refused support from the new converts and had paid for the food consumed by himself and those with him (2 Thessalonians 3:8). During his stay in the city the Philippians twice sent gifts of money to him (Philippians 4:16), but his needs were met primarily by his own work as a skilled worker (see Acts 18:3). The wisdom of this course of action became apparent when the charge of greed was rumored about (2:5). Paul could remind the Thessalonians that he had worked very hard throughout the period he had preached the gospel (2:9).

The suggestion that the enthusiastic gospel of the Spirit which Paul proclaimed had led to impurity is met with a forthright appeal to the twofold testimony of the Thessalonians and God (2:10). The conduct of the evangelists had been irreproachable before God and people. Any standard lower than this would have been inconsistent with their own solemn charge to live a life worthy of God (2:12).

When Paul had wished to express the affection he had shown for the believers he spoke of a mother with her children (2:7). He now appeals to the image of a father with his children to express the moral earnestness with

which he had instructed them (2:11). He had been sensitive to the particular needs of individuals and had adjusted his approach accordingly. With the hesitant he employed a word of urging; with the fainthearted he resorted to encouragement; with the weak he did not hesitate to command. His ministry undoubtedly entailed both public and private instruction (see Acts 20:20), for Paul knows that he has worked with “each one of you.”

His concern was to help each convert see what was implied by “a life worthy of God” (2:12)—the very God who now called former idolators to be citizens of his kingdom and participants in his glory. The motive for obedience which Paul planted in the mind of the Thessalonians was thanksgiving to God for his grace and an eager desire to experience fully what God has prepared for those who love him.

THE EFFECTIVE WORD

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-16

God has allowed you not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake.

PAUL WAS FILLED with a sense of thanksgiving whenever he thought of the way in which the gospel had been received in Thessalonica. It would have been possible for the crowds that milled through the streets and bazaars to regard him as just one more peddler of popular religious philosophy or morality. His readers, however, had listened to his message and welcomed it as the word of God. They saw plainly that while the way of speaking was his own, God was expressing his own powerful, creative word through him (2:13). What distinguished the apostolic word from what was proclaimed by a Greek teacher was its ability to impart life. The word had taken root in the hearts of believers and showed its power in daily experience.

That effectiveness was particularly clear in the endurance of the church under the pressure of disruption and persecution from other residents in the city. The apostles saw in this perseverance proof that they were being faithful to Jesus Christ. Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian congregations were united in a common bond of faithfulness to Jesus Christ and a common experience of suffering because they were Christians (2:14).

The words which follow (2:15-16) should be recognized as an expression of heartbreak and exasperation on the part of one who had suffered much from his own compatriots. From the time he became a Christian in Damascus

(see Acts 9:24) to his present experience in Corinth (Acts 18:5ff.) Paul had been the object of repeated attack by zealous Jews who saw in him a threat to true piety. At Thessalonica it was Jewish leaders who instigated the riot which made necessary Paul's sudden departure from the city (Acts 17:5ff.); not content with this achievement they had pursued him to Berea as well (Acts 17:13).

The mention of suffering inflicted by the Jews (2:14) was like pulling a plug from a dike. With a rush of emotion the apostle spills out his grief that his own people should be so insensitive to God's purposes. The catalog of sins reaches its most poignant expression when Paul speaks of the roadblocks raised by the synagogue to the preaching of salvation to the Gentiles. It is the rejection of the gospel which moves Paul to bitter denunciation reminiscent of the prophets of God.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

## 1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-20

Like any parent separated from their child, Paul feels intensely for the church at Thessalonica.

PAUL HAD BEEN forced to leave Thessalonica abruptly (Acts 17:5-10). He had moved on to Berea, Athens and finally Corinth. The mission to Thessalonica had been initially successful. Yet he remained anxious about his converts. When it became impossible to satisfy a strong desire to return to Thessalonica (“Satan hindered us,” 2:18) the apostle while still in Athens sent Timothy, who afterward rejoined him in Corinth (3:1-6). Timothy’s report greatly encouraged Paul, but there was also sobering news. Taking advantage of the apostle’s absence, opponents had maligned his character and misinterpreted his failure to return to the city as proof that he did not care at all for his converts. They compared Paul to the roving charlatans who could be found in any Greek city, preying on the gullibility of the people. Such imposters moved from town to town, working solely for their own advantage, with no real concern for those who flocked to them.

Paul answers these insinuations in 2:17–3:13. Was his failure to return to Thessalonica proof that he did not care at all for his converts? When he had been separated from them (“in person not in heart”), even for a short time, he had eagerly wanted to return and see them face to face. The degree of eagerness the apostle experienced is apparent as he abandons the first person plural used in the letter to this point (“we were bereft ... we endeavored ...

we wanted to come to you”) and he thrusts himself before his readers (“I, Paul, again and again”). With a rush of emotion he demands of his converts, “What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” (2:19).

The apostle’s language could not help but evoke deep feelings among his listeners since his words show his alertness to the conventions of the society in which they live. When a ruling monarch officially visited a Greek city, the populace would form a triumphal procession to escort him into the city. Citizens knew when a state visit was planned because taxes were levied or contributions solicited in order to prepare an appropriate gift for the royal guest. A papyrus from the third century BC speaks of contributions for a crown of gold to be presented to the king. While the monarchs of this world at their coming expect a costly crown, the Thessalonians themselves constitute the crown which Paul will joyfully present to Jesus at his coming (2:20).

APOSTOLIC ANGUISH

## 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

Your deep concern for the welfare of other Christians is a reflection of God's yet deeper concern.

FROM THE TIME of the second missionary journey Paul adopted the policy of delegating important tasks to members of his company. When he was forced to withdraw from Philippi, Luke was left behind to organize and nurture the believers. Under similar circumstances Silas and Timothy remained at Berea to consolidate the gains of the mission (Acts 17:14). When Timothy rejoined Paul at Athens he found the apostle very restless about the welfare of the believers at Thessalonica. While Paul writes in 3:1 "we could bear it no longer," he says clearly in 3:5, "I could bear it no longer." When it became apparent that Paul could not leave the city, he sent Timothy north once more to learn how his people were faring.

Timothy had undoubtedly earned the respect of the Christians during the weeks he had labored at Paul's side. Paul's regard for this younger man is expressed often (see also 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:19-22). Here he describes his delegate as "our brother and God's servant" (3:2), a man fully qualified to assist the oppressed young church. Timothy's ministry was a reinforcement of teaching Paul had already committed to the church. The experience of the Thessalonians from the first days of the mission confirmed that suffering is an integral element in Christian experience (3:3; 1:7; 2:2). The statement that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of

God” (Acts 14:22) was an established item in the instruction Paul shared with all his churches (3:4). Subsequent experience had served only to confirm the importance of that insight.

Paul was fully aware of the dynamics at work in Thessalonica and the eagerness of the Tempter (see 2:18) to unravel the fabric of faith. Continued opposition by neighbors and kinsmen, aggravated by the reports that Paul actually did not care at all for the believers, would provide fertile ground in which to plant the suggestion that the commitment to faith was not worth its cost. Behind that suggestion Paul saw clearly the devices of Satan. Out of deep concern for his converts Paul had extended himself through the person of Timothy.

INEXPRESSIBLE JOY

## 1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10

The effect of Timothy's report was to strengthen, not slacken, Paul's prayer for his friends.

IN THE TRANSITION from 3:5 to 3:6 there is a change of tone from anxious concern to joyful relief. Timothy has just returned to Corinth with a report which exceeds the apostle's highest expectations, and his delight is apparent in every line. Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonica to learn the condition of their faith (3:5). Timothy had returned with the news that their faith in Christ was strong, their love toward one another earnest, and their affection for the apostle deep (3:6; see also 1:3; 4:9f.; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). They had not forgotten Paul and were as eager to see him as he was to be in Thessalonica once again (2:17-20; 3:6,10f.).

So overwhelmed was Paul that he speaks of Timothy's report as "the receiving of a gospel" through which he was comforted and made to know a new surge of life. Only here in all the New Testament does this nontechnical use of the term "gospel" ("good news") occur. What encouraged Paul most of all was the steadfastness of the Thessalonians on the matter of faith (3:7). When he speaks of his life depending on the firm stand of the believers (3:8), he is not exaggerating. The one thing that made life worth living was the experience of introducing people to the Savior and the privilege of watching them grow in grace and knowledge.

Paul had laid a sound foundation for faith at Thessalonica, but he recognizes at once that the glory for the faithfulness of his converts belonged only to God (3:9). He finds himself inadequate to express the thanksgiving which wells up in him as he presents the Thessalonians to God in prayer. At the same time he is not blind to the realities under which his converts live. They are subject to many pressures and still young in the faith. While their faith in Christ is strong, it lacks moral depth and doctrinal certainty. Paul, therefore, continues to pray earnestly and unceasingly that God may still allow him to return to his friends, that he may bring them to a greater maturity in the Lord (3:10).

A SPONTANEOUS PRAYER

1 THESSALONIANS 3:11-13

Spontaneous prayer is the response of sensitive Christians to the clear signs of God's involvement in their lives.

AS PAUL RECORDS his transition from the depths of anguish to the heights of exhilaration, he is overwhelmed with emotion and breaks out into spontaneous prayer. The lines he has just dictated suggest the direction of his thoughts: 3:11 resumes the thought of 3:10a, while 3:12-13 are prompted by 3:10b. The prayer serves to round off the larger section, 2:1–3:10, and prepares for what Paul has to say in the second half of the letter.

On repeated occasions Paul had experienced the desire to return to Thessalonica but Satan had hindered him (2:17f.). Recognizing that only God can remove the obstacles that Satan has set up, Paul prays earnestly that God may still enable him to visit his friends. That no sharp distinction exists in Paul's mind between "our God and Father" and "our Lord Jesus" when he bows to pray is suggested by the fact that the word "direct" is singular. Paul senses a unity of action between Father and Son in the response to prayer.

Paul's second request is that the Lord may perfect the love which the Thessalonians have already displayed toward one another until it overflows to the enrichment of all—stubborn Jews, calloused pagans, those who slander them or persecute them (see also Matthew 5:44-48). Only God is able to give love of this quality. Conversely, only love of this quality will direct the attention of people beyond the believers to God himself. The presence of love

in ever-increasing measure is the sure promise that the church is being prepared for presentation to the Father on the day when the Lord Jesus comes with all his people. What God will demand is blamelessness in holiness. Love toward God and love toward our neighbor turn us away from selfish concerns and open the way to that moral perfection which is the condition of holiness. It is this radical transformation of character that Paul desires for his converts, that they may face the awesome event of Christ's return without fear or shame.

A CALL TO PERSONAL PURITY

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8

To please God, we must live a holy life. Having prayed for their holiness in chapter 3, Paul now describes in down-to-earth detail what this means.

PAUL'S DESIRE TO return to Thessalonica reflects a concern to supply something lacking in the faith of the believers (3:10). Even under the most favorable circumstances difficulties could be expected among converts from paganism. While still in the city Paul had anticipated the need for practical instruction in such important areas as personal morality and holiness (4:1-8), love and mutual respect (4:9), social behavior and work (4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:10). He now supplements his oral instruction by considering specific areas of shortcomings and uncertainty. The key is provided in 5:14. What Paul has written was prompted by the temptations of "the weak," the discouragements of "the faint-hearted," and the unbrotherly conduct of "the idle." The apostle's ultimate concern is that his converts may "please" or satisfy God (4:1; see also 2:4,15).

By "the weak," Paul means those who are weak with respect to some aspect of faith. Apparently moral weakness was the problem of this group (4:3-8). It is understandable that the attitudes of some Christians living in a cosmopolitan seaport had been shaped by the conventions of pagan society. In Greek society, generally, sexual morality was treated with relative indifference. Religious sanctions had become attached to forms of

immorality, since fertility rites were an accepted form of consecration to the deity in certain of the mystery religions and cults. Believers needed careful instruction concerning the type of life which God demanded; specifically, that consecration to the living God was both religious and moral.

Paul's instruction is based on the fact that personal sanctification is the will of God for every Christian (4:3). This means that the primary demand on Christians is to live their lives as those who are set apart for devoted service to God. This requires the discipline of the body and thoughts and the cultivation of a purity of life.

Immorality is incompatible with commitment to Jesus Christ—then and now. To be enslaved to the passions of lust, to enter marriage merely for sexual convenience or to commit adultery is to imitate “the heathen who do not know God” and to invite divine judgment (4:5-6). The apostle marshals forceful reasons why Christians cannot confuse their freedom with pagan licence: there is a fearful judgment on sin (4:6); purity of life alone is consistent with the character of the Christian's call “in holiness” (4:7); and impurity expresses a contempt for God who has given his Holy Spirit to believers (4:8). These considerations demand a fresh hearing in contemporary society where sexual immorality, the exploitation of people and the flouting of divine authority are common and are championed even within the church.

## THE DIMENSIONS OF LOVE

### I THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

Both Christians and non-Christians will evaluate the sincerity of your love for God by the way you treat others.

PAUL DESCRIBES A SECOND group in the church as “the idle” (5:14). These were those people whose refusal to work had disrupted the life of the Christian community and incurred the disrespect of those who were not Christians. While the Roman world tended to despise manual and even supervisory labor as beneath the dignity of the citizen, the command to work drew its authority from the cultural mandate to “subdue the earth” and from the Law of God (Genesis 1:28; 2:15; 3:17-19; Exodus 20:9).

It was the responsibility of every Jewish father to teach his son a trade by which he could support himself. While in Thessalonica Paul had worked night and day to meet his needs (2:9). When idlers joined the young church he laid down the rule, “If anyone will not work, let them not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). In disregard of this explicit instruction some people in the assembly had not only refused to work but had also sought to be supported by other Christians. When support was denied on the ground of Paul’s word, the idle made their plea on the basis of “love of the brothers and sisters.” This is the background presupposed in 4:9-12.

That God had taught the Thessalonians to love one another was clear to the apostle (4:9-10). Nevertheless, he appeals to them to demonstrate still more love, and he introduces a series of specific responsibilities which define

the depth of love for others which God demands. It is the practical orientation of communal love which is the startling element in this section. Who had considered that to live quietly, to mind one's own affairs and to work with one's hand were actually a consequence of the love which God teaches? Yet further reflection affirms that each of these actions springs from a selflessness which has its source in God's love. A basic consideration for others moves Christians to avoid unnecessary conflict and the uninvited intrusion of themselves in the affairs of other people. This same considerateness moves them to do the honest work which commands the respect of outsiders and frees the worker from dependence on others for support. The idle needed to recognize the practical dimensions of Christian love.

CHRISTIAN HOPE

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

Death remains an enemy to Christians, but it has been conquered by the Lord of life.

EVEN THOUGH ONLY a few months had passed since Paul left Thessalonica, some from the fellowship had died. Death was an awesome reality in the ancient world. Grim inscriptions along the roads reminded travelers that it was the common experience of everyone. The anxiety of “the fainthearted” concerning those who had died is understandable. Paul had proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus (1:10), yet he may have neglected to instruct the Thessalonians that they would participate in the resurrection. The apostle had spoken much about the glorious event of Jesus’ coming with all his saints. Did the death of Christians exclude them from sharing in the triumphant climax to history?

The encouragement provided by Paul’s response to these concerns can be appreciated when his words are contrasted with a pagan letter of consolation dating from the second century: “Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over the departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things which were fitting I have done ... But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore, comfort one another. Fare ye well” (*Oxyrhynchus Papyrus No. 115*). While this letter both opens and closes on the note of comfort, its most striking feature is a frank recognition that no real basis for comfort has been provided. After the expression of

sincere sympathy and the appropriate memorials, after the grief and tears, the fact of utter helplessness remains.

How different is the encouragement Paul offers to the fainthearted. The reason they are not to “grieve as others who have no hope” is that God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise believers who have “fallen asleep” (4:13f.). For them, death is no ultimate catastrophe. Not even Jesus, the Lord of life, had been spared the experience of death. But he rose again! Because of his resurrection “sleep” is no longer a euphemism for the finality of the grave, but a description of a rest which is followed by an awakening.

The fourth-century preacher, John Chrysostom, helps us to sense the majesty of 4:17: “When a king made his entrance into a city, certain ones among the dignitaries, the chief officials and those who were in the good graces of the sovereign, would go out from the city in order to meet him, while the guilty and the criminals are kept in the city where they await the sentence which the king will pronounce. In the same manner, when the Lord will come, the first group will go forth to meet him with assurance in the midst of the air, while the guilty and those who are conscious of having committed many sins will await below their Judge” (*Homily 8 on First Thessalonians*). For Paul’s readers, who were familiar with the Greek ceremony described by Chrysostom, the language evoked deep feelings and was readily understood. The final encouragement to “comfort one another” therefore rings with confidence and joy based on the character of Christian hope.

CHILDREN OF THE DAY

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

God calls the church to be alert in order that he may display it as the church triumphant.

THE SECOND CONCERN of the fainthearted was their unpreparedness for the Day of the Lord, when God comes to judge all people and unleash his wrath (see, eg Amos 5:18; Isaiah 13:6-8; Ezekiel 13:10; Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). Paul had instructed them that the Day of the Lord will come with an unexpected suddenness “like a thief in the night,” catching the wicked unaware (5:2f.; see also Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10). Without a blameless life men cannot enter into eternal fellowship with the Lord (3:13; 5:22f.). Who is equal to such a demand? The fainthearted were fearful for their own salvation.

At the beginning of the letter Paul had anticipated his present words of encouragement when he expressed his assurance that God had chosen the Thessalonian Christians (1:4). Now he takes up their concern in earnest, perhaps in response to a specific request for further information concerning “times and seasons” (5:1). The Thessalonians were asking, “How long will it be before the Lord comes?” and, “What guideposts will help us to recognize the nearness of his coming?” The apostle assures his readers that they do not need additional instruction concerning the Day of the Lord (see 5:2-5), but a fresh determination to demonstrate the watchfulness and soberness characteristic of the “day” (5:6-8).

“Night,” “darkness,” “sleep,” “drunkenness” describe those who are insensitive to God’s purposes and for whom there will be no escape when the Day of the Lord exposes their deeds to his judgment. “Day,” “light,” “wakefulness,” “soberness” evoke the image of the alert church vigilant, waiting expectantly for the coming of Christ. The church knows all that it needs to know—that the Day of the Lord will come, that God will bring to fulfillment his sovereign purposes, and that God demands a life consistent with the character of Christian calling (4:7). The antidote to anxiety and fear is engagement in a spiritual warfare, for which God has provided an adequate armor in faith, love and hope (5:8; see also Ephesians 6:10-20). To dispel unjustified fears once for all, Paul reassures his readers, “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:9, see also 1:10). He reminds the Thessalonians of Christ’s death on our behalf and his ultimate intention that we shall “live with him” (5:10; see also 4:16f.).

The Day of the Lord is a day of wrath, but not for God’s redeemed people. In this assurance there may be found a sufficient reason for mutual encouragement and upbuilding (5:11).

THE CONDUCT OF CHURCH LIFE

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-22

Paul urges his readers to encourage one another—what do you need to do to put that appeal into practice?

THE CALL FOR mutual encouragement and upbuilding in 5:11 prompts the apostle to set out some guidelines for regulating the conduct of church life. He expresses them in the form of appeals addressed to the congregation as a whole: 5:12-13 concern the leadership of the congregation, 5:14-18 the relationships between members of the fellowship as a whole, and 5:19-22 the response to prophecy and other charismatic manifestations in the public gatherings of the believers.

The church is charged to respect those who were appointed elders in the congregation (see Acts 14:23). In view are men like Jason (Acts 17:5), Secundus (Acts 20:4) and Demas (2 Timothy 4:10). It was their task to work diligently among the membership of the church, preside over its meetings and maintain discipline. Paul's language implies an appreciation of those who exercise the gifts of leadership based on close observation of the quality of their personal lives and work. A consideration of their Christian service should dissolve any resentment toward their taking of authority and move the congregation to hold them in special regard and affection. It is the responsibility of the fellowship to provide a climate that will enable the elders to do their work. Conflict is always distracting. Paul, therefore, appeals, "Be at peace among yourselves" (5:12-13).

The appeals to the brothers and sisters which follow clarify the responsibility of the entire congregation to engage in the tasks of ministry. The warning to the idle, the encouragement of the fainthearted, the assistance of the weak (5:14) are precisely the ministries Paul has fulfilled among the Thessalonians. Now they are assigned to all with the added appeal to be patient in dealing with weakness of any kind. Christian love will refuse to keep a record of injuries received but will find its fulfillment in services which may be rendered to all—without discrimination (5:15). Unbroken joy, prayer and thanksgiving offer sufficient proof of the outworking of God's will in the fellowship (5:16-18).

The concluding appeals consist of five crisp sentences which recognize the legitimacy of the exercise of spiritual gifts in the congregation as well as the necessity of testing their origin (5:19-22). The test is simple: what is good is to be received, while every form of evil must be rejected. Paul finds in the presence of the Spirit the promise of the discernment required from all believers.

THE GOD OF PEACE

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-28

Paul ends with the note of reassurance that the God of peace is faithful. Do you need to remember that again for your life?

PAUL'S CONCLUDING WORD to the congregation is a prayer that they may be completely possessed by God. It will become the apostle's frequent habit when bringing a letter to its close to think about "the God of peace," as he does here (5:23; see also 2 Thessalonians 3:16; Romans 15:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9). The reference is to God's peace of restored relationship with him that the Thessalonians enjoyed through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The fellowship enjoyed with God on earth is a foretaste of unbroken fellowship throughout eternity. For that reason Paul prays that the work of sanctification, by which believers are prepared for God's presence, may be brought to a point of maturity.

The words "spirit and soul and body" are not to be understood as providing some insight into the constituent "parts" of a person, but should be understood rhetorically as further emphasizing the term "wholly." In a contemporary context Paul might well pray in terms of "heart and soul," by which he would mean simply "your whole person" (see Mark 12:30). In praying that believers may be kept "sound and blameless" for their presentation to Christ at his coming, the apostle echoes a theme introduced first in the prayer of 3:13. Paul's own experience of God's faithfulness assures him that his prayer will be wonderfully answered (5:24).

The letter closes with three brief requests and a blessing. The request for prayer (5:25) is a reminder that Paul, Silas and Timothy also work in a context of trial, and can be sustained only through the intercession of the believers and the strength which God supplies. The kiss of peace which men shared with men, and women with women—presumably on the cheek—was the sign that God had constituted the church one family in Christ (5:26). No one was to be excluded from this sign of affection. The letter—to be read publicly—must serve to compensate for the visit he cannot undertake at this time; in it Paul has said what he would wish to say if he were present with his people. The final blessing (5:28) replaces the single word “farewell” in papyrus letters with the blessing of Christ on the congregation.

GROWTH IN SPITE OF ADVERSITY

## 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-4

The fact that Paul gives thanks to God for answering his prayers reminds us it is all too easy to forget to thank God for answering our prayers.

ONLY A TENTATIVE reconstruction can be offered of the events between the reception of Paul's first letter by the church and the composition of the second. The outward situation at Thessalonica appears little changed. Persecution has continued (1:4; see also 2:17; 3:3ff.). Paul, Silas and Timothy are still together, evidently at Corinth, where opposition to the gospel also persists (1:1,7; 3:1f.). Our scanty evidence suggests that the second letter was addressed to Thessalonica in AD 50, perhaps no more than two months after the first.

Its immediate occasion was the emergence of a new crisis in the congregation. Some individuals were convinced that Paul had said that the Day of the Lord was actually present (2:2). This provided a new argument for the idle and rekindled all the fears of the fainthearted. If the Day of the Lord had come, what time remained to gain the holiness or the faith, hope and love which Paul had insisted on (1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:8)? The wrath reserved for unbelievers would certainly overtake the Christians as well! When the elders saw that the crisis was more than they could cope with effectively, they sent word to Paul by the first of their number who had occasion to journey to Corinth (see 3:11). 2 Thessalonians was written in response to this urgent

request for help. It is a simple, tactful, pastoral letter, devoted almost entirely to encouraging the same fainthearted Christians previously addressed (1:3–3:5), and to warning the idle (3:6-15).

The opening lines of Paul's two letters to the church are almost identical. The addition of "our" before "Father" in the address shows that Paul is contemplating the relationship of sonship which the Thessalonians have come to enjoy with God the Father in common with all those who have experienced faith through Christ (1:1). The prayer for grace and peace (1:2) is repeated from the earlier letter, but now the apostle reminds his readers of the divine origin of these gifts. In both the address and the initial greeting, God the Father and Christ the Lord are intimately associated. The existence of the church and the giving of the qualities that sustain its new life are the gifts of God as we know him in Jesus Christ.

The reason for the apostle's continued thanksgiving for the Thessalonians is seen in the vigorous growth of their faith, the increase of their love for one another and their steadfast endurance in the face of persecution and affliction (1:3-4). Adversity had prompted a depth of Christian experience to which Paul could appeal when instructing the churches of Achaia. In spite of a misinterpretation of hope and in spite of severe suffering, the church of the Thessalonians was marked by a dynamic faith and a devoted love inspired by Jesus Christ.

## THE LAST JUDGMENT

# 2 THESSALONIANS 1:5-10

How significant is the judgment of God in your thinking?

PAUL URGES THE Thessalonians to penetrate beneath the opposition they are encountering and to perceive the righteous judgment of God (1:5). The fact that their faith has increased rather than diminished under adversity (1:3), and that they have been sustained in much affliction (1:4) is sufficient evidence that God is just and cares for his own people. God's nearness to them in their suffering is the assurance that he will judge between believers and their persecutors. Until the time of that judgment, suffering has meaning precisely because it is endured for the sake of the kingdom of God.

But there must be no mistake; there is a retributive judgment of God (1:6). Retribution for sin is a necessary consequence of life in a moral universe over which God rules as Sovereign. With skillful strokes Paul paints a canvas on which is sketched the Last Judgment (1:7-10). The colors he chooses are dictated by the language and thought forms of the Old Testament when it speaks of the Day of the Lord (see Isaiah 2:10,19,21). Jesus Christ, the righteous Judge, is given central prominence. Before him are assembled two groups of people. The first consists of those who have recklessly disregarded God's laws and have refused obedience to the gospel (1:8). Their rejection of God is further expressed in their affliction of the weak and their persecution of the righteous. Having refused the fellowship of the Lord during their earthly life they now experience exclusion from his presence and his glory

for ever (1:9). This is the just and inescapable consequence of a deliberate defiance of God.

The second group consists of those who have served Christ faithfully and have enjoyed his fellowship. Their reward is to experience relief from the affliction of the world (1:7) and to enjoy in the fullest measure the immediate presence of God in Christ for ever. The reality defies the ability of language to describe all that is meant; the apostle depicts the company of the redeemed as openmouthed, filled with wonder at the glory of Christ. Paul's point is clear. To be a son of the kingdom now, faithfully following Jesus the Christ, is to be with him always (see also 1 Thessalonians 4:17). To reject Christ, and stubbornly align oneself with the disobedient, is to suffer eternal loss.

THE GOAL OF GOD'S CALL

## 2 THESSALONIANS 1:11-12

The sufferings we have endured for Christ are not worthy to be compared with the glory which will be revealed in us.

THROUGHOUT THE TWO letters to the Thessalonians Paul emerges as a man of prayer (1 Thessalonians 1:2f.; 3:11-13; 5:17,23,25,28; 2 Thessalonians 1:3,11f.; 2:16f.; 3:1,5,16,18). He assures the believers that he thanks God for them always (1:3). He now adds that he prays for them always (1:11). His prayer is prompted by reflection on the triumph of Christ in which the Thessalonians will participate. He asks God to count them worthy of his honor and to mature the qualities of life they possess, so that they may add glory to Christ at his coming.

Later in the letter Paul reflects on the origin of God's call in its eternal character and the issue of the divine calling through missionary proclamation (2:13f.). Here the call is viewed from the perspective of its culmination. Only God can equip his people to fulfill their destiny as Christians at the Lord's coming. God brings to birth within us "good resolves" and only he can enable us to translate these holy impulses into action. He gave the gift of faith and only through the consecrating work of the Holy Spirit does faith find its fruit in works of love.

The fulfilment of "every good resolve" and "work of faith" has as its one purpose the glorification of Jesus Christ (1:12). Paul's formulation reflects the Greek text of Isaiah 66:5, "That the name of the Lord may be glorified."

In the Old Testament the “name” involves the character of the person designated; the son who is named “Immanuel” has the character of “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14). In Paul’s prayer “the Lord” is identified as “the Lord Jesus,” and “the name of our Lord” is his person as revealed through his word and works.

The person of the Lord Jesus is to be glorified by the magnificent witness to his grace, which the Thessalonians give when Jesus is revealed at his coming. In that high and holy moment every knee will bow before him and every tongue will confess that he is indeed Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). What will move people most to wonder will be the radical transformation achieved in those who formerly served idols (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9), but who now give evidence of the fulfillment of good resolve and the perfection of works of faith. On that occasion the Thessalonians will share in Christ’s triumph. They have shared his sufferings; they will also share his glory. This is the final outcome of “the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

## RUMOR AND UNREST

### 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-2

A broad exposure to God's word and quiet reflection on its meaning is the best preventative for panic in a time of crisis.

AT THIS POINT Paul speaks about the excitement and unrest in the congregation. In his earlier letter he had spoken of the coming of the Lord and of the gathering of believers to him (1 Thessalonians 4:16f.; 5:10; see also Mark 13:26f.). He had made it clear that while the Day of the Lord comes suddenly, its arrival will not be a surprise to "the children of the day." The finest preparation for its appearance is a life of watchfulness, soberness and prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:2-10). In spite of this instruction, a rumor of the imminent appearance of the exalted Lord appears to have unsettled completely the thought and action of a number within the fellowship. They were behaving irrationally and irresponsibly. If the end of the world were already upon them, what time remained for getting ready to meet the Lord? If the Lord were at hand, what need remained for working?

The rumor, which circulated as certain truth, was that the Day of the Lord would come before the end of the year. (In the papyri, Paul's term "has come" is used with reference to the current year.) It is difficult to trace its source. What Paul had said in the first letter allowed the interpretation that the Lord would come during their generation (1 Thessalonians 4:17). It is possible that they misinterpreted what he had said about the awesome suddenness of his appearing (see 1 Thessalonians 5:2f.).

What is clear is that Paul's authorization was claimed for the statement that the Day of the Lord had come. The apostle emphatically denies the report and categorically dismisses any allegation that in prophecy, in ordinary conversation or in a letter, he had proclaimed that the crisis of consummation was at hand. The ease with which the congregation had been disrupted was particularly disturbing, since Paul had given them specific instructions about the conditions that must prevail before it would be meaningful to talk about the end of the world (2:5). The apostle had the right to expect a degree of maturity on the part of believers, whose responsibility was to pass all rumors and reports through the grid of truth committed to them in the apostolic instruction.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN CONTROL

## 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-12

When you are confronted by lawlessness and rebellion everywhere it is time to make certain that God is enthroned at the center of your life.

IN THIS LETTER there is a vivid reference to the final judgment (1:6-10), a brief sketch of the events which precede the consummation (2:3-8), and a characterization of “the lawless one,” whose coming counterfeits the coming of the Lord (2:9-12). But precisely in these passages Paul emerges as a pastor who offers these descriptions not for their own sake but for the practical encouragement of his converts. So nothing is said about the events surrounding the manifestation of “the lawless one” (2:9-12) until Paul has spoken of his destruction (2:8). The intention is not to introduce new truths but to remind the Thessalonians of the oral instruction the apostle had given while still with them (2:5).

There is a theology of history and judgment implied in the letter, but it is subordinated to a distinctly pastoral concern. It is therefore a mistake to turn to 2 Thessalonians for a blueprint by which to read the “signs of the times” and to plot the course of the unveiling of the Antichrist. Much that Paul wrote in this section—for example, the identity of the power or person who restrains the lawless one (2:6-7)—remains obscure to modern readers. Nevertheless, the affirmation that all things take place by God’s sovereign will is transparent. This truth, together with the consequence that God has

destined believers to life and fellowship with himself (1:5ff.,11f.; 2:1,13ff.; 3:1-5), was the message that the fainthearted needed to hear.

The pattern of truth envisaged by Paul is sufficiently clear. He had instructed the believers to look for a general rebellion against God before the end arrived. There is no reason to suppose that he had in his mind a clear picture regarding the form that the rebellion would assume. He now reminds his readers that it has not yet occurred. A divine restraint of lawlessness still provides time for rescuing people who are perishing (2:3-7).

The lawless one is the embodiment of wickedness in human form. The description of his coming, power and self-deification amounts to a blasphemous caricature of Christ. He is swept into prominence on the crest of a wave of rebellion prompted by the activity of Satan. Yet he too is subject to the sovereign control of God who will destroy him and introduce the consummation of history through Jesus Christ (2:3,8-10).

Paul's thought is related to a practical situation: the end has not yet arrived. The Thessalonians must carry on in a sober and disciplined fashion in spite of deception and persecution. Positively, they must love the truth and find their delight in righteousness, confident that God alone is sovereign.

CHOSEN AND INSTRUCTED

## 2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-15

True Christians are secure in God and will share in Christ's glory.

A CONSIDERATION OF the deception of many who are to perish because of their refusal to receive the truth of God (2:10-12) confirms the apostle's thankfulness for the Thessalonians who so warmly received the gospel (2:13). His people were afflicted and perplexed. Paul assures them that they have nothing to fear in life or death. Like Benjamin, whose blessing was to live in safety with God (Deuteronomy 33:12), they are "brothers and sisters loved by the Lord." Like Israel, God loves them and chose them because of that love (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Before the world began God had taken thought for them. The certainty of their deliverance from sin, death and condemnation lies in the timeless will of God that they should experience salvation. This had become clear when they responded joyfully to God's call through the gospel proclaimed by the apostle (2:14). Their response to the God who committed himself to people was the commitment of themselves to God. The prospect Paul now holds before the congregation is the enjoyment of the full perfection of Christ's glory. With this vision before them the Thessalonians are to stand firm, conscious of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the undergirding of the everlasting arms of a loving Father.

To help them stand firm, Paul commends to the church the importance of apostolic tradition (2:15). Under this category he includes both oral and written instruction. Much is said in 2 Thessalonians about the establishment,

preservation and authority of the apostolic tradition (see 2:1f.,5,15; 3:6,10,14,17), and it is clear that Paul regards his letter as a deposit of tradition (3:14). The tradition of teaching delivered to the church remains normative for the testing of doctrine and the regulation of conduct. If the Thessalonians will remember this, there will be no recurrence of an atmosphere of crisis in the congregation based on misinformation or deliberate deception (2:1f.,5).

THE BLESSING OF GOD

2 THESSALONIANS 2:16-17

God's comfort is the assurance that he is concerned with all that exposes you to hurt and suffering.

THROUGHOUT CHAPTER 2 Paul has been concerned to quieten the frantic excitement of believers who were convinced that the Lord would come before the year was completed. His pointed appeal not to be torn from their moorings like ships poorly anchored in a storm (2:1f.) was buttressed by a patient and clear rehearsal of the parade of events which must precede the Day of the Lord (2:3-12). A word of thanksgiving to God for the unmistakable signs of his choice of the Thessalonian believers prepares the church for a calm and reflective consideration of the pattern of truth set out in the oral and written instruction which they have received (2:13-15). Paul then crowns his response to the crisis with a prayer (2:16f.).

The source of encouragement for the ruffled believers is "our Lord Jesus Christ" and "God our Father," whom Paul sees as one in giving love, comfort and hope to the congregation. The mention of the Son before the Father is due to the fact that the apostle has just been contemplating what it will mean to share "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2:14). But about both Father and Son it may be said that "He loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace" (2:16). This language echoes the strong assurance Paul has just given to the believers in 2:14f., where he wrote about God's loving favor, his eternal choice and the hope of glory set before the believers.

He now adds a fervent request that they may appropriate that comfort and strength which God has made available to them from eternity, and that he will enable them to reflect stability in all that they do and say (2:17). One can sense the peace of this blessing on the congregation.

A REQUEST FOR INTERCESSION

## 2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

As you pray for the advancement of the gospel through pastors, teachers and missionaries, your confidence can rest in the faithfulness of God.

BEFORE INTRODUCING THE second main theme of the letter (3:6ff.), Paul draws attention to his own dangerous circumstances on the isthmus, and invites the believers to pray specifically that the word of the Lord may “speed on and triumph” (3:1). The word of preaching is regarded as a spiritual force which is capable of sweeping through the land under its own power. While Corinth was well known for its vice and violence, Paul was far less concerned for his own safety than for the success of the mission. He coveted for the province of Achaia the same enthusiastic response to the gospel that he had witnessed in Macedonia.

What Paul actually encountered, however, was the concerted effort of people dedicated to stop the advance of the mission. The allusion to “wicked and evil people” has in view certain Jewish leaders in Corinth who were at this time making Paul’s work as difficult as possible (Acts 18:6,12-17). The sad word that “not all have faith” (3:2) refers almost certainly to the stubborn refusal of the synagogue to acknowledge Jesus as the promised Messiah. Was the vision through which God strengthened Paul (Acts 18:9-11) the answer to the prayers of the Thessalonians?

The apostle's attention moves quickly from his own encounter with evildoers to the plight of the Thessalonians, who also experience harassment (see 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-7). The lack of faith in people sharpens his appreciation of the faithfulness of Christ, who will strengthen the believers and protect them from evil (3:3). Whether Paul has in view evildoers (see 3:2) or the Evil One (see 2:9) is unclear; the ambiguity may be deliberate, since the evil which people commit is inspired by Satan. Confronted with powers greater than their own, the Thessalonians were to flee to Christ for refuge.

Paul's confidence that the Thessalonians would carry out the instructions he is about to give is based on their common allegiance to Christ (3:4). Before turning to the matter immediately at hand—the discipline of the idle—he prays that the Lord may direct their hearts to the love of God and the patience of Christ, which are to find a response in the obedience of believers (3:5).

PERSISTENT IDLENESS

## 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13

Paul tackles head on the problem of those who refuse to work. Despite others' bad example, we are to keep busy doing what is good.

THE REMAINDER OF the letter is addressed to the persistent problem of idleness. The offense of those in the congregation who refused to work had two aspects: first, they were living irresponsibly, and secondly their behavior showed a rejection of the clear teaching Paul had given. Paul had first confronted the problem of idleness in the early days of the mission (3:10). He had supplemented his command instructing the necessity of work with the appeal in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:11f.; 5:14). He now imposes a more severe injunction on the congregation, to place the idle under the discipline of separation (3:6). Paul's appeal drew its support from his own example of toil and labor while in Thessalonica (3:7-9; see 1 Thessalonians 2:9). He had applied himself to his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18:2f.), and with the money he earned he had paid for the food eaten by his company (3:8). The motive which prompted this course of action was the necessity to establish a pattern of responsible self-support which could be imitated by his converts (3:7,9).

In any great cosmopolitan center, idlers and beggars could be found in great number. When these people came to faith, it was necessary to demand of them a reformation of manners. Persistence in the professional loafing which suited their disposition would burden the church unduly and detract

from the seriousness with which the gospel was advanced. To set them an example, Paul had refrained from accepting hospitality or support; he would not make the gospel a spade with which to dig, in spite of his right to do so (see also Matthew 10:9-10; 1 Timothy 5:17f.).

Throughout this section Paul is writing to the majority in the congregation. He now speaks directly to those unwilling to work. Moffatt's translation succeeds in reproducing Paul's word play in 3:11: "Some of your numbers are loafing, busy-bodies instead of busy." On the authority of Jesus Christ, Paul commands them to stop interfering and to earn their own living (3:12). The final word is addressed to the whole congregation. They are not to be distracted from the central concerns of the Lord by the hysteria of the fainthearted or the demands of the idle for community support (3:13). The prayer of 3:5, pointing to the steadfast patience of Christ, is the apostle's provision for a people who, understandably, are growing weary with exasperation.

## ENFORCING DISCIPLINE

### 2 THESSALONIANS 3:14-16

Paul warns against tactlessness or unnecessary harshness in applying discipline: the offender is not to be treated as an enemy but is to be warned as a brother or sister.

PAUL'S FINAL PROVISION for dealing with the idle implies a public reading of his letter (see also 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Once the letter has been publicized, no excuse remained for an unwillingness to comply with its instructions. If tactful appeal failed to result in obedience, and the apostle's strong injunctions were disregarded, social pressure must be brought to bear on the obstinate individual.

Such a person can no longer be regarded as a person in good standing in the church. They are to be "noted," which may mean that they are to be publicly named in a meeting of the church. Close fellowship is to be withdrawn from the offender in order to drive them to their senses. No action less radical could hope to penetrate a heart hardened by the persistent refusal to put into practice the apostolic teaching, delivered first orally at Thessalonica (3:10), and then in written form in the two letters to the church. Discipline is imposed to shame the person into thoughtful reflection and repentance in order that they may be brought back into the fellowship of the obedient.

Basic to Paul's approach in the discipline of the idle is the assumption that the social relationships of individual Christians are a matter of concern for the

whole congregation. Society judges the church by the public actions of those who profess to belong to the church. The man who becomes a Christian, therefore, is responsible to God and to his brothers in Christ. If he breaks faith and brings dishonor to the name of Christ, it becomes necessary for all in the fellowship to exercise moral courage and deal with his offense. However, the heart of Christian discipline is love. This moves the apostle to warn against tactlessness or unnecessary harshness in applying discipline: the offender is not to be regarded as an enemy who must be purged, but is to be warned as one would warn his own brother of imminent danger (3:15).

The purpose of discipline is to restore sound life to the congregation. Paul recognizes, however, that only “the Lord of peace” can mediate that quality of dynamic relationship and understanding in the church that will assure a climate of peace in which the tensions of the fellowship may be resolved (3:16). The peace about which the apostle writes is a reality which asserts itself over against the threat of conflict and misunderstanding. Paul is himself a mediator of this peace when he adds to the traditional greeting, “The Lord be with you,” the significant word “all.” Within the “all” are included the troublesome idle as well as the pillars of the congregation. The presence of the Lord with “all” will guarantee both the administration of the quality of discipline demanded and the restoration of the disciplined to the fellowship of the obedient.

A PRAYER FOR GRACE

## 2 THESSALONIANS 3:17-18

Where there are divisions, Paul prays that God's grace will reach everyone.

THE WRITING OF the final greeting in Paul's own hand was very important, for it guaranteed the authenticity of the document. The practice of signing our personal name at the conclusion of a letter was unknown in the ancient world; the place of the signature was taken by the final greeting written by the sender himself. In many original papyrus letters the final greeting is clearly in a hand different from the rest of the text. In such cases, the sender dictated the letter to a professional scribe and then endorsed it on his own by adding the final greeting himself. On three occasions Paul says explicitly that he has written the final greeting "with my own hand" (1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17). He also refers to his writing in Galatians 6:11 and Philemon 19. This suggests that while Paul may have written the brief letter to Philemon, he dictated the other four except for the final greeting (which in the case of Galatians extends from 6:11 to the end).

The importance of the caution that "this is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine" (3:17) lies in the fact that some people were attributing to the apostle statements which he had not made and had succeeded in creating confusion and disturbance (see 2:1f.). Paul assures his readers that they will be able to distinguish between the false and the true by applying this

test to letters claiming to have come from him (see also 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

The emphasis in the final greeting is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (3:18). It is significant that the letter both opens and closes with a prayer for grace. This should not be understood as a mere formality, for Paul’s prayers are intimately related to the crisis at Thessalonica. The gracious favor and steadfast love of God expressed in Jesus Christ provide the center of stability for Christians hard pressed by persecution and slander from outside (1:4), and by fears and disturbances within, the congregation (2:1ff.).

The final greeting is identical with the conclusion to 1 Thessalonians (5:28), with the significant addition of the inclusive word “all.” As in 3:16, Paul’s pastoral concern reaches out to the entire congregation in an expression of tenderness which would not exclude the troublesome or the disorderly. While it had been necessary to speak harshly concerning those who caused disruptions in the church, the generous “all” demonstrates the reality of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and gives the prayer the character of a blessing.

## INTRODUCTION

# 1 TIMOTHY, 2 TIMOTHY & TITUS

## LEON MORRIS

THESE THREE WRITINGS are known in modern times by the collective title the “Pastoral Epistles.” They contain material useful to pastors and are concerned with the immediate practical problems confronting Christians in a pastoral situation. As they stand, they give guidance to Timothy and Titus, two of Paul’s assistants, as to how they should handle the problems involved in their oversight of churches. These men were, of course, not pastors of individual groups of Christians, but rather superintendents of pastors whose sphere was much wider.

Nowhere in antiquity is there any indication that the general character of these letters was doubted. It was accepted that they were genuine letters of Paul and that they were written to the two recipients mentioned. But in modern times both conclusions are often doubted. It is held by some that the letters were written, probably early in the second century, by some orthodox believer, keen to perpetuate Paul’s teaching as he understood it, and only conventionally addressed to Timothy and Titus. The principal reasons for holding such views are first, linguistic (the language of these three letters is held to be so different from that of the ten “genuine” Pauline letters that they must come from a different author) and secondly, doctrinal (these letters are said to be concerned with doctrines which were of no concern to Paul while, conversely, characteristic Pauline doctrines are passed over).

It may be significant that few critics care to commit themselves to the view that there is nothing Pauline about our three letters. They usually hold that there are some genuine Pauline fragments which a later writer has taken and written up. It may be accepted that there is something Pauline about them. And a number of competent critics are convinced that the objections to Paul's authorship of the whole will not stand up to critical examination.

In these studies we will treat the letters as genuine letters written by Paul with a desire to convey to his younger assistants guidance for the oversight of the churches.

As to their date, the biographical details which emerge incidentally make it impossible in the judgment of most scholars to fit them into the period covered by Acts. It seems that Paul was released from the imprisonment mentioned at the end of that book and engaged in further missionary activity. These letters belong to this late period.

## THE LAWFUL USE OF THE LAW

### 1 TIMOTHY 1:1-11

How easy it is to become more interested in controversial issues and novelties than in actually doing God's work.

A FIRST-CENTURY LETTER usually began with the name of the writer, a short description of him, the name of the recipient(s) with a similar brief description and a short prayer. Paul breathes life into this conventional framework by making it the means of bringing out important Christian teaching. Here we see something of the nature of apostleship (a man does not say, "I think I'll be an apostle"; he must first be commanded by God and Christ), the close relationship between God and Christ (none else could be joined together as they are), the tender relationship between Paul and his convert Timothy and the primacy of such as grace, mercy and peace. Paul usually has grace and peace in his greetings, but in his two letters to Timothy "mercy" is also included.

In the letter itself, the first thing emphasized is the importance of sound doctrine resulting in upright living. "The law is good," Paul says, "if anyone uses it lawfully" (1:8). It is for the restraint of wickedness of all kinds (1:9f.). This might be expressed in another way, as when Paul speaks of the aim of his charge to Timothy as love (1:5). The use of both ideas shows that he is not arguing for the kind of situational ethics close to some modern thinkers. He agrees that love is the important attitude for Christians, and that it proceeds "from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith" (1:5).

But this does not mean that the law can be disregarded. Elsewhere Paul tells us that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10) and this is much the thought here. This is not in contradiction of the gospel, but in accordance with it (1:11). And it is something given, something entrusted, to Paul (1:11) and indeed to all Christians.

But it is always easier to get into an argument than to live the Christian life. It is human nature to prefer vigorous discussion to sacrificial living. “Certain persons” (1:3) whom Timothy confronted were using the law the wrong way. Clearly they were using some form of allegorical interpretation which made the Bible yield “myths and endless genealogies” (1:4); they had “wandered away into vain discussion” (1:6). It is still quite possible to use the Bible not as the source of “the divine training that is in faith” (1:4), but as the starting point for the exposition of our own pet theories. Calling these “Christian,” “orthodox” or “sound doctrine” does not make them so. For that there must be a real submission to what God has revealed.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17

How much do you thank God for his great patience with you in your life?

WONDER AT THE miracle of grace that changed Saul the persecutor of the church into Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ never left this transformed sinner. The mention of the gospel with which he has been entrusted (1:11) immediately recalls to his mind what that gospel meant in his own experience. He had “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” Christ. His conversion did not represent a minor change in a man who was fairly well disposed to things Christian. It represented God’s miracle in the heart of a deeply guilty man. Both the guilt and the miracle were real. There is always a tendency for Christ’s followers to limit God’s power. Without ever putting it into words, we frequently act as though we expect conversions only among those who have the right background and upbringing. While we should never undervalue the importance of good early training nor the way God so often uses this to bring about spiritual depth, we should not regard it as the necessary beginning to a real conversion. The miracle of Paul has been repeated many times in the history of the church, not least in our own day.

Out of this come two important lessons. The first is that the salvation of sinners was the purpose of the coming of Jesus into the world (1:15): he did not only come to seek; he came to save. The second is that God uses whatever experiences a person has before their conversion as well as those

afterward. Paul received mercy “for this reason,” that Christ’s work in him might be an example. Every converted sinner has something in their background that now leads to the glory of God no matter how little credit it was to the sinner when they did it.

**Notes** 1:13: “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” translates three nouns, “blasphemer and persecutor and insolent man.” That he acted “ignorantly in unbelief” is not the reason for Paul’s being saved, but it is a mitigating circumstance. He had even then acted “with a clear conscience” (2 Timothy 1:3). Notice that he does not exaggerate his sinfulness. 1:14: “overflowed” translates a strong term giving the thought of lavish and abundant supply. 1:15: “The saying is sure and worthy” renders a Greek expression found only in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). It marks the saying as both important and reliable. Paul’s humility comes out at the end of the verse. 1:17: typically Paul’s gratitude finds expression in a little outburst of praise. “The King of the ages” is found only here in the New Testament (unless it is read in Revelation 15:3). It is a strong affirmation of God’s eternity.

A CHARGE TO TIMOTHY

1 TIMOTHY 1:18–2:7

How important do you view prayer—and why should you pray for everyone, especially those in authority?

PAUL'S TESTIMONY TO God's grace at work in him is not an idle tale. He wants Timothy to be inspired by what God has done in him, so that he too may go on to fulfill all God's purposes in his own life. God has important work for Timothy to do and it is important that he should not fail to accomplish it. There is dispute about the meaning of "the prophetic utterances which pointed to you" (1:18), and some see a reference to Timothy's ordination, calling attention to 4:14. But perhaps more relevant is Acts 13:1-3, which speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in initiating the travels of Barnabas and Paul which were to lead the apostles to Timothy. (See NIV, "the prophecies once made about you".)

Either way, Paul is stressing the divine initiative in calling people to any work of ministry. Timothy should obey the charge not because on the purely human level he has started a work and ought to finish it (true though that might be), but because God has designated him for an act of service which he dare not fail to accomplish. Paul is able to point to a certain Hymenaeus and Alexander who have rejected the leading of their conscience and who accordingly have "made shipwreck of their faith" (1:19).

After this buildup, it is perhaps surprising that the very first duty Paul lays upon Timothy is that of prayer, especially prayer for rulers and all in

positions of authority. But prayer is not the tepid, insipid thing that modern Christians have so often made it. It is an adventure with God. It is a powerful weapon for the waging of our warfare in the world. It is the believer's one effective means of bringing about powerful results. And this is not to be confined to what we would call "spiritual" things. The issues of community life concern Christians as much as they concern any member of the community. But whereas our unbelieving friends usually do no more than complain about those set over us, as Christians we can, and must, pray for them. In our prayers we are partners with them and set forward right purposes.

**Notes** 1:20: The meaning of "delivered to Satan" (see also 1 Corinthians 5:5) is not clear, but it involves disciplinary action and probably supernatural punishment. 2:4: God's will is for salvation, not that people be lost. 2:6: "ransom" points to the substitutionary nature of Christ's offering of himself.

**Meditation** Three key doctrines of the Christian faith are found in 2:5-6—the unity of the Godhead, the mediatorship of Christ and the atoning sacrifice of the cross.

FOCUS ON WOMEN

1 TIMOTHY 2:8-15

The most obvious things about a woman, writes Paul, should not be her fashion sense but her good deeds.

THE RESPECTIVE PLACES of the sexes have been a problem from the very beginning. It is clear that in the early church there were some women who felt that the fact that “there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) abolished all distinctions between the sexes. They were emancipated, and could do anything at all that men could do. Paul deals with the topic more than once. He maintains that before God there is no room for a superior sex. All are equal in his sight. But that does not mean that the functions to be fulfilled by the two are identical. The sexes are made for different roles, and, while full allowance should be made for exceptional cases, neither should try to usurp the functions of the other.

On this occasion his subject is public worship. Men should pray everywhere, he says. “Lifting holy hands” reminds us that posture for prayer is not without significance. The Bible does not prescribe any one position, but as we pray we should be aware that physical posture has some influence on our mental attitude. “Without anger or quarreling” spells out the importance of right inward attitudes. We cannot pray effectively when filled with concern for our own petty vindication. It is likely that we should take the sense of 2:9 from the previous verse, “that women likewise should pray, dressed in respectable clothes.” Paul’s first point is that women should set

more store by their way of life than their dress code (2:9f.; this does not mean that they should not dress attractively, it is an insistence that the priorities should be right). His second point is that a woman should not take a place of superiority over her husband (2:12: “a man” is the usual word for “husband,” though it can on occasion mean “man”). He drives this home by an appeal to the case of Adam who was “not deceived” by Satan in the way Eve was. He simply followed her, but her fall came about through assuming an unjustified place of leadership. 2:15 might mean that women will be “brought safely through childbirth,” or “saved” in the sense of finding fulfillment and a proper place in life through bearing children. The man who has just written 2:5f. cannot be held to mean that eternal salvation is gained by childbirth.

**Thought** The conditions of effective praying are purity (toward our selves), peace (toward other people), faith (toward God) (A.M. Stibbs on 2:8).

ON BEING AN ELDER

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7

These verses remind us we should pray more for our church leaders.

PAUL'S SECOND "SURE saying" (see 1:15) emphasizes the nobility of Christian service. He is speaking specifically about the elder or overseer (see also Titus 1:5-9). These officials exercised leadership in the early church, and from their functions there emerged in due course the offices as we know them in the later church. At this early stage in the church's history, Paul's prime concern is that those who so exercise leadership should be men whose lives agree with their teaching. Notice the importance attached to home life (3:2,4f.). It is an interesting provision that the elder must not be a recent convert (3:6): maturity in faith is important for all who exercise any function of leadership. Paul also attaches importance to the way the church's leadership is seen from outside (3:7). If the elder does not have a good reputation there is danger. The devil will catch him and that will be greatly to the disadvantage of all that he stands for. He himself will be harmed and so will the church.

**To ponder** List in order of immediate importance, in the light of conditions in contemporary society, the elder's qualifications and duties found in these verses. To what extent are these demands met in your local church? Do you think church officers should be appointed if no one fulfills these high standards exactly?

## ON BEING A DEACON

### I TIMOTHY 3:8-13

Dignity, integrity and uprightness are among the marks of deacons.

IT APPEARS THAT in the early church the main element of the local ministry was elders (overseers) and deacons (apostles, prophets and others exercised wider ministries and cannot be thought part of the local organization). So after speaking about elders (overseers) bishop Paul turns his attention to the deacons. Between two sets of instructions specifically addressed to deacons (3:8-10,12f.) there is another for “the women” (3:11). Some consider this refers to the wives of the deacons, others to deaconesses. The principal point in favor of the former is that there is little clear evidence in the New Testament of a specific order of deaconess, or for that matter in the early church. In favor of the latter is the difficulty of seeing why Paul should take two bites at the deacon’s duties interspersed with an instruction that does not concern a church official. On the whole it seems more likely that he does refer to deaconesses.

As in the case of elders, deacons must be people of good character. They must have a sense of serious purpose, be careful in their speech and not indulge themselves either in wine or loving money. A firm hold on the faith is important (3:9) and it is important that they should be tested before being admitted to office. Unfortunately Paul does not tell us what the test consisted of, nor what the office consisted of (see also Acts 6:1-7). We are left to guess at both. We do not know what deacons did in those early days. There is a

reference to the deacon's home life (3:12) and to the result of serving well (3:13).

**Notes** 3:8: deacons are to be "serious" ("dignified") as are the women (3:11); and for that matter the elders (3:4). The term denotes a sense of high and serious purpose, the opposite of frivolity. 3:9: "mystery" means something that people cannot possibly work out for themselves (not simply what is difficult to work out), and usually, as here, there is the added thought that it has now been revealed. People would never have guessed that the way of salvation has nothing to do with their good living, prayers, offerings, etc, but that it depended on God's sending his Son to die for us. That had to be revealed. 3:11: "slanderers" is literally "devils." Let us not take slanderous gossip lightly as though it were a normal part of human life. It is not: it is devilish.

THE FAITH—AND ITS PERVERSION

1 TIMOTHY 3:14–4:5

Having written about the outward qualities of godliness, Paul turns to a hymn describing the mystery of godliness.

AT THE END of chapter 3 we have a poetic expression which may well have formed part of a Christian hymn. The arrangement in modern Bibles brings out the rhythmical structure, though it could be three couplets or simply six lines. “He” (3:16) at the beginning is properly “who” or “He who” (see *ESV* margin; some manuscripts read “God” but “He who” seems correct). This is not explained but there is no doubt but that Jesus Christ is meant. The hymn then refers to his incarnation, then apparently to his resurrection. It was this that the Spirit used to bring about his vindication (see Romans 1:4). “Seen by angels” may refer to the same thing, for angels saw him at the resurrection. But it may well be the ascension that is primarily in mind at this point. There is uncertainty about the last line. This may be another reference to the ascension, but it makes good sense to see it as used prophetically of the final triumph. Then the six lines of the hymn would represent six stages arranged chronologically. This is a magnificent statement of the sweep of Christ’s saving work.

But some are not content with it, and Paul moves immediately to those who “will depart from the faith” (4:1). That the Spirit “expressly says” this indicates that what is to take place is not beyond God’s control. He is

supreme despite human raging and a preference for “deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (4:1). The heretics in mind are wrong in three ways:

1. Their doctrine is astray.
2. Their conscience is also astray (4:2).
3. Their attitude to the things God has created is astray (4:3).

In the ancient world as in the modern, people sometimes advocated celibacy for religious reasons. Some also drew up curious food laws. Paul insists that both are completely wrong, for nothing that God has created is to be rejected if it is received in the proper way (4:4f.).

**Notes** 3:15: note the dignity of the church and its place in God’s scheme of things. 3:16: “mystery” again, the essence of “our religion” is not of human origin but has been revealed by God. 4:4f.: control of diet for proper reasons is not in question. Paul is opposing the setting up of food laws for religious reasons. Christians know no such taboos. 4:3: Paul is not saying that no one is called to serve God in the unmarried state (see also 1 Corinthians 7:7), but that celibacy is not in principle to be exalted above marriage.

## TRAINING IN GODLINESS

### I TIMOTHY 4:6-11

What do we learn here about living in this world and preparing for the next?

THE IDEA THAT we simply grow in the Christian faith by doing nothing about it is crazy. Paul has already pointed out that the devil is active and eager to trip up even Christian leaders (3:7). Now he develops the theme that it is important for the servants of God to train themselves in godliness (4:7). There is always the temptation to set up any rules that may be devised by Christians into a system that must be obeyed at any cost. It is even easy to slip into the error of thinking that our systems enable us to achieve merit before God. When such attitudes occur, our systems are a snare. But that does not mean that we should go to the opposite extreme and simply drift through life. We must be nourished (4:6). We must be trained (4:7). We must toil and strive (4:10). It can be very helpful for believers to work out guidelines by which we engage in the kind of reading, prayer, worship, etc which will build us up in the faith. There is no one way of doing this. To lay down rules binding on all Christians would be a calamitous error. But, human nature being what it is, for the average Christian settled habits, especially of prayer and Bible study, are tremendously important.

Christians are nourished on “the words of the faith” and of “good doctrine” (4:6). This means that study of the Bible and of Christian doctrine are necessary. The fact that we do this will in itself put us off “godless and

silly myths” (4:7). There are many perversions of the faith. But Christians who are nourished on the word of God and sound doctrine will not readily fall prey to them.

We are familiar with the value of physical exercise for the development of physical fitness. Paul brings out the point that there is a spiritual analogy (4:8). He goes further, pointing out that training in godliness is valuable not only in the here and now, but also “for the life to come.” How foolish therefore to neglect it! He solemnly assures Timothy of the importance of this (4:9) and rounds off the section with the reminder that all this is worth doing because our hope is set on God.

When Paul speaks of God as “the Savior of all, especially of those who believe” he is not saying that all will be saved ultimately and that believers will be specially saved. He is saying that God watches over all people, delivering them from evils and showering his blessings on them. He makes his sun shine on all and sends rain on just and unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). But “Savior” has a fuller, richer and deeper meaning for those who believe. They are saved in a way other people are not.

AN EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW

## 1 TIMOTHY 4:12-16

Timothy is to set an example in speech, life, love, faith and purity—  
what a witness we would be if we were like that!

STUDENT UNREST, PROTESTS and even riots, in many countries mean that modern young people are in no danger of oversubmissiveness. “Let no one despise your youth” (4:12) is scarcely a necessary injunction for our generation, no matter how much Timothy needed it. Young people as a whole are very confident, at least in their criticism of the establishment.

But even modern young people may ask, “Exactly what am I trying to do? What kind of life do I want?” Paul reminds Timothy that people do not live for themselves. Inevitably their lives form some kind of example. What kind is the important thing. Both “speech and conduct” are important, and Paul looks for a lead “in love, in faith, in purity.” All three are important in a world like ours.

Timothy was a public figure in the church and Paul goes on to consider how he should fulfill his responsibilities. It is interesting that in the conduct of worship he singles out public reading of Scripture, preaching and teaching (4:13). It is still the case that these are the significant elements in worship. Christian worship must center on the reading of Scripture, for it is rooted in what God has revealed in Christ. The preaching which sets out the teachings of Scripture is a necessary consequence. “Teaching” is not so different from preaching, but it puts some emphasis on instruction in sound doctrine. What

is taught in the name of Christ is important. A little later Paul stresses this again: “Take heed to yourself and to your teaching” (4:16). In a day when many conflicting views are put forward as authentic Christianity, it is good to pay renewed attention to the content of teaching. Scripture is our standard, and what does not agree with the revelation is not accepted.

Paul further appeals to his young friend, “Do not neglect the gift you have” (4:14). It is easy to long for gifts we do not have and in the process neglect the one God has given us. In Timothy’s case Paul is apparently referring to ordination, for that is the natural interpretation of the laying on of the hands of the elders. Fulfillment of any ministry is not automatic, but requires diligent effort.

**Note 4:16:** “save” is used in a wide sense of realizing to the full what is implicit in Christian salvation.

HONOR WHERE HONOR IS DUE

## 1 TIMOTHY 5:1-8

Because the church is like a family, members are to treat one another as they would brothers and sisters, parents and children. This means that we must care for those in need.

PAUL TURNS TO classes of people in the church and instructs Timothy in the proper attitudes to be taken toward them. He begins with the “older man” or perhaps the “elder” (it is not always certain whether the term is being used of age or of official position, but the official appears in 4:17, so here we probably have senior citizens). It is not proper for a youth to rebuke his elders. Timothy should therefore treat older men as he would his father. This gives the clue to the way Christians should interpret all their relationships in the community of believers. They should treat fellow Christians as brothers, mothers or sisters (5:1f.).

It seems clear that in the early church there was a sustained attempt to relieve the needs of widows (see also Acts 6:1 for the early origin of the practice). Due to the social customs of the day they were in a particularly vulnerable position and the church saw their care as something important. But the financial resources of the church were very limited, and it was important that they be used wisely. This appears to be behind 5:3ff., with the distinction between “real widows” and others.

Paul gives instructions about family godliness. People should make provision for their own where they can (5:4; see also 5:16). It seems likely

that when the church began to help the needy widows, some who were far from worthy tried to get in on the list. So Paul speaks of the kind of life that a “real widow” will live. He contrasts her dependence on God and her constant prayers with the self-indulgence of one who “is dead even while she lives” (5:5f.). And Paul can use very strong language when he comes to the importance of making proper provision for one’s own immediate family (5:5). This is not the kind of thing to be left to the collective efforts of the church where one can well do it oneself. Even unbelievers will often perform this duty and in so doing show up professing Christians who do not. “He has disowned the faith” is a strong statement and should provoke serious reflection.

## YOUNG WIDOWS

# 1 TIMOTHY 5:9-16

Paul continues to give practical advice about widows.

PAUL CONTINUES WITH the problem of widows. First he speaks about enrolling mature widows whose lives commend the faith. Presumably this means putting them on an official list of people who would be given financial or other assistance, and who apparently would be expected to do something to forward the work of the church. The widow who qualifies is over sixty years of age, having been “faithful to her husband” (5:9, NIV) and has lived an exemplary life.

Younger widows are a different matter. From 5:12 it seems that being “enrolled” meant pledging oneself to some form of service which involved continuing being unmarried. Young widows naturally looked forward to remarriage in due course, and this made it difficult for them to fulfill their pledge. While they were doing service it would be with a divided mind, for some of their attention would be concentrated on their own future marriage. And if they did marry, the pledge to continue in that service would be broken. Paul is not blaming them for a desire for remarriage. On the contrary, he expressly encourages it (5:14). But he is realistic enough to see the effect of their natural desires on their performance of the duties expected of those on the roll. Moreover, lack of maturity may lead them to indulge in gossip when they think they are engaged in visiting (5:13). Paul was a very practical person! On all counts it was better that they should be not enrolled.

Over against this Paul sets the desirable procedure. These young widows should by all means remarry (5:14). This would give each a proper place in a household and an important task to perform. Instead of being the targets for legitimate criticism, they would then give no occasion for “the enemy” to gain an entrance. Paul makes it clear that he is speaking out of experience. Some had already made the most grievous error by straying after Satan (5:15). The reference in the concluding verse to “any believing woman” is rather puzzling as one would have thought the duty of providing for one’s own family rested on male Christians as well as on women. Probably Paul means that if there are widows in a household they will come under the immediate care of the wife. In this way, she should “assist them.” The church can then concentrate its aid on those who are really destitute.

## THE MINISTRY OF ELDERS

### 1 TIMOTHY 5:17-25

Paul doesn't share the thought that "preachers are six days invisible and one day incomprehensible." Those who preach and teach are worthy of special consideration.

THE EXACT FUNCTIONS of the elders are not set out in the New Testament. But we may assume that they were not dissimilar to those exercised by the synagogue elders, in which case the elders were the responsible local officials. Here we learn that they (or at least some of them) "ruled" and that some labored "in preaching and teaching." The implication from the latter statement is that some did not preach or teach. They were to be remunerated for their work (5:18), and treated with respect, not lightly to be accused (5:19). But this does not mean that they were not to be accused under any circumstances. They might on occasion do wrong, and the persistent sinner must be rebuked publicly (5:20). Precisely because they were leaders and very much in the public eye, wrongdoing on their part must not be condoned. So Timothy is warned against partiality (5:21).

In its context the reference to "the laying on of hands" (5:22) must refer to ordination (see also 4:14). This is a very important act and must be exercised with due care. To ordain someone who is not worthy is to be responsible for the harm that will follow; it means participating in the sins of another. At the end of this passage another aspect of sin is emphasized, namely, that in the end sin will come out. Sometimes sin appears hidden, sometimes obvious.

But nothing can prevent its final disclosure. It is comforting to reflect that the same is true of goodness (5:25).

There is a little health note (5:23). The ancients did not know that germs in the water supply could cause disease, and they were ignorant of the fact that the alcohol in wine killed them. But they normally drank nothing but water or wine, and they observed that people who drank water only sometimes got diseases that those who used wine did not. It is this which is behind Paul's instruction. In our day, when there are many drinks and when the causes of sickness are better known, it is possible to obtain the required result without resorting to the use of wine.

**Notes** 5:17: "honor" is usually taken to mean or at least include the thought of remuneration. 5:18: note the linking as "Scripture" of verses from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Matthew 10:10 (or Luke 10:7).

**Thought** The ministry especially worthy of "double honor" (5:17) is that of preaching and teaching. Consider the implications of this fact.

## SLAVES

### 1 TIMOTHY 6:1-2

Why should slaves respect their masters? What can we learn from this about relationships at work?

SLAVES PRESENTED A problem to the early church. On the one hand slavery was an institution accepted throughout the world, and probably no one envisaged a society in which there could be no slaves at all. But on the other hand, there was something in Christianity that was incompatible with slavery and which meant that in time those who took their faith seriously must do away with this monstrous system. Believing slaves were regarded by Christians from the very first as brothers in Christ. They were men for whom Christ died, and they were redeemed just as truly as any free man. So Paul can understand the unity of believers in Christ to mean among other things that “there is neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28). He can speak of a slave as “a beloved brother” of his owner (Philemon 16).

Now to some slaves this must have been heady teaching. Accustomed all their lives to being treated as no better than cattle, to being bought and sold in the marketplace, to being chattels for their masters’ use, it was an intoxicating thought that they were their masters’ equals in God’s sight. It was only to be expected that some in this newfound faith were inclined to presume on their new relationship. Especially when their masters were Christians, they found it difficult to retain their ordinary position. And this in turn must have been something of a hindrance to the gospel. If becoming a Christian meant

putting up with disrespect from slaves and finding them less ready to work than where the owners were heathen, some slave owners would not even consider the claims of the gospel.

Therefore, the New Testament from time to time has warnings to slaves not to presume on their new relationship to their masters. In this passage Paul is pointing out that slaves should give their owners due respect. Indeed they should serve all the more willingly in that those who receive the benefit of their labors are themselves believers.

## MISINTERPRETING THE FAITH

### 1 TIMOTHY 6:3-10

This passage points to how we should live: simply, generously and joyfully.

PAUL COMES BACK to the thought of false teaching which he has already opposed (4:1ff.). It is important that we take Christianity for what it is and not impose our own pattern on it, making it what we wish it to be. That is the way of pride (6:4), the way which in effect means (whatever its exponents may say) that those who express it think they know better than Christ and his apostles. A concern for orthodox teaching does not come simply from an innate conservatism. It comes from a firm conviction that there is a finality about God's sending of his Son. People cannot improve on the teaching of the Son of God or on what he committed to his apostles. The apostles gave definitive witness to Jesus and to reject this is to walk in the way of pride and self-sufficiency. The false teachers Paul has in mind also had a love for controversy. Discussion of issues can be a useful way of clearing up the points involved. But it can degenerate into "disputes about words" and result in angry wrangling (6:4f.).

Mixed in with the heretical teaching was a concern for material profit. Regrettably, throughout the centuries there have been those who have used religion as a means of personal profit, and such a sorry story is not yet over. Paul points out that to imagine that "godliness is a means of gain" is to be "depraved in mind and deprived of the truth" (6:5). But this enables him to

make the point that godliness does indeed bring gain, though of a very different sort than money. The end of this passage discusses the way in which the love of money can harm spiritual life. This should be closely studied in our own materialistic age. It is the case that people will often keep their faith in the face of difficulties and even persecutions, but surrender it in the times of peace and prosperity. The love of money and all it brings is insidious. It can and does corrupt the most unlikely people, and bring in its train all kinds of evils (6:10).

**Notes** 6:9: “desire to be rich” means “set their will on being rich.”

**Consider** “Content” (6:8). Does this describe my inner feelings today in regard to what I possess, what I have achieved and what I want? How far should it?

THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH

1 TIMOTHY 6:11-21

Paul concludes his letter with a renewed call to Timothy to engage in strenuous Christian service, and with special warnings for the rich and the knowledgeable.

IT IS NEVER easy to be a Christian, and believers must always be alert to the temptation to think they will grow in spiritual maturity and judgment by simply sitting still. There are some things that can be learned only in quietness and waiting on the Lord. There is “a time to keep silence” as well as “a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). But it is also the case that God has called his servants to work for him in a busy world, a world where evil abounds and where it is easy to find excuses for avoiding difficult courses of action. So Paul instructs Timothy, “Fight the good fight of the faith” (6:12).

The devil is often likened to an enemy, one who takes hostile action against the people of God. It is important to be clear that our battle is real and that it calls for our best endeavors in the strength of Christ. Paul appeals to Timothy’s call and to “the good confession” he made before many (6:12). Some understood this to refer to his baptism, but it seems more likely to refer to ordination. Paul reminds Timothy that his solemn confession had been made before God and Christ (who himself made “the good confession”), so it is not to be regarded lightly.

Note the marks of a “man of God” as given in 6:11-12.

The apostle has some words for the rich (6:17-19). They are tempted more than most people to rely on what is at best temporary and uncertain, and need help in getting their priorities right. They still need help, as do those who put their confidence in “what is falsely called knowledge” (6:20). Undue preoccupation with what appears to be knowledge can be damaging to faith.

## THANKSGIVING

### 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-5

Paul recalls several matters which lead him to give thanks. How thankful are we?

As with 1 Timothy, Paul opens this letter in the conventional way, but he adapts the conventional framework in order to bring out Christian teaching. He speaks of his being an apostle as “by the will of God” and also as “according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus” (1:1). God does not send his apostles aimlessly. He has a definite plan, and they move according to that plan, a plan which concerns the bringing of life to sinful humanity. The word “promise” is a reminder that life comes as God’s gift. It is not earned by human merit. Paul strikes a note of tenderness when he refers to Timothy as “my beloved child” (1:2). Clearly Timothy was very dear to him.

As we turn to Paul’s opening thanksgiving we may profitably reflect that this is a necessary part of the Christian life. An ungrateful Christian is a contradiction in terms. All that is necessary to come up with matters to give thanks for is a good memory. Paul uses three different expressions for remembering in 1:3,4,5 (and another in 1:6). Memory is important and many-sided.

So Paul now remembers that his ancestors had served God “with a clear conscience” (1:3) and he is following in their steps. The Christian faith he professed was not a recent invention but the fulfillment of all that was

involved in the religion of his ancestors. He worshiped the same God as they had, and did it with complete sincerity. Paul is able to recall also that Timothy had cause for similar thanksgiving, for his mother and his grandmother had been women of faith, the faith that Timothy himself now possessed (1:5). While we cannot trust to the merits of our predecessors in the faith, it is always good to recall them and to thank God for them.

The tears about which Paul writes (1:4) were evidently tears shed by Timothy when they parted. There were not the same inhibitions in those days about men weeping as in the modern western world. This is evidence not of weakness but of affection.

THE PATTERN OF THE SOUND WORDS

## 2 TIMOTHY 1:6-14

Paul encourages Timothy to be not only faithful but also bold in his ministry. Do you need such an encouragement?

ARISING OUT OF the good heritage in which Timothy stood, Paul proceeds to appeal to him to remain faithful in his ministry. It is usual to take the gift given by the laying on of Paul's hands (1:6) as the divine enablement given at Timothy's ordination (see also 1 Timothy 4:14), though some prefer a reference to an equivalent of confirmation. The point in either case is that God's gifts do not operate automatically and quite irrespective of people's spiritual states and inclinations. Such gifts must be "stirred up" if they are to be effective.

Much of this passage is concerned with the necessity for boldness in Christian witness and ministry (1:7-8,12). In every age it has been easier to be timid than to stand up and be counted for Christ. And in every age people have needed the uncompromising message of what God has done in Christ for their salvation. It is still important that Christians are not ashamed either of the gospel by which they stand or of their fellow Christians with whom they stand (see also 1:8). This will often involve a measure of suffering, but then that is inseparable from the life of the Christian (3:12), and especially from that of the preacher (1:11f.).

The other great thought here is that of the given nature of the Christian message. Notice the way the thought of what God has given runs through our

passage (1:6-7,9,12,14). God gave the gift of salvation, in all its many-sidedness. But he has entrusted the proclamation of that full and rich salvation to people. They are not to try to improve on it. They are to proclaim it. Finally, trace in 1:9-11 our past salvation, our future hope and our present duty.

**Note 1:7:** notice the importance of self-control and what is associated with it.

## ENDURANCE FOR CHRIST

### 2 TIMOTHY 1:15–2:13

Though others may wander from the truth, Timothy is to be strong and train reliable people to teach others.

THE THEME RUNNING through this passage is the importance of being singleminded in our service of Christ. It is not easy to be a Christian and never has been. The opposition is so strong that it comes naturally to a man like Paul to use military terms for Christian service, so here he speaks of being “a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2:3).

The metaphor is significant. Paul first draws attention to a couple of citizens who fell short (1:15) and to one who did not (1:16ff.). The time of testing sifts people. It is not to be taken for granted that someone who starts out hopefully on the path of service will continue. These two did not. From this Paul turns to a direct appeal to Timothy to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2:1).

Paul then borrows illustrations from three different spheres of human endeavor to drive home his point that endurance to the end is necessary. A soldier does not entangle himself in civilian affairs. An athlete must strive lawfully (which involves strict training). The farmer must work hard before sharing in the fruits of his labor.

Paul is qualified to appeal to his young friend, for he is practicing what he preaches. He is no armchair strategist, giving good advice in the knowledge that he himself will not be hurt. He writes from prison (2:9) and speaks from

a wealth of experience, much of it painful, which gave him full and accurate knowledge of what being a good soldier of Christ means.

It is generally thought that 2:11-13 is part of an early Christian hymn, and that the words “The saying is sure” refer to the following, not the preceding. The point of the hymn in this context is that it forms an encouragement to troubled Christians. It speaks of the certainty of ultimate vindication for those who serve Christ faithfully (2:11-12a). It reminds us of the grim certainty that will follow a denial of Christ (see also Matthew 10:33). But the hymn ends on a note of assurance. God is faithful, and his faithfulness will persist. This is not a charter for lax service, but an encouragement to troubled souls, despairing of their ability to do what they should. Their security rests not on their abilities but on God’s faithfulness.

**Consider** The believer’s strength is unmerited, since it is “in grace,” but it is also unlimited, since it is “in Christ Jesus.”

GOD'S WORKER

## 2 TIMOTHY 2:14-19

God deserves our best.

PAUL IS FOND of contrasting mere words with real power (eg 1 Corinthians 2:4; 4:19f.; 1 Thessalonians 1:5). When people become Christians, this means more than mere outward profession. It is true that what Christians say is important. They are to bear witness to Jesus. But it is even more important that they should have a witness to bear, that they should be showing in their lives the power of the Spirit of God. It is in this spirit that Paul urges Timothy to do his best to be “a worker who has no need to be ashamed” (2:15). There is nothing pretentious about “worker.” It is a down-to-earth word (used often to refer to agricultural laborers), and points to the fact that honest work is an essential for Christian service. It does not matter if we have no mystical visions, but it does matter if we do not produce hard work in the service of our Lord. So Paul warns Timothy once more against “disputing about words” (2:14), and “godless chatter” (2:16). The false teachers with whom Timothy was confronted were evidently long on talk but short on performance. It is a temptation in the way of every Christian.

Paul singles out one specific error, namely, that of holding “that the resurrection is past already” (2:18). This could no doubt be made to look superficially attractive, for there is a sense in which it is true (Colossians 2:12; 3:1), but clearly these teachers were affirming it in a different sense. They were interpreting it in a “spiritual” sense which excluded any future

resurrection of the body. This is the kind of error which Paul combats so magnificently in 1 Corinthians 15. It must always be opposed because “Christianity without a resurrection ceases to be a living faith” (Guthrie). The consequence of such teaching was that some were unsettled. But Paul is not dismayed. He knows that “God’s firm foundation stands” (2:19), and he sees this in two Old Testament passages, Numbers 16:5,26. His confidence is in God.

**Notes** 2:14: For “disputing about words” see 1 Timothy 1:4,7; 6:4,20; 2 Timothy 2:16; 3:7f.; 4:4; Titus 1:10; 3:9. 2:15: “rightly handling” means literally “cutting straight” but whether the imagery is from cutting a road (Proverbs 3:6; 11:5), cutting stones or cutting a furrow, is not clear. In any case the stress is on “straight” rather than “cutting.” 2:17: Hymenaeus is probably the one mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20.

VESSELS FOR HONORABLE USE

## 2 TIMOTHY 2:20-26

The Christian message and Christian character are inseparably linked. People will never come to Christ through quarreling or speculation but by our open commitment to truths clearly shown in our lives.

UPRIGHT LIVING AND the proper exercise of godly discipline in the church are the themes of these verses. The general bearing of the illustration from the vessels in a house is clear, but the detailed application is not. In a large house vessels of wood and earthenware have their uses, and Paul would certainly not have thought that the humble and ill-equipped have no place in God's scheme of things. The thought is not so much the native qualities of believers as what they do about themselves. It is as though the vessels were able to determine for themselves something of their quality. Paul is saying something rather like the metaphor of costly or shoddy materials in building, which he uses in 1 Corinthians 3. So those who "purify themselves" will be "for honorable use" not dishonorable.

Paul develops the theme that Timothy (and others) should aim at uprightness in character and living (2:22), but this brings him to the further thought that this means refusing to associate with "stupid, senseless controversies" (2:23). The proper attitude toward those in error is a matter of some difficulty. On the one hand the Lord's servant must not do or say anything to support the error. On the other hand, the Lord's servant is not so much concerned to win an argument as to win people for Christ, that is he or

she must resist the error but in such a way that those who hold it are not repelled. The Lord's servant must correct opponents, but "with gentleness" (2:25). The aim is to deliver them from "the snare of the devil" (2:26).

PAUL'S REALISM

2 TIMOTHY 3:1-9

Paul is realistic: sadly, there are some professing Christians who observe the outward forms of faith but whose lives show they have never known God's power to change them.

IT IS CLEAR throughout these letters that Paul is greatly concerned for both purity of life and purity of doctrine. He does not regard the way a Christian lives as unimportant, nor does he dismiss his own opinions as unimportant. It matters that he holds the true faith and that he shows this by his way of life. At this point Paul informs Timothy that "in the last days" there will be false teaching. To the very end we must expect there will be some who will pervert the faith. Paul is not speaking simply of people who live badly. He is talking about professing believers, people "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it" (3:5). These people are characterized in the first place as "lovers of self" (3:1), and much of what follows stems from that. The unhappy list in 3:2-4 is made up of qualities which are natural enough for those dominated by selfishness.

At the beginning Paul speaks of "the last days." But the evils he mentions are not confined to the end times, and we may suspect that he was troubled by people of this kind in his own day. Certainly this is the case in 3:6 (notice the present tense). He appears to be speaking of religious leaders, perhaps ministers, who used their influence wrongly. They captivated credulous women of the type who never reach a firm knowledge of the truth (3:6f.). But

Paul is confident that this will not get out of hand. He likens the work of the false teachers to that of Jannes and Jambres. These names do not appear in the Old Testament, but in a number of early writings they are the names of the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses. It is possible that the teachers Paul opposed practiced magic (someone has remarked that superstition and heresy are often connected). But (3:8) his “as [the magicians] so [the heretics]” requires no more than that they opposed the truth. Paul concludes with an assurance that “their folly will be plain to all” (3:9). Their success will not last.

**Notes** 3:6: “weak women” is contemptuous: “silly women” might be a better translation. “Burdened” is “heaped up.” 3:8: “counterfeit” = “that has not passed the test.”

PAUL'S EXAMPLE

## 2 TIMOTHY 3:10-13

Paul's life was an example in his teaching, way of life and the suffering and persecution he experienced.

ONE OF THE interesting features of Paul's letters is the way he so confidently appeals to his own example. He can call the Thessalonians to witness "how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:10), and he can even say, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The whole thrust of his letters is such that he cannot have meant that he was without any sin. He is too insistent on universal sinfulness for that. But he knew very well that believers do not commend the gospel they preach unless their lives agree with their words. Paul was wholehearted in his living out of the faith. He had given himself unreservedly to the service of Jesus Christ and he knew that he had done so. Therefore he could and did point people to his own example. In the very different circumstances under which we live we cannot use the same language about our own lives. And in any case few of us would claim that our lives meet Paul's standard. But unless we are living in such a way that if people did follow our example they would be brought closer to Christ we cannot expect to commend the gospel. The importance of upright living cannot be overestimated.

All this lies behind this section of Paul's letter. He knows that Timothy has observed his teachings and his life. He singles out his aim, his faith,

patience, love and steadfastness, before coming to persecutions. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the mention of love is specially frequent in Paul's writings. We usually think of John as the apostle of love, but Paul uses the noun more than anyone else (75 times out of its 116 New Testament occurrences). Paul is such a controversial figure that we sometimes see him as a brave and persistent fighter, but overlook the fact that he is gripped with the importance of love.

Nor did this come from a sheltered existence, for he had to struggle with tremendous difficulties. So he goes on to encourage Timothy in his troubles by pointing out that he himself had been through bitter persecutions and God had delivered him from them all (3:11). He goes on to make the extremely important point that this is the common lot of Christians (3:12). We must not expect that in an age like ours we shall escape. If our commitment to Christ is wholehearted, we must expect persecution of some kind.

**Notes** 3:11: Antioch, Iconium and Lystra were all places Paul visited early in his ministry. Was he turning Timothy's attention to what had first attracted him to Paul? 3:12: "desire"—the word denotes an effort of will.

THE COMPLETE SERVANT OF GOD

2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

Paul underlines the importance of Scripture: Scripture shows us how to live and also shows us where we go wrong.

PAUL GOES ON from his own example to what he trusts Timothy will make of it. He is very anxious to see his protégé firmly established in the faith. He draws his attention in particular to two things, his mentors in the faith and the place of holy Scripture. Paul has already alluded to the faith of Lois and Eunice (1:5), the grandmother and mother who had been Timothy's instructors in his earliest years. In view of what he has just said we cannot doubt but that he also includes himself under this heading. He had been the means of Timothy's conversion and he had started him along the Christian way. As Timothy respected his predecessors in the faith, so he must take with the utmost seriousness what they told him about the way.

But Paul's most important advice concerns Scripture. From his earliest days Timothy had known the Old Testament, and Paul speaks of Scripture as "able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15). Christ is the key to all Scripture and one cannot come to salvation apart from him. But clearly Paul regards the place of the Bible as supremely significant. He goes on to speak of it as "inspired by God," an expression which means "God-breathed," ie it is the utterance of God. Scripture comes from God and therefore it is thoroughly reliable. It is profitable in a variety of ways. In the area of doctrine it is of value positively for teaching, negatively for reproof. It

is just as useful in matters of behavior, negatively for correction, and positively for training in righteousness. Thus Paul can speak of the servant of God as “complete, equipped for every good work” (3:17). It is still the case that no servant of God can expect to be fully equipped for the service of God unless they are well grounded in the truth of the Bible.

PREACH THE WORD

## 2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

Speaking the word is an urgent matter. Whether the occasion is convenient for us or not, we are always to be on duty for the gospel.

FROM WHAT PAUL has been saying Timothy should be active in God's service. There is no point in having a servant of God who is "complete and equipped for every good work" if that person sits down and does nothing. So having pointed to the use of Scripture that will enable Timothy to become the sort of person he should be, Paul immediately goes on to urge him to make the greatest use of the training he has had. This is no light matter and Paul introduces it with a solemn charge before God and Christ. He describes Christ as Judge, which will remind Timothy that he is responsible, that he will one day give account of himself to the Jesus before whom Paul charges him.

The content of the appeal boils down to one pithy command "preach the word" (4:2). All else is simply commentary. Today people are often filled with the importance of modern knowledge and with the necessity for Christians to be aware of the contributions of science, philosophy, etc to our understanding of life and the universe. It is good in such times to remember from where the essential Christian message comes. We must not be obscure, and we certainly cannot hope to preach the gospel with any prospect of success if we ignore the world in which we live or insist on using the thought patterns of a past age. But it is still the case that the essence of the gospel is a

given message. We are not at liberty to manipulate its terms (see eg Galatians 1:6f.).

Paul points out that Timothy will face a time when people will prefer another message. In every age faithful preachers of the gospel have found that this is the case. There is something about the gospel that puts down human pride, and leaves people utterly dependent on the grace of God. This does not appeal to people in their natural state and their ears “itch” for someone who will flatter their ego more. In this frame of mind such people will listen to any myth rather than the gospel. But this does not mean that the servants of God are to go along with the demand. They are to be constant to follow what they know to be right. It means steadiness, and it means enduring suffering (see also 3:12). But it also means that God’s servants fulfill their ministry (4:5). And there is no greater satisfaction on earth than that.

## THE GOOD FIGHT

### 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-22

At the end of his life, Paul's concern was still for the gospel.

WE SHOULD NOT overlook the importance of the "For" which begins this section of the letter. The reason Paul has now urged Timothy to be urgent as an evangelist and to fulfill his ministry is that he, Paul, has finished his work. He describes this first in terms of sacrifice ("already I am being poured out as a drink offering"; he uses the same metaphor in Philippians 2:17). Then he speaks of departing, after which come three further ways of looking at his life, probably all taken from the Games. The word rendered "fight" is a technical term for competing in an event at the Games; "the race," of course, means a running contest (notice that Paul does not speak of having beaten others, but only of having completed the course); "the faith" will for Paul mean the whole content of the Christian faith, but there is probably also a glance at the Games where competing athletes must promise to compete lawfully. Paul has kept the rules, so to speak, and lived out the faith for which he stood. So there awaits him "the crown of righteousness" (4:8), which reminds us of the crown awarded to the successful athlete. We could understand this to mean the crown consisting of righteousness, but this is scarcely in harmony with Paul's thought that the believer is already justified or righteous in God's sight. More probably it refers to the reward to be given at the last day to those whose righteousness has been revealed in their lives, a

reward which does not go only to outstanding people like Paul, but also to “all who have loved his appearing” (4:8).

**Notes** 4:8: “that Day,” ie the Day of Judgment; “his appearing,” probably the second coming which was longed for (“loved”), not feared. 4:10: Demas had been a trusted fellow worker (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24). 4:13: “the books” were evidently papyri, perhaps in roll form, “the parchments,” ie the “vellums,” were more costly writing material. Paul does not say what was written on either, but it seems probable that Scripture was included. Some think citizenship papers or other important personal papers may also be meant. 4:16: apparently Paul had already had a preliminary stage in his trial, but none of his friends stood by him. Despite this the Lord delivered him at that stage (4:17), which gives the apostle confidence that the Lord will continue to watch over him and bring him to “his heavenly kingdom” (4:18).

**Consider** “Luke alone is with me”: the earthly friend. “The Lord stood by me”: God, the constant friend.

GOD NEVER LIES

## TITUS 1:1-4

Paul focuses on the great privileges and responsibilities of his life.

WE HAVE ALREADY seen in both the letters to Timothy how Paul delights to take the conventional opening greeting and make that the means of bringing out important Christian teaching. He does it again here, with an emphasis on the reliability of God. God never lies and so we may and must believe him implicitly.

But as the convention demanded, Paul begins with himself. Nowhere else does he describe himself as “a servant of God,” though he does use the phrase “a servant of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:1; see also Philippians 1:1). The following expression is far from straightforward. Literally it means something like “according to the faith of God’s elect ...,” which the NIV understands as “to further the faith ...” The words appear to mean not so much the purpose or the mark of his apostleship as that it is this which is its very essence or characteristic. His apostleship is grounded in and determined by the qualities named. “The faith of God’s elect” preserves a due balance between the divine initiative and the human response. “Their knowledge of the truth” draws attention to the importance of apostleship in promoting advance in the knowledge of what God has revealed.

But the main part of this opening is concerned with “eternal life.” This is spoken of as the object of hope. But this hope, as is usual in the New Testament is not a vague optimism, but the present conviction of something

which is not yet but which surely will come. There is, of course, a sense in which eternal life is the Christian's present possession. But there is another sense in which its full realization is still future, and this is what is being referred to here. Although we do not yet see it, there is no doubt about it, for it rests on the promise of God and God "never lies" (1:2). The promise goes back "ages ago." The revelation is up to date, in the preaching of the word as it has been entrusted to Paul. There may possibly be a glance at Jesus as the Word (as in John 1:1), but this is not the main thought, which is that God is pleased to reveal himself in the preaching he commits to his apostle Paul. Notice that Titus, like Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2), was a convert of Paul's (1:4).

GOD'S STEWARDS

TITUS 1:5-16

Paul contrasts the qualities required in elders and those seen in the lives of the false teachers. How could our own lives be described?

CLEARLY TITUS WAS a man of ability and one in whom Paul placed a good deal of trust. He had left him in Crete, he says, "that you might amend what was defective" (1:5). This is fairly difficult, but Paul appears confident that Titus would be successful. In this passage Paul's concern is chiefly with the ministry. First he speaks of the qualifications to be looked for, and then of the opposite kind of teaching ministers would meet.

Paul says much the same to Titus as he said to Timothy on the qualifications required in ministers (1 Timothy chapter 3). He speaks first of "elders" and then of "an overseer," but this should not be understood in the sense that there were many elders in a church and only one overseer. The sense is, "The elders you appoint must have certain qualifications, for one who exercises oversight must be ..." Paul insists on the necessity of an upright life, a good home and family, and a firm hold on sound doctrine so that he can deal with false teachers (1:9).

Interestingly, the people of Crete were troubled by teaching with a Jewish flavor (1:10,14). Apparently it had something to do with food laws, for Paul quotes a Cretan poet among other things for the expression, "lazy gluttons." But the main thrust of the quotation is that the Cretans "are always liars." This incidentally is written into the Greek language with the verb *cretizo*, "to

lie.” The poet also speaks of Cretans as “evil beasts” (“evil brutes,” NIV). It adds up to a grim situation where very firm action is necessary. So he calls on Titus to “rebuke them sharply” (1:13). There are occasions when the servant of God must take a very strong line. These people were thoroughly corrupt (1:15f.). They required the firmest of firm hands.

**Notes** 1:10: the worst heretics were Jewish, but these were not the only ones. 1:12: the poet is Epimenides (sixth–fifth century BC), though some think Paul takes the quotation immediately from Callimachus (third century BC). Epimenides was widely held to be a prophet and Paul evidently uses the general title. 1:16: this is surely the ultimate condemnation of the merely professing Christian.

MAKING THE TEACHING ATTRACTIVE

TITUS 2:1-10

Paul not only gives Titus advice on how different groups should apply the gospel to everyday life; he also calls on him to be an example of such qualities.

AGAIN WE HAVE an emphasis on sound doctrine. Whatever is the case with the false teachers, Titus is to teach what is correct. Throughout the Pastoral Epistles this concern for teaching what is right is constant. But it is also the case that these same letters stress the importance of lives that commend the sound doctrine that is taught. Paul insists that right teaching and right living must go together. At the end of this passage he urges slaves to live in such a way that “they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way” (2:10), and this might well be considered to apply to all. Paul looks for Christians who will show by their lives what kind of faith they profess.

As in 1 Timothy he has instructions for various groups in the church. The older men, who were then looked up to as leaders and revered for their experience and wisdom, are to show due appreciation of the seriousness of life (2:2). The older women are likewise to act appropriately and to train up the younger. The injunction tells us a good deal about both age groups. The younger women are to be especially careful of their home and family duties (2:4f.). When he refers to young men, Paul singles out the importance of self-control, an appeal that still needs to be heeded today. Titus himself is not

excluded, and indeed the appeal to him personally is much more detailed than that for young men in general (2:7f.). “To whom much is given shall much be required.” As elsewhere in the New Testament, slaves receive special mention. As we saw when dealing with 1 Timothy 6:1f., Christian slaves, especially if their masters were also Christian, were strongly tempted to presume on their relationship, and Paul is very anxious that they should commend the Christian faith.

**Notes** 2:2: notice “love”; Paul always sees it as important. 2:3: “reverent” has a meaning like “suited to a sacred character.” For the Christian all of life is sacred.

THE GRACE OF GOD

TITUS 2:11-15

Jesus doesn't just tell us to be good; he also gives us the grace and strength to resist temptation and to live for him.

HAVING DEALT WITH the kind of behavior he looks for in believers, Paul goes back to the basis of it all. The "For" which introduces 3:11 should not be overlooked. People should live in the way outlined because God has acted for salvation. "The grace of God" is viewed dynamically: it "appeared." In Christ the grace of God was seen. *Grace* is one of Paul's great words (he uses it 100 times out of 155 times in the New Testament) and it emphasizes the freeness of God's gift of salvation. This is universal in its scope: for "all people."

It is in keeping with the characteristic emphasis of these letters that this grace "trains us" in right living (2:12) both negatively and positively. It is reinforced by an appeal to the "blessed hope," Jesus' second coming. This is distinguished from the first coming by the explicit reference to his "glory." Notice that Jesus is expressly called "God." The deity of our Savior meant a good deal to the people of the New Testament and those who today have rejected the doctrine have cut themselves off from a considerable part of the riches of Christianity. It matters immensely that the salvation we proclaim is not one that proceeds from any created being but from none less than God himself.

Christ's saving work is described in terms of redemption (2:14). This means the setting free from slavery or a death sentence by the payment of a

price (the “ransom,” see also 1 Timothy 2:6). Here redemption is “from all iniquity.” Left to ourselves, we could not break free from our sins, but Christ’s redemption frees us from both their consequences and their power. The result is “a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (2:14). Nothing less is adequate as the fruits of our redemption.

This is a grand message; no grander has never been committed to humanity. So Paul confidently calls on Titus to proclaim it “with all authority” (2:15), so speaking directly to the needs of our day.

THE LIFE OF FAITH

TITUS 3:1-15

What do you need reminding about more: what God has done for you  
or what he expects of you?

THE DUTY OF Christians to the State is mentioned briefly. They are to be submissive and obedient, for the State performs a necessary function and one which would be impossible without the cooperation of citizens. In the same breath Paul mentions the necessity of being kind and courteous to all people (3:2). The believer has obligations to those who are outside the faith.

We should treat everyone well, for we recall from what we ourselves were saved (3:3). In 2:11 Paul almost personified grace, and here God's goodness and loving kindness are treated similarly: they "appeared," that is, were revealed or became visible in Jesus Christ. Paul proceeds to speak of our salvation through the mercy of God, a salvation which comes "by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (3:5). Most today see a reference to baptism. This is possible, though it is also possible that Paul is using "washing" symbolically and defining it as regeneration and renewal. If a reference to baptism is considered to be present, it is not in the sense that the ceremony itself conveys spiritual blessings, for in this context Paul is stressing the opposite of ritualism. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit which is important. This is not to be separated from the work of Christ (3:6) but is its necessary completion. He goes on to speak of this salvation in terms of

justification, grace, hope and eternal life (3:7), a rich collection of significant terms.

Before he finishes, Paul has still another warning against false teachers (3:8-11). A significant feature of this section is the reference to repeated warning (3:10). For someone to be rejected as a heretic, there must be persistence in error in the face of repeated warnings.

**Notes** 3:1: “Remind them” shows that this is not a new instruction. They already knew it. 3:4: “God our Savior”; see also 2:13. 3:14: to the end Paul insists on “good deeds.”

INTRODUCTION  
PHILEMON  
LEON MORRIS

PHILEMON IS A purely private letter from Paul to his friend Philemon about a runaway slave named Onesimus. It seems that Philemon lived at Colossae, and that this letter was sent to him at the same time as Paul's letter to the Colossian church (see the references to Onesimus, Colossians 4:8f., and Archippus, Colossians 4:17). Paul was in prison somewhere (v.1), and he had evidently been the means of the conversion of Onesimus (v.10). Now he is sending the slave back to his owner, but this letter is evidence that he is taking every care to ensure that Onesimus be properly received. It is a delightful letter, giving us a revealing glimpse into first-century life and showing us from a new angle the way Christians lived out their faith.

Most scholars think that the imprisonment in question was in Rome, and that it came toward the end of Paul's ministry. It is possible that it was during another of Paul's imprisonments (2 Corinthians 11:23), but there is no way of deciding the point.

Nothing is known about Onesimus other than what we learn here, though there was a tradition in the early church that he became a bishop. Similarly, nothing is known of Philemon other than what we learn from this letter.

REFRESHING THE HEARTS OF THE SAINTS

PHILEMON 1-7

We read of one man's active love and faith.

WE HAVE THE typical beginning to a first-century letter. Paul describes himself by referring to his current imprisonment, which he sees as “for Christ Jesus.” He links Timothy with him in sending the letter, but there seems no reason for thinking that Timothy had any real part in its composition. The recipients are Philemon, Paul’s “beloved fellow worker,” Apphia (apparently Philemon’s wife) and Archippus (who may well have been the son of the house; a little message is sent to him in Colossians 4:17). “The church in your house” appears to mean that a local group of Christians assembled for worship in the home of Philemon. What relationship such a house church had to the church of the city we have no means of knowing.

Paul goes on to say that he gives thanks for his friends. It is characteristic that the two qualities he specially notes are love and faith (v.5). There is no substitute for love in living out the Christian life. And, of course, unless there is a genuine faith in Jesus Christ there is no Christian life at all. It is likely that we should link love with faith as directed toward Christ and all the saints (rather than thinking of this as referring only to faith).

Paul goes on to speak of the way he himself had derived “much joy and comfort” from the same love, and he explains that “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” (v.7). An outgoing love (which ought to be characteristic of the way all Christians live) has far-reaching effects.

Obviously it makes an impression on its immediate recipients. But it does not stop there. Philemon's kindnesses to the saints at large brought joy and comfort to Paul and no doubt to many others as well. And, though Paul does not mention it, such love has its effects on those outside the circle of believers. "See how these Christians love one another!" was a verdict which brought the non-Christian world to take seriously the faith that could produce such results. It may well be that many of the troubles facing the church today would be solved or at least considerably reduced if the whole church structure were permeated by a spirit of love.

But we must not go on from there to conclude that the church's task is simply to show love. Paul commends Philemon for sharing his faith (v.6). There is no substitute for believing on the Lord Jesus Christ and we need to be clear about this. It is only by faith that we may obtain "all the good that is ours in Christ."

THAT USEFUL MAN ONESIMUS

## PHILEMON 8-25

We read of Christ's transformation of one man and this man's responsibility to do what was right.

FROM THIS SECTION of the letter we are able to gather what had happened. Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon's (v.16), but had run away, possibly robbing his master before he left (v.18). He did what many other escaping slaves did, and went to the big city where it would be almost impossible to find him. But somehow he had been brought into contact with Paul the prisoner and Paul had been the means of his conversion (v.10). Now questions arose: what is the place of a runaway slave who has become a Christian? What should be done about the fact that legally he is still the property of his owner?

Paul is clear on the matter. Onesimus must go back. He is a Christian, and a Christian respects the rights of others no matter at what inconvenience to himself. So Paul sends him back to his master. It must have been difficult for him but he does it. It must also have been difficult for Onesimus. After all, he had made good his escape and was presumably safe from recapture. Voluntarily to go back to the slavery from which he had broken free could not have been easy, quite apart from the fact that he must face whatever penalties were involved in his having escaped in the first instance. He might feel that Philemon would not be hard on him, but he could not be sure. But he

was a Christian. And that meant that he must do what was right even if it meant hardship.

This letter, then, is Paul's attempt to ensure that Onesimus is well treated when he returns. It has been held up as a model of tact, as the apostle gently but persistently pleads for one who quite plainly had become very dear to him (v.12). He could command (v.8), but prefers that Philemon should act of his own free will (v.14). But he does remind his friend of what he owes to Paul (v.19), and of the value Onesimus the Christian would be to his master (v.16).

Paul makes something of the meaning of the name Onesimus, "profitable" or "useful." Formerly, this man had done anything but live up to his name. Now Christ had transformed this unpromising person and he is a valued helper of Paul's (v.13); he is "the faithful and beloved brother" (Colossians 4:9).

INTRODUCTION  
HEBREWS  
LEON MORRIS

THIS WRITING IS anonymous. A number of possible authors have been suggested, such as Paul, Barnabas, Apollos and Prisca. The style of the letter is against Paul as author, as it is very different from his normal style. Naming such possible authors is no more than guesswork and we must accept our ignorance.

The recipients of the letter have traditionally been seen as Jewish Christians, tempted to relapse into Judaism. In recent times this view has been challenged by scholars who maintain that there is no way of knowing whether the writing was meant for Jews or Gentiles. They point out that the appeal to the Old Testament as sacred Scripture was accepted by Christian Gentiles as well as Jews, and that the author nowhere says that he is writing to Jews. This view cannot be ruled out as impossible. But it is to be doubted whether it explains the many parts of the letter that insist on the superiority of some aspect of Christianity to something Jewish. So it still remains the most likely view that Jews are in mind. But it is not written to Jewish Christians as a whole. It is clear that the recipients are a small group who might have been expected to be teachers but who had not made the progress in the faith expected of them (5:12).

It is not easy to date the letter. Perhaps it is relevant that there is nothing in it which indicates that Jerusalem had fallen, for in view of the line of argument adopted we might well have anticipated a reference to that event if

it had taken place. On the other hand, there has been time for the gospel to spread to some degree and a certain amount of development both of doctrine and Christian maturity are presupposed. Perhaps we will not be far wrong in dating it in the 60s.

We have spoken of the writing as a letter, but this may be going too far. It certainly does not have the normal framework of a letter and it reads more like a theological treatise than a letter. We may retain the name letter owing to its long use. But we should bear in mind that it is not by any means an exact description of the writing's literary genre.

## THE REVELATION OF GOD

### HEBREWS 1:1-4

This grand opening shows us the main theme of this letter: the person of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

THIS SHORT PARAGRAPH forms an introduction to the whole letter. It concentrates on the revelation God has made of himself: we are to remember the implication that people by themselves do not come to know God. He has revealed himself in many different ways from past times, as the prophets witness (1:1). But the culmination of the revelation has been reserved until recent times when he spoke "by a Son" (1:2). The contrast is between the prophet who knows God externally and can say only the things that are given him from outside, and the Son who shares in the nature of deity and can speak of what God is in himself and show what God is in his actions as well as his words.

The author proceeds to bring this out by insisting on the high place Christ occupies. "Whom he appointed the heir of all things" (1:2) should not be understood as if God adopted Christ into his family. Rather, it is a way of saying that Christ stands to God in the relation of heir. It is a way of emphasizing his excellence, not of bringing him down to the level of created beings. Far from being himself created, he was the means of the world's creation. He "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." He upholds the whole universe. He "made purification" for sins. He sits at God's right hand. It is difficult to see how words could more clearly

convey the thought that he belongs with God and not with humanity, that in him we see the very revelation of God himself.

**Note 1:3:** “reflects” really represents a noun with a meaning like “effulgence”; it is not so much that he reflects glory from elsewhere as that the divine glory shines from him. “Very stamp” (character) means exact representation. He shows us exactly what God is. “When he had made” is an aorist tense which points to a completed work. This is brought out also with the reference to sitting at God’s right hand.

CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

## HEBREWS 1:5-14

How highly do you honor Jesus?

THE WHOLE OF the opening phase of the argument is directed toward showing the surpassing excellence of the Christ from whom the readers were tempted to fall away. First, the author shows that he is far greater than the angels. The writer's method is to assemble a collection of passages from the Old Testament which combine to prove his point. He quotes Psalm 2:7 to show that God does not speak to any angel in the way he speaks to his Son. It is this Father-Son relationship which is seen also in 2 Samuel 7:14, originally spoken with reference to Solomon, but here interpreted of the Messiah, the very Son of God.

Next we turn to the function of the angels, which is to worship God's Son and so definitely to take the lower place (the quotation might be from the Septuagint of Deuteronomy 32:43 or Psalm 97:7). Psalm 104:4 follows with its definite placing of the angels in the category of "winds" (or "spirits") and among the "servants."

In strong contrast, Psalm 45:6f. addresses the Son in terms of eternal sovereignty. This puts him outside the class of the angels. But it is significant that the quotation is continued in terms of moral uprightness. We miss the Son's true greatness if we concentrate only on power and glory. His scepter is a righteous one (1:8). His love is for righteousness (1:9). It is this which the psalmist sees as the reason for the Son's superior exaltation (1:9).

The writer links Psalm 102:25-27 with this, combining an expression from Isaiah 34:4. Again he uses the Septuagint, because the Hebrew does not contain the word “Lord.” But the revealing thing is that he has taken words which in the original apply to Jehovah and has used them of Christ. This shows as nothing else could the very high place he assigns him. The quotation sees the Son as having a part in creation and as remaining unchanged while the creation grows old. His eternity is not to be overlooked.

The final quotation is from Psalm 110:1, a passage which is often cited of Christ. The words speak of God as giving him a place at his right hand (the place of highest honor), and as overcoming all his enemies. Over against all this the angels appear as no more than “ministering spirits,” and indeed spirits whose task is to serve for the sake of the saved (1:14). Clearly Christ is preeminent over them all.

**Consider** “Salvation” (1:14), like “eternal life,” is both present and future.

SO GREAT A SALVATION

## HEBREWS 2:1-4

If the gospel really is so great, then we should carefully guard against drifting away from it.

THE STATURE OF the Savior shows the quality of the salvation. Since Christians have a Savior who is so infinitely superior to the highest created beings, they must regard the salvation he brought for them as no ordinary thing. It is a salvation to be highly valued and sought out diligently. However, it is easy to miss it, for this requires not a deliberate rejection but simply a drifting away from it (2:1). “We are all continuously exposed to the action of currents of opinion, habit, action, which tend to carry us away insensibly from the position which we ought to maintain” (Westcott). It is the case that we may fail to secure salvation simply by neglecting it (2:3). God has made ample provision for the needs of everyone. But if we neglect the means he has provided for our deliverance, then indeed “how shall we escape?”

The greatness of the salvation is brought out by a comparison of the Christ, who secured it, with the angels. Elsewhere in the New Testament we read that angels played a part in the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). This is not mentioned in the Old Testament but the writer sees it as a way of stressing the dignity and importance of the old Law. This Law (here called “the message”) was fully established and every failure to keep it brought retribution. This opens up the way for the “how much more?” type of argument of 2:3.

The Christian salvation is thoroughly affirmed. Appeal is made to three different witnesses to establish this. It was in the first instance “declared” by Christ himself. This will refer to his preaching, but also to his actions. He set it out by what he said and was and did. Secondly, it was “confirmed to us by those who heard him” (2:3, NIV)). That is to say, the recipients of this letter had good grounds for accepting it. The gospel had been preached to them by people who had heard Christ. And finally, God bore witness by unusual happenings which accompanied the preaching. The Holy Spirit had done wonderful things. The final “according to his own will” (2:4) is a reminder that these miraculous happenings are not under human control. God acts as it pleases him, not as people may demand, a truth which is still up to date.

**Thought** You need not do anything to drift!

“JESUS ... CROWNED WITH GLORY AND HONOR”

## HEBREWS 2:5-9

We are called to live under the kingly rule of Jesus Christ.

THE WONDER OF the salvation about which he has been speaking now causes the author to bring before us the further surprising truth that “the world to come” about which he is writing, the world that is relevant to salvation, was not subjected to angels but, as 2:6ff. show, to humanity. God has this high destiny for people in Christ. The quotation from Psalm 8:4ff. brings out the high dignity of humanity.

Now comes a different thought. From the fact that we do not yet see everything in subjection to humanity, as the Psalm prophesies, our author turns to what we do see. And what we see is Jesus. The human name draws attention to Jesus the Man, and we may reason that the writer sees in him the fulfillment of the prophetic word. He is the Man made lower than the angels. But he is also the recipient of the highest honor because of what he did when made lower in this way. It was “so that ... he might taste death,” and not death simply, but death for every person. We see therefore that early in the letter the point is made that the death of Jesus is necessary if we are to be saved. Paul tells us that death is “the wages of sin” (Romans 6:23), and we cannot doubt that this is the thought here too. Since people’s sin involved them in death, Jesus came where people are and died their death.

“By the grace of God” stresses the freeness of it all. It implies that salvation could not be accomplished by our own efforts. But where we could

not prevail, God's grace could and did. The death of Jesus then was not an accident, nor simply the result of the malice of his opponents. It was the outworking of God's grace so that the salvation of humanity might be accomplished.

TRULY HUMAN FOR OUR SALVATION

## HEBREWS 2:10-18

Since Jesus knows what it is like to be one of us, he has perfect sympathy with us in our weakness and temptations.

LIFE WAS NOT easy for the little group of discouraged believers to whom this letter was written. Almost certainly, they faced the possibility of suffering for their Christian faith and they must have wondered whether it was all worth suffering for. Why not give the whole thing away and enter into peace?

For one reason, says the author, because Jesus suffered. Was this a dreadful accident that could not be guarded against? Not at all. It was the way he saved people. To bring about our salvation he came where we are, even though this necessarily involved him in cruel suffering and death. But since we had sinned and brought the penalty of death on ourselves, it was inevitable that our Savior should enter our humanity and die our death. It was through death that he destroyed “him who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (2:14).

To do this, he had to become human. But this was the point of everything. His work on earth was not with angels. He did not come to save angels (2:16). It was people who sinned. It was people who needed salvation. Therefore he became human and died and saved people. His genuine sharing in our human nature (2:14) shows God’s passionate concern for us to be saved.

The author speaks about Christ's being made "perfect through suffering" (2:10). This does not, of course, mean that before suffering he was not perfect. But there are different kinds of perfection. The perfection of the bud is one thing and that of the flower another. There is a perfection involved in actually having suffered which does not exist apart from the experience of having suffered. Christ does not merely love us enough to suffer for us. He loved us so much that he actually did suffer for us.

A series of quotations brings out his sharing of our humanity. These come from Psalm 22:22 (where the key words are "brothers and sisters"), Isaiah 8:17 (Septuagint; if he trusted in God he was certainly man), and Isaiah 8:18 ("the children"). The real humanity of Jesus was necessary if he was to be our Savior. Only by becoming human could he take our death and remove our condemnation.

This passage concludes with some other aspects of this saving work. Christ became "a merciful and faithful high priest" (2:17). This concept is found in Hebrews only in the New Testament, but, as this writing shows, it is a powerful way of bringing out what Christ has done for us. And arising out of this is the thought, full of comfort to the tempted, that Christ can indeed help them, for he himself knows suffering and temptation from experience (2:18).

**Notes** 2:10: "pioneer" like our word "leader" can mean "first along the way" or "first in importance," and in addition it can mean "originator." Christ was all these. 2:17: "to make propitiation" (ESV); "to make atonement" (NIV): the personal process of removing wrath.

CHRIST SUPERIOR TO MOSES

HEBREWS 3:1-6

Christ is greater than Moses, so our confidence can rest in Jesus because of all he has done and achieved for us. Do we have such a confidence?

MOSES WAS REVERED throughout the Jewish nation as the really significant man in the history of the nation. It was he whom God had appointed to lead the nation out of its bondage in Egypt and bring it to the Promised Land. It was he through whom God had given the law to his people. The great miracle of the exodus, with the plagues in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, followed by the wanderings in the wilderness, with God's providential care over his people, and Moses as the mediator of God's commands and the leader of the nation, all combined to leave Moses with such an aura as set him apart from all the great men that followed. He was incomparable. There never could be another Moses.

To say that Jesus was superior to Moses, then, was to put him out of the class of ordinary people. If these words are indeed written to Jews, it is difficult to see how the point of Jesus' excellence could have been made more strongly. This is brought out first by speaking of him as "the apostle [ie the sent one; God sent him for our salvation] and high priest of our confession" (3:1). This puts him in a unique place as regards the Christian way. Only one person could have such attributes assigned to him. And in fulfilling his task he was faithful. This is not unique, for people have been

and are faithful in their generation (the degree of his faithfulness was unique, but that is not to the point here, so it is not mentioned).

Specifically, Moses was faithful. But here there is a difference. Moses was faithful as a servant is faithful, ie in a subordinate position. Jesus' faithfulness was that of a Son (3:4f.). Moses' faithfulness pointed beyond itself ("to testify to the things that were to be spoken later"). But this fuller meaning was realized in Christ. Moses was a faithful subordinate, but he was a subordinate. Christ was not. The point is further made with the illustration of the house (3:3f.). Moses was faithful in the house, but there is One with a higher glory than that. The illustration passes over to the builder as more worthy than what he builds. God, being the builder of all, is worthy of highest honor. Christ shares this honor, for he has already been associated with God in the work of creation (1:2). There is yet another shift in the house illustration when believers are spoken of as the house (3:6). This is a high privilege. But notice also the importance of perseverance.

**Consider** Consider Luke 16:10-12.

## DISOBEDIENCE

### HEBREWS 3:7-11

Life is serious and we should remember that failure to give attention to God's voice carries inevitable consequences.

IT FOLLOWS FROM what has been said that it is most important that we give proper attention to the gospel. Failure to respond to God's gracious invitation will have disastrous consequences, precisely because it is God's gracious invitation, and because it concerns the salvation brought for people by none less than Christ. The author drives home his point by an appeal to Psalm 95:7ff. Notice that the Psalm is ascribed to the Holy Spirit, the writer preferring to draw attention to the divine origin of Scripture rather than to the human author through whom the message was mediated. The quotation follows the Septuagint in substituting "the rebellion" and "the day of testing" (3:8) for the place names given in the Hebrew.

The point of the quotation is that during the wilderness wanderings the people did not give their attention to the voice of God. Throughout the forty years they persisted in hardening their hearts, in rebelling against God and in putting him to the test (this means something like seeing how far they could go). But failure to obey God is never finally successful. The full weight of the divine punishment does not necessarily fall at once, but sinners are deluded if they think they can escape.

The psalmist stresses the fact that God is never passive in such a situation. He is "provoked" by those sinners; he recognizes that they always go astray

and that they have not known his ways. The consequence is that they must experience the divine wrath. That this is certain is emphasized by the reference to the divine oath, the oath that they will “never enter my rest” (3:11). In the context this must refer to the Promised Land. But it will also have the deeper meaning of fellowship with God.

Life is a serious business and we should remember that failure to give attention to God’s voice carries inevitable consequences. These days we do not like the thought of “the wrath of God” and many have decided that there is no such thing. Granted that it is possible to interpret it in too human a fashion, the term still draws attention to a grim reality. If someone persists in sin, they must ultimately experience divine opposition and rejection. And that is a frightening prospect whether we call it the wrath of God or whether we prefer some softer description.

AN EVIL, UNBELIEVING HEART

## HEBREWS 3:12-19

We must never harden our hearts and take God's grace for granted.

FOLLOWING FROM THE quotation from Psalm 95 we come to the application. This example from Scripture shows that God does not show partiality. Even the people for whom he had performed the miracles in Egypt and whom he had brought to the borders of the Promised Land were not spared when they persisted in unbelief and sin. The "evil, unbelieving heart" that was in them could not but produce evil consequences. So the readers of this letter are warned against such a heart. It will surely lead to a falling away from the living God (3:12). There is an interesting combination of the individual and the community. The appeal is addressed to them all. But they are to take care to make sure there is not unbelief in any of them; they are to encourage one another constantly ("every day"). The community of believers has a concern for its individual members. It is difficult to preserve the highest standards of conduct and purity of belief unless there is a concern throughout the whole membership for the good of the individual.

A warning about "the deceitfulness of sin" follows (3:13). Sin always comes in an attractive disguise. For the original readers of this letter it was apparently in that of being faithful to the glorious heritage of the past. There are circumstances when such an attitude is praiseworthy. But there are also times when it means the betrayal of what is highest and best. Here it signifies

going back from the living Christ to what was dead and gone. The readers are warned that to share in Christ it is necessary to persevere (3:14).

It is not very hard to make a profession of faith in him. But to continue as his servant through all the difficulties of life is different. There is paradox here. “We share” is a perfect tense, indicating permanence. But the writer immediately goes on to say, “if only we hold ...” This paradox is to be found throughout the New Testament. Our salvation is given. It is all of God. We should never lose sight of this. But this does not excuse us from the obligation to persevere, and the New Testament writings contain many appeals to faithfulness.

In 3:16-19 we return to the Israelites who perished. Those who rebelled in the wilderness were not pagans who had no knowledge of God. They were those who came out from Egypt under Moses’ leadership. They had had such significant examples of God’s power before their eyes and still had perished. Only continuing faith sees final salvation.

GOD'S REST

## HEBREWS 4:1-13

God knows us completely: noting can be shielded from his searching examination.

WE NOW TAKE up an expression in the Psalm, "They shall never enter my rest." Actually this has probably been behind the argument for some time, but the writer now openly concentrates on it. As the people wandered through the wilderness, the "rest" stood for the end of their troubles when they entered their Promised Land. But there is a deeper meaning than merely the ending of external hostilities. The writer recalls that the Bible speaks of God as resting on the seventh day from his work of creation (4:4). This shows that there is a blessed state in which God is, and into which God's people might come. But when God swears that certain people will never enter it, then obviously the entering has not yet been accomplished. It is not these people, but some others, who will enter.

But perhaps the words apply strictly to the entering of Israel into Canaan? This possibility is ruled out by the date of the Psalm. Long after Joshua's generation had entered Canaan, it was recorded that God swore they would not enter his rest. Clearly the "rest" in question was something other than the uncertain rest of living in Canaan. The true rest still remains for the people of God (4:9). It is explained as resting from our labors as God did from his. This refers to the work of salvation. It is not obtained by strenuous striving. It is a good gift of God. And we do not enter into it until we stop our own

ineffective efforts to obtain it and rest quietly on the promises of God. It is only then that we are really found resting in and with God.

It is then important that we concentrate on this rest and do not fall away by the kind of disobedience that ruined the Exodus generation of Israelites (4:11). This leads to the reflection that God's word is not to be taken lightly. It is conceived dynamically. It is not static waiting for us to handle it as we will. It is "living and active" and stands in judgment on us. It is sharper than a sword, for it penetrates to the innermost recesses of our human personality (4:12). Nothing is hidden from God (4:13). It is impossible to bluff our way through. The word is always adequate, always revealing. We stand before God as we are, stripped of all pretensions and shams. This is still a solemn warning.

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

## HEBREWS 4:14-16

The One who knows what it is like to be tempted also knows exactly what help we need ... including what help you need today!

IN THE ANCIENT world priesthood was accepted as a necessary part of religion. Everywhere people took it for granted that the gods are too holy for ordinary people to approach them. Worshipers need the help of a professional religious man, someone who knows the way and can intercede on their behalf. So the priesthods performed their function on a thousand altars, for sacrifice was as universal as priesthood. Indeed a primary function of the priest was to offer sacrifices (see also 5:1). The priesthood of the Old Testament meant that the idea was just as much at home in Israel as anywhere else. It was, of course, clear that some priesthods were more effective than others. Like those engaged in any branch of human endeavor, priests differed in expertise, in local knowledge and in other ways. So not all priesthods were put on the same level.

The author makes use of all this to bring out important aspects of the Person and the work of Christ. Each of the New Testament writers has his own way of doing this, and in Hebrews we have the profound concept that Jesus is our great high priest. He is the One who offers the sacrifice that really puts away sin and brings people to God. This can be seen as a process of redemption, of reconciliation, of justification and much more. Seen as the work of a priest certain aspects are emphasized in a way they are not when

other metaphors are used. As the letter proceeds, these truths will be unfolded.

In this passage two significant thoughts about Christ are stressed. The one is his greatness. He is not simply a priest at home in a particular earthly sanctuary. He has “passed through the heavens” (4:14), something that can be said of no earthly priest. But this does not leave him remote from us, for the second point to be stressed is his sympathy. He came right where we are, was tempted with the same things with which we are tempted, without sinning. This may mean that he kept himself from sin, or it may mean that he does not know those temptations which arise out of having sinned (as we unfortunately do). But the main point is his sharing our humanity. He knows what we go through. Knowing then what kind of high priest we have, let us “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.”

CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST

HEBREWS 5:1-11

How does the description of Christ's earthly experiences reassure us?

THE THOUGHT OF high priesthood is continued. First, we are reminded of the things that characterize earthly high priests (the high priests of the Old Testament are chiefly in mind). The principal thing is the offering of sacrifice (5:1), but there is an important qualification before a priest can do this. He must himself experience the weakness of those on whose behalf he ministers (5:2). This enables him to “deal gently” with those who fail. Of course, in earthly priests this means moral weakness, too, and such priests must offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for others (5:3). Soon, the writer will bring out the point that this is not the case with Jesus, but for the moment it is the sharing of nature and the ability to understand that he stresses. To this he adds the necessity of the divine call (5:4). It is not possible to have an Aaronic high priest without these qualifications.

With Christ, the author takes up the two points in the reverse order. Jesus did not take the initiative in order to make himself a high priest, but was called by God (5:5f.). The first Scripture quoted to demonstrate the point does not however mention priesthood. We must remember that it is the author's basic concepts that control his way of writing, not strict conformity to the illustrations he is using. It matters to him immensely that Christ is God's Son, so he reverts to a passage he has already used (1:5) to bring out again that Christ stands to God in the relation of Son. We must never lose

sight of the fact that Christ transcends all that is meant by “priest.” He is God’s Son, and that comes first. But to this is added a further quotation that does see him as a priest, a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4; see also Genesis 14:18). Though Christ’s priesthood resembles the Aaronic in some respects, it is Melchizedek and not Aaron who gives the significant model.

Next, the author turns to Christ’s earthly experiences which show him to be one with us. The “loud cries and tears” (5:7) presumably refer to Gethsemane. They certainly show that he understands our weakness. He “learned obedience,” which must be taken in the sense of his being made perfect (2:10). The meaning is not that he was once disobedient and became obedient, but that there is a quality of obedience known only through actually undergoing the costly act of obedience. It was in this way that he secured salvation for his people (5:9).

SPIRITUAL MATURITY

HEBREWS 5:12–6:3

There is so much to know and enjoy in the Christian faith that we can never come to the end of it. Are you stuck at the simple ABC or have you moved on to more advanced teaching?

IT IS THIS passage above all that gives us a glimpse of the spiritual state of those for whom this letter was originally written. The writer expected them to have been teachers (5:12), which indicates that they had been Christians for some time, and that they were people of some ability. But they had not made the most of their opportunities. The result was that they were still in the kindergarten stage. The author uses a variety of metaphors to bring this out. He does not think that the teaching he is giving is necessarily obscure. But it is so to them since they have become “dull of hearing” (5:11). “Dull” is literally “sluggish” (see also 6:12). Since they were sluggish in hearing, the explanations tended to be difficult. Their position is further brought out by a comparison of the food used by the child with the “solid food” of mature adults. Milk is, of course, proper food. But it is proper only at a certain stage of development. If the physical body is to be built up to its full stature, it must have the solid food it requires. The spiritual parallel is not difficult. The immature Christian lacks skill in the teachings about righteousness (which might mean righteousness of life, but more probably has to do with the righteousness that comes by faith). By contrast, the mature have trained faculties and discern good from evil (5:14).

It is interesting to notice what the author counts as “elementary doctrines” when he goes on to appeal to his friends to go forward in the faith (6:1). Repentance and faith come first, for they are basic. A person must repent of their evil ways and really have faith, or otherwise they are not Christians at all. It seems that “ablutions” is a way of referring to rites with water practiced by religions in general. It is elementary that Christians should know what their religion teaches about baptism in distinction from the purifying rituals practiced by others. The laying on of hands may point to something like confirmation or ordination, or it may point to a general ceremony for separation to a particular work. We are handicapped by not knowing as much about the practice of the early church as the recipients of this letter. Resurrection and judgment (6:2) are doctrines to be learned early, as being fundamental to the faith. All this is a foundation and a necessary one. But it does not represent the last word. There is more to Christianity than that. And like the recipients of the letter we should go on to them.

THE HORROR OF HARDENED REJECTION

HEBREWS 6:4-8

These verses remind us not to be lazy but to get on with the task of living out the Christian life.

FOR SOME CHRISTIANS this is one of the most difficult passages in the letter and indeed in all Scripture. They see it as coming in conflict with the eternal perseverance of the saints and they find it difficult to think that no matter what sin a person has committed God should refuse to receive them back.

We should notice first of all that the state described here comes short of the full Christian experience. The Greek rendered “the word of God” (*theou rhema*, 6:5) does not elsewhere stand for the full gospel message. And quite a number of important, even essential, Christian teachings are missing. For example, nothing is said about love. Can someone be said to have a full Christian experience if they are not practicing love, love to God and to other people? The passage appears to be describing the experience of someone with enough experience of Christianity to know what is meant by it and what its demands are but who in the light of such knowledge rejects it. Perhaps Simon Magus is an example of the kind of thing that is in mind (Acts chapter 8, especially 8:13,20ff.).

The biggest difficulty to many is, however, the suggestion that those who fall away cannot come back. It is not easy in the light of New Testament teaching in general to hold that God will refuse any sinner who calls on him, no matter how grievously they have sinned. But that is not what this passage

is saying. Rather, it says that when someone really understands and really rejects Christianity, they put themselves beyond the possibility of real repentance. They harden themselves in their chosen way. The passage does not say that God will refuse them. It says they cannot repent. The present participles rendered “since they crucify ... and hold him up to contempt” (6:6) are significant, for they point to continuing attitudes of active hostility to Christ. It is not an occasional sin about which the author writes but a persistent attitude. Some indeed suggest that we should translate “while they crucify ...” (RV margin).

But in our concern for such difficulties of interpretation we should not overlook the fact that the passage is giving us all a clear warning of the dangers of going back on the knowledge of Christ that we have. There should be progress in the faith. To slip back is disaster, as even nature teaches (6:7f.).

## ENCOURAGEMENT TO PERSEVERANCE

### HEBREWS 6:9-12

Simply to be members of a group who are generally doing the right thing is not enough. It is important that each one of us persists in the right way.

THE LAST SECTION contained a very stern warning. There is no mistaking the seriousness of the writer, nor the unpleasant nature of the fate that he sees awaiting those who commit apostasy. It is comforting now to come to this section which makes it clear that, while the writer has found it necessary to warn his friends, his confidence is that they will not go back. He is sure of “better things that belong to salvation” (6:9), ie there are things about the readers which connect them with salvation (the Greek is a little obscure, but this seems to be its sense).

The basic reason for this is God’s faithfulness. God is not unjust. He takes notice of the realities of the situation and included among these is the fact that the writer’s correspondents are showing the truly Christian quality of love. If people who call themselves Christians are showing a warm love to others, then the inference is that God is at work in them. And the further inference is that they are not on the way to apostasy. The love spoken of was shown in the past and continues. It is not short-lived, but something that carries on, and this strengthens the conviction that these people are in fact right with God.

But the end is not yet. Further, the love shown by the group is not necessarily shown by each of its members, and it is this to which the writer

now directs his attention. It is important that “each one of you” persists in the right way. Merely to be members of a group who are on the whole doing the right thing is not enough. There is a necessary element of personal participation. In encouraging them to persevere to the end, the writer draws attention to the examples of those who had gone before. He warns against sluggishness, and looks for “faith and patience,” an interesting combination. There is the combination of a reliance on God and a readiness to endure. And it is in this way that they (and we) inherit the promises.

GOD'S PROMISE IS SURE

## HEBREWS 6:13-20

Are you in need of encouragement? Then take to heart the encouragement shown here: Abraham, God's unchangeable promise and oath, and Jesus himself.

THE THOUGHT OF promise is continued. Believers are not seeking some paradise of their own creating. They are servants of a God who has made provision for their salvation and who holds out before them certain promises. It is important to realize that these promises are thoroughly reliable. If we put our trust in God, we are not following some will-o'-the-wisp. We have entered on a path that cannot but lead to the goal.

We see this in the case of Abraham, to whom God made a promise which he confirmed with an oath (6:13). In due course Abraham obtained what God had promised, though not without exercising patient endurance (6:15). God swore to Abraham and he performed his oath.

An oath in human terms is the ultimate way of confirming what we have to say (6:16). So when God wished to convey to humanity the unalterable character of his promise, his unswerving determination to do as he had said, he confirmed his promise with an oath. The oath in question appears to be the one already spoken of; that to Abraham. It is relevant to a wide circle, for it includes Abraham's descendants, and indeed "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 22:17f.; Acts 3:25). It is not impossible that there is a side glance at the oath mentioned in Psalm 110:4 which concerns the priesthood of Christ

and which the author quotes in 7:21, but the main thought here is that God's faithfulness to Abraham is an encouragement to believers still. Now they have "two unchangeable things," the promise and the oath, on which to rely.

This leads to the thought of the hope set before us (6:18), that hope which is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (6:19). Hope in the New Testament is not a vague optimism about the future. Rather, it refers to something certain, though as yet unrealized. The certainty is one which is reached by faith, and there can be no other way of reaching it, or otherwise hope would not be hope. Our hope is one which reaches right out into that holy place where Jesus now is. That is to say, it gives us assurance that we will one day be where he is. And this will be not through any merit of our own, but because of the high priestly work he has performed on our behalf (6:20).

**Thought** Hope, like an anchor, is fixed on the unseen God.

## MELCHIZEDEK'S PRIESTHOOD

### HEBREWS 7:1-10

Are you ready for some of the “solid food” that the writer mentioned?

MELCHIZEDEK, THE KING of Salem and a priest of God, comes before us only in one incident, when he met Abraham as the patriarch returned from the slaughter of certain kings. He brought him bread and wine and blessed him. Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder (Genesis 14:17-20). There is one further reference to this mysterious figure, namely in the Psalm already quoted and to which the author will refer again, Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” And that is all. Jewish thinkers on the whole neglected Melchizedek. For them priesthood came from Aaron and any other was ignored.

But the great contribution the writer of Hebrews makes to our understanding of the meaning of priesthood is an unfolding of the significance of this priest-king. He finds many things about Melchizedek which help us to understand what Christ has done for us. He lists some of them here. The name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness” and the title “king of Salem,” “king of peace.” It is also the case that no genealogy of this man is listed, though priests were usually very careful about such matters. Nor is there recorded anything about his birth or death. All this gives a fine picture of a priest who “has neither beginning of days nor end of life” (7:3). But notice that he is said to resemble the Son; it is not the Son who resembles Melchizedek. In other words it is Christ’s priesthood that is the

standard, not that of Melchizedek. All that the latter does is to provide a useful illustration which brings out certain aspects of Christ's priesthood.

The greatness of Melchizedek next occupies our attention (7:4-10). This is brought out mainly by the facts that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek and that he received the priest's blessing. The former fact helps us see that the Aaronic priesthood is inferior. Levi, the one in whom the Aaronic priesthood originated, "was still in the body" of Abraham when the tithe was paid, and so there is a sense in which Levi paid the tithe (and therefore took up the place of inferiority). This is involved also in the blessing, for the less is blessed by the greater (7:7).

All in all, Melchizedek has much to teach us about the kind of priesthood Christ exercised.

**To think about** 7:2: There can be no real peace without righteousness.

## A CHANGE OF PRIESTHOOD

### HEBREWS 7:11-14

The new priesthood in Christ is a royal priesthood.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF the subject of priesthood is implied in the very existence in Scripture of a reference to the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. If the Aaronic priesthood had done all that was required, humanity's priestly needs would have been fully met. There would have been no need and no place for another priesthood. The reference in the Psalm should therefore have made thinking Israelites realize that the Levitical priesthood was inadequate. It is not that that priesthood did nothing. Under it the people received the Law (7:11) which was a great good (and would have been a greater had they realized the true function of the Law and the way it could point them to Christ; see John 5:46f.; Galatians 3:19,24).

But Psalm 110 does speak of a priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. It sees this as persisting forever. This obviously means a change in priesthood. But it also means "necessarily a change in the law as well" (7:12). The Law cannot remain unaffected when the Aaronic priesthood is replaced by another. The Law, and the priesthood which offered the sacrifices prescribed by the Law, are closely bound up together. The one cannot be done away with without serious modifications in the other. Paul can speak of Christ as "the end of the law" (Romans 10:4), and the writer is making the same essential point in his own way.

The particular point which is emphasized is that Christ came from a tribe which was never by the Law connected with priesthood. Judah is the royal tribe, and the fact that Jesus came from this tribe fits in with the fact that Melchizedek was king as well as priest. The new priesthood in Christ is a royal priesthood.

A BETTER HOPE

## HEBREWS 7:15-19

In Jesus we really do have a better hope—we can draw near to God.

THE SUPERIORITY OF Christ's priesthood is before us again. It is not quite certain to what the "This" which opens 7:15 refers, whether to the "change in the law" (7:12) or the inferiority of the Aaronic priesthood. These are closely connected and perhaps we should not make too sharp a distinction. But it does seem that it is priesthood which is primarily in mind here.

The point of importance that is singled out is that Christ's priesthood is "not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life" (7:16). Set therefore in sharp contrast, the principles that establish the two priesthoods show the marked inferiority of the Aaronic. It was, of course, the case that to be a priest of Aaron's line it was necessary only to be born into a particular family. And it is obvious that this gives no special effectiveness to the priest born in such a way. But with Christ it is different. It is the quality of his life that makes him the kind of priest he is.

The word translated "indestructible" is important. It means "that cannot be dissolved," not simply "endless." It is the quality of the life and not its duration that is in mind. The term is set in contrast with "bodily," which is more exactly "fleshy," "expressed in flesh." What cannot be dissolved is in the strongest contrast to what is merely of flesh. There is also a contrast between "legal requirement" and "power." We should not see these two

priesthoods as generally similar. They are strikingly different in their essentials. The thought of the quality of life is reinforced with another quotation of Psalm 110:4, the important word on this occasion being “forever.” Christ’s priesthood will never be superseded. It has something in its very nature that makes it the final priesthood.

The other point which is stressed here is the contrast between the ineffectiveness of Aaron’s priests and the effectiveness of Christ’s priestly work. The former line of priests and the law which went with them were set aside because they could not bring about that to which they pointed. But Christ has brought us “a better hope ... through which we draw near to God” (7:19).

THE GUARANTOR OF A BETTER COVENANT

HEBREWS 7:20-25

Christ's priesthood is permanent: he lives forever. He is therefore constantly interceding for us as we come to God.

THE IDEA OF permanence in Christ's priesthood is very important. In the previous passage we read that the indissolubility which characterizes the life of Christ is significant. This is the basis of his priesthood. It makes it what it is. Now we find that there are important consequences to be drawn from it. Just as earlier, Abraham's position was secured by a divine oath so it is with this priesthood. The indissoluble life would make it permanent even if it stood alone. But it does not stand alone. There is a divine oath to support it, and again we are referred to Psalm 110, this time to the words which refer to God's having sworn "You are a priest forever." So: both from the intrinsic nature of the life and the oath which God has sworn this priesthood is perpetual. The Aaronic priesthood was superseded in due time. Christ's priesthood will never be superseded. And this makes the covenant that Jesus establishes "a better covenant" (7:22). The covenant stands for the whole way of approach to God. What was associated with Aaron involved the offering of animal sacrifices and it was hedged around with a variety of requirements laid on the worshiper. If the worshipers failed to perform these, the sacrifices were of no advantage. Later in this letter the point will be brought out that in any case animal sacrifices are of no benefit for saving people. They cannot

put away sin (10:4). The way of approach which Jesus makes possible is a “better” way from every point of view.

But the one thing which is being hammered home at this point in the argument is the quality of permanence. Clearly, a covenant which depended on priests who could not continue was inferior to one which featured a priest whose life is eternal. The author goes on to notice that those priests were limited in their ministry because from time to time they died. Death has an inhibiting effect on a person’s work! But Christ is in sharp contrast. His priesthood is permanent. He lives forever (7:24). He is therefore always able to save those who come to God through him. His intercession for them never ends (7:25). His presence before the Father in his capacity as the crucified, risen and ascended One is in itself an intercession that never ends.

**Thought** 7:25: “I have prayed for you” (see also Luke 22:32).

“A SON ... PERFECT FOREVER”

## HEBREWS 7:26-28

These verses show how costly it was for Jesus to secure our salvation.

THIS PART OF the argument is rounded off with a little summary drawing attention to the principal points brought out by the Melchizedek concept of priesthood. There are three sections.

In the first it is the personal qualities of Jesus that are emphasized. There is a sequence of thought here which is worth noticing. Jesus is “holy,” a positive word denoting the ethical perfection associated with God, which is further described with two negative terms, “blameless” and “unstained.” Then “separated from sinners” is explained as “exalted above the heavens.” The author has been at pains to show that Jesus came right where we sinners are and took upon himself the weakness of our mortal nature. But he offered one perfect sacrifice to deal with our sins and now he is “separated” from all that that involves. It is a favorite thought in this letter that sin has been dealt with once and for all.

The thought moves on to the sacrifice Christ offered. There is a small problem about the daily offering of sacrifices attributed to the Aaronic high priests (7:27), for the principal sacrifice which the high priest (in distinction from other priests) offered was the Day of Atonement sacrifice. This was an annual not a daily offering, and the author discusses this principally. But there was a daily need for cleansing, and there were daily sacrifices. The high priest, of course, might offer these. The expression therefore fits in with the

office as understood at the time. In any case the contrast is between the repeated offerings under the Aaronic system (daily or yearly, the principle is the same) and the offering of Christ “once for all.” There is a perfection in his offering that is lacking in theirs.

Finally, there is a contrast between the high priests in their weakness and the Son “made perfect forever” (7:28). We have before had references both to the Law (7:12) and to the oath (7:20). Now we read that the oath “came later than the law,” which means that it was the definitive thing, replacing what went before it. There is also contrast between the weak nature of the priests (they were no more than sinful men) and the Son. His relationship to God was very different from theirs, and this is driven home with the “made perfect forever.” He has suffered for sin and in this way accomplished what is permanent in its effects.

THE SHADOW AND THE SUBSTANCE

HEBREWS 8:1-7

We must make sure we are not going through the motions of being Christians without really coming to grips with the reality or reckoning with the wholehearted demands of Christ.

THROUGHOUT THE ANCIENT world there turns up from time to time a distinction between what is real and fundamental, and what is merely a copy or shadow of the real. The author has some such idea which he brings out at intervals during the following chapters. The thought is probably indebted to Exodus 25:40 (quoted in 8:5). The point which our author is concerned to drive home is that in the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices we see something resembling true priesthood and sacrifices. But the truths to which the shadows point are found in Christ alone.

As he begins to bring this out, the author outlines the chief points in his argument so far. First, he insists that Christ's is the true priesthood because offered in "the true tent" (8:2), "the heavenly sanctuary" (8:5). The fact that if he were on earth he would have no priestly ministry (8:4) is not significant. It is what happens in "the heavenly sanctuary" which matters, and the service rendered in what is no more than "a copy and shadow" of that sanctuary is comparatively unimportant. There is a clear warning here for those who were tempted to go back from the priest in the true sanctuary to the priests in the copy of the true. And we should not overlook the fact in our eagerness to condemn the recipients of this letter that in our age as well as any other it is

easy to prefer the shadow to the substance. “Christians” can still go through the motions, but without getting to grips with the reality or really reckoning with the wholehearted demands Christ makes.

The final thought leads us into the new covenant which dominates the next couple of chapters. The point made here is that it is “enacted on better promises” (8:6). It is a covenant of pure grace, with Christ’s atoning sacrifice at its basis. It offers people the promise of full and free forgiveness. If this could have been given by the first covenant, the author reasons, there would have been no need for a second (8:7). The very existence of the second shows the inadequacy of the first.

## THE NEW AND THE OLD COVENANT

### HEBREWS 8:8-13

Are you enjoying all the benefits Christ gained for you in the new covenant?

STUDENTS OF THE Bible are sometimes perplexed by the expression “the new covenant.” The Bible teaches that God does not need to work by trial and error, as though he had to try one covenant and when it did not work, substitute another. He sees the end perfectly from the beginning. Accordingly, when he makes a covenant, we expect it to be binding for eternity. Yet Scripture speaks clearly of a new covenant and our passage tells us unambiguously that the first is obsolete (8:13).

The answer appears to be that there is a sense in which any covenant God makes is unchanging and unchangeable. Nowhere in the Bible, for example, is there any indication that the covenant with Abraham is canceled. It still stands. God’s way is the way of grace and this is abundantly clear in the covenant with Abraham. It is implied, in fact, in the covenant with the people in Exodus 24 (see also Exodus 19:4 where God’s action in grace precedes anything the people do). But spontaneously the people offered to obey God (Exodus 24:3,7). Indeed, while the covenant is initiated by God’s grace, there is the clear implication that the people will live as the people of God (see also Exodus 19:5f.). Increasingly the people came to understand this in a legalistic way. And increasingly they failed to live up to their obligations to God.

Since then, they were unable or unwilling (or both) to respond to the grace of God shown in the covenant, the promise of a new covenant is spelled out for us in Jeremiah 31:31ff., quoted in this passage. There is a sense in which this covenant is the same one. It is still the expression of God's grace. But there is also a sense in which it is radically new. It involves an action of the very Spirit of God within people (8:10). It involves their having a real and personal knowledge of God (8:11). And it involves their sins being really put away (8:12), something which happened and could happen only in Christ's atoning work. Since Christ has made all these things possible, it is clear that any previous arrangement is out of date. The old is obsolete and ready to vanish (8:13).

## THE TABERNACLE FURNITURE

### HEBREWS 9:1-5

The first covenant with its regulations and sanctuary prepared the way for the work of Christ.

THE MAIN INTEREST of the author was in what Christ had done for people. But he clearly loved and had a profound interest in the Jewish institutions which foreshadowed the work of Christ. In a way that is without parallel in the New Testament he now writes about the place and the manner of worship under the old covenant. Though now superseded, neither was without significance.

It might have been expected that he would write about the temple, which would have been much more familiar to the people of his day. But he prefers to concentrate on the tabernacle which had been used in the wilderness in the formative days of Israel. The essentials were, of course, the same as those in the temple, so not a great deal hinges on the choice. But there was something about that first tabernacle set up under Moses which might be expected to make a special appeal to those who loved the old way of worship.

The first covenant, he says, “had” (past tense) its regulations and sanctuary. This may point us back to the days of Moses when it was instituted, or, perhaps more probably, may come from the conviction that it had now been superseded by Christ’s saving work. He speaks of two tents, the first being the Holy Place, the second the Most Holy Place. The word he uses for “the Holy Place” (*hagia*, “holy things”) does not appear to be used in this way elsewhere, but is quite intelligible. He goes on to refer to “the

second curtain” (the first would have been that at the entrance to the Holy Place). This screened the Most Holy Place, the furniture of which are noted.

There is a difficulty about “the golden altar of incense” (9:4). In the first instance the word rendered “altar” might mean “censer” and some understand it this way. But the ESV and NIV are almost certainly correct. The term can have this meaning and it is this that is required. In the second instance the altar of incense was not in the Most Holy Place, but in the Holy Place. It had to be, because of its use. But in fact our author does not say that it was “in” the Most Holy Place at all. He speaks of the Most Holy Place as “having” it, ie it belonged to the service of the Most Holy Place (see also 1 Kings 6:22). The offering of incense was an integral part of the ceremony of entrance into the Most Holy Place. The threefold reference to gold (9:4) stresses the glory of the tabernacle, as in another way do the references to the cherubim and to the mercy seat (9:5). Clearly the old way had its values, even though not the ones attributed to it by the Jews of his day.

## THE TABERNACLE WORSHIP

### HEBREWS 9:6-10

How much better is the Christian new order, with its spiritual institutions and universal blessings.

FROM THE FURNISHINGS of the tabernacle we turn to the nature of the worship that was carried on in it. While the writer notices the daily worship performed by the priests (9:6), his real interest is in the ceremonies on the Day of Atonement. He stresses the limitations on access to the Most Holy Place. Ordinary priests could never enter, and even the high priest “only once a year” (9:7). Nor did he have the right to enter as he pleased on that day. He must first offer “blood” both for himself and the people. The author does not see this as merely a piece of old-fashioned ritual. It has meaning. It is unthinkable that God would bring about the setting up of such a complete system of worship without there being profound meaning in what is established. In later chapters certain points in this meaning will be unfolded.

Here the author’s concern is with the fact that the careful hedging about of approach to the Most Holy Place is in itself significant. It showed that the way into the very presence of God was not open to sinful humanity. The people had no way into it. The priests had no way into it. The high priest had no way into it for every day of the year except one. And on that one day his access was severely restricted. Could it be more plainly shown that the way to God was not open? Incidentally this is a truth which still needs to be learned. In our democratic days we are apt to take it for granted that we have

the right to approach God whenever we will. The meaning of the tabernacle furniture has an important message still.

The readers of the letter are reminded in conclusion that the ritual regulations were concerned with the purely external. They could deal with the body (9:10), but they could not deal with the problems of conscience (9:9). Ritual is not unimportant and it has lessons to teach us. But it has inbuilt limitations. It should never be regarded as bringing about things to which it can only point.

## CHRIST'S EFFECTIVE SACRIFICE

### HEBREWS 9:11-17

What does Christ's sacrifice mean for you today?

FROM THE INEFFECTIVE the author now turns to the effective, from the ritual to what the ritual points to. He reminds us of the character in which Christ appears, "a high priest of the good things that have come" (or "to come"; the manuscripts are divided). Some understand "the greater and more perfect tent" to be an imaginative description of Christ as passing through a heavenly sanctuary on the way to the Most Holy Place where he would perform his priestly duties; others see it as a symbolic description of the incarnation. What is most important is not the resolution of such points but the shedding of the blood of Christ which is emphasized. Everything else leads to this. The writer has already made the point that there is no more than a limited and purely external purpose achieved by the performance of ritual (9:9f.) and he repeats this (9:13).

The perfect and effective sacrifice of Christ stands in contrast with the limited effect of the institutions of the old covenant. Christ's death secures "an eternal redemption" (9:12). Redemption in the ancient world signified release from slavery or sentence of death, and release by payment of a price. So Christ paid the price that secured the release of sinners from slavery to sin (Romans 7:14) and from the sentence of death hanging over them (Romans 6:23). And this release is not temporary but "eternal."

Next we have Christ's work viewed as the mediation of a new covenant. Once again there is the thought of eternal worth (9:15), this being linked to the redemption that deals with sins even under the first covenant. The old sacrifices could not really take away sin. But Christ's death can and does. The Greek word *diatheke* means both "covenant" and "will," which is the point of 9:16f. The author plays on the double meaning of the term to bring out his point that the death of Christ was necessary. Death brings a will into effect and the death of Christ brought the new covenant into effect, just as if it had been a will.

## THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD

### HEBREWS 9:18-22

In the Bible, forgiveness is never cheap: the death of Jesus was the price he paid to atone for our sins.

WE MOVE BACK in thought to the old covenant described in Exodus 24. Its establishment illustrates the principle that blood must be shed to bring into effect a covenant, for Moses sprinkled blood when that covenant was brought into effect. The author gives us some information not found in Exodus 24, for example, the mention of the offering of goats, and the use of water, scarlet wool and hyssop, and the sprinkling of the blood. In Exodus we are simply told that Moses threw half the blood against the altar and half on the people (Exodus 24:6,8).

The author also goes beyond the Old Testament when he speaks of Moses as sprinkling with blood the tabernacle and the vessels used in worship (9:21). This of course refers to a later event, for the tabernacle did not exist when the covenant was made. In Exodus 40:9ff. Moses was commanded to anoint the tabernacle and its furniture, and presumably he obeyed this command. Nothing is said, however, about any use of blood at this time.

From this the author moves to the thought that the Law prescribed the shedding of blood on a number of occasions. Practically everything “is purified with blood” (9:22). An occasional exception is allowed (see Leviticus 5:11), but this merely highlights the rule. The teaching of the Levitical law is plainly that “without the shedding of blood there is no

forgiveness of sins” (9:22). Among many ancient peoples sin was taken very lightly and regarded as unimportant. Nobody who took the sacrificial system of ancient Israel with full seriousness could make that mistake. The solemn ritual underlined two points: the seriousness of sin, and the necessity for the offering of a pure victim if sin is to be forgiven. In this way, the people of God were prepared for the coming of the One who would offer the one sacrifice that really takes away sin. The sacrifices could not remove sin, but they had an important educational function. In the modern world where the pagan view of sin is so widespread there is still the need to learn the seriousness of sin and the necessity for the shedding of blood if it is to be put away.

## THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

# HEBREWS 9:23-28

Here we read more about the finality of Christ's sacrifice.

AGAIN WE HAVE the concept of shadow and substance, this time to drive home the point that Christ has offered the perfect sacrifice. The sacrifices of the Law had limited effectiveness (9:13; see also 10:1,4). They could "purify" the "copies of the heavenly things" (9:23) which is all that an earthly sanctuary can provide at best. But we need more if our eternal need is to be met. And that need has been met, because Christ has provided the sacrifice that perfectly meets our need. The writer sees him as doing perfectly all that the ancient ritual foreshadowed.

Therefore, the Most Holy Place, which was hedged about with such elaborate safeguards, and into which the high priest might enter and only he once per year, is no more than a "sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one" (9:24). What appeared to the Jews to be the place of revelation of God's presence is now seen to be no more than a pointer to what really is true. But Christ ministers where it counts. He appears in God's presence for us (9:24). Our sin is dealt with at the highest level.

The second point that is stressed is the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice. The author comes back several times to the thought that the continuing nature of the ministry of the high priest is itself evidence of its ineffectiveness. But Christ did not offer himself repeatedly. He made only one sacrifice. He offered himself once for all (9:26).

Intertwined on this occasion is the other thought that he offers his own blood. There is a quality about his sacrifice that could not possibly be seen in any other. The high priest necessarily entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of an animal, “blood not his own” (9:25). There is a qualitative difference when Christ offers himself.

The chapter concludes with a forward look. This must always be taken seriously, knowing that before everyone is death and then judgment. Judgment is as certain as death. In fact, judgment is more certain than death, for some will still be alive at the end of the age and will be changed, not die (1 Corinthians 15:51). But all will stand before Christ’s judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:10). We should never take death anything else than very seriously. Yet the really important thing is not this. It is that when Christ appears again it will be for the consummation of salvation. Then he will not deal with sin but take his own people into salvation. It will be a fearful thing not to be ready for him when he comes.

THE WILL OF GOD

## HEBREWS 10:1-10

Animal sacrifices were a picture of God's gracious purpose in providing a substitute, Jesus Christ, to die in our place.

THERE IS A sense in which here we come to the heart of the whole matter. Some misinterpret it by a wrong insistence on the doing of the will of God. They point out that our author quotes Psalm 40:6-8 in bringing out the truth that God does not delight in animal sacrifices. Prophetically the Psalm goes on to speak about the Messiah as doing the will of God. Christ, then, the reasoning goes, has come, not like wild animals who have no say in their being offered, but as a man to make a perfect surrender of his will to God. The essence of his offering is the offering of a will completely submissive to that of the Father. In a day when many find sacrifice and substitution unacceptable, such a view of the Psalm, of the teaching of this letter and of the nature of the atonement, finds some support.

But it is not what the author is saying. It overlooks his express declaration that "by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). Christ does indeed do the will of God. But that will is not expressed in vague generalities. It is the offering of Christ's body that is the will of God.

The author introduces the thought by repeating that the sacrifices of the old covenant are ineffective (10:4). The Law has only the shadow, not the substance. It offers the same sacrifices over and over again in silent testimony

to the fact that they cannot really cleanse (10:1f.). They recall sin each year (the Day of Atonement sacrifices are clearly in mind). But it is quite impossible for them to take away sins.

10:4 is the definitive statement of the ineffectiveness of all animal sacrifices. Animals move on a different level from people. Their worth is infinitely less. They cannot possibly be accepted on behalf of people. It is this that makes the Psalm applicable. It categorically rejects animal sacrifices as the way, and puts the will of God in the supreme place. This means the abolition of the old way altogether and the substitution of something altogether new (10:9). The offering of the body of Christ is the one effective sacrifice. This brings about the sanctification of believers. And this passage finishes with the characteristic “once for all.” There is an air of finality about this sacrifice. It cannot be repeated. Nothing can be added to its perfection.

ONCE FOR ALL

## HEBREWS 10:11-18

We read here of the work of the Son and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

ON A NUMBER of occasions the author has insisted that Christ suffered once and for all, and this is the central point of this passage. Once again we are reminded that the Levitical priests offered repeatedly and that their sacrifices were totally unable to deal with sin (10:11). In contrast, Christ offered “for all time a single sacrifice for sins” (10:12). Since his sacrifice really deals with sins there is no need and no place for a repetition.

The same point is brought out in a different way when the author speaks of Christ as sitting down at God’s right hand. This imagery is repeated a number of times in the New Testament. It is, of course, a metaphor, for we cannot conceive of spirits as having literal right hands or of adopting a sitting posture. But the meaning of the metaphor is important. Sitting is the posture of rest. It indicates that the One sitting has completed his work. The fact that Christ is seated means that the work of salvation is accomplished. Nothing can be added to its perfection. The fact that he is at the right hand of God means that he is in the place of highest honor. No longer is he despised and rejected. He is in the chief place in all of heaven.

Our author’s interest in forgiveness is seen in the way he quotes Jeremiah chapter 31. In chapter 8 of this letter he has quoted fully. Now he has the opening words about the new covenant, but omits a considerable section as

he goes straight on to those about forgiveness. The new covenant is what really brings forgiveness. The same point is brought out in another way when he speaks of Christ as having “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14). The sanctified are those set apart for God by Christ’s one offering. They are perfected because their sins are put away and they see them no more. This is for all time, for nothing more is needed. And we come back to this thought at the end with the reminder that where sins are forgiven there is no more offering for sin (10:18): nothing can be added to perfection.

A TRUE HEART

## HEBREWS 10:19-25

We can come into God's presence with complete confidence that he will accept us, so the question is: do we come and make full use of that access?

ATTENTION NOW TURNS from the Savior to the saved. Since Christ has done so much for us there must be consequences in our attitude both to God and to other people. As believers, we should have confidence in their relationship with God. Because of what Christ has done for us, the way into the very holiest is open to us. The curtain was torn literally to make open the way into the Holiest (Mark 15:38). And metaphorically the flesh of Christ had to be torn to open up that way. The expression is poetic and vivid. Some prefer to take "his flesh" rather with "way": the way through the curtain was his flesh, his human nature with all that this means. But the interpretation of the tearing of his flesh seems more in accordance with the reference to his blood (10:19). What is clear is that we are being reminded of the access into the very presence of God which Christ's death brought to sinners, and we are encouraged to make the greatest use of that access. We should come with true heart, with faith, with assurance, and with our hearts purified inwardly just as water (the water of baptism) cleans our bodies outwardly (10:22).

For those tempted to go back, there is point in the appeal to hold fast and not to waver (10:23), as also in the reminder of what is involved in "confession" and "hope." They should not try to stand on their own. Basic is

the faithfulness of the One “who promised.” God will not go back on his promises.

As believers, we can help one another. We can stir one another up to produce deeds of love and other good works. Notice how love is thought of as the most important thing in keeping people steadfast in the Christian life. And the assembling of Christians together is something not to be neglected (10:25). The assembly for worship, when all criticisms have been allowed their full weight, is still a source of strength to those who come with a true heart.

A FEARFUL THING

## HEBREWS 10:26-31

The writer warns of judgment that will come to those who deliberately reject the faith.

WE RETURN TO the thought of the danger of apostasy. In mind is the person who has come to understand what the truth is, but who nevertheless has chosen to sin deliberately (10:26). Such a person has rejected Christ, desecrated the covenant blood and insulted the Holy Spirit (10:29). It is idle for such a one to think that there stands before them anything other than certain and fearful judgment.

It is one of the heresies of our times that this truth is not only rejected but regarded as sub-Christian. People may know only the truth that “God is love” that they have forgotten such complementary truths as “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). In the process they have distorted even what they hold to, for they have confused love and sentimentality. The God of modern humanity is a morally flabby god, a little god who does not greatly mind if his worshipers go astray.

But the God of the Bible is a great God and One who loves—really loves—his people. He is infinitely concerned for their welfare and hates everything that makes them less than the best that they can be. True love opposes every evil in the beloved. This thought is in mind throughout this passage when the writer speaks in terms of “a fearful prospect of judgment,” of “a fury of fire” (10:27), and of what “a fearful thing” (10:31) it is to fall into the hands of the

living God. The fact is that we are not irresponsible children playing at life. We are responsible people, each of us given one life to live. We are to live it as those who will one day be called on to give an account of ourselves. This is not meant to strike terror into us, but we are foolish—and more—if we do not see that life is too serious a business for trifling with. Flippancy will not be enough when we stand before God and give an account of what we have done with his good gifts.

A CALL TO PERSEVERE

HEBREWS 10:32-39

The writer reminds his readers that in the past they have persevered through suffering; they are now not to turn back but stand firm and keep going forward in faith.

THIS PASSAGE PROVIDES a glimpse of the kind of trouble into which the early Christians constantly fell and is all the more revealing in that it is incidental. The author is not setting out to give details of the troubles that Christians might be expected to face. He is appealing to his friends to remain loyal in their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. In the process he reminds them of what they have already endured for Christ and suggests that they should not let all this be in vain. Being a Christian in those days meant no minor pain, but “a hard struggle with sufferings” (10:32). It meant public abuse and being linked with others similarly mistreated (10:33). It meant confiscation of property (10:34). There are Christians in modern times, as there have been in every age, who have such hardships to endure. Those of us whose sufferings are comparatively minor should have a real sense of gratitude to the One who has protected us from the worst. And when we do suffer, as we will in some way, we should regard this as being in the true apostolic succession.

But the author does not dwell on the sufferings of his friends. He recalls them but does not stress them. His emphasis is rather on their being faithful in their service of God. “Do not throw away your confidence,” he says

(10:35). The implication is that confidence will normally remain. It is a willful thing to discard it.

Since God has done such a wonderful thing in us when he brought us salvation, we have every reason for being confident. And we will remain so unless we give way to evil. For our confidence is not in anything we do, but in what God has done and will do. This does not mean that life is always easy for us as Christians. We must not expect that God will smooth out all our difficulties. That is not the path God's servants must tread. But if we cannot expect a smooth path, we can expect help to overcome the difficult places. So the author appeals to persevere. He recognizes that there are those who shrink back (10:38). But he does not think that his readers are included in their number. He links them with himself in the fine affirmation of 10:39.

**Thought** Can you imagine 10:34 being said of you?

## FAITH

### HEBREWS 11:1-7

Faith means taking God and his word seriously; faith grasps the unseen power of God.

THE LINKING OF faith and perseverance at the end of the previous study leads the writer to a more extended treatment of the subject. He begins by speaking of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for” where “assurance” translates the Greek *hypostasis*, “that which stands under,” and so is the “essence” or perhaps “basis.” He is saying that faith is all that we now have of the things still to be. It is faith that gives reality to those things (though not in the sense of creating them; faith simply lays hold of them). So with the following, “the conviction of things not seen.” We do not yet see the realities to come. But by faith we know that they will come. Faith gives us the conviction of their certainty.

Faith is therefore an important quality for Christians. Without it we lack spiritual perception. With it we enter in some measure into an apprehension of what God has done and will do. The chapter goes on to bring this out, with illustrations from the lives of some of God’s outstanding servants. First, the writer deals with the theme generally. It was by faith that the people of old received God’s approval (11:2). It was by faith that he and the people of his day recognized that creation had taken place and that “what is seen” is not the last word (11:3), a judgment which is far from being out of date.

This section contains references to three specific people. Abel's offering was preferred to that of Cain because it was offered in faith. Enoch's being "taken up" to heaven was due to faith, which elicits the important comment that "without faith it is impossible to please" God (11:6). Someone cannot reason themselves or work themselves into a place of acceptance of and acceptance by God. That is always a matter of faith. And Noah's faith was a condemnation of the world of his day as he acted on his profound spiritual convictions. Faith always shows up unbelief for the shallow thing it is.

**Consider** Does reason have any place in Christian experience? If so, what?

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

HEBREWS 11:8-12

Faith is a matter of trusting God and accepting and obeying his word.

THROUGHOUT THE NEW Testament Abraham is regarded as the prime example of faith. Faith, for him, was not conventional piety. The point first brought out here is Abraham's willingness to act with nothing to go on except his faith in God. He knew he was called by God but he could not have justified to unbelievers a journey that meant leaving his country, his family and his father's house (Genesis 12:1). But his faith in God was such that he acted on God's word. He did leave his home, his family, and in fact his whole way of life.

Nor was that the end of it. He had been promised the land of Canaan, but he lived in it not as possessor but as a visitor. Isaac and Jacob shared the promise with him, but they all lived in tents, obviously temporary dwellers in the land. But Abraham's vision was fixed, not on the things that anyone could see, but on "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:10). It is still the case that faith does not fix its attention on the same things as the world does. The essence of faith is that it gives the prime place to God and his leading.

Other people were associated with Abraham. We have already noticed that Isaac and Jacob are said to have shared in his life. So also did Sarah, who was able to conceive only "by faith" (11:11). It is worth noticing that her initial reaction was anything but one of faith (Genesis 18:12ff.). But God did

not judge her by her worst moment (as he does not judge us by ours). Sarah's settled attitude was one of faith, not doubt. She trusted God and "considered him faithful" (11:11). So God honored the faith of his servants, and from one man "as good as dead" in time there descended a great nation (11:12).

## THE FAITH OF THE PATRIARCHS

### HEBREWS 11:13-22

What are you looking forward to? Read verses 14 to 16 to see how it matches with what these heroes of the faith had their sights set on.

THIS PASSAGE DIVIDES into two sections, the first a general consideration of what is implied in the faith of the people spoken of, and a second in which individual patriarchs are mentioned. The outstanding character of the faith of people like those mentioned is shown by the fact that to the very end of their lives they never did see the realization of the promises of God. This happened, of course, because these promises are bound up with the saving work of Christ.

Until Christ came there could be no complete fulfillment of God's promises, whatever partial anticipations might be granted the people of old. But if they did not see the fulfillment, there was nothing wrong with their vision. They saw themselves for what they were, "strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13). If their interest had been in earthly possessions, they would have been able to go back to the land from which they came (11:15). But their vision was fixed on something far better, on that spiritual possession that God had for them. They were giants in faith. And it is a wonderful thing that is said of them when our writer reports that "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (11:16). It calls for heartsearching on our own account as to whether God could in any meaningful sense be called "our" God. Would he be ashamed of being called the God of people like us?

When he gets down to cases, the author thinks first of Abraham's readiness to offer up Isaac, that son in whom God had said the promises would be fulfilled. The patriarch trusted God, that God can even bring people back from the dead. Indeed, the author sees a figurative resurrection in the way Abraham received his son again. Again, Isaac looked forward to a future he would not see as he called a blessing on Jacob and Esau. And Jacob and Joseph followed in the same way by looking forward in faith to what they knew God would bring to pass after their lives had ended. So each of the patriarchs sets us an example. They all trusted God against the present indications. And in each case their faith was vindicated.

THE FAITH OF MOSES  
HEBREWS 11:23-31

Faith is depending on God's power in the face of what the world offers.

ABRAHAM AND MOSES were regarded as the two great men in the early history of the people. So when the author refers to them as his outstanding examples of faith he is making a strong appeal to all who revered Jewish institutions and people. In the case of Moses, faith was seen even in his babyhood, for his parents needed faith to defy the edict of Pharaoh (11:23).

The point that is emphasized is Moses' readiness to put up with ill-treatment which he could have avoided by deserting the divine call. He could have lived as a royal prince, "the son of Pharaoh's daughter" (11:24). Instead he chose to be one of the despised nation of slaves. Faith gave him clarity of perspective so that he could discern rightly the true significance of both. It is not being realistic, but suffering from a distorted sense of values, when someone prefers the "security" of worldly safety to the "uncertainties" of faith in God. In the long view it is faith that matters, faith that emerges triumphant.

This is brought out by saying that Moses "looked to the reward" (11:26). He understood what the reward was if he allied himself closely with Pharaoh and his court. And he understood what the reward was if he joined himself to "the people of God." In both cases the lasting spiritual result and the immediate material result were in sharp contrast. So Moses endured

steadfastly the present trial, his faith assuring him that the difficulties were relatively unimportant alongside the greater evil of abandoning the life to which God had called him.

So it was the vision of “seeing him who is invisible” (11:27) that sustained him when he left Egypt, having chosen the wrath of the ruler instead of his favor. It was faith again that guided his actions in instituting the Passover. He had nothing but faith to guide him in keeping that feast himself and in persuading his fellow Israelites to do the same. But that faith was vindicated, as was that of the people when they crossed the Red Sea and captured Jericho. It is interesting to see Rahab among those who showed faith, a faith which led her to welcome the spies (11:31). In each case, faith was triumphantly vindicated.

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH  
HEBREWS 11:32-40

Faith produces the power to persevere when the going gets tough.

THE AUTHOR HAS not exhausted the catalog of the heroes of faith. There are many more and he lists some of their names (11:32). But for lack of time he does not go into detail in their exploits. Instead he has a quick summary. First he speaks of the broad, general results achieved by these people of faith: they had success in conflict, success in the area of government, and the spiritual reward covenanted by God (11:33). They also experienced forms of personal deliverance. Some were saved from wild animals, others from fire (which may stand for physical forces in general), and others again from people who would have destroyed them (11:33f.). The third group of successes rings the changes on human strength: they won it, they used it in war, and they triumphed with it by putting armies to flight (11:34).

We may wonder why women are singled out as receiving their dead by resurrection (11:35). But most such resurrections recorded in Scripture were in fact for women (eg 1 Kings 17:17ff.; 2 Kings 4:17ff.; Luke 7:11ff.; John chapter 11; Acts 9:36ff.), so there is point in the comment. But in rejoicing over such victories we must not think that faith is always triumphant on the human level. Sometimes it must undergo hardship and even apparent defeat. That was the way of the cross, and Christians follow in the steps of the Master. So we are told of those who suffered in a variety of ways, some accepting death, knowing that their faithfulness would have its effects in the

resurrection (11:35). Some endured only insults, some accepted torture, some imprisonment, some destitution and the loss of homes and the like.

But the climax to all this comes with the surprising information that, giants of the faith though they were, and examples to believers as they continue to be, these “did not receive what was promised” (11:39). This does not mean that God let them down in any way. It is the author’s way of making the telling point that in the providence of God the consummation of the promises was not in the days of old, but would include his readers. God’s plan is that all his people will be made perfect together. Christ’s saving act has consequences for the whole people of God.

CHRIST OUR EXAMPLE

## HEBREWS 12:1-3

Remembering Jesus, and all that he experienced for us, is to encourage us as we run the race set out before us.

THERE IS DISPUTE as to whether we should understand the “cloud of witnesses” (12:1) as witnessing us as we live out the Christian life, or whether they are witnesses to the truth of the things of God from whose example we can learn much as we serve our Lord. In favor of the latter view it is pointed out that the word for “witnesses” seems never to be used of mere spectators. It is characteristically applied to those who have witnessed for the faith, and in time came to be applied specifically to those who witnessed by a martyr’s death. In favor of the former view is “we are surrounded,” which is not naturally interpreted as our looking to them, all the more so since the writer immediately goes on to say that we should have our attention fixed on Jesus (12:2). Perhaps there is a bit of both meanings. On the one hand the heroes of the past watch to see how we acquit ourselves. But on the other hand they do not do this as mere spectators. They are those who have borne witness in their day, as they look to us to do the same in ours.

But the important thing is that we have a race to run. We should therefore strip ourselves of everything that may hinder us (the distinction between “weight” and “sin” indicates that there are some things which, though not sins, we as Christians should avoid, since they are hindrances to our Christian advance). And especially we should fix our gaze on Jesus. He is our perfect

example and inspiration. He is the “pioneer”: he is the One who shows us the way and is our leader as we seek to follow him. He is also the “perfecter”: he both initiates and brings to completion the faith by which we live.

Especially important is the cross. This is, of course, the way our salvation was brought about. But it is also our supreme example. Christ accepted it despite all the shame it involved (12:2) and now is in the place of highest honor. When we are confronted with open hostility, it is a strength to consider that we serve a Master who knows it exactly. For our salvation, he put up with the worst that sinners could do.

CHILDREN RECEIVE DISCIPLINE

## HEBREWS 12:4-10

Like a father disciplining his children so they might grow up strong and mature, so God uses our sufferings to mold us.

IT IS ONE of the facts of life that we do not like suffering. Nobody does. But it is also one of the facts of the Christian life that suffering has been transformed by the sufferings of Christ. When we look at the cross, we see that suffering can be meaningful and that it can accomplish great good. No one who has experienced in their own soul the saving benefits of the sufferings of Christ can ever look on suffering in the same way again. This is not to say that we simply speak the words “the cross” and all our problems concerning suffering vanish. They do not. But the cross means that they must be viewed in a new light. They cannot be seen now simply as misfortunes that a God who does not greatly care allows to afflict us. The cross shows us that God cares passionately for us and our best good. And since God is all-powerful, he must see meaning in the sufferings that come to us. Otherwise he would not allow them to come. In a number of places in the New Testament various aspects of the problem of suffering are brought out.

Here the thought that is emphasized is that the sufferings of Christians are evidence of their status in the heavenly family. They mark Christians out as children, as those for whom God cares and cares enough to discipline. Many today thoughtlessly maintain that suffering is evidence that there is no God, or that if there is one, then he is a God who does not care about his people.

The writer draws exactly the opposite conclusion. After pointing out that his readers should not exaggerate the problem, for they had not yet suffered “to the point of shedding your blood” (as Christ did), he goes on to the important point that children are disciplined.

A father may not worry overmuch about people with whom he has no close connection, but he is very concerned indeed for the children he loves. The very fact that God allows Christians to undergo trials is evidence that he is acting as a father and that he loves them. He treats them as children and disciplines them for their profit (12:10). Their sufferings are evidence, not that he does not care for them, but that he does, not that he regards them as outsiders, but that he sees them as sons.

HOW DO WE RESPOND TO SUFFERING?

## HEBREWS 12:11-17

A right attitude to suffering has good, peaceful results.

SUFFERING, RIGHTLY ENDURED, can be the means of great blessing, both to the person suffering and also to those with whom such a person comes into contact. Nothing, it is true, can make suffering pleasant (12:11). But a right attitude can make it profitable. It is this with which our author proceeds to concern himself. He points to “the peaceful fruit of righteousness,” ie the fruit which consists in righteousness. Notice the adjective “peaceful”: this may not be a description that would spontaneously occur to most of us. But when discipline is accepted, the soul is at peace. It is rid of the tensions and divisions which make life difficult for the undisciplined. It is at one with God. This is real peace.

Because of this the writer can appeal to his readers to lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees (12:12; see also Isaiah 35:3), a vivid picture of people who are not realizing their full potential. In language reminiscent of Proverbs 4:26 he urges that they make the paths straight (ie take away awkward bends and roughnesses). The lame will then not be hurt but healed. It is easy to live in such a way as to neglect the needs of the spiritually lame, but those who heed the discipline God sends will not make that mistake.

“Strive” (12:14) is perhaps better “pursue.” There is the thought of diligent and eager pursuit. This is directed towards peace, here “peace with

everyone.” This follows naturally enough from that peace with God which we have just noticed (12:11). With this is linked “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” This does not, of course, mean that people must by their own effort produce such qualities of character as fit them for the vision of God. Such an idea cannot be fitted into the New Testament. Rather the writer is speaking of earnestness in living out the gospel. If a person does not yield themselves to God in response to Christ’s atoning act, they will not see God. This is something to be sought after from the depths of our being.

This passage ends with the reminder that some have had a certain acquaintance with the things of God but have failed to profit thereby. It is the thought of 6:4ff. in another form. If people nourish a “root of bitterness,” they will surely fail to obtain the blessing of God. Esau is the example of the kind of thing that is in mind. We learn here that, following his rejection of his birthright, he wanted back the blessing he had once treated so lightly. But his renunciation was a solemn act that could not be undone by tears.

THE CITY OF GOD

## HEBREWS 12:18-24

Have you accepted God's invitation to come into his presence? If so, are you honoring God by enjoying all he wants to give you?

THE SERIOUSNESS OF the issues involved is now brought out with a reminder of the inauguration of the old covenant. At Mount Sinai there were various fearful phenomena that are listed for us (12:18f.). The people who heard it all begged that they receive no more such messages (12:19), and even Moses, the man of God, could say, "I tremble with fear" (12:21). It is clear that the scene was one of terrifying grandeur. It emphasized the truth that God is not to be taken lightly.

But the purpose of drawing attention to Mount Sinai is not that we may concentrate on the terrors. They are there, but in the background. The emphasis is instead on the graciousness which is the characteristic of the new covenant. Not Mount Sinai but Mount Zion is the place to which Christians have come, and this is described as "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). There is a grandeur about this concept. We see this in the references to the angels, the inhabitants of heaven, and especially to God, now described as "a judge who is God of all" (12:23). While the author is stressing the graciousness of the new covenant, he does not lose sight of the fact that it includes elements of seriousness and even severity. The issues involved are of deep and lasting consequence. When we preach the gospel, we should not think that we are playing a kind of game in which it does not

greatly matter who wins. We are offering people salvation from a lost eternity. And as every person must stand before the “judge who is God of all,” no one can evade the challenge.

But the climax is reached in the reference to Jesus Christ (12:24). There is one reference to him as the mediator of the new covenant, and one to his blood (which, as it brings blessing and cleansing, “speaks more graciously” than the blood that pleaded for revenge, Genesis 4:10). In a few words, the author has managed to include much meaning about the graciousness of Christ. Christ’s way is one of full salvation for us by free grace.

“OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE”

## HEBREWS 12:25-29

May we keep a proper reverence and awe for God that his holiness rightly deserves.

THE PREVIOUS PASSAGE emphasized the graciousness that characterizes the Christian approach. It centers on the atoning work of Christ who shed his blood that our sins might be put away completely. Salvation is therefore a great and free reality. But this does not mean that we can regard the issues involved as unimportant. To reject God’s grace is to invite certain condemnation.

The comparison has been made of Mount Zion and Mount Sinai (12:18-24). But this is not to be understood as though one God was responsible for the former arrangement and another for the latter. There is one God behind the Old Testament and the New Testament We should not mistake his grace for weakness. Indeed, if it was a fearful thing to refuse the God who was revealed in the thunders of Sinai, it is, when we think seriously about it, a more solemn thing by far to refuse the God who speaks so graciously in Christ. Or, as the author puts it, as they did not escape who rejected the warning on earth, so much less will those escape who refuse the One who warns from heaven (12:25). God did indeed shake the earth at Sinai, but another shaking is envisaged, a final one, from the same God (12:26).

This turns our attention to the importance of a sense of values. There are some things that can be shaken and destroyed and there are others which are

permanent and cannot be shaken. They will remain throughout the time of this world's existence and beyond. This is one of the things in this letter that needs emphasizing in today's world. People tend to regard all human achievements as no more than relative and to go on from there to think not only that human grasp of the truth is relative, but that truth itself is relative. They deny absolutes.

Perhaps Christians have sometimes been too prone to cling to things that are temporary and to confuse what is merely cultural with what is essential to the faith. But when full allowance has been made for that, it is still the case that there is "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:28). It is that with which we have to do. To reject what it stands for is disastrous, for God is implacably opposed to every evil thing. He is a consuming fire (12:29), a New Testament truth with great practical consequences.

CHRISTIAN SERVICE

HEBREWS 13:1-6

The final chapter ends with instructions to work out in practice the teaching that has gone before.

THE WRITER OF the letter now appeals to his readers to fulfill some practical Christian duties. We should never be so taken up with intricate questions of the effects of Christian truth on philosophical difficulties or on the social problems of the day that we neglect the duties that lie ready to our hands. So Christians are to love one another as brothers and sisters. This incidentally was apparently a new virtue; the expression “brotherly love” appears in pre-Christian times always to have been used in the literal sense of love within a family. To have such love for fellow believers is striking. And it is something which formed a powerful weapon of evangelism in the early church, for the pagans were immensely impressed when they had to confess, “See how these Christians love one another!” Hospitality is another virtue to be stressed. It was important to the early Christians, for as they traveled in the service of the gospel they experienced difficulties in securing lodging places. Inns were expensive and often of doubtful reputation. Hospitality in Christian homes was important.

Prisoners were usually badly treated, so that compassion toward them was not out of place. The attitude looked for here is an advance on hospitality. Strangers seek one out and bring the opportunity for hospitality, but prisoners must be sought out. Probably Christians in prison for the faith are primarily

in mind. The readers are to remember them “as though in prison with them,” as in fact in due course they well might be. For the attitude which these readers in fact practiced, see also 10:34.

In a day of sexual laxity the Christian attitude to marriage stood out. Sex is a good gift of God, and it is to be used in the way God intends, not as a mere gratification of sinful desires. For the Christian there must always be the thoughts that marriage is indeed an honorable estate, and sex something that can be exercised “undefiled,” but also that the severe judgment of God is against the immoral (13:4).

The last vice our author mentions is the love of money, which can be a fruitful cause of all kinds of evil. But when people resist the temptation and are content with God’s provision, they will rejoice in a well-founded confidence (13:6). Where God is Lord and security, we need not fear what people can do.

CHRIST OUR SIN OFFERING

## HEBREWS 13:7-16

We must take our stand with Jesus Christ, because we don't really belong on earth any longer. We are going to share heaven with him.

WE ARE REMINDED that Christians have a duty to their leaders, a thought to which our author will return (13:17). The leaders' way of life is to be imitated (13:7). Perhaps it is the consideration that even the way of life of the best leaders is subject to change which leads to the abrupt introduction of the thought that Jesus Christ does not change (13:8). Look back or forward: it makes no difference. He is always constant. "Diverse and strange teachings" (13:9) might lead astray. But Christ's faithfulness is an encouragement to us to be faithful in our place.

The main part of this passage is taken up with a consideration of Christ's work for us viewed from the aspect of the sin offering. The "altar" (13:10) should not be misinterpreted as though it referred to any material earthly object. It is a way of referring to Christ's sacrifice for us, and if any material object is in view, it is the cross. The interesting thing about the reference to the sin offering is that the part singled out for mention is not the manipulation of blood or the burning on the altar or the like. It is the burning of the bodies of the victims "outside the camp" (13:11). These bodies were so identified with sin that they could not be offered on the altar. They were simply thrown outside the city and burned. This is a vivid way of saying that Christ in his

death became one with sinners and bore their sin (see also 2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is made the basis of an appeal to the readers to be ready likewise to go “outside the camp,” not in any sense that they might be doing an atoning act, but in the sense that they are identifying themselves with Jesus, even at the cost of breaking valued earthly ties. All the more is this the case in that Christians have their citizenship not in any earthly place but in heaven (see also 11:16). They should in accordance with their calling offer up sacrifices, but sacrifices of a spiritual character (13:15f.). In the light of what Christ has done there are no others we can offer.

## FINAL APPEALS

### HEBREWS 13:17-25

In the middle of practical commands comes an exclamation of praise to God.

AS HE COMES to the close of his letter, the author has some final advice for his readers. He begins with a further reference to the place of Christian leaders. All too often church members are harshly critical of their pastors and other ministers, and their attitude may do harm to the cause of Christ. We should not, of course, suggest that ministers are above criticism. They are imperfect and just as liable as anybody else to make mistakes. But they have important work to do and it will be hindered and not helped if they are the objects of constant criticism. Moreover, typically, they are people who have a deep concern for the wellbeing of their people. They “are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (13:17). It is therefore good that those who are committed to their care act in such a way that these leaders can render their account “joyfully, and not sadly.”

These leaders are always in need of the help their followers can give by their prayers. So is the writer of the letter, and he includes his personal request for his friends to help him by their intercessions (13:18f.). This leads him into a magnificent blessing that has helped Christians throughout the centuries. It describes God as “the God of peace” and reminds us of his part in bringing about Christ’s resurrection. Christ’s care for us comes out in the description of him as “the great Shepherd of the sheep.” Then we revert to the

thought of God's faithfulness. He has done all this "by the blood of the eternal covenant," ie the blood that Christ shed is the means of bringing about a covenant which will never be replaced. Since the Son of God himself mediated this covenant, it is final. Then we come to the thought of what God will do in his people, equipping them for service, and the blessing is rounded off with an ascription of glory forever. There are some personal notes, one of which speaks warmly of Timothy (13:23), and the letter is completed with "the grace."

INTRODUCTION  
JAMES  
LEON MORRIS

THE ORIGINAL READERS of this writing are unknown. It is in the form of a letter, but it is not certain whether it should be taken as a real letter meant for a certain definite circle of recipients. There are no personal details such as would be expected in a writing of that sort, and the address is general. It reads much like a sermon, a short appeal to fulfill Christian duties and to remember the essence of Christian teaching.

If nothing definite is known of the original readers, the same must be said about the author. He tells us that his name is James, and he describes himself only as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” a description that would fit all of God’s servants. As James was a fairly common name among the early Christians, this makes it difficult for us to be precise in our ascription of authorship. It is often held that the James in question was James the Lord’s brother, and that he is identical with the James who is so prominent in Acts. This may well be so, and it would explain the authoritative tone in which the letter is written. But it must be recognized that there is a good deal that is speculative here. In the end our verdict will probably have to be that we do not know for certain who wrote the letter, though James the Lord’s brother is a possibility.

Just as there is uncertainty as to writer and readers, so there is doubt as to the date of the writing. Nothing dates it with any exactness and we are not likely to get beyond the position that it is undoubtedly early. No advanced

stage of church development seems indicated, and the section on faith and works looks early. After Paul's writings had become widely accepted, it is not easy to see a writer producing something which might be interpreted as opposing the great apostle.

But if there are many uncertainties, one thing is plain: we would be greatly impoverished without this short document. Zahn speaks of the author as "a preacher who speaks like a prophet ... in language which for forcibleness is without parallel in early Christian literature, excepting the discourses of Jesus." Moffatt cites this and goes on to point out that in 108 verses there are no fewer than fifty-four imperatives. This is forthright writing emphasizing the importance of practical Christian action.

PERSEVERANCE

JAMES 1:1-8

God uses difficult times to make us stronger.

JAMES IS CONTENT to see himself as occupying a lowly place, because he speaks of himself as a servant of God. Notice that he links God and “the Lord Jesus Christ.” He had come to see Jesus as occupying the highest place of all. He addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” which raises more than one problem. There do not appear to have been twelve tribes in existence at the time, or if there were, they were not in evidence. Again, the “Dispersion” was a technical term for the Jews dispersed throughout the ancient world, the Jews outside Palestine, but it seems very unlikely that James was writing to the Jews as such. It therefore seems likely that we should take “the twelve tribes” as a reference to the spiritual Israel: the church regarded as the people of God. The reference to the Dispersion will then indicate that it is the church at large, the church throughout the world, that is in mind and not Christians in any specific area.

To Christians at large, then, James writes about the need for faithfulness. We do not like difficulties and trials. We regard them as unfortunate necessities to be borne with as good a grace as possible. James sees them as occasions for joy (1:2). His point is that it is only through trials that we are able to develop the quality of perseverance. The New Testament has a number of such appeals to remind us that in the pleasant days of peace we do not really develop spiritual strength. That comes about in the process of

grappling with difficulties. Trials are not pleasant but Christians should never face them in the same spirit as do non-Christians. For Christians, suffering has been transformed by the suffering of Christ. It is seen now as the means through which God can bring about great good. So it is not to be regarded as an occasion for rebellion, but of progress in the faith. So, too, Christians must be faithful in the face of lack of wisdom and of doubt. We can look to God for all that is needed, knowing that nothing necessary will be held back. But the blessing is not for the doubleminded (1:7f.). Perseverance is necessary if we are to go forward in the Christian life.

**Thought** If you are wise you will ask for wisdom.

GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

## JAMES 1:9-18

What do you value most in life?

WE ARE ALWAYS tempted to use a wrong set of values. It is natural for us to think of wealth as important and there are few people who do not make a serious effort to gain many of this world's goods. James reminds us that riches will fail (1:11), and he goes so far as to say that it is "the lowly brother" [believers in humble circumstances] who should "boast in his exaltation" (1:9). When a poor person receives the gospel, they become rich in the things that really matter. They are exalted, and although they lack earthly wealth, they may well rejoice. Likewise a rich person who becomes a Christian has matter for rejoicing, but this time in their "humiliation." Like the poor person's exaltation, this refers to a spiritual condition. It is not that the rich person loses any of their wealth (though it is possible that their becoming a Christian will mean the loss of certain sources of gain). Rather, they have learned the true place of riches (and the place of true riches) and no longer think of themselves in the same way. They have learned real humility and lowliness.

A similar lesson lies behind James' next section (1:12-15). He advises his readers to consider times of testing in the right way. It is a blessed thing, not a disaster, to undergo testing. Those who enjoy this experience are also learning a sense of values. To survive testing is the way to "the crown of life" (1:12). This includes an understanding of the meaning of temptation, namely,

that it does not come from God, but from a person's own desire. And the end result of giving way to it is death (1:15).

So both poverty and a right attitude to wealth are gifts of God. So, too, in another way, are trials. God never sends temptations, but he uses them for the building up of his people. James goes on to notice that every good gift really comes from God. Our attention may be fixed on some intermediary through whom the gift comes, but it is God who is the author. And he is not subject to change. So whether what comes to us seems pleasant or the reverse we can take it as from the hand of a God who never stops giving good gifts to his children.

ACTIONS, NOT WORDS

## JAMES 1:19-27

How would you describe a religious person? Does it fit in with verses 26 and 27?

MOST OF US like to hear ourselves talking, and in any conversation enjoy getting our viewpoint across. And most of us like to be sure that our own interests are properly safeguarded. We all too easily become angry when we are thwarted. James reminds us that both attitudes can endanger our spiritual development. It is a much sounder policy to listen first. Christians should be slow both to speak and to become angry (1:19). They should make the effort to put away all evil decisively and to receive the word from God that brings salvation (1:21). In view of the way some have misinterpreted this letter, as though it were giving expression to a doctrine of salvation by works, it is good to notice this clear expression of the truth that salvation comes from “the implanted word,” not from anything people do.

But this does not mean that our way of life is unimportant. James is always ready to remind his readers of the importance of living out their faith. Now he uses the illustration of a man looking in a mirror, a casual glance which means very little. The man looks into the mirror and goes on his way forgetting even what it was he saw. Not in such a lighthearted way should a Christian face obligations. For that, perseverance in well-doing is needed.

To show us the kind of thing he has in mind, James turns attention to contrasting religions (1:26f.). What is not characterized by control of the

tongue (see also 1:19) is “vain,” ie empty. There is nothing in it. Such a person is self-deceived. Real religion, by contrast, comes out in a person’s attitude to the defenseless. Orphans and widows were proverbial in the ancient world for poverty and defenselessness. They had no one to act as their protector and were easy prey for the unscrupulous. They normally found it very difficult to earn their living and had little redress if exploited. So it is a mark of a genuine religion to look out for such in their affliction and help them. They could make no return.

## THE RICH AND THE POOR

### JAMES 2:1-7

God loves to turn our values upside down: how do you respond to his ways?

THE PROBLEM OF the right attitude to rich people exercised James greatly. Paul tells us there were not many people of influential position in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 1:26ff.), and this would no doubt have been true fairly universally. There is no reason for doubting that the first converts to Christianity came largely from the depressed classes. They were poor people, even slaves. According to the accepted standards of their day, they had been used to giving special honor to the wealthy and the well placed. When they became Christians, they quite naturally carried the attitude over into their new life. This natural human tendency must have been strengthened by the equally natural human tendency to be very concerned about the few rich people who were converted. They would tend to be highly respected in the little Christian assemblies and to be given special consideration and honor.

This kind of treatment is not easy to reconcile with a proper Christian understanding of life. If all people are sinners, and all stand in need of God's salvation, then no one, no matter how wealthy they are, is anything other than one needing God's mercy. James reminds his readers that the kind of behavior that singles out the rich for special consideration is contrary to important Christian teachings. It means that the people who do this have set

themselves up as judges, as they make distinctions between one believer and another, and, moreover, “judges with evil thoughts” (2:4).

It is also the case that the poor more commonly than the rich are “rich in faith” (2:5). This does not mean that God rejects the rich. Rather, it arises from the fact that all too often those who have great material possessions give way to the temptation to put their trust in them. They cut themselves off from humble, dependent faith. James adds one practical point. It was the rich, not the poor, who were usually responsible for the oppression which overtook the Christians from time to time. As a class it was the rich rather than the poor who blasphemed the name of God by their behavior (2:7). In an affluent society such warnings are very much to the point.

THE ROYAL LAW

JAMES 2:8-13

Why and how should we love one another?

IT MIGHT HAVE been objected that James was making too much of this one point. After all, it is a natural tendency, and it is only a small thing. James' reply has two aspects: first, it is not a small thing, and secondly it is a sin and all sin is serious.

It is not a small thing, for the supremely important thing in living the Christian life is to practice love. James calls the requirement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," the "royal law." That is to say, it is the supreme law, the law that matters above all others. It fits in with the words of Christ himself when he summed up the obligations resting on his followers to love both God and people (Mark 12:29-31). It is not without its interest that the command to love one's neighbor as oneself is taken from Leviticus 19:18, and that in the immediate context we read, "you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great" (Leviticus 19:15). So to give special consideration to the rich, while putting the poor in a place of low respect, means to go against what is laid down in God's law. It is to commit sin. Those who do this are transgressors (2:9).

Nor is there a defense that it is only a minor commandment that has been broken. To break any commandment is to become a lawbreaker. This is often lost sight of. Almost everybody in our society thinks they are generally living a fairly good life (it is always other people who do the really bad things).

People are usually ready to admit there are some things they do which they ought not and that there are some things they do not do which they should. But it always seems to work out that the really serious sins are never those they themselves commit. In the face of such a common and natural human attitude, James still has something to say. To break a law of God, any law, is to become a lawbreaker. Nobody who thinks seriously about it can regard any sin as unimportant. We are responsible people. One day we must give account of ourselves to God. Judgment is a serious business. But James' last word is on mercy (2:13).

## FAITH AND WORKS

### JAMES 2:14-26

If our trust is in the living Lord, it must make a difference in our lives.

NOWHERE DOES JAMES' strong emphasis on practical Christianity come out more clearly than here. Indeed, it is so prominent that some have felt that James is contradicting Paul. Paul, they say, teaches that a person is justified by faith, not works (Galatians 2:16), whereas here James is teaching the opposite and indeed goes so far as to say that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24).

It is important not to be hypnotized by words, but to ask what James means. And it is quite clear when we try to answer this question that James does not mean by works what Paul means. Paul is speaking of those works done in obedience to the law by which a person tries to deserve their salvation. Untiringly, Paul fights this error. People cannot earn their salvation by works of law. But James is not talking about this at all when he looks for works. The works about which he writes are the outworking of a living faith. In fact, he says specifically, "I by my works will show you my faith" (2:18). Works are the evidence that faith is present. For James, faith is undoubtedly important (see 1:6; 2:1,5; 5:15). He assumes that faith is necessary. But he denies that a right faith can exist without works. The kind of faith that lacks works is dead (2:17).

The faith James has in mind in this section of the letter is something very different from what Paul means by faith (or for that matter what James means

elsewhere). We are not left to guess at this, for he tells us plainly what this kind of faith is like: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder” (2:19). This is not the warm personal trust in a living Savior which is what Paul means by faith. James then is opposing something which Paul is not advocating. There is no contradiction.

Finally, let us notice that James’ point is important. It is always easier to make a profession of faith than it is to live out that profession in practical service of God. But we are called to give such practical service. James calls attention to Abraham and Rahab as people who lived out their faith. Saving faith is a faith that works by love (as Paul puts it, Galatians 5:6).

**Consider** How is James’ emphasis on an active faith that leads to works relevant to your situation?

## TEACHERS AND THE JUDGMENT

### JAMES 3:1-5

Becoming a teacher is a serious business and we should not rush into it.

IT APPEARS FROM the opening verse that there was a tendency in some parts of the church to seek the office of teaching. Some people always find the limelight attractive, and there were not many opportunities for finding it in the early church. Christians seem to have been a fairly closely knit group. There was not much opportunity for showing off before others. But teaching did put a person in a position of prominence, and people of a certain temperament therefore sought the position. While a person should not avoid any responsibility that God lays on them, they should not seek a post about which this could not be said. So James begins by pointing out that those who teach will be judged very strictly. It is still a principle to be carefully observed that greater privilege means greater responsibility.

The danger involved in this is that people tend to make mistakes (3:2), and more particularly in the things they say. A slip of the tongue with serious consequences is always a possibility. And it is more of a possibility for the teacher than for other people. Words are a teacher's tools of the trade. Teachers have to use them to communicate, So to rush into a position of teaching means to thrust oneself into a situation where a dangerous error is a constant possibility.

This leads James to the reflection that the tongue, though small in size, is great in achievement. He gives three illustrations of this: the small bit that guides a large horse, the small rudder that steers a huge ship, and the little fire that kindles a whole forest. We should not be misled by the tongue's small size. Small though it is, it is powerful. It is the tongue that enables the teacher or the preacher to communicate. It is by the tongue that ordinary Christians can witness to others and so win them for Christ. So James' warning on the responsibility of rightly using a weapon with great potential is of wider application than simply to teachers.

THE EVIL TONGUE

JAMES 3:6-12

Who can tame our tongues? No one—only God can give us grace to control our tongues.

HAVING SHOWN THAT the tongue is able to accomplish great results and should not be underestimated because of its small size, James goes on to the further point that it is fraught with great possibilities for evil as well as for good. Rightly used, our words accomplish much in the service of God. Wrongly used, they bring about incalculable damage. In a vigorous verse (3:6), James speaks of the tongue as “an unrighteous world” (which indicates the extent of its influence as well as its bias toward evil), as “staining the whole body” (I am wholly defiled when I misuse my tongue; it is not only a part of me that is affected), and as setting on fire the whole course of one’s life. This last expression is an unusual one: James is carrying on the metaphor of the forest fire and indicating that the tongue can start an evil which will spread throughout the world. And its origin? It is “set on fire by hell.” There is something satanic about the wrong use of the tongue.

James further notes that humans have shown great skill at taming wild animals, and he uses this as yet another way of bringing out the evil caused by wrong speech. In strong contrast with our ability to handle the wildest animal is our inability to control our tongue. James speaks of it as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison,” the last expression being probably suggested by

his reference to reptiles (3:7). The poisonous tongues of snakes are often referred to in former times.

James' final point is that this is all unnatural. It is inconsistent to use the same mouth for blessing as cursing. This is quite contrary to what we see in nature, for example in springs where the water is either fresh or brackish but not both, or in trees where the fruit is consistent. The moral is obvious. It is clear to all God's servants that they should bless and praise him. All their other speech should be consistent with this. This sets the tone for their words to others.

TRUE WISDOM

## JAMES 3:13-18

Truly wise people have a right sense of proportion: they are humble, thoughtful for others and genuine.

FROM THE TONGUE James moves to the life as a whole and he contrasts the wise with the unwise, though he does not use the latter term. Rather he speaks of a “wisdom” not of heavenly origin. Just as earlier he has spoken of every good gift as coming from God (1:17), so now he thinks of all true wisdom as “from above.” The main point that concerns him is the self-assertion of the wicked, which he finds in sharp contrast to the meekness (humility) of God’s own people. Such a quality, incidentally, was not universally regarded as a virtue in the Greek world. It was held that real people would stand up for their rights and not allow themselves to be trampled on. It was humiliating not to be accorded one’s full rights and one’s proper place; rivals must not be allowed to usurp one’s proper privileges. So what James is rebuking as “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (3:14) was usually regarded as a proper concern for one’s rightful position. The point, and it is important, is that Christians do not take their standards from the world.

There is a reversal of values when a person knows they have been saved by Christ. Such a person knows they can contribute nothing to the process. Their sins have been put away not by their own best efforts, but by Christ’s atoning death. They see that they have sinned against God, but that God has

refused to condemn them. Instead, God's Son, Christ, has suffered to save them. When the significance of this has sunk in, a person cannot be selfish and self-assertive. They react to others as God has acted towards them, that is, in forgiving love. So they now look for that wisdom which comes from above. They look now for purity in life, and for an attitude of peaceableness and mercy to others (3:17). They reject jealousy and ambition as devilish (3:15). The connection between righteousness and peace (3:18) is noteworthy. The world has not yet realized, in its deep yearning for peace, that peace and righteousness are intimately connected. It is still not possible to have real peace if in our self-seeking we reject real righteousness.

THE CAUSE OF WAR

JAMES 4:1-4

Are our prayers sometimes selfish?

IT IS POSSIBLE that James is not speaking in the first instance about wars in the military sense. He may well be using military imagery to rebuke quarrels among church members. But what he says has relevance to a wider circle than quarrelsome Christians. To an age as eager for peace and as much given to war as ours these words about the root causes of wars come home with forceful relevance. For the fact is that if we promote a warlike spirit it is only to be expected that we will have wars, whether on the grand scale between nations or on the small scale between church members. We must get down to the basic issues.

James is stressing the very important point that the cause of hostility is basically human passion. People desire and covet. And our passions are so strong that we take into our own hands the gratification of our desires. This is the spirit that leads nations to wars and individuals to quarrels. Wherever people or nations act on the assumption that they themselves are the guardians of their own rights and that they are entitled to take whatever steps they consider necessary to safeguard those rights, then enmity is inevitable. The attitude is certain to be met by a similar attitude on the side of the other party. So hostility results and this may well lead to open warfare on a grand or minor scale.

For Christians there is a further reflection that the reason they do not have what they need is that they do not ask (4:2). Prayer is a powerful force. And when some of his readers are prepared to retort that they have prayed, James replies that they have prayed wrongly. They have tried to use prayer for the gratification of those same passions! Instead of renouncing the worldly way, they have thought they could enlist God on their side. Even in what they take to be a proper religious activity they have shown a worldly spirit. They (and we) must learn that the world's friendship means enmity with God (4:4).

There is a fundamental incompatibility here, and as long as we gloss over it with words, while hanging on to a worldly spirit of self-aggrandizement, we must expect strife.

## GOD'S YEARNING

# JAMES 4:5-10

How many promises can you take to heart in these verses? And what are the conditions for the fulfillment of these promises?

IN REJECTING THE way of the world, James does not want it thought that he is advocating in God's name a course which would mean anything less than the best for God's people. God calls on people to reject the way of self-aggrandizement, but not because he wants to cramp them into a narrow and unsatisfying existence. Rather, the reverse is the case. In bold language James pictures God as yearning jealously over us, as longing for us so that he may bring us into that perfect fellowship with him, which is our best good. The exact source of the quotation in 4:5 is not clear. It seems to be a free and somewhat poetic rendering of the thought of Exodus 20:5. And its exact meaning is not plain either. The "spirit" may refer to the human spirit over which God yearns. But it might also refer to the Holy Spirit with the meaning, "the Spirit which dwells within us yearns jealously over us." Either way, the thought is that God longs for us to find our rest in him.

In such a spirit he gives us grace (4:6), a thought which fits in with Proverbs 3:34, for the proud do not look for God's grace, whereas the humble gratefully accept it. James launches into a series of appeals, the burden of which is "Follow the right way, and you will certainly receive the blessing of God." James is making with some emphasis the point that God is always ready to give his blessing, but that it is quite possible for people to adopt a

self-seeking way of life that cuts them off from God's help. So we should resist the devil, not yield to him (4:7). We should submit to God (4:7), and draw near to him (4:8), when we will find that he will draw near to us. But our attitude must be wholehearted. This means a thoroughgoing purification (4:8) and a genuine sorrow for sin (4:9). But those who really humble themselves before God will surely find that God will not abandon them. God will exalt them (4:10).

THE WILL OF GOD

JAMES 4:11-17

It is not enough simply to say “God willing”; our first concern must be to submit ourselves to the Lord for him to order our lives according to his will.

ONE OF THE commonest human frailties is that of setting ourselves above the law. Often it may be in a comparatively minor matter, such as when Christian motorists determine their own speed limits instead of driving within those laid down by authority. Sometimes it is in a matter of great importance and the climax is reached with a criminal who defies all authority and acts according to his own desires and his conception of his own profit. A proper regard for the law is necessary if people are to live in community. James is concerned, however, not simply with community life but also with the attitude of Christians to law. He is concerned at the way Christians sometimes act as though they are superior to law. The particular aspect which he deals with is that of speaking evil of others. Gossip and slander are more than the social pastime they appear to be. They proceed from an attitude of mind which presumes to sit in judgment on others, and so which assumes to itself a function that belongs only to God. This is a dangerous practice as well as a wicked one, for the God whose place the slanderer usurps is the One who is able to destroy as well as to save (4:12). None of us is so great (or so safe!) that we can engage in criticism of our fellow servants.

People sometimes ignore the will of God in other matters, as when they plan without taking God into account. James does not mean that we should not exercise reasonable forethought in planning our affairs. That is only a correct use of our God-given intelligence. He is opposing the attitude by which Christians plan as though they were worldly, completely ignoring God. All our plans should include an attitude of “If the Lord wills.”

The final verse in this chapter is notable. We usually think of sins of commission as the important ones and tend to overlook altogether the good we might have done. James reminds us that it is important to make use of every opportunity of doing good. Failure to do good is not simply a matter for mild regret. It is sin.

## THE DANGERS OF RICHES

### JAMES 5:1-6

How caught up are you in materialism?

IT IS CLEAR that in the church with which James was concerned there were problems created by the activities of the wealthy. James had occasion earlier in the letter to rebuke a wrong use of riches. As he returns to the theme, we should not think that this is an obsession with something that does not matter or does not matter greatly. Through all the centuries of the church's existence it has been the case that many whose faith stood firm in the days of doubt and difficulty have not been able to withstand affluence. The Christian life is always a battle and this is clear to the poor. But for the rich some of the struggle has been taken out of life and it is easy for them to lose their grip on spiritual realities. The possession of some affluence all too often leads to a strong desire for greater affluence and so to that love of money which is the root of every kind of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

James clearly has in mind at this point some rich people who had engaged in oppressing the poor. He is not talking about riches in general, but about those known to him and his readers who had defrauded their laborers (5:4). This is a good example of the kind of temptation to which the rich are exposed and which does not confront the poor to the same degree. The rich in their desire to be even richer may press on without regard to the rights of others. When this happens, their riches may be said to have "rotted" and the like (5:2f.). Incidentally, when James speaks of gold and silver as having

“rusted” (5:3) this should not be taken as evidence of ignorance of the properties of precious metals. James is not speaking about physical and chemical properties. He is referring to the fact that wealth obtained by improper means does not ultimately last. The rich, like all people, will stand before God’s judgment, and their riches will then be found worthless. There may also be the thought that these riches are tarnished.

James is giving a serious and very vigorous warning. No one can use their wealth to the detriment of others and expect to get away with it when they stand before God. An affluent generation does well to heed the warning.

PATIENCE AND STEADFASTNESS

JAMES 5:7-12

A distinctive mark of a Christian is that we are to persevere. Is that true of us or do we give up easily?

THERE ARE TWO Greek words which are sometimes translated “patience,” and both come in this passage. One means very much what we mean by patience. It contains the idea of longsuffering. It is formed on exactly the model of a word which means “short-tempered” and is its opposite, ie “long-tempered.” It is a refusal to give way to provocation. It is a readiness to put up with contradiction and baseless opposition. It is a steady refusal to lose one’s temper in the face of frustration. There is nothing that one can do about this kind of opposition except be provoked by it or endure it. It is this that James has in mind when he speaks of the farmer. There is nothing farmers can do about the weather or the seasons. When farmers have planted their crop, they must wait patiently. But in their patient waiting they know that the time of harvest is surely coming. And Christians also know that the time of this world’s harvest is coming. They must endure innumerable provocations and frustrations. But they can bear them all with patience, for they know that their Lord will come one day. The last word is not with those who provoke and frustrate. The last word is with the Lord. Since his coming is sure, we may settle our hearts (5:8).

The other word means steadfastness rather than patience. It is the attitude of soldiers who in the midst of a severe battle are not dismayed by the hard

knocks they receive but continue to fight with endurance and a proper goodwill. There is an air of activity, even aggressiveness, about it. James uses this word of Job (5:11), who came through triumphant. While perhaps James does not want us to differentiate too sharply between his two words, they do have different emphases and we can benefit by reflecting on both. James' final statement in 5:11 should be borne in mind in all troubles. The Lord who permits them is compassionate and merciful.

5:12 reminds us that our word should always be reliable. James is not concerned with the problem of oaths in lawcourts and the like. He is saying that in ordinary life our word should not need to be bolstered by an oath before it can be accepted.

THE PRAYER OF FAITH

JAMES 5:13-20

There is nothing too small or too great, nothing too sad or too happy  
that cannot be turned into prayer.

THROUGHOUT THIS LETTER we have seen that James is strongly practical. He is greatly concerned with the way Christians live out their faith. Now in his concluding section he gives attention to prayer, possibly the most powerful weapon in the Christian's armory, and certainly a powerful factor in the everyday life of believers. He relates prayer to suffering and to sickness. In the latter case he suggests that the elders of the church should pray over the sick person and anoint them with oil in the Lord's name (5:14). Many have pointed out that in pagan religions there was widespread use of incantations and the like in times of sickness, and the thought is that James is advocating a Christian practice that would replace this kind of thing. That may be true, but his emphasis is not on the oil but on prayer. It is "the prayer of faith" that "will save the one who is sick" (5:15). James also sees this as connected with the person's spiritual condition. Forgiveness of sins is to be sought and will be granted. This is the point also of the mutual confession advocated in 5:16. It is not a sacramental confession but a mutual sharing of grief, with prayer for healing. Christians should be concerned about one another's spiritual condition and be consistent in prayer for one another. James goes on to refer to Elijah as a well-known example of the power of prayer. That power, which caused drought and then rain, he feels, is very applicable to believers.

This brings him to his final topic, that of soul-winning. To bring people back from sin to Christ is to bring them into salvation. It will cover all their sins. Nothing could be more worthwhile.

In all our concern for sickness and sinners we should not overlook the fact that James has something for those whose souls are healthy (5:13). The cheerful should sing praise. It is God who is the source of all their blessings and it is good that they recognize it.

INTRODUCTION  
1 & 2 PETER  
H.L. ELLISON

1 PETER WAS written to the scattered Christians of northern and western Asia Minor, an area which was mainly outside the sphere of Paul's missionary work. Various references make it clear that the majority of the intended readers were Gentiles. Silvanus (5:12), ie Silas, Paul's companion on his second missionary journey, may have interested Peter in the area. The excellent Greek is probably due to Silvanus having acted as scribe. The letter was probably written from Rome (5:13), possibly after the beginning of Nero's persecution.

The language of 2 Peter is very different, but this can be explained by Peter's using a different scribe, for there is no marked difference in thought. The recipients of the letter are not named, but since this letter was perhaps the last book to be accepted into the canon, it was probably not written to an influential church. The chief reason why many reject Peter's authorship is the way he speaks of Paul's letters (3:15f.), but the argument is hardly valid. The same may be said of the use of Jude, the message of which Peter may have wished to make better known.

## THE PRECIOUSNESS OF FAITH

### 1 PETER 1:1-9

Our Christian hope isn't a vague wish that may be disappointed; it's an absolute certainty that cannot possibly fail.

WITH THE DOUBTFUL exception of Galatians 6:16, the name Israel is not applied to the church in the New Testament, but its various descriptions are. Peter uses here and in 2:11 three such terms. "Dispersion" (1:1) was the regular term for the Jews living outside Palestine; the Christian's homeland is heaven. "Exiles" (also in 2:11, see also 1:17), better, sojourners, is well rendered "who lodge for a while" by the NEB. The stress is on the short while we are here. Then there is "foreigners" in 2:11. The stress is that Christians, not being citizens of this world (see also Philippians 3:20) have no rights here. They are Christians by a threefold act of the Trinity (though the word is not used): chosen by the Father, made holy by the Spirit, consecrated by the blood of the Son.

"Grace and peace" (1:2): the former includes the experience of God's covenant love, the latter the opening of God's treasure chamber. This fact leads to a blessing. "Blessed" (1:3) virtually means that we accept this in gratitude on bended knees. Central is Jesus' resurrection. His new life has started a new life in us which expects to reach him in heaven. He is our inheritance which we shall obtain at his coming. Because it is a person, not a thing, it is "imperishable" (1:4), etc. While it is secure for us in heaven, we are kept for him down here, his power corresponds to the faith within us.

We can never be sure of anything until it has been tested—“temptations” (1:6) had this meaning earlier—and so we must pass through testings or “trials” (1:6), which can be very painful. Paul assures us we shall never be overtested (1 Corinthians 10:13), and the outcome is that we know our faith is not merely something we have produced, but it has been given us by God. Victory in trial shows that the faith came from God, so it is “precious” (1:7), and can be the cause of praise and glory. Peter was no doubt thinking of Christ’s words to Thomas (John 20:29), when he wrote “without having seen him” (1:8). The rendering of “the salvation of your souls” (1:9) can be misleading: in the Bible, the soul is the whole of a person including their body.

**Thought** Salvation is complete!

## THE FAITH OF THE PROPHETS

### I PETER 1:10-12

How much do you appreciate the privileges of your salvation?

PETER'S READERS MIGHT legitimately have asked why their faith should be so specially important. Where Paul referred to Abraham and Hebrews to a long line of the faithful, Peter turned to the prophets. In contrast to the predominant modern view, which sees them as little more than clear-sighted interpreters of their own time, he followed the rabbinic saying, "No prophet ever prophesied except for the days of the Messiah." This did not mean that they did not prophesy for their own time, but that they saw their own time in the light of the day of the Lord. Peter said that they were so convinced that they were giving God's message that they committed themselves to it before they knew to whom it applied or when it would come to fulfillment.

To be noted is that they showed deeper interest in the salvation (1:10) than in the time (1:11). The term "the Spirit of Christ" is found again in Romans 8:9. Here it means they were so possessed by the Spirit of the Messiah that they were able to see coming suffering and glory with his eyes.

In addition, however, they saw that they were also foretelling the salvation of those to whom Peter was writing, ie the church. It has often been suggested that the prophets could not discern the interval between the first and second comings of Christ; just as when a man viewing two parallel ranges of mountains from a distance cannot know the deep valley that separates them. With all the truth in this view, it is inadequate. Throughout

the Old Testament God is praised as Savior. But there is always an element of inadequacy in it and so there is a looking to the future. This is concisely summed up in Hebrews 11:39f. Not only has Christ entered into his glory (Luke 24:26), but also we share in it, eg Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-4. It is not merely that we shall experience “the powers of the world to come,” but we have tasted them already (Hebrews 6:5). Eternity is projected into time, the glory of Christ may be seen in the church before his return, and so the salvation which the prophets hoped for has become a reality through our faith.

THE LIFE OF FAITH

I PETER 1:13-21

Do we live every day with a humble trust in God?

OUR SALVATION IS so wonderful that “angels stoop down to look” (1:12), so Peter turns to our responsibility. His readers were to “pull themselves together.” The growing hostility to the Christians which came to a climax in Nero’s persecution in Rome and was no doubt copied in the provinces, clearly made them feel sorry for themselves. It is not clear whether we are to take “be sober” literally or “to exercise self-control” (NLT); Ephesians 5:18 is sufficient evidence that undue drinking did take place. They were to set their hope “fully”: there is always the temptation to hope that there may be some private relaxation. The thought is that his readers are to set their hope fully on the grace that is being given to them in the Lord’s appearing.

Since their hope was set on the future, they had to be “obedient” (1:14). The combination of “passions” and “ignorance” strongly suggests Gentile readers. Since they were children, they should show the character of the Father (1:15-17). Note that 1:16, just like Leviticus 19:2, can just as well be rendered “You will be holy ...” Sanctification, making holy, is the work of the Holy Spirit, who sets apart his people for God—the meaning of *holy*—who are willing to be separated. “Reverent fear” is better than simply “fear” (1:17). “Your exile”: see on 1:1.

“You were ransomed” (1:18): to ransom or redeem belongs to the standard language of salvation in the Old Testament. The question to whom

the price is paid is never raised; what is important is that God frees the slave. Mark 10:45 makes clear that a price has to be paid, though even here no recipient is suggested. The “futile ways” (1:18) are probably idolatry. Many are tempted to think of God like an earthly ruler, adapting his policy to circumstances.

The cross is an essential part of God’s purpose dating back to before creation (1:20). Neither the fall of Satan nor of humanity took God by surprise. “At the end of the times” (1:20), or ages; we are in the final age already, though only those who know Christ can enjoy the powers of the coming age.

**Thought** We must not tarnish God’s triumph.

THE SOIL FOR LOVE

I PETER 1:22–2:3

Our growth depends on spiritual food—the living word of God.

GREAT THOUGH FAITH is, it takes second place to love. Peter remembered that his passionate devotion to his Master brought him a stinging rebuke (Matthew 16:23) and did not keep him from denying him. Christian love is a fruit of the Spirit, borne by the “purified soul” (1:22). The NEB gets the sense “... you have purified your souls until you feel sincere affection.” The evil things mentioned in 2:1 are weeds which effectively smother the growth of love. Some of those who complain of lack of love may find the clue to their trouble here. It may seem strange, but love is not one of those quiet virtues that grows best when least observed; the more we actually love, the more we will be able to. Furthermore, it is a long-term virtue. Many think that life is so short that they dare not give themselves unrestrainedly in love. We have been reborn for eternity, and love is one of the few things we can carry with us.

“Pure spiritual milk” (1:2): it is doubtful whether Peter is making the distinction found in Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 3:1f., where milk represents the simpler and more fundamental facts of the gospel. Babies need food regularly to remain in good health and grow. Adults may be able to fast or eat a little for days at a time, but not babies. This is why regular habits of Bible study and prayer are important for new converts. “Pure” (2:2): unadulterated. For us adulteration means the addition of some harmful substance, but here any addition is implied. The uninterested, blinded

outsider may need some attraction to induce them to listen. For babies, born by the work of the Holy Spirit, such things are unnecessary. We must not water down our teaching, or add the sugar of sentimentality. On the other hand we must not offer a dry dehydrated teaching that has no life.

## THE HONOR OF CHRIST'S PEOPLE

### 1 PETER 2:4-10

How important is Jesus Christ to you?

THERE IS A complete change of subject. In a theological article this would be strange, but not in a letter. There are many examples of this in Paul's writings. Up to this point Peter has been thinking of his readers as individuals, but now he thinks of them as linked together in the church. A comparison of 2:6-8 with Romans 9:33; Acts 4:11; Mark 12:10f., will show that the New Testament wove together Isaiah 8:14f.; 28:15f.; Psalm 118:19-23, and applied them to Christ.

“That living stone” (2:4): the Greek word does not imply a rock, as in Matthew 16:18, but one that has been shaped; see Hebrews 2:10,18; 5:9. It is not merely to the eternal Son of God that we come, but to Jesus, the God-man. If he was shaped, so are we, so that all together we may form a spiritual temple; see also 1 Corinthians 3:16f.; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; Ephesians 2:19-22. Here the temple enables God to live among people, even though they reject him. Not the church building, but the company of faithful Christians is the house of God.

Because the temple is built with living stones, they are at the same time the priests who minister in it. The “spiritual sacrifices” (2:5) are not that of Romans 12:1, which is individual. These refer to the work of the local church as an organism. They include the worship of the church, but surely also all those activities that reveal the character of God to people. The vagueness of

Peter's language indicates that he was not thinking of something limited and definite.

The quotations that follow do not link logically with 2:5, but with Peter's thought as a whole. "He is precious" (2:7); it is doubtful whether this is the meaning. We should probably take it as "To you who believe he is honor," ie belief ensures honor to those who believe. The NEB rendering, "The great worth of which it speaks is for you," expresses this thought. The honor is the spiritual reality of the promise made to Israel (Exodus 19:5f.). "A royal priesthood" in the light of the Old Testament and Revelation 1:6 probably means a priesthood in the service of the king, ie God. "A holy nation": both in Hebrew and Greek, the word for *nation* is that used for the nations in general, the Gentiles; it is holiness that makes Israel and the church different.

## CAESAR AND GOD

### I PETER 2:11-17

We are ultimately responsible only to God, but we are also to respect the earthly authorities.

ONCE AGAIN THE subject changes. Peter urges his readers to behave as “foreigners and sojourners” are to; see also Philippians 3:17-21. As foreigners in this world there is no compulsion for them to live as worldly people. The world will malign them (2:12)—foreigners are often suspect—but on the day of judgment (“visitation”) it will acknowledge the truth before God; in Joshua 7:19 the phrase is used in the sense of “tell the truth.”

For 2:13-14, see Romans 13:1-7. As Christians we are free (2:16), citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), and yet we are to accept the world order around us. That is because it is based on law, and the apostles knew that bad law is better than lawlessness and chaos. They would not have regarded the totalitarian tendency to “legalize” the wrongs it has committed as the rule of law. The difference is that under law one knows what is prohibited, under chaos one is at the mercy of those in power at the moment. The quiet bearing of injustice under the guise of law is always harder than plotting the overthrow of the unjust, but it is also always more effective in the long run.

Later parts of the letter make it clear that Peter knew that his readers might and would suffer for their loyalty to God, eg 3:13-17; 4:1,12-16, but that did not alter the principle. If Christ suffered unjustly, so can we. When Jesus said, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things

that are God's" (Mark 12:17), we often overlook that what is Caesar's has been given him by God. To most believers comes the moment when they have to say to those in authority in the home, the church, the state, "Here I take my stand; I can do nothing else, so help me God." When this happens, there is suffering and blessing. Unfortunately most of us take our stand on ground of our choosing, not Christ's; then there is strife and division, not blessing. So often difficulties arise because we do not honor everyone (2:17); we regard them as potential salvation fodder, but no more.

## THE GLORY OF THE SLAVE

### 1 PETER 2:18-25

Our example is Christ: in his integrity he never reacted violently but placed himself completely in God's hands.

SLAVERY WAS LEGAL, and God had given his qualified recognition of it by legislating about it. So slaves—not “servants” (2:18)—provided perhaps the most extreme and most painful example of being subject to human institutions (2:13). Though only some slavery remains in the world today there is much subordination: economic, social and traditional. Sometimes it is good and right, sometimes abhorrent. Whenever the attempt to throw it off is made, we discover that where there is no inner freedom, outward freedom leads only to new slavery. In addition, people are discovering that where they are not willing to serve, they will not be served in the hour of need.

It was Christ who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), so he is the pattern for those who serve. If slaves are willing to serve for Christ's sake, as their God-given calling, then the sting of slavery has gone. They are also the example for those who suffer injustice and abuse from those who abuse their positions (2:21-23). Few Christians grasp what a privilege it is (painful, of course) to be allowed to share the injustice Christ suffered.

In 2:24, Peter here assumes, but does not stress, the death of Christ; it is what went before and prepared for the death that occupies him. Jesus was not suddenly identified with our sins when the nails were driven into his hands and feet. All that had gone before was part of his self-identification with our

sins. He carried them “to the tree,” (NRSV margin), the burden becoming heavier as he went. Rendering John the Baptist’s words, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) and drawing out their full meaning is literally, “... who carries the sin of the world.”

Concepts like these throw light on Paul’s remarkable statement in Colossians 1:24. We cannot share in Christ’s atoning work, except to benefit from it, but we can share in his sufferings. When we think of his life, we are apt to think of him living under Jewish law, the law of God, even if distorted by Pharisaic reasoning. We forget that Palestine was under Roman colonial law as well, with all its brutality and frequent arbitrariness.

**Thought** Christ specially sustains and supports those who serve.

## MARRIAGE

### 1 PETER 3:1-7

The real test of our spirituality is at home.

FROM SLAVERY AND, by implication, all similar forms of subjection, Peter passes to marriage. He uses the same word, “submissive,” for the wife as for the slave (2:18) and the younger church member (5:5). The NEB is correct in the first two cases in rendering “accept the authority,” and this would have been best in the third as well. God has ordered his creation on the basis of authority and subordination, and Peter is calling on us to respect God’s order. Relative subordination in this world disappears in a common subordination to Christ, before whom we all stand on the same footing. The difficulty felt in Peter’s teaching by many today would in great measure vanish, if we took “honor everyone” (2:17) seriously. Not “obey,” but “honor” is the difficult word for many in the marriage promise.

Some of his readers were women married to unbelievers, Jewish or pagan (3:1). Peter says it is their lives rather than their words that may win their husbands. Both Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:9f., and Peter concentrate on the same point. “Don’t be concerned about the outward beauty of fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God” (3:3-4, NLT). In contrast to modern concepts, the church’s wedding robe in Revelation 19:8 is for the glory of the bridegroom. The women Peter describes are dressing for themselves, not

their husbands. JBP may be correct in paraphrasing, “do not give way to hysterical fears” (3:6). Some marriages are wrecked by deeprooted fears. If a woman simply trusts her marriage, children and husband to God and does not think she must fight to preserve it, she will find fear vanishing.

When Peter turns to the husbands, he does not rise to the heights of Ephesians 5:25, but he should be understood in the same way. “In an understanding way” (ESV) is better than “considerate” (NIV) (3:7). If a husband does not remember that his wife is his equal spiritually, he will diminish his own spiritual standing and not be able to pray properly (3:7).

## MUTUAL SUBMISSION

### 1 PETER 3:8-12

If we want others to be different, then let us set them an example.

JUST AS IN Ephesians 5:21-22, Peter sees marriage as only a special case of general relationships. While “unity of spirit” (3:8) is created by the Holy Spirit, it is far more than the one Spirit living in us all. If I do not try to find out what my fellow Christians are thinking, I cannot be one with them. If I do not discover what they are feeling, I cannot suffer with them, the meaning of “sympathy.” “A tender heart,” means having a well-balanced reaction to the situation of those I meet. I must neither be carried away by my feelings, nor deal with others purely intellectually. “The humble mind” enables me to honor others rightly (2:17) and by the fact that, like me, they are God’s children. If anyone objects that too high a standard is being demanded, Peter quotes Christ’s own words (Matthew 5:39,44). The “blessing” we obtain is found in Matthew 5:45. Sometimes we feel that someone deserves to hear the truth harshly expressed of what they are really like (“reviling”) or a dose of their own medicine (“return evil”); we should remember Christ’s words then (Matthew 5:45,48).

Peter develops the thought of the blessing by quoting Psalm 34:12-16. The two features stressed are a check on one’s words, ie not reviling, and turning from evil. The blessing is life, good days and prayers that are heard. When we hear complaints about discord in a local church, lack of love, and unkind actions and judgments, we would do well to look at the one who

complains. Very often that person's own life embodies the things they are complaining about. We may give them the benefit of the doubt and say they did not begin the trouble, but they have seen to it that the trouble continues.

## CHRIST'S TRIUMPH

### 1 PETER 3:13-22

Whatever we are going through, what is our security to be in? How true is this of your life today?

IT MIGHT BE argued that self-assertion is necessary in this evil world. “God cares for those who care for themselves” is a frequently heard saying. Peter makes no secret of the probability that they will have to suffer for righteousness’ sake. Apparent defeat will be merely the way to victory. It should be noted, however, that we are far more likely to suffer, if we are zealous for other people to do right, than if the zeal is applied to our own lives (3:13).

Christ’s death combined with his resurrection represents God’s greatest triumph (3:18). In the natural realm (“in the flesh”) he was put to death; in the spiritual realm he was made alive: his bodily resurrection is the consequence of this; see Acts 2:24, in the course of which (“in which”) he made proclamation of his triumph (“preached”) to the angels (“spirits”; the word is not used of the dead) imprisoned in the days of Noah; see also Jude 6. They had done their best to destroy the world (Genesis 6:1-8), and had apparently succeeded, for all except eight people were overwhelmed by the flood. To them, and presumably to any other fallen angels awaiting their final judgment, came the knowledge that their utmost efforts had been defeated. The idea that Christ was proclaiming his salvation to those overwhelmed by

the flood does not seem to play any part here, all the more so as they were simply a special case of a common problem.

The transference of thought to Christian baptism (3:21) is an easy one, but there is much to be said for the theory that this letter represents an expansion of a baptismal sermon. Baptism results from Christ's triumph: see Romans 6:3f. The ark was the symbol of God's triumph and saving power in the midst of corruption, and so is baptism. "Not as a removal of dirt from the body" (3:21); baptism cleanses the inner being, or represents a person's cleansing, that "with a good conscience we can appeal to God" or "make a pledge to him for a new life."

Note in the midst of this the constant outward-looking readiness to respond to everyone who asks us about our hope (3:15-16).

**Thought** The eye of faith sees the ark, not the floodwaters.

## LIFE IN THE LAST DAYS

### 1 PETER 4:1-11

God gives the strength to use the gifts he has given.

NOT THE FEAR of death, but of dying, dogs the feet of many Christians. Christ's sufferings (4:1) are his death; so the Christian's death will mean triumph, ie "ceasing from sin." But in the measure in which Christians share Christ's sufferings, they will cease sinning, for they place themselves by so doing under "the will of God" (4:2).

Jews were notorious among the Gentiles for their refusal to share their meals and celebrations, so 4:3-4 are strong evidence that most of Peter's readers were Gentiles. It is likely that the NIV "detestable idolatry" (4:3) is preferable to "lawless idolatry" (ESV). We are not called on to sit in judgment on the immorality around us; we have simply to proclaim that there will be a divine judgment. We do not escape this judgment by death. Though the Christian dead (4:6) received the common judgment of the flesh, ie death, they will live. So for the others there will be the second death (Revelation 20:14).

The response? "Keep your heads" (4:7, Selwyn). The final failure of human devices, of which there is so much in Revelation, should find believers untroubled and prayerful. It is particularly in a time of chaos that the basic virtues find their place. Love can be difficult when all around us others are panicking. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (4:8): this may well be a saying of Christ's. Its meaning is not clear, for it means more than that

love veils the sin of others; see also 1 Corinthians 13:7. Certainly where a person is outstandingly known for love, most people are likely to overlook shortcomings that might otherwise be glaring. Even more, true love can turn others to the source of love, so that they may see him “covering” their sins by his blood.

“Hospitality” (4:9); where church meetings were in private houses, and where there was a tendency to move round so as not to draw undue attention to any one meeting place, hospitality in the widest sense could be a heavy burden. “A gift” (4:10) can have a wide range of meaning. The onesidedness of modern church thought is shown by the exaltation of speaking (4:11), whereas every form of “service,” because given by Christ, ranks equal with it in the right place.

## GOD'S JUDGMENT

### 1 PETER 4:12-19

What are the blessings of suffering for being a Christian?

JUDGMENT BEGINS “WITH the household of God” (4:17). One of the less considered tensions in Christian theology is that between justification and judgment. This judgment may be experienced in three ways. The tension of Romans 7:24f. may be intensified by earlier evil living, especially if it was in defiance of the known will of God. Then there is suffering for the failure of the present, eg 1 Corinthians 11:29-32 and the warnings to the seven churches (Revelation chapters 2–3). Thirdly, there are certain things against which we are specially warned, eg Mark 9:42 (does a Christian never do this?); Hebrews 4:1; 10:26-31. The clue is probably given by 1 Corinthians 11:31.

Here Peter is considering the suffering of Christians as members of the church, rather than as individuals. Because the church has fallen short and falls short, its innocent members must suffer together with the guilty. Innocent? All too often wrongdoing in the local church has been possible because of the laxity of standards. Neither now nor before the judgment seat of Christ can the Lord be indifferent to ungodly living and low standards (2 Corinthians 5:10).

If we suffer through no fault of ours, we should rejoice that the judgments of God are doing their work and that we are permitted to share in the sufferings of Christ (4:13; Colossians 1:24). We must, however, be careful.

Experience suggests that when we are most wronged, we have by omissions or commissions often helped to create the situation in which we were wronged. God is not interested in legal technicalities.

“The spirit of glory and of God” (3:14): here glory, literally, the glory, is the equivalent of the Shekinah, or abiding presence of God, ie Jesus Christ; see also John 1:14. So the phrase means the Spirit of Christ in all his glory and of God.

## THE ELDERS

### 1 PETER 5:1-5

Elders are to be caring shepherds, not bossy overlords, and are to show everyone how the Christian life is to be lived.

ACTS SHOWS US clearly enough Peter as the leader of the Twelve, and equally clearly he never forgot the special charge laid on him to be a shepherd of God's people (John 21:15-17). This will have been his motive in writing the letter, because there is no evidence that he had ever worked in the area to which it is addressed. So he has a special appeal to the elders in the churches to which his letter was sent. He avoids the word *shepherd* with reference to himself, except by implication, when he calls Christ "the chief Shepherd" (5:4), because in the figurative language of the Old Testament the shepherd is the king. It is, however, unfortunate that it has been forgotten that true elders are vice-regents. They are so important that Peter claims no authority over them but simply calls himself a "fellow elder" (5:1). Yet he had a claim to be heard. He had witnessed the sufferings of Christ and had seen the transfiguration, "the glory that is to be revealed" (2 Peter 1:16-18).

There are three sets of contrasts: "constraint," "shameful gain," "domineering"—"willingly," "eagerly," "examples"; in each case there is a logical and spiritual link. The "constraint" today comes often from the failure of the church to realize that the very real spiritual gifts a young man may have do not necessarily qualify him as an elder and pastor. It comes, too, from those who should be pastors, but do not wish to accept the

responsibility. The “crown” is more specifically the victor’s crown in the games; see also 1 Corinthians 9:25.

The principle of authority applies in the church as everywhere else (5:5). Some difficulties today may come from the elders assuming that because they have authority they have knowledge, and from a younger generation believing that their far more extensive education implies spiritual maturity. Both sides need “humility” (5:5). We tend not to take John 7:15-16 seriously enough. Arguing from what we think Jesus should have known, we attribute his authority as a teacher to his knowledge, while he claims it comes from his Father.

GOD'S CERTAIN CARE

1 PETER 5:6-14

We can turn all our worries over to God, because he cares for us. No problem is too big or small for him.

“HUMBLE YOURSELVES” (5:6) contains the thought “Allow yourselves to be humbled; accept your humiliations.” “The mighty hand of God,” whether acting directly, or through people and things around us, brings us down. There are few things so disgusting or, perhaps, ludicrous, as a person looking for opportunities to be humble. Where God does it, it should be a cause of praise, for we know we will be exalted, when we can stand the testing involved. We can turn all our worries over to God, because he cares for us. No problem is too big or small for him. The fact that God has a concern for us comes not merely from our being his children, but from our being involved in the rearguard action that Satan still wages against him (5:8-9). The lion is at its least dangerous, when it roars. The hunting lion can be amazingly quiet; the roaring lion (Amos 3:4) comes when the prey has been secured.

So the picture is of a lion trying to do by bluff and intimidation what it cannot do by stealth and strength.

For the idea behind “the God of all grace” (5:10) see Philippians 4:19. Peter does not minimize the power of persecution—after all, he had collapsed at the jeers of a servant girl—but he promises that even if we are shaken by it, God will “restore” (make good what has gone wrong), “establish” (set us

more firmly on our true foundation), and “strengthen” (provide the strength where weakness has been revealed).

Papias, as early as the second century, understood Babylon to mean Rome. It is not likely that Babylon in Mesopotamia or the one in Egypt would have been suggested, if some had not wished to weaken the tradition linking Peter with Rome. The mention of “Mark,” who is linked both with Peter and Rome, supports the traditional view. “She who is at Babylon” is the church there; see also 2 John 1,13.

## CHRISTIAN GROWTH

### 2 PETER 1:1-11

Have you stopped growing?

THERE IS LITTLE doubt that “Simeon Peter” (2:1, ESV) is correct; see also Acts 15:14. If his first letter, (see 3:1), was 1 Peter, then this will have been written when Nero’s persecution was reaching its height. This is sufficient reason for the lack of details about the recipients. “Obtained” (1:1) is inadequate; the word means to obtain by lot or divine decree, ie all personal merit is excluded. There is only one true “faith”; the gifts that follow it are diverse. The only linguistically valid interpretation of “our God and Savior Jesus Christ” is that Jesus is being called God; see also 1:11; 2:20; 3:18; Titus 2:13. For “grace and peace” (1:2), the former includes the experience of God’s covenant love, the latter the opening of God’s treasure chamber. The covenant love and riches of God are constant, but our knowledge of God teaches us to draw on them.

In John 17:3 knowledge and salvation are linked (1:3). While God may reveal to us individually the implications of salvation (1 John 2:26f.), yet it is a surer method to give us the promises of Scripture (1:4), which are always greater than our interpretation of them at any given time. The promises do not deliver us from corruption, but stir us up to claim deliverance. With 1:5-7, see also Romans 5:3-5; Galatians 5:22f. “Virtue” (1:5): it is a pity that the link with 1:3 has not been indicated, where the word is rendered “excellence”; the quality is something coming from God. “Knowledge” is not

that human quality condemned by Paul in 1 Corinthians, but a gift from the Holy Spirit giving us true balance in judgment. “Self-control” (1:6) without knowledge and balance is likely to become asceticism or fanaticism; similarly “steadfastness” without self-control is liable to lead to an explosion. “Godliness,” see also 1:3: “piety” (NEB) or “devotion to God” (JBP) are preferable; it refers to a visible quality in life, our attitude to God expressed in actions. The difference between “mutual affection” (1:7; see also 1 Peter 1:22; 3:8) and “love” is not made clear. The former probably has more of the emotional about it.

Human maturing is accompanied by physical growth and mental development; where these do not occur this is evidence of an abnormality. This is even truer with spiritual growth, and all the more because the purpose of our salvation is to become like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2). “To confirm your call” (1:10): the necessity to respond to God’s call does not end with conversion.

## THE ASSURANCE OF CHRIST'S RETURN

### 2 PETER 1:12-18

Note the eyewitness account that Peter gives of Christ.

AT THE TIME Peter wrote this letter, he was already an old man as things were then reckoned. It is not likely that he had had a special revelation of his coming death (1:14); it is more likely that he foresaw that the prediction of John 21:18 would soon come to pass. This latter is referred to in 1:15. They would be able to refer to it at any time.

Clearly the difficulty in the minds of those to whom he was writing was not the resurrection of Christ, but that the One who had lived here in humility could ever conquer the world—the dream that the church would conquer the world for Jesus had not crossed their mind. Indications of this doubt may be traced here and there in 1 Peter. If Christ could not keep his own from suffering, how could he triumph? So Peter reminds us that he had seen his divine “majesty” (1:16)—the word is not used of people—break through on the Mount of Transfiguration. This had been confirmed by the glory which came from the majesty on high and the voice which acknowledged him (1:17). In other words, his earthly poverty and humility had been assumed and were not the expression of his real nature; see also Philippians 2:5-8. Equally then, the humility and poverty of the church were a cloak hiding its true nature.

Today, also, every effort is being made to show that the New Testament teaching about the return of Christ is mere myth (1:16); it is doubtful whether

the term “cleverly devised” would even be given to such attempts! We may differ about the how and when, but the New Testament teaches clearly that the Creator of the world came into his creation (John 1:10f.) and won or redeemed it for himself. Whatever the future of the world, he does not abandon his creation to futility (Romans 8:18-23), but will achieve his original purpose with it. The world, too, is capable of transformation.

## THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

### 2 PETER 1:19–2:3

Scripture isn't the product of human imagination; God took up writers and caused them to write down what he wanted people to know.

TODAY THERE IS an emphasis on religious experience. In so far as this is produced by the Spirit, it is valid and not to be despised. But even Peter let his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration step into second place behind the prophetic Scriptures, which for him included the Pentateuch and the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings, apart from Ruth. "We have the prophetic word made more sure" (1:19): the Greek is ambiguous. It may mean as in the ESV, "we have something more sure, the prophetic word." Peter does not ask his readers to look away from the prophets but rather "to pay attention" (1:19).

There are certain points to be remembered about prophecy. The oriental "lamp" illuminated only the immediate surroundings. Prophecy is given not so that we should know the details of the future, but so that we may understand the future when it becomes the present. Then no prophecy "is of any private interpretation." Since prophecy came from the Holy Spirit, it must be interpreted by the Holy Spirit. The church is far from infallible, but an interpretation rejected by spiritual people after due thought and prayer is not likely to be correct. It also means, however, that since prophecy is a unity because it all comes from the same Spirit, we have no right to take a passage and interpret it in isolation from the rest. A great weakness in biblical

exposition, and not merely in our interpretation of prophecy, comes from our frequent ignoring of this principle. The prophets “were carried along [impelled] by the Holy Spirit” (1:21). Peter is not denying the personal contribution of the prophets to their message, but that it was in any way something thought out and shaped by them.

Yet there have been “false prophets” (2:1), just as there are false teachers. Much in the later prophetic writing is devoted to false prophets; see especially Jeremiah 23:9-40. The characteristics of the false teachers are that in one way or another they disown their Master, they are immoral, and they exploit their hearers. The proportions of these vary from false teacher to false teacher, but they are always present. Peter is not thinking of those who do not claim to be Christians.

## FALSE PROPHETS AND TEACHERS

### 2 PETER 2:4-16

False teachers are worse than atheists. Atheists say there is no God and act accordingly; false teachers speak in his name and defy him.

IN THIS CHAPTER, Peter largely reproduces Jude 4-16. The humility which is apparent in both his letters probably made him consider that Jude had expressed himself far better than he could.

The remarkable thing about the false prophets and teachers (2:1) is that they ignore the long list of warning judgments. “The angels when they sinned” (2:4): see 1 Peter 3:19f. Clearly this does not refer to Satan. “Cast them into hell,” literally “into Tartarus” (NIV footnote); it is a pity that most translations have “hell,” as hell has taken on the meaning of Gehenna, or the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:14). Tartarus was the lowest abyss of Hades. The flood and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah left an indelible impression on Israel. “Lot” (2:7) is mentioned, as is “Noah” (2:5), to make quite clear that these catastrophes were not merely natural events. The deliverance of the only righteous people among those destroyed showed God’s guiding hand over all.

“Defiling passion” (2:10): the presence of false teaching shows itself almost invariably in an ascetic depreciation of marriage or in a denial of its bonds. “Despise authority”: those whom Peter condemns either thought they could prophesy by their own impulse or denied the apostolic authority in the church.

“They are not afraid to revile” (2:10); see Jude 8-9; Peter abbreviates here. By their despising God’s order they have sunk to the level of animals (2:12) and will go to their destruction blindly. “To revel in the daytime” (2:13): contrast Peter’s indignant comment in Acts 2:15. Work is also part of God’s order, not merely a result of the fall (Genesis 2:15). The NEB gets the sense better: “While they sit with you at table they are an ugly blot on your company, because they revel in their own deceptions” (2:13). “Eyes full of adultery” (2:14): they are not merely driven by an insatiable sexual urge; it obtains a special relish in its defiance of the seventh commandment. It is interesting that of the three names given in Jude 11, Peter restricts himself to Balaam. He was a true prophet and feared God. But when the price was big enough he listened to money rather than God. Though he would not prophesy falsely against Israel, he was willing to lead the people of Israel astray (Numbers 31:16).

## FALSE PROPHETS AND TEACHERS

### 2 PETER 2:17-22

It may seem that Peter is laboring the point but his purpose is that we should be prepared for false teachers.

THE TRAGIC DESCRIPTION CONTINUES. The worst aspect about these false prophets and teachers is the way they fail those who put their trust in them. Two pictures are used. “Waterless springs” (17): for the implications, see Job 6:15-20. In the drier Mediterranean lands travelers plan their route by known springs and wells. If one of these fails, it means, possibly, death. From these false prophets and teachers comes a sound as of abundance of water springing up, but when one comes to them, one finds only wind. Then they are “mists driven by a storm.” On the wings of the storm wind, a mist covers the parched land which longs for rain. When the sun comes out again, it is clear that all that has come is a humidity that has merely raised false hopes. The sun is hotter than ever and the mist has vanished into nothingness. The proverb quoted in 2:22 indicates that these false prophets and teachers had never been changed. They had genuinely been drawn to Christ and had found much in the teaching of his messengers that fascinated them. But instead of submitting themselves to him as Lord they tried to force him into their systems and philosophies.

This description will be valuable to us only as we first look to see how far we have been tainted with the danger. It is so easy to demand that Christ should conform to our emotional experiences—and others’ also—or to our

preconceived ideas of what they should be. If we have been truly born again, this will lead merely to our making true Christianity revolve around an experience instead of Christ. All those who come to us with infallible recipes for blessing or signs of spirituality fall into this category. Alternately, we will so emphasize one aspect of truth that the whole picture of Christ becomes distorted, or much truth is excluded from the framework we have so strictly drawn. Most of our sects and divisions are due to this. The great danger is that if we persist in this course, we shall find our sense of our own importance so growing that the Person of Christ grows dimmer and marginal. Finally, we worship not him but our idea of him. Once that has happened, only the grace of God can set limits to the evil into which we may fall.

When we have judged ourselves, we will be better fitted to estimate Christian teachers around us. Beware of teachers who make themselves the measuring-rod of truth and condemn all who do not conform. Beware of teachers who exalt their experience above the Scriptures and who let the moral law of God sit lightly on them. Beware of teachers who seem to have one eye on their hearers' purses. Such teachers may be all right, but they stand in slippery places.

## SCOFFERS

### 2 PETER 3:1-7

If God broke into human history in Jesus, is there any reason why he should not do so again?

PETER NOW RETURNS to the subject of Christ's second coming. The very formality of 3:1 shows that chapter 2 was a digression, caused probably by his recent reading of Jude. Far more important than false teachers is our attitude to Christ's return. After all, if our attention is fixed on Christ and his coming, we are not likely to be led astray by the false prophets and teachers. "The commandment of the Lord" (3:2) refers to his statements in passages like Matthew chapters 24–25; Mark chapter 13; Luke 12:32-18; 17:22-37; 21:5-36, with their repetition of the command to watch. "Through your apostles": the letters are full of admonitions reinforcing Christ's command. 1 and 2 Thessalonians make it clear that Christ's second coming must have played a large part in Paul's preaching and teaching in Thessalonica: see especially 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 2:5.

There is no reason for identifying the "scoffers" (3:3) with the false teachers of chapter 2, though from the nature of their doctrines Christ's second coming will have played little or no part in their thinking as they follow their own sinful desires (3:3). The future "will come" (3:3) implies that the scoffers are there and will continue, for, in company with the other apostles, Peter regarded the period of the church as "the last days," see also 1 John 2:18; Romans 13:12. These scoffers were those who wanted to live

“natural” lives bounded by the here and now. The concept of a God who can break into history and transform it is abhorrent to them. They may appeal to science as a justification but their god is human security.

Peter reminds them that in the flood there was already a drastic re-creating of the earth. His words are a warning against minimizing the flood, but equally to read into them a meaning in conflict with all the evidence of science is foolish. Peter is not giving a new revelation of how Genesis is to be understood. Since the flood, though a destruction, was a re-creating, so the fire (3:7) will be a re-creating; see also Revelation 21:1.

NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH

2 PETER 3:8-13

In God's patience and mercy, he is giving people the opportunity to turn back to him.

IT DOES SEEM strange that Jesus has not come back earlier, but then, that's because we don't see time as God sees it. Just as he sees each moment with a greater intensity than we ever could, so he also lets the years roll by with no sense of long delay. He has his reasons—generous reasons—for he wants as many as possible to hear the gospel and have the opportunity of trusting in Christ (3:9). See also 1 Timothy 2:4: what is your part in making Christ known?

But the end will come and when it does, it will take many people by complete surprise. In place of the deceit and hypocrisy of this world, everything will be seen in the true light of God's judgment, for the end also means the reckoning.

It's not enough to know that those who teach error will be proved horribly wrong when Christ returns. The thought of meeting him and answering to him should have an effect on how we are living for him here and now. If we're living for him, trying to please him, and putting him first in everything we do, the thought of the end should not frighten us. Rather, it should be our ambition to be "found" like that whenever it might happen.

For the end is not the end of everything. It also marks the beginning. If God burns up our old home, he has promised to provide a new one for us to

live in (3:13), a world untouched by sin or suffering. That sort of prospect should also make us all the more keen to be ready for it when it comes.

LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING

## 2 PETER 3:14-18

In the light of these verses, how should the fact of Christ's second coming affect how we live?

PETER SETS TWO ideals before his readers. When Christ comes they should be "without spot or blemish" (3:14; see also 3:11; Ephesians 5:27). We are not called to approximate to some abstract ideal. We are to let the Holy Spirit work out the perfection of what we are. God made us all different, and those differences are preserved in time and doubtless in eternity. It is the flaws and stains for which God is not answerable that are to vanish. Then we are to be "at peace" (3:14). Does the thought of his coming stir any fears in us? If so, we are not at peace with him. Do our circumstances create anxiety in us? Then we do not enjoy his peace, ie God's riches in Christ Jesus.

We sometimes complain that there are things hard to understand in the Bible, as though God were small enough to be comprehended by our formulas. Even Peter, the fisherman, found Paul, the scholar, hard to understand at times (3:16). Where we find such difficulties, we should humbly tell God and others that we do not understand. Not so the proud. They must find a meaning, even if they twist the Scriptures and deduce doctrines dishonoring God and harmful to people (3:16f.).

Peter's last word is "grow" (3:18). That is one of the wonders of being a Christian. We have all eternity to grow in, and eternity will be inadequate to exhaust the wonders of God.

INTRODUCTION  
1, 2 & 3 JOHN  
H.L. ELLISON

1 John

STRICTLY SPEAKING, THIS letter is anonymous. As it has much in common with the fourth Gospel, the church has always accepted it as being written by the same author, the apostle John. The author clearly has a position of authority in the group of churches he addresses and they will have known him well. There are no hard facts about its date of writing but most people think of a date towards the end of the first century ad.

The readers of the letter were well known to the apostle John. Some of the congregation had recently left them (2:19), perhaps to follow false teaching (2:26). John writes to reassure them that their faith in Jesus Christ is true (5:13). As tradition tells us that John spent his later life in Ephesus, the readers probably lived in the same area, the west of modern Turkey.

2 and 3 John

Their author is identified as “The Elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1) who does not give his name. Traditionally, the author is seen as the apostle John, who also wrote 1 John and the fourth Gospel. Its date of writing is uncertain; possibly in the AD 80s or 90s.

As John's ministry took place in Asia Minor (present Turkey), the readers probably lived in that area. 2 John was written to "the chosen lady and her children" (2 John 1). This was a way of referring to a congregation of Christians. 3 John was written to Gaius, a member of an otherwise unknown congregation, and a personal friend of the apostle John (3 John 1).

## THE WORD OF LIFE

### I JOHN 1:1-4

How far do we know true fellowship with other Christians?

THERE IS SUCH a striking similarity between the introduction to this letter and the introduction to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) that it seems fairly certain that the letter was a covering document for the Gospel or that it was written shortly afterward to develop certain concepts in it. The Gospel was written "that you may believe ... and that believing you may have life" (John 20:31), and this letter "that you may know you have eternal life" (5:13). So the Gospel begins with the Word (John 1:1), and this letter with the Word of life (1:1), because by experiencing him, Christians have come to know the One who has brought life (John 1:4).

1:1 amalgamates John 1:1 and John 1:14. The one controversy in the fourth and fifth centuries that never received a satisfying answer was how God could become man; there should never have been controversy, because Matthew 11:27 gave due warning that an answer would not be found. No one stresses the deity of Christ more clearly than John, but his humanity is as clearly demonstrated. We have to lean back and let the wonder penetrate us. On the one hand, he was "the Word of life which was from the beginning" and on the other he was "looked upon" and "touched" (1:1).

When we think of "eternal," or everlasting, "life" (1:2) our tendency is to stress its endlessness, but for John it is, above all, what was "with the Father." The presence of the tree of life in Eden (see also Revelation 22:2)

reminds us that humanity was not created immortal, but capable of not dying. Immortality belongs only to God (1 Timothy 6:16), and by giving himself to us in Jesus Christ, he gives also immortality.

“Fellowship” (1:3) means having something in common. Christian fellowship is not based on common doctrine—that is the weakness of the denomination based on a detailed doctrinal basis, though this may be justified in a society which has been formed for a special purpose—but on sharing a common God and Savior (1:3). “We are writing” (1:4): the “we” is emphatic. It is a letter from one who has had contact with the incarnate Word during the days of his flesh (“we” is merely the normal style for letters, now mainly reserved in the editorial “we”, though it is more appropriate here, for John knew that all of his apostolic brothers would have agreed with him). True unity in Christ produces true joy (1:4).

## FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

### 1 JOHN 1:5-10

God is light and true Christians love what is pure and right and want to live that way.

WE SAW THAT fellowship with our fellow Christians depended on our fellowship with God. If there is in us what God cannot share, there can be no true fellowship with him. For the opposites light and darkness, see Revelation 21:25; 22:5. To understand 1:5 we should think of the effects of a car's headlights, or even more, of a searchlight beam; with them we have either light or darkness; there is no intermediate zone. People may hesitate to judge another person, but for God the issue is clear-cut; a person is either in the dark or in the light. Because God is light, we can know him and his will, but it involves our laying ourselves bare to the revealing light as well.

We have here a darkness-light parallelism, each on an ascending scale; on the dark side are 1:6,8,10; on the light side 1:7,9; 2:1. First, we have the person who does not recognize the darkness, ie the lack of fellowship with God in which they live (1:6). This is followed by the person claiming perfection at any given moment (1:8), and finally, in 1:10 there is the one who denies that they have ever sinned or show any of its imperfections (the perfect tense in Greek). It is probable, however, that John is not thinking merely of those people who have persuaded themselves that darkness is light and that they are mysteriously right and all others wrong, but also of those people who in any given position claim complete rightness. With the

ascending darkness of sin there is also the increasing power of Christ. In 1:9 we have the need of definite confession of the sin. Finally, in 2:1 we have awakened sinners calling on Christ to deal with the serious situation in which they find themselves.

The way to fellowship with our brothers and sisters is through fellowship with God, but lack of fellowship with our brothers and sisters will reveal that we are out of fellowship with God (1:7). This verse also encourages us to avoid an undue preoccupation with our sins. Unless it is something serious we have persisted in, it is sufficient to walk in the light.

## JESUS CHRIST OUR ADVOCATE

### 1 JOHN 2:1-6

John offers reassurance in Christ if we feel condemned.

JOHN WAS AN old man when he wrote his letter, so “My little children” (2:1) comes appropriately from him. We will see what he means by “that you may not sin” when we deal with 3:9; here we content ourselves with the remedy for sin. “Advocate” is a linguistically accurate rendering of “Paraclete,” a term used in some hymns for the Holy Spirit. It is used of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7, and of the Lord himself here. Obviously the same rendering should be used throughout if possible, for the Holy Spirit is “another” Paraclete. The Paraclete is the One whom one calls to one’s side. This may be for help, advice, comfort or representation. Behind all these lies the assumption that one hands over one’s affairs completely to one’s Advocate. He cannot act adequately unless one does. “Jesus Christ the righteous”: the implication of “righteous” is that he completely meets the Father’s standards.

Christ acknowledges that we are guilty but presents “the atoning sacrifice” (2:2 NIV; “propitiation,” ESV) of himself as the grounds of our being acquitted. So we, and all believers throughout the world (2:2), can know forgiveness and go free.

Knowing him (2:3-4; see also John 17:3) is virtually equivalent to walking in the light. Fellowship with God implies keeping his commandments. In addition, if we do hand our affairs over to Christ, it

implies that we will not be concerned with this or that commandment, but that his word becomes an indwelling power (2:5). Then John passes over to a more personal expression. Walking in the light can be taken impersonally, but abiding in him (2:6; see also John 15:4-10), indicates the believer's personal link with the Savior. It is possible to stress Jesus as the pattern for our lives in a way that overshadows his atoning work, but for all that it is an essential part of the gospel.

**Thought** There is nothing to fear, if we have handed everything over to Christ.

## THE COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

### 1 JOHN 2:7-17

A mark of true Christians is that they love their fellow believers.

WORDS DIVORCED FROM events can be empty. So it is with Christ's "new commandment" (John 13:34; 15:12,17)—the fact that John does not specify it explicitly till 3:11,23 shows the close link of 1 John with the Gospel. It is not a new commandment, because we find it already in Leviticus 19:18. The very question in Luke 10:29 shows how relatively shallow was the way in which it was understood. The moment Jesus linked it with himself, he transformed it, so that it became a new commandment. As the implications of Christ's work became clearer in the church (2:8), the darkness which hid the implications of Leviticus 19:18 was vanishing. "He who hates his brother" (2:9): the linguistic use of the Old Testament, eg Malachi 1:2f., and Christ's teaching, eg Matthew 5:43-48, make clear that no shadowland is being left between love and hatred. Hatred is quite simply absence of love, and love must be understood in the light of Christ's life. Sin can be so evil that it is sometimes very hard to hate the sin and love the sinner, especially when the sinner loves their sin. So John makes his words turn on love to one's "brother or sister" (2:9-11) in faith instead of to the outsider.

John then gives what should be the characteristics of the developing Christian. To begin with, there must be the knowledge of forgiveness (2:12) and of God's desire that people should be saved (2:13). The strength and courage of Christians who have grown to stature are seen in their victory over

the “evil one” (2:13f.) and their knowledge of God’s will. Full maturity is shown by a true understanding of “him who is from the beginning” (2:13f.), ie Jesus Christ. It would be well to compare these standards with much that is stressed today.

Wherever people are organized for business or pleasure without thought of God there we have the world (2:15). “The things in the world” are human works for human glory and pride, and not God’s creation. No thing is in itself worldly; it is the human attitude, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life,” that makes it so. So while experience may show that certain things are dangerous or disadvantageous to Christians, the vital question to ask is why they want something, or why they wish to do it. For Christ’s teaching on the subject, see Matthew 6:19-21,24-34; Luke 16:9-13.

**Thought** Seek the things that are above, where Christ is.

## THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

### 1 JOHN 2:18-27

True Christians don't run after new teaching or go against the "sixth sense" given to them by the Holy Spirit.

CHRISTIANS WHO HAVE learnt how to look on society with the eyes of God are not likely to be misled by those false teachers whom John calls "antichrists" (2:18). "Anti" means "in place of"; and so, antichrist may mean one who displaces Christ by claiming to be more important, or one who is the outspoken enemy of Christ. The latter is the sense in which we generally use the term and make it equivalent to "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3) or the "beast" (Revelation 13:1). Here John uses it for teachers who claimed to be Christians (2:19) but denied that Jesus was God's king (the Christ, 2:22). Since God is the Father primarily in virtue of Jesus Christ as his Son, and not in virtue of his creation of humanity, to deny the sonship of Jesus is to deny the fatherhood of God (2:22).

Scripture must be interpreted in its context. To all true Christians the Holy Spirit gives an anointing and so they have an intuitive, inner knowledge of certain basic facts: "you all have knowledge" (2:20). This knowledge is not something that makes teaching and the study of the Scriptures unnecessary, nor does it introduce us to secrets of which the Bible says nothing. It is rather an intuitive knowledge that certain teaching is false (2:27; see also John 10:5,27) One of the greatest difficulties for young Christians is when they find this inner light decried and they are virtually forced to assent to

propositions which they know to be false. This inner light can easily be distinguished from the intellectualism that challenges established Christian doctrine. It will never deny the Scriptures; if it does, it does not come from God.

It should be specially noted that John shows no distress at the fact that these antichrists were once church members (2:19). He was evidently confident that in the local church where Christ was Lord the false teacher would soon be too uncomfortable to stay for long. The mention of “the last hour” (2:18; see also 2 Peter 3:3) is intended to bring out that just as Jesus Christ brought the revelation of God to its earthly climax, so it also brings out the revelation of the climax of sin’s rebellion.

**Thought** Do not be afraid of being led by the Holy Spirit.

OUR HOPE

1 JOHN 2:28–3:3

Every Christian who lives in the expectation of Christ's return will make an honest attempt to live in a Christlike manner.

IT IS OF little importance whether someone has much or little knowledge of Christ, whether their spiritual growth has been fast or slow. If they are abiding in Christ, the Spirit of Christ (see 1 Peter 1:11) is doing his transforming work in them, and such a person will welcome the returning Christ with all the simplicity of a child. It is Christians who have chosen their own way that will “shrink from him in shame” (2:28), for the emptiness of their character will have become apparent at once. In 2:29; 3:7, we have one of the most important principles of the Christian life. We can teach correct doctrine to a parrot, but correct life comes only from the Holy Spirit.

Through our misunderstanding of the use of Father for God (see 2:22), we have largely lost the thrill of being able to say “Father” to God. “Children of God” (3:1) reflects Hebrew thought and implies that we reveal his character. We have become so hypnotized by correctness of doctrine that we fail to remember that it is correctness of life that matters. Since the world did not understand the Son of God, we cannot expect it to understand his sons and daughters, see John 15:18f.; Matthew 10:24f. There are very few who can predict the development of a child simply by looking at the child; so it is with Christians. There is little point in speculating about the transformed resurrection body; what is important is that we will be like him, “like God in

Christ” (Westcott), of the same nature. No wonder the one who has not allowed the Holy Spirit to do his work “will shrink from him in shame.”

No one can purify themselves in the first place. That must be done by Christ as we trust in him. But once we have been purified we can keep away from what we know will defile us. Little children hauled out of a coal bunker cannot clean themselves up, but can keep away from coal in future. No wonder John can extol the love of the Father. Those who have really been gripped by this hope are not likely to be worried by worldliness. The glory of Christ causes the best human dreams to grow pale.

**Thought** If you do not want to be like Christ, be assured that his likeness will never be forced on you.

## THE REBORN PERSON CANNOT KEEP ON SINNING

### I JOHN 3:4-10

God transforms; he does not force his children in to a mold.

“SIN IS LAWLESSNESS” (3:4): this does not mean that it is a breach of the law of Moses or of any specific command (see Romans 5:13f.) Sin is the setting up of oneself as one’s own law and authority. It is the assertion of the selfish will against a supreme authority. The distinction between “sins” and “sin” (3:5) is vital to understand this passage. Sins are the result of an inner principle of sin. The knowledge that Christ has borne our sins reconciles us to God, but our coming to him and being reborn implies a treatment of the root rebellion of sin. One cannot abide in him, or even know or see him and remain rebellious against the law of God (3:6). The one “born of God” (3:9)—the verb is perfect, ie the life continues and develops—will not continue in a state of rebellion against God. Furthermore, this birth means that something of “God’s nature” has been implanted in a person, so it is impossible that they should be in a state of rebellion. But John fully shares Paul’s attitude expressed in Romans 7:7-25. The vanishing of the old nature awaits Christ’s coming (3:2), and so falling short is bound to continue (1:8). See also 5:14-18. That this is the correct interpretation is seen by the fact that John sees sin particularly in two things: the consistent failure to try to achieve God’s standards (“whoever does not do right”), and to “love their brother and sister” (3:10), in other words, it is a question of attitude rather than acts.

Human thought naturally expresses itself in alternatives, in either ... or. Either a man is a sinner or sinless. Divine truths normally express themselves in both ... and, or neither ... nor. It is the latter we are dealing with here. Regenerate people are neither sinless nor rebels against God. If a person is in a state of rebellion against God, they should not expect their claim to be a Christian to be taken seriously. If we find them falling short of God's will, provided they do not deny the fact, it is rather a testimony to what God has already done.

LOVE IN ACTION

1 JOHN 3:11-24

You cannot claim to believe the truth about Christ if you fail in love.

WHILE “THAT WE should love one another” (3:11) represents the goal of the message rather than its terms, we may well ask how far this could be affirmed of the normal presentation of the gospel today. Though none of those who reads this is likely ever to murder another person, Christ has warned us that anger and insult rank along with it in God’s sight (Matthew 5:22). So many of us criticize, impute motives, quietly stand in another’s way because their life is an implicit criticism of ours, and their acts are more clearly blessed than ours (3:12). We should not wonder if the world hates us (3:13); indeed the wonder should be, if it does not. But what are we to say of the petty hatred and spite of our fellow Christians? We have to hold in spiritual balance the truths that hatred, ie lack of love, is murder (3:15), and that love is not natural but the result of rebirth (3:14). The love John is writing about is Christ’s love (3:16; 4:19). “He laid down his life” (3:16): the translation is unsatisfactory. He gave up his self and this culminated in death (Philippians 2:5-8). Similarly, we have to give up our selves; whether this ends in premature death—unlike Jesus we have to die—or not depends entirely on God’s will. “The world’s goods” (3:17): the NEB captures the sense with “enough to live on.” The giving out of our superfluity is taken for granted; it is the lowering of our own standard of living that is being considered. Note,

too, that John is not writing about turning away beggars, but of responding to what our eyes have seen. Love sharpens vision.

The fruit of love is confidence (3:19; 4:18). The Greek of 3:19-20 is not easy. The sense seems to be that if our heart, ie our conscience, condemns us (there is no suggestion that the condemnation is mistaken), then the knowledge that we love the brothers and sisters enables us confidently to trust in the grace of God, who has given us new life, for he is greater than any shortcoming of ours. On the other hand we do not have confidence for unrestricted asking (3:22) until the voice of conscience is satisfied (3:21), for we could be asking wrongly. The summary of the Old Testament law (Mark 12:29-31) is here rephrased as trust in Jesus Christ (“believe in the name”) and love for one another (3:23). There is a double abiding. Our abiding in him depends on our doing his will. His abiding in us is by his Spirit (3:24).

**Thought** Tragic is the plight of those who resist the urge of the Spirit to unite them to Christ.

LOVE IS SUPREME

## 1 JOHN 4:1-12

People cannot see God, but at least in our love they can see some expression of him.

AT THE END of chapter 3, John mentioned the Holy Spirit for the first time, even though he is implicit in a passage like 2:20. The reason immediately becomes obvious. Then as now there were those who preferred the “gifts of the Spirit” to the more costly “fruit of the Spirit.” They might not show much love, but they did display spiritual gifts, in this case prophetic (4:1). John did not deny the fact of spirit activity, for there are spirits other than the Holy Spirit (4:1). The acknowledgment of the incarnation was a sure test (4:2), for apparently it had brought the spirits in a special way under the control of the name of Jesus Christ (Mark 16:17; Acts 19:13). “The spirit of antichrist” (4:3): see 2:18. Stress on these phenomena, even if they are superficially harmless and orthodox, deflects attention from Christ. Their attractiveness is that “they are of the world” (4:5), ie they appeal to our natural side. Ultimately, we may know the validity of a teacher’s message by those whom they attract (4:6).

John then dismisses these people by returning to the subject of love, the supreme nature of which remains absolute (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3), and it is the one certain test of a person’s standing before God. Such love is always seen in action: the love of God is characterized by God’s sending (4:9; see also John 3:16). God’s love is always prior and basic (4:10). One of the basic

emphases in Hosea lies here. Since God had included all Israel in his covenant love, for one Israelite to wrong another was to deny the relation of covenant love that God had set up. “Love me, love my dog” is a down-to-earth version of what is being stressed here.

It goes further. “No one has ever seen God” (4:12): we know him by what he has done for us, above all in Jesus Christ, in whom he became visible, and by what he has worked in other people. So long as our love toward God is a matter of feelings toward him, or even expressed in the living of a moral life, it is a static love. Once it shows itself in action toward those whom God has loved, it “is perfected in us.”

GOD IS LOVE

## 1 JOHN 4:13-21

Our attitude toward the people we see daily is a sure sign of our attitude toward God whom we have never seen.

AT THIS POINT John pauses and picks up some of the strands of his message. 4:13 looks back to 3:24; 4:14 to 1:2; 2:2; and 4:15 to 3:23f. The basis of everything is that the Father sent and the Son saved. We accept this in our confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and to us the proof of this is the possession of the Holy Spirit.

“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us” (4:16): the climax of our union with God is a fusion of experience and faith, not concerned with abstract theology but with the expression of God’s love, not merely to me, but also to others.

A new section begins with “God is love.” We may not qualify this in any way, but equally we may not preach it to those who have not experienced it. Since it is an abstract statement, we must make it concrete in Christ and in our own lives, otherwise people will interpret it by their own concepts of love. Where humanity and God are linked in love, the love of God flows to humanity, and through them out to others and back to God, so causing “the day of judgment” (4:17) to take on another aspect. Even in this world we show by our love that we are like him. To those who are strangers to God, or who have just come into living contact with him, we have to demonstrate that

Christ's death was more than just the tragic death of a very good and noble man. When caught up in the sphere of love, both doubts and fears vanish.

"There is no fear in love" (4:18) does not exclude the possibility of God's discipline or even of the tendency of the old nature to shrink back. "Punishment" here is almost fear of the consequences, for it is the punishment of retribution and not discipline (see Hebrews 12:5-11), that is being considered. In God's love this is excluded for those who are linked to him by the bonds of love. There is not even the fear of our love breaking down, for it is his love (4:19). Human love can discriminate; God's does not, so to hate my brother or sister is to make a mockery of the love to God I claim (4:20). In any case, my attitude toward the one I see daily is a sure sign of my attitude toward the One I have never seen.

## THE THREE WITNESSES

### 1 JOHN 5:1-12

To believe is life, to disbelieve is death. Do you believe? If so, does your life show it?

“CHRIST” IN GREEK is not a proper name but a title, and a most unusual one for John’s contemporaries. The challenge is to believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah, ie his king and representative. Once again we have the stress that love is a relationship within the family (5:1). As such, it is not primarily emotional but derives its nature from God. If we have the right relationship with God and “obey his commandments” (5:2), our love to God’s children will look after itself, because obedience is a sign of our love to God. Obedience is “not burdensome” (5:3), because we share a common character with God (see also Matthew 11:30). Yet we may never think that the Christian life is something merely automatic. There is the continuous conflict with the world, which demands the continued use of “our faith” (5:4), which must give Jesus his full position (5:5).

The verse numbering of contemporary versions hides the fact that 5:7 of the KJV has been omitted, certainly correctly. The statement about the three witnesses in heaven is found in Latin sources in the fifth century, but no Greek manuscript before the thirteenth century contains it. With its omission we find the justification for our confession of Jesus as the Son of God. John’s thought is hard to follow in detail, and there is point in Law’s view (*The Tests of Life*) that we have “a summary ... intended to recall fuller oral exposition.”

While “water and blood” (5:6) have some relation to John 19:34, the different order shows that primarily it refers to his baptism and death. In contrast, the reference to the Spirit is in the present and must refer to his witness in the church. So the “three witnesses” (5:8) are the Spirit (mentioned first!), baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The blessing on the sacraments, when rightly used, from generation to generation, shows that God has approved of them, and so the three are God’s testimony (5:9). Where people accept God’s objective testimony, they receive a subjective inner testimony as well. People may disbelieve us with impunity, but to disbelieve God is to charge him with being a liar. To believe is life, to disbelieve is death (5:12).

## SIN LEADING TO DEATH

### 1 JOHN 5:13-21

We must be careful that nothing takes the place of Christ in our lives  
which should be reserved for Christ alone.

IN THE CONCLUDING section of the letter, John brings together a number of his main points. Certainty of salvation (“eternal life”) is not a necessity, but it certainly makes the Christian walk easier and more triumphant (5:13). When we love (3:21-23) we will know the will of the Beloved, and so we will ask according to his will and receive it (5:14). Neither need we wait for the visible answer (5:15).

As regards “the sin leading to death” (5:16f.), only God can ultimately classify sin. John is writing about believers (5:16), and the Roman Catholic concept of mortal sin, ie one that will bring a person to hell, if not repented of, has no scriptural justification. Especially in the light of 1 Corinthians 11:30 there is no reason why we should not take death and life literally. All sin within the church is unspeakably serious for it mars the witness of the body of Christ. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira we see God judging them with death (Acts 5:1-11). Paul envisages the notorious sinner as handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:5). Because of the serious lack of discipline in the church, we seldom see John’s teaching being applied, but this does not alter God’s attitude towards the sin of Christians.

The mention of this possibility of sin causes John to stress once again that it is really a contradiction in terms (5:18). The combination, however, makes clear that we must regard the state of not sinning as the normal, not as the impossible. Children can deny their parentage, but they cannot undo it.

Because there was a time when it appeared that the church had Christianized Europe and many of its colonies, the distinction between the true church and the world became blurred. It remains true, however, that the world (2:15) is always in opposition to God, and whether it knows it or not, under the control of Satan.

“To know him who is true” (5:20): see Revelation 19:11. There “reliable” is the better rendering, but here “real” (NEB) is perhaps best, for it is contrasted with “idols” (5:21). The Greek word implies an image without inner reality, or a shadow. God is real; human desires are worthless shadows.

## THE SUPREMACY OF LOVE

### 2 JOHN 1-6

Love is a soil in which falsehood cannot grow.

NEITHER CONTENTS NOR tradition give any idea of the date of this short letter, or of its recipient. The style suggests a date near that of 1 John. If that is so, the worsening position of the church in the Roman empire would explain its essential anonymity.

“The elder” (v.1; see also 1 Peter 5:1): John is not claiming apostolic authority. “The elect lady”: the position might explain the omission of the name, but contrast 3 John 1. The use of the same term in verse 13, however, suggests strongly that a personified local church is intended. This is strengthened by his statement that all who know the truth share his outlook. “The truth” (v.2) is, of course, Christ (see John 14:6). “Grace” (v.3) is God’s free covenant love; “mercy,” or better, “compassion,” is his understanding of the church’s position and weakness as it faces the increasing hostility of the Roman power; “peace” is the inner quiet from having all the resources of God at one’s disposal.

“Some of your children” (v.4): this otherwise strange remark becomes clear, if we understand it to mean that John had met some of the recipient church’s members when they were on their travels. In this case it does not imply that the others had lapsed. John was living at a time when false teachers were rife, and so the churches were making their first steps towards tighter organization and formulation of doctrine, to exclude them. John

approves, but he sees the danger. So he urges that first things be placed first, ie love. Where there is true love, false teachers will find themselves ignored. We are to walk in love (v.6): love is “to be your rule of life” (NEB). Since it is God’s love that John is writing about, it is neither weak nor sentimental. It will not compromise nor call evil good, nor false true.

## CARRIERS OF THE PLAGUE

### 2 JOHN 7-13

Do your own particular views enhance the glory of Christ?

FOR VERSE 7, see 1 John 2:18; 4:3. In one way or another false teachers try to diminish the importance of Christ in order to emphasize their doctrine. Whenever anyone suggests that their views should take priority in a Christian's life and thinking, they have become an antichrist. Unbalanced doctrine, even if not positively false, leads to unbalanced thought and action, and this will lead to an unbalanced reward, ie something will be missing (v.8). "Anyone who goes ahead" (v.9): Phillips gets the meaning excellently with, "The man who is so 'advanced' that he is not content with what Christ taught." Where true love exists, there will be the willingness to believe that God's love has revealed all that is necessary, and that, in any case, ideas that only puzzle my fellow Christians have no real place in Christian teaching. We generally assume they are too uneducated, too conservative, too unintelligent (how loving!) to understand; love would suggest that it is their spirituality that makes them turn from my ideas. The refusal of greeting (v.10) shows that John is not writing about the casual stranger, whose views would be unknown, but about a known teacher claiming the right to propagate their views. To receive such a false teacher would be as senseless as welcoming the carrier of plague or other major infectious disease. Probably John was thinking about certain teachers going round the area, but he did not wish to put too much on paper, in case the letter should fall into

the hands of the authorities. The person who has given themselves to the perversion of truth will also twist the fact that I have given them hospitality and will claim that my action has given him a testimonial of respectability.

It is not always wise to write too much. Very much harm has been done to Christian work in the mission field and in lands hostile to Christianity by enthusiastic reports that have fallen into the wrong hands. So John was prepared to leave what else was to be said until he could visit the church to which he had sent his warning.

A HOSPITABLE HOME

3 JOHN 1-8

We do not have to preach to share the preacher's work.

THERE ARE NO grounds for separating this short letter widely in time from 1 and 2 John. In other words it was probably written toward the end of the first century. "Elder" (v.1): see 2 John 1; 1 Peter 5:1. The apostles were authorities on doctrine, but they could not impose their will on an already established church. John writes with the authority due to the senior elder of the church in Ephesus—at least so tradition says—but that does not give him power over another church. "Gaius" was a common name at the time. Three or possibly four other men of that name are mentioned in the New Testament, and we can hardly identify him with any of them. The greeting suggests that he may have been ill, and even that he may have been involved in some difficulties. John had no doubt of his spiritual state. Gaius may well have been a convert of John's (v.4). "The truth of your life" (v.3) does not refer to doctrinal purity, but to a harmony between words, actions and character.

Here we have the opposite of 2 John 10f. For reasons connected with Diotrephes (v.9), the church in which Gaius was a member had not welcomed wandering preachers as they should. Gaius had evidently taken them in and been taken to task by the church for so doing. John expresses the hope that he will so do again (v.6), for they refused to accept any form of payment from the "pagans" to whom they had preached. The obvious distinction between them and the false teachers was that they were not seeking to influence the

church at all; they were missionaries to the pagans around. The regulations of Matthew 10:5-13 could apply only partially because they were preaching, not to God-fearing Jews, but to idolatrous pagans. If it is asked why the church that sent them out did not provide for their needs, it may be suggested that it was often inadvisable for such travelers to carry much money. Until the local synagogue rejected Paul's teaching, he could rely on Jewish hospitality, but those days were long past.

## THE CHURCH DICTATOR

### 3 JOHN 9-15

True leaders know that only Christ can have first place.

THE TROUBLE IN the church was due to Diotrephes (v.9), “who wants to be head of everything” (JBP). No false doctrine is attributed to him; it was simply that he felt he had to have a finger in every pie. It is not clear whether the “something” John had written to the church was a protest to the church for the way it had behaved or a few lines commending the traveling preachers. Since he is not likely to have written so lightly about a formal protest, it was probably the latter. Diotrephes probably objected to the fact that the letter had not been addressed to him personally and that he had not been consulted in advance. He will have had no objection to the preachers as such.

Diotrephes was not yet a bishop; they developed later. His authority was limited, and the only way he could counteract John’s lines of commendation was to slander him. This has remained to this day one of the most effective ways of undermining true spiritual authority. Diotrephes tried to “put them out of the congregation.” There is no evidence that Gaius had been excommunicated, though Diotrephes would no doubt have been pleased to get rid of him. While John could not order the church about, he had the right to expose what had happened, when he visited the church. The “authority” (v.9) which Diotrephes had not recognized was to commission the preachers. “Demetrius” (v.12) had probably resisted him and been bitterly attacked.

Diotrephes has always been in the church, and has probably done more harm than false teachers. There is always the willingness to let the “willing horses” carry more than their share of church burdens. This, of course, robs the less gifted of their opportunities of service. Sometimes the “willing horse” is motivated purely by the spirit of service; then such a person may have a breakdown. Sometimes it is the drive to interfere in everything. If this is allowed, the day comes when they are felt to be indispensable and they become a dictator. Then they grumble because no one seems willing to pull their weight!

**Thought** “Through love be servants of one another” (Galatians 5:13).

INTRODUCTION

JUDE

H.L. ELLISON

JUDE WAS ALMOST certainly written by our Lord's brother of that name. The fact that most of the letter was taken up by Peter into his second letter suggests that it was originally addressed to a limited circle. It is concerned with those who were both false teachers and false livers, as were so many who were influenced by early Gnosticism; see also Revelation chapters 2–3.

## JUDGMENT ON GODLESSNESS

### JUDE 1-7

The best way of contending for the truth is living it.

MOST OF THIS short letter is reproduced in 2 Peter 2. As we read through it, we must remember that we are dealing with two phenomena which need not be linked. It is a pungent attack on people who, while genuinely attracted to certain features of Christianity, had no real claim to the name. Today they may be represented by some of the modern cults and certain New Age and theosophical groups. Then they represented a widespread antinomian, anti-moral movement, which was not confined to Christian circles, though they found the rapidly growing enthusiastic groups a useful base. Such an outlook is sweeping over us in this generation, but for the most part it has no interest in Christianity, or the churches.

Jude (see also Mark 6:3) is Judas or Judah, the third of Jesus' brothers; apart from this letter nothing is known of him. Hegesippus tells us that his grandsons were brought before the emperor Domitian (ad 81–98) as members of the house of David, and so possible rallying points for Jewish disaffection. When he found they were mere peasants, he sent them home. The NEB gives the sense well in verse 1, "to those whom God has called, who live in the love of God the Father and in the safe keeping of Jesus Christ."

Jude had been wanting to write to his unnamed readers when a sudden danger made it necessary (v.3). "To contend": there is no necessary connection with physical fighting in the word. "Once for all," and so new

ideas and revelations just cannot be true. Certain people (v.4) found acceptance in Christian circles by hiding their views at first. The foretelling of their coming is found in passages like Matthew 24:5,24. “Our only Master and Lord”: Master is a strong word, used in 1 Peter 2:18 for a slave owner. Only here and in 2 Peter 2:1 is it applied to Jesus Christ, to show how wicked their action was. Their denial was by a life and teaching completely contrary to his.

He said their doom had been foretold (v.4), and he demonstrates this by listing some of the judgments on similar people in the past. As Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 10:6-8, one of the chief sins of the Israelites in the wilderness was immorality. We know from Jewish writings that “the angels” (v.6) were above all those mentioned in Genesis 6:2,4 (see also 1 Peter 3:19f. On the basis of Genesis 19:4-11, it is assumed in Jewish tradition that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was above all unnatural vice, though this is hardly borne out by Ezekiel 16:49f. “Eternal fire” means fire that blotted out the cities forever.

## THE UNGODLINESS OF THE UNGODLY

### JUDE 8-16

Jesus Christ died for these people also.

JUDE CALLS THE doctrines of these teachers dreams (v.8); they had no solid basis. They degraded the human body, ignored authority ordained by God and insulted those to whom God had given glory by the position he had granted them. One feature of Jude is his familiarity with Jewish apocalyptic and pseudepigrapha. In verse 9 he quotes from the Assumption of Moses. It is immaterial whether it is factual; this is how one should behave in the presence of God's great officials. Satan acted as a sort of public prosecutor (see also Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Zechariah 3:1-5; Luke 22:31). These men had destroyed their higher nature by their dreams, and so they had become like animals to be destroyed by their passions. Cain committed murder because his brother's life rebuked his (see 1 John 3:12). For Balaam, see Numbers 22:5-7; 2 Peter 2:15; he was willing to flout God's will for money. Korah rebelled against God-given authority (Numbers 16:1-35).

“These are blemishes on your love feasts” (v.12): this is the way it is taken in 2 Peter 2:13, where an almost identical Greek word is used. There is, however, much to be said for taking the word here as meaning “hidden reefs”: “these men are a menace” (JBP). The picture is of them sitting in the love feasts of the local church threatening the spiritual life of those around them by their conversation and selfish conduct. Like “waterless clouds” they have a promise of good things but give nothing; “fruitless trees in late

autumn” will bear no fruit (see Mark 11:12-14,20), and none in the future because they have no roots. The “sea” (v.13) is the Old Testament symbol for chaos and lawlessness (see Isaiah 57:20). The “wandering stars” are probably comets.

In verses 14-15 we have a quotation from the Jewish writing, the book of Enoch. There is no importance in the fact that this is an extracanonial book, for Jude could have easily found similar statements in the canon. The tense is the prophetic perfect, ie that something foretold is so certain that it can be described as though it had already happened. It was the constant use of “ungodly” that commended the passage to Jude. They were “loudmouthed boasters” with small people, but flatterers of the great (v.16).

OUR DEFENSE AGAINST THE GODLESS

JUDE 17-25

Only God is strong enough to take us through all the pressures and challenges of life into the joys of heaven.

SUCH PREDICTIONS HAD been given by the apostles—Jude does not claim the rank—quite frequently; this is the force of the tense in verse 18. Examples are Acts 20:29; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1f.; 4:3. We have the general sense of them in verse 18. One of the characteristics of such people is the divisions they cause (v.19). Since they care only for themselves, they care nothing for the unity of the church. Though they are completely unspiritual, they claim to be spiritual teachers.

The defense against such teachers is fourfold. Our faith (v.20) is only the beginning. We have to build up a rounded Christian character on it. Then we must “pray in the Holy Spirit” (see Romans 8:26f.). This means that we must allow God’s Spirit to mold our thoughts, see also 1 John 5:14f. “Keep yourselves in the love of God” (v.21): the love of God is always there, but we can cut ourselves from it by sin. A thin blind can shut out the sunlight. Above all, there is the waiting for the return of Christ. It has a strange power to bring matters into true perspective and inspire us to try to save others.

The final doxology faces facts squarely. On the one hand is us in our imperfection, who can be helped to stand when we are in danger of falling, and kept unblemished though not perfect; on the other hand is God with all

glory, majesty, dominion and authority. The two are linked by Jesus Christ, the God-man.

INTRODUCTION  
REVELATION  
H.L. ELLISON

WHEN IT IS rightly understood, Revelation is one of the most important books in the Bible. Though it was not the last to be written, it fittingly stands at the end of the New Testament, for in many ways it picks up themes that start in Genesis and brings them and others to a focus.

There are three main recognized methods of interpreting the book, though each is capable of almost infinite subdivision. The Preterist sees the whole book, except the final couple of chapters, as referring to and fulfilled in the time in which it was written. The Historicist sees the history of the church depicted in broad outline from chapter 4 onwards. The Futurist considers chapters 2–3 to be an outline of church history, while everything from chapter 4 onward is still future. The first two are obviously inadequate, the third must wait for the future before it can be judged, but its treatment of chapters 2–3 does not give us much confidence in its attempts to look into the future. Best is to accept the opening words as a guide and to look on it as a revelation of Jesus Christ. These notes adopt this method, though the obviously future elements are treated as such. Only rarely are the three schools of interpretation mentioned.

The language of the book is largely symbolic. This symbolism is sometimes taken from contemporary apocalyptic writings, more often from the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel and Daniel.

There are no real grounds for doubting that the John who wrote the book was the apostle of the same name. It is more likely to have been written in the reign of the emperor Domitian (ad 81–96) than in that of Nero (54–68).

GREETINGS FROM THE TRIUNE GOD

## REVELATION 1:1-8

It is not only the original readers who can expect to receive encouragement from this great prophecy (1:3).

FUNDAMENTALLY “THE PREACHER” was correct in maintaining that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9), for neither the nature of God, of Satan, nor of humanity changes. Therefore the same patterns keep on recurring, though no doubt they may reach a climax before Christ’s second coming. This justifies the emphasis on “the time is near” (1:3). Jesus is the coming One, and Christians are intended to be kept awake by seeing signs of that coming in the things that happen. So it would be unfair to say that the Preterist or Historicist was spiritually wrong in their interpretation.

We may look on Jesus in two ways. He is the eternal Word of God (John 1:1-18), but he is also that Word who was once in time made flesh for us, keeping his humanity forever. It is these two aspects that are united in this portion; in 1:2 “word” should probably have a capital letter. Before Greek philosophical skill led to our formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, there was really no other way of expressing this mystery. God as the one “who is to come” (1:8) is Jesus Christ (1:7). If God is the A and the Z, the modern English for “Alpha and Omega” (1:8), Jesus calls himself “the first and the last” (1:17; see also 22:12f.). For “the seven spirits” (1:4), see Isaiah 11:2; the Holy Spirit is meant, but Hebrew thought allowed each of his attributes to be

considered separately; seven is the number of perfection and completeness. There is nothing outside his power and influence.

The Greek of Revelation is unusual and it is likely that we should take 1:6 as in Exodus 19:6, to which it obviously refers. We are not merely under God's sovereignty, the force of "kingdom" (1:9), but we also have the right of unhindered access to him, the force of priests. Zechariah 12:10 refers only to the Jew, but 1:7 extends the truth to all, for in the sight of God all are responsible for the crucifixion. The expression "the clouds" (1:7), means that he comes from God as God's representative (see also Daniel 7:13).

**Thought** The main thoughts of Revelation are so understandable that there is a blessing in its public reading (1:3).

THE GLORY OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

REVELATION 1:9-20

How great is Jesus to you?

IF, AS SEEMS almost certain, Revelation was written about AD 90 during Domitian's persecution, John will have been getting on for eighty years old when he was condemned to hard labor in the quarries of Patmos. This must have been physically crushing for a man of his age, but though he had no day off and little leisure, he could still be "in the Spirit" (1:10). It is unlikely that the Lord's day means Sunday; it corresponds rather to the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament, meaning the period in which the judgments of God are at large in the world as he sets up his universal rule. While the visions may perhaps span a long period in the history of the church, they are looking to and preparing for the second coming. "The seven churches" (1:11) are literal, and a Bible map will show that they come in the natural order for a messenger carrying the letters; seven, however, indicates that we may expect to find all forms of church experience paralleled here. The force of "angels" (1:20) is not clear; it may mean their guardian angels, see also Matthew 18:10. Neither bishops nor the churches' messengers to John carries conviction.

The description of the glorified Christ is almost completely symbolic. "One like a son of man" (1:13; see also Daniel 7:13)—human, yet with heavenly glory. "A long robe": see Isaiah 6:1; the length of his garment showed his dignity as king and priest. The "girdle" by its material showed the

wearer's rank; that it was "around his chest" means that it was not holding up his robe, ie he was at rest, his work completed. "His hair" (1:14; see also Daniel 7:9); he is simultaneously one like a son of man and the Ancient of Days, depicted with white hair because he has existed from all eternity. The description of his eyes reflects Daniel 10:6—for him to see means purification or destruction. "His feet" (1:15) showed that there had been no defilement from the paths of earth he had trodden. "Like the sound of many waters" (1:15; see also Ezekiel 1:24); to stand by a rockbound coast in a storm or a mighty waterfall and let the noise possess you will give the sense. The "two-edged sword" (1:16) reminds us of Hebrews 4:12f. The "right hand" (1:17) is a symbol of strength and protection, so it also imparts strength. "I died" (1:18): better, "I became dead" (RV), for it refers to a deliberate and voluntary action. "Hades" (Hebrew *Sheol*) is not hell, but where the souls of the dead await the resurrection and judgment.

LOST LOVE REBUKED

## REVELATION 2:1-7

Have you lost your first love for Christ?

THE KEY PHRASE in all the seven letters is “I know.” Our knowledge of ourselves is at the best distorted by self-interest, ignorance and prejudice. We see in part and we know in part. Christ’s knowledge is complete, objective and constructive. He rebukes so as to restore.

The church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and later John’s home, had all the makings of an ideal church. It not only did what it should, but continued when the ground was stony and the going hard. It was not influenced by outward appearances, but tested the claims of those who claimed special gifts and position (2:2, “apostles”). But though it had not grown weary in well doing (2:3), the original motives and driving force had gone (2:4). The rendering “abandoned” (2:4) should make us sit up. The KJV “lost” (NIV “forsaken”) may make us think of a very human cooling of ardor, something that is inevitable when love is thought of as mainly or entirely a matter of feelings. But here was the deliberate adoption of a lower standard. The works had ceased to be the outpouring of love and had become essentially legalistic, for the demands of love were proving too costly. Where this happens in a church, it is near spiritual death.

The root of the matter was still there, however, as was seen in their treatment of the Nicolaitans (2:6), ie the followers of one Nicolaus, of whom absolutely nothing is known. Certain popular guesses are best disregarded.

That love was there was shown by their hating neither the heretics nor their teaching, but their works. A teaching, however plausible, which produces the wrong results, must be false; if the results are right, its errors must be marginal. Love will always detect the loveless life, even if it is bewildered by the loveless teaching.

“To him who conquers” (2:7): to be counted righteous by faith is only the beginning of a life leading to the victor’s crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8). Eternal life comes through the act of faith, but the rewards through a life of faith. Conquerors know they will be members of the glorified church, the new Jerusalem, where the tree of life is (22:2).

**Thought** What excuse will I give Christ for failure?

HARD-PRESSED BUT STEADFAST

## REVELATION 2:8-11

The poor church enjoys the riches of no condemnation.

SMYRNA WAS A much smaller town than Ephesus, and so the church there, even though it was probably much smaller, was much more obvious to its neighbors and correspondingly persecuted. As a result they were poor (2:9), probably in numbers, spiritual gifts and possessions, things that often go together. So Jesus reminded them of his victory (2:8), and that they were rich (2:9), for to those who are poor in spirit comes the guarantee of living under the kingly rule of God (Matthew 5:3).

Evidently their chief difficulties came from the local Jews. Satan is the accuser and slanderer, the meaning of *diabolos* (Devil). They had both accused the church and slandered it (see Acts 13:45,50; 14:2,19; 17:5-8,13; 18:12f.). For the denial that they were really Jews (2:9), see Romans 2:28f. This kind of attitude is too common among Christians when they speak of movements they dislike or reject. We picture them as we feel they should be, and we allow reports to become facts.

Even though it is usual for church histories to describe the nearly 300 years of persecution by the Roman authorities under ten major heads, this does not justify us in equating the church in Smyrna with that of the period of persecution. Probably the significance of the “ten days” (2:10) is that the Lord of the church both gives it over to persecution and so controls the persecutors, that he can foretell the time of its ending before it begins.

Because Christ was raised from the dead, physical death should have no terrors for us, even if it can be very painful. The death to be feared is the second, spiritual death (2:11; see also Matthew 10:28). There are Christians who, though they will not be burnt, will as it were be singed. Probably no one knows the full implication of being saved “but only as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). Though there is no suggestion of purgatory in it, it certainly implies more than the loss of one’s lifework.

HARD BY SATAN'S THRONE  
REVELATION 2:12-17

For those who remained firm there would be a reward: the gifts and riches of Christ.

PERGAMUM HAD ONCE been the important capital of an independent little kingdom, but now its political importance was a memory and it had been outshone commercially by Ephesus. It remained famous for the temple of Zeus which topped its hill: "Satan's throne" (2:13). Life was dominated by it, and its priests had early claimed the life of Antipas, who is otherwise unknown. In such surroundings there had to be a clearcut response to the official paganism of the city, which presented no difficulty to true believers. More subtle by far was the suggestion that they should recognize the hidden truth in it, an attitude that is prevalent in some missionary thinking today.

The mention of "Balaam" (2:14, see Numbers 25:1-9,16-18; 31:8,16) shows that the syncretism they were threatened by was a grosser form of Gnosticism, in which those initiated into it were encouraged to indulge in sins of the flesh to show they had risen above the restraints of the Law. If you meet such people (for they still exist) shun them; they carry a spiritual plague. The mention in the same context of the "Nicolaitans" (2:15, see also 2:6) suggests that Nicolaus' teaching was also a Gnostic one, though probably not so gross. When a church permits such things, God's judgment on sinners will affect it as well (2:16).

“The hidden manna” (2:17) in its literal meaning looks back to the jar of manna placed in the ark (Exodus 16:33; Hebrews 9:4), the contents of which were controlled only by God. In the context we have true spiritual secrets, “the name” and the nourishment, in contrast to the false wisdom and secrets of the Gnostics. For some, there is always a strong pull toward the idea that there are special teachings and meanings in the Bible which can be appreciated only by the elite. When such teaching is met, we should not stop to ask whether it is true—though it is well to remember that the unprovable has little to commend it—but whether it brings us to closer personal intimacy with God.

## A MIXED CHURCH

# REVELATION 2:18-29

If our thinking is on the wrong track, our behavior will be wrong too.

THE CHURCH IN Thyatira was a strange mixture. On the one hand it excelled that in Ephesus in its Christian life and labor (2:19, see 2:2-3), because their mounting scale showed that their love had not grown cold (see 2:4). Had Lydia (Acts 16:14) perhaps returned home? On the other hand it had gone further than any of the other churches in yielding to the immoral Gnostic teaching around (2:20).

“Jezebel” was evidently one of those women with pronounced psychic powers who have a strange influence on otherwise levelheaded Christians. The name given her—it is hardly likely to have been her real one—links her with Ahab’s wife, a woman who showed sufficient respect for the God of Israel to let her children’s names include his and who no doubt attended her husband’s worship of Jehovah, but whose real religion was the gross nature worship of Tyre with its deification of sex. In Ephesus and Pergamum it is a syncretistic corruption of Christianity that is condemned, but here the adoption of another religion—“adultery” (2:22)—which would involve suffering and death for its propagators and followers.

It is impossible to be sure whether “the deep things of Satan” (2:24) refers to “Jezebel’s” teaching or to some other form of Gnostic aberration. There are those who delight in penetrating beyond the veiled hints in the Bible about the powers of evil that surround us. At best their teaching deflects our

attention from Jesus Christ, at worst it defiles heart and mind. There is normally spiritual pride behind it. Have you noticed that the Old Testament never describes the pagan religions that surrounded and influenced Israel? Not evil but its remedy should be our interest.

Those who conquer in the situation of Thyatira are those whose heart and mind are satisfied and filled with their Lord. So their reward is that they live in the hope of the coming dawn (2:28; 22:16), and that they share in their Lord's rule (2:26-27).

The picture of the rod of iron is taken from Psalm 2:9. We must choose whether we are to be shepherded and defended by the Lord's rod (Psalm 23:4) or broken in pieces by it.

A DEAD CHURCH

REVELATION 3:1-6

Members of the church are to turn back to God, going back to what they heard and believed at first, grasping the message firmly. Is there a lesson for you there?

DOCTORS CONDUCT POST-MORTEMS to discover the cause of death. Though we sometimes hold a post-mortem to find out why something has failed or gone wrong, post-mortems on spiritual deaths rarely serve a good purpose, and so we have none on Sardis. Today there is much controversy on when a person should be reckoned as medically dead. Though the church in Sardis was dead to all appearances—only the name for a short and honorable past remained—yet the Giver of life could see that a flicker of life still remained (3:2), and for him that is a ground of hope.

Many of us would no doubt have told the few who were true (3:4) that they should come out of a dead church and be separate. However much this may have been historically necessary from time to time—in many cases the loyal ones were thrown out—there is no scriptural justification for the proliferation of denominations in Protestantism.

Their white garments speak not merely of purity but also of life in the midst of death. For many the thought of names being blotted out of “the book of life” (3:5) raises major theological difficulties. This is due to a widespread popular watering down and distortion of what may for convenience be called Calvinist teaching, though Calvin would have disowned it. It is the belief that

because a person has prayed certain words, passed through certain routines, etc they are saved by them and saved eternally. The only proof of life is life, and the only proof of salvation is a changed life. The blotting out is presumably of what a person had assumed as certain. Those who are content to die spiritually will not be forced by Christ to live, whatever assertions to the contrary they may have made at some time.

It should be specially noted what is said about the works of Sardis (3:2). Evidently in the sight of other people they were admirable. It is possible for a church to get into a routine which can go on very happily even while it is dying on its feet. A great need in the church today is for those with spiritual discernment. All too often the life of a local church is judged by pure externals, even by its numbers.

WEAK BUT TRIUMPHANT  
REVELATION 3:7-13

Our little becomes much in Jesus' hands.

THE PICTURE OF “the key of David” (3:7) is taken from Isaiah 22:22; it speaks of Christ’s kingly rule within the people of God, here the local church. We may deduce from the “open door” (3:8) that there are locked ones as well. Many spend the best years of their lives battering at these and wondering why there is no clear call and blessing. Just as others cannot shut the door Christ has opened for us, so we cannot open the doors he has locked. The door, ie the opportunities of service, will always be proportionate to our “power” (3:8): whatever we may not be able to do, we can always keep Christ’s command (“my word”) and not deny his character (“my name”) by our lives.

There is no point in interpreting “the hour of trial” (3:10) as the great tribulation, the more so as “the hour of testing” is the true rendering. There are recurrent judgments of God, nationwide, even worldwide, which reveal the true nature of those who pass through them. The church in Philadelphia had already shown this, and so there was no need of further testing: for a similar thought see 1 Peter 4:1.

Alongside the talk of great evangelistic advances, we need to remember “keep” (3:10), “hold fast” (3:11), “stand” (Ephesians 6:13-14). All too often more ground is lost by erosion in the church than is gained by these advances. The promise to such people, the conquerors, who have “little power” is that they will become “pillars” in God’s temple (3:12). Though the promise is for

the future, its reality is very often worked out in the present. The strength of the pillar is that it is rock and that it is based on rock. They are rock because the name, ie character, of Christ is written on them. The features of Jerusalem's name that must be intended are "holy" (21:10) and "new". One is holy when one belongs to and is set apart for God. So there is no going out. The feature implied by "new" in Jerusalem and in Jesus' "own new name" is a disclosure of riches and wonder only half guessed by us.

TOO ROTTEN TO BE WICKED

## REVELATION 3:14-22

The cure for lukewarmness is to ask Christ to share every area of our lives.

THE LAST OF the seven churches, Laodicea, stands lower than any of the others, even than that of Sardis. Notice that it has neither false doctrine nor evil living. Its sin is that of Ephesus, but on a much worse level. Ephesus had loved, and its abandoning of its first love was visible to the human eye only by comparison with what it had once been. It is doubtful whether Laodicea had fallen, for it is doubtful whether it had had anything to fall from. To the purely superficial observer it probably seemed to be what it thought itself to be (3:17). That is why in the introduction, the unshakable validity of Christ's judgment is stressed. As the beginning, the ruler, of God's creation (3:14; see also Colossians 1:16ff.), he can judge both actions and motives accurately.

Both love and hatred make us sensitive to the views of others; self-satisfaction and lukewarmness lead us to ignore their judgments. The easiest way with such people is to leave them "to stew in their own juice," but love will rebuke, and where possible deflate (3:19). There are few things more painful than to be entertained out of a sense of duty, so we have the picture of the Lord waiting outside the life of the lukewarm believer (3:20). Though we are entirely justified in using this verse in appealing to those who have no living knowledge of Christ, we should not forget it was first said to those who claimed to be Christians. If we shut our eyes and ears to the fact that there are

many Christians who have no personal experience of Christ, we only deceive ourselves. God never accepts divided loyalty, and this lukewarmness is its result. True fellowship in this life must involve conquering, because we cannot involve Christ in our defeats; they are evidence of the lack of his presence. Conquest means quite simply that the fellowship begun in this life is continued in eternity (3:21). The one difference is that at this time he transforms the humble life and home that I offer him into his palace; he will then welcome me to his palace as one who will rule with him (see also 20:4,6).

THE THRONE OF GOD  
REVELATION 4:1-8

How should these verses affect our worship?

IT IS REASONABLY certain that the vision of God on his throne introduces us to a new chapter of his activity on earth, but our identification of that moment in time will not help us understand the vision better. The once widely held view that “Come up here” (4:1) refers to the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16f.) is based on an inferior text in 5:10, where the KJV has the first person, but ESV and NIV, correctly, the third.

“A throne” (4:2) is the symbol of rule (see also Isaiah 6:1). No more than in Isaiah chapter 6 or Ezekiel 1:26f. is there any attempt to describe God. The transparency (4:3) symbolizes inner purity. Perfection is indicated by the complete rainbow of one color, contrasted with the part rainbow with broken colors we see on earth. “The twenty-four elders” (4:4) are high angelic rulers; we meet this number elsewhere, eg 21:12-14, so they may be the guardians of the true Israel and the church. For the “lightning, voices, thunder” (4:5), see Exodus 20:18; Hebrews 12:18ff. Grace does not abolish law but puts it in its perfect context. “The seven spirits of God”: see 1:4. For “the sea of glass” (4:6), see Ezekiel 1:22-26; Exodus 24:10; it separates the purity of heaven from the sinfulness of earth. It is completely transparent for those who look down from there to us, but it dazzles us, hiding the glory from the eyes of sinful humanity.

The “four living creatures” are the four cherubim of Ezekiel 1:5-10; 10:15. It is immaterial that they are somewhat differently described, for the description is symbolic; see Ezekiel 41:18f., where they have only two faces. They are almost certainly also the seraphim (= the burning ones) of Isaiah 6:2, as is suggested by their song. They are the representatives of God’s earthly creation. The importance God attaches to it—not merely to humanity—is shown by their being the guardians of God’s throne, or, in the symbolism of the mercy seat, his throne itself. All biblical revelation is given to humanity for humanity, so we have God’s estimate of the home he made for humanity. If God became human on earth, how wonderful must humanity and humanity’s home be; if he died for humanity, how fallen must humanity be! Therefore, so that those who receive the revelation should not become proud, the song of the cherubim begins with the declaration of God’s holiness, his separation from sinful humanity.

THE BOOK OF THE FUTURE

REVELATION 4:9–5:5

If Jesus' victory is so great that he controls the future, cannot we trust him to direct our lives in the present?

FROM 4:9 IT IS clear that 4:8 is only a summary of the song of the living creatures. Since what follows primarily concerns the earth and the perfect working out of God's purposes for it, the distinctive feature of their song is thanks, in contrast to the worship of the elders; they worship in admiration, the living creatures in gratitude.

As the sequel shows, the "scroll" (5:1) is the book of the future. It is in God's "right hand" to show his control over it; it is written on both sides to show that no one can add to it, and it is sealed so that no one can bring it to pass before the time. We do not always sufficiently realize that Jesus Christ as the righteous and victorious Man has a special place in God's purposes. It is as Man that he is humanity's Savior and humanity's judge (John 5:27). Equally humanity's future history is entrusted into his hands. So, mysteriously, God allows the working out of his purposes to be linked with people. We are God's fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:9).

As early as Genesis 49:9, the lion is associated with the tribe of Judah, and traditionally the tribe used the lion on its standard. So when the conqueror is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (5:5), more than a contrast with the following "Lamb" (5:6) is intended. He is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Genesis 49:9 in a higher sense than Jacob can have foreseen.

“The Root of David”: see 22:16, where its meaning is made clear; it is probably based on Isaiah 11:10, quoted in Romans 15:12. David was considered to be the great glory of Judah, with the Messiah no more than a second David. John affirms that not only is Jesus greater than his ancestor David, but also that David’s greatness was entirely due to the will, planning and strength of his “Son,” whom he nevertheless called “Lord” (Mark 12:35-37).

WORTHY IS THE LAMB!

## REVELATION 5:6-14

Only one being can make sense of existence; only one is worthy enough to interpret life and history. That is why creation and heaven join in worshiping the Lamb.

THE LAMB STOOD “at the center of the throne” (NIV). He was not “among the elders” but in the middle of the circle formed by them and the living creatures (NIV). In other words, he occupied the central position even before he took the scroll. “With the marks of slaughter upon him” (NEB) is preferable to “as though it had been slain,” for it makes it clearer that sacrificial death is meant. The lexicons give no support to the sentimental tradition, that we should translate “little lamb.” The horn is a symbol of strength. In 12:3 and 13:1 the number of horns is linked with Daniel 7:7 and must be interpreted in the light of it. Here the number is clearly symbolic, the perfect number representing perfect strength, just as the “seven eyes” show perfect knowledge.

“The prayers of God’s people” (5:8, NIV) have such an inherent value, since they are a testimony to God’s salvation and power, that they can make the worship of heaven even sweeter. People admire ability and force; the key word in heaven is “worthy” (5:9,12).

In the dominant Greek philosophical thought of John’s day matter was not merely inferior to spirit but was positively a limitation on it, and therefore evil. Old Testament thought is radically opposed to this throughout. As soon

as the Hebrew Christian was squeezed out of the church, and the Old Testament was increasingly neglected, Christian theology was poisoned by this Greek concept. This earth was regarded as evil and destined to be destroyed once its purpose as a testing ground for humanity was accomplished. The true biblical concept was retained mainly by those regarded as sectarians or ignorant. We are told in Genesis 1:31 that God saw that all that he had made was very good. This creation has been partly marred by human sin, but to assume that this means its destruction is to affirm God's defeat, at least in one sphere. So in the worship of the Lamb we find the creation anticipating its deliverance (5:13; see also Romans 8:19-22). So, too, the elders see the goal of redemption in "they shall reign on earth" (5:10). This is equivalent to affirming that humanity will reach the original purpose of their creation, namely having dominion (Genesis 1:26,28). This thought is taken up again at the end of Revelation, which ends on earth and not in heaven, or which brings heaven down to earth rather than earth up to heaven.

## THE FOUR RIDERS

# REVELATION 6:1-8

In spite of everything we should have learnt about life, this world is still a troubled place and will remain so until Christ returns.

THERE ARE THREE basic principles in this section which must be grasped:

1. All four riders are essentially evil. Yet all four had been written beforehand in the scroll by God. The suffering of the world is not evidence of an imperfect control by God, or even of an imperfect witness by the church.
2. Nothing happens until the Lamb breaks the seals one by one. The development of human history is in the hand of Christ, and it is all working towards a predetermined end.
3. It is the living creatures, the cherubim, who call on the riders to appear. Although the outcome is suffering for the creation they represent, they welcome it because it means the approach of final deliverance for the world.

Whether or not a closer historical interpretation can be given to the four riders, it is clear that they primarily represent the four main aspects of war. War is the supreme evidence for humanity's fallen state and inner depravity, and so writers constantly try to justify and glamorize it more than most other evils. Its roots lie in covetousness, in the desire to possess what belongs to

others, and often in the instinct of self-preservation rooted in lack of trust in God. It always issues in theft on a grand scale with murder as its climax.

Traditionally the first rider is often interpreted as being Jesus Christ coming out on his conquest of the world by preaching the gospel. The mention of the bow, which is never used elsewhere as a Christian symbol, should have been a sufficient warning. In addition, symbolism has an inner cohesion, which is denied when we suggest that the rider is Christ at the moment when as Lamb he is opening the seals.

Part of the attraction of war is the repeated belief that an opportunity exists for an almost bloodless victory march. Very often those who yield to this temptation find that they succeed, and the world justifies them, for they seem to guarantee peace over a wide area. In fact, sooner or later, they cause only the bitterer hostilities, which are represented by the second rider. After bloodshed and pillage there follow shortage, rationing and hunger. Then it is only a short step to famine, plague and death, and the inrush of wild animals, over which humanity should rule.

THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS  
REVELATION 6:9-17

The response the martyrs receive to their call for vengeance tells them to remain patient. Is there a lesson for you there?

IT IS OFTEN very difficult to establish causal connections, to be sure which is cause and which is effect, or whether both alike are evidence of the depravity of the human heart. It is a fact of experience, however, that the breakdown of society, linked with war and the persecution of God's people, go hand in hand. So after we have seen the horrors of war, we are introduced to the sufferings of the saints.

Many interpretations of "the altar" (6:9) have been offered. It could be the golden altar of incense, which is not specifically mentioned until 8:3, but this does not explain why the souls of the martyrs are under it—note that the same word, "slain," is used for the Lamb in 5:6 (see also John 16:2). It is probably better to understand it as the earth, which has been sanctified to God by the blood of the martyrs from Abel onwards. The dwelling place of the dead is always pictured as under the earth. It is often said that Christ's second coming is delayed so that the total number of the elect may be gathered into the church. Here (6:11) the delay is so that the total of the martyrs may be complete! The "white robe" is a guarantee of the verdict, when they stand before Christ's judgment seat (see also 2 Timothy 4:8). It would be dangerous to draw conclusions from this passage about the amount the righteous dead know, but it certainly affirms their consciousness, as against

those who teach “soul sleep,” and that they are not yet in heaven, even if the altar mentioned is there.

The language of 6:12-14 was common in apocalyptic and eschatological literature. If we realize this, it will keep us from attributing scientifically impossible meanings to it. In general the pictures speak of the collapse and vanishing of all that seems fixed and stable in life. Nothing human can endure, if the “earthquake” is sufficiently strong; the “sun” and “moon” not merely give light but also fix the seasons (Genesis 1:14-18). The “stars” speak of God’s sustaining role (Isaiah 40:26; Psalm 147:4), and their vanishing is linked with the rolling up of the sky in Isaiah 34:4. Just as the “island” (6:14) seems to provide fixity in the midst of the stormy seas, so the “mountain” seems to be the most stable element in a changing landscape (see also Psalm 46:2; 121:1; Isaiah 54:10; Jeremiah 42:4). The “great ones” (6:15-17) recognize the disasters for what they are, for by that time the gospel has been preached to all nations (Matthew 24:14).

GOD KNOWS HIS OWN  
REVELATION 7:1-8

The 144,000 are not an elitist group; 14:3 interprets them as the redeemed.

THOUGH MOST EXPOSITORS who take this book seriously will regard this chapter as indubitably future, there are spiritual principles in it which are applicable to all times.

Daniel 7:2 explains 7:1 here. Long before Abraham, the term “the four corners of the earth” was used to imply universality. The “sea” is the lawless chaos of the nations, the “earth” is according to context either Palestine or the lands where God’s law is respected (see also 12:16), and the “trees” the rulers and leaders. The “winds” represent unrest and war. Repeatedly in Scripture we find a gap between the pronouncement of judgment and its fulfillment, between disaster as a warning and disaster as final. So it is here, but it is made clear (7:3) that the delay is less to give those who have had their warning time to repent and more to prepare those of the saints who are to pass through the intensified judgments to come. This preparation is not one of learning how to adopt a protective coloring, but the making obvious of their faith. The seal on their foreheads is where it cannot be hidden. Both seal and the sealed are apparently explained in 14:1.

In Revelation the distinction between true Israel and the victorious church is reduced to a minimum (see 4:4). So there is little point in arguing how the Israelite tribes are to be understood. We should probably interpret in the light

of 14:1. Of importance is that all God's chosen are represented, in full number, twelve, and in ample number, 12,000. The symbolic number does not suggest that each group must necessarily be equal.

Great play has sometimes been made with the fact that Dan is apparently not included. This is one of the pieces of "evidence" cited for the baseless theory that the Antichrist is to come from the tribe of Dan. In fact, it is strange that along with "Joseph" (7:8) "Manasseh" also (7:6) is mentioned and that apparently in an unnatural position. Dan and Naphtali are generally coupled together, so it is probable that in an early manuscript Dan was read as Man, which was then interpreted as an abbreviation for Manasseh.

THE TRIUMPHANT REDEEMED  
REVELATION 7:9-17

Our triumph on earth calls out the highest praise of God in heaven.

IN THE EARLIER part of this chapter we saw the people of God at a given moment, and their number seemed very small. But when they are seen as a whole, they are “a great multitude which no one could number” (7:9). There is no suggestion here that God’s sealing is a guarantee of physical protection. Because the church is the body of Christ here on earth, it has the privilege of sharing in his sufferings (see Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 3:12). Whatever the details of Christ’s second coming and the relation of the rapture to it (1 Thessalonians 4:17), it is a sad fact that for many the emphasis has been laid on the “fact” that believers are not to pass through the great tribulation. For some, at any rate, this emphasis has led to a shrinking from suffering and the regarding of persecution, when it has come, as strange. The sad fruits of this attitude can easily be seen.

The redeemed are apparently pictured as standing even nearer the throne than the elders and the living creatures. The “white robes” (7:9) are the victor’s dress, but it is due to Christ’s death that they are white. The “palm branch” takes the place of the olive or laurel crown of the winner in the Greek games, the change being almost certainly to link them with John 12:13, to show that their victory was through Jesus and by the same path as his. Their position is as it should be, for where Christ is, there should his people also be. The worship of 7:12 throws light on Ephesians 3:10, for

“principalities and powers” need be understood in a bad sense only where the context demands it. The wisdom, power and love of God are specially displayed by the triumph of the church by his grace in the midst of tribulation.

The “elder” (7:13) can teach us a lesson in communication; he knew that John did not know, but he did not force the information on him. By his question he gave John the possibility of asking—“Sir, you know” (7:14) is a polite question—and ensured his participation. With 7:15, see also 22:3f. We have the redeemed here as God’s kingdom, under his protection, and his priests (see also 1:6). There is an obvious reference to Psalm 23 here in 7:16-17. All that humanity experiences of God’s grace on earth is only a foretaste of heaven.

THE LAMB'S WORK IS FINISHED

## REVELATION 8:1-6

Among the virtues we must learn is patience. More harm is sometimes done through haste than slowness.

TODAY THERE IS growing agreement that chapters 4–20 should be divided into a number of approximately parallel sections (4:1–8:1; 8:2–11:19; 12:1–14:20; 15:1–16:21; 17:1–19:21). They start at varying points but all terminate at the point of Christ's return. If that is so, 8:1 comes at the end of the section that began with 4:1. When the seventh seal is broken, the silence shows that there is nothing more in the scroll. The glorified and victorious church has echoed the "It is finished" of its Lord. Nothing remains but for the Lamb to take up his power on earth. Even so he can wait; the Lord knows no haste in the fulfillment of his purposes.

With 8:2 we go back in time, probably to the fifth seal (6:9) and see the judgments of God in more detail. As was mentioned on 6:9, the golden "altar" (8:3) is a new feature. Hebrews 9:3f. tells us that it belonged to the Most Holy Place, ie this is a mere shadow of the heavenly reality. Incense has a double meaning. It is something that goes up, and so can represent prayer (5:8), but it also hides (Leviticus 16:12f.). So here it is something that hides God from humanity (Isaiah 6:4, "smoke"), symbolized by the veil of the tabernacle. This is a warning against taking symbolism as a sort of mathematical game in which, for the solver, two terms are interchangeable. If

it were so, it would be no more than a poetic device. The seven trumpets speak primarily of God's wrath on people from whom he is hidden.

In favor of a link with 6:9f. is the fact that the censer used for the offering of the prayers and incense is now used for the hurling of fire on the earth, prophetic of the woes to come. The fulfillment of the prayers of the martyred saints might seem a long time coming, but it was sure.

GOD TURNS THE WISDOM OF THE WISE TO FOLLY

## REVELATION 8:7-13

“If God wills” is not a pious formula, but a serious statement of fact. God has all the forces of nature at his command to stop us, if he wishes to.

THE ESSENTIALLY SYMBOLIC nature of the woes announced is seen most clearly in 8:12. A disaster to sun and moon would decrease the total quantity of light given or reflected by them. What it could not do would be to cause darkness for a third of the night and day. In fact one third, and similar proportions, are a regular feature of such prophecies (Zechariah 13:8f.; Ezekiel 5:2,12). Major, but not irreparable disaster is indicated. At the first God’s judgments are intended to be educational. It is only when they are ignored that they finally overwhelm humanity in disaster.

The reading “eagle” (8:13) is justified not merely by very strong manuscript support, but also by the impossibility of explaining its presence, if “angel” (KJV) had been original. It must symbolize war, and the sequel in chapter 9 supports this. That being so, we may infer that the sufferings under the first three trumpets were from natural catastrophes. The fourth probably represents the trouble caused by the failure of the leaders when faced with these things. Such people repeatedly seek to justify themselves by turning to war in the hope that the people will forget their failures when faced with greater perils.

There is undue willingness in certain circles to see in any disastrous natural phenomenon a sign of the near coming of Christ. It would be far better if we were to stress that they show most effectively the hollowness of humanity's claim to dominate nature. In many cases, they are also clearly a divine answer to the claim that humanity has everything under control, and so they do not need God, even if he exists. Politicians who believe that they are masters in their own house and need no divine guidance and help find these natural occurrences especially galling. They cannot humble themselves to confess there are forces completely outside their control.

AN INVASION OF DEMONS  
REVELATION 9:1-12

We read here of the torturing and destructive effects of demonic influence on humanity.

EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY the scourge here described with some known nation past or present have carried little conviction, but an application of symbolism may help us. The “star fallen from heaven” (9:1) will be as symbolic as in 8:12; in the light of 12:9, Luke 10:18, it may well be Satan that is meant. He does not possess the key to “the shaft of the Abyss” (NIV)—which is better than the rendering “bottomless pit,” which is probably justified neither by the Greek nor by common sense—it is given him, obviously by the Lamb. However much Satan may wish to wreck God’s work, he is the agent of his will (Job chapters 1–2).

Those that rise from the abyss are obviously demons, but the demon has seldom, if ever, power over nature as such—they are not to harm the grass or trees (9:4)—but over evildoers whom they enter and control. They cannot therefore hurt those with God’s seal. The predominant impression they create is of the beast—“horses” (9:7)—for the demon-possessed is always essentially subhuman, even where this is not immediately clear. He claims to rise above human limitations, therefore the “crown” (9:7). The reference to “women’s hair” (9:8) may be to remind us that the inrush of evil is almost always linked with an apparent glorification of sex, which always leads to its debasement. They are pictured as an army. There are many periods when evil

puts on the mask of goodness, even as Satan may appear as an angel of light, but there are others, and we are passing through one now, when evil is in embattled opposition to God. We find ourselves in the position of Ephesians 6:10-18, when we may be thankful, if we have been able to do no more than stand our ground. “Abaddon”: see Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Psalm 88:11; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20, means, like “Apollyon,” “destruction,” and is another name for death or Sheol. Demon influence tortures humanity first of all, and in the end destroys them.

Of special importance is the mention of “five months” (9:5,10). This is the first of numerous passages where a fixed number is mentioned. It is not the interpretation of the period that is important, but that we realize that the apparent triumph of evil is God-permitted and controlled, its very beginning and ending being fixed in advance.

EVIL LET LOOSE

## REVELATION 9:13-21

If our response is right in the face of calamity, we will repent. Are we humble enough to do so?

THE FORCES IN this section are as clearly demonic as in the previous one, though probably physical as well as spiritual warfare is intended. Here again there is an exact indication of time given, in this case of when the disaster is to break out (9:15). Its duration is governed by the time taken to accomplish their task. It should be noted that because the evil done seems to be physical rather than spiritual, there is no mention of God's people being spared (see also 9:4).

No explanation is given as to who "the four angels" (9:14) may be; that they are bound suggests that they are fallen ones; that they are four—see 7:1—may imply that they represent the fallen angels as a whole, and they may be the otherwise unexplained "cavalry" (9:16). The Euphrates (9:14) seems to play a symbolic part in biblical thinking. It served as a kind of symbolic frontier between civilization and barbarism. Civilization, the world, is on the one hand a gift of God (Romans 13:1), on the other it has been twisted by Satan and evil people into an obstacle to the advance of God's will and rule. So God has repeatedly allowed the stable world to be rocked to its foundations by the inrush of barbarism. Sometimes it has been like a tidal wave of barbarian destruction, which in due course has ebbed again. Sometimes their way has been prepared by propaganda, as with the inrush of

communism, which has often effectively destroyed all desire to resist. It should not be forgotten that human totalitarian systems seek to use Satan to drive out sin. We should be staggered if we could reckon how many lives have been lost through totalitarian systems of various kinds.

Whenever such judgments have come, the result has always been the same. People have never turned as a body from the worship of their false gods, and from their crimes, whether they are crude ones like those mentioned in 9:20f. or the rather more subtle ones of today. If anything, disaster is explained away by saying that the worship of these gods had not been thorough enough. “Sorceries” (9:21) is probably not a satisfactory rendering; it probably refers to drug traffic, either to murder or to create willingness to sin.

THE MYSTERY OF GOD DRAWS TO AN END

## REVELATION 10:1-11

When God teaches us, it is so that we may teach others.

IT IS GENERALLY agreed that there are two visions (10:1-11; 11:1-13:) which form a parenthesis before the blowing of the seventh trumpet in 11:15. So far as the former is concerned, there is no evidence that it should be fitted into the developing revelation, however this is understood. It is rather a message to the seer, returned for a moment to earth—the angel came down (10:1)—for if we respond to revelation we may expect more to be given us.

The identity of the “angel” (10:1) is immaterial. The various attributes, like cloud, rainbow, sun, are not to identify him with Christ, but are to make it clear that he is speaking with the authority of God. The “little scroll” (10:2) is not that of 5:1, but looks back to Ezekiel 2:9–3:3, and is John’s continuing message. It is smaller, because no one in his personal ministry can hope to do justice to every aspect of God’s revelation. The message concerned the people of God (“the land”) and the nations at large (“the sea”). “The seven thunders” (10:3) did not merely sound, they spoke (NIV). No indication of their nature or of what they said is given. They may have given revelation beyond what John had to reveal; we must confine ourselves to what God teaches us. On the other hand it may have been the opposition of apparently authoritative circles. We are not to record and so give longer life to voices that oppose God’s revelation.

The rendering of the KJV text in 10:6 (“there shall be time no longer”) is unfortunate; it has given rise to unprofitable theories about the timelessness of eternity and its consequent stagnation. God’s “mystery” (10:7), or “hidden purpose” (NEB), has been revealed, but our full understanding of it awaits the end of present history. The subtle difference between 10:10 and Ezekiel 3:3 should be noted. There is a bitter element in the gospel which cannot be eliminated without distorting it. It is a fragrance from death to death among those who are perishing (2 Corinthians 2:15f.). At the age he had reached, relaxation from his labors would have seemed natural for John. There is no doubt, however, that his Gospel and letters were written after this. Though John is called the apostle of love, he has some of the sternest and straightest language in the Bible about the lack of love and sin.

## GOD'S MESSENGERS

# REVELATION 11:1-14

Are you willing to be defeated for Jesus' sake?

NO PART OF Revelation has lent itself more to fanciful interpretations than this one, but we shall ignore them. No description of the measuring is given. It was no doubt performed in vision, for it seems to be a temple on earth, and that in Jerusalem had already been destroyed by Titus. The measuring is no doubt of the same nature as the sealing in 7:3, ie the guaranteeing of God's care, and the temple is God's people (see also Ephesians 2:19-22; 2 Corinthians 6:16); once again there is no need to distinguish between the church and the true Israel. There are no grounds for identifying it with the temple of 11:19. "The court outside" (11:2), the court of the Gentiles, represents all that mixed multitude which at most times is associated with the people of God (see Isaiah 1:12). For the "forty-two months" in 11:2, see 11:3; 12:6,14; 13:5; it is the same period as that in Daniel 7:25; 12:7. We need not doubt that there will be a fulfillment in a later day, when the time will be literally fulfilled, but it is also symbolic, for it represents half the great week of God's purposes, nor may we forget that in Daniel 9:24 we are dealing with a day equaling a year. God can allow his adversaries to have their way so long.

The "two witnesses" (11:3) are linked through 11:4 with Zechariah chapter 4, where they are Zerubbabel and Joshua. Without our ruling out the possibility of literal fulfillment, we should recognize that they speak to us of

due leadership in the people of God, who maintain its witness. The triumph of the beast (11:7) links with 13:7, where it is imperative that a wide meaning be found. We should note the short period of the beast's triumph compared to the length of the witness.

The same movement within a narrower and wider meaning is seen in the description of the city (11:8). While in its narrowest sense it refers to Jerusalem, the description "great city" asks us to look outward. Jerusalem is compared with Sodom in Isaiah 1:9f.; Ezekiel 16:46-56, but never with Egypt. What is true of apostate Jerusalem is true of apostate civilization generally. The disciples understood this (see Acts 4:25-27).

CHRIST IS KING!

## REVELATION 11:15-19

Here at last is the seventh trumpet: an acclamation that the kingdoms of the world are superseded by another kingdom, decisively and permanently.

WE NOW REACH the same point as 8:1. The apparent difference and even contradiction is due to the nature of symbolism. A symbol never claims to represent more than one aspect of the truth. Therefore two symbols may be used for the same event, which at first sight are incompatible. Silence (8:1) brought out the completion of Christ's work in the church. Here we have the response of the heavenly powers to it.

“The kingdom of the world” (11:15): better is “the sovereignty of the world” (NEB) or “the kingship of the world” (JBP). God has always ruled the world, but the majority of humanity have been in revolt against him. Since God willed to control the animal creation through humanity (Genesis 1:26–2:8; Psalm 8:5-8; Hebrews 2:5-9), humanity's revolt and fall mean that God's rule in the animal world is only partially discernible. At this point we see Philippians 2:10f. about to go into effect.

If we are to understand the frequent prosperity and well-being of the wicked—there are many exceptions; while Stalin died in his bed as an old man, Mussolini died by violence and Hitler by his own hand—we must grasp that the sufferings of this present time are seldom God's punishment, which awaits the final judgment. They are partly the sequel of broken law, but even

more God's effort to bring humanity to their senses. The sufferings that precede the coming of Christ, "the birth pangs of the Messiah" (Mark 13:8), which have been repeatedly foreshadowed in history, are intended to break humanity's will to resist, even though they do not necessarily bring them to faith.

"Your wrath" (11:18): God's wrath is essentially "the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10; see also 1 Thessalonians 5:9; Matthew 3:7); that is why the NEB renders well, "Thy day of retribution." It is revealed in mankind's sufferings and above all in their being "given up" (Romans 1:24,26,28), but all this is only a foretaste of what is to come, which finds its climax in the seven plagues (15:1). We should avoid replacing wrath by anger. There is normally an element of reaction to the wrong done to oneself in anger; in God's wrath there is merely the reaction to the wrong done to others. The climax of God's judgment is on "the destroyers of the earth" (11:18).

For the temple in heaven (11:19), see 15:5. Presumably we are to infer that the earthly tabernacle and temple are merely symbols of the heavenly reality seen in chapter 4.

SATAN AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

REVELATION 12:1-6

Birth pangs precede the coming of Jesus—but God’s will prevails over the dragon’s designs.

AGAIN A NEW section begins; “And” (12:1) is only the introduction common in Hebrew narrative. The measure of time (12:6) puts it before 11:3, but we cannot say more. Few passages of Scripture have given rise to more diverse interpretations, so the following must be regarded merely as an effort to take the symbolism seriously.

The section 12:1–14:5 is played out on three levels: the throne of God (Mount Zion), heaven and earth; they are to be understood of spiritual status, not of physical position (see also Ephesians 2:6). The sun, moon and stars link the woman with Israel (Genesis 37:9), to be understood, as elsewhere in Revelation, as the people of God. The “red dragon” (12:3) is identified with the devil (12:9). It is red because Satan is a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). The heads and horns are identical with those of the second beast (13:1); it is easier to explain them in the latter, so we may assume that Satan is pictured in this way to show that the second beast is a real reproduction on earth of Satan and his system. If in the first the diadems are on the heads, in the second on the horns, it shows that the sovereignty is only delegated in the second. In 12:4 we have an intensification of Daniel 8:10; here it probably refers to the seducing of many of the angelic host.

What of the “male child” (12:5)? The apparently obvious meaning is Jesus, but why should there be a reference back to his birth? In addition, 12:5 would be a strange summary of his earthly work. 2:26f.; 20:4 suggest that he personifies the conquerors, the true church within the church that claims the name (see also 14:1-5; Ephesians 5:27).

The woman is seen in heaven and on earth, ie the “wilderness” (12:6). This is the contrast between the people of God as seen by God, and in their humiliation as seen by humanity, as they are judged by God and people to be. When they are most despised by people, they are most in the place prepared by God for them, and where they will find God’s provision.

THE DEFEAT OF SATAN  
REVELATION 12:7-12

Christ's great and final victory on the cross means forgiveness of sins  
and power over our accuser.

POPULAR CHRISTIAN FANTASY, basing itself on this passage, Isaiah 14:12, etc, has pictured a war in which God's angels led by Michael threw Satan and his angels out of heaven long before the creation of humanity. There is no scriptural warrant for this, least of all in this passage. What is depicted is something within the range of events described by Revelation and affecting its readers (12:12). What is more, the defeat of Satan is merely symbolic, for the victory has been won by the conquerors within the church (12:11), so almost certainly confirming the interpretation given to the male child (12:5). Whether or not this scene has a still future application and climax, it has worked itself out throughout the history of the church. They had conquered Godward by their trust in Christ's death, and manward by their witness. Because in both directions they had renounced trust in what they did themselves, "they loved not their lives even unto death" (12:11). This must not be understood merely as a willingness to embrace a martyr's death, but also as a renunciation of success as the world inside and outside the church considers it.

By their victory they first of all shut the mouth of Satan (= the Accuser). As the image of Christ was formed in them (see also 2 Corinthians 3:18), they demonstrated to the world that Satan is not its ruler and that there is a

greater power than his, so depriving him of his place in human esteem. No doubt there will be a great, final demonstration of this, but it is something that has had to be worked out afresh in each new generation. The church is never in greater danger than when it is acclaimed by the world, for it may allow itself to be persuaded that there is some merit in it, and that there is something it can achieve. When the church allows its task and methods to be dictated by the world, it is the subtle recognition of the wisdom of Satan, prince of this world.

Perhaps the most important lesson of this section is that we must not look on the church merely as the sphere of salvation, but as that of God's continuing victory in Christ. The body of Christ is no mere empty metaphor but a living reality (see also Ephesians 1:22f.; 3:10; Colossians 1:24).

THE SAINTS ATTACKED

REVELATION 12:13-17

Keeping the commandments of God and witnessing go together.

WE HAVE TO distinguish between the willingness to suffer martyrdom (12:11) and the foolhardy challenging of death. Jesus himself commanded his disciples to flee to another city when they were persecuted (Matthew 10:23), implying that the message would be better spread that way. Here (12:14) we see the people of God going underground for the present time, something that has been more frequent and more fruitful than is often realized. The wings symbolize the speed at which it happens. There is always a danger, when the church becomes too anchored and hampered by physical things which restrict its mobility.

The symbolism in 12:15-16 is probably clear in general outline but difficult to apply in detail. The earth always stands symbolically for what is firm and steadfast, and therefore law-abiding. Sometimes, but hardly here, it represents Israel as the people under God's law. The water floods, whether the sea, or as here a river in spate, represent the nations in their lawlessness and rebellion against God. So the picture is of Satan loosing mob violence against the church, as he has so often done. Indeed, in every age action by the State against the church has often been based on popular demand. Here, however, the forces of law and order react against the mob violence and foil it. But as chapter 13 shows us, this merely means that subtlety is substituted for force by the enemy.

Satan changes his attack from the church as such to its members. The description of them (12:17) precludes any interpretation that they are those left behind at the rapture. They are surely the male child unrecognized in their humble state.

WAR ON THE SAINTS

## REVELATION 13:1-10

How does this passage put us on our guard?

IN DANIEL 7:3, four beasts come out of the sea. Here there is only one (13:1), but it combines the traits of the first three (13:2; see also Daniel 7:4-6), and as it develops, it shows another trait, its mouth, which links it with the fourth (13:5; Daniel 7:8,20); this is in any case shown by its horns (13:1; Daniel 7:7). As Daniel 7:17 makes clear, the beast is both a man and a system. It is in fact the summing up of an age-old system, which John calls the world, and of a line of people who have sought to rule in defiance of God's will. Its last stage is merely the climax of what has been all along.

It comes out of the sea (13:1), ie it is the product of humanity in rebellion against God; it is a beast, because humanity in revolt against God is subhuman. Even the mortally wounded head (13:3) is only a special case of a common phenomenon. Repeatedly in human history a system or ruler is saved when at the apparent point of death. This is regarded as proof of divine favor, and honor and validity are attributed which are in fact a worship of Satan.

Far more effective than mob violence against the believer is to embrace him in the all-competent, authoritarian state, which may pay lip service to God, but by its claims blasphemes him. The dragon may give the beast his power (13:2), but only God can allow it to make war on the saints and conquer them (13:7), and no doubt it is also God who gives it its authority

(see also Romans 13:1), though its length is strictly limited (13:5). From 13:7 we see that these principles are worldwide.

In Holy Communion we take the bread as symbol of Christ's body of humiliation, not of his glorified body. Similarly the church follows in the steps of his humiliation, even though it may enjoy hours of popular favor, as he did. Periodically, not only in the end time, the church knows the bitterness of apparent defeat and death. Only so can God separate the true from the false. Natural human sights are set on the present or immediate future, the spiritual person's on the end of the age, when Christ returns and true judgment is meted out (13:10; see also 14:16-20).

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

REVELATION 13:11-18

One of the Christian's greatest problems is to hold in balance subjection to the authorities with a rejection of the satanic powers that use them.

THE VERY FACT that the second beast rises out of "the earth" (13:11) suggests its nature. It represents every organization that claims to accept God's law, but is opposed to its spirit. Very much ingenuity has been used in interpreting the number of the beast (13:18), and some of the interpretations may have a limited validity. But "wisdom," and not a knowledge of Greek, or even Hebrew, is called for (13:18). The RSV is among the few translations that realizes that "the number of a man" is a false translation; "it is a human number," or the number of humanity. Seven is symbolically the perfect number, God's number; six is the number of humanity at their best. 666 is humanity at the climax of their achievement, but still falling short of the perfection of 777. The details of the vision are not so important as the realization that we have essentially the worship of humanity depicted, which is indirectly the worship of Satan, as lord of the world.

There are times when the killing of those who refuse to worship (13:15) is to be taken literally; sometimes no more than the squeezing out of the nonconformist is involved. The reference is not to ration cards, though these show how easily the vision can be carried out, but to the raising of human organizations, particularly those of the State, to complete power. There was a

time, when either by the inefficiency of the State machine, or by moving to virgin lands, people could opt out. Today this has become impossible, and it is merely a question of how much authority the State chooses to exert. The fact that in almost every land liberal, not necessarily Christian, people are alarmed by the growth of State power is a great cause for concern.

Perhaps our greatest danger is the belief that we extend our influence by increasing and strengthening our Christian organizations. However pure their doctrine, they are in danger of being caught up in the orbit of the second beast. One of the saddest lessons from the Communist and Nazi dictatorships is the way in which they were able to capture and, in great measure, use completely admirable church organizations.

THE CONQUERORS  
REVELATION 14:1-5

John is given a vision of the triumphant church.

THOUGH MOUNT ZION is repeatedly used as a symbol for God's throne among humanity, it is never so used for something future, separated from this earth; see especially Hebrews 12:22, which speaks of a present reality. It seems to be the symbolic expression here of Ephesians 2:6. We return to the "male child" and see what his being caught up to the throne of God really meant.

The conquering Christian lives on two planes simultaneously. One we saw in 13:7, but all the time the beast seemed to be triumphing he was in fact being conquered. The mention of the Father's name (14:1) is a reminder that it is possible to develop a worship of the purely earthly Jesus of Nazareth, which is as one-sided as the ignoring of his earthly life.

The literal rendering of 14:4, "These are they who did not defile themselves with women, for they are virgins" has led to a false exaltation of celibacy. Such an understanding assumes that the whole company is male, which is never otherwise suggested, and it commits the basic fault in interpreting a symbolic biblical passage literally. It also assumes that marriage causes some form of defilement. Over half the instances of the word groups of adultery and fornication in the Old Testament are applied to the worship of other gods, or to a conception of Jehovah which he refused to recognize, and that is surely the meaning here. In these days of overvaluing sex, every Christian should consider passages like Matthew 19:10-12; 1

Corinthians 7:7-8,25-26,32-35 prayerfully, but let us not forget that under other circumstances Paul commanded marriage (1 Timothy 5:14). Above all there is never any suggestion that celibacy increases a person's standing as a Christian; most of the apostles were married (1 Corinthians 9:5).

It should be specially noted that the evidence that they "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4) is that they do not lie (14:5). Lies are caused by two things, fear and pride, which cause personal desires to take the chief place. Both disappear in the presence of Christ; see also 21:8,27; 22:15.

This close contact with their Lord also enables them to understand him and the purposes of God better and more clearly. It is this that is implied by the "new song" (14:3) that others could not learn. Salvation does not depend on understanding God and what he has done in this way; scholarship will not teach it and spiritual exaltation will not give it. It comes from fellowship and obedience, and the two cannot really be separated.

GOD HAS THE LAST WORD

## REVELATION 14:6-13

To the very end, men and women have the opportunity to hear the gospel and turn back to God.

IT IS PROBABLY best to see in 14:6-20 the climax of the vision of 12:1–14:5, and its inevitable outcome. The Victorian period with its frills and knick-knacks loved complication, and so many saw in the “eternal gospel” (14:6) a special and different one for the world after the rapture of the church. Today we are learning that God’s greatness is seen above all in a simplicity too great for humanity to grasp. The expression of the gospel at any time takes on a special form, for it should always be adapted to the circumstances of the hearers, but essentially it is eternal and unchangeable. A preaching of the cross that neglects the eternal sovereignty of God is always less than the gospel.

Here in the face of the apparent triumph of the beast the abiding sovereignty of God is proclaimed. This is reinforced by the fall of “Babylon” (14:8), both ecclesiastical and commercial, which means the humbling of human pride. So then the third call is for mental and spiritual revolt against the enthrallment of the beast (14:9), which for so long had bedazzled people. True Christians do not and will not worship the beast. Those who have been misled and have worshiped him in ignorance are given the opportunity of repentance.

We tend to smile indulgently at the practice of “keeping up with the Joneses,” but we repeatedly fail to see what it hides. It puts what I have before what I am, and makes possessions the standard of judgment; it exalts the temporary above the eternal. It is the implicit rejection of all that Jesus’ life meant. When such people are faced with the realities of eternity, it means torment.

The last mile of the road, the last lap of the race, the last round of the fight, is always the hardest. The clear evidence that the systems of this world are breaking down and chaos is coming in will be the most taxing for the church. Even today, many feel that there should be rest rather than light at evening. It will be especially hard for those who die just as they think they can see the light of Christ’s return on the horizon. So there is a special word of encouragement for them (14:13).

THE HARVEST

REVELATION 14:14-20

If people choose to fight God, why should they be saved from the consequences?

THE GREAT DIFFERENCE between biblical religion and probably all others is its sense of final purpose. Islam and Mahayana Buddhism believe in a judgment after death, but neither sees any real purpose behind the world process. Equally, modern philosophies including Marxism and humanism may offer motives for what is considered good behavior, but they have no real goal for human history. For the Bible, human history is surely, if slowly, moving towards that moment when God's triumph will be obvious, not so much because he crushes opposition—if that were his purpose, he could and would have done so long ago—but because the harvest is ripe, and the difference between wheat and tares is finally obvious. His goal is that humanity should accept his will, and that this acceptance be seen as humanity's greatest good. "One like a son of man" (14:14): from the context it seems improbable that Jesus Christ is meant (see also Matthew 13:39,41,49).

If here the contrast is between grain and grapes, it is not a disparagement of the latter, or of the wine made from them—they can be used of the fruit borne by the Christian (John 15:2,5)—but because of the picture offered by the treading of the grapes in the winepress (19:15; Isaiah 63:3). "Outside the city" (14:20): normally a winepress would be outside the city walls. Here, however, "the city" is probably Jerusalem. This would link it with what is

normally called the battle of Armageddon (16:16), though this is in fact merely mentioned as the mustering place for the army. The vision deals with the results of active and deliberate opposition to God.

“The angel who has power over fire” (14:18): the Greek is “the fire.” Probably lightning is meant. This was regarded in the ancient world as peculiarly the expression of God’s power, and in its suddenness and devastating destruction still reminds humanity of our weakness and insignificance.

## THE SEVEN LAST PLAGUES

# REVELATION 15:1-8

If you say “No” often enough, God will take you at your word.

IN THIS CHAPTER we find ourselves at the same point in the development in God’s purposes as 7:9-17 and 19:1-10. The rapture of the church is past (14:14f.), and the grape harvest (14:17-20) is about to be reaped. We here see that the plagues are an interpretation of the treading out of the grapes. There are “seven plagues” (15:1): they are the full, perfect and final pouring out of God’s wrath. We shall be safe in assuming that they occupy very little time.

The “sea of glass” (15:2) is that of 4:6, but where it formerly merely dazzled the earth dwellers, now, once the church has gone, the signs of the imminent judgment (“fire”) are seen. The “harps of God” (15:2): better “harps given them by God” (NIV). “The song of Moses and ... of the Lamb” (15:3): as has been repeatedly said, John does not draw any clear distinction between the true Israel and the conquering church; here both are represented, and so the double song. Yet Israel can sing the song of the Lamb, for all the time it had looked forward to his coming, even if it had not recognized him, and the church can sing the song of Moses, for Christ is the completion of the Old Testament and of its hope (John 8:56). “The song of Moses” refers to Exodus 15:1-18. It matters little whether we read “King of the ages” (15:3) or “of the nations.” The song of triumph recognizes that God has not merely guided and ruled his people, but has guided (Amos 9:7) and overruled the

nations which did not accept him, as well as the ages to which human thinkers could give no meaning.

“The sanctuary of the tent of witness” (15:5): for the concept, see Hebrews 8:5. The angels have, like the Lord (1:13), their chests girded with golden girdles to show that they act as his representatives. The sanctuary was filled with smoke so that no one could enter (15:8), for those on whom the plagues were to fall had made their choice, and it was too late to repent.

THE FIRST THREE PLAGUES  
REVELATION 16:1-7

Humanity can achieve what is worthwhile only by God's permission.

SINCE ALL THE plagues are future, every attempt to give a definitive explanation to the symbolism is likely to fall short. Yet here, as elsewhere in the book, we will probably do better taking the details symbolically rather than literally.

We live in a time when most still try to keep a facade of respectability for their lives, and it is still possible for many in the public eye to hush up scandals until after their death. The minority who do not trouble about appearances nevertheless try to justify their actions by terms like freedom and self-expression and a brushing away of hypocrisy. Now, however, the reality of an evil life is to be made clear to all; the inner is to become visible.

One of the results of the gospel was very gradually to teach Christendom that violence was evil, and murder a unique sin. This recognition was always superficial; with the increasing rejection of the gospel, violence has become commonplace, and we find even Christian ministers advocating the use of violence to right wrongs. Murder has therefore become only one crime among many. With the removal of the church, murder and violence become the characteristic of the nation—"the sea" (16:3); in Old Testament thought "the blood of a dead man" means life violently taken.

Since "the angel of water" (16:5) approves of the third plague, it is clear that "the rivers and fountains of water" (16:4) are something good. In eastern

Mediterranean lands, water is the most important of the gifts of heaven and, except in Egypt, it comes through rain at the right time. So we should probably think of a breakdown of the great uniformities of nature (Genesis 8:22) and of God's generous providence (Matthew 5:45). It is a sign of human pride that so few today are any longer prepared to see the hand of God in drought and flood, storm and unseasonable weather. The picture of blood is taken from Exodus 7:17-21. Just as we can only infer the causes of the first plague in Egypt, so we must reserve judgment here; in both cases blood refers to the color, not composition, of the water. The first two plagues strike at human pride and the society humanity has created, the third at our boastful domination of nature.

When we hear "the altar cry" (16:7), we are fairly safe in interpreting it as of the earth as in 6:9. The Old Testament concept of the involvement of the soil in the life of those that live on it has been almost completely lost today.

KEEP AWAKE!

## REVELATION 16:8-16

Does your lifestyle show that you are prepared or unready for Christ's return?

SINCE NONE OF the other heavenly bodies is here mentioned with “the sun” (16:8), there is no reason why we should not take it literally. A very small rise in the sun's inner temperature could raise that of the earth to an almost unbearable level beside causing major natural disasters by the melting of glaciers and the polar ice caps.

The darkness over the beast's capital (Babylon?) and the heart of its kingdom is doubtless to be explained as in Exodus 10:21. Drought and great heat—nor may we exclude the possibility of volcanic action (16:18-19)—create the conditions for a major sandstorm. The result of these two plagues justify the grape harvest of judgment (14:17-20). Those who do not respond to God's love will not humble themselves before his judgments.

The Euphrates (16:12) seems to play a symbolic part in biblical thinking. It served as a kind of symbolic frontier between civilization and barbarism. Civilization, the world, is on the one hand a gift of God (Romans 13:1), on the other it has been twisted by Satan and evil people into an obstacle to the advance of God's will and rule. We are probably intended to see the breakdown of civilization under the inrush of the underprivileged peoples from all sides; not only the east is intended.

Faced with the breakdown of all that satanic deceit, human pride and religious self-confidence had created, the three beasts plan a supreme comeback. Since the war on the saints (13:7) is not to be understood literally, neither should that on God. Armageddon is named as the mustering place, not the battle ground. Since it is the largest plain in Palestine, it points to the size of the forces involved. There is no suggestion of an attack on Jerusalem; we must beware how we try to piece different prophecies into a tidy unity, as though they were bits of a jigsaw. The mustering is done by “demonic spirits” (16:14), so it seems that a supreme effort is being made to get humanity to renounce God.

In spite of their horror, the plagues are merely intensifications of what has already happened, just as the plagues on Egypt were of natural troubles that have often struck the land.

So Christian readers are warned that the judgments of God are at large in the land and so they must keep awake (16:15; see also 1 Thessalonians 5:2-8). The temple area was a fortress and Levitical troops used to be on duty at night. At an unpredictable hour the “captain of the temple” used to make his rounds. Should he find a sentry asleep, he took a torch from one of the escort and set his clothes on fire; with morning light his burnt appearance proclaimed to all his companions his failure in his duty (see also 1 John 2:28).

IT IS DONE!

## REVELATION 16:17-21

How far is this concept of the end a decisive part of your Christian worldview?

WE HAVE AGAIN reached the same point as 8:1; 11:15-19; 14:17-20. Though there is no connection, the fear shown by so many of nuclear disaster will show what the pouring of the last bowl “into the air” (16:17) means. Everywhere, with no nook or cranny left for safety, the wrath of God floats down on humanity, leaving nothing more to be awaited. With 16:18, read 8:5; if the divisions of the book suggested are correct, it is an intensification we are now dealing with, but it is one of the signs which justify us in thinking that God constantly causes humanity to experience foreshadowings of what is to be.

The meaning of the great city (16:19) see 11:8; 17:9,18. Though there is no reason why Jerusalem should not be included, it is most doubtful whether any exclusive reference to it is intended. The first two cities recorded in the Bible are Enoch (Genesis 4:17) and Babel (Genesis 11:4), and both were expressions of lack of trust in God (see also Hebrews 11:10). What is here being proclaimed is the complete destruction of humanity’s last line of defense against both God and chaos.

“Great Babylon” (16:19): though Babylon is not mentioned in Scripture between Genesis 11:9 (Babel is the Hebrew name for Bab-ili, which we render Babylon) and the days of Hezekiah, it had its own position in Hebrew

thought. Though it had little political importance between its capture by the Kassites in 1530 BC and its being made the capital of a Chaldean empire in 626 BC, it was the virtually undisputed commercial and religious capital of the Fertile Crescent. So it is the personification, so to speak, for the Bible, of humanity organized for financial profit, and of manmade religion in all its attractive sophistry. These are the two aspects which are dealt with in chapters 17 (religion) and 18 (commerce). If we compare Nahum and Habakkuk, we shall learn something of the different impression created by the pride and cruelty of Assyria and the corruption of human nature which the prophet saw in Babylon.

“Hailstones” (16:21): see Job 38:22f. For the inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean lands, it was a supreme sign that something was wrong with the world, when the rain which was the supreme blessing could become a threat to life and property as it was turned to ice. So hail was looked on supremely as a sign of divine intervention and anger; here it can be anything that carries that message.

BABYLON THE PROSTITUTE  
REVELATION 17:1-6

This staggering and shocking vision is a picture of the world in its true colors.

IT IS THE religious aspect of Babylon we are here considering. She is called “the great prostitute” (17:1) because false religion, like false sex, cheats; it gives only a counterfeit, never the reality. She is riding “a scarlet beast” (17:3), which is later clearly identified with that of 13:1, or sitting on “many waters” (17:1), rightly rendered “the ocean” (NEB), see also 17:15; Daniel 7:2, ie the nations. Here we have religion not as a political organization, but as exercising power through the State. This involves “the prostitute” in supporting the State; that is the price she must pay for power. Since God and the world are in irreconcilable conflict, religion must adopt the world’s values to retain its position. So she is seen in “a wilderness” (17:3); she kills true spiritual life.

When Marx said, “Religion is the opium of the people,” he probably did not know that he was repeating the maxim of one of the Cromwellian Levellers or Fifth Monarchy men. In its original sense it is true. Every religious system, to preserve its own existence, is tempted to preach obedience to something in addition to Christ. In the measure it does this it belongs to the prostitute. We may think that one system more than others is the prostitute, but John makes no effort to identify her. We may also think that for someone to belong to such a system automatically taints them.

Experience has shown that Christ leaves some of his choicest saints in such churches, that they may resist, often at great loss, the desire for power and the demand for obedience where it must not be given.

While it is the beast that persecutes, the impulse comes from the prostitute (see also 13:16, where the second beast is referred to that represents the religious side of persecution). The official world has normally very little fear of saints, for it knows that they have no longing to rule, no desire to seize power. It has been only when rulers have made themselves as gods, like the Roman emperors, or have claimed religious power they had no right to, like some Reformation monarchs, or virtually made a god of the State, like totalitarian systems, that the secular power has persecuted in its own interests. We are told the prostitute was “drunk” (17:6). That is one of the worst aspects of persecution. Once it starts, it seems to know no bounds; this is as true when it is done in the name of orthodoxy as in that of false teaching.

THE FATE OF THE PROSTITUTE  
REVELATION 17:7-18

In the midst of all the talk of worldly power, be encouraged in your stand for truth and uprightness (see 17:14).

JOHN TELLS US that when he saw the prostitute, “I was greatly astonished” (17:6, NIV). If it were not that we are so familiar with the existence of an official church, we should probably be so, too. At the time the Roman empire was turning itself into a god; it ignored religious faiths unless such a faith claimed first place above Rome, and then Rome persecuted it. So in that sense the beast “is not” (17:8). From the time of Constantine the new alliance began. Wherever European civilization has become dominant, in one way or another there has been an alliance between church and State. Even in the United States of America, where established religion is barred by the constitution, Christian churches still enjoy some privileges and respect.

Though Rome is not the only city to have been built on seven hills—the same is asserted of Jerusalem—there can be no doubt that it looms large in the picture, and we need not be surprised that for the Reformers the identification of the prostitute with the Roman Catholic Church was almost an article of faith. This is the more natural, if we remember that Constantinople (as later Moscow) had claimed to be the heir of Rome. In so symbolic a book we may, however, question an interpretation that may deflect attention from one’s own denomination. We have met seven before, and the hills are the symbol of stability. At all times the established church

has been the chief supporter of the establishment. The identification of the prostitute with organized society is seen in her being called “the great city” (17:18).

There is a tendency in some circles to link certain modern church groupings with the prostitute. All church groupings that aim at or exercise power fall into her orbit. So do the organizations set up to fight them. Every church organization seeking power and setting its own claims for loyalty has been so drawn.

In the end the beast tires of the prostitute and destroys her. This is a process that began with the French Revolution, if not earlier. It has been greatly advanced by the rise of Marxism and totalitarianism. Already politicians have little time for the pronouncements of church circles. The final overthrow of the prostitute, when the world will appear unmasked as unashamedly anti-God, will show that the end is very near.

## BABYLON THE GREAT

# REVELATION 18:1-8

As Christians we face the constant temptation to share the world's attitudes, values, standards and outlook. Here is a call to dissociate ourselves from the world and its actions while there is time.

HOW INEXTRICABLY THE prostitute church and human society are intertwined is shown by the difficulty in realizing that we have moved to another Babylon. The passage is shot through with memories of the prophets, eg Isaiah 13:21; 14:23; 34:11,13; Jeremiah 50:39; 51:37 for verse 2, and Jeremiah 50:15; 51:9; Isaiah 47:7-8; Zephaniah 2:13 for verses 6-7.

The call to come out of her, which shows that in 18:2 we have the “prophetic perfect tense,” ie what is about to happen is spoken of as though it has already occurred, is parallel to 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, which is quoted from Isaiah 52:11. It is to be noted that in none of the three cases is there any question of leaving some form of corrupt Christianity, whether doctrine or life is involved. Here it refers to the money-based commercial power system that dominates our society. In certain Christian circles a faith mission or “living by faith” implies a claim to be looking to God alone for daily needs. Though such an expression has no real biblical justification and can be very uncharitable towards some other Christian workers, it is a tacit recognition of the difficulty of refusing to conform to the present world system. It is almost always easier to separate oneself from what one deems to be incorrect churchmanship than to abandon the mutual benefit system of the world. The

call reflects the position in 13:16, and is addressed to those who by continued conformity risk their souls; coming out would preserve their souls even though it risked their bodies.

18:6 reminds us of Psalm 137:7-9. One of the achievements of Babylon is to hide from us the worst evils it commits. Even a press watchdog is apt to deal with evil facts as the cinema does with a hero lost in the African jungle. She may emerge in rags, but she looks as though she had just left the beauty parlor. Somehow the real evil in evil is normally eliminated before it reaches us in print and picture. On the other hand we have “selective condemnation,” where we see only those evils that are committed by those outside our political views and ideologies. The call of 18:4-8 reminds us that evil when seen by heaven is blacker. “To know all is to forgive all” is not one of God’s maxims!

**Thought** Lot was not the only righteous man that has lived in Sodom.

THE LAMENT OVER BABYLON  
REVELATION 18:9-19

We are to seek the things that are above, where Christ is.

THERE IS NO more honorable call open to man than to be a king, as the term was and should be understood, for the king should make God's rule real to his subjects. But few have been the kings who realized their high calling and so have gone down in history as "the Good." By most it was understood not as a call to serve but to be served (Mark 10:42-44). For them Babylon was the means by which they received the baubles their office brought them; therefore their lamentation (18:10).

The real losers are the merchants. We should read through their list carefully, weighing each item and asking ourselves how necessary it is (18:12-13). Few of the goods will pass the scrutiny of eternity, though some may make life easier and more pleasant. The list ends with "slaves." It does not matter whether we take "human souls" as a qualification (so ESV), or render "and the lives of men" (NEB). Commerce is bitterly condemned here and in the Old Testament, because normally it pays so little attention to the good of those involved in it. Today it is often merely a question whether human labor or machines are cheaper. This is not a condemnation of commerce, but of commerce as it has been twisted by the world. It is clear that God made the world in such a way that no individual or country can be completely autonomous. For modern life even giants like the USA are not

completely self-supporting. Perhaps the most telling condemnation of it is 1 Kings 10:22, with which see also 1 Kings 10:16-21,27.

The selfishness of the whole business is seen in the fact that kings, merchants and sailors alike think merely of what they have lost. There is no sign of sympathy with those who have perished, not even with those with whom they had personal business links. We need to put the person of Jesus Christ against this background and then read Matthew 6:25-34. Teaching, which seems idealistic and even impossible, becomes possible in the light of Christ and practical in the light of Babylon's end.

THE DOOM OF BABYLON

REVELATION 18:20-24

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

THE PRESENT WRITER considers it strange that many modern versions should have taken 18:20 as the close of the mariners' lament. If it were so, their sudden recognition of the role of heaven, and the justification of those who had lost their lives in or through Babylon would run counter to the whole trend of the chapter. Rather, 18:20 would seem to be John's own comment, showing his deep satisfaction. Whether we think of Babylon as a place or a system, as religious or commercial, there seems no reason why its judgment should anticipate the general judgment. It could have been swept away in the dust caused by the return (see Daniel 2:34f.).

There follows the symbolic sign of the doom of Babylon (18:21; see also Jeremiah 51:63f.). It should be noted that we are not told exactly how Babylon the prostitute and the city perish. The foretelling of Scripture is to enable us to recognize God's hand, when he brings his purpose to pass, not to enable us to flaunt our knowledge by being able to tell people exactly how things are to come about.

Just as the destruction of the prostitute is not something sudden like a bolt from the blue, so too, just at the time when international commerce seems to have reached its height, there are growing signs of its breaking down.

The prostitute offers humanity second-rate religion, the outward appearance without the inner reality. International commerce draws the world

closer together, not to create a true sense of family, but to make exploitation easier. True believers, by true fellowship with their Lord and sense of family and community, show up the hollowness of Babylon. That is one reason why true believers are hated and persecuted.

JOY IN HEAVEN

## REVELATION 19:1-5

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

WE ARE ACCUSTOMED to think of joy in heaven over a sinner who repents. Here it is ultimately over those who will never be able to repent. This may seem frightful, until we remember that it is over those who made it so hard for others to believe, those who fought to the last against the truth, those who were the incarnation of Satan's hatred even as the church is of Christ's love. In addition, Christ in his judgment of the great white throne can discriminate between those who had sold themselves to satanic powers for gain and power, and those deluded ones who were swept along by the current of the age.

The NIV does well to render "the roar of a great multitude" (19:1); it reverberates like peals of thunder (see also 19:6). "The smoke from her" (19:3): for mortal minds it is as difficult to conceive of perfect sinless bliss as of utter, inexorably just condemnation. Therefore both are described in purely symbolic language, which should always be treated as such. The best chapter to study the symbolic language of judgment is probably Isaiah 34. In Isaiah 34:1-4 we have universal judgment involving even the heavenly bodies (but are they rulers?); the earth is strewn with corpses and the mountains flow with blood. In Isaiah 34:5 the general judgment is particularized by Edom, and in Isaiah 34:6-7 we have the soil manured with fat and blood. In Isaiah 34:8-10 we have it as active volcanic waste, but in Isaiah 34:11-17 it is

inhabited by animals, real and mythological, that do not live among pitch and brimstone. From this we should grasp that we do not have any unitary picture of judgment; we are allowed to judge its reality by the putting together of mutually incompatible pictures which give some idea of the awefulness of God's judgment. The picture of smoke continually rising (19:3; see also 18:18; Isaiah 34:10) is taken from Genesis 19:28, so linking the destruction of Babylon with that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB  
REVELATION 19:6-10

Just as a bride belongs wholly and exclusively to her husband, so the church will finally be made what it should be: wholly Christ's.

THE CONCEPT OF Israel as the wife of Jehovah is at least as old as Hosea, and figures prominently in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as well as the second half of Isaiah. The thought behind it is partly that of God's love, partly of his covenant loyalty, partly that Israel by representing Jehovah "completes" him upon earth. The concept was then taken over by the church, especially as Christ the Messiah-King, and a king must have a people. When that people was thought of as expressing his character, the picture of the vine and branches was used (John 15:1-8), the fruit being the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f.).

When the church is looked on as serving and representing Christ, it is called his body. When the fellowship between the church and its Savior is emphasized, then it is his wife (Ephesians 5:21-33; this passage shows that there is no contradiction between the pictures of body and wife). Since engagement in Israel was equivalent to marriage, the church can be called the wife of Christ now, but the fullness awaits the victory of Christ through the church.

One of the loveliest pictures in the New Testament is "the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). The picture evoked is of a great loom in heaven; every righteous deed, ie every act produced by our being counted

righteous in Christ, is carried up to the angel weaver, who incorporates it in the material of the wedding dress, designed to bring glory to the Bridegroom, not the bride.

Needless discussion has raged around “Blessed are those who are invited” (19:9; see also Matthew 25:1-13). By its nature, symbolism is never the complete expression of truth. Terms like body and wife refer to the corporate church, local or universal, and not to the individual. In symbolic language, therefore, we can have the wedding feast and yet those who compose the wife, the conquerors, invited to it.

“For testimony to Jesus is the spirit that inspires prophets” (19:10, NEB, margin) seems to give the meaning best. The angel refused to let his testimony bring him worship, ie honor. Wherever the prophet brings honor to himself instead of Jesus, his message is not from God. The interpreter of prophecy who draws attention to others than Jesus, or to himself by his cleverness, has lost his way.

THE VICTORIOUS WORD OF GOD

REVELATION 19:11-21

The picture we are shown here of Christ is one of radiant purity, divine power and unrivaled sovereignty.

THE WORD OF God, a title hinted at in 1:2,16 and given in John 1:1, comes victoriously (19:13). Jesus Christ has been the perfect expression and performer of God's will from beginning to end. The only weapon mentioned is his sword (19:21), which is his words; a similar concept is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. If there is war at all in this passage, it is spiritual and not physical. In fact it is questionable whether there is war at all. How can any stand against the unveiled glory of Christ?

“A white horse” (19:11): the sign of the conqueror (see also 6:2). “Faithful and True,” ie trustworthy and dependable. “Like a flame of fire” (19:12; see also 1:14). “Many diadems,” in contrast to the seven (12:3) and ten (13:1); all authority is Christ's. The name known only to himself (19:12) probably refers to the widespread superstition in antiquity that knowledge of a person's or god's name can give power over them; no one can control the Lord, and there is no formula of words that can force him to do our bidding. “Dipped in blood” (19:13): not “sprinkled with” as in the margin. Sprinkling was for cleansing from sin; here it is his own blood and replaces “as though he had been slain” in the description of the Lamb (5:6). “The armies of heaven” (19:14): this is a victory parade. “Winepress” (19:15): see 14:19. “His thigh” (19:16): this probably means his girdle.

The call of the angel (19:17) does not invalidate the earlier comment about the absence of fighting. The symbolism of war is carried on throughout. The enemies of Christ are destroyed that they may await the general resurrection. If the beast and the false prophet are treated differently, it is because they are systems and not merely people (see also 20:14, where death and Hades are also so treated). This should warn us against dogmatism in our understanding of “the lake of fire” (19:20). The picture is symbolic, but that does not entitle us to strip it of meaning. Symbolism always expresses less than the whole truth. The modern reaction against the crudities of the medieval concept of hell should merely be a challenge to us to envisage something worse and more tragic for those who find their eternal destiny there.

THE THOUSAND YEARS  
REVELATION 20:1-6

Whatever our interpretation of the thousand years, Christ will finally be shown to be Lord over all. Evil will be put down. All resistance will be quelled. Christ will be triumphant.

THERE IS ALWAYS a strong temptation for theologians to try to avoid the obvious teaching of symbolism, if it does not fit in with their theories. Now that so much more is known of Talmudic and Intertestamental Jewish writings, it is beyond dispute that John is referring to the “days of the Messiah,” the period which links this age with the world to come. Any other interpretation would force on the prophecy a meaning its first hearers could not have understood.

Two interpretations seem compatible with this. One claims that the triumph of Christ in 19:11-21 is purely spiritual and that it is followed by a long period of the triumphant church bringing blessing to the world before the final revolt and the return of Christ in judgment. The fact that Augustine, and after him most in the medieval church, thought that they had already entered the millennium (thousand years) does not invalidate this interpretation. The other is that 19:11-21 shows the return of Christ, and that the millennium follows it, the world being in some way under the personal rule of Christ. This view has more difficulties in it than its supporters often realize, but it certainly fits the evidence of the New Testament better.

Rightly understood the two views are not so far apart as is often thought. Both should see Christ's triumph through the church, and both should look to the future for its open revelation.

The purpose of the long history of God's dealings with humanity is to make them realize that only through complete trust in and obedience to God can there be true blessing. The final lesson that we have to learn is that the root of the trouble is in us and not outside; so Satan, having been defeated, is for the time being rendered incapable of doing his work.

While there is not much about "the first resurrection" (20:5) in the New Testament, it is undoubtedly there. It is implied in Luke 14:14 and probably in 1 Corinthians 15:23; it is stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and probably in the Greek of Philippians 3:11. Since all resurrection is the outcome of Christ's, the New Testament avoids giving the impression that the earlier resurrection of the conquerors is in any way a result of their own merits. The nature of the "judgment" (20:4) is not specified, but there is no indication that it has anything to do with the dead. There is, however, no suggestion of sinlessness during the millennium.

## THE FINAL JUDGMENT

# REVELATION 20:7-15

Everyone will have to give account of their lives to God. That is why it is important that we trust Christ here and now.

ORGANIZED EVIL AND opposition to God need a leader, and so Satan is released to show that essentially humanity has not changed. Gog and Magog, see Ezekiel 38:2-3, seem to represent all those peoples who have been on the fringe of civilization and therefore only marginally involved with the beast. The use of “camp” (20:9) may be an indication that even the millennium is not the final goal of the church (see Hebrews 11:10; Revelation 21:2); the JBP translation “the army of the saints defending the beloved city” is worthy of consideration. It is striking how little is told us of the millennium.

The One who sits on the “great white throne” (20:11) is presumably Jesus Christ (see also John 5:22,27). The throne represents rule, and white purity. Faced by it, even material creation cannot abide it; 21:1 makes clear, however, that there is no thought of the abolition of the world. The “books” (20:12; see also Daniel 7:10) are no doubt the record of human history, though we should hesitate to take them literally. We should remember that this is genuine judgment, not merely a parade for condemnation, though there are those who appear only to hear the sentence (see John 3:18). The books give evidence of the person’s life and character, but the verdict is based on “the book of life”; in other words, acquittal is by grace. The idea that the book of life is opened merely to show that a person’s name is not there is

almost blasphemous. We may be certain that the hardened Jew (Romans 11:25), the Gentile who has never heard, and all those who have seen and heard only perversions of the gospel, will be treated accordingly. We can accept without hesitation that the Judge, who was the sin offering for all humanity, will say to some, “Your life shows that if you had heard, or heard properly, you would have believed.” We may imagine some of those who had never heard falling at his feet in adoration, as they recognize the One they had always longed for. We are not entitled to think that Satan will have the satisfaction of drawing the bulk of humanity with him to hell. We know that some will be lost; our estimate of how many will be saved is likely to depend on our estimate of the power and love of God.

“The second death” (20:14): it might be better if we were to use this term rather than hell. Death is something that makes it impossible for humanity to accomplish their dreams and God’s will. As people stand before the great white throne they know what they are and what they have missed, but there remains no hope of ever changing or achieving.

GOD WITH HUMANITY

## REVELATION 21:1-8

Remember that you can be made new!

“A NEW HEAVEN” (21:1): this is the same word as in 20:11; it is the sky and not God’s home that is meant. The word for new in Greek implies that there is some link with the old, just as there is between our resurrection bodies and those that now are. The “new Jerusalem” is the wife of the Lamb (21:9), ie the glorified church. Contrary to popular opinion the age to come does not see the abolition of this creation in favor of heaven—that is a legacy of Greek thought with its despising of the material—but its transformation through its being linked with heaven by the glorified church. “With man” (21:3): not the church but the new nations (21:24). It is likely that we should translate 21:3 as “God-with-them shall himself be their God” (NEB, margin), ie we have finally the complete fulfillment of the promise of Isaiah 7:14.

In this section of Revelation we do not merely have a picture of the future, for the Bible is never interested in the future merely as future, but in its bearing on our lives in the present. So repeatedly there is a message addressed to the reader, eg 21:5-8: “Trustworthy and true” (21:5) the same as the name in 19:11—as the speaker, so his words. “It is done” (21:6); what John had seen was not to find its fulfillment until many centuries had rolled by, but since God is the Creator and Sustainer from beginning to end, his decree would bring the vision to certain fruition.

Those who are finally to enjoy these things must be like Christ (1 John 3:2) and be God's children because they have been transformed into the image of the Son of God. Exclusion is due to lack of Christlikeness. The sins mentioned fall into three categories. Liars (see also 14:5), cowards, faithless persons (ie those who having no faith in God cannot be trusted) are those who fear other people rather than God, and who place the judgment of others above that of God. The murderers and sexually immoral destroy lives now and children who have not yet been conceived. Then there are the idolaters, those who would make God in their own image, and the sorcerers, those who seek to twist God round their own will by magic of all kinds; such people are polluted, for they have no interest in the cleansing that only God can offer.

## THE NEW JERUSALEM

# REVELATION 21:9-21

Here we consider the future state of the church seen as a bride and a city.

IT HAS ALREADY been pointed out that we are dealing with the glorified church (21:9). If the gates have the names of “the twelve tribes” (21:12), and the foundations those of “the twelve apostles” (21:14), it means that the true Israel and the victorious church, whose essential unity has been assumed throughout the book, have now coalesced, though we are not told how. Those who speak of a heavenly calling for the church and an earthly one for the Jew are correct only on a short-term view.

“Twelve thousand stadia” are about 1,500 miles. A perfect cube (21:16) of such dimensions makes no practical sense, especially if it has a wall only “144 cubits” (21:17), ie 216 feet, high. We can, however, interpret it in terms of Ezekiel 40:2 and see a pyramid-shaped mountain. But instead of there being a relatively small temple on the summit, the city, which received only passing notice in Ezekiel 48:30-35 (note the twelve gates), has now filled the mountain; see also Daniel 2:35; Isaiah 11:9. The measurements are, of course, as symbolic as the city itself. Spurgeon in one of his lectures made fun of the literalist by calculating the size of the oyster needed to produce “a pearl” (21:21) large enough to form a city gate, and speculated on the kind of sea needed to grow such an oyster. Those used to abstract or poetic thought

can be satisfied with “having the glory of God” (21:11), but for the more primitive or childlike mind this has to be expressed in material terms.

Eight of the precious stones in 21:19f. are found in the standard Greek translation of Exodus 28:17-20, though not in this order. It is a safe guess then that they are meant to be the twelve stones of the breastplate of judgment, the Greek version available to John using other names in the missing positions. If this is so, any symbolic meaning in the stones must be sought in their Old Testament significance. The walls are founded on judgment, but also on the love and thought of God, for the breastplate was worn over Aaron’s heart. Yet the values of the city are not those of this world, for gold, for which many people will sell their souls, is of no more value than to be used as a paving material to be trodden underfoot.

I SAW NO TEMPLE THERE

## REVELATION 21:22–22:5

The life of eternity begins here on earth.

WE THINK OF a temple normally as a place where people worship God. In fact, both with the tabernacle and the temple the real purpose was to separate the worshipers from God. Only the high priest could come one day each year into the Most Holy Place with its cherub throne for God; only priests were allowed in the Holy Place when they were carrying out their duties. The ceremonially clean Israelite man could come into the court of the tabernacle and the inner court of the temple only as he brought his sacrifices. In the tabernacle court there was no room for the woman or the man without a sacrifice. In the temple John had known, the Court of the Israelite, the Courts of the Women and of the Gentiles had decreasing stages of sanctity, but in the strictest sense they were not part of the sanctuary. The reason for the separation was to keep apart divine holiness and human sin. Already Jeremiah foresaw the day when Jerusalem, not the ark, would “be called the throne of the Lord” (Jeremiah 3:17). Now the vision is fulfilled. Sin has gone, so the dividing walls have, too (21:22).

“Night shall be no more” (21:25; 22:5); physical conditions under the conditions of eternity are unknowable. Once again we have symbolism, where night and darkness represent evil, sin and absence of God (see also John 1:5; 1 John 1:5), even as the sea in 21:1 is once again lawlessness.

One of the great weaknesses of traditional theology is that it tends to overlook in practice the universality of atonement and makes the church the only sphere of salvation. Yet we have “the nations ... and the kings of the earth” (21:24) in addition to the city, ie the church. Among them there is not perfection, for unlike the church they need “healing” (22:2) even in eternity.

We are given three aspects of the eternal state. “His servants,” literally slaves, “shall worship him” (22:3); neither the Christian’s title nor occupation (see Romans 12:1) has changed, only the degree of perfection. “They shall see his face” (22:4): though we now see in a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), the fellowship implied has already begun. “His name shall be on their foreheads”: this awaits Christ’s coming (1 John 3:2), but the process of transformation is already going on (2 Corinthians 3:18; see also 14:1).

“I AM COMING SOON”

## REVELATION 22:6-15

The decisions we have made about God and his goodness will be confirmed and made permanent.

FOR 22:6:, SEE 19:11; 21:5. We meet a crux in interpretation in 22:6-7; “what must soon take place ... I am coming soon,” see also 3:11; 22:20. It is increasingly being claimed that the apostles were mistaken about Christ’s teaching on his return, or even that they projected their own ideas into his teaching. It is therefore suggested that we do not need to take seriously the New Testament teaching on Christ’s second coming. The one answer we may not give is that the time measure used is God’s: see 2 Peter 3:8. The answer lies in another direction. If our explanation has achieved its purpose, it will have made clear the timelessness of so much in Revelation, so that people were justified in thinking that its prophecies were going into effect in their day. It is not important when Christ comes but that he comes, and that there has never been a time since the destruction of Jerusalem when he could not have come. It is our attitude to the coming that matters (see also 2 Timothy 4:8) and we are meant to be on the watch.

“I fell down to worship” (22:8; see also 19:10): the Greek word is used of any act of profound respect, especially prostration, to high-ranking people as well as gods. It is therefore used frequently in the New Testament in settings where “worship” is misleading. John, the Jew, could never have thought of worshipping an angel. It is his extreme respect that is being rejected. Those

entrusted with the word are apt to expect undue honor from people (see John 5:43f.).

In 22:11 we have neither indifference to human salvation, nor a suggestion that there is no hope for those mentioned. Those who have taken in the warnings of “this book” (22:10) and have gone their way unchanged have little hope of changing. While we may not exclude hope so long as there is life, we should have little for those who have repeatedly heard and repeatedly rejected. Theoretically “the gates” should come before “the tree of life” (22:14), but since both are pictures of Christ, it represents the normal order. Those who practice falsehood will come to love it (22:15). “The dogs”: see Matthew 7:6; Philippians 3:2, a description often applied by the Jews to the pagans. It refers to the person without a sense of values or morals: the dog was the scavenger of the ancient city.

COME, LORD JESUS!

## REVELATION 22:16-21

The awaiting church tingles with anticipation at the appearance of the bright morning star. How may we best prepare for that day and speed its coming?

FOR “THE ROOT and the offspring of David” (22:16), see 5:5. While we are used to think of the Old Testament as being summed up in Jesus Christ, we must never forget that it is also the unfolding of his will. “The bright morning star”: two lines of thought converge here. He is the star of Numbers 24:17, proclaimed by the star of Matthew 2:2. He is also the abiding hope as the night grows long, declaring that dawn cannot be far off.

It is normal to take “Come” (22:17) as a call to Christ, as in 22:20. In the context, however, it is more likely to be the appeal to those outside. Day has not yet come, so while the daystar is yet to be seen, the continued appeal goes out.

For anyone to add to or subtract from the Scriptures is a spiritually daring act for which a person will have to give account in the judgment. But that is not the point of 22:18-19, which refer only to Revelation. In looking at the world around us it is easy for those with a reputation as prophetic experts to convince themselves that they are witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy and so quietly to twist it slightly to prove their thesis. On the other hand, passages that do not suit it can be quietly ignored. It is this way of treating prophecy that has brought it into such disrepute.

For those who live where people have not defiled the world, it can be very beautiful. Humanity has created much which must arouse our admiration and regard in art, music, architecture and literature, though part of our handiwork suggests hell rather than heaven for its place of origin. Married love and the family are such that God is willing to use their language to express his relationship to his people. But over the best there lies the shadow of death, reminding us that sin has left its mark on all. Once the light of Christ's second coming falls on the scene around us, it is like the traditional transformation scene in a pantomime, where all relationships are changed. Revelation has showed us that beauty and ease for Christians are merely the calm at the center of the cyclone, while the attractiveness of the world hides the corruption beneath. So the heart cries longingly, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

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Robert F. Hicks  
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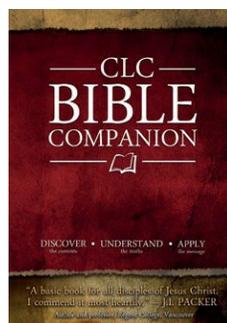
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