

STUDY 9

SECOND EXHORTATION AND WARNING

HEBREWS 3:7 – 4:1

EXPOSITION

We now come to the second warning section, which arises naturally from the first (which we find in 2:1-4). The problem, as always, was that there were those in the Hebrew Christian congregations who professed faith in Christ, but were putting up barriers to any further involvement, and were quietly slipping away.

THE WARNING PASSAGES

The first question we are prompted by the writer to ask is: 'Are they really saved?' '**... how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation.**' (Hebrews 2:3) How can Christians be assured that after years of professing Christ they will not fall away at the end? Our writer, throughout his letter, says that all will be well if we believe in Christ and obey his words and commands.

Here in 3:7 – 4:1, we have a further development of that thought. Not only must we be willing to receive Christ as Saviour, and listen to his words and commands, but we must also be willing to obey them. The cure for any spiritual backsliding is a willingness to obey the commands of Christ. Here is an extract from one very well-known hymn from among the 100 written by an American Pastor:

**When we walk with the Lord
In the light of his word,
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.**

***Trust and obey!
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.***

**But we never can prove
The delights of his love,
Until all on the altar we lay,
For the favour he shows
And the joy he bestows
Are for them who will trust and obey.**

**Then in fellowship sweet
We will sit at his feet,
Or we'll walk by his side in the way;
What he says we will do,
Where he sends we will go,
Never fear, only trust and obey.**

John Henry Sammis (1846-1919)

The opening word **'therefore'** (7) points us back to the faithful and obedient service of Moses in God's household, and a reminder that Christ was the head of that house (3:5-6), as he is also the head of his Church.

In comparison with the unfaithful members of Moses' house (the nation of Israel), we must necessarily compare ourselves. How do we stand today in regard to our commitment to Christ and his Church?

We find some alarming phrases in this section:

'Do not harden your hearts' (8)

'...in the rebellion' (8)

'Therefore I was angry' (10)

'So I swore in my wrath' (11)

'...an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God' (12)

'...hardened through the deceitfulness of sin' (13)

'...could not enter in because of unbelief.' (19)

This is hardly the language to use of God's own dear children for whom Christ died on the cross and shed his blood to redeem them!

This section is really a little sermon based on Psalm 95:7-11. It points out the danger of falling away from the faith by neglecting to heed the voice of the Holy Spirit (7), and refusing God's rightful authority (7-8). The application of such words to today is obvious. Do we not have people in our churches who are falling away? Do we not today observe spiritual stubbornness and a refusal to obey the commands of Christ? Do we not lament the lack of Christians who live all-out for Jesus Christ?

In this sermon, we have an introduction, a conclusion, and three points in between.

1. The introduction (6)

Being in God's house makes us responsible for accepting the authority of Christ over the Church, and, therefore, over our lives – **'... whose house we are if we hold fast the**

confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.' There is great perseverance involved here. John Owen, the Puritan preacher, declared: **'... the principle evidence of truth and sincerity of [a profession of faith] is to be taken from its endurance unto the end.'**

Commenting on the **'Therefore'** of verse 7, John Owen continues: **'That is, seeing the Lord Jesus, who is the author of the gospel, is, in his office as an apostle, preferred far above Moses, let us consider what duty is laid upon us, especially how careful and watchful we ought to be, that we should not by any means be diverted or turned aside from that obedience which he requires, and which on all accounts is due to him.'**

2. The long quotation from Psalm 95:7-11 (7-11)

'...as the Holy Spirit says:

**Today, if you will hear his voice,
Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
In the day of trial in the wilderness,
Where your fathers tested me, proved me,
And saw my works forty years.
Therefore I was angry with that generation,
And said, "They always go astray in their heart,
And they have not known my ways."
So I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."**

3. A brief exposition of these verses (12-14)

Verse 12 – are you a real Christian, or are you a deserter in your heart? **'Beware, brothers, lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.'** Just as Israel, during the wilderness wandering, departed (the Greek word is 'became apostate') from God by rebelling against him, so we need to check our own hearts that we are not following in the same path. What a sorry tale when we read that Israel:

- fell into immorality and idolatry
(Exodus 32:1-9)
- lusted for meat when they had manna
(Numbers 11:13-35)
- rejected the leadership of Moses (Numbers 27:14)
- refused the good advice of the spies
(Numbers 13:32 – 14:4)

- and sadly, many more such incidents!

If you preach on this passage in Hebrews, you could raise doubts in the minds of your hearers. They may well ask, 'Can, then, a true believer lose his salvation? Can he become an apostate, and fall away from the living God?' Indeed not! God does not lose his own. Jesus said, **'And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand.'** (John 10:28-29)

We may backslide, but the warning of the terrible example of Israel, and what God did to them, should bring us back to him.

Verse 13: **'...but exhort one another daily, while it is called "today", lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.'** There are two dispensations for those who profess Christ – time and eternity. In time, there is grace and salvation for all who believe. In heaven, salvation is only for those who are in Christ. Their state in time will determine their state in eternity. So, beware of the deceit of the enemy, and refuse to listen to him.

Verse 14: the mark of a true Christian is that he will continue to stand for Christ. He will continue faithful to the end; he will persevere. God will keep him to the very end, unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, of whom all died in unbelief except Joshua and Caleb. **'For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said, Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'** (15)

4. Three questions we must ask (16-18)

The **first** question is this: Who was it that heard God's voice, but rebelled? (16)
'For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt led by Moses?'

They had been delivered from Egypt by the hand of God. They had seen mighty wonders. Why should they rebel against the Lord who had delivered them? They hardened their hearts against him in sin. Thus they provoked God to wrath.

The **second** question is this: Why was God provoked against them? (17)

'Now with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?'

They became habitually disposed to sin. And that is the mark of an unbeliever. They proved by their behaviour that they were not God's children because they were neither able to acknowledge their sin, nor do anything about it. They went on sinning, for they possessed no true spiritual nature. Therefore, they continually fell into sin, and God buried them in the sands of the desert without seeing the end of their journey.

The **third** question is this: What kind of sin brought such a terrible judgement? (18)

'And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey?'

We find the same pattern in Genesis 3:1-6. Eve and Adam did not believe, and that led to their disobedience. It was the same with sinful Israel. Their unbelief led to their disobedience, and that led to God swearing an oath that they would not receive his blessing of 'rest'.

'So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.' Later, there is, of course, a great appeal to faith in Hebrews 11.

A gospel application may be made at this point with the following statements:

By refusing to believe God, Eve and Adam lost Eden.

By refusing to believe God, an entire generation of Israel perished in the desert sand.

By refusing to believe God, sinners refusing Jesus Christ will not be saved, and will not enter heaven.

5. Conclusion (4:1)

The writer now speaks briefly of the godly reaction of believers to spiritual backsliding.

'Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.'

The rule we may give our hearers is very re-assuring – 'If you are afraid of backsliding, you won't!' The fear of backsliding indicates spiritual alertness to dangers of such a great sin.

'...let us fear'. There are two dangers we must alert our hearers to with regard to this word 'fear'.

The **first** danger is that of becoming too apprehensive, too nervous. That means that we lose our trust in God. The remedy is found in Philippians 1:6 – **'...being confident of this very thing, that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ'**. Believers do not lose their salvation if they fall into sin. The mark of a true Christian is that he will repent of that sin, and rely entirely upon Jesus Christ for his salvation. God does not regard us as his children because of our efforts; he keeps us as his children because it is his will and good pleasure to do so.

The **second** danger is to be so caught up in the struggle to survive as Christians that we lose sight of the heavenly vision of Jesus and his love. There is a 'rest' in prospect. Unbroken peace is yet to come. Then there will be no more sin, no more tears, no more heartbreak, no more pain, and no more parting and sorrow. Jesus says, **'Come unto me ... and I will give you rest.'** (Matthew 11:28)

No true believer can come short of that promised rest, for he already feels it in his soul now. He has inherited salvation (1:14). He has received so great a salvation (2:3). He has One to help in time of need (2:18).

A true believer can never fall away from the grace of God, or come short of God's 'rest' The pretend Christian will eventually fall away because he never had salvation or true faith. He will certainly never enter the 'Promised Land'.

John Calvin comments:

'This fear is commended to us, not as something that drives away the assurance of faith, but as something that inspires us with concern, that we do not grow slack with carelessness. We are to be afraid not because we ought to tremble or be in despair as if we were uncertain of the final outcome, but in case we desert the grace of God.'

But as the writer goes on to say in the next section, we have a deliverer, a Joshua whose name is Jesus. All we need to do is believe in him, and trust him for our salvation.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 9

A & B COMBINED QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED, AND ON THE EXPOSITION

Read John 10:28-29

1. What is it that God gives to his children?
2. What two desirable things give the child of God great confidence?
3. To whom does the Father give his children?
4. How do these two verses make Christians feel spiritually secure?

Read Matthew 11:28

5. Rest from what?
6. Which two characteristics of Jesus indicate a position of rest for God's children?

Read again the hymn by John Henry Sammis. In the hymn you will find six things a believer must do after trusting in Christ and following in obedience to him.

7-12 Name them.

13-16 Make a list of at least four bad things that disobedient Israel did in the wilderness.

17. Read again John Owen's comments in the sermon transcript (**1. Introduction**). State what he says in your own words about faithful perseverance, and faithful duty.

C. PRACTICAL

Preach a sermon on the three points made for gospel application in the Exposition [4. Three questions we must ask].

- (1) Find a relevant Bible verse for your sermon.
- (2) Write an original title for your sermon.
- (3) Write out in full your introduction and conclusion.
- (4) Describe any reactions to your sermon, or any comments after your sermon.

If there were no comments, ask two of your elders or deacons for them.

STUDY 10

CHRIST AND JOSHUA

HEBREWS 4:2-10

EXPOSITION

'[Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it.] For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as he has said, 'As I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest,' although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works'; and again in this passage, 'They shall not enter my rest.'

Now, we have been comparing the Lord Jesus with Moses, a great saint in the Old Testament. Moses was a faithful servant in God's household, but only as a servant; whereas the Lord Jesus Christ is head over the household. Moses was the servant, Christ is the Son of the household. If we are to enjoy the benefits of the new covenant, the kingdom of God, the household of Jesus Christ, we must first, says the writer to the Hebrews, come to Christ. If we wish to enter this household, we must first come to the founder and head of this household. **'How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?'** (Hebrews 2:3) So to enter the household, to be saved, we must first come to the head of the household, to the Saviour.

Having been accepted by Jesus Christ – I put it that way deliberately – as the head of his house, we were made members of that household. In that position, we bow to his lordship. If we are members of the household of faith, then we must act as responsible members of that household, just as Jesus was faithful over his house.

Now, if Christ is the head of the house to which we belong as Christians, then surely, as Christians, we will want to honour our Saviour by submitting to his lordship in every aspect of our lives. **'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word'**. (John 14:23)

This challenge prompts the question, 'Does our house need putting in order today?' In Hebrews 3:6, we read this concerning our obedience to the head of our house – **'Christ as a son over his own house, whose house we are'**. Notice that he is not in the house, but over the house. **'Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign,** Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:24-25.

Now, we read in the next verse, (3:7) – **'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.'** So, too, we look into our own hearts and

lives, and say to ourselves, is there something in our lives that is not yet in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Concerning Moses, briefly, we note that Christ is greater than Moses. Moses was a servant, but Christ the Son of God is the head over his own household. He is Lord. Then the writer compares Christ with the one who followed after Moses, whose name was Joshua. Moses delivered the people of Israel from Egypt where they were slaves. As he took them through the desert for forty years, he exerted his authority, which was from God. Time and again, Moses was resisted by a stiff-necked and an obstinate people, a whole generation of them. When Moses finished his work and brought them to the borders of the Promised Land, God raised up a new man to bring the next generation into the blessings of the Promised Land. His name was Joshua, meaning 'Jehovah saves'. This land, the writer describes with the key word 'rest'. This is the promise that was given to the people of Israel that they would enter into rest. There would be no more wandering, only perfect security. They would rest in the blessings of the Promised Land.

In Hebrews 4:1-11, it is clear that the old covenant failed. What happened when they entered Canaan? They were still imperfect. It is true that they had greater faith than the previous generation, but they were still sinners. Did they find 'rest' in Canaan? Not at all! They fought first with the Canaanites in order to conquer the land. After several centuries, they fought among themselves and the land was divided into two, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. They did not enter into perfect rest.

'**Therefore**', says the writer to the Hebrews, '**there remains a rest for the people of God.**' (9) That is what Hebrews is about – belonging to Christ, the better Joshua. The new covenant in Jesus Christ brings grace and mercy and forgiveness of sin.

Now let us go back to our last Study, where we were comparing the relationship between the disobedience, unbelief and the sin of Israel with the disobedience and sin and unbelief of Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:3, we are introduced to this idea of 'rest' – '**Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.**' So in a world that did not know any sin there entered this idea of rest.

Rest existed before sin came into the world. It says, '**... he [God] rested on the seventh day from all his work**' (Genesis 2:2), and, '**he rested from all his work**' (2:3) So wonderful was this idea of rest, that it was included as one of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:8 declares – '**Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.**' Why the 'Sabbath'? Because the Hebrew word for 'Sabbath' means 'rest'. 'Remember the day of rest.' The third Commandment continues – '**Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God ... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.**' That period between the end of the sixth day when God ceased from his creation, until the moment when Eve and Adam fell into sin, is a period described as 'rest'.

Now, in some sense, we are still in that period of rest. God has ceased to create. But through sin, we have lost what in this period is described as 'rest'. So the writer to the Hebrews challenges us, and says, '**For we who have believed do enter that rest**'. (3) It is only through grace that we may enter into what the Bible describes as 'rest'. It requires a new Covenant to enter this 'rest'. Only by entering into the household over which Jesus Christ is head through faith can we experience this 'rest'.

WHAT IS 'REST'?

Now, what is this rest? The writer indicates that there is a direct connection between saving faith and 'rest'. What exactly is it? Hebrews has already told us that it means entering into salvation, a coming back into communion with the God who created mankind before sin came into the world. This communion is restored in the believer's life, bringing 'rest'. In our faith in God, we experience security and many of God's blessings, which come to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. So it is a 'rest' of salvation, and a 'rest' of security, and a 'rest' of blessings. In contrast, we read in Ephesians 2:5-6 – **'God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.'** That is not something in the future, it is something now; something he has already done, the moment we believed in Jesus Christ as our Saviour. So here is an anticipation of what is yet to come. We are already in the heavenlies, and yet we are not in heaven. We are already experiencing salvation, but we are not yet saved completely and absolutely while we are still sinners. However, we do possess a new nature. So there is an anticipation of what the Bible describes as 'rest' even now, an anticipation of what is yet to come.

Now, then, anyone who comes along and says 'Oh, you Christians always say, 'We have to wait to experience God's promises! Promises today, fulfilment tomorrow!'' This argument goes against all our experience, for what we already experience is what God has promised for the future. We talk about heaven in the future, but heaven is experienced and anticipated now. We speak of being released from sin in the future, but we are set free from sin now. We talk of salvation in the future, but we are saved now. We speak of eternal life in the future, but we anticipate eternal life now. **'He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.'** (1 John 5:12) Notice that the verb 'to have' is in the present tense. We do not have to wait for it; it is here now. Of course, it will be greater in eternity than what we experience now.

As true believers, we know the very atmosphere of heaven in our present experience. In the same way, the blessings of the 'rest' are set out before us now, before we die and go to our perfect 'rest'. Here is another foretaste of heaven, and yet another indication of a true believer.

We and our hearers are bound to be challenged with such a message. Do we really have this 'rest'? It is available to all who believe. Those who accept the Lord of his house as the head of their house will enter into the blessings of the house. As we read in Hebrews 4:1 – **'Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.'** There is held out to us this security in Christ, in whom all God's promises are yes and amen. (2 Corinthians 1:20) God's promises cannot be broken, for if God is God, his promises cannot be broken. So here is an unbreakable promise, that of entering into his rest. When we enter into Christ by faith, we enter into rest.

However, there is another **'therefore'** at the beginning of verse 1, indicating that there is something that we must do. God can do this, but there is a condition attached to it. The condition is that of obedience, obedience to Christ. Obedience must follow faith. So, if there is no obedience in the professed Christian's life, only one conclusion can be drawn: that he never had a saving faith to start with. He is a pretend Christian. Now I think it is, as the letter points out time and again, likely that such a pretend Christian will fall into back-sliding and fall away.

1. God's promises must be matched with an obedient faith (2)

Faith is very important, but obedience is a sure sign of saving faith. Obedience is faith in action. Now, the promises of God must be matched with an obedient faith. We are reminded that the Israelites in the wilderness perished because they would not believe – **'For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them: but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.'**

They neither believed nor were obedient. We note that both faith and obedience are the natural responses of the believer to God's promises. We trust God to keep his promises, and we guarantee our faith to God by being obedient to him. Does that sound strange – guaranteeing our faith to God by being obedient to him? Obedience is our guarantee to God just as keeping his promises is God's guarantee to us. For receiving forgiveness, assurance, eternal life, and a place in heaven we will be obedient to Christ from whom all these blessings come.

'For indeed the gospel was preached to us'. Here is good news. Here is the promise of the gospel. Now, what was the good news to Israel? This was the promise of freedom: freedom from slavery, and the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. But Christians have much greater promises than these: the promise of a kingdom that lasts for ever, of salvation which cannot be taken away, and a Lord who never changes, **Jesus Christ [who] is the same yesterday, today and for ever**, as the writer to the Hebrews exclaims later. (13:8)

Sadly, Israel did not believe. She was not obedient, as it says in verse 2 – **'... but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.'** They were disobedient in other ways also. Why did they not believe? Why did they not do the right thing? In the case of the return of the spies, 'Ten saw the giants great and tall, but two saw that God was in it all.' The people responded by believing that their enemies were too great for them, and refused to enter the land. But two believed when all the others failed. They persevered in faith; and God blessed them in a new generation.

2. The reward for obedient faith is the fulfilment of his promises (3a)

Now, Christians also believe that God will deliver them from their enemies. Read the book of Revelation if you want to know how God delivers his people from enemies who are determined to persecute them, torture them, torment them, and destroy them. Against all odds, the Church of Christ triumphs and grows and overcomes all trials. As the writer says, **'For we who have believed do enter that rest'**.

The Lord saves us from our enemies. Our response to that is – **'And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.'** (1 John 5:4) It is an obedient faith that causes us to persevere. And God's reward for obedient faith is to fulfil his promise as seen in verse 3. Believers enter into (what may be called a 'futuristic present') a promise, that is not only fulfilled here and now, but also later. We do enter into rest now, and we will enter into rest in the future. That is what the writer is saying here. We are true believers if we believe and obey. We have spiritual rest because God promises it to us, and yet we have it in the future to look forward to.

3. God's 'rest' for mankind was not fulfilled in Genesis 2 (3b-5)

'...as he has said: 'So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest', although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works'; and again in this place: 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

Finally, not only should our response to God's promise be obedient faith, not only is God's reward for that obedient faith his promise of rest, but thirdly God's rest is not fulfilled in Genesis 3, although his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

Sinful men are incapable of entering God's rest by their own works. It is impossible for them to do it. They try very hard. It is amazing what people will do to obtain this 'rest' that they

lost by sin (See Genesis 3). They will ascend mountains, they will crawl along stony roads on pilgrimages, they will starve themselves, they will pay all sorts of stunning penalties to somehow try and achieve this 'rest'. But they can never do it. There is a great gulf fixed between a holy God and sinful men.

But in Jesus Christ, we find a perfect way to God, and entry into his 'rest'. God's 'rest' is to enter into perfect communion with him. Adam and Eve lost that 'rest' by sinning, and taking of the forbidden fruit. They disobeyed God, and God drove them out of the garden, making it impossible to return that way by stationing two cherubim with flaming swords at the entrance.

Consider the 'rest' that is described in Genesis. What a wonderful thing it was that God brought out of nothing this great universe that we live in, a world, planets and stars, powerful upheavals of water and land-masses, great sea creatures and birds and fish, and then mankind! And having done all that, there came on the seventh day, a peaceful first Sabbath, when God ceased from all his works. There was a silence that the world had never known before. There was a peace, and there was perfect fellowship between man and his creator. There was a perfect creation with a perfect rest.

Now, this 'rest' returns through the Lord Jesus Christ. He is described, by the apostle Paul, as **'the last Adam'**. (1 Corinthians 15:45) It is through this last Adam that we enter into God's 'rest'. Now, how do we apply this teaching of 'rest' as a gospel message? We may possibly say -

“How do you stand at this time? Do you want God’s blessings, the blessings of the kingdom, and the blessings of the household? What a wonderful Saviour we have! What grace of salvation is ours! To know our sins are forgiven! To have a Saviour to guide us through life! To have peace with God! We would not exchange these things for all the riches of the world.

Not all the security of the world would we exchange for the Lord Jesus Christ.”

It was in 1926 that C. F. Butler wrote this gospel song:

1
Since Christ my soul from sin set free,
This world has been a heaven to me,
And 'mid earth's sorrows and its woe,
It's heaven my Jesus here to know.

*Oh, hallelujah! Yes, it's heaven,
It's heaven to know my sins forgiven;
On land or sea, what matters where?
Where Jesus is, it's heaven there.*

2
Once heaven seemed a far-off place
Till Jesus showed his smiling face;
Now it's begun within my soul,
'Twill last while endless ages roll.

3
What matters where on earth we dwell?
On mountain top, or in the dell?
In cottage, or in mansion fair,
Where Jesus is, it's heaven there.

What greater incentive, then, is there than to do as our writer pleads? **'Therefore...enter into that rest'**?

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 10

A. QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read John 14:23-24

1. What is mark of a true Christian who loves Jesus?
2. What are two results of this?
3. Whose word must the Christian listen to?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:24-25

4. When will Christ deliver the kingdom to the Father?
5. What will happen to all human authority then?
6. What will Christ do to his enemies?

Read Genesis 2:2-3

7. What do these verses have to say about the sermon?
8. What do they have to say about the seventh day, the Sabbath?
9. What are the two things God did to this day?
10. What ceased on this day?

Read Exodus 20:8

11. What is this commandment about?
12. What number is this commandment?
13. What must Israel not do on this day?
14. What must Israel do on this day?

Read Ephesians 2:6

15. What are the two positions of Christians now?
16. What two things are revealed to exalted Christians? (See verse 7)

Read 1 John 5:11-12

17. How do we obtain eternal life?
18. What is the difference between a believer and an unbeliever?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:19-20

19. What did God say to sinners in Jesus Christ?
20. Through what things did God say this to sinners?

Read 1 John 5:4-5

21. Who overcomes the world?
22. What is the instrument by which a believer overcomes a hostile world?
23. Who helps the believer to overcome the world?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:45

24. Which verse of Scripture is Paul quoting here?
25. How did Adam, the first man, become a living being?
26. Why do we need a 'Last Adam'?
27. Who is the last Adam?
28. Who gives the believer spiritual life?

B. QUESTIONS ON THE EXPOSITION

1. You will find three different kinds of 'rest' mentioned in this sermon on Hebrews 4:1-10. Name them, and explain what each one is?
2. What is the connection between God's rest and the Sabbath Day, and the Christian's salvation.
3. What important things must be understood before an unbeliever can enter into 'rest'?
4. Read the hymn by C. F. Butler quoted in the sermon. State in some detail what the author is saying about heaven.

C. PRACTICAL

Preach a sermon from this passage in Hebrews 4:1-10 to show that just because Israel of old was not permitted by God to enter the Promised Land, that does not mean a true believing Christian can lose his salvation.

- (1) Write out in full your introduction and conclusion.
- (2) Send in the outline of your sermon with all other Bible verses you quoted in your sermon.
- (3) Discuss this sermon with another pastor, and write about the main points that arose in your conversation.

STUDY 11

'REST'

HEBREWS 4:6-10

EXPOSITION

SEEMING TO COME SHORT OF 'REST' (1)

We will concentrate in this Study on the whole of Hebrews 4 so that we may continue with this important theme of **'rest'** first introduced in 3:18. Let us consider these phrases

'a promise remains of entering his rest' (1);

'There remains therefore a rest for the people of God' (9).

We particularly note the promise of our Lord – **'...and I will give you rest'** (Matthew 11:28); for it is undoubtedly true that whoever repents of his sin, and turns to the Saviour, will come into spiritual rest.

There is also a 'rest' from works; a 'rest' from pleasing God by trying to keep his impossible laws; a 'rest' from a guilty conscience; a 'rest' from the inability to cope alone with the hardships, difficulties and deprivations of this life; a 'rest' from the puzzles of this life. All that is required is a simple trust in the Lord. There is a peace from God that transcends the intellect and the understanding. It does not depend upon our comprehending it, but is available for those who are right with God. It is called **'the peace of God'**. (Philippians 4:7)

There is an indefinite time scale for 'rest'. We speak of the rest into which the Christian is brought after his conversion; but there is also the rest during the Christian's experience on earth; and finally, there is a greater rest to come in the future. Now, let us consider this theme of 'rest' in chapter 4.

There was a great problem in the Christian Jewish congregations where there were Jews who were brought up in the strict observances of the Jewish religion but who had come to embrace (so it would appear) the Christian faith. They were now thinking of returning to their old way of life, deserting the gospel, and leaving the Christian community. This exercised the mind of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, and also touched his heart as to what his fellow-countrymen were missing. He longed for them to go on in their faith, and says in effect, 'Look, are you going to act as our ancestors did and turn away from the Lord, despite all his great blessing and the enlightenment of God by sending his Holy Spirit, his word in the commandments, and the great miracles he performed for you in delivering you and

bringing you into a land flowing with milk and honey? Are you like Israel, who did not, unlike Abraham her father, believe God, but turned away from him, becoming obstinate and hardened and disobedient and unfaithful? They did not enter into rest.'

So here is some important teaching that has an application, perhaps, to your own congregation. Today, we find many people in the church community who tend to slip out unnoticed. They dip into this and that, and then leave. They never appear satisfied. Now, satisfaction can only come through a right relationship with God in Jesus Christ, and truly resting in him. When someone finds this rock of 'rest' in the Lord, he will never be moved – **'He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defence; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength. And my refuge is in God.'** (Psalm 62:6-7)

We noted previously that a **'Therefore'** stands at the head of verse 1 – **'Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.'** It is sad to see many today who move in Christian circles, going from church-to-church, group-to-group, conference-to-conference, who are unable to see that they **'seem to have come short of it [rest].'** They are like the raven that Noah sent out from the ark, flying here and there over the waters of the flood, and never finding a place to rest. (Genesis 8:7) They do not perceive that they do not enter into that rest that is available for the people of God. They **'come short of it'**. That is a very serious phrase, for it indicates that they are not Christians at all, whatever they profess. It is the same phrase used to describe the world of sinners – **'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'** (Romans 3:23).

It appears that they do not belong to the heavenly world despite their profession of Christ. They act contrary to what they say. Thus we read, **'... since a promise remains of entering his rest'**. Now, of course, a promise points to a future event; and not only do Christians come into a true rest in the Lord, but there is also a rest to come. Christians are not finished when they are converted; they are only at the start. They are spiritual babies, finding their feet for the first few faltering steps. However, there are those who do not enter into this 'rest'; they do not trust the Lord, and continue to plot the course of their lives, and are not prepared to say to the Lord, 'Your will be done.' They do not take the Bible very seriously; and are reluctant to obey the commands of God. Consequently, they **'seem to have come short of it.'**

How can a true Christian bear to remain in such a condition? It is a sign of true spiritual life when believers become concerned about their spiritual condition. When the Holy Spirit works in the people of God, they feel dissatisfied with the way things are, and long for better things. This leads them on to 'rest' in the Lord.

THE WORD THAT IS PREACHED (2)

Verse 2 speaks of those in the Hebrew congregations to whom the gospel was faithfully preached – **'For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them'**. The good news was preached in these churches, the good news of Jesus Christ: that sinners needed repentance; that the dissatisfied ones in their hearts should come to Jesus Christ for rest. However, just because the gospel was preached regularly, did not make all the hearers in the churches strong Christians, for **'the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.'**

All Christians would be spiritually challenged if they read ***PROFITING FROM THE WORD*** by Arthur Walkingden Pink. The book has been included under the title pink.profitting. In it, Pink makes it clear that it is easy today to possess or have access to a Bible. Therefore it is not unreasonable to expect Christians to read the Bible every day. Yet, although it is easy

to read the Scriptures, it is not always true that profit comes from such a reading. It is possible to sit each week listening to a sermon that is full of the Word of God, yet receive little or no profit from the exercise.

These individuals described in Hebrews who were falling away from the faith, and who did not enter into rest, were finding that **'the word they heard did not profit them'**. When a doctor prescribes a treatment, he expects the patient to take the medicine, for he knows that it will do him good. We preachers expect a response of faith and obedience to the Word.

There is a vital link between those who hear the word and what they do next. To hear the word is good, but it of no value until it is put into action. A sinner can hear of the goodness of God and his love, and the salvation of God through Jesus Christ. He can hear of the shed blood of Christ on the cross as an effective sacrifice for sin. Yet none of this will do him any good until he mixes that word with faith. As the Israelites walked through the desert, they lacked faith. They did not believe, and this is one of the themes to be found earlier in Hebrews. The writer explains that those who did not believe perished in the wilderness. (3:17) There were many rebels against the authority of Moses, an authority God invested in Moses, unfaithful men who would not accept authority, and who wanted to go their way. These all perished in the wilderness. That is why we find in verse 1 the words **'...let us fear'**.

Receiving the Word of God is a serious activity for every Christian. Every week, under the preaching of the Word, we take stock of our spiritual experience, meeting the Word with an act of faith and obedience. And what is that act of faith? To do whatever Christ commands. He said, **'You are my friends if you do whatever I command you.'** (John 15:14) It is so easy to listen to the preaching of the Word of God, to hear various things that stir our hearts and cause our minds to agree with what we hear; yet we do nothing about it. We are moved, but not moved enough to do something about what we hear.

What, then, are we to say to our congregations on this point? Possibly something like this -

I say to you, as the Lord touches your mind and heart by the Word, and you know the way you should go, and the commands you should obey, come to him in faith. 'Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you'. (Psalm 55:22) Come to the Saviour who shed his blood for you. If you turn away from him, where is there further blood to cleanse you from sin? 'There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins'. (10:26) If you turn away from the Cross, where else is there to go for sin?

THE FAILURE OF ISRAEL (3)

'For we who have believed do enter that rest, as he has said, "So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest"'. (Psalm 95:11) The Psalmist is referring back to that period in the wilderness wanderings when Israel became obstinate and turned away from the Lord. **'I [God] swore in my wrath'** – fearful words! There are those who are very casual in their attitude to the things of God, who profess to be Christians, but who fall again and again into sin thinking that all is well. They become disobedient to God. They do not serve well the Saviour. They are content with the little they have. But the Lord demands everything of them – their time, their life, their minds, their hearts, their strength, and their ambitions. Until they do that, they will know no rest. Indeed, God declares, as he did to Israel, **'I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.'** There comes a point when God gives them up, and will bring no more blessings to those who remain wilfully disobedient.

Now, our writer, taking up the word 'rest' declares, **'They shall not enter my rest'**. What is the meaning of 'rest' for true believers? Well, first of all, he says, **'... although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.'** When God finished creating the world,

he rested on the seventh day. (Genesis 2:2) We have here the Hebrew word for 'Sabbath'. God 'sabbathed'; that is, he rested.

Now, our writer raises this question in our minds: 'How can we enter into a future rest when God is already resting? How can there be a future rest when rest took place in the past when God finished creating the heaven and the earth? How can there be a rest for the people of God? Verse 4 enlightens us: **'For he has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works"'**. It is true that God finished creating the physical universe. He had completed his work in six days, then stopped; and the final day was called the Sabbath day, commemorating the completion of the creation. However, we are not very interested in the physical universe. We know that the universe will not remain forever. At the end, **'the earth and the heavens ... will perish ... they will grow old like a garment; like a cloak you will change them, and they will be changed.'** (Psalm 102:26, quoted in Hebrews 1:11-12) And, **'... the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up ... Nevertheless, we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.'** (2 Peter 3:13) From the time when he finished his work, God has not created anything else. Nothing new in the universe has come into being since the original act of creation. And we remain yet, as it were, in the seventh day. In that sense, God is resting.

Now, in view of the dissolution of the physical universe, there is something more important. There is a new creation that begins in the heart and soul of every sinner saved by grace. And that is what we look for: a spiritual rest. There is a rest, so far as the physical universe is concerned, but that does not concern us, beyond the fact that the Jews were commanded in the Ten Commandments to keep the seventh day holy. Likewise Christians come together on their day of rest, on the first day of the week. They not only praise God for his act of creation, but, more importantly, thank God for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the new creation in him.

It is true that unless we enter into spiritual rest, we will perish. God swore concerning the unbelieving Israelites, **'They shall not enter my rest.'** Indeed, in the same way, God's wrath come upon all those who profess to be believers, but do not enter into his rest of salvation. That is why this theme in Hebrews needs to go out in our preaching, to challenge our hearers who base their spiritual security on their works. They have not found rest from their works, and they are not the Lord's.

However, some will respond to your challenge and will enter into spiritual rest. How hopeful verse 6 is! **'Since therefore it remains that some must enter it [rest]'**. How thankful to God we are that our sins do not keep us from entering into this spiritual rest! Now, if this rest was a reward, none of us would qualify, for we are all sinners. But this rest is given, like all else from God, freely, by his grace. He promises when we believe.

There is a 'rest' for those of us who desire it. Even though it appears the whole world turns against Christ, we take our stand for him. One dedicated Christian shines out like a beacon in a world of spiritual darkness and unfaithfulness. Yes; it does remain for some to enter into 'rest'. On the other hand, those who formerly had the gospel preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience. The same pattern is seen over the centuries.

In contrast, there were some in the Hebrew congregations who were growing spiritually, feeding on his Word, walking in his way, and becoming mature in obedience. It is good to see that. It makes the heart of any gospel preacher rejoice. But how disappointing it is to look and see some self-professed Christians who have not moved on spiritually over the years. They grow gospel-hardened and become un-reachable and un-teachable. Nothing

can be done with them, and nothing will move them, and nothing will inspire them. They show no concern for their spiritual condition. **'... and those to whom it [rest] was first preached did not enter because of disobedience'**. (6)

A gospel preacher looks for change among his hearers. He seeks those who reveal a strong sense of dissatisfaction with their lives, and desire to move on in their faith. Thank God for such a response! This is a true work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. A dissatisfied Christian is one in whom God is at work and there is a remedy for that as we shall see. We read in verse 7: **'... again he designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today"'**. When can a remedy be applied to those who are concerned about spiritual decline? The answer is, as always, **'Now'**. God has a certain day for applying the remedy to backsliding – **'Today, if you will hear his voice: do not harden your hearts'**. (7; Psalm 95:7-8) To harden the heart is to turn away from God. The more the heart is hardened, the further away from God it is, until, in the end, it is so far away, that gospel appeals no longer reach it.

JOSHUA (8-10)

Now, consider the end of their pilgrimage journey. What were they marching towards? They were looking to a land that God had promised them. They were bitten by poisonous serpents in the wilderness; they were seduced by the heathen women of foreign tribes; they entered into warfare on both sides of the Jordan. They knew no rest until they came and possessed the land and subdued it. And who brought them into the land of promise? It was Joshua who succeeded Moses. Why Joshua? There is no mistake or coincidence of history, for Joshua was not only the minister of Moses, but he became commander-in-chief of the army. He took over when Moses died, and brought the people into the land of rest. It was Joshua who brought them successfully through battles and turmoil and struggles into their condition of rest. His name means 'Jehovah saves' or, in the Greek, 'Jesus'.

It was Joshua who brought Israel into the land of promise and 'rest', and Christians have a 'Joshua' who brings them into a spiritual land of promise. **'For if Joshua had given them rest, then he would not afterwards have spoken of another day.'** (8) Yes; there was a rest for the people of God over and beyond entering the land of promise. There is a day that he spoke of, and that day concerned the coming of our 'Joshua'. It is Jesus who promises true spiritual rest to his people. This is not only a 'rest' for the converted who trust in the Saviour, but is a 'rest' in our present Christian lives, and a 'rest' in eternity. Thus verse 9 – **'There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.'** How it saddens the preacher's heart when, it seems to him, so few of God's people enter into that 'rest'!

Then we come to verse 10. **'For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his.'** Christ was indeed a man. The writer to the Hebrews emphasises this fact many times, that, although he was the true image and stamp of God (1:3), nonetheless, he was also a man, and a high priest with the same nature as ours. He was tempted in all things but without sin; he sympathises because he too is a man. The first thing that we must say is that Jesus Christ himself entered into rest.

Here are two things that we might say to our hearers about this verse.

Firstly, after Christ had completed his work of salvation, he entered into his 'rest'. Then he sat down at the right hand of God (1:3) Sitting down indicates that he was resting from his work which was completed. Sitting down at God's right hand shows that he had finished his saving work.

Secondly, when we believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour, we sinners rest from our labours. We cannot be saved by our works because we would boast in them. We are saved by grace, through faith in Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-9) We enter into rest through faith. We come into rest because we no longer have to strive and struggle to obtain salvation.

THE DEEPER MINISTRY OF THE WORD (12-13)

Verses 11 commences a serious gospel appeal from the writer – ‘**Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest**’. Here is a solemn call. Let us not sleep until we have done something about this, ‘... **lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience.**’ Here the heart of the true Gospel preacher goes out to all his hearers. He may be stirred to say something like this -

“Dear friends, how do you stand before God at this moment? Have you entered this rest? Or are you content to remain as you are, in danger of drifting away, and doing nothing about it? You say, ‘I’ll leave it till tomorrow, or next week, or next month’. Listen to the words of a wise preacher – ‘Let us be diligent to enter that rest lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience [of Israel].’ A disobedient Christian is no Christian at all unless he repents and turns to the Saviour. And that is the intention of this Gospel appeal from the writer to the Hebrews.”

And how can you enter into this ‘rest’? By looking at the promises of God, among which ‘rest’ is only one, and receiving them by faith.

Verse 12 then bring the Bible into this gospel appeal – ‘**For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword**’. There can be no Gospel preaching without the Word of God. It is the function of the Word to stir up dissatisfaction in every Christian who hears its proclamation. Every preacher should be encouraged by the fact that when he preaches the Word it creates a desire in the hearts of Christians to go on to something better, as well as showing sinners how to come to the Lord.

So extensive is the ministry of the Word that we find it ‘**piercing even to the division of soul and spirit**’. It finds out unrest of our hearts, and it touches our souls and spirits at the deepest level of our need, in the ‘**joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.**’

Verse 13 is very humbling. The Word brings us to a position of utter honesty about ourselves before God. And, because we are sinners, it needs the Holy Spirit to expose us both to ourselves and to God. ‘**And there is no creature [or, nothing in creation can be] hidden from his [God’s] sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**’ Is it any wonder that Christians are brought to tears when God deals with them at such a deep level? Is it any wonder that Christians lose sleep when they know that there are things wrong in their life that need to be put right? Indeed, it is not! It is the result of the ministry of the Word. Above all, time and again we are driven to the words of Jesus Christ – ‘**Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest**’. (Matthew 11:28)

OUR COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST (14-16)

Finally, and briefly, we come to verses 14-16. What happens when we come into this present ‘rest’, this restoration of a lost communion between the saved sinner and the Saviour? ‘**Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**’ (14) That is the direction we must take. We cannot commend ourselves, or our Christian lives, to God. We have no strength to live the Christian life, and we lack boldness to come before God. But we are urged to hold fast our confession by holding fast to Jesus.

‘For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.’ (15) No doubt there were Christians

in those Hebrew congregations who were thinking, 'Oh, the writer is speaking about us! We must do something about this.' Well, thank God there are some who do react like that! They may think, 'Oh, are we not very good examples! No; we are not good Christians. We are sinners, but we acknowledge that we have a Saviour who is without sin. We have no strength, but he is all strength and all power. He sympathises with our weaknesses, and he draws us further through our weaknesses to become better Christians.

Our writer then concludes – '**Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace**', moving on from a sense of fruitlessness and lack of faith to a wonderful communion with God that is available to every child of God entering into 'rest'. Every time we draw near with boldness to the throne of grace we move closer home, to that final and new Jerusalem, where every Christian is assured of a place. We come to the throne of grace in order '**that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**' And, as our writer will say later in his letter – '**But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant**'. (12:22-24)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 11

A. QUESTIONS ON THE TEXTS QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read Philippians 4:6-7

1. What is a common human feeling?
2. What is the difference between prayer and supplication?
3. What should be an essential element of prayer?
4. What keeps the hearts and minds of Christians?
5. Through whom does it come?

Read Psalm 62:6-7

5. There are six descriptions of God's relationship with the believer here.
6. Name them.
7. Which two are mentioned twice?
8. What are the two commands of the Psalmist in verse 8 which bring calm?

Read Romans 3:23-24

9. What is common to everybody?
10. What has God provided as a remedy?
11. What does this word mean?
12. What else can those who profess to be Christians fall short of?
(See the Exposition)

Read John 15:14

13. What is the great privilege of all Christians?
14. What is the condition of this position?

Read Psalm 55:22

15. What disturbs believers in this verse?
16. What does the Psalmist exhort such believers to do?
17. What promise does God make to his righteous ones in this verse?

Read Psalm 95:8-11

18. What are the two bad things Israel had done?
19. How long did this go on?
20. What did God swear?

Read Psalm 102:25-26

21. When did God make the earth and the heavens
22. What will happen to them?
23. How are they described at the end?
24. What will happen to believers?

Read 2 Peter 3:11-13

25. What two things are characteristic of Christians?
26. What do they look forward to?
27. What will happen to the heavens?
28. What has God promised?

Read Ephesians 2:8-9

29. What are the two things that bring peace to a Christian?
30. What does a Christian rest from for salvation?

B. & C. QUESTIONS ON THE EXPOSITION AND PRACTICAL

1. How would you explain to your congregation in your own words how the Israelites proved that they did not believe in God?
2.
 - (a) Explain what is the 'rest' of the people of God which is described in Hebrews chapter 4?
 - (b) How would you apply this explanation to the spiritual needs of your own congregation?

John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, preached this classic sermon as a warning against backsliding. Notice the number of quotations there are from the Bible. There are no questions on this sermon.

THE WILDERNESS STATE

A SERMON BY JOHN WESLEY

(A version in easier English by Geoffrey Stonier)

'There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.' (Hebrews 4:9)

A wilderness state

After God had brought a great deliverance to Israel by bringing them out of the house of bondage, they did not come immediately into the land which he had promised to their fathers; but **'wandered in the wilderness'**, (Joshua 14:10), and were variously tested and distressed. In the same way, after God has delivered those who fear him from the bondage of sin and Satan, after they are **'justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'** (Romans 3:24), yet not many of them come immediately into **'the rest there remains for the people of God.'** (Hebrews 4:9) Most of them 'wander', more or less, out of the good way into which he brought them. They come, as it were, **'into a desert land and into a wasteland, a howling wilderness'** (Deuteronomy 32:10), where they are variously tempted and tormented. And this, in reference to the Israelites, some have termed, 'a wilderness state'.

It is certain that those in such a condition have a right to the tenderest compassion. They labour under an evil and severe disease, though one that is not commonly understood; and for this very reason it is extremely difficult for them to find a remedy. Being in darkness themselves, they cannot understand the nature of their own disorder; and few of their brothers, indeed, perhaps, few of their teachers, know either what their sickness is, or how to heal it. So there is a great need to inquire, firstly: 'What is the nature of this disease?'; and, secondly: 'What is the cause of it?'; and, thirdly: 'What is the cure for it?'

1. What is the nature of this disease into which so many fall after they have believed?

What is it all about; and what are the true symptoms of it?

(1) It begins with the loss of that faith which God once worked in their heart. Those in the wilderness now lack that divine 'evidence', that satisfactory conviction 'of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1) which they once enjoyed. They no longer possess that inward demonstration of the Spirit which previously enabled each of them to say, **'... the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'** (Galatians 2:20) The light of heaven can no longer be said to **'shine in their hearts'**, (2 Corinthians 4:6), neither do they see him **'who is invisible'** (Hebrews 11:27); but darkness is again on the face of their souls, and blindness on the eyes of their understanding. The Spirit no longer **'witnesses with their spirits, that they are children of God'** (Romans 8:16); neither does he continue as the Spirit of adoption, by whom they cry out in their hearts, **'Abba, Father.'** (Romans 8:15) They do not have now a sure trust in his love, and a liberty of approaching him with holy boldness. **'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him'** (Job 13:15) is no longer the language of their heart; but they are shorn of their strength, and have become weak and feeble-minded, just like other men.

(2) Consequently, there comes a loss of love, which cannot only rise or fall, at the same time, and in the same proportion, as true, living faith.

Accordingly, those who are deprived of their faith are deprived of the love of God also. They can no longer say, **'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love thee.'** (John 21:17) They are not happy in God, as everyone is who truly loves him. They do not delight in him as in time past, and savour the **'fragrance of his good ointments'**. (Song of Solomon 1:4) Once, all their desire was unto him, and to the remembrance of his name (Psalm 73:25), but now even their desires are cold and dead, if not utterly extinguished. And as their love of God has declined, so also their love for their neighbour. They do not now have that zeal for the souls of men, that longing after their welfare, that fervent, restless, active desire of their being reconciled to God. They do not feel those **'tender mercies'** (Colossians 3:12) for the sheep that are lost, that tender compassion for the ignorant, and those who are out of the way. (**Hebrews 5:2**) Once they were **'gentle to all'** (2 Timothy 2:24), meekly

instructing those who opposed the truth; and, **'if any was overtaken in a fault, restoring such a one in the spirit of meekness.'** (Galatians 6:1) But, after a lapse, perhaps, of many days, begins to regain its power; yes, anger and impatience takes possession of them so that they fall; and it is well if they are not sometimes driven, even, to **'render evil for evil'**, and angry argument with angry argument. (1 Thessalonians 5:15)

(3) In consequence of the loss of faith and love, there follows a loss of joy in the Holy Spirit. For if the loving consciousness of pardon is now no more, the joy which comes from it cannot remain. If the Spirit does not witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, the joy that flowed from that inward witness must also come to an end. And, in the same way, those who once **'rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory'** (1 Peter 1:8), are now deprived of that hope which is full of immortality, and of the joy it brings; as also of that which results from a consciousness of the love of God, **'poured out in their hearts.'** (Romans 5:5) For as the cause is removed, so too is the effect. The fountain is dammed up, and those living waters spring up no more to refresh the thirsty soul.

(4) With loss of faith, and love, and joy, there is also joined a loss of that peace which once passed all understanding. (Philippians 4:7) That sweet tranquillity of mind, that composure of spirit, has gone. Painful doubt returns; doubt, whether we ever did, and perhaps whether we ever shall, believe. We begin to doubt, whether we ever did find in our hearts the real testimony of the Spirit; whether we did not rather deceive our own souls, and mistake the voice of nature for the voice of God; indeed, and perhaps, whether we will ever hear his voice again, and find favour in his sight. And these doubts are again joined with slavish fear, with that fear which brings torment. (1 John 4:18) We fear the wrath of God, even as we did before we believed. We fear, lest we should be cast out of his presence; and so sink again into that fear of death from which we were before wholly delivered.

But even this is not all; for loss of peace is accompanied with loss of power. We know that everyone who has peace with God through Jesus Christ has power over all sin. But whenever he loses the peace of God, he loses also the power over sin. While that peace remained, power also remained, even over the stubborn sin, whether it be the sin of his nature, of his constitution, of his education, or of his profession; yes, and over those evil tempers and desires which, till then, he could not conquer. Sin had then no more dominion over him; but he has now ceased to have dominion over sin. He may struggle, indeed, but he cannot overcome; the crown has fallen from his head. His enemies again prevail over him, and, more or less, bring him into bondage. The glory has departed from him, even the kingdom of God which was in his heart. He is dispossessed of righteousness, as well as of peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Such is the nature of what many have termed, and not improperly, 'The wilderness state.' But the nature of it may be more fully understood by asking this:

2. What are the causes of this 'wilderness state'?

There are indeed several answers to this question. But I dare not attribute them to the bare, arbitrary, sovereign will of God. He **'has pleasure in the prosperity of his servant'**. (Psalm 35:27) He takes no delight in affliction, which causes the children of men to grieve. His unchanging will is our sanctification, accompanied with **'peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'**. (Romans 14:17) These are his own free gifts; and we are assured, **'the gifts and calling of God are [on his part] without repentance'**. (Romans 11:29) He never repents of what he has given, or desires to take them away from us. Therefore he never deserts us, as some say; it is only we who desert him.

The most usual cause of inward darkness is sin of one kind or another. This, and its complications, is often the cause of much misery.

(1) First, the sin of commission.

This can frequently be seen to darken the soul in a moment; especially if it is a known, a wilful, or presumptuous sin. If, for instance, a person, who is now walking in the clear light of God's countenance, should be in any way prevailed upon to commit a single act of drunkenness or uncleanness, it would be no wonder, if, in that very hour, he fell into utter darkness. It is true, there have been some very rare cases, where God has prevented this by an extraordinary display of his pardoning mercy, almost in the very act. But in general, such an abuse of the goodness of God, so gross an insult on his love, brings about an immediate estrangement from God, and a 'darkness that may be felt'.

(2) Sin of omission

But it may be hoped that this case is not very frequent, and that there are not many who so despise the riches of his goodness as, while they walk in his light, so grossly and presumptuously rebel against him. The light is much more frequently lost by giving way to sins of omission. This, indeed, does not immediately quench the Spirit, but gradually and slowly. The former sin may be compared to pouring water on a fire; the latter to withdrawing the fuel from it. And many times will that loving Spirit reprove our neglect, before he departs from us. Many are the inward checks, the secret notices, he gives before his influences are withdrawn. Only a train of sins of omissions, wilfully persisted in, can bring us into utter darkness.

Perhaps there is no greater sin of omission than the neglect of private prayer. Nothing can take the place of this ordinance whatever. Nothing can be plainer than that the life of God in the soul does not continue, much less increase, unless we use every opportunity of communion with God, and pour out our hearts before him. If, therefore, we are negligent of this, if we allow tiredness, company, or any other excuse, to prevent these secret exercises of the soul (or, which comes to the same thing, makes us hurry them over in a slight and careless manner), that spiritual life will surely decline. And if this carries on for a long time, it will gradually die away.

Another sin of omission, which frequently brings the soul of a believer into darkness, is the neglect of what was so strongly commanded, even under the Jewish dispensation: '**You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him.**' (Leviticus 19:17) And, '**Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.**' (Zechariah 7:10) Now, if we hate our brother in our heart, if we do not rebuke him when we find him in a fault, but allow sin because of him, this will soon bring leanness into our own soul, seeing that we have become partakers of his sin. By neglecting to reprove our neighbour, we make his sin our own. We become accountable for it before God. We saw that he was in danger, but we gave him no warning. Thus, '**... if he perish in his iniquity**', God may justly require '**his blood at our hands**'. (Ezekiel 3:18-19) No wonder, then, that by grieving the Spirit, we lose the light of his countenance.

(3) Secret sin

A third cause of our losing our way in the wilderness is, by giving way to some kind of secret sin. For example, we know that every '**perverse person is an abomination to the Lord**' (Proverbs 3:32), and that this pride of heart should not appear in the way we live. Now, how easily may a soul that is filled with peace and joy fall into this snare of the devil! How natural it is for him to imagine that he has more grace, more wisdom or strength, than he really has! And '**think more highly of himself than he ought to think!**' (Romans 12:3) How natural to glory in something he has received, as if he had not received it! But seeing God

continually **'resists the proud, and gives grace [only] to the humble'** (James 4:6), this must certainly obscure, if not wholly destroy, the light which before shone in his heart.

The same effect may be produced by giving way to anger, whatever the provocation or occasion, even though it were coloured over with the name of zeal for the truth, or for the glory of God. Indeed, all zeal, which does not go under the name of love, is 'earthly, animal, and devilish'. Its proper name is wrath. It is plain, sinful anger, neither better nor worse. And nothing is a greater enemy to the mild, gentle love of God than this! They never did, they never can, exist side-by-side in one breast. In the same proportion as this prevails, love and joy in the Holy Spirit increase. This is particularly observable in the case of offence; I mean, anger at any of our brethren, at any of those who are united with us either by civil or religious ties. If we give way to the spirit of offence but one hour, we lose the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit; so that, instead of enjoying them, we destroy ourselves, and become an easy prey to any enemy that assaults us.

But suppose we are aware of this snare of the devil, we may be attacked from another quarter. When fierceness and anger are asleep, and love alone is waking, we may be no less endangered by desire, which equally tends to darken the soul. This is the sure effect of any foolish desire, any vain or any silly feeling. If we set our affection on things of the earth (Colossians 3:5), or on any person or thing under the sun; if we desire anything but God, and what tends to God; if we seek happiness in any creature; the jealous God will surely clash with us, for he will have no rival. And if we do not hear his warning voice, and return to him with the whole of our soul, if we continue to grieve him with our idols, and running after other things, we shall soon become cold, barren, and dry; and the God of this world will blind and darken our hearts.

But this he frequently does, even when we do not give way to any definite sin. It is enough, it gives him sufficient advantage, if we do not **'stir up the gift of God which is in us'** (2 Timothy 1:6); if we do not agonise continually **'to enter in at the narrow gate'** (Matthew 7:13); if we do not earnestly **'compete according to the rules'** (2 Timothy 2:5), and **'take the kingdom of heaven by violence'**. (Matthew 11:12) There needs no more than not to fight, and we are sure to be conquered. Let us only be careless or **'faint in our mind'** (Hebrews 12:3), let us be easy and lazy, and our natural darkness will soon return and take over our soul. It is enough, therefore, if we give way to spiritual idleness, this will effectively darken the soul. It will as surely destroy the light of God, if not so swiftly as murder or adultery.

But it is well to observe that the cause of our darkness (whatsoever it be, whether by sin of omission or commission, whether inward or outward sin) is not always right at hand. Sometimes the sin that occasioned the present distress may lie at a considerable distance. It may have been committed days, or weeks, or months before. And that God now withdraws his light and peace on account of what was done so long ago is not (as one might at first imagine) an instance of his severity, but rather a proof of his long-suffering and tender mercy. He waited all this time, if perhaps we might acknowledge and correct what is wrong; and, in default of this, he at length shows his displeasure, so that, at last, he might bring us to repentance.

Another general cause of this darkness is ignorance; which is similarly of various kinds. If men do not know the Scriptures, if they imagine there are passages either in the Old or New Testament, which assert that all believers, without exception, must sometimes be in darkness, this ignorance will naturally bring upon them the darkness they expect. And how common has this been among us! How few there are who do not expect it! And no wonder, seeing that they are taught to expect it, and seeing that their guides lead them along this way. Not only the mystic writers of the Roman Catholic Church, but many of the most spiritual and experiential in our own century (but very few of the last century) lay it down

with all assurance, as a plain, unquestionable scripture doctrine, and quote many texts to prove it.

Ignorance also of the work of God in the soul frequently brings about this darkness. Men imagine that because they have been taught to think this way, particularly by Roman Catholic writers (whose misleading assertions too many Protestants receive without due examination), that they are not always to walk in the light of faith; that this is only a lower dispensation; that as they rise higher, they are to leave those comforts of the sense and live by naked faith; (naked indeed, if it is stripped both of love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!) that a state of light and joy is good, but a state of darkness and dryness is better; that it is by these alone we can be purified from pride, love of the world, and inordinate self-love. That therefore we ought neither to expect nor desire to walk in the light always. Hence it is (though other reasons may occur) that the main body of pious men in the Roman Catholic Church generally walk in a dark uncomfortable way, and if ever they receive it they soon lose the light of God.

Another cause of this darkness is temptation. When the lamp of the Lord first shines on our head, temptations frequently flee away, and totally disappear. All is calm within; perhaps without too, while God makes our enemies to be at peace with us (Proverbs 16:7). It is then very natural to suppose that we shall not see war any more. And there are instances when this calm has continued not only for weeks, but for months or years. But generally it is otherwise. In a short time, again **'the winds blow, the rains descend, and the floods arise'**. (Matthew 7:25, 27) Those who do not know either the Son or the Father, and consequently hate his children, when God slackens the bridle which is in their teeth, will show that hatred in various ways. As of old, **'he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now'**, (Galatians 4:29) the same cause still producing the same effect. The evil which yet remains in the heart will then also move afresh; anger, and many other roots of bitterness, will endeavour to spring up. At the same time, Satan will not be found wanting to cast in his fiery darts; and the soul will have to wrestle, not only with the world, not only **'with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, with the rulers of the darkness of this world, with wicked spirits in high places.'** (Ephesians 6:12)

Now, when so many assaults are made at once, and perhaps with the utmost violence, it is not strange that it should bring not only heaviness, but even darkness to a weak believer – more especially, if he was not looking out for it. These assaults are made in an hour when he is not looking for them. He is armed as if he expects nothing less, but he falls if he fondly tells himself, 'The evil day will not come any more.'

The force of those temptations that arise from within will be greatly strengthened if we think too highly of ourselves, as if we had been cleansed from all sin. And how naturally do we imagine this during the warmth of our first love! How ready we are to believe that God has 'fulfilled in us the whole work of faith with power!', that because we feel no sin, we have none in us; but the soul is all love! And well may a sharp attack from an enemy we supposed to be not only conquered but slain, throw us into great heaviness of soul; yes, sometimes, into utter darkness; particularly when we stop to reason with this enemy instead of immediately calling on God, and casting ourselves upon him in simple faith, who alone knows how to deliver his own out of temptation.

3. We ask, thirdly, 'What is the cure for this wilderness state?'

To suppose that this is shared to all cases is a great and fatal mistake, and yet is extremely common, even among many who pass for experienced Christians, yes, imagine themselves to be teachers in Israel, to be the guides of other souls. Accordingly, they know and use

only one medicine, whatever the cause of the condition. They begin immediately to apply the promises; to preach the gospel, as they call it.

To give comfort, is the single point at which they aim; in order that they may say many soft and tender things concerning the love of God to poor, helpless sinners, and the efficacy of the blood of Christ. Now this is quackery indeed, and that of the worst sort, as it tends, if not to kill men's bodies, yet, without the peculiar mercy of God, **'to destroy both their bodies and souls in hell'**. It is hard to speak of these 'daubers with untempered mortar', these promise-mongers, as they deserve. They well-deserve the title, which has been ignorantly given to others. They are spiritual cheats. In effect, they make **'the blood of the covenant an unholy thing'**. (Hebrews 10:29) They wretchedly prostitute the promises of God by applying them to all without distinction. Whereas, indeed, the cure of spiritual, as of bodily diseases, must be as varied as are the causes of them. The first thing, therefore, is, to find out the cause; and this will naturally point to the cure.

For instance: 'Is it sin that has brought the darkness?' What sin? Is it outward sin of any kind? Does your conscience accuse you of committing any sin, whereby you grieve the Holy Spirit of God? Is it on this account that he has left you, and joy and peace have gone with him? And how can you expect them to return till you put away the accursed thing? **'Let the wicked forsake his way'** (Isaiah 55:7); **'cleanse your hands, you sinners'** (James 4:8); **'put away the evil of your doings'** (Is 1:16); **'then your light shall dawn in the darkness'** (Isaiah 58:10), and the Lord will return and **'abundantly pardon'** (Isaiah 55:7)

If, at the closest search, you can find no sin of commission that has caused a cloud to settle on your soul, inquire next, if there is not some sin of omission that separates between God and you. Do you allow sin by your neighbour to go un-remarked? (Leviticus 19:17) Do you not reprove him for that sin in your sight? Do you walk in all the ordinances of God, and participate in public, family, and private prayer? If not, if you have habitually neglected any one of these known duties, how can you expect that the light of God's countenance should continue to shine on you? Make haste to **'strengthen the things that remain'** (Rev 3:2), then your soul will live.

'Today, if you will hear his voice' (Hebrews 3:15), thereby God's grace supplying what is lacking. When you hear a voice behind you saying, **'This is the way, walk in it'** (Is 30:21), do not harden your heart; do not be **'disobedient to the heavenly vision'** any more. Till that sin, whether of omission or commission, is removed, all comfort is false and deceitful. It is only putting a bandage on the wound, which is still festering beneath. Look for no peace within till you have peace with God; which cannot be without **'fruits worthy of repentance'**. (Matthew 3:8)

But perhaps you are not conscious of any sin of omission that impairs your peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Is there not, then, some inward sin, which, as a root of bitterness, springs up in your heart to trouble you? Is not your dryness and barrenness of soul the result of your heart **'departing from the living God'**? (Hebrews 3:12) Has not **'the foot of pride come against you'**? (Psalm 36:11) Have you not thought of yourself **'more highly than you ought to think'**? (Romans 12:3) Have you not, in any respect, **'sacrificed to your own net, and burned incense to your dragnet'**? (Habakkuk 1:15)

Have you not ascribed your success in any undertaking to your own courage, or strength, or wisdom? Have you not boasted of something **'you have received, as though you had not received it'**? Have you not gloried in anything, **'except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ'**? (Galatians 6:14) Have you not sought after or desired the praise of men? Have you not taken pleasure in it? If so, you see the way you are to take. If you have fallen through pride, **'humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and he will exalt you in due time'**. (1 Peter 5:6) Have not you forced him to depart from you by giving place to anger? Have not you **'fretted yourself because of evildoers'**, or **'been envious against the**

workers of iniquity' (Psalm 37:1)? Have you not been offended at any of your brothers, looking at their real, or imagined, sins, so as to fall into sin yourself against the great law of love, by estranging your heart from them?

Then look to the Lord, that you may renew your strength; that all this sharpness and coldness may be done away with; that love, and peace, and joy may return altogether, and you may be invariably kind to each other, and **'tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.'** (Ephesians 4:32) Have you not given way to any foolish desire? To any kind or degree of extreme affection? How, then, can the love of God have a place in your heart till you put away your idols? **'Do not be deceived, God is not mocked'**. (Galatians 6:7) He will not dwell in a divided heart. As long, therefore, as you cherish Delilah in your bosom, he has no place there. It is vain to hope for a recovery of his light till you pluck out the right eye, and cast it from you. O let there be a delay no longer! Cry to him, that he may enable you so to do! Bewail your own impotence and helplessness; and, the Lord, being your helper, will assist you in entering in at the narrow gate. Take the kingdom of heaven by violence! Cast out every idol from his sanctuary, and the glory of the Lord will soon appear.

Perhaps it is this very thing, this lack of striving, this spiritual slackness, which keeps your soul in darkness. You dwell at ease in the land; there is no war in your land; and so you are quiet and unconcerned. You go on in the same even track of outward duty, and are content to abide there. And do you wonder, meantime, that your soul is dead? O stir yourself up before the Lord! Arise, and shake yourself from the dust; wrestle with God for the mighty blessing; pour out your soul to God in prayer, and continue in it with all perseverance! Watch! Awake out of sleep, stay awake! Otherwise there is nothing to be expected, but that you will be alienated more and more from the light and life of God.

If, on the most detailed and most impartial examination of yourself, you cannot discern that at present you have give way either to spiritual laziness, or any other inward or outward sin, then call to mind the time that is past. Consider your former feelings, your words, and your actions. Have these been right before the Lord? **'Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still'** (Psalm 4:4), and desire him to test the ground of your heart, and bring to your remembrance whatever has at any time offended the eyes of his glory. If the guilt of any unrepented sin remains on your soul, it cannot be but you will remain in darkness till, having been renewed by repentance, you are again washed by faith in **'the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness'**. (Zechariah 13:1)

Entirely different will be the manner of the cure, if the cause of the disease is not sin but ignorance. It may be, ignorance of the meaning of Scripture; perhaps due to ignorant commentators – ignorant, at least, in this respect, that however knowing and learned they may be in other fields, they know nothing of spiritual truth. And, in this case, ignorance must be removed before we can remove the darkness that come with it. We must know the true meaning of those texts which have been misunderstood. My sermon does not permit me to consider all the passages of Scripture which have been pressed into this service. I shall just mention two or three which are frequently brought to prove that all believers must, sooner or later, **'walk in darkness'**.

(1) Isaiah 50:10

'Who is among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of his Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon his God.'

How does it appear, either from the text or context, that the person here spoken about ever had light? One who is convinced of sin fears the Lord, and obeys the voice of his servant.

And him we should advise, though his soul is still dark, and has never seen the light of God's countenance, that he should trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon his God. This text, therefore, proves nothing less than that a believer in Christ must sometimes walk in darkness.

(2) Hosea 2:14

'Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her.'

This is another text that is thought to teach the same doctrine. Therefore, it has been inferred that God will bring every believer into the wilderness, into a state of deadness and darkness. But it is certain the text speaks no such thing, for it does not appear that it speaks of particular believers at all. It obviously refers to the Jewish nation; and, perhaps, to that only. But if it is applicable to particular individuals, the plain meaning of it is this: 'I will draw him by love; I will next convict him of sin; and then comfort him by thy pardoning mercy.'

(3) John 16:22

'Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.'

A third scripture, from whence the same inference has been drawn, is the one above. This is supposed to imply that God would, after a time, withdraw himself from all believers, and that they could not, till after they had sorrowed, have the joy which no one could take from them. But the whole context shows that our Lord is here speaking personally to the apostles, and no others, and that he is speaking concerning those particular events concerning his own death and resurrection.

'A little while', says he, **'and you will not see me;'** (that is, while I am in the grave) **'and again a little while, and you will see me,'** (when I am risen from the dead). (John 16:16) **'You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.'** (John 16:20) 'You now have sorrow because I am about to be taken from you; but I will see you again after my resurrection, and your heart will rejoice, and your joy, which I will then give you, no one will take away from you.' All this we know was literally fulfilled in every particular for the apostles. But no inference can be drawn from this with regard to God's dealings with believers in general.

(4) 1 Peter 4:12

'Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.'

This is a fourth text (and I will mention no more) which has been frequently quoted as proof of the same doctrine. But this is fully as foreign to the point as the preceding. The text, literally rendered, runs thus:

'Beloved, do not wonder at the burning which is among you, which is for your testing.'

Now, however this may be accommodated to inward trials, in a secondary sense, yet, primarily, it doubtless refers to martyrdom and the sufferings connected with it. Therefore, there is nothing in this text that serves the purpose for which it is quoted. And we may

challenge anyone to bring one text, either from the Old or New Testament, which is any more to the purpose than this.

‘But is not darkness much more profitable for the soul than light? Is not the work of God in the heart most swiftly and effectively carried on during a state of inward suffering? Is not a believer more swiftly and thoroughly purified by sorrow than by joy, by anguish, and pain, and distress, and spiritual martyrdoms, than by continual peace?’ So the Mystics teach; so it is written in their books, but not in the oracles of God. The Scripture nowhere says, that the absence of God best perfects his work in the heart! Rather, his presence, and a clear communion with the Father and the Son. A strong consciousness of this will do more in an hour than his absence in an age. Joy in the Holy Spirit will far more effectively purify the soul than the want of that joy; and the peace of God is the best means of refining the soul from the dross of earthly affections. Away then with the idle conceit that the kingdom of God is divided against itself; that the peace of God, and, joy in the Holy Spirit, are obstructive of righteousness; and that we are saved not by faith, but by unbelief; not by hope, but by despair!

So long as men dream in this way, they may indeed **‘walk in darkness’**. Nor can the effect cease till the cause is removed. But yet we must not imagine it will immediately cease, even when the cause is no more. When either ignorance or sin has caused darkness, one or the other may be removed, and yet the light which was obstructed by them may not immediately return. As it is the free gift of God, he may restore it, sooner or later, as it pleases him. In the case of sin, we cannot reasonably expect that it should immediately return. The sin began before the punishment, which may, therefore, rightly remain after the sin is at an end. And even in the natural course of things, though a wound cannot be healed while the dart is sticking in the flesh, yet neither is it healed as soon as the dart is drawn out; but soreness and pain may remain long after.

Lastly, if darkness come with many and heavy and unexpected temptations, the best way to remove and prevent this is to teach believers always to expect temptation, seeing they dwell in an evil world among wicked, subtle, malicious spirits, and possess a heart capable of all evil. Convince them that the whole work of sanctification is not, as they imagine, done at once; that when they first believe, they are only like new-born babes who are gradually to grow up, and may expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ.

Above all, let them be instructed, when the storm is upon them, not to reason with the devil but to pray; to pour out their souls before God, and show him their trouble. And these are the ones to whom, mainly, we are to apply the great and precious promises; not to the ignorant, till the ignorance is removed, much less to the impenitent sinner. To these we may largely and affectionately declare the loving-kindness of God our Saviour, and dwell upon his tender mercies which have been ever of old. Here we may trust the faithfulness of God, whose word is tested to the uttermost, and the virtue of that blood which was shed for us, to cleanse us from all sin. And God will then bear witness to his word, and bring their souls out of trouble. He will say, **‘Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.’** (Isaiah 60:1) Yes; and that light, if you walk humbly and closely with God, will **‘shine ever brighter unto the perfect day.’** (Proverbs 4:18)

STUDY 12

THIRD EXHORTATION AND WARNING

HEBREWS 4:11-13

EXPOSITION

Let us now turn to another warning passage found here in Hebrews 4:11-13. In chapter 3 we saw that Moses failed. He failed in a household in which he was a servant. He failed to bring his household – the nation of Israel – into the promised land of rest. We read in 3: 16-19 – **‘For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.’**

It was Joshua who brought them safely in. And we too have a Joshua, a ‘Jehovah saves’; and if we will, and may, come to him, then he comes with these words of invitation, **‘Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.’** Joshua, with the nation of Israel of old, is a ‘type’ of Christ. But Jesus [Joshua] Christ is the true source of salvation. He sustains us in it, for he not only saves us, but he keeps us.

THE FIRST THREE WARNINGS

Now, in 4:11-13, we come to the third warning of the letter. Each of the seven warnings throughout the letter is designed to urge us on when we are tempted to grow slack, when we are tempted to let our faith go. Also, these warnings help to explain why some, who started well enough, have fallen away into grievous and sinful backsliding. Now, in this warning – this third warning – we are directed to look back to unbelieving Israel. They perished in the desert during their forty years of wandering. Why so? Because, indicates the writer to the Hebrews here, they refused to obey God’s word.

Consider 3:7 – **‘Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”** Here is direct confirmation that they hardened their hearts. Also, in 3:15, we read – **‘... while it is said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the day of rebellion.”** Then Hebrews 4:7 declares, **‘... again he designates a certain day, saying in David ... “Today, if you will**

hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” On these three occasions, the writer quotes Psalm 95:7.

The first warning tells us to ensure that we are truly saved – ‘... **how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?**’ (2:3) Do not neglect to grasp hold of it. Make sure that you have it. That is the first warning.

The second warning is found in 3:7-8, where we are warned of the possibility of refusing to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit – ‘**Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion”**’. How strange to think that there were those who were able to resist the very voice of the Holy Spirit!

THE WORD OF GOD

Now, the third warning takes us a little further, for it tells us that we harden our hearts against the Holy Spirit when we refuse to listen to, and obey, the Word of God, as we read the Bible. The first thing we must ask our congregation, as faithful gospel preachers, is, ‘Are you sure that you are saved? The second thing is, ‘Do not refuse the voice of the Holy Spirit.’ And the third thing, ‘Listen carefully to the Bible, and obey it, for it is the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 declares – ‘**For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.**’

So there are three warnings. This one, the third one, is about the Bible. The Bible is like a fire and a hammer (Jeremiah 23:29); and the Bible is also like a sword. (Ephesians 6:17) All these descriptions are ways in which the Bible describes itself. The Bible is designed to show us our need; it guides us into the truth; and it guards us against our spiritual enemies. Paul declares that the Bible is our weapon of attack against Satan – ‘...**the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.**’

When we backslide – and God forbid that we should! – then our feeding on the Word of God is one of the very first things that are given up. It is a sure sign of backsliding when we no longer feed on the Word of God. A strong Christian is always firmly grounded on that Word.

Do you remember when Paul went to the town of Berea? There he went to the synagogue of the Jews. In Acts 17:10-12, we have a memorable description of the honourable Bereans. They would not take Paul’s word for granted but checked it against the Bible; and, although they were not yet Christians, they automatically performed that vital and spiritual task. ‘**Then the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These ... received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.** The result of this examination of the Scriptures is described in the next verse – ‘**Therefore many of them believed**’.

This was a work of the Spirit, and is repeated often enough when unbelievers come under the preaching of the Word. These Berean Christians went home and studied their own Bible in order to check what Paul was preaching to them. We must also instruct our congregations to do that, to go home and check that what they have heard in the message is true, and if it truly is from the Scriptures.

Jesus, in a prayer, described the Bible as the word of truth – ‘**Your word is truth.**’ (John 17:17) The Bible is inspired by God, and is the unerring Word of God. This point is vital, and is basic for all gospel ministry. We must constantly challenge our hearers about it, perhaps in these words -

‘How do you stand in relation to this Word of truth? Do you read it, do you feed on it, do you obey it? Why is the Bible so important to you? Well, there are three reasons. The first and obvious reason is that no one can know the Lord Jesus Christ without it. There is no knowledge of him apart from the Scriptures. It is impossible to come to him as Saviour and Lord without knowing him through the Word of God. The second thing is that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures. He is both author and interpreter of them. And the third is that believers are kept spiritually fit and healthy through reading, and feeding on, the Word of God.’

So now, in this Study, we come to Hebrews 4:11-13. We are told three things about the Bible. **Firstly**, it warns us against disobeying the Word of God. (11) **Secondly**, it goes on to describe the activity of God’s Word in our lives. (12) And **thirdly**, it brings sinners before the very holiness of God. (13) How did the Bible come into existence? **‘...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.’** (2 Peter 1:20-21) Some have spent their lifetimes in copying the Bible, and in translating it. Some have been burnt at the stake for being loyal to it, and desiring to spread the Word throughout the world. As gospel preachers, we must constantly challenge ourselves with these questions: ‘What does the Bible mean to us? Do we believe it? Do we preach it? Do we apply it to ourselves and our hearers?’

1. A warning against disobeying God’s Word

Let us look first of all, then, at verse 11. There is a direct connection between obedience to God’s Word and entering into God’s ‘rest’. **‘Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience.’** There is a clear warning here against disobeying God’s word, mentioned in the next verse.

(1) You will recognise a note of urgency here with the appearance of the word **‘therefore’**, and this refers back to 4:9 – **‘There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.’** How may we enter into this Sabbath rest, this right relationship with God with all its many blessings? By being obedient to the Word of God.

That is how we enter into ‘rest’; by being obedient to what the Bible lays down as the conditions of that ‘rest’, which are faith in Christ and an absolute trust in his death upon the cross for our sins and for our salvation. If we are to enter into that ‘rest’, we must therefore obey God’s word. Now, the blessings of God – the blessings of this rest – as we discovered earlier, are available now. We do not need to wait for them. We receive them as they are revealed in the Word. It is like ploughing a furrow in a field where under the earth there are buried precious stones. As we plough, they become exposed, and as we go along we pick them up. As we come to the Bible, and read it, and study it, these precious things – these blessings of God – are thrown up as we plough our furrow. We pick them up and appropriate them, and make them ours. Here is a promise from God. Here is a blessing for me. And we take it for ourselves, and, indeed, it does become a blessing to us.

There are also commands in the Bible, and these we must obey. By one act of disobedience, sin entered into the whole world. When Adam disobeyed God’s command, the whole of mankind came under the curse of that sin. By our disobedience, we may cut ourselves off from receiving God’s blessings. Let us examine ourselves each day to look for signs of wilful disobedience, when we hold out against God’s rightful command in our lives, and thus lose his blessings. This is an urgent task.

(2) There is also a call to strenuous effort, for the writer continues, **‘...be diligent to enter that rest’**. Now **‘diligent’** is a strong word. It means to persevere. It is hard work being a

Christian. We get tired in the work. We seem to have so little time, and yet we make time to stop and eat a meal. We would be very foolish if we did not, for without food we would become weak and die. Now, if we can make time amid all our activities to eat physical food, how much more should we make time to read and to study the Word of God, which feeds our souls.

We need the strong meat of the Word. We need to plough a deep furrow into the Word of God. We should be examples to our hearers, and expose their lack of maturity. Consider the heartache of the writer in Hebrews 5:11 – **'...of whom we have much to say, and things hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.'** So even this writer to the Hebrews found problems among his congregations in those far away days, just as we do today!

How frustrating it is for preachers to spend so much time and effort in Bible study, that when they come to preach, they find that those who would benefit the most are not there, or do not respond to what is preached. Well, those who make no effort, those who do not strive, will gain no blessing, and among such there will be some who will fall away. We ourselves need to **'be diligent'**, and the word of God will strengthen us in our faith to the end. I have never heard of anyone who is diligent in the Word of God who has fallen away. The Bible enables us to run over many obstacles. **'Therefore, since we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us'**. (12:1) Endurance and perseverance comes from the strengthening of God's Word. **'For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.'** (Romans 15:4) Notice also 13:20, where the will of God is mentioned – **'Now may the God of peace, who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do his will'**. How can we know the will of God? By reading the Scriptures. The Bible helps us deal with our sinful will, and encourages us to embrace God's perfect will.

Well, why this note of urgency? Why all this effort? Why all this diligence? The answer is in verse 11 – **'... lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience.'** We can almost detect the tears in this pastor's voice – **'lest anyone should fall'**. We can all give examples of what happens to those who once professed a faith, but are now right away from it. That is why we should be diligent.

Now, the people of Israel had witnessed God working on their behalf. They were a privileged people. Think of what God did for them. They had seen the angel of death coming over the whole land of Egypt. They had seen the death of the first-born Egyptians, and their own families saved who were covered with the blood sprinkled on the doors of their houses. They had gone out from slavery. They were able to walk through the Dead Sea on dry land when God parted the waters. When they grew hungry, they saw how God provided faithfully each day, except the Sabbath, manna for forty years. They saw Moses strike the rock when they were thirsty in the desert, produced living waters for them. Yet we read that they were 'disobedient'. How amazing it is to read that although they saw God's work at first hand, yet they remained unmoved and untouched in their hearts.

What a warning there is there in Jude verse 5! **'Now I want to remind you, though you once knew this that the Lord, having saved a people out of the land of Egypt,**

afterwards destroyed those who did not believe.' And because they did not believe, they were disobedient; and because they were disobedient, they were destroyed. How sad to see members of our own congregation who have seen God at work in other people's lives, who have seen others in the fellowship come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and yet remain untouched by it! They do not grow in the Christian life because they have not started in it. They are like the Israelites, who went on to be destroyed in the desert.

2. A description of the activities of God's Word

Verse 12 goes on to describe how the Word of God works in us. It says first of all that it is **'living and powerful'**. It speaks God's Word to us. When we open it and read, we find God speaking our minds and hearts and consciences. That is its function. The Bible is not a book full of dead letters; it is the living word. When Stephen faced his accusers in the Sanhedrin court, and spoke to those who sat on the seat of Moses with all their learning, he said to them, **'This is he [Moses] who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt.'** (Acts 7:38-39) Those living oracles are the living words of God in the Bible. They bring spiritual life to us; and they sustain us in our faith.

Here is an example of the power of the Word of God. Some years ago, there was a beggar on the outskirts of a small town in China. One of the missionaries had been distributing Christian literature in that town. He had handed over a tract to a man in the street. The man took it, and read it, and became so angry about it that he tore it up and threw the pieces down on the ground, and walked away. Now, there came a storm that night, and the rain took one of the pieces to the edge of the town. The beggar saw this piece of paper, and saw some writing on it in Chinese characters. He picked it up and read the words of John 3:16 on it. That man became a Christian in the instant he read the words.

The Word has never lost its power, and is just as transforming today as it was when it was written. It is **'living and powerful'**. The Bible touches the conscience. When Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost, we read, **'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"'** (Acts 2:37) What had they heard? They had heard the words of Peter. And what were the words of Peter? They came from Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110. Quoting from these Scriptures, Peter concluded, 'You have rejected and put to death your Messiah, and thus', by implication, 'you have resisted the Holy Spirit!' That is what they heard, and that is why they were cut to the heart. The Word of God is **'...sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.'** The **'two edged sword'** was not the usual sword the Roman soldier held. It was kept close to kill the enemy. He carried two swords. One sword had only one edge, and was used for hacking and disabling. The two-edged sword was designed to kill. That was its purpose. A one-edged sword hacked but a two-edged sword penetrated. One disabled but the other killed. Now, the Bible kills the sinner. It kills his pride, it kills his good works, it kills his self-righteousness, it kills his false security, it kills his own religious ideas, until he cries out like they did at Pentecost, **'Brothers, what shall we do?'** (Acts 2:27)

It is at this point that the Word of God becomes his healer. It becomes his source of spiritual resurrection and eternal life through Christ, and it brings him to the truth as it is in Jesus. Jesus said, **'And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free ... Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.'** (John 8:32, 36) If we know the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ, and believe in him, we are set free. The Scriptures bring us the truth about Jesus Christ; and if we have Christ, we are set free.

The Bible's '**piercing**' penetrates right to the very depths of our being. It reaches needs that we may not be aware of. It effects a great change at a very deep level of our lives. That is why Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 – '**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.**' It has an all-round ministry, and seeks out and meets every human spiritual need.

The Bible also discerns our true motives and thoughts. God knows our hearts that they are evil and corrupt, as Jesus said. (Matthew 15:18-19) We may be outwardly cheerful, but God knows our heartaches and our burdens. We may be outwardly respectable, but God sees our hidden crippling sins. Very quickly, his Word finds us out. It exposes all hypocrites before God. Instead, they prefer to lurk in the dark, without the Word of God. The unbeliever dislikes the Bible. He will not want to read it or study it. But the one who loves Jesus will love the Bible, for it constantly speaks of him. He enjoys it like King David, who declared, '**Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.**' (Psalm 119:97) It brings constant blessings.

3. The effects of God's Word

Lastly, here is the object of God's word – '**And there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**' (13) The Bible brings us to face up to the very holiness of God. God is revealed throughout the Scriptures as a holy God. The Scriptures also reveal how we may be rid of the sin that separates us from a holy God. So not only does it diagnose the problem, but the Bible provides us with the remedy.

Well, the Bible takes us forward in time to the great Day of Judgement, the day when all the books will be opened and read. Nothing will be hidden on that day: all thoughts and words and deeds. All will be exposed to public view. The Bible does that to sinners now. It is a foretaste of the Day of Judgement. In their courts, the Romans had a particular practice, at the end of a case, when all the evidence had been presented, the defence made, and the verdict brought in, one of the court officials would come to the accused and would hold him by the head direct his gaze to the judge so that he would have to look the judge straight in the eye. There would be no head down, no trying to hide from the truth, when the sentence is pronounced. All will be '**naked and open**' on the great Day of Judgement.

The Bible, the very Word of God, does the same. If we hide our head, and avert our gaze, and refuse the Word of God now, we will have to face it fully on that day. This is the God '**to whom we must give an account.**' he cannot be fooled. The Apostle Paul declares – '**Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to the flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.**' (Galatians 6:7-8)

Well, that is not a good ending to a sermon, is it? The gospel message is that when every believer stands before the great throne in the Day of Judgement, the book will contain only blank pages. When Jesus died on the cross, he died to blot out all our transgressions. The book will say simply, 'Refer to the Book of Life'. Their names were transferred by Christ to that Book when they received him as their Saviour. Our sermon might end like this -

'Have you received Christ as your Saviour? You see, we have a great high priest who has entered heaven to transfer the name of every believer into the Book of Life, so that all his sins may be blotted out. That is why the next words in this chapter are, 'Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.'

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 12

A. QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read Jeremiah 23:29

1. Which two words are used here to describe the Word of God?
2. How do these two words describe the activities of the Bible?
3. What is the connection between these two words and verses 30-38?

Read Ephesians 6:17

4. What is 'the sword of the Spirit'?
5. Why is the Holy Spirit mentioned?
6. It has been said that all the other parts of the Christian's armour are defensive, and only the sword is offensive. Explain this statement.

Read Acts 17:10-12

7. Why were the Bereans described as 'fair-minded'?
8. What was the result of this Bible-searching?

Read John 17:17

9. What did Jesus say was the outstanding characteristic of the Bible?

Read 2 Peter 1:20-21

10. What must we say about Scripture?
11. Who wrote the Scriptures?
12. Would the prophetic Word ever have come if it has been left to man?

Read Romans 15:4

13. Why was the Bible written?
14. What does the 'patience and comfort' of Scripture give us?

Read Jude verse 4

15. How did false teachers get into the church?
16. What was the attitude of God towards them?
17. What sort of men were they?
18. What did they do with the grace of God?
19. What two things did they deny?

Read Acts 7:38-39

20. Who was speaking on this occasion?
21. What did God give to Moses?
22. What two things did the people of Israel do about this?

Read Acts 2:37

23. Who was preaching on this occasion?
24. What did the people hear from Peter? (See verse 36)
25. What effect did this sermon have on the hearers?
26. What did the hearers ask the preacher?
27. Which two books in the Bible had the preacher quoted? (See the Exposition)

Read John 8:32, 36

28. Where is 'the truth' Jesus referred to?

29. What is the effect of knowing and accepting the truth?
30. What is the truth of the Scriptures about? (See verse 36)

Read 2 Timothy 3:16

31. Is there any part of Scripture that is not inspired?
32. Why does Paul consider Bible study good?

Read Psalm 119:97

33. What was The Psalmist's attitude to the Bible?
34. How often did he meditate on it?

Read Galatians 6:6-8

35. In the light of verse 6, who can be deceived in verse 7?
36. What is the result of indulging and living according to the flesh?
37. What is the best way to live?
38. What is the result of question 37?

B. QUESTIONS ON THE EXPOSITION

1. Give a summary of the first three exhortation and warning passages in Hebrews.
2. How does the Word of God bring believers to rest in God alone for their salvation?

C. PRACTICAL

Write out fully the meaning of this statement concerning the Bible as if you were explaining it to the members of your church.

Finally, preach a sermon to your congregation on the meaning of Hebrews 4:12-13.

Its title will be: THE WORD OF GOD.

- (a) The three points of the sermon will be:
 - The living and powerful Word (12a)
 - The penetrating Word (12b)
 - The exposing Word (13)
- (b) Include all other Bible verses used to prove these points.
- (c) Write out your conclusion, and say how you used this sermon to make an evangelistic appeal at the end.

Here is the classic fight between the devil and the pilgrim. The 'sword of the Spirit' plays a very important part in that battle. There are no questions on this extract. May it be of great spiritual benefit to you! Perhaps you will enjoy telling this story to your congregation.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS – John Bunyan

The pilgrim's fight with his sword against Apollyon.

(A version in easier English by Geoffrey Stonier)

Now, in the Valley of Humiliation, poor Christian found it hard going; for he had only gone a little way before he saw a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him. His name was Apollyon. Then Christian began to feel afraid, and to wonder in his mind whether he should go back or stand his ground. But he remembered that he had no armour for his back, so he thought that to turn his back on him might give him a chance to pierce him through with his darts. Therefore, he decided to stand his ground; 'for', thought he, 'if saving my life is all there is to lose, this would be the best way to stand.'

So he went on, and Apollyon met him. Now, the monster was hideous to look at. He was clothed with scales like a fish, and they were his pride and joy. He had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his stomach came fire and smoke. His mouth was like the mouth of a lion. When he came up to Christian, he looked at him with disdain, and began to question him.

'Where have you come from, and where are you going?' Christian replied, 'I have come from the City of Destruction which is the place of all evil, and am going to the City of Zion.' Apollyon replied, 'By this, I see that you are one of my subjects; for all that country is mine, and I am the prince and god of it. How is it, then, that you are running away from your king? If I had no hope that you would perform some more service for me, I would strike you now, with one blow, to the ground.'

'I was indeed born in your dominions', said Christian, 'but your service was severe and your wages not fit to live on; for the wages of sin is death. Therefore, when I grew up, I did as other thoughtful people do, and saw how I might improve myself.' Apollyon said, 'There is no prince who will easily lose his subjects, neither will I lose you. But since you complain of your service and wages, be content to go back, and, what our country can afford, I promise to give you.'

Christian exclaimed, 'But I now belong to another, even to the King of all princes; and how can I in fairness go back to you?' Apollyon replied, 'You have done as the proverb says, you have exchanged a bad for a worse! But you will find that it is usual for those who have professed to be his servants, after a while, to give him the slip and return to me. If you do this, all will be well.'

Christian declared, 'I have given him my faith, and sworn allegiance to him. How, then, can I go back from this and not be hanged as a traitor?' To which Apollyon replied, 'You did the same to me, and yet I am willing to pass it over if you will yet return to me.' Christian said, 'What I used to do, I did in ignorance; and, besides, I believe that the Prince, under whose banner I now stand, is able to forgive me. Yes; and to pardon also what I did when I served you. And, besides, O destroying Apollyon, to speak the truth, I like his service, his wages, his servants, his government, his company and country better than yours. Therefore, stop trying to persuade me further. I am his servant, and I will follow him.'

'Think again', said Apollyon, 'when you are more sober, of what you will come against on the way that you have taken. You must know that on the whole his servants come to a bad end because they are transgressors against me and my way. How many of them have been put to a shameful death! And besides, you count his service better than mine, whereas he has never come from the place where is lives to deliver any who serve him out of the hands of his enemies. But as for me, how many times, as all the world knows, have I delivered,

either by power or deceit, those who faithfully serve me, from him and his, though taken by them! And so I will deliver you.'

Christian replied, 'He holds back from delivering them in order to test their love, whether they will stick to him to the end. And as for the bad end you say they will come to, that is the most glorious part of it. They do not look for present deliverance, for they stand firm for the glory that is to come to them. Then they will have it when their Prince comes in his glory and in the glory of the angels.' Apollyon asked, 'You have already been unfaithful in your service for him. How do you expect to receive any wages from him?' Christian answered, 'How, O Apollyon, have I been unfaithful to him?' To which question Apollyon answered, 'You fainted when you first set out, when you were almost choked in the Gulf of Despond. You tried to get rid of your burden, whereas you should have waited until your Prince had taken it off your back. You sinfully went to sleep and lost your precious things. You almost went back when you saw the lions. And when you talk about all you have seen and heard on your journey, are you not full of pride in all you say and do?'

'All this is true', agreed Christian, 'and many other things that you have left out. But this Prince whom I serve and honour is merciful and ready to forgive. But besides, these things happened to me in your country; for there I sucked them in and groaned under them. I have been sorrowful for them, and have obtained pardon from my Prince.'

Then Apollyon broke into a fearful rage, saying, 'I am an enemy of this Prince; I hate his person, his laws, and his people. I have come out on purpose to stand against you.' Christian replied, 'Apollyon, beware what you are doing! For I am standing in the King's highway, the way of holiness. Therefore take care what you do.'

Apollyon then straddled the whole of the way, and said, 'I have no fear in this matter. Prepare to die; for I swear by my infernal den that you will go no further. Here I will spill out your soul.' And with that he threw a flaming dart at Christian's breast. But Christian held up the shield in his hand, and caught it, and so prevented any danger from that.

Then Christian drew his sword, for he saw that it was time to defend himself. Apollyon, as fast as he could, threw darts as thick as hail, by which, despite all that Christian could do to dodge them, was wounded by Apollyon in his head, his hand, and his foot. This made Christian fall back a little. Apollyon, therefore, continued in his evil work, but Christian again took courage, and resisted as well as he could. This severe fight lasted more than half a day, till Christian was almost spent. For you must know that Christian, because of his wounds, was growing weaker and weaker.

When Apollyon saw an opportunity, he began to get closer to Christian; and wrestling with him, he gave him a dreadful fall. And with that, Christian's sword flew out of his hand. Then Apollyon said, 'I am sure of you now!' And with that, he almost choked him to death, so that Christian began to despair of his life. But, as God would have it, while Apollyon was about to deliver his last blow to make an end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out his hand for his sword. And catching it, he said, 'Do not rejoice against me, O my enemy! When I fall, I will arise again.' (Micah 7:8) And with that, he gave Apollyon a deadly thrust, which made his enemy fall back, like one who had received a mortal wound.

When Christian saw that, he attacked him again, saying, 'No; in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.' (Romans 8:37-39). And with that, Apollyon spread out his dragon's wings, and flew away, so that Christian did not see him again.

This fight no one can imagine, unless he saw it and heard it, like I did. What yelling and hideous roaring Apollyon made all the time of the fight! He was roaring like a dragon. And on Christian's side, what sighs and groans burst out from his heart! I never saw him smile

once until he saw that he had wounded Apollyon with his two-edged sword. Then, indeed, he did smile, and look upwards! But it was the most dreadful sight I have ever seen.

When the battle was over, Christian declared, 'I will here give thanks to him who delivered me out of the mouth of the lion, to him who helped me fight against Apollyon. And this he did.

STUDY 13

OUR HIGH PRIEST

HEBREWS 4: 14–16

EXPOSITION

We now consider these three further verses –

‘Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.’

GREATER THAN MOSES OR JOSHUA

Now, we have been discovering in this Letter to the Hebrews that through the Lord Jesus all Christians become members of what Paul calls **‘the household of faith’**. (Galatians 6:10) This comes about through simple faith in the Saviour. We affirm that those who believe in him have **‘the right to become children of God’**. (John 1:12) If we look back to Hebrews 3:6, we find these words – **‘...but Christ as a son [was] over his own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.’** So by believing in Christ, they become members of Christ’s household, of that household of God over which Christ has been made the head. The same passage goes on to say that if believers are obedient to him, then they will enter into the blessings of salvation, just as Israel was brought out of slavery by Moses and brought by Joshua into the blessing of the Promised Land.

There is, says the writer to the Hebrews, a greater than Joshua (4:8–9). The Hebrew name for Jesus was Yeshua (Joshua). Jesus is the greater Joshua. Just as Joshua brought the people of Israel out from their wilderness wanderings into the Promised Land, so our Joshua, the Lord Jesus, brings us into the Promised Land which he calls **‘that rest’**. Here is the challenge every gospel preacher must present to his congregation – **‘Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest’** (4:11), for it is only by faith in Christ that we receive salvation. In obedience to him, we receive all the blessings that come with salvation. Here, then, is the challenge the gospel preacher should present to his hearers – **‘...therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience.’** Let us be careful to enter into that rest, and all the blessings that come to the members of this household. We must be diligent; we must be obedient; we must want to enter into that rest.

THE GREAT BLESSING OF ‘REST’

Now, here is vital question – ‘What is the greatest blessing of the Christian life, the greatest blessing of entering into what the writer to the Hebrews calls **‘that rest’**? Well, I believe that the right answer takes us back to Adam and Eve before they fell into sin. Here was an unhindered communion with the God who created them. We recall how this sinless and holy and perfect relationship came with their creation, and how God desired to walk with them in

the garden in the cool of the evening. (Genesis 3:8) Surely that is the greatest blessing we can experience in the Christian life – an unhindered communion, and a sense of the immediate presence of our Creator. This was re-established through the work of the Lord Jesus, who grants us access to God. What a contrast with our former state when we were once far away from God because of our sin!

Through Christ, we have direct access into the very presence of a holy God; and that is the greatest blessing of the Christian life. This access is through Christ's finished work on the Cross, where his saving work was an offering for sin which acted as a barrier to fellowship with God. Sin is a great gulf fixed between the sinner and a holy God. (Isaiah 59:2) Our sins have cut us off from God. But when the sin is removed through the blood of Christ shed on the Cross, there is nothing that can hinder us from coming to God.

1. Jesus our great high priest (14)

And how did Jesus bring this about? By becoming our great high priest – **'Seeing then that we have a great high priest ...'** (14) Under the Old Covenant, it was the function of the high priest to come on the Day of Atonement and present the shed blood, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, to act as a mediator between an offended God, who is angry with sin, and sinners who cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness. The blood acts as an effective atonement, making sinners one with God, and bringing about a reconciliation. As the high priest made the offering, he acted as a mediator, a reconciler, bringing together a holy God and sinful men. Through Christ's shed blood, which was the price of sin, the two are made one.

The writer declares that Christ is the high priest. Hebrews 5:1–10, which we will consider in our next study, describes his qualifications. Our passage here in Hebrews 4:14–16 is a description of our high priest, emphasising his humanity, although not denying his deity – **'Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God ...'** (14)

The title **'Son of God'** is a reference to the deity of Christ; for it was only God who could reconcile sinners to himself. Man is totally incapable, and has no ability to be reconciled with God – **'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.'** (Romans 3:23) But God is incapable of sinning, and so, in his Son, he was able to do a work that made it possible for sinners to come to God. The other passage in Hebrews 5:1–10 describes Christ's humanity. That Jesus Christ was truly man we cannot doubt. In order for God to do this saving work for men, he had to come among men and be a man (5:7–8). Our writer actually uses the words, **'... in the days of his flesh'**. (5:7) We are reminded of the words, **'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'** (John 1:14), a reference to his human nature. He was not something other, something distant, something unrecognisable, but someone who is like us, **'yet without sin'**. (4:15)

This fact does not distance God from us, nor the work of his Son. It brings God close to us, and his saving work. We recognise in Jesus someone who is like us. Our writer continues in 5:7 – **'... in the days of his flesh, when he offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears'**. We read nowhere in the Old Testament that God cried. But Jesus did, just as we do. Verses 7–8 continue, **'... with cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.'**

What sort of high priest was Christ? The first thing we are told is that he is a **'great high priest'**. He is a superior high priest, a unique high priest. Why is he called **'great'**?

(1) Because that is how he is described in the Bible. **'Great'** is a word the writer to the Hebrews employed several times. He used it to show how much better is the Lord Jesus, and the work that he has accomplished, in comparison with the old covenant of Jewish Law. Jesus fulfilled the Law, and is so much greater – greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than Joshua, greater than Aaron, and greater than Melchizedek. All these great ones were the brightest and best of the old covenant; but Jesus was greater still. Our writer is appealing to the Jewish people to come out, for the Law is finished. The new covenant, which was established in Jesus Christ, is so much greater. This new covenant is entirely effective through the blood of Christ.

(2) He is great because of what he has done. What Jesus accomplished was great. That he is able to save to the uttermost those who believe in him is also great. (7:25) He is able to save from amongst the lowest and raise them to the highest. He has saved a great number – **'a great cloud of witnesses'** (12:1–2), from the time of the old covenant onwards – **'Therefore, since we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith'**.

(3) He is also great because he ascended into heaven; and no one can do that by his own merit. It says in 4:14 – **'...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens'**. In other words, he has gone to heaven. Jesus said to Nicodemus, **'No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.'** (John 3:13) The Son of Man, who descended from heaven, alone has the right to ascend into heaven. He earned the right to ascend into heaven and sit at God's right hand. (1:3) The One who is the true expression of God, the fullness of God, the very stamp of God's image, had the right to ascend to heaven. As the Son of Man, and as a human being, he shed his blood and died on the Cross. But as the Son of God, he had the right to ascend into heaven and have immediate access into the holiest of all. He is truly a man, yet he **'passed through the heavens'**. We sinners have a human representative in heaven who knows what it is like to be a man, and who is our mediator. He is one of us, one like us, who died for our sins because he had no sin. He bore our punishment and ascended to heaven to take up the work of being our mediator, a reconciler, a high priest, appearing before God on our behalf.

He is not only called **'Jesus'**, the man who has gone to heaven, but he is also **'the Son of God'**. Because he has a divine nature, he has the right to enter heaven. And, having entered heaven as our high priest, what is he doing there? He intercedes for us, speaking on our behalf. He acts as our representative, interceding and pleading for us on the grounds of his shed blood. On the basis of his sacrifice on the Cross, he has obtained forgiveness for us. If he had not accomplished that, he would not have earned the right to enter heaven. But, because he has passed through the heavens, because he sits at God's right hand, he pleads for us. Here is the ground of Christian assurance. We have Jesus, the Son of God, at God's right hand interceding on our behalf.

Now, when the Letter to the Hebrews was written, there was a high priest on earth whose name was Ananias, son of Nebedaeus. Ananias was no lover of Christianity, but interestingly enough, just a decade after the writing of this letter, there was no high priesthood left because he had been slaughtered, together with his whole family, in AD 70. That was the end of Judaism. Now, our writer says here **'...let us hold fast our confession.'** Believers confess Jesus Christ. They will not fall back into Judaism. **'Therefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to him, outside the camp, bearing his reproach.'** (13:12–13)

2. The humanity of our high priest (15)

Jesus is a great high priest. However, although he is such, he is just like us, and that is remarkable – **‘For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.’**

(1) Notice his sympathy in suffering.

The verb ‘sympathise’ comes from two Greek words –SYM (meaning, together with), and PATHEO (meaning, suffer). He is the One who suffered with us. He knows our sufferings because he himself has suffered. He knows weakness and pain, and the rejection of his friends and the betrayal of his intimates. He has felt suffering himself. He knows what it is to be tempted and burdened. He knows what it is to cry. He knows grief over the death of a loved one. Jesus knows all these things because he has experienced them. He is a high priest, who is like us because he has been through all human experiences.

Many years ago, William Edensor Littlewood (1831–1886) wrote a hymn about experiencing the love of Jesus in times of suffering. One of the verses expresses this thought:

**No throb nor throe that our hearts can know,
But he feels it above.**

**Jesus’ love, precious love
Boundless and pure and free!
Oh come to that love, wandering soul,
Jesus pleadeth for thee.**

(2) Notice his obedience in temptation.

We must also assure our hearers that Jesus knows what it is to be tempted. He has been through fiery trials. The devil tempted him in the wilderness, and nothing he could do could make him deviate from complete obedience to the will of God, something Adam completely failed in. And that is why Christ is called the Last Adam. (1 Corinthians 15:45) He became the first of a new race because he fulfilled the will of God in total obedience, to the satisfaction of God. Therefore he knows our weaknesses, and, because he himself resisted temptation, he can help those who trust in him.

Here is a point where a gospel appeal might be appropriate. It could go like this:

“I say to you, do you have a great high priest in heaven pleading on your behalf? Is Jesus the One to whom you come in all your need? Do you come to him because he is your Saviour? Do you come carrying heavy burdens? Do you come with anxieties and cares? Do you come with a heavy load of guilt for the sins of the past? Well, now, come to our great high priest who can help us in our need, for he is well able to bear it himself. He is our great high priest who sympathises because he is just like us, but without sin.”

3. The way to the Father (16)

Lastly, he has opened a way to come to God – **‘Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.’** (16) We may come to God with ‘boldness’. This is an astonishing word to use with regard to God, for it means to come with complete confidence. How can a sinner come into the presence of God with such boldness? Well, he may if his sins are forgiven. He can come boldly. He comes with boldness as a son of the king.

To what do we come? We come to **'the throne of grace'**, the same throne on which the Creator-King sits. And what is this 'throne of grace'? Is it not the place of effective prayer? And is there not another challenge here? Do we make use of this throne of grace as a place of prayer? Do we come boldly? Do we make great petitions to our king, for great prayers receive great answers? The throne of the king was a place where he granted his favours to those who petitioned him well. The throne was the place where the king made judgement: righting wrongs and effecting justice. This is the place to which we are invited, the 'throne of grace', not because we have earned the right to come, but because Jesus has made it possible to come. Here is a work of grace; and because it is grace, it is a free gift. Here is the seat of his grace and mercy. There is no place here for works; there is no place here for hesitation. We approach only on the grounds of God's grace and mercy. We enter this Holy of Holies, into the very presence of God, through the Lord Jesus Christ and his grace.

It is like entering a door with two doorposts. If we are afraid of coming to God, there are two words written each side of the door: grace on one side, and mercy on the other. Here is an encouragement to come boldly into the presence of God, for the verse continues. **'... that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'** So, then, come. We enter this Holy of Holies because we have a high priest who is interceding for us.

The apostle Paul declares – **'... in whom [Christ Jesus our Lord] we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.'** (Ephesians 3:12)

I do not believe that anyone has put it better than the Reformer John Calvin -

"The basis of this confidence is that the throne of God is not marked by a naked majesty which overpowers us, but is adorned with a new name, that of *grace*. This is the name that we ought always to keep in mind when we avoid the sight of God. If we turn our minds to it alone, the glory of God cannot but fill us with despair, such is the awfulness of his throne. Therefore, in order to help our lack of confidence, and to free our minds of all fears, the apostle clothes it with grace, and gives it a name that will encourage us by its sweetness. It is as if he were saying, 'Since God has fixed on his throne as it were a banner of grace and of fatherly love towards us, there is no reason why his majesty should ward us off from approaching him.' The sum of all this is that we may safely call on God, since we know that he is propitious [favourably disposed] to us."

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 13

A. QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read Galatians 6:10

1. What phrase is used here to describe the Church?
2. What must we do to improve the life of the Church?
3. How often should this be done?

Read John 1:12

4. What are the two conditions of becoming 'children of God'?
5. What 'right' to we receive?

Read Isaiah 59:2

6. What other word is used for 'sins' in this verse?
7. What are the two effects that sin has had on God and man?
8. How does salvation come to sinners? (See verse 1)

Read John 3:13

9. Who is speaking here?
10. Who came down from heaven?
11. Who is being addressed?

Read Hebrews 13:12–13

12. Who sanctified the people with his own blood?
13. Where did he suffer?
14. What was ‘the camp’ in the history of Israel?
15. What was at the centre of the camp?
16. What part did blood play in this place?
17. Where are the readers told to leave Judaism?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:45

18. Who was the first Adam?
19. Who was the last Adam?
20. Make a list of contrasts between the first and the last Adam

B. QUESTIONS ON THE EXPOSITION

Explain the three reasons why believers can approach the throne of grace with confidence.

Give definitions for the following words:

- the humanity of Christ
- the deity of Christ
- reconciliation
- high priest
- boldly
- the throne of grace

C. PRACTICAL

1. Discuss with another Pastor, or Elder, or Evangelist, how you would use Hebrews 4:14–16 in a sermon to encourage your congregation to pray more often and effectively.
 - (a) State the name of your helper.
 - (b) Give the date and place where your discussion took place.
 - (c) Send in a summary of your discussion.

Describe all the activities in your Church that involve prayer. Say how you hope to improve the prayer life of the members of your Church through your preaching.

STUDY 14

AARON THE HIGH PRIEST

HEBREWS 5:1-10

EXPOSITION

We now come to a new chapter. In our last Study, we considered the last three verses at the end of chapter 4 where Jesus is described as our compassionate and sympathetic high priest. He is vastly superior to all those high priests of the old covenant whose names can be found in some of the Old Testament books. The cry of the writer of this letter to Hebrew Christians is this: 'Come out of Judaism, and come to Jesus who is better. He is the fulfilment of all that Judaism longed for. He is the fulfilment of the Law of Moses and the fulfilment of the old covenant. He did what no Jewish high priest could do: he entered heaven in his own merits on the basis of an acceptable blood sacrifice, which he offered on the Cross.'

In 4:14, he states that **'we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens'**. This refers to Jesus. It follows on the basis laid down 1:3 – **'When he had by himself purged [cleansed] our sins, [he] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'**. No high priest ever entered heaven in his own merits, or offered an acceptable sacrifice for sin. Only Jesus Christ did.

Also, we read that we have a high priest who is both human and divine, who is in heaven with two natures. He has that nature which is signified by the name 'Jesus'. He is a man. He sympathises with us because he possesses our nature. But unlike us, and unlike any man descended from Adam, he defeated our greatest enemies – sin and death. We read in 4:15 – **'For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.'**

Next, we discover that, unlike the high priests of the old covenant, he himself is the ground of our assurance for the forgiveness of sin. We know that God accepts us for his sake. 4:16 states – **'Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.'**

So, here is a description of our high priest in chapter 4.

Now we go on to chapter 5:1-10, where we will consider the qualifications of Jesus as the Christians' high priest. What then are his qualifications for this office? There are two.

1. First qualification: his high priesthood was as human as Aaron's (1-4)

We read in these verses that he was a high priest in some ways like the order of Aaron. He was not a spirit. He actually died a fearful and painful death on a Roman cross. He felt the pain. He cried out, **'I thirst'**. (John 19:28) He experienced God deserting him as he bore the load of men's sins, crying out, **'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'** (Matthew 27:46) He shed his blood and died. He was a true man, and a Jew.

He was also a high priest like Aaron; but he was not of Aaron's line. His was a parallel line fulfilling all that Aaron foreshadowed. Aaron was the shadow, and Jesus was the substance; Aaron was the prototype, the picture, whereas Jesus was the anti-type and the fulfilment. What Aaron foreshadowed, the Lord Jesus fulfilled.

Now, what qualifications did a high priest after the order of Aaron need? Well, the first thing was, that he should be truly human. The high priest was a true man, representing men as a man among men. How could he be a true representative if he was not like the ones he was representing? In Hebrews 5:1, we read – **'For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.'** He must represent other men as a man just like them. He must be their true representative. He must be of their kind, able to bring on their behalf their gifts and sacrifices for sin to God. To do this, he must be like them to represent them. Jesus was truly human; but, unlike Aaron, he offered himself sinless as a sacrifice for sin.

The high priest also, being truly human, must reflect, as a man created by God, something of the image of God in his own nature. If he is representing men to God, he is also, at the same time, reflecting something of God in his own life, the God whom the high priest was chosen and called to love and to serve.

Verse 2 continues – **'He can have compassion [‘he’ being the high priest] on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also beset with weakness.'**

Now, what outstanding quality, reflecting something of God's character, could be found in the high priest? Well, his gentleness (or, as it is sometimes translated, his patience. He must not be impatient with those who are slow, those who are simple, and those who are proudly obstinate (often described in the Old Testament as 'stiff-necked'). The high priest must be patient; for if God were not patient, who among men would stand? In a moment, God would loose his judgements and consume us in our rebellion and obstinacy. But we praise him that he does not do this. He is forbearing and kind, **'not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.'** (2 Peter 3:9) He holds back his wrath until the day that he has appointed, when he will judge the world in righteousness by his Son. (Acts 17:31) He holds back; he is patient. He deals with us in grace, in kindness, in love, and in gentleness. He bears with us patiently. And that was the quality that should be found in the earthly high priest. So how much more was it pre-eminent in Jesus, who fulfilled the high priestly office perfectly in himself!

You will remember the occasion when Jesus and his disciples came to the borders of Samaria, and they were stoned. Now, the disciples reacted to this by saying in effect to Jesus – 'How terrible that they should reject you as the Messiah! Why do you not ask your Father to send down fire on all these villages and burn them up.' (Luke 9:54) That was what they said, and that was what they wanted. But Jesus rejected their anger, replying, 'No.' It was against his nature as a high priest who would offer himself as a sacrifice for sin on the Cross. He should reflect in himself this eminent quality of patience with sinners found in the Aaronic high priest.

In John 3:17 we find this declaration concerning the coming of Christ – **'God did not send the Son into the world to judge [or, condemn] the world, but that the world through him might be saved.'** A man condemned has no hope of salvation; so the judgement of God was held back for the cross, when it fell upon Christ. The wrath of God, instead of coming upon sinners, fell instead on Jesus, thus drawing forth from believers a great love for Christ the Saviour.

The high priest of the Aaronic line was very much aware of his own sin, and could not condemn another when he himself was a sinner. Jesus summed it up in his Sermon on the Mount, when he declared – **'And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye,**

but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me remove the speck from your eye”; and look, a plank is in your own eye?’ (Matthew 7:3-4) On another occasion, Jesus said, **‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.’** (John 8:7)

Because Christ was without sin, he bore our sin. This thing Aaron could never do because he was a sinner. He could not offer himself up as a perfect sacrifice; but Christ did. Oh, the patience of Jesus! Patience in calling us over such a long time; pleading with us so long to come to him for salvation. How long he gently called us to win us for himself! How long he bore with us until we came to him! How patient he is!

What a great theme this is for gospel preaching! What an opportunity for gospel preachers to plead with sinners to come to the Saviour, our patient and gentle high priest!

As truly human, the high priest offered up a sacrifice for his own sins as well as the sins of others. Thus we read in verse 3 – **‘Because of this [because he is troubled with weakness and sinfulness] he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.’**

JESUS IDENTIFIED HIMSELF WITH SINNERS IN HIS BAPTISM

How could Jesus identify with sinners when he was without sin? Well, we have that great event described in the Gospels, when Jesus came down to the banks of the Jordan river. And what was happening there? A prophet of God had appeared – the first for four centuries – who was causing a great stir in Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside by calling people to repent of their sin to prepare them for the coming of God’s Messiah who would bring judgement upon sin and sinners. They should prepare themselves. They must repent of their sins, and, as a sign of God’s cleansing of their sin, they must submit themselves to the little ceremony of being dipped in the water of the Jordan. It did not save them, it did not deliver them from their sin, but, then, neither did the sacrifices of the Old Testament. It was an outward sign of what God does spiritually inwardly.

Sinners came in great numbers. Even some of the Pharisees and the priests came, and some of the Roman soldiers. And then Jesus came. Immediately, John called out twice, **‘Behold the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world.’** (John 1:29, 36) Jesus said, ‘You must baptise me.’ ‘How can I baptise you?’ replied John, ‘for one thing, I am not worthy.’ ‘Ah! but do this’, said Jesus, ‘to fulfil all righteousness.’ (Matthew 3:15) What did he mean by that? He was declaring that although he himself was righteous before God, for he was sinless, he was declaring which side he was on. He identified himself with sinners. By allowing John to take him through the ceremony of baptism, he was declaring publicly to the world which side he was on. He often identified himself with sinners, and associated with evil people such as tax collectors and sinners. If anyone sought Jesus, he could be found often enough in the company of those whom the Pharisees called ‘sinners’!

In the same way, as he did at his baptism, Jesus took his stand as the high priest whose sacrifice before God would be acceptable. In this way, by identifying himself with sinners, Jesus was able to bear and take away our sin. Although he was sinless, he died in the place of sinners.

This teaching is called substitutionary atonement. It is the doctrine right at the heart of the Christian message; that Jesus, a sinless high priest, took upon himself in his sacrifice the sin of a countless number who would put their trust in him. **‘The Son of man ... [came] to give his life a ransom for many.’** (Mark 10:45). Now, young people in the congregation who are interested in soccer will understand the meaning of the word substitute very well, for it means, ‘in the place of’. When a player is injured, another comes into the game to take

his place. 2 Corinthians 5:21 is a verse that every gospel preacher should use constantly, for it is the plainest declaration of the substitutionary death of Christ on the Cross that can be found. It reads as follows – **‘[God] made him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.’** Is this not an excellent text from which to preach the gospel? The facts are these: Christ came to take away our sins, and bore the punishment for them in himself so that we might go free. That is at the heart of the Christian gospel.

Now, who made Christ to be sin? Oh, wonder of all wonders! It was God himself who made him to be sin. God saw his own sinless Son dying on the Cross, **‘who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by his stripes you were healed.’** (1 Peter 2:24).

Yes, indeed; Jesus was truly a man.

A HIGH PRIEST APPOINTED BY GOD

The second qualification for a high priest is found in verse 4. He must be appointed by God. No ordinary person could be the high priest, for he must be chosen by God himself. We read – **‘And no man takes this honour to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.’** There is a full account of this event in Exodus chapter 40. There, we are told that Aaron, and his sons after him, were appointed only from the tribe of Levi to be high priests. They were directly set apart by God for this office. Later, some of the people challenged this appointment. Now, when this was questioned, Moses took Aaron’s rod and placed it in the ground together with twelve other rods, each one representing a tribe. There it was left overnight before the glory of the Lord, beside the tabernacle. When they came in the morning, they discovered a great miracle, for the dead rod of Aaron had, miraculously, burst into almond flowers, with all its fragrance and loveliness. Indeed, this incident so impressed the writer to the Hebrews that he mentions it in 9:4. Here he describes the ark of the covenant, the box on which sat the mercy seat, where the blood of the covenant was sprinkled each year by the high priest. Now, in that box, there were several things. He says – **‘... the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna (God’s provision), Aaron’s rod that budded (God’s setting aside of a high priest to offer sacrifice), and the tablets of the covenant (which was God’s Law, convincing men of their sin, and their need to turn to God’s salvation through Christ’s sacrifice).’**

2. The second qualification: Jesus Christ is our great high priest (5-10)

Jesus Christ was not only a high priest like Aaron, but, as the writer so characteristically says, Jesus Christ was **a great high priest** (4:14). This statement implies that the priestly line of Aaron had come to an end in failure. But in Christ, we see the fulfilment of the high priestly office in Christ, and his success (verses 5-10). The two qualifications we have been considering – the humanity of the high priest, and the fact that he was appointed by God – our writer now treats in reverse order.

Firstly, he deals with the appointment of the high priest. How was Jesus appointed by God? We find the answer in verse 5-6. In verse 5, we are told that God bestowed on Jesus the office of high priest. **‘So also Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was he who said to him: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”’. As he also says in another place: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’.** (5-6)

Now, let us look more closely at these words. First of all, Jesus did not grasp for himself the office of high priest. It was given him by the Father. It was the glory of Christ to do the will of God in every way. Jesus says this, **'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me'**. (John 8:54) And how did Jesus define his glory? He says in the next verse – **'My glory is that I know him and keep His word.'** Is there anyone else who could stand before God and say 'I have kept your word in every respect.'? There is no one except Jesus. Jesus was sinless, and thus was perfectly obedient to God.

Secondly, how do we know that God found the sacrifice of Jesus acceptable? Well, verses 5-6 quote from two Psalms: **'You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.'** (Psalm 2:7) And, **'You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.'** (Psalm 110:4) So then, how do we know that God found his Son acceptable? Because he raised him from the dead. That is how we know that he was acceptable to the Father; that his death on the Cross was pleasing to the Father; that the shedding of his blood for sin was effective before the Father. God raised him from the dead. The first Psalm quoted here is Psalm 2:7 – **'You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.'** Some have thought that this is a reference to the birth of Jesus, but the Early Church was taught by the apostles that the mark of God's approval of Christ's finished work was his resurrection.

When did this 'begetting' occur? The first clue is in the word 'today' – **'... today I have begotten you.'** Throughout Hebrews consistently, 'today' refers to the day of salvation; that is, a salvation that has been accomplished, a salvation that is finished and effective for all who accept it. Now, when did salvation become effective? When Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Three days later, God raised him from the dead declaring thereby that his sacrifice was acceptable and sufficient to save. Therefore, the word 'begotten' must mean as it does in Hebrews 1:5, where the writer quotes the same verse from Psalm 2:7. There, Christ is shown to be superior to the angels because **'he had by himself purged our sins'** (Hebrews 1:3) as the Son of God. His resurrection from the dead was a sure sign that his finished sacrifice was acceptable to God. The same thought is found in Paul's Letter to the Romans – **'... declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'**. (Romans 1:4)

Let us also consider the words of the apostle in Acts 13:33 – **'God has fulfilled this promise to our children'**. What promise was that? Well, the fulfilment was this – **'... in that he raised up Jesus as it is also written in the second Psalm (Psalm 2:7), "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you."'** So Paul understood that the 'begetting' was when Jesus rose from the dead after bringing about our salvation. His sacrifice on the cross was accepted by God, and his resurrection showed God's approval.

Aaron died, and the high priestly office came to his son. But that son died also, and so did his son, and many, many sons through the centuries, until the time Jesus came. They all died. That was the end to their service as high priests. But with Christ, he rose from the dead, and is alive for evermore. The high priests came before God with their blood sacrifices, but Jesus offered himself to God as a sacrifice for sin. The Old Testament sacrifices could not take away sin; they were only pictures of what Jesus would fulfil. Only the blood of Jesus takes away sin.

Here are some simple words from a gospel hymn written by an American preacher, Dr. Robert Lowry (1826 – 1899):

1
**What can wash away my stain?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!**

***Oh, precious is the flow,
That makes me white a snow!
No other fount I know;
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!***

2
**For my cleansing this I see -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
For my pardon this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus**

3
**Nothing can for sin atone -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
Nought of good that I have done -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!**

4
**This is all my hope and peace -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
This is all my righteousness -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
For my pardon this my plea –
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!**

God accepted the sacrifice of this high priest, who was not after the order of the family of Aaron, but was **'according to the order of Melchisedek.'**

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST (7-10)

The emphasis in this chapter, as it was at the end of chapter 4, is on the humanity of Christ. Jesus Christ was fully human, as well as being the eternal Son of God. How so? Our writer offers us **four** proofs.

1. He suffered just like us. **'...who, in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear.'** (7) Here is one of the most profound statements concerning the humanity of Christ to be found in the New Testament. John Owen, the Puritan writer, comments -

'...on the cross, it is plainly said, he cried with a loud voice – with a great outcry, with a loud and strong cry. This was the manner of his prayers as a priest when he offered up himself a sacrifice for sin.'

John Calvin, the Reformer, adds these words of practical encouragement -

'... whenever our troubles press us and torture us, we should cast our minds back to the Son of God who toiled under the same burden. As long as he goes before us, we have no reason to fail. At the same time we are warned not to look for our salvation in time of trouble from any other than from God alone. What better rule for prayer can we have than the example of Christ?'

Here, then, are some practical applications of the teaching of Christ as our human high priest. As gospel preachers, we have a wonderful appeal to make to sinners to turn to such a compassionate and sympathetic Saviour.

2. He submitted himself perfectly to the will of God, particularly in suffering. **'...though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.'** (8)

3. His perfect obedience to God made him worthy to offer a perfect sacrifice to God. **'And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him'**. (9)

4. We now have a Man in heaven making perfect and eternal intercession for us – **'...called by God as high priest according to the order of Melchisedek'**. (10)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 14

A. QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read Matthew 27:46

1. From which Psalm was Jesus quoting?
2. In what sense did Christ feel that God had forsaken him?

Read 2 Peter 3:9

3. To which promise is Peter referring? (See verse 7)
4. Why does God not bring the world to an end right now?
5. What is he looking for from sinners?

Read Acts 17:30-31

6. What does God command now?
7. When will God judge the world?
8. Who will judge the world?
9. What is the proof that he is fit to judge?

Read Luke 9:54-56

10. What did the disciples see? (See verse 53)
11. What Did James and John want to do?
12. Who did this in the Old Testament?
13. What was the reaction of Jesus?
14. If not to destroy the Samaritans, what did Jesus want to do?

Read John 3:17-18

15. What was not the purpose of Christ's coming?
16. So what was his purpose?
17. Who is condemned?

Read Matthew 7:3-5

18. What is the meaning of the speck and the plank?
19. What name did Jesus call the one who condemns?

Read John 8:7-11

20. Why did they wish to condemn?
21. Why did they not execute justice?
22. What did Jesus refuse to do?

Read John 1:29, 36

23. Where did John the Baptist first see Jesus?
24. Why did John compare Jesus to a lamb?
25. What was the effect of John's declaration? (See verse 37)

Read Matthew 3:15

26. What did Jesus ask John the Baptist to do?
27. What did John say?
28. What did Jesus say to that?
29. Read the sermon transcript again at this point, and say what this reply means.

Read Mark 10:45

30. In relation to the phrase '**Son of Man**', what does this say about Jesus Christ?
31. What did Jesus absolutely refuse?
32. In contrast, what did he say he had come to do?
33. What else did Jesus say was the purpose of his coming?
34. Who are the 'many'?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21

35. Which phrase in this verse particularly indicates substitutionary atonement?
36. What is substitutionary atonement? (See the sermon transcript on this point)
37. What, according to this verse, is the result of Christ's death and resurrection?

Read 1 Peter 2:24

38. Which word is used here for the cross?
39. Why does Peter refer to the body of Christ?
40. Where in Isaiah can '**by whose stripes you were healed**' be found? Give chapter and verse.
41. Why do you think this verse is used so often for preaching the gospel?

Read John 8:53-55

42. Who did the Jews think Jesus was making himself to be greater than?
43. Who else?
44. Who honoured Jesus?
45. What claim did Jesus make about God?
46. What further claim did he make?

B & C. PRACTICAL

Show how the high priests of the Old Testament were a type (picture) of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

You may also refer to:

Exodus 28:1, 12, 29-30, 38;
Leviticus 16:15;
Zechariah 6:12-13.

What do Psalm 2:7 and 110:4 have to do with Christ as the great high priest?

How would you explain the word 'begotten'? (See the Exposition)

How does Christ as the effective high priest show that he actually saves those for whom he intercedes, and does not stand offering salvation from heaven in the hope that someone will trust in him?

STUDY 15

FOURTH EXHORTATION AND WARNING: GROW UP!

HEBREWS 5:11 – 6:20

EXPOSITION

We turn now to Hebrews 5:11–6:20. We must consider this long passage as a piece, for it covers again, but in further detail, the vital subject of backsliding. The whole passage is one extended argument. It goes like this: first comes a warning, then an encouragement to grow in faith, and finally, an exhortation to persevere and not fall back.

The passage, then, can be divided into three parts:

1. The writer reproves his Jewish readers (5:11-14)

They are Jewish in the sense that they were Jews by race, upbringing and religion, but are now found in some Christian churches. The writer sends his letter as an intermediary between himself and those in whom serious faults can be found. We gospel preachers do not have that advantage! However much the Hebrew Christians reacted to what he said, at least he was not there at the receiving end. However, we will, by God's grace, take up without hesitation the writer's reproof to these Hebrew Christians. We are very glad to repeat and explain what he writes, and apply what he says.

We find in verses 11-14 a strong reproof, where a reproof implies a criticism. He says to them, 'My dear friends, I have been speaking to you about some very deep and important Christian issues. I have explained to you that Jesus Christ is the express image of God's person; that he is very God. And for that reason, he is able to bring the final word of God to us concerning salvation. Because he is God, he is able to take his seat by right at the throne of the Majesty on high. (1:3) Because he is God, and yet also man, he was able to die for our sins on the Cross. Because he is God, he is an eternal high priest who is able to make intercession for all those who come to his sacrifice of blood on the Cross and believe in him. He is able to present our case at God's throne of grace, making our salvation secure.' That is what he has been dealing with so far. These are complex yet very wonderful Christian truths.

He concludes in chapter 6 with an appeal to a mysterious character called Melchisedek. The writer naturally thought of Melchisedek because he represented in the Old Testament – in extraordinarily accurate picture language – what the Messiah would be like. Indeed, the Psalmist saw this himself in Psalm 110. He presents Melchisedek as a picture ('type' – TUPOS is the Greek word) of that of which Christ is the antitype. He was the prototype (the first of its kind), while Christ is the antitype, the one who completes it. Melchisedek is the shadow, Christ is the substance.

The problem to the Jews was that Melchisedek (the picture) was a priest who did not come from the tribe of Judah, but to whom Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race and faith, paid utmost respect and worshipped, giving him a tenth of all he possessed. We are informed that he was a king and a priest. But, in particular, he was a special sort of priest

because in the story he had no beginning and no end. He was a figure who mysteriously appeared once in one part of the Old Testament, and was commented on only once in the Psalms. Just as suddenly, he disappeared. He was thought of as mysterious and eternal.

Melchisedek was not of the tribe of Levi or of the family of Aaron the high priest, but was something else. Now, if Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race and religion, offered worship and honour and tithes to Melchisedek, we have, then, a greater high priest than those of the family of Aaron who were descended from Abraham. The high priests who offered sacrifice for sin were not effective, for the blood of beasts did not cleanse the conscience from dead works, as our writer says later in 9:13-14. The defilement of the flesh can be washed away with water, for when we get dirty, we wash. But how do we deal with the defilement of our souls? There is only one way, and that is by the sprinkled blood of Jesus Christ who himself was the sacrifice, and is a superior high priest after the order of Melchisedek, not after the order of Aaron.

Well, after explaining this important truth, we can imagine the writer putting his pen down briefly in order to offer this short prayer: 'Lord, I have been telling these people some very deep Christian truths about Jesus Christ, but how will they accept them? Will they understand them?'

Then he considers various people in the churches who have been described to him, and he thinks, 'What sort of people are they? They are so weak and needy; and some are barely saved.' He is concerned for them, for he has a real pastor's heart for them. He cares for them. He wants them to grow up to maturity. He wants them to become strong Christians so that when adversities arise which test their faith they will not be moved. They will remain strong in their faith and God will keep them. Our writer says to himself, 'If they do not take in these truths, they will never stand.' And so he says (in verses 11-14), 'My dear friends, I have written about some wonderful truths. Understand them and grow up in them.' In verse 11, he says – '**... of whom we have much to say**'. Normally, the word 'whom' would refer to the last person mentioned in the previous sentence; so that would be Melchisedek. But Melchisedek in his turn was a picture of someone even greater: the Lord Jesus Christ. Our writer spoke of him earlier in these words:

Verse 8 – '**...though he was a Son...**'

Verses 9-10 – '**And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him, called by God as high priest "according to the order of Melchisedek"**'.

Christ is prefigured in the person of Melchisedek who was a type. So the one who was '**called by God**' was Jesus Christ who is our great high priest. 'These are great truths I am telling you', says the writer to the Hebrews. 'We have much to say concerning these things, but they are hard to explain.' Gospel preachers know how difficult it is to prepare a sermon. They know how long it takes to prepare an exposition of the Word of God. It is not an easy task. It is often very hard to explain some of these truths. It is even harder to make the hearers understand these truths.

Then he continues in verse 11 – '**...since you have become dull of hearing.**' This is hardly a pleasant description of his readers. '**Dull**' means slow and uncomprehending. How sad and discouraging! 'Well', says the writer to the Hebrews, 'there are some of you who are reading this letter who have become dull of hearing while I have been trying to explain these great truths to you. Why are you like this? Verse 12 persists – '**For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.**'

How sad it is for Christians to profess to follow Jesus Christ and yet remain incapable of understanding an explanation of the truths of the gospel! They have not concentrated their minds as they ought because it is painful to comprehend these revealed truths which, very often, are against their natural way of thinking. But they must do so if they are to grow spiritually. That is what the writer is saying. How wonderful when someone takes hold of these truths, and appreciates them, and understands them! He will inevitably become a teacher of them, for he cannot help himself! It is a natural thing to teach what we know.

'Now', says our writer, 'here you are, professed believers; you should be teachers by now, yet you keep needing to be taught because you are **'dull of hearing'**. You do not need to be a Doctor of Divinity to teach others some of the great truths of Scripture. Any Christian can do it. He gets hold of a biblical truth, makes it his own, and then becomes a teacher to someone else who does not know it.

'And worse still', says the writer, the professed Christian will only receive milk and not solid food. He has not yet been weaned on the way to becoming a mature Christian. He is still a baby. How sad to see these long-standing Christians still babies as far as spiritual things are concerned, hardly able to lisp the A, B, and C of the gospel. 'Well', he asks, 'how can I explain the teaching of Melchisedek, and the high priestly office of Christ, and the shedding of his blood, and his headship over his household, and his deity, and so on. How can I explain these things to you when you have not advanced beyond spiritual babyhood? I cannot give you solid food; I must keep giving you milk. You are stunted in your growth.'

He continues in verses 13-14 – **'For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.'** Now, no training is without its own discipline and pain. When we are training, we set aside certain things. They might be legitimate things, but we have to say 'no!' to them. In the same way, we must discipline our minds in the things of God.

So here is the writer's word of reproof. He has an eye to the ultimate end of his hearers. He longs to see his hearers on the road to progress and maturity in the Christian life – complete and perfect in Christ. He wants to see them growing towards that maturity which is only possible through an understanding of the Word of God.

2. A warning (6:1-8)

It must be admitted that Hebrews 6:1-8 is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.

If we had the choice of which passage to preach on, we would leave out these verses under any circumstance! It would be honest to admit that the writer of this course on Hebrews does not fully understand everything about it. I have been looking at this passage for a good many years now, many of them as a preacher of the gospel, but I still find severe difficulties in this passage. I find that many others feel the same, including some famous theologians.

What I do understand is this, that there is a point during backsliding when it becomes impossible to return to the Lord. Now, that is a very difficult thing to appreciate. It sounds like a contradiction of the mercy and goodness and love of God. We have spoken of backsliding in the two introductory Studies on Hebrews because it was a burden on the heart of the writer of the letter. Indeed, in several further passages, he continues to deal with this theme of backsliding. In chapter six, we reach the highest (or, lowest) point on the subject.

The writer refers to a special kind of backsliding called 'apostasy'. Apostasy means to fall away completely from the way of salvation. Now, I put it that way – very carefully – because

it must be accepted that those who fall into apostasy were never saved. We must not fall into the error of some teachers in the past who taught that it is possible for a Christian, at some future point in time, due to some wilfulness, or disobedience, or unforgivable sin, to actually become unsaved again. Well, even if that were true, this passage teaches us that even if a saved person becomes unsaved, there is no way of becoming saved again because there is no further repentance in order to renew that person.

Now, that is a fearful thing to declare. True to Scripture, the Protestant Reformers taught what Augustine taught, who in his turn taught what the apostle Paul taught, and what the Lord Jesus himself taught, that no believer can be plucked out of his Father's hand. (John 10:29) When they are in the Father's hand, they can never be lost; and that is the basis of the security of every believer, urging them on to persevere to the end.

Our writer is teaching here something about a particular people in particular circumstances. Do not forget that he is addressing Christian Jews. These were people who left Judaism and came to Christ. And some had left any profession that they had had in Christ and gone back, not to the world as some backsliders, but to Judaism. What did it mean to go back to Judaism? Paul mentions this in his letter to the Galatians – **'Who has bewitched you?'** (Galatians 3:1-3) So great was the enormity of the step they had taken, that Paul had to ask, 'Why have you gone back to Judaism? Why have you gone back to the law when you had Christ? Why do you go back to the law, when you had the Holy Spirit? So why have you gone back to Judaism?'

Well, we must say, first of all, concerning the backsliding Hebrew Christians that they were never really saved in the first place. Let us have a close look at these verses at the end of chapter 5. He is saying to these people, 'Grow up'. But what can we say about those who do not grow up, who not only do not grow to spiritual maturity, but gradually drift away from the Christian faith. And not only do they drift away, but they never come back. And not only do they never come back, but they finally renounce their faith altogether. These are Jews who came to Christ in some way, made a profession of him, and followed him, but went right away from him, and no longer met with the Lord's people, but renounced the Christian doctrines outlined here by the writer in the Hebrews: that Christ is Saviour, and Head over his people, that he died on the Cross for our sins, that he has gone to heaven and is there interceding for us as our eternal high priest like Melchisedek.

These great truths they have renounced. They have gone back to Judaism. They have given up their faith. They have either given in to the social pressures or they have given way to their persecutors. And they now are back in their former religion. They are not irreligious; they have re-entered another religion. As someone has put it, 'They received enough inoculations in the Christian faith to make it impossible for them to catch the real thing.' There are many things that are similar in both Judaism and Christianity. The little Christianity they had, inoculated them against true faith.

When they were children, growing up in Judaism, they were taught certain doctrines. Here we have mentioned briefly some of their early lessons. Our writer mentions six of them.

'Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith towards God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgement.' (6:1-2)

(a) Repentance

Now, all these six things any Jew would have been taught as part of his religious education. When they professed to embrace the Christian faith, these are the things they would have

known. Their Christian teachers could say to the new converts, 'Look, these truths you were taught in Judaism. You know all about repentance.' The Jews celebrated the New Year with enthusiasm. During the week before the New Year, they spent much time thinking about their sins and repenting often, particularly when the ram's horn was blown. They desired to be ready for the Day of Judgement if that should arrive some time during the coming year. This was part of the Jewish faith: **'repentance from dead works'**.

(b) Faith

'Faith towards God' is an issue often arising in the Old Testament. Think of God's promise to Abraham – 'I shall make of you uncountable seed like the stars in the sky and the sand on the beaches.' And we are told that **'he believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness.'** (Genesis 15:6) Faith was as important in the Jewish religion as it is in Christianity. Remember Habakkuk, who declared, **'the righteous man shall live by his faith.'** (Habakkuk 2:4) Later, our writer will say how important it is that **'he who would draw near to God must first believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.'** (11:6) So faith is a very important element in both Judaism and Christianity.

(c) Washings

The Revised Authorised Version of the Bible (the NKJV) reads **'the doctrine of baptisms'**, but the word 'baptisms' is in such a form that it is only found here in this verse, and refers to all the washings of the Old Testament. Now, the Jews spent much time in washing. It was part of their rituals and their religion – such as the washing of hands before meals; the washing of the high priest before he took the atoning sacrifice into the Holy of Holies; the washing of the priests before they took on their priestly work, with the washing of their hands and feet before going into the Tabernacle. All these things were familiar to them. You may remember that vital message in Ezekiel where the Lord declares, **'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.'** (Ezekiel 36:25) Washing only cleansed the body, but there was to come a washing of the heart; and that was wonderfully fulfilled, as the writer to the Hebrews says, in Jesus Christ who alone can make us clean from sin. (Hebrews 9:9-10, 13-14)

(d) Laying on of hands

The laying on of hands referred to the appointment of elders or teachers in the Church. It referred, as we read many times in the Bible, to when someone took office; it could be a social office or an office under the judicial system. Many times in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Numbers (8:10, 27:23), and in the New Testament we read of those who were separated for their work for God with the laying on of hands. (See Acts 6:6; 13:13; 1 Timothy 4:14) So they were taught about this as the practice continued in Christianity.

(e) Resurrection of the dead

They were also taught about the resurrection of the dead. Judaism was split over this issue. The Sadducees taught that when you died, that was the end of your existence. Consequently, they believed that you should live as well as you can in this life because that is all we will know. And they were rich people. The Pharisees, however, taught that there was to be a resurrection, for after the resurrection there came the judgement. You remember how Paul stood before the Sanhedrin on one occasion (recorded in Acts 23:6), and said – **'Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day.'** Then the Council was split, and an uproar began. They took Paul off to Caesarea in custody, and

confined him to the castle there because they found him such a trouble-maker. The Jews knew all about the resurrection of the dead, and they received instruction in it.

(f) Eternal judgement

Finally, the teaching of eternal judgement went hand-in-hand with the resurrection. John Owen contrasts this with Christian belief – **“Eternal” is with respect not to the duration of the judgement, but its end and effect...The rule of judgement at the last day neither is, nor shall be any other, but what is preached every day in the dispensation of the gospel.**

Now, all these things were taught to the Jews, and it was from this base that Christian teaching began.

‘Now’, says our writer, ‘consider these Jewish beliefs as elementary only. You learned them when you were a child. But Christian teaching goes beyond them. They are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ. I should not have to teach you about these things again. You should have left them behind long ago. No’, he says, ‘let us leave **“the discussion of the elementary principles”** behind.

Then in verse 3, he adds – **‘And this we will do if God permits.’** So let us leave Jewish beliefs behind. Let us grow up as Christians. But there were those who would not leave them behind, and there were those who, in fact, went back to the inferior things of Judaism. They, sadly, became apostates.

Verses 4-6 contain these frightening words – **‘For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away...’**

Now, if you count the phrases here, you will find five, with the last two linked together. You will notice that they do not appear to go all the way so far as the Christian faith is concerned. They seem to fall short of its fullest declaration and commitment. So we cannot say definitely that these people were true Christians. For example, they **‘were once enlightened’**. In other words, they understood that they were sinners, and that they needed a Saviour, but their repentance and faith were deficient. They **‘tasted of the heavenly gift’**. As they looked around them, they saw that the lives of believers were being changed. They saw other people, like the Samaritans, who were baptised by Peter after professing faith in Christ. (John 4:39-42; Acts 8:4-25) They were made **‘partakers of the Holy Spirit’**. They knew what it was to be convicted of their sins. They knew the truth that God brought to them through the Holy Spirit. **They ‘tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come’**. In other words, they came under the teaching of the apostles, and experienced something of **‘the powers’**. The word ‘power’ is used nine times in Acts (according to the RAV/NKJV (1:8; 3:12; 4:7, 32; 6:8; 8:10, 19; 10:38; 26:18) Here, it refers to miracles and healing, and, in particular, according to Simon, one of the Samaritan converts, the great power of the Holy Spirit coming upon the people. Simon, you remember, wanted to buy this power from Peter, offering him money for the gift. Now, I do not know whether our writer had Simon particularly in mind here, but he is certainly a good example of an apostate. Church history records that Simon, became one of the most notorious mischief-makers in the Church, causing no end of trouble among Christians, and eventually dying a very miserable death.

Well now, why is it that such a person, in such a state of apostasy, cannot come back to Christ? Our writer says – **‘... if they fall away, [it is impossible] to renew them again to repentance’**. (6a) As mentioned earlier, they had inoculated themselves against real faith –

‘...since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put him to an open shame.’ (6b) They returned to their Jewish roots and religion, and to those who had put Christ on a cross, and had witnessed the hammering of the nails through his hands and feet, and seen him put to death in a most cruel and shameful way. They went back and identified themselves with those who had put Christ to death. And, in that sense, they left Christ and returned to a Judaism that had crucified him. They were, in effect, crucifying Jesus all over again. What a terrible thing to do! And for this state, there was no repentance. How so?

John Bunyan, the Puritan writer, described such a condition in his **PILGRIM’S PROGRESS**, in the parable of the man in the cage in the house of the Interpreter. This is the saddest piece of Christian literature I have ever read.

The Interpreter took him by the hand again, and led him into a very dark room where there sat a man in an iron cage. Now, this man, to look at, seemed very sad. He sat with his eyes looking down to the ground, his hands folded together; and he sighed as if his heart was breaking. Then asked Christian, ‘What does this mean?’ At which the Interpreter invited him to talk to the man.

Then Christian asked the man, ‘Who are you?’ The man replied, ‘I am not what I once was!’ Christian said, ‘What were you once, then?’ The man said, ‘I was once a fine and flourishing professor of the faith (Luke 8:13), both in my own eyes, and also in the eyes of others. I was once, as I thought, fair set for the Celestial City, and even had great joy at the thought that I was going there.’ Christian asked, ‘Well, but what are you now?’ The man replied, ‘I am now a man of despair, and am so shut up in it that it is like this iron cage. I cannot get out. Oh, now I cannot get out!’

Christian asked, ‘But how did you get into this condition?’ The man replied, ‘I left off being watchful and sober. I rested the reins on the neck of my lusts. I sinned against the light of the Word and the goodness of God. I have grieved the Spirit, and he has gone. I tempted the devil, and he has come to me. I have provoked God to anger, and he has left me. I have so hardened my heart that I cannot repent.’

Then Christian said to the Interpreter, ‘But are there no hopes for such a man as this?’ The Interpreter replied, ‘Ask him.’ Then Christian said, ‘Is there no hope, but must you be kept in the iron cage of despair?’ The man replied, ‘No, no hope at all.’ Surprised, Christian asked, ‘Why? The Son of the Blessed is very compassionate.’ The man replied, ‘I have crucified him to myself afresh. (Hebrews 6:6) I have rejected his person and authority. (Luke 19:14) I have despised his righteousness. I have insulted the Spirit of grace. (Hebrews 10:29) Therefore I have shut myself out of all the promises, and there now remains for me nothing but judgement and fiery indignation which will devour me as an enemy.’

‘How did you get into this condition’, asked Christian. The man replied, ‘By seeking the lusts, pleasures and profits of this world; in the enjoyment of which looked for much delight. But now everyone of those things bites and gnaws at me like a burning worm.’ Christian then asked, ‘But can you not even now repent and be converted?’ In despair, the man replied, ‘God has denied me repentance. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe; indeed, he himself has shut me up in this iron cage. Nor can all the men in the world let me out. O eternity! O eternity! How can I bear with the misery that I must meet with in eternity?’

Then the Interpreter said to Christian, ‘Let this man’s misery be remembered by you, and be an everlasting warning to you.’ Christian replied, ‘Well, this is fearful!’

May God help me to be watchful and sober, and pray that I may avoid the cause of this man's misery!

(Bible verses quoted by John Bunyan: Luke 8:13; Hebrews 6:6; Luke 19:14; Hebrews 10:29)

Hebrews 6:7-8 comments – **'For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.'** This reminds us of our Lord's words, when he said that the branch that bears no fruit because it does not abide in him, will be cut off and burned. (John 15:6)

Now, that is fearful state, as John Bunyan indicates. The Lord has greatly blessed us, and shown us our need of faith in his Son. It is our sorrow as gospel preachers to see some of our hearers putting this off week by week. Pressures at home or at work cause them to hesitate to come to Christ under the preaching of the gospel, and would rather remain in their old life or religion. What do we say to such people? Possibly something like this -

"You hear the gospel regularly, yet you do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You refuse to come to him. Do not remain as you are. Do not go back to what denies these gospel truths to be found in Hebrews and in the rest of Scripture. Come out from among them, and come to Christ.

In effect, that is what our writer is saying here. 'God pours out his blessings on you. You are his beloved field. (Isaiah 5:1-7) God asks if there is anything else he can do for you? Yet you continue to produce briars and thistles and thorns. God has done so much for you. He has brought you among the Christian family. He has, perhaps, given you Christian parents. And yet you will not come to Christ. When God looks upon your heart, he sees briars and thistles and weeds.'

This, then lies at the heart of these warnings against backsliding. Here, apostasy is fully exposed in horrible detail and in all its dark processes. How terrible it is! Well, all that could be changed in a moment for the hesitating Hebrews with a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

3. An encouragement (6:9-20)

Finally, we consider verses 9-20. This last section offers a word of encouragement. We have considered a word of reproof, then a word of warning, and now a word of encouragement.

'But beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this manner.' (9) He is saying in effect, 'I am sorry to be so severe. I do not like to frighten you. But it has this purpose:

'For God is not unjust to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown towards his name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.' (10-12)

Then our writer refers to Abraham – **'For when God made the promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself ...'** (13) What had Abraham just done? He had committed his whole life into the hands of God. He had the joy of begetting a boy to a woman long past the age of child-bearing. In obedience to God's command, he had taken the boy, and was willing to slay him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. God then told Abraham that he did not require a sacrifice, only his faith. We are told later in

Hebrews that he believed that God could even raise his son from the dead. (Hebrews 11:17-19) He had a faith that was thoroughly centred on God.

What a great need there is for gospel preachers to call for such commitment from their hearers! In order not to fall away, we need to persevere in Christian life and service, and to rely on our sovereign God. Abraham did, and he received the blessing. Verses 14-15 provide the details – ‘... **saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.**’

Our writer then comments on the fact that God ‘**swore by himself**’. (13) When God makes a promise, he always keeps it. ‘**For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.**’ (16) When a man can be induced to be perfectly honest, ‘his word is his bond’. He will never go back on his promise. In the same way, ‘**Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation**’. (17-18)

Now, what are these ‘**two things, in which it is impossible for God to lie**’? (Not that it is possible for God to lie under any circumstance!) The first is the fact that he makes the promise; and the second that he makes an oath. What sort of promise does God give to his children? And what sort of oath does God swear? It is surely this: ‘Give me your heart, my son, and I will keep you safe until I bring you into my presence.’ That is his promise upon which we base our perseverance. And he is bound to keep his promise concerning our life and security. This is our ‘**hope**’ (19); and this is what our writer is saying. Here are two further unchangeable things:

- (1) All the promises of God are, in Christ, yes and amen.
- (2) God swears an oath that when he saves us, he will keep us.

And what security do we have for this? And on what is it based? If you are a Christian, and you are concerned about falling away, and even becoming an apostate, believe me, you never will, because apostates do not think that way. So what is the basis of our security, to prevent us from falling into backsliding for which there is no remedy?

Well, the answer is found in verses 19-20 – ‘**This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become high priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedek.**’ Chapter 7 then goes on to explain more about Melchisedek, a theme already started in chapter 5:10, and interrupted by this warning passage (5:11-6:1-20).

Well, here is the ‘**hope**’ of our security. Our anchor is in Christ who has entered through the veil, and gone into heaven, and is even now interceding for us as our high priest at the throne of God.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 15

A. QUESTIONS ON THE VERSES QUOTED IN THE EXPOSITION

Read John 10:27-29

1. How do we know those who are truly Christ’s sheep?
2. What are the two unbreakable promises in verse 28?
3. How did they come to follow Christ? (See verse 29)

Read Galatians 3:1-3

4. Can it be rightly said that some of the Galatians were apostates?
5. How do we know?
6. Why were they foolish?
7. Did they know the gospel of the Cross?
8. What do 'law' and 'faith', two opposites, refer to?

Read Ezekiel 36:25-26

9. What was the great sin of Israel?
10. What two new things would God give them?
11. What happens to the hearts of all believers?
12. Explain your answer to question 11.

Read John 15:6

13. What happens to the one who does not persevere in Christ?
14. What is his ultimate end?

15-18 See the Exposition. John Bunyan uses four verse to illustrate the terrible plight of the man in the cage (the apostate). They are: Luke 18:13; Hebrews 6:6; Luke 19:14; Hebrews 10:29. Say how Bunyan uses each verse to illustrate the man's plight.

B. QUESTIONS ON THE EXPOSITION

1. What evidences are there to show that someone has become dulled to the hearing of the gospel?

How does the writer to the Hebrews use this word 'dull'?

2. Write a brief explanation of the following elements of the gospel:

- 'repentance from dead works'
- 'faith towards God'
- 'baptisms'
- 'laying on of hands'
- 'resurrection of the dead'
- 'eternal judgement'

2. What reasons can you state to prove that the writer considered most of his hearers to be true Christians?
3. What are the things that can never change by which God has promised salvation to believers and which are their hope of salvation?

C. PRACTICAL

Preach a sermon on the subject: TURNING AWAY FROM CHRIST.

- (1) Using Hebrews 6:1-9 as your text, prepare a sermon outline showing that any who turn away from Christ and his gospel of grace have no hope of salvation.
- (2) Write out your introduction and conclusion in full.
- (3) Make a list of other verses in the Bible you referred to in your sermon.

STUDY 16

MELCHISEDEK

HEBREWS CHAPTER 7:1-10

EXPOSITION

We now come to Hebrews chapter 7. We remember that the appeal of the letter was addressed to those who had become associated with the Christian Church, having emerged from Judaism. And that meant everyone, until the time when the Gentiles were received after professing simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There was also a danger that some Hebrew 'Christians', growing low in their spiritual life (if they ever had any spiritual life), were liable to backslide, or apostatise, and go back to their roots in Judaism. Because they knew a little about the Christian faith, and had some experience of Christian things, they had enough to inoculate them against true Christian experience. Consequently, they sank back and were submerged in the old Judaism and the Law, and the impossibility of pleasing God by works. 'There can be no more blood sacrifice for them', says the writer to the Hebrews.

There is, then this sad theme running through the letter where, on several occasions, we uncover passages of warning and exhortation. As gospel preachers, we fear that those who make a profession of faith will backslide and fall away. Indeed, we find the same tendency in our own lives. Yes; we are saved by grace, but we discover a downward force that tends to drag us down. Thus from time to time the Lord speaks to us such a word of warning that we become alarmed when we realise that we are not what we should be, and need to press on '**looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith**'. (Hebrews 12:2)

There is another theme that makes its contribution to the main argument of the letter. It is this: 'Why did you come to Christ for salvation? Because Christ is better. You left the old and came to the new, for the new is superior to the old. The old is worn out, and obsolete.'

The Law of Moses, and the priesthood, and the sacrifices, held out the promise that those who live perfectly will receive eternal life. But no one was able to live a perfect life; that is, until Jesus came, for he lived a perfect life and was totally obedient to God. On that basis, he was able to offer a sacrifice for our sins on the Cross. Thus the true believer must leave the Law and come to Christ. The Law brought him only despair, but Christ brought him hope'.

Now, in what sense then, is the way of Christ better than the old? Well, we discovered that he was better than the angels because he is very God, as it says in Hebrews 1:3. He is the express image of his person, the outshining of the Godhead. No angel can be like that. Christ is set apart from anything that is created, whether angel or man. Then he strengthens his argument by saying that Christ is better than Moses. Moses had his own house, over which he was the head, yet he was only a servant in that house. Jesus Christ is the head as the Son of the household, and by faith, we belong to that household. Christ is better than Moses. Christ is also better than Aaron and the old priesthood, and it is at this point that we now come to consider Melchisedek.

The Letter to the Hebrews presents this view of the priestly work of our Lord Jesus Christ:

(1) He is truly a human high priest – **‘For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.’** (4:15)

(2) He is a perfectly obedient high priest – **‘...though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered ...called by God as high priest ‘according to the order of Melchisedek’.** (5:8, 10)

(3) He is an eternal high priest – **‘This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the inner part behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become high priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedek.’** (6:19-20)

(4) He is an interceding high priest – **‘Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he ever lives to make intercession for them.’** (7:25)

1. Melchisedek was superior to the Levitical priests (1-3)

We have been looking at what we might call a parenthesis (an interruption). Hebrews 5:10 concluded with this argument. He stated, **‘... called by God as high priest ‘according to the order of Melchisedek’.** Our writer then thought, ‘Oh yes; I have just remembered that you are only young Christians. You do not know much! You have only got to the ABC’s of the gospel. I had forgotten that you are not ready for advanced teaching yet.’ And so, for the rest of chapter 5 (from verse 11) to the end of chapter 6, he encourages them to go on in their faith. He says in 6:1 – **‘Therefore, leaving the elementary principles of Christ’.** He is saying, ‘Leave the elementary teaching and go on.’ If they do not do this, they will fall back into the old ways. ‘Go on in Christ. Look to him, and learn all you can. Here lies our security. Here is the anchor of our soul. That is our hope. When we are inclined to fall, Jesus is interceding for us. Remember when Peter was about to fall away. Jesus said to Peter, **‘I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’.** (Luke 22:32) Our security is in the fact that Jesus is, at this present moment, interceding for us at the Father’s right hand, not as a suppliant but as our high priest. He prays by right, on the basis of what he has done on the Cross. He is able to demand of the Father that we should be safely brought through this life to be presented before the Father. That is wonderful! Our security is in Christ.

Thus chapter 6 concludes – **‘... where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become high priest forever according to the order of Melchisedek.’** (20) He is saying in effect, ‘Well, dear friends, and fellow Hebrews, you need to go on in your faith. Here is something to help you go on. Here is some teaching that will advance you in your Christian lives. Let us talk about Melchisedek, even though it is rather advanced.

In chapter 7, our writer takes us into this advanced teaching concerning Melchisedek. So, what kind of person was Melchisedek? In verses 1-10, he shows that the order of the priesthood of Melchisedek was in its turn superior to the normal priesthood of Judaism, which was serviced by the descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Melchisedek came before that, and is superior to it. He is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a description of Melchisedek in verses 1-3 -

‘For this Melchisedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated ‘king of righteousness’, and then also king of Salem, meaning ‘king of peace’, without father, without mother, without

genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.'

This is who Melchisedek was. The first thing that we are told about him, apart from his name, was that he was a king – 'king of Salem'. He was also 'priest of the Most High God'. Thus he was a king-priest.

Now, what sort of king was he? He was a king of Salem, an old name for Jerusalem. 'Salem' in Hebrew means 'peace'. When a Jew greeted a fellow-Jew, he said, 'Shalom', an ordinary word of greeting meaning 'peace'. So he was also 'king of peace'. Salem was the old Jebusite fortress, which was later made by David his capital city. (2 Samuel 5:6-9; Psalm 76:2)

Secondly, we are told that he was '**priest of the Most High God**'. Now then, do not forget that this was before the Jews became a nation. There was just Abraham and his family. Do not think that the revelation of God began with Abraham. God was perfectly able to reveal himself to others, and to make them righteous before him. Melchisedek was one such, and another was Job (Job 1:8). Well, Melchisedek was a priest of God, who knew how to approach God by offering sacrifice, Thus he became a picture of what Christ would accomplish on the Cross. He was both king and priest.

2. Melchisedek was served by Abraham (4-10)

You will remember how Abraham and his nephew Lot parted, and how Lot went down into the city of the plains and settled there. Sodom and Gomorrah were attacked by a confederacy of four kings from elsewhere who were fierce, warlike, tribal kings; and they came and made great slaughter. Lot, as a stranger among these people and a rich man, was taken, together with his wife and his family to the north, When Abraham received news of this, he became very sad. He gathered all his men together, which was a considerable number, and went up to Damascus, and there his army engaged in battle with Chedorlaomer and the other three kings, won the battle, and set Lot free. As he was returning south with all the spoils of war, and Lot and his family with him, he met this mysterious figure, Melchisedek, the priest-king of Salem. We are then told that Abraham did a very unusual thing; he gave a tenth part of all the spoils to Melchisedek.

Now, before we go on to the tithing of the spoils of the war, let us consider the meaning of the name of 'Melchisedek'. Our writer states that it means 'king of righteousness', and that he was also 'king of Salem [Peace]'. First of all, there are two Hebrew words in the name 'Melchisedek'. The first is 'melek', and the second 'zedek'. 'Melek' means a king, and 'zedek' means 'righteousness'.

On the basis of these facts, we may ask our hearers -

'Can you truly say of Jesus, 'You are the king of my life'?' It is easy to take for ourselves the benefits of his work on the Cross. But to accept him as sovereign Lord of our lives is something else. Can you really say that he is Lord and King over all your life? For that is what he has the right to be.'

The second meaning of his name is this: he is also the way of righteousness. He is the one who offers sacrifice as priest. 'Zedek' (righteousness) shows that it is possible for a sinner to be counted as righteous before God. Now, there can be no righteousness except on the basis of sacrifice. But the Law of Moses could not save anyone, for no one could keep the Law. The way of righteousness was provided freely by God through his Son, by faith. Abraham knew that. **'He believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness'**. The Law brought no salvation, neither did good works. But a simple faith in the sacrifice and

saving work of Jesus Christ on the Cross does bring salvation. And Melchisedek was a figure of this new way. He was the priest-king. And sacrifice was the way of righteousness.

Now, there is something else that is rather interesting here before we come to the tithing. How do we find Melchisedek in verse 3. We are introduced to a very mysterious and very strange figure. In fact he is mentioned, apart from Hebrews, in only two other parts of Scripture: Genesis 14:18 and Psalm 110:4. What are we told about Melchisedek in the Bible? Well, very little. Therefore, the writer's perception of him is to see him as a prefiguring of Christ, 'a type'. We are told nothing about his parents; he has no 'genealogy'. He suddenly appears outside Jerusalem where Abraham offer him his tithes. We are not told when he was born, and there is no indication in the Bible that he died. He was **'without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life'**. Yet he was an ordinary man, for he had been born. We are told nothing of this. That is omitted from the Bible. Thus our writer sees him as a picture of something else – **'made like the Son of God'**.

You will notice that we are not told that the Son of God was made like Melchisedek, but rather the reverse. We are not to infer that Melchisedek was eternal, having no beginning and no end, but the way he is described in the Bible is suitable to illustrate the Lord Jesus who had no beginning and no end.

Now, let us go on to the next point. In verse 4 we read -

'Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils.' Again, the word 'great' occurs, a key word in the Letter to the Hebrews. In other words, Melchisedek was greater than Abraham, even though Abraham was the founder of the Jewish race where the priesthood played an important part. Yet Abraham came to Melchisedek, and by offering him a tithe of all the spoils of war he was showing his inferiority to him. An inferior gives tithes to a superior, not the other way round.

Now, our writer adds to his argument in verse 5 – **'And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though these have come from the loins of Abraham'**. Abraham's great grandson was Levi, and from the family of Levi rose the priesthood that God had commanded in the Law. In order to maintain the priests, who were not allowed to own any land of their own, the people gave them tithes from their own land. This showed that the Levites' status was higher than the ordinary people; they were the priests of God. Now, here we find Abraham offering tithes to Melchisedek. What do we conclude from that? Simply that Abraham regarded himself as inferior to Melchisedek, and to his priesthood. Thus the priesthood of Levi, who was in his seed, was inferior to Melchisedek. Therefore, our writer comments, 'Where did Levi come from? Was he not from the loins of Abraham?' Abraham was offering these gifts to Melchisedek on behalf of his descendants, including the priests. The priesthood of Aaron is inferior to that of Melchisedek.

Gentiles may find this sort of arguments very difficult to handle. But the Jewish writer of this letter would find no difficulty in following the argument, and drawing the correct conclusion.

Our writer goes on to say – **'... but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the greater.'** (6-7) Melchisedek came and blessed Abraham, so Abraham and the Levites who were his descendants, were inferior to Melchisedek. He continues – **'Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives.'** (8) There is no record of the death of Melchisedek anywhere in the Bible, although he was certain to die. Verse 9 concludes, **'Even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak'**. Even Levi, who was yet to be born, paid his tithes, as it were, to Melchisedek. Therefore Melchisedek is greater than the Levitical priesthood.

'Go on in your faith', the writer is saying to his Hebrew readers. 'Let me give you some more advanced Christian teaching!' His final words on the subject are these – **'for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchisedek met him.'** (10) He was yet to be born, but his great grandfather, on his behalf, offered tithes to a superior, the priest-king Melchisedek.

So, to sum up – what is it our writer is saying, and how can we use this subject to preach the gospel?

Here is one whose name meant king of righteousness and king of peace, both fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have both peace and righteousness in him. **'Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'**. (Romans 5:1) That is the basis of the gospel. Righteousness and peace were there pre-figured in Melchisedek, who points on in history to the coming of Jesus Christ to come. His is a superior priesthood to the priesthood of Levi under the old covenant of the Law of Moses. Therefore, Christ, who is the fulfilment of Melchisedek, is superior to Judaism.

This is how our writer argues for the superiority of Christ before the Jews. It is difficult at first to understand his argument, but the great truths that are represented in Melchisedek are formidable weapons in the hands of a gospel preacher.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY 16

A. & B. COMBINED

Read Luke 22:32

1. Which office of Jesus Christ gave him authority to pray for Peter?
2. Why did Christ pray for Peter?

Read Job 1:8

3. What did God say about the character of Job?
4. What in Job 42:6 indicates that Job was not a perfect man?

Some questions on Melchisedek

5. Write a history as far as you are able of the life of Melchisedek using Genesis 14; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:13
6. Make a list of as many points of comparison you can find between Melchisedek and Christ.
7. How did Abraham's giving of a tithe to Melchisedek show that Christ was superior to the Levitical priest?
8. What is the significance in relation to Christ of the statement that Melchisedek remains a priest forever?

C. PRACTICAL

Having made earlier a list of points of comparison between Melchisedek and Christ, preach a sermon using the following five points:

- (1) Who was Melchisedek?
- (2) How was Melchisedek a type (picture) of Christ?
- (3) In what things was Melchisedek similar to Christ?
- (4) How is Christ superior to Melchisedek?
- (5) How does this teaching relate to the experience of Christians today?

Send in your sermon outline, and include other verses of Scripture that you used in your sermon.

Report any reactions to your sermon, and comments made to you. If there were none, ask some of your elders, or deacons, or evangelists for comments.

THIS IS THE END OF MODULE 2