

The God of New Beginnings

Eighteen Seminars on the Book of Genesis

David Gooding

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Introduction

Reading: Genesis 1–2:24; Matthew 19:3–6

We are embarking on a very long study of the book of Genesis, eighteen studies in all. Let me therefore remind you (although I am persuaded that you know it well) of the importance of this first and very large book of holy Scripture.

First of all, our Lord Jesus Christ himself quoted from this book, and quoted it as the word of God. For that reason, we have taken time to read a passage from the New Testament where he quotes from the Old.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.' (Matt 19:3–6)

Being asked what his views were about divorce, our Lord did not reply by quoting his own authority; though he might well have done so, being God's Son incarnate. He chose to reply by quoting the book of Genesis. He asked these Pharisees, with some surprise, 'Have you not read . . . ?'

I trust that if he were to put that question to us we should be able to reply, 'Yes, Lord, many times.'

History, Prophecy, Prototypes

History

Notice the details of what he said: 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?' Then he quotes his words from Genesis 2. So authoritative is what it says and implies that it is binding on our lives right down to this very present day. Genesis therefore is not some antiquated book, some fusty, musty piece of museum antiquity, it is a book whose living authority derives from the Creator and is binding upon us in the practical behaviour of life. There is no matter more fundamental to society than the matter of marriage and divorce and it is to be governed by the inspired word of God found in the book of Genesis.

Not only is the book of Genesis important because our Lord quoted it and recognized it as the word of God, but it is important likewise because his holy apostles quote it and

acknowledge it as God's word about things that are utterly fundamental, both to our ordinary life and to God's work of salvation.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. (Rom 5:12–14)

Paul the apostle sets about telling us that every single person born into this world is born a sinner. He offers a diagnosis of the spiritual trouble that afflicts us. If what the apostle has to say about salvation is going to be realistic and practical, then it has to stem from a realistic assessment of what the need is. How shall anyone put us right if he has no notion what made us go wrong? Paul tells us that sin entered into our world through one man's sin and through that sin came death (v. 17). He is clearly referring to the story of Genesis 3, not as myth or parable, but as historic explanation. The sad state we see in the human race right up to the present is that, without exception, we are sinful.

Similarly, when the Apostle Paul comes to tell us how we may be reconciled to God, justified, put right with him, as well as explaining it to us in theological terms he holds up an actual historical case of a man who was justified with God. He quotes the case of Abraham our forefather. Again, he is not quoting a parable, nor is he making up an artificial illustration or analogy; he quotes Abraham as a case of a literal, historical man who was actually justified with God.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' (Rom 4:1–3)

He is setting him as precedent, as the lawyers might well do. If Abraham was justified before God this way, it creates a precedent for all time as to how anyone is to be justified, if he is to be justified at all. Paul is referring to Genesis 15:6, 'And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness'; and he is expecting you to accept that statement as the authoritative, unchallengeable word of God.

To come to even more delightful things, Paul is at pains to prove to believers that we have an enormous inheritance, nothing short of world inheritance.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal 3:8–9)

What a wonder it is for us, who would have been content with forgiveness of our sins and for some lowly seat within the door of heaven, to be told that not only are we forgiven, reconciled and at peace with God, justified by faith, but also in Christ we are heirs of a worldwide dominion.

If you ask Paul to prove to you and assure you that world inheritance is guaranteed to every believer, he will reply that it is a very simple matter. Away back in the early days of the race, God made a legal covenant with Abraham; that legal covenant stands unalterable and irrevocable. It is valid to all the seed to whom that covenant promises an eternal inheritance. I ask you to notice again that Paul is quoting Genesis 15 as literal, accurate history; not merely as an illustration, type, or parable. It is as literal a covenant as the will by which your grandmother left you her sideboard and your uncle George (you hope) will leave you his American fortune.

Prophecy

But then we shall find that while Genesis is to be taken literally as history, from which we shall learn many a practical lesson, very frequently it is prophecy. Not merely because there are explicit prophetic statements, but also because many of its events and institutions were designed to be prototypes of bigger things to come. There are some literal prophecies. To Eve in the garden, so recently fallen and miserable in her sin, God prophesied the very essence of the gospel.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen 3:15)

It is literal, explicit prophecy when Jacob, about to die, gathers himself together on his bed and says,

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him *shall* the gathering of the people *be*. (Gen 49:10 KJV)

Prototypes

But then the New Testament points out to us that there is more than just explicit prophecy. Many of its events and institutions were designed as prototypes of bigger things. Let us recur to the matter that we have already mentioned, the making of woman for man,

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. (Gen 2:23)

We have already seen how Christ takes that statement from Adam as the authoritative word of God and applies it at the practical level as to how marriage should be ordered. Paul points out that this statement in Genesis 2 has also a higher dimension.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and

without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:22–32)

Of course, it is practical guidance and authoritative commandment at the level of the matter of Christian marriage, but it is also a great mystery concerning Christ and the church.

Some folks imagine that typology is a kind of convenient mumbo-jumbo and a way of making Scripture mean anything that you like. Some have grown so discouraged with typology that they would banish it altogether. But not so fast! There is no magic in it and certainly no mumbo-jumbo. Many of the events and situations of Genesis become prophetic of coming things. The God who started this world going and guided its early development designed its events and institutions so that they should be both valid in themselves and at the same time prototypes and preparations for the coming bigger things.

Do you find it surprising that the child's toyshop, with its paper money, cardboard coins and imitation cash tills has a kind of likeness with the big Marks and Spencer downtown? Of course not. You know that one day those children will grow up and need to go to Marks and Spencer, so to prepare them for that a wise father designs a toy Marks and Spencer for the child. As she crouches in front of the fire on a cold Wednesday afternoon and has no bigger horizon than the toyshop, very valid lessons are being learnt. She finds that $1 \times 1 = 1$ and $1 \times 2 = 2$. These are lessons that will be valid all through life as a prototype of bigger things to come.

We must not be surprised therefore, when we come to Galatians, to find Paul quoting the story of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar as a prototype of something far bigger. When Ishmael was born of the slave girl, Hagar, she tried to run away, but the angel of the Lord sent her back and she had to live in Abraham's house until the promised seed, Isaac, was born. At that very moment Ishmael and Hagar are cast out (Gen 21).

Paul informs us that it is an early prototype of a much bigger thing. The nation that descended from Abraham was originally without the law, but there came a point when God gave them the law. It was a law that brought about slavery in many respects, but in God's good providence it was given until the Promised Seed, Jesus Christ our Lord, should come. When he was born, and died as a sacrifice for sin, and rose again, then something new was done.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Gal 3:23–26)

Our Lord's present priesthood is the full glowing reality, fashioned after a prototype invented in the days of the book of Genesis (chapter 14). He is declared to be a priest after the order (according to the prototype) of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6).

In our studies of Genesis, we shall be taking it from time to time at these two levels:

1. *Actual history*, bringing us many practical lessons that have been valid ever since they were given and have not changed.

2. *Prototypes* of larger things in world history and prophecies of the consummation of world redemption.

Genesis is a very large book; it has fifty chapters and the very number of them sometimes is forbidding. Let us therefore help ourselves to confront this very large study by first of all taking a bird's eye view of the contents of the book. We should be able to convince ourselves that its broad subject matter can be very easily comprehended.

The first part gives us three stories of creation

Let me point out to you at once that these stories do not contradict each other. They give us the story of creation from three different points of view. In the New Testament we have not one story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ our Lord, but four. There are four Gospels and they do not contradict themselves. It has been God's good pleasure to show us the life of Christ from four slightly different points of view and he has done the same with the story of creation, asking us think of it from three distinct perspectives.

The chief topic of each story is not about suns and stars and moons and vaporous gases out in empty space, though they do mention such things. They tell us particularly about man, who was made to be God's viceroy and representative. They tell us about man's relationship to God's great creation; what he was meant to be and what the purpose was for having a world. That is an important thing to know! We clean our carrots, grow wheat and make clothes because we need a living. God doesn't make carrots because he has to earn a living; he does it for the sheer joy of making things, for the thrill of inventing ideas and getting them to work. I say it reverently, there isn't a lazy streak to be found anywhere in God Almighty. He loves to do things and he tells us about his creation, why he made it and how and what he intended it to be for, so that we might know our place in it and co-operate with God, sharing in his ideas and activities.

1. *The first creation story (1:1-2:3)*

Between them these three creation stories tell us also of what went wrong with man. The first story leaves everything perfect— God made man perfect in his image. The second story starts to tell us the sad event of the fall and what it meant. And similarly the third story takes up that same idea and tells us that the effect of sin was to ruin man constitutionally. God doesn't tell us this to mock us with visions of things that could have been but now are impossible; he tells us immediately about the beginning of his process for salvation and redemption.

2. *The second creation story (2:4-4:26)*

In the second creation story we begin to notice indications of redemption, which we shall follow throughout all the subsequent histories in the book of Genesis. We shall find a recurring pattern. There is a little phrase, 'These are the generations of.' Sometimes it will

occur frequently within a few chapters and then you go for numbers of chapters before it turns up again.

You will find that they follow a certain pattern. They are landmarks on the road down which the path of redemption is following. It is like a main road that goes on towards its goal, but every now and again you come to a fork in the road. If you were to follow the fork one way very soon you would come to a dead end, so you find that in the book of Genesis you will sometimes have to retrace your steps a bit, come back to the fork and go down the other side. You then discover that this in fact is the main road and now you're on your way again until presently you come to another fork in the road. You take the first road and go a little way, once more to come to a dead end! Genesis won't pursue it any further, so back you come to the fork and go down the other side. You find that this is the main road and you can continue again for many more chapters. You will find the pattern repeating itself. Then you will discover that it is the road that God has designed for the salvation of individuals and ultimately the redemption of the whole world.

Genesis therefore is not concerned with a lot of things that humans would normally be interested in. Vast empires arose and parted in the days that are covered by the history of Genesis and very little is said about them. Not because they were not important in themselves, but simply because they were not God's main road through history to salvation and redemption.

Look at this road for a moment. The second creation story begins,

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. (Gen 2:4)

He promises to tell us about two things:

1. The generations of the heavens
2. The generations of the earth

You will find no more mention of the heavens in that particular creation story. It tells us that God made the heavens, but nothing about what he's going to do with them. I wonder what he is doing with all that gas in Andromeda at the moment and what he is going to do with it later on. Shall he pour it down the drain, or is he going to do something with it? I wonder what he's going to do with the millions of suns and planets. Genesis doesn't tell us here, so for us at least that's not the road down which salvation shall come. The heavens get left at the dead end of that fork on the road and we come back to the generations of the earth.

Man was made out of earth and exciting things began to happen until Satan ruined it. He came into the garden and planted in the man and woman the poison of his unbelief and hate towards God, but God did not give up and abandon them. Having made such a marvellous creature and blessed him with indescribable blessings he believed Satan's lies and proved himself to be a traitor. Had I been God should I not have been tempted to scratch him out of my hand, and say, 'You insignificant little bit of dust, what do I need you for? I've millions of other worlds. I'll blot you out!' — and you'd scarcely notice that the earth was gone.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? (Num 23:19)

Did he devise an earth and say that man should have dominion over it? God will not give up; not for man and devil combined. God went on with the great adventure and goes on with it still. Hebrews 2 tells us that God will continue until he brings it to its final glorious, complete and utterly victorious solution.

3. The third creation-story (5:1–9:29)

In the third creation story here's the phrase again, 'These are the generations of' (6:9). Here is a creation story that now puts man in the context of his constitution; but more of that on another occasion. The first man, Adam, was a failure and he died. All his successors died. At last man became so hopelessly corrupt that God brought in a flood and destroyed the whole phenomenon called 'man'. Or did he? That fork in the road came to an end, but there was a second! Genesis takes up the second man's own story. Noah went through the judgment like everybody else, but he came out the other side into a new and cleansed world to make a new beginning for the human race. The first man, the first beginning of the race, went wrong and the race was blotted out. Genesis takes up the main road again with the story of another man, a new beginning and a race that will never be blotted out.

So we have seen the three stories of creation. Two of them are telling us of man's fall and the beginnings of God's plan of redemption.

4. The rise of the Hebrew nation from among the Gentiles (10:1–25:11)

After the flood the second half of Genesis takes up the story. You will recognise the road going on, 'These are the generations of.' The road is fast becoming a highway as God develops his great historical plan for the redemption of mankind.

These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. (6:9)

These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood. (10:1)

These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. (11:10)

But then the book comes to its dead end there. Important as those nations were, and interesting as their history is, Genesis does not follow it. That was not the great highway of redemption for mankind; God will do a new thing. Out of the nations, on the branch of Shem, God took a man from the idolatrous pagans of Mesopotamia. God called Abraham out of the Gentiles and transformed him into a Hebrew. That was the beginning of a thrilling and unique story that still holds the front page in all the newspapers of the world. God chose to use the unique nation of the Hebrews in his developing plan of redemption.

The first great part of the story is the call of Abraham out of the Gentiles and building from him the special nation of the Hebrews. It is the story of Abraham and his seed, but this was

no exclusive tea party. In the very moment he was drawing him out of the Gentiles to make him a separate nation, God said, 'I have made you the father of a multitude of nations' (17:5). In calling Abraham out and making him walk a path of separation and pilgrimage, God's design was not to bring him at last to some conservative, exclusive heaven. It was that eventually he and his seed should be the vehicle of worldwide salvation for mankind.

In part four of Genesis, Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation (through whom one day the promised seed, Messiah himself, should come) is learning lessons about the fundamental condition for true human existence. Abraham was justified by faith and he was justified by works (see Rom 4).

5. The maintenance of the Hebrews' vision and their development into Israelites (25:12-35:29)

When we have read that story as history and also as prophecy, Genesis will ask us to look again at the fork in the road. From Abraham there came two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Genesis goes a little way down that fork and we read the story of Ishmael, but it comes to a dead end very quickly. It was not to be through Ishmael that the promises were given or fulfilled, 'For through Isaac shall your offspring be named' (21:12). And so we come back on the main road to see God's developing plan of salvation.

It does not repeat the lesson of Abraham the Gentile being called out from the Gentiles to form a special nation, or how a man is justified by faith or by works; it is the first stage in God's developing of that nation, turning Hebrews into Israelites. That was an intricate and exceedingly absorbing process. It involved the children of Abraham maintaining their vision of the purpose of God and maintaining it among nations that became increasingly hostile to the idea of their very existence as a nation.

On this part of the road we shall find that the Philistines tried to make life impossible for Isaac (chapter 26). We shall see also how it was that the Hebrews themselves, through Jacob no less, were taken out of the promised land (28:1-5). Jacob toiled year upon year among the Gentiles, making his fortune and then losing it. He, the promised seed, had to spend a long period of twenty-one years out of the promised land, scattered among the nations and finding life increasingly tough. There were periods of romance, as you know, and business success, but in the end life was impossible among the Gentiles.

He was chased out and ran for his life to get back to the promised land. When he got back he lived in fear of his life because of the Canaanite nations that were around him. Those distressing long years were God's discipline, turning unregenerate Hebrews into princes with God. He was turning them into Israelites who should be able, when the time came, to take over the government and administration of the Gentile world. This is actual history that I'm talking about, but we would be very dull if we couldn't see that it's happened again on a bigger scale. Genesis has proved to be a prototype of bigger things, holding its prophetic message of promise and fulfilment for the day even yet beyond our own. How is that nation to be brought at last to the end that God designed for it and how shall the road of salvation reach its glorious goal?

The nation literally became a blessing, as God prophesied it would, 'In thy seed shall all the nations of the world be blessed.' There came a famine, not only upon Egypt, but also upon

all the nations around it. They were dependent upon Egypt, for Egypt was their granary. They were in utter bewilderment and distress, not knowing what to do, then Joseph, a Hebrew, became the veritable saviour of the world's economics. It is a lovely story of ancient history and at the same time of prophecy.

We in our day live in a diminishing economy and growing violence. Under the judgments of God, the Western world will get worse and economic problems will become impossible. What a joy it is then to read this ancient history. God has prepared beforehand a saviour of the world, a man who should be able to take over earth and make it work as God intended it should work. He will make of it something glorious and good. That man comes through the line of that special nation; he is a Hebrew, an Israelite, the promised seed. Joseph was rejected by his brothers and sold to the Gentiles, put down a pit and then into a dungeon. At last he was brought up to a place of power as the head of the whole world, and his brothers were reconciled to him. The road of redemption shall reach its final goal when the blessed Jew, Jesus Christ our Lord, shall come again. His earthly people have rejected him, but he is still the saviour of the world:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)

They shall eventually own him as he takes over and makes something of the earth as God originally intended man should do.

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!' (Rev 5:11-12)

As far as I conceive it, that is the story of the great book of Genesis. May God help us as we study it. It will be hard work. We shall be talking of a real God, the God who made the world with its gold and silver and resources. He is a God who is big enough, not simply to save my little soul and give me some wonderful feelings, but big enough to save a world and bring it to the glory that he originally intended it to have. If we are the companions of Christ we must be prepared to work hard and have our minds stretched and thus prepare to share with him the glories of heaven that God has designed for us.

The First Creation Story (Part 1)

Genesis 1:1–2:3

We are to study now one of the most famous chapters in the word of God, Genesis chapter 1. It is a pity perhaps that we are not coming to it for the very first time. We come to a chapter that for many years has been the battleground of a struggle between science and faith; or it would be better to say between pseudo-science and faith. Genesis 1 stirs up all sorts of questions that have been debated many times. There is a tendency then to start asking questions that Genesis 1 was never designed to answer. Not only that, but in the process sometimes we forget to listen to what exactly it is trying to tell us.

Therefore, we shall notice right from the very beginning that Genesis 1 is concerned with two things.

1. It is concerned to tell us something about God's creation.
2. In addition, it tells us a great deal about God's organisation of the world that he has made.

We must try and find a place in our thinking for both those elements, *creation* and *organisation*. Genesis 1 will tell us a little bit about the *how* of God's creation, and it will tell us equally as much, if not more, about the *why*. From one point of view, the *why* is much more important than the *how*.

Let me try and illustrate what I mean. If you came to this hall in Belfast via Bradbury Place and Shaftesbury Square you may have noticed an extraordinary lamp perched on a very high post in the middle of the square, shedding its yellow and white beams far and wide. If I were to ask you, 'How is that light yellow?' I should expect you to give me a scientific explanation in terms of chemistry, electricity and filaments etc. That would be the 'how' of the thing being yellow. Though that is important and exceedingly interesting to some people, most of us very rarely think about how that light is yellow. We are much more concerned with why it is yellow. If you ask 'why?', then the answer is not to be given in terms of chemistry and electricity. The answer is that it is yellow because the city fathers thought that it was a very good thing to have in Bradbury Place, in order to assist the organisation of the evening traffic through the city.

So, how and why are two very different questions, and we shall try not to confuse them. Many people expect Genesis 1 to be talking about the how of God's creation, and to some extent it answers the question. But we must be aware that Genesis 1 is equally, if not even more, concerned to answer certain questions as to the why. It is concerned not merely with

God's creation but with a creative act, the way the Creator has organised our world and universe.

It has long since been a battleground, so permit me to take another minute or two to suggest certain preliminary things—some cautions and precautions—that we ought to consider as we approach the chapter.

Scientific theories

If we profess to be Christian people we must believe all that Genesis 1 says, and I affirm my own personal faith in it. Then we must be humble enough to admit that we do not necessarily understand all it says. Therefore, it is not because we do not believe it, but because we do not necessarily understand it all, that it will be necessary to ask all sorts of questions from time to time. Moreover, in our attempts to understand it, we should not be too quick to identify what Genesis is saying with current and popular scientific theories in the world.

Scientific theories are important and valuable things. Science must proceed by first observing the facts, and then framing its theories, and finally proceeding to test its theories by experiments to see whether they stand up to the experiment or are proved wrong. Scientific theory, therefore, is an integral and necessary part of scientific understanding. But it would be bad science to confuse the theory with the established fact. No true scientist would make that confusion. Very often, as science gets published in magazines, papers and schoolbooks, the popular writers are not always careful to distinguish between what is theory and what is fact. Sometimes the popular books are guilty of publishing as fact what is no more than unproven theory, and sometimes theory that by definition could never be proved. So we should not be too quick in identifying Genesis 1 with modern scientific theory.

And for another good reason as well. Scientific theories have a way of changing—even popular theories. In centuries gone by there were competitive theories to explain life and how life develops and is passed on. There was a theory called *preformationism*. It was at one stage the dominant theory, and everybody more or less accepted it. But then it fell into disrepute because of certain extremes. Its place was taken by another theory called *epigenesis*. It became the reigning theory, and if you questioned it you would have been regarded as someone a little bit lacking in the true scientific spirit. Then epigenesis went the way of all theories, and a new one took its place. We should not be too impressed by the colossal weight and pressure that sometimes gathers round particularly favoured theories. We should have a certain sense of history and reserve our opinion until the theory is confirmed or set aside.

We must very clearly define the basic term that we shall be using when we speak of creation. Genesis 1 tells us of a succession of creative acts that the great creator performed. I do want us to notice that it is talking of *creation*, strictly so called. Elsewhere in Scripture we shall read of another side of God's activity. He is the one who created all things, and he continues to uphold all things.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16–17)

If you were asked how our world has come to be in its present situation, you would have to give two answers to it:

1. Because of the original acts of creation;
2. Because of the million and one acts of maintenance and development that have come after the original creation.

For instance, in this chapter we shall read of the creation of the first man and woman. In the very strictest sense of the term, they were created. No other man or woman ever since has been created. Billions upon billions of human beings have been born into this world, but not by special creation, simply by the normal processes of development. Having created the original pair, God has left them, by the normal process of birth, to produce all the multi-million generations that have been since.

The apostle Paul, speaking at Athens, observes,

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. (Acts 17:24–26)

How has God made them? Even by Paul's time, mankind came in different kinds of wrappings. All human beings, but there were black and yellow and white and red, Asian and Eurasian and European, and others of varying sizes, shapes and appearances. How has God made that vast variety of men to develop on the face of the earth? The answer is not simply by creation. Creation produced the first pair; the rest were produced by the process of ongoing development, but with all the permutations inherent in the creation of the first pair. Genesis 1 is concerned to tell us of creation, strictly so called; but it says very little, if anything, of that other great part of the work, the development over multi-million years (if need be) of what was originally created.

God did not make everything at one and the same time

With those initial observations, let's come to the chapter itself. If only we could be reading this chapter now for the first time, what delightful surprises we should have. And this is surely the first of them; when God created the heavens and the earth he did not create them all at once.

If we had no Bible and argued merely philosophically, we might well say to ourselves, 'God is Almighty; God can do anything. Therefore, if he made the heaven and the earth, he could make it all at once if he so pleased.' And philosophically that could be quite true, but that is not how he did it. Genesis 1 is at pains to tell us that he did not make it all at once; he made it in stages. He made it by a succession of creative acts that had certain intervals between them.

Secondly, we should notice that, as those creative acts followed each other, what was produced was not merely more in quantity, but more complicated in quality. It was not merely as a child builds a house out of bricks, all the bricks being exactly the same, apart from the colouring, and he just piles one brick on the top of another brick. There is more; but not more complication. If we look at the various creative acts of God, we shall find that they bring into existence successively more complicated things until you come to what is the most complicated of all—the first human pair.

The pinnacle of creation

It is evident therefore that Genesis 1 tells us of an ongoing process that was designed from the very start to lead to a glorious climax and goal, the very pinnacle of the works of God. It is an exciting thing when we find Genesis 1 telling us what that pinnacle is, and what goal God had in mind when he began these creative acts and as they continued, becoming ever more complicated and colourful. The goal he had in mind was *man*. We who believe God's holy word should lift up our heads as we observe what a dignified and glorious concept the Bible has of human beings. *We were made in the image of God, to have dominion over the creation.*

For centuries men and women have lived in indescribable slavery and fear for letting go of this glorious truth, and not believing that man owes his position in the world to an almighty Creator. Man was the pinnacle of his creation; God made him to be viceroy of it, to control it, to be lord of it. Generations have slipped into idolatry and superstition; by banning the knowledge of God from their minds they thought they would strike a blow for freedom, but they have descended into being slaves.

If you look around the world it will not take you five minutes to observe that there are colossal, almost immeasurable, elemental and physical powers. Powers that we have not even a hope of controlling in our own strength. Sooner or later we must ask ourselves what is our relation to those great powers. If there is no God, and our world is merely the result of chance—working on blind matter without forethought or plan, then are we slaves indeed. We are beings with intelligence who can think and reflect and we find ourselves in the universe surrounded by colossal powers that we cannot control. And they don't all come in big sizes. There is a tiny little virus that one day perhaps will get into your body and in the end tear it apart; not all the medical science in the world can stop it.

What is our relation to this world?

Generations that have lost faith in a living God and Creator have turned to abject idolatry, worshipping these great forces of nature. Worshipping the god of the storm or the storm itself. Worshipping electricity with its mysteries. Worshipping the psychological urges that we find within our own person, the sex urge, the urge of aggressiveness, exalting them to be gods and goddesses until man became a slave of his very body, his own urges. If in our modern day we would escape a similar, though more sophisticated, slavery to the mere material elements of the universe, we must adhere to what Genesis proclaims as the basis of man's very existence and status in the universe. He comes from the powerful hand of almighty God who created

the vast universe. Because God has the power to control it, he has power to put man in it and make him God's viceroy over the universe.

Sin has done its deadly work. Mankind has rebelled against God and sought a false independence, and God is in the process of teaching us where independence of God will lead. But God has not given up his intention and glorious adventure of having a thing called *man*. This creature in the image of God can have fellowship with God, and on a smaller scale do the kind of things that God does and rule God's universe for him. God still adheres to the programme, and the glorious adventure will go on until one day it is finally realised in full. I cannot resist reminding you how far along the road that design is.

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour. (Heb 2:8–9)

This man who was made a little lower than the angels is crowned already with glory and honour; he has done a work that lays the foundation for the reconciliation of all things. Redeemed humanity will soon come to that glorious goal that God first conceived of when he invented the world and determined to put man in charge.

We notice then that these days reach a climax of activity. The pinnacle and goal is man, and he was made to have dominion.

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. (Gen 1:26)

Let us consider that term just for a moment. The Hebrew word means not so much, 'to have *dominion*,' as being a king, politically. It means to have dominion in the sense of being the one to organise, administer, run the place and develop it. I do admire the genius of God's inventions. All the glorious fun that he proposed when he invented a universe and then made a man in his image, to whom he could talk; a man who could respond to God and feel how God feels, think how God thinks and take part with God in developing the thing.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. (2:1–2)

God didn't make it in its final form, there was still a lot to be done; the world still had to be developed. God subsequently planted a garden, 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it' (2:15). I think that is lovely! God didn't put man in a world that was finished, to the last crossing of the 't' and dotting of the 'i', he left something for man to do and to develop.

I don't know what your father was like when he gave you presents, a bicycle maybe or a toy train. I can distinctly remember that it was usually some older person that would give you a train. The adult wanted to show how it should be done, so he hitched the engine up; he even

wanted to show you how the signals went. As the evening went by you hadn't been allowed to do anything, the adult had done it all!

I'm glad God isn't like that. He invented a big world for man, put him on it and said, 'Adam, you develop it!' God has packed his world with all sorts of surprises to keep man interested and entertained. On that physical level, in doing things with God, man might then grow up and get to know God, just as a child grows up and gets to know his father, and advance into those deeper spiritual lessons and get to know God on that highest of all levels.

It has its implication for us still. Work nowadays is not what work was originally designed to be. It was originally designed to be a gentleman's occupation; not one long struggle to make ends meet, with boring, back-breaking labour, but sheer joy and gladness, as we enjoy using our gifts and powers of mind and body. Now work has in some sense been spoiled. Because of sin there has had to be added this hard discipline of labour and difficulty and pain and sorrow. Taken rightly, though, that labour shall train us the better to enjoy working with God in days yet to be.

This is still God's world and, at the basic level, God's intention for us remains. It's all right that the farmer exploits his farm, learns how to make bigger and better carrots. God intended that some should study needlework and develop the arts and make this world beautiful as God himself has done. He intended that some should be physicists and study God's work in the laboratory. We should not allow ourselves to be misled into a false dichotomy, separating life into two separate parts. There's God's work in creation and maintenance; and there's his great and more important activity in redemption. That should not make God's activity in the running of the world somehow simple, or our cooperation with him somehow less dignified or less worthy; both must proceed together.

If God calls you to spend most of your life working with him at the level of his creation and the maintenance of it, that is just as honourable a calling as it would be if God called you to be an Apostle Paul and serve him at the highest levels of redemptive activity. Let there be no clash of conscience, all life should be lived with God. We must indeed be careful lest, being fascinated by life at the level of creation and maintenance, we turn a deaf ear should God call us to serve him in the higher realms of redemption. At the other extreme, we should not allow what we imagine to be a call to serve God at the level of redemption to make us lazy and escapist in the realm of creation.

May I speak to my younger Christian brothers and sisters who are still at school? Do your sums and your physics and keep at your languages. That is working together with God as he intended you should work. None of this skimping of lessons because we are so holy that we think physics is a waste of time. It's God's world and we are to serve him. If he has called you to do physics, serve him with all your mind, heart, soul and strength. It is at those basic levels that we indicate to God our willingness to serve him thoroughly and faithfully. He will be watching to see if we are the kind of people who can be trusted with higher responsibility, to serve him equally faithfully in the realm of redemption. But redemption was never meant to be an escape from the world of creation, nor will it ever be.

In the last vision of the new Jerusalem, the great city and administrative centre of the Redeemer for all eternity, it is not going up from earth—glad to get away from earth forever,

it is coming down from heaven to earth to carry on further glorious projects that an almightily wise God has designed to fill eternity.

The *how* of creation, 'And God said'

Now let us notice something of the *how* of creation. We shall not have time to investigate every verse. Therefore, let us notice the basic principle, which is to be found in that little phrase so frequently repeated, 'And God said.' It is vital that we get hold of it and understand what it means. It lies at the heart of the matter.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb 11:3)

Genesis 1 says, 'And God said' and John tells us,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

Every creative act was performed by a word of God. And this whole universe has meaning, precisely because it was made by the Word of God. It is not a chance happening; he initiated it. God is all-intelligent, all-reasonable, all-rational, purposeful and meaningful. Creation gets its meaning from him who was ever the Word of God, and has imprinted his code in material and given meaning to the universe.

An atheist is a desolate person; he finds himself with a brain and with intelligence, but he holds that the universe is the result, not of any Word, but blind force working on blind, mindless matter. Often he hasn't the sense, perhaps, to see where that logic leads him. Whether he is ready to admit it or not, it leads to the fact that he himself is ultimately meaningless, his world is ultimately meaningless and the very thing he is pleased to call his intelligence and reason is ultimately irrational. Ultimately there is no meaning to be had in anything unless this vast universe goes back to the Lord.

Notice very carefully how frequently this phrase, 'And God said,' comes into these days of creation.

Day 1 once
Day 2 once
Day 3 twice
Day 4 once
Day 5 once
Day 6 twice

Why the difference? If you look at the days where God spoke twice, you will see that on those two days two groups of things were created that were totally different.

On Day 3 the first mention of 'And God said' has still to do with inorganic, lifeless matter, as the preceding days have done. But the second mention of 'And God said' is concerned with organic matter, vegetable life; and very clearly God has indicated to us that between inorganic matter and organic matter there stands an 'And God said'.

As I said earlier, God has done many things simply by the principle of development. He started something going and then he let it develop on from there. All the many races and colours and kinds of mankind have come by way of development, but organic life did not come out of inorganic simply by development. Life was introduced by its own particular and specific 'And God said'.

Notice again in Day 6. The first 'And God said' is concerned with the making of animals; then in that day man is made as well. But not made by development out of the animals. For all I know, God may have started with just one pair of dogs and thereby developed all the multitudinous kinds of dogs that could possibly grace a dog show simply by development from the first pair. But God didn't make man by development out of the animals. When it comes to making man, God explicitly interposes one more 'And God said'. And if we are Christians that is what we are called to believe.

What about the length of the days?

I had better tell you what I think about the days! Were they literal days, or were they ages? It seems to me that there is room for difference of opinion here, and I respect those with whom I do not happen to agree. For my part, I understand these days to have been literal days of twenty-four hours or thereabouts. I gather that from the fact that every time, except for the last day, we are told, 'And there was evening and there was morning, the [first . . .] day.' That is telling you what kind of a day it was—there was evening and morning.

'But what about the vast ages that geology has proved there have been?' you say. What about them? We are not talking about them here. We are talking about six days, not of God's maintenance and development—we are talking precisely and explicitly about creation, not development. It may have taken vast geological ages for all I know, but we are not talking about development. We are talking about creative acts that followed after 'And God said'.

I ask you to time it, if you like. How long do you think it took the Creator to say, 'Let there be light' (1:3)? We are talking about a precise act of creation, which by definition is done in a split second. Following these acts of creation there doubtless were long periods of development; but that's not what the days of Genesis are talking about.

We ought to look very hard at the chapter, because people have got it into their heads that the seven days of Genesis 1 were the days of one week. They are inclined to think that they started on a Sunday and ended up on a Saturday. Well, there is nothing in Genesis 1 that says that! There was one day; there was a second day; and there was a third day . . . but there's nothing to say that they were six days of one week. We should be careful not to read into the text what the text doesn't say.

Day seven had no ending. Day seven still lasts. Since then God has gone on maintaining things and developing them over years and years and years and years. But day seven likewise tells you that now his creative acts are at an end (2:2). The development will go on. And it seems to me quite conceivable that having said, 'Let there be . . .' and the Scriptures

confirming 'and it was so' (and he said it within a day of twenty-four hours)—God might then have left the whole universe to go on its way for thousands, even millions of years before he came to a second day of twenty four hours and proceeded to another great act of creation.

Chaos in God's creation?

You say, 'Do you adhere to the catastrophe theory? We like to get our geological ages into Genesis 1, presuming that between verse 1 and verse 2 there was a great catastrophe, and the earth became void and chaotic!'

Well you may be right, but it depends what you think of chaos, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing.

You say, 'Well isn't it by definition bad?'

Not really, it depends which way the chaos is going whether it's good or bad.

If you ever enter the kitchen in your house at certain times of the year, you will see your wife standing in front of a nice bag of sugar, some orange peel, currants, sultanas, some rather larger bags of flour, sugar and some milk, all in nice neat parcels. You watch her as she proceeds to make chaos of those parcels, pouring the milk into the sultanas and the flour and the sugar, and the goodness knows what else; and instead of having nice neat packages it's utter chaos. You don't say, 'What a disaster!' but, 'If I know anything, it's going to come out a Christmas cake.' It's a lovely kind of chaos when you see it begin. Of course you don't want it to remain chaos, you want it to proceed to the final product. But because the chaos is going that way, the chaos is to be welcomed and it is a jolly good thing. But suppose, when the cake is made and it stands in its icing and has Happy Xmas on it in pink writing, you come into the kitchen (a clumsy type) and knock it on to the floor and it's all smashed up and mixed up with the china and the plate. That's chaos too, isn't it? It's chaos going the wrong direction, a very bad chaos.

What kind of chaos was it when God created the heaven and the earth and it was without form and void? You may be right if you hold it was bad chaos and I would not dispute it with you. It seems to me quite probable that it was good chaos, because it was the first stage in the right direction. You say that if God were to make it, it would be perfect. Read Genesis! It tells you precisely that that is what he didn't do. He didn't make it all at once, he made it in stages.

So, we have been considering Genesis 1 and some of the principles of the *how* of creation, but we'll have to spend another evening's study on it to consider the *how* and then the *why*. Of the two I fancy the *why* will be the more important.

God stimulate his image within each one of us, for if we are being conformed to his image we will be interested in the things that God has made and done. One of the blessed results of redemption is that, as sons of God, we come to have a sane attitude towards his glorious handiwork in creation.

The First Creation Story (Part 2)

Genesis 1:1–2:3

The word of God calls each one of us to stand still for a moment and stare at some of the glorious wonders of God's creation around us. It is a pity that the thousand and one duties of our daily life, the myriad modern devices – artificial and sophisticated, very frequently so fill our lives and sight that they leave us very little time for the virtue of wonder. We lose the sense of the excitement of just being; of the glory and the marvel of the world and universe in which we live. And it is a wonderfully refreshing thing now and again to sit still and let life go rushing by, while we regain the wonder of a child's vision of the world and begin to fill our hearts with a sense of awe and delight at its magnificence.

Let us sit still then and stare at things that we have seen and known for many years. Let us try and empty our ears of the babble of the thousand and one voices – most of them saying nothing in particular, the noise we listen to every day, and let us hear those far more important messages that Nature herself daily relays to us from God who made her.

The wonders of creation

Light

The first wonder I call your attention to is the way that Almighty God has arranged the lighting system of our world. We take it very much for granted that when we get up in the morning the light is there, or it will come very soon. On average we get twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. It has been doing it ever since we were one-year-old and we're now sixty-six and a half and we may have lost the wonder of this extraordinary mechanism. But consider it as God himself has called attention to the way in which he has arranged the lighting system of our world.

I need not tell you how important our lighting system is. It is necessity number one for all human, animal and plant existence. We need the light; without it we cannot see to work, and without it we should not even live. The humblest green plant needs that light to set going the mechanism in its leaves that makes life possible. Were we left too long in the darkness, life for us would become extinct. Let us think how God has arranged it. And if you would perceive the wonder and the message in God's organisation, perhaps you had better stop just a moment and see what kind of a lighting system you would have arranged if you had been God. I don't know if you have tried it – what would you have done? Please don't say that the way God has done it is the only possible way. God, being almighty, could have done it a thousand and one

ways. He could have made you like a fish that inhabits the deepest ocean, with a little bit of phosphorescence in the forehead perhaps, so that you should have your light within yourself. But he hasn't done it that way.

And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (1:3-5)

Why did God call the light *Day* and why did he go on to call the darkness *Night*? A child could tell us that 'light' and 'day' is not exactly the same thing. When he puts his head down on the pillow, and as mum is drawing the curtains he looks outside and it's all dark, the child knows that the light is still there somewhere up in the sky. The light hasn't gone off just because day is finished. And the child knows likewise that 'night' and 'darkness' is not exactly the same thing, for when night is over and the sun's beams begin pouring again on to our side of the planet it doesn't mean that the darkness has gone out. The darkness remains, for space is largely dark. Were we to get out like the astronaut into space we should at first be overwhelmed with a colossal sense of the vast darkness everywhere, broken only by pinpoints of light almost lost in the vast recesses of space—permanent dark. But if we look in one direction, our sun shines there with its tremendous force.

What then does God mean when he called the light *Day*? He means to call our attention to the lighting system and the way he has done it. What schoolboy doesn't know how the thing works? It's not a switch that somebody puts on in the electricity headquarters and it turns the sun on and switches it off at night. Our little planet is constantly revolving in space and carrying us with it as it revolves. For roughly twelve hours in each day of twenty-four we are swivelled round into the light of the sun so that we see the light. We call that bit of experience *Day*.

Then, whether we want it or not, whether the gardening is done or the football game finished or whatever it may be, our little planet carries us round into the darkness again and the light is lost. And there we sit, utterly helpless to do anything about it. We cannot make our world move along one tiny bit faster. We must wait until the planet swivels us gradually round once more into the light. It is not that the light ever went out. It is that God Almighty has rationed us for light.

We have learned to follow his description, so in one sense we use the word *Day* to cover all twenty-four hours.

We say to ourselves, 'What day is Aunt Sally coming?'

And you say 'She's coming on Saturday.'

Well, that's the day she's coming and we mean the period of twenty-four hours that goes by the name of Saturday.

But then somebody says, 'Is she coming by day or night?'

So we say, 'By night, the last flight from Heathrow.'

So we have learnt that little bit. In one sense *Day* is twenty-four hours; but in another sense *Day* isn't twenty-four hours. In a day of twenty-four hours we are allowed twelve hours of light and we call that bit especially *Day*. But the other twelve hours, the bit that we put in the dark, we call that *Night*. What a curious system of giving us light!

Our Lord Jesus himself has commented upon this bit of organisation. He pointed out a simple but exceedingly important and deliberate matter. Even the physical light that we all need for living our lives is not in us. The light that we must have to stay alive and see our way around is not in us. It is a number one necessity, but it is not in us. The light is not in our little world either. The tremendously impressive fact is that this light, our basic necessity, is no less than about ninety million miles outside us. For life's basic number one necessity we are helplessly dependent on a source that is millions of miles removed from us and completely out of our control. Man has invented marvellous things, but he is still as helplessly dependent on this external source as ever he was.

Why has God done it that way? I think it was for two reasons.

The physical level

He has done it at the physical level. Every twenty-four hours, men, women and children are reminded that we are utterly dependent on things outside our world. We are rightly impressed by the thousand and one marvellous inventions of modern technology. However, like the builders of the tower of Babel, it would be a bad thing if we became so impressed by it that we forgot that we still remain helplessly dependent on the vast lighting systems all those millions of miles away. We didn't make our world and we didn't make our universe. It is good for us to remember that we didn't make ourselves either. We are creatures of God and he has written across our daily experience one large reminder that to live at all we are dependent on him.

The spiritual level

And if it is true of physical life, that the light is not in us, how much more at the spiritual level. The light, which we need to see our way through life, is not in us.

Our Lord Jesus was the Creator incarnate. We who are believers in him have already come to him as the light of the world and know the light and joy of his salvation. Hear him then, as he applies Nature's lessons to his disciples. The occasion is at the death of his friend Lazarus of Bethany.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.' (John 11:7-10)

Thomas, with all the disciples, was concerned that he should not go into Judea. So, thinking with their own human powers and walking in the light of their own minds and brains, they said, 'No, Lord, that would be most unwise.' But our Lord replied, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day?' (In the Middle East there are exactly twelve hours in the day.) 'If anyone walks in the day he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world (the sun up in the sky). But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles . . .'. Why is that? 'Because the light is not in him.'

If you go into your garden and kick your toe against the garden fork that somebody left behind, the pain will remind you that the light is not in you! And the light that we need to show us our way through life to our desired goal is not in us. That light is the light of God. We have eyes to see it and brains to understand it, but the light isn't in us. It comes from God and the will of God. When we are content to walk in the light of God's will, with his plain direction shining on our paths, life will make sense. We shall see our way and we shall not stumble.

If I come to a point in life where God very clearly shows me that my path should run one way, but for reasons of my own I decide I don't want to walk down that pathway, Christ's warning is that I will inevitably stumble. There may be things I don't like down that pathway, maybe things that I fear; but to walk a road outside of the will of God is to take myself out of the light into the darkness. The light is not in me and the darkness will get deeper every step I take.

I speak with great sympathy. I wonder is there a believer here and there is a sense in which you are lost. A believer lost? Many believers are lost! They are certainly not lost as to their final destiny; they have come to Christ and Christ has received them. As far as their security goes, nothing shall ever pluck them out of his hand. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

But in another sense, as to living their lives and making some sense of it, there are many believers that are lost. They've lost a sense of purpose, they've lost their Christian zeal, their spiritual momentum. You will not find them gathering regularly with the church or vigorously pursuing the work of the gospel. The Bible has ceased to mean much to them and their prayers have become ragged and desultory. A sense of aimlessness fills their hearts. They are believers, but they are lost.

Why are they lost? Very probably they came across a path in life where the will of God said, 'This way.' And they said, 'No, not that way, I want to go this other way!' They went the other way, only to find that the light that they had when they walked in the will of God seems to be no longer with them.

Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' (John 8:12)

The light is not in me. When I allow myself to diverge from him and walk another way that I prefer, the further I get from him and his will the more I find that the light is not in me, and I go deeper into darkness.

You say, 'What must I do?' Dear Christian friend, you must repent. God isn't asking you to change your feelings; you can't change your feelings. But you still have power to change your mind. It is serious to go on like you are, you will waste your life. Can't you turn round? Can't you at least admit the fact that the light is not in you? Like the planet turns round on its axis, you must turn round and face the light. That light is Christ. You must come and say, 'Lord you are right, I am wrong. There is no light in me and life without you makes no sense. Lord, I repent of my folly and my foolish disobedience and independence of your will. Lord, I'm willing for you to find me, and I want to come and walk in the light!'

The world's physical lighting system preaches a message to those who have never yet trusted Christ. It tells them that without God there is ultimately nothing but darkness.

Watch an atheist scientist at work. (Thank God, not all scientists are atheists.) He looks at the mechanism within a daisy, but when he starts asking himself why the daisy exists he suggests that it is to beautify the meadows, or so that children may enjoy making daisy chains. So, we ask him, 'Why do the meadows exist?' He will say that they exist for the cows to eat the grass so that we can drink the milk. 'And why do we drink milk?' So that we can live. 'And why do we live?' Faced with life's ultimate question, a man who has decided that there is no God has no answer. He is obliged to say that there is no reason why we live. There is no logic, no purpose. It is all one mass of blind chance, ultimately insignificant and going out into darkness. He tells you that there is ultimately nothing for you but eternal darkness. Without God there is ultimately no reason. Without God this universe is irrational, without God it is meaningless. Every time our little planet turns round it takes us out into the dark. A whole life without God and the whole of eternity without God is darkness.

We were made with eyes to see and brains to think; and just as our eyes crave light so our minds crave the light of reason and purpose and sense in life. If we go on without God, we shall not cease to exist. When earth has turned for the last time, it will bring us to what holy Scripture calls 'the blackness of darkness forever' (see Jude v. 13 KJV). There is literally no sense in confining yourself to ultimate irrationality, purposelessness and senselessness. You were made to be able to see the light of reason, purpose and sanity. Why will you not turn to the light that shines?

Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' (John 8:12)

While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. (12:36)

The firmament, or atmosphere

The other two lessons can be done much more quickly. So in the second lesson I would ask you to consider the way in which Almighty God has arranged our atmosphere. Again, this is absolutely fundamental.

And God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. (1:6-8)

We are told that God made a *firmament* (KJV), by which he divided the waters from the waters. In other words, in one of the early stages of his creative activity he provided our planet with an atmosphere. Without it, human life would have been impossible. And though it is such an elementary matter, I would ask you again to sit back and wonder at it. We take for granted every lungful of air that we breathe. It is very speculative indeed whether there might possibly be one other planet that has life on it, but certainly they haven't got suitable atmospheres. It is something to be frequently wondered at therefore, that our little planet

should be so wonderfully constructed. It is not too small and not too big that its gravity can keep just enough atmosphere on it to make human life possible.

Not only has God provided our planet with an atmosphere but he has done something else very wonderful. In giving us what the Bible calls a firmament, he has put a great belt of radiation around our world. This is to prevent harmful rays from outer space penetrating in large quantities, otherwise they would destroy our planet, or at least destroy life upon it. If that protective layer were not there, life would fast become impossible. That seemingly blue sky hides hostile forces beyond description, so it keeps them from us. The atmosphere that God has given us is a thing of surpassing wonder.

'And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day' (1:8 KJV). I wonder did God have a twinkle in his eye when he informed Adam what the name for the firmament should be! Did Adam say, 'You're going to call the atmosphere Heaven—where the birds fly, you're going to call it Heaven?'

Why did God call the atmosphere 'heaven'?

Isn't Heaven how the theologians describe the presence of God? It is indeed, and God himself uses it to describe his presence. So why did God call the atmosphere Heaven? He wants our very atmosphere to teach us a lesson. It's a little difficult to see how we come across on the earth, unless you can view it from space. It must look a little comical to see it for the first time. We live on earth and in our vision it looks so tremendously large. It seems as though earth is everything, but if we could get out a few miles into space and look back at ourselves, mostly we are not on the earth at all. Our earth is round and when we stand on it the only part of us that is touching the earth is our feet. The remainder of our bodies is in the atmosphere and God called that bit Heaven!

Isn't that a curious way of making the world? How would you have made it? Would you have made us like rabbits, living in middle earth? God didn't! He has made a world for us to live on and we are able to live there by the force of gravity—our heads are sticking out into space. In this technical sense, whether we stand or sit, a big part of us is in heaven.

Heaven is absolutely vital to our existence; earth isn't big enough. If earth were all we had, it wouldn't be big enough to support life for more than five minutes or so. How forgetful we can be. With our noses stuck to the grindstone, as we plough our fields and run our businesses, earth becomes everything. Even for our physical survival we need this atmosphere that God calls, Heaven. To be fulfilled as human beings we need another dimension beyond our earth, beyond this little planet. We need that bigger heaven, the very abode of God. Earth may support our physical lives for a little while, but if you would know life indeed then you must walk daily with the God of heaven. To be in spiritual fellowship with him, that is eternal life. What God is offering is not merely safety in heaven when this world is done, he is offering us a higher dimension of life here and now. Along with physical life, a spiritual life that is eternal. Heaven in its spiritual sense has already begun.

This little world which we call earth won't last forever. One day it shall cease, and when the earth departs from our feet where shall we be? May God in his kindness let us see Nature's illustration. There is a bigger heaven and man was made for it. This physical heaven, the

atmosphere, is necessary for our life even now and is the bigger part of it, but there is a larger heaven waiting when this life is done.

Earth and its finely tuned balance

Come to think about it, even this earth we live on is a tiny place. We call the whole globe Earth and rightly so, but in another sense we can only call part of it Earth. God made a bit of soil for us to stand on; he swept the seas aside so that we humans should have somewhere to put our feet.

We call this 'our' world. But it isn't altogether ours, is it? When we think of those vast oceans, the scientists tell us that the amount of water on our planet is just about rightly balanced with the amount of dry land. If the balance were upset one way or the other, again life would become impossible. It is just nicely balanced, but it's something we can't control. If the mighty ice caps of the North Pole were suddenly to be melted, many of our modern civilised cities would immediately be submerged. And if the earth's axis were to be tilted just a little bit, the vast forces of the ocean that God keeps in their place would immediately destroy us. We build our breakwaters as high as we can so that we have dry land to work on. But we couldn't stop the seas by our own efforts. We live because God, in his mercy and love, has 'set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth' (Ps 104:9).

Men and women are creatures of time, yet travelling to eternity. What lessons these are for us. If we would be realists, we must face the fact that we are utterly dependent on God. The tragedy of human existence is that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray; each one of us has turned to his own way (Isa 53:6). By trusting in our little brains and in our little brawn, we thought that we could know better than God and grasped at independence of him. That way only leads to darkness. But then, there is the thought of tomorrow's sun! In your imagination think of that greater Son of life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Said he, 'Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

O friend, the God that made this world and put you on it meant to bring you at last to his glorious heaven when this temporary world is finished. He would be broken-hearted if you were to miss the way and perish. Therefore, he stands waiting to save us with an almighty salvation, not a salvation that we procure by our efforts or produce by our merits. As poor little frail creatures of dust, how could we save ourselves? But we have a God of almighty power and infinite love who stands waiting to save us. 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other' (Isa 45:22).

We have considered the marvels of his world, so right now let us bow our hearts and turn ourselves to look again upon the face of God in Christ. Let's call upon him and he will find us where we are and give us light and give us salvation.

'For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom 10:13).

The Second Creation Story (Part 1)

Genesis 2:4–4:26

Thus far we have given ourselves what you might call a bird's eye view of the first creation story. We found that it was concerned, in the first place, with the stages of God's creative activity; the great acts of creation, strictly so called. Not with the centuries of development and maintenance, but those few successive creative acts that each occurred within a day of twenty-four hours, as far as we know. Not within days that were necessarily days of one week, but days that were marked by certain creative words of God that may well have been followed on each occasion by centuries, or billions of years of development and maintenance.

Then again, a series of creative acts that came to their end on the sixth day. That sixth day was followed by a seventh, which has lasted to this very present moment, for God's creative activity ended on the sixth day. Quite clearly his maintenance and his development of all that he had created has gone on and still goes on, and accounts for the vast variety of things that we see around us now.

Then we noticed that those days of creation took God's creative process further and further along, introducing at each stage things that were more complex. That series of creative acts comes at last to a climax with the creation of man. We saw what a wonderful concept that is, that man is created to be the climax, the chief of all the ways of God in this world. He was made in the image of God to be God's viceroy; to be and to do and to act and to think on his lower level the kind of things that God is and does and thinks at his higher level. Therefore, man was given to have dominion over God's great creation and to develop it, to subdue the earth and fill it, and make something of it for God.

We found that Genesis 1 is not only concerned with God's creative activity, but also dilates upon God's methods of organisation. We found that the common reason behind God's organisation is that man should learn to live in utter, glad dependence upon God. Therefore, it was important that we should put both these ideas together. Man was made to have dominion, to be king of the earth, its overlord, ruler and administrator; but at the very same time he could only have dominion so long as he acknowledged that he was content to live in humble, glad, filial dependence upon God.

The message of the book of Genesis

If we may anticipate the message of Genesis for a moment, it would tell us how earth came to its present chaos. Man was made dependent on God and put in a world so organised that it would emphasize his dependence. But he chose to grasp at independence of God and came to

a point where he was no longer content to accept God's judgments and decisions. He insisted on knowing good and evil for himself, so that he might make his own decisions independent of God. And in the very moment of grasping that independence, he quite logically lost a great deal of his dominion. He not only lost a lot of his dominion in the world external to him, but a good deal of dominion of the world that is internal to him. Very often he is unable to govern even his own passions.

Let's anticipate it a bit further. Genesis not only tells us of man's folly at grasping independence and of the fall that followed; Genesis preaches us the gospel. If you ask what is the gospel message particular to Genesis, then it is not so much the message of redemption by blood and sacrifice—it is hinted at in Genesis, but that message of salvation is left to books like Exodus and Leviticus to spell out in detail—the great message of salvation in the book of Genesis is *justification by faith*.

If we pondered it a moment, we would see how that method of salvation is admirably and exactly suited to man's need as disclosed in Genesis. If man's ruin has come by his grasping at independence, his salvation will come as he learns in true repentance to come back and be utterly dependent upon God. The New Testament quotes Genesis 15:6, 'Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness' (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). It explains what it means to believe God. Taking Abraham as an example, it points out how God waited until Abraham was physically quite incompetent. He and Sarah knew that their bodies were as good as dead, and if ever they were to have a son it would be God who did it all. So, from the very first chapter of Genesis, we get lines of thought that will tell us not merely what was originally intended to be, and how the fall came about, but how mankind is in the process of being redeemed and one day in Christ we shall reach the goal that God originally planned.

The second Creation story

Now we move on to the second creation story. There are no less than three creation stories in Genesis. They lie side by side. They do not contradict each other, in spite of what school textbooks tend to say. They are there to complement each other and to put creation in its different contexts, so that we might see it from different points of view.

So this second creation story that we are now to study would tell us not merely about the creation of man, and focus our attention on him rather than on the sun, moon, stars, whales and elephants. It will proceed to the fall of man and what it involved for Adam and Eve and for the whole human race. Then it will go further still and give us a glimpse of the effect of the fall upon the succeeding generations and their first attempts at civilisation. When that story is done, chapter five will come back once more to the story of creation and put it in another, different context.

The repetition of the word 'ground'

Now let me therefore demonstrate to you that chapters two, three and four of Genesis all do in fact stand together as one deliberately arranged section of the book. They carry one very noticeable and simple main thought and that is to be found in the simple repetition at strategic points of the word *ground*.

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. (2:5–7, 9, 19)

And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' . . . therefore, the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. (3:17–19, 23)

And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. And the LORD said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.' (4:2, 10–14)

And I'm sure you must be thinking that that is a very elementary and simple observation to make. Why shouldn't the word 'ground' occur very many times in those chapters? But notice that not only does the word recur, but it recurs at the centre and peak of interest in all of those three chapters. Without any doubt, the most important part of chapter 2 is the creation of man. How was he created and from what stuff? What is he anyway?

In chapter 2 the idea of ground lies at its very centre:

Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground. (v. 7)

Chapter 3 is notable for the fall of man and the consequent curse that God was obliged to pronounce. At the heart of that most solemn of all passages, while God is pronouncing his curse on the fall, we read, 'Cursed is the ground because of you' (v. 17). And subsequently, man was sent out of the garden, 'till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return' (v. 19).

In chapter 4 we meet Cain's rebellion against God and the punishment God had to inflict upon him for his deliberate and persistent rebellion. What was that punishment? Said God to Cain, 'And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand' (v. 11). And Cain, who had the sense to see how grave was

the punishment inflicted upon him, said, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground' (vv. 13–14).

So this idea of the ground and man's relation to the ground stands at the heart of chapter 4 just as it stands at the heart of chapters 2 and 3. What it all signifies we shall discover later. It is going to talk to us of the reason for man's existence, and begin to answer the question, 'Why was man made?' Then it shall raise in our minds the question, 'Why do we live; what am I meant to be doing and what is the point of human existence?' It will tell the sad story of how man's rebellion took him eventually into a head-on clash against the very reason for his existence. It shall tell us what God did with man, when man turned round and defied God over the very reason why God had made him. And then it shall let us into the secret of a lot of the frustration that nestles at the heart of our otherwise excellent civilisation.

The definition of life

But before we come to study that in detail, we shall need to notice another theme that lies particularly in chapters 2 and 3. It is in these chapters that God describes and defines what life is. We shall read the sorry state of affairs that when man sinned he brought death upon himself. Of course, if you would understand what death is, you must first have some concept of what life is.

What is life? What is man anyway? So Genesis takes us to the very beginning and tells us that the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground. From one point of view man is so much stuff, which doesn't flatter his ego very much. The chemists assure us it is so. In my young day the price of the chemicals that compose the human body used to be three shillings and five-pence ha'penny. With inflation the price will now have gone up, but even so it isn't a lot! We are so much stuff. The astronomers tell us that the chemistry of the universe is more or less uniform; we're made of the same stuff as the ground, the moon, stars, or anything else. Such a lowly origin may well help us to see the grandeur that God has designed for creatures that were made of earth,

The first man *is* of the earth, earthy: the second man *is* the Lord from heaven. As *is* the earthy, such *are* they also that are earthy: and as *is* the heavenly, such *are* they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.
(1 Cor 15:47–49 KJV)

Man is so much stuff, but not *just* so much stuff. For God took this man that he formed out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul (2:7 KJV). Now if we would know what Genesis means by that we do well to take the New Testament's commentary upon it. Paul shows us by contrasting the first man with the second,

The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam *was made* a quickening spirit . . . The first man *is* of the earth, earthy: the second man *is* the Lord from heaven. (1 Cor 15:45, 47 KJV)

In other words, Genesis is not telling us that man had a soul as well as a body. Genesis is telling us the kind of man the first man was. 1 Corinthians would tell us that the second man,

the last Adam, is the Lord from heaven. He is a somewhat different kind of human being. The first Adam is a living soul; the last Adam is a life-giving spirit. Human beings are alive; we are not just so much dead stuff, we are animate, alive, unlike these old benches and the floor and the rocks that are inorganic, inanimate.

If you ask a biologist to define what life is he will say that things are alive when they can reproduce themselves. That's precisely what man is. He has life, he can reproduce his own kind; he can pass life on, but he can't create it. Man is a channel of life, but he is not a source of life. The first man was made a living soul; alive, animate, he can reproduce but he can't create life.

And that 'second man,' 'the last Adam,' is human, but he is a somewhat different kind of being. He was, and is, a life giving spirit—he can create life. And our contact and dealings with him put us in contact with an infinitely superior kind of human being to anything we could have been by ourselves. More about that later.

Is that all that life is? In that sense, yeast is alive—it can reproduce. So God goes on to explain,

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. (2:8–9)

How lovely it was that God should plant a garden to put man in. Why a garden? Because God wanted man to live, really live, not just to be a bit of yeast that could multiply. He wanted him to have life. So, what do I mean by 'life'? Life has all sorts of dimensions.

Different kinds of life

First of all, God made trees that are good to look at, and then trees that are good for food. Man's physical life will need to be provided for. It is interesting that God made trees that are good to look at first, and then trees that are good for food. That's God's order of priorities. Isn't it a curious thing how sometimes Puritanism has reversed the order and exalted the importance of the stomach far beyond the importance of the brain? Good Christian folks think that eating your food is a very good thing, but they're not quite so sure about art. But God's very sure about art, he invented it. He made trees in that garden that were good to look at. I love God for that! God is no utility God; he could have made us a colourless world full of concrete, like men do nowadays. That's not God. I suppose we could live without colour and without beautiful things to look at, but I should imagine that more often than not we should be very difficult to get on with.

So God wants us to live. He has ministered to our aesthetic life and to our sound mental health by giving us tulips and daffodils and forget-me-nots. When we come in all steamed up from work we can go and sit in the garden and have a look at the tulips and all those beautiful things and let them calm us down. And when a husband wants to please his wife he can give her a nice bunch of flowers. Many an invalid has found a renewed desire to live (not by the injections, important as they are) by the lovely colours of a bunch of flowers somebody has put on his locker.

Isn't he a lovely God! He made trees that are good to look at, to cope with our aesthetic sense. But I shall have to add to this. We need to be careful as Christians what we spend on these things. God has given us richly all things to enjoy and he wants us to enjoy them with a very good conscience, but we must remember that we are living in a fallen world and get our priorities right. There are men wanting to be redeemed and that means that we shall not always have the time to enjoy the nice things as much as we would like.

Our blessed Lord came from the regions of glory and for a time he was prepared to give up the sight of lovely things, which are beyond description. He walked along the smelly old streets of Jerusalem and felt the wood of the cross so that we might be saved. He's back now in the glories of heaven. There's nothing wrong with glory, but he expects those of us who owe our redemption to him to have a certain proportion in life as to what we spend on the nice things. Spend some on them and enjoy them, Christ had time to watch the lilies; but we need to get our proportions right.

Those trees were good to look at and good for food. Then there was the tree of life, which was in the middle of the garden (2:9). If you ask whether I think that it was a real tree or a symbolic tree, it would take too long to prove why I personally hold that it was a real tree. In himself man does not have *physical* (mark the adjective) immortality. For him to go on living physically, it demanded that he should constantly have access to that tree of life and eat from it. When man sinned God drove him out of the garden, so that he should no longer be able to put out his hand and take of the tree of life and thus live forever. When he was denied that tree, with the trace elements whatever they were, man began gradually to decline and the ageing process set in. It is still a mystery what makes people age. The Bible's answer is that we don't have access to the tree of life. But one day we shall — on each side of the river in the heavenly city there is a tree of life,

In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, *was there* the tree of life, which bare twelve *manner of* fruits, *and* yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:2 KJV)

We have noticed that man has an aesthetic dimension and a physical dimension. Next we discover that man, as he was originally created, has the dimension of adventure. I wish I could just catch how Adam and Eve felt in the garden. On Tuesday they discovered an even greater surprise than they had on Monday! And then, when they thought they had seen everything, they came across four rivers. These went out past the limits of the garden, out and out and out. Did Adam say to Eve, 'I wonder what lies beyond there'?

The fascination of it! God is not only lovely, but he is never a bore. He's always got some new things for you, yet another new horizon.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (2:10–14)

And for this early couple, the four rivers going out hither and thither were inviting them to geographical exploration. In the generations that followed, they came across gold, and then there was bdellium and onyx. I'm genuinely sorry for those whose job is one long monotonous thing day after day; those soulless conveyor belts in the motor car factory. How much healthier folks would be if in their daily jobs there were new interests and room for initiative. There would be fewer neurotics and perhaps more peace.

My dear Christian folk, I hope that you haven't lost your sense of wonder and exploration. If you see a young man interested in astronomy, then please don't say, 'Why study the stars, what good will it do? It won't get you much of a job.' Why must we always think of things in terms of pounds, shillings and pence? That's not living; living is having an interest for its own sake. That's why God put a universe around us. It is supposed to capture our imagination and to develop our initiative, our potential and our gifts, so that we might live. Some folks are only three-quarters alive. They've got all sorts of gifts, but they've never tried using them. Some of them could embroider if they liked, or they could carve, or they could cook. But no! They've lost the interest; they're sort of half alive.

And then there was another dimension of life, infinitely higher than any we have mentioned so far.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.' (2:16-17)

Spell out life at its highest, and that life is a relationship with almighty God. It is marked out by moral conditions. Every true relationship has to have its conditions and limits; an association that is not defined and has no limits isn't a relationship. A woman that is anybody's wife isn't anybody's wife. How wonderful it is that man should be made in the image of God so that he can sustain a relationship with God.

How will you mark out the relationship, and what kind of a life would it be? Caterpillars are related to the Creator in a sense, but it is a very humble relationship. The Creator made them and the Creator sustains them, but the caterpillars don't know that. They don't even know that they are caterpillars.

Man's relationship to God

Man is in a moral relationship with God. What does that mean? It means a relationship where God declares himself Creator and Lord by laying down a command, which man is expected to reply to through loving obedience and trust. It is a relationship at the level of one's morality and behaviour, choice and moral judgment. God says, 'You shall not eat of it.' And if man asks 'why?' God says, 'Because I say so.' Man has to decide what he's going to do with this prohibition and consequently his relationship with God.

Now see a wonderful thing! It's a little bit difficult to explain, so if you think I'm saying heresy, I'm not. In order that mankind might have this relationship with God, God had to give them the ability to sin. And I repeat that last phrase, God gave them the *ability* to sin. I hasten to add God didn't give them *permission* to sin. In fact, God very strictly forbade it.

When Adam was faced with that prohibition he was able to disobey it, and he did. God didn't make him like a caterpillar. He could have made us, like he made many of his creatures, simply to go by instinct. They have no choice what they do, they just do it by the mechanism inside that keeps them going. They don't even know they are doing it; they have no choice in the matter. A bumblebee that gets on your arm doesn't sit there pondering if it would be a Christian thing to do if it were to sting you. It doesn't ask itself if its Creator would want it to sting you, it just reacts blindly. God could have made us like bumble bees with no choice. We should all have been the best behaved, but there wouldn't have been much significance in it.

It would have cut out love in its highest and truest sense, what the Bible means by loving God. It would have made a high relationship with God at a moral level impossible. You can't have love in that sense unless people have a choice.

If some clever scientist were to produce a computer with arms and legs and shiny bulbs for eyes, and so programmed it that it would come into the room and put its arms around you, kiss you, and say 'Hello my darling!' you would say, 'Don't be daft!' The thing had no choice; it was just programmed to do it. It couldn't say 'No' if it wanted to, unless the fuse went wrong or something.

God could have made us like that, but in his magnificent kindness he didn't. He made us something bigger and that meant giving us the ability to say No to God. What a tremendous gift (I nearly said what a dangerous gift). God gave us the ability to say No to him, in order that when we said Yes it would mean something. It should be a response of willing, deliberate trust, an expression of our admiration of God himself. Thank God that he dared to give us the ability to say No.

At a lower level a human parent has often deliberated with himself. His six year old has seen boys out in the street with a beautiful jack-knife and now he wants one. What shall the parent do? I suppose, if he's going to grow up to be a man, he'll have to learn how to use these things. But it's a dangerous gift for a six year old; there's no telling what he'll do to himself and to the furniture.

God gave his creature the ability to say No to him. I don't know whether it is an appropriate remark, but I feel I want to say what tremendous courage it showed in God. It was so that he might give us the opportunity of the very highest fellowship and love. He did strictly forbid Adam and Eve to eat of that tree and warned them of the consequences of disobeying him.

Do I think that it was a real tree? I don't see why not; it didn't need to be any particular or special tree. In order to set up this relationship, there just had to be one prohibition. You say, 'That's God, he spoils it all. When you think he's given you some lovely gift, then he adds some kind of snide prohibition and makes life difficult.' No! God put the prohibition there so that man might learn freedom and exercise it. You never know what freedom is until you meet a prohibition.

I come into your house, and you say,

'You're very welcome here. You may do as you like; make yourself at home.'

You don't know what I do at home and yet you say, 'make yourself at home!'

I say, 'Really?'

'Yes, there isn't anything you mustn't do!'

What a pity, for now I have no choice. I can't do anything wrong, even if I want to. I can't express my personality; there is nothing that I mustn't do. God was bigger than that. He said there's one thing you mustn't do and he therefore let man sense his freedom of choice.

We know too well the sad results. But before we get to the end of Genesis we shall be told what glorious things have developed from this marvellous concept of life that God has designed for human beings. In chapter 24 we shall read the story of a servant who came to a girl and said, 'My master is exceedingly rich, has one son, and has given him all that he has. Would you like to be his bride?' It was a free choice; she didn't have to go.

The marriage supper of the Lamb will go on for all eternity. And this is the thing that shall fill heaven with consummate delight: men and women freely saying Yes to God's Son, not because they have to, but because they want to.

Human relationships

The story of life isn't quite finished. Life had a dimension Godward, upwards if you like. And it had a dimension sideways.

Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' (2:18)

That's life's completion. (Have mercy on those to whom God has not given that gift and think twice before you make them the butt of your jokes.) God brought all the animals and Adam named them. But among them there was not found a 'help meet' for Adam. Isn't that interesting! The first man was not a somewhat improved animal. An animal that was just a little bit improved might have been delighted to have a lion for his wife, or an ape for all I know, but Genesis roundly declares that in the entire animal world there was not an affinity in any of them with the first man. Mark that carefully; we are required to believe it.

Adam gave names to the animals. I can't tell you what language he used. Unless God gave him a language already invented and complete, we have here evidence of a tremendous mental capacity. Inventing language was one of the most brilliant things that man ever did. Animals communicate with nods and grunts; as far as we know none of them has a developed language system like humans. It was somebody's genius that hit upon the system of using an arbitrary sound to represent a thing or person.

What do I mean by *arbitrary*? If you come to Ireland and you see a thing growing in the ground with branches and green leaves, you call it a tree. We make the sound, *tree*. But if you go across to the French, they say *arbre*. That's a different sound. When you go to the Greeks, they say *dendron*. They are just arbitrary sounds; somebody hit upon the thing of making arbitrary sounds to represent things, we must thank them for it. What marvellous devices words are; everything that has been created put into words.

This matter of language is first introduced when Adam is presented with his wife, Eve. If ever there was a place for them to use words, beautiful words, and to really act like human beings it was in human relationships. When the lion thinks his lioness is pretty he has ways of expressing it—he nibbles her ear and pats her on the back. But there is not much he can say to make her heart glad. What marvellous things words are! Christians should never be found

saying, 'This holy book; it's only words.' What do you mean it's only words? It is the highest expression of fellowship and life. Adam found his language and a wife to talk to. The second man came to win a bride—he is called the Word (John 1:1).

Are you alive at every level? Are you alive and enjoying the beauty and aesthetics of Creation? Alive and enjoying its fascination and exploration, its challenge and its interests? Are you alive in your relationships with your fellow men and women? Alive to the Scriptures, those inspired words? Are you alive supremely to God as he has expressed himself not only in Creation but also in the Word, Jesus Christ our Lord? In all the experiences of life are you really enjoying God? May the Lord help us to have that as our supreme aim in life.

[The Second Creation Story \(Part 2\)](#)

Genesis 2:4–4:26

We have now arrived at Genesis chapter 3, where we are told of the tremendous attack that Satan made on the human race and upon God himself. We are to read now of the fall; what it was and what it implied. This story will tell you of the fall and its results from certain points of view, which we have already read about, but if you would have the full account then you must go to the third creation story, which will tell you the results from another point of view.

In the first creation story we considered man as the great climax of the works of God. He was made to have dominion as the viceroy of God. He was made in God's image to do and to be at his lowly level what God is and does at his higher level. *He was made to have dominion.*

In our last study, in the first part of the second creation story we discovered two other major themes about mankind. We considered his reason for being: *he was made to till the ground.* And not only the ground that lay around him, *he was himself made of the ground* and he was responsible to cultivate for God that bit of the ground that walked around on two legs. And thirdly, we saw that chapter 2 of Genesis describes *the many different levels at which God gave man life.*

Now we shall see how, in those three particulars, Satan makes his dastardly clever attack upon man. Man was God's viceroy, made in God's image, so to attack him was to attack God himself

1. Satan's challenge to the rule of God on earth

The way Satan attacked him was to stage a very explicit rebellion against the rule of God on earth. The first thing Satan did was to upset God's intention for the government of earth. God had put man in charge and given him a helper specially made to help him in this task that God had given him. God had set the man and woman over the beast of the field. There was an order: man, woman, beast. And Satan comes along. He did not first tempt them with loathsome vices and horrible immoralities. Satan is concerned to disrupt the government of this world and hence the government of God, so he takes God's plan and turns it upside-down. He starts with the beast and then he corrupts the woman, and through her he causes the man to fall. It was a direct attack to upset God's scheme of government.

The effects of redemption have begun to undo the works of the devil. When now on earth you see a company of Christians gathered together, if they are behaving right you should see God beginning to correct what Satan put wrong. At the Lord's Supper, for instance, men and women are there to celebrate the establishment of Christ's government under the terms of the new covenant. The men are there with their heads bare and the women with their heads covered. It isn't some curious concession to the fashions of Paris, London or Belfast; it is a

deliberate symbol to show that God is on the way of redemption, undoing Satan's chaos and restoring his government. Man with his bare head acknowledges the headship of the man, that is, our Lord Jesus Christ; the woman with her veiled head acknowledges the headship of man; and Christ acknowledges the headship of God.

And not only shall we see Satan making his attack on God's arrangements for government; we shall see him attack man's life and introduce its opposite at every stage: death. The sad results of that fall bring grievous trouble to the man and woman at the level of their very reason for existence.

First of all, then, let us think of Satan's tactics. He came to tempt our foreparents to rebel against God.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' (3:1-5)

He started with a blunt question and denial of the word of God

'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?'

'That's right,' says Eve.

'You will not surely die,' said Satan.

That was a downright denial of the word of God. He is a past master at psychology. If you want to upset a doctrine, he'll go for it tooth and nail—he denies it in total. But then notice how clever he is. In order to back home his denial of the word of God, he offers an alternative explanation that in itself is quite true.

'You will not surely die,' says he. That was a lie. But to make her think that it was the truth, he added, 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' That bit was true. As God himself subsequently remarked, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil' (v. 22).

It is so important for us all, and particularly our young friends, to observe his tactic. Satan constantly uses it, particularly with those who love to think or have to think. He will deny the truth of God's word outright and then he'll give his alternative explanation. Generally speaking, the alternative explanation is true and people fall into the trap of thinking that, because the alternative explanation is true, the denial must be true. It doesn't follow logically, and it leads to chaos.

In the fall of man, Satan's prime approach was to deny God's holy word. To notice something is to be forearmed and the way to overcome Satan therefore is to know, believe, and use God's word. Our Lord is the supreme example. He was tempted, not in a lovely garden surrounded by many fruits but for forty days hungry in the wilderness. To every temptation from the tempter, he replied, 'It is written'.

The elderly Apostle John, writing to his Christian brothers and sisters, remarks, 'I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have

overcome the evil one' (1 John 2:14). He wanted the young men who had grown beyond spiritual babyhood to be vigorous for God. 'You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.' It is in knowledge and the implicit faith in God's word that we can overcome the evil one.

If young people would become vigorous for God in their day and generation they should attempt by God's grace to store God's word in their minds and hearts. It may be that young folks expect Satan's attacks to come at the level of their conduct or moral behaviour. They must expect them there too, of course, but Satan is still far more interested in smashing your faith in God and his word than he is in making a moral wreck of you. There are multitudes of decent people who no longer believe God's holy word. It is at the level of your intellect, your thoughts, your belief of God's word, and your belief in God that Satan is out to break you. If that goes, everything goes.

That is why Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, spends quite a lot of his time writing about Satan's attack on our thought life.

The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God . . .

I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor 4:4; 11:2-3)

For young folks particularly, it is often a strain to know how to balance their Christian faith with the sundry scientific and philosophical information that they pick up in the course of their education. They want to be loyal to their faith and to the Lord Jesus; and yet they sense that to be good scientists or good arts men and women they must be honest with the evidence. Sometimes this leads to a contradiction in their thinking. One young man said recently that he never had any problems about his faith because when he was in church he shut his science out of his mind and when he went to his science lab he shut the Scriptures out of his mind. That is a false dichotomy!

Many good folks have the notion that Christian things are what you do in Sunday School, but the real world is what you do in the science lab or in the market place. That cannot be; that is a wedge that Satan tries to drive between God and us. He wants to get us into a position where our faith is nothing more than a psychological dose of comfort—a fantasy that we indulge in on a Sunday morning when we are safely away from the 'real' world.

You say, 'How can I shut my eyes to the scientific evidence?' Nobody is asking you to shut your eyes to any evidence! Who made the world? Where is the truth? The truth of the atom lies with the God who made the atom; the truth of the molecule lies with the God who created it and that God is to be trusted. The only true scientific attitude is to proceed in our investigations in utter trust of the God who created the evidence. He created the world and to start from a position of non-faith is a fallacy right at the ground floor. It is not scientific.

Let me repeat that. To start from the scientific presupposition that there is no God, is to start with a basic fallacy. True scientific investigation must start in utter trust of the God who made the world that you are trying to study.

And the last analysis is the same as the first; we must trust him. Faith is not just something that I indulge in at the Lord's Supper or when preaching the gospel, and I have to discard it when I come to my scientific investigation of the universe. Faith is something that must underlie our whole life at every level and at every dimension. This universe is a personal universe, and in the last analysis *the truth about everything is in the God who made it*. Do not allow Satan to get in at the ground floor by undermining your faith at the level of your scientific studies. He will make a bad scientist of you if you do that and he will make an atheist of you as well.

Listen to St. Paul again, 'I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.' Particularly in the ancient Eastern world, before a girl gave her word of betrothal to a man she was free to decide, would it be this man, or that one? She would weigh up the pros and cons on either side, she could even decide to wait and see. But once she gave her word of betrothal it was no longer a moral thing for her to have an open mind and to consider other possibilities.

That is how it is between our Creator and us. There is a certain basic reality in our thought life. If I have believed in Jesus Christ as God's son, then it is an immoral thing for me to question his word and faithfulness and honour. And that is precisely what Satan will always try to do, break my loyal faith in Christ. And the sad thing is he will use truth to do it, as he did in the garden. 'Go on,' he said. 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' It was perfectly true, but he used the truth to argue a lie, and how many folks have been caught by that ploy.

A very common example of that nowadays is to take a young man or woman into the lab, or preferably to the TV screen where the science is not quite so exact, and point out that we now know all about the atom; we understand what makes lightning and thunder and what causes earthquakes. And generally speaking the explanations are perfectly true. So what? So the suggested conclusion is that you can't believe in God anymore. Satan uses a true explanation of how a thing works in order to reinforce a lie; and because we understand how it works we don't need to believe in God anymore.

Therefore, we need to remember that our sheet anchor is unswerving faith in a person and that person made the world.

Two other things are implied in what Satan said to Eve.

1. God could have done better for you

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden"?' (Gen 3:1)

This was deliberate exaggeration.

And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden."' (v. 2)

'I thought so,' said Satan, 'he could have given you that tree as well; but that's God. He could do better for you than he's doing.'

How many believers have heard that whispered in their ear? In times of pain or perplexity or bereavement the old whisper is to be heard, 'God could do better for you than this, couldn't he?'

2. Faith in God is degrading

But God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' (v. 3)

Implied in his temptation was the idea that faith in God was a degrading thing. 'Strike a blow for freedom, Eve,' he said. 'God says that you mustn't touch it, but he knows that whenever you eat of it you shall be as God; you will rise in the universe and no longer be kept down by these religious inhibitions!'

How many there are today who spread the message that faith in God is an antiquated, degrading thing. If we want to be free intellectually, they say, we must cast off these old ideas of a 'God out there' and rise to be gods ourselves. Satan has not yet finished with his tricks.

For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. (2 Thess 2:3-4)

The New Testament declares that this age shall end in the greatest apostasy that our world has ever seen. Satan's final goal is to get it into man's head that he is as good as God. Around us there is a vast tide of propaganda, subtly getting it into people's heads that God is dead, the word of God is out of date and faith in Christ is unscientific and degrading. Presently it shall lead to Satan's great counterfeit throwing out the idea of God and trying to be God himself.

What is life?

But look now at Eve's mistake. And with this we come back to what we were considering on the last occasion—what is life? We found that life is a multi-dimensional thing, as described to us in chapter 2. Man was made of the dust of the ground and was so much stuff; then God breathed into his nostrils and man became animate. He was able to reproduce; he was alive *in the physical sense*. Then again, God added life *at the aesthetic level*, giving him trees which were good to look at. And then he added life *at the level of interest and employment*, with a garden to keep and rivers going out of it and metals to mine, and the earth to be subdued. Life was fully engaging all his gifts and talents and developing his personality.

We saw then how God gave man life *at the level of love and marriage*, and also those tremendous gifts of *language and communication and creative arts*. Among man's most noble living and most noble production is his literature, his creation in words; but supremely God gave man life *at a moral and spiritual level*. He laid down the prohibition, 'Of every tree you

may eat, but not of the tree of knowledge of good and evil,' thus linking man to himself in a moral relationship in which man was free. He was commanded not to eat of that tree, but was actually free in the sense that he had the ability either to obey God or the ability to disobey him.

Now watch Satan in his arguments with this woman. With desperate cleverness, and in the right order, he has inserted doubts in her mind as to the word of God. He presented her with an alternative explanation that was true in itself, very convincing, and therefore seemed to support the first lie. With her faith in God's word shaken, he now directs her attention to life and to this tree. She had not looked at it quite like this before—for the first time she was looking at life without faith in God. What did it look like? It was beautiful!

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise. (3:6)

It was good for food; it would satisfy her physically. It was delightful to look at; it would satisfy her aesthetically. It was to be desired to make one wise; it would satisfy her intellectually. She stood there aghast—what else could she want? Physical, aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction; that is life! In one sense that was true; it is life at a certain level, but in the absolute sense it was a terrible lie, for it missed the great ingredient of life. *It missed God's word and fellowship with him.*

Our Lord had to face it. Before he could win back our lost dominion he was hungry in the wilderness. Satan said, 'Make those stones into bread.' What's wrong with physically satisfying yourself? Nothing wrong in itself, but it is a lie to think that even physical life can be satisfied without God and his word. 'Man shall not live by bread alone,' said Christ. Man shall not live by art and aesthetics alone. And for you students, man shall not live by intellect alone. Intellect without God is death in the end. Art and literature without God are corrupting, and only death in the end. And the most wholesome food without God will lead to death in the end.

The first result of man's rebellion against God and grasping at independence was to lose his own dominion

How soon the disillusionment followed upon the yielding to the temptation. Said the serpent to the woman, 'If you were to eat of that tree you would be like God, knowing good and evil. You would rise, you would evolve one step in the universe and be as God.' So the woman took it and gave to her husband, and they realised they were naked. But they were naked before. Yes, that's how God made them. If God made them that way, then what's wrong? There was nothing wrong in their being naked; why then were they ashamed all of a sudden?

What a wonderful creature man was, part spirit, part animal. At the spiritual level he needed to remain in touch with God, the Father of spirits. As long as his spirit was perfectly in control of the animal part of him, he felt it no shame to be an animal. But the moment he left off faith in God and grasped at independence of God, he fell to a lower degree in the universe and found he was an animal that he could no longer perfectly control. He was a prisoner now in his own castle, and ashamed of it. He would now be driven by urges and

pushed by instinct. The animal within him would do all the suggesting and he would find it very difficult to keep hold of the reins in order to remain decent.

Have we not known it too, and felt like the Apostle Paul?

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:18–20, 23–24)

Strike a blow for freedom by getting rid of the idea of God? The only way that we shall ever be free is by returning in genuine repentance, willingly submitting to God through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, finding himself fallen, the man ran off. He found that he could no longer control himself and he tried to run away from God. God was now an unpleasant thought to him.

Like a little toddler, whose mum told him not to touch the ice cream. Before she went out to the shops he thought his mum was the loveliest person in the entire world. She's got ice cream! When she'd gone, he thought he'd like to see this ice cream. There would be no harm in looking at it, so he went to the fridge and opened the door and there was the ice cream. He wondered if it was as cold as it looked. There would be no harm in just tasting a little; but five minutes later the whole tub had gone! And then? Mother had become the most undesirable person in the whole house and the sound of her feet coming up the drive made him want to run away.

They tried to hide from God

The man and woman go running to hide themselves in the trees of the garden. Pathetic, isn't it? As though those lovely trees that God had made could somehow become a hiding place from him.

There are many folks doing it still. We all do it, actually. We don't all run away from God and hide ourselves in the brothels of Soho. Many a very respectable woman is hiding in the lovely flowers of her garden, the stylish furniture of her home and her bonnie wee children.

'I don't have time for religion because I'm so busy. I don't believe it's right that I should neglect my children and I need to see after my husband and I have to keep the garden. What would the neighbours say, if I let the dandelions grow? I am so busy in these things.'

Hiding in the lovely things of the world, they haven't time for God and run away from their Creator. There's many a man hiding behind the 'trees', away from the garden's God. Many of us say that we've got intellectual problems; and God knows that there are genuine intellectual problems. But some of our intellectual problems are mighty convenient, particularly if the message of God's call to repentance and faith gets too close to home and then we've got a problem.

You would be surprised how many folks are interested in the heathen; not to get them converted or to spread the gospel among them. When an evangelist or some other friend is urging them to yield their loyalty and trust to Christ, believe him and receive him as Saviour,

then the thing is getting too close and suddenly they develop a tremendous interest in the heathen.

‘What about the heathen?’ they say.

What about them?

‘Well, if people have never heard, are you going to say that they are lost?’

If they were really interested, the Bible does talk a lot about it. Have they read the passages where the Bible speaks of it? No, they haven’t done that. They mustn’t really have a problem, or they would have tried to find the answer. It’s one of those places where men hide, then they try to cover up, but eventually they must come and meet God.

What a tragedy that is. They have sinned and then they get the idea into their heads that God must be against them. It’s endemic in the human race, from the pagan with his hideous sacrifices, to the finest gentlewoman you ever met. Under pressure, men and women begin to think that God is against them. Genesis makes it abundantly clear that, even though man sinned, God was still for him. As they came before God, sensing their nakedness, one of the first things God did was to kill a sacrifice, take its skin and clothe them so that they might be at rest and unembarrassed in his presence.

God did not give up on them

If we learn nothing else, it would be well worth repeating it again — God is for you, man; God is for you, woman. In spite of all your sins, God is for you. When Satan had done his worst and come near to wrecking them, we read how God comes down and announces that he is going on with the human race. To our way of thinking, how easily it could have read that, when man rebelled and sinned, God decided to finish with the whole phenomenon of humanity and start again with something different. But the glorious message is that God came down to announce that he was going to carry on with the great adventure of the human race.

But there would now have to be discipline

The Lord God said to the serpent: ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.’

To the woman he said: ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’

And to Adam he said: ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it”, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’
(3:14–19)

God is to go on with the human race, and from the seed of the woman shall come humanity’s deliverer. This was God’s great practical answer to the onslaught of the devil. Man is a wonderful thing; he is made part spirit, part animal and therefore able to reproduce. God

could come into his own creation. Angels do not marry nor are they given in marriage; 'In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven' (Matt 22:30). There would seem to be no possibility that God should ever become an angel. Man was so made that God could get inside manhood, and one day in human form he would destroy man's enemy.

Until that day should come there would have to be disciplines at every level of human life. Not only had they lost dominion externally, but dominion within themselves.

First, God talks to the woman about childbearing. What could have been nothing but delight, under God's discipline it becomes toil and a sorrow. 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'

In chapter 4 these sad words are also used of Cain (vv. 11–12). At the centre of human life now, instead of being free, there are great driving animal urges.

As for Adam, 'Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.' Instead of it being a gentleman's occupation, it is now reduced to slavery. And for man to survive, he must toil with backbreaking labour and sweat of his brow.

'Isn't God being very unkind?' you say. No! Man has now proved that, left to himself, he cannot govern himself. If left as he was — fallen, with the animal in him predominant — man would have destroyed himself. God must bring in a discipline and begin to teach him that he is indeed a fallen creature in need of a redeemer.

Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live for ever —' therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (3:22–24)

Scientists are still uncertain as to what causes ageing. Ten years ago they had some bright ideas that seemed to promise explanations of the mysterious business of ageing. Later reports show that they have not come up with any answers and the matter is as mysterious as ever. Why do human beings begin to age? Because, says Genesis, we have been cut off from certain food. We do not have physical immortality in ourselves; to be physically immortal we need a supply of the food that was in that tree. Having been cut off from it and losing its trace element, or whatever it is, human beings age and go back to dust. What can we do?

Two choices are open to us

1. We can accept these disciplines and the discipline of death itself. We can admit our sin and the sin of our race and humbly seek the redemption that God has provided through the sacrifice of Christ.

2. Or we can grow more rebellious still and try to defy God.

These attitudes are very ancient. In the very next generation following Adam and Eve you will find those two reactions predominant. There was Abel and there was Cain. Abel had the wisdom to confess to the fall and humbly seek the redemption that God provided. But Cain

grew defiant and went all-out to build himself a civilisation, regardless of the fall. Our modern civilisation sits there. What are we going to do when faced with this diagnosis? Our birth is labour and sorrow, our daily work is full of difficulty and at the end we all die.

Is there any hope for mankind?

Some people say, 'Let's get rid of religion. By our scientific genetics and our bio-chemical engineering we will do away with illness, disease and death. Our chemicals will do away with pests and we'll not have thorns and thistles and weeds. By our technology we will control the weather and get bumper harvests. We will make ourselves lords again by our own effort. We will build a paradise.'

When will that happen?

'Not yet,' they say, 'but we'll do it.'

Man has been trying a long time and he's not yet done it.

'But you must have faith!' they say.

How curious—I didn't know they believed in faith. In whom is their faith placed? All their great godless programmes depend after all on faith!

'Faith in the future,' they say.

What does that mean? Do they mean faith in future men? If they mean that their faith is simply in men, the evidence is against them.

In our next talk we shall see the other alternative for the future. It is bright and blessed indeed. God is determined that his experiment should succeed and there is a glorious future for mankind. That will require faith, not in man but in God.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:19–23)

[The Second Creation Story \(Part 3\)](#)

Genesis 2:4–4:26

Sooner or later every thinking man and woman will ask what the cause of the universal phenomena of pain, sorrow, sin and death is. In our last study we were considering the biblical doctrine of the fall, and it was a dismal story. Yet, on the other hand, it is the only story I now know that adequately accounts for these phenomena. It is certainly the most merciful and kindly of all the explanations and it is the only story known to man that has in it any spark of hope for suffering humanity.

Is it all by chance?

There is of course only one serious alternative explanation, if you can call it serious. It is that you can account for all the pain, sorrow, suffering and death by supposing that this world just happened of itself without any God or Creator, mind, reason or purpose. The whole thing is the result of colossal chance, multiplied by millions of chances. Chance is liable to go wrong, and therefore you mustn't grumble because that is all you should expect.

But then that won't account for the facts either. When all is said and done, this world remains a fantastically beautiful place. If it is all the result of mindless chance, how does it come that it manages to be so fantastically and so regularly beautiful? The laburnums that looked so gorgeously pretty last year are pretty every year and somehow the great cycles are repeated regularly, producing so much wonderful beauty and glory in our world. Is it an adequate explanation to say that that too is the result of chance?

I have an atheist friend who happens to be a biochemist and he can't resist pulling my leg. He says he to me, 'There are things that we can produce by an injection of chemicals, but the thing that moves me is the fantastic beauty in this world. If it is all by chance, how does it manage to recur billions of times over every year?' That is a vital point—how is there so much wonder and beauty if it is all by chance? Even arguing at that level, it makes much more sense to understand it as something wonderful that was made by an all-wise and all-powerful Creator, which someone or ones then spoiled by sin and its consequent devastation.

And then the Bible story of the fall is the only story that adequately accounts for the fact that every single person born into this wide, wide world sins. (Apart from Jesus Christ our Lord, whose birth was altogether exceptional.) If it were by chance, then I can understand that some men sinned, some women were awful and a large number of people were terrible, but how come everybody, without exception, is sinful?

On my way from home to work there are sundry traffic lights. I could almost guarantee to you that they are more often red than they are green, especially when I am in a hurry. Of

course, it is quite a chance affair whether they should be red or green when I get up to them. It may seem to me that they are more often red than green, but they are not always red, and if they were I shouldn't believe it was by chance.

How is it that every single man, woman, boy or girl in this world is sinful? Why doesn't chance produce some who are sinless?

Or was it by choice?

What we have in God's word makes much better sense. The creature that came from the hand of God was perfect, but he chose to use God's gift of free will and free choice to sin against God. Not only did he do something wrong, but he severed a relationship with God that was vital to his very being. From that moment he became something different to what he was originally. His very constitution was changed; he became a fallen creature. As fallen creatures he and his wife produced, through natural birth, fallen creatures. They were different from what God intended.

The doctrine of the fall tells how man was tempted and then he fell. That is a very kindly admission. Some people no longer believe in the devil and they pride themselves on being very humanitarian and civilised, but they say that all the vast agony, sadism, wickedness, cruelty and perversion that you can find in this world are the responsibility of man, single-handed. What a cruel charge this is to lay against humankind—all of it is the sole responsibility of man? God is kinder than that. Man had his part in his rebellion, folly and waywardness, but the thing was sparked off by a higher intelligence than man. He was the sorry dupe of Satan.

The story is more kindly, and it is marvellously full of hope. If the sin and sorrow and suffering of our world were merely the result of chance, there is no hope for any improvement. We may pick our brains to try and discover the source of an illness and make this or that improvement, but if we are living in a chance universe, some day chance will ruin the lot. There is no hope for the world or for any individual.

God made immediate provision for them and gave them hope for the future

But this sorry story of the fall is nevertheless a story that brims over with wonderful hope. It tells not merely of a creature of God who wilfully disobeyed him, and therefore fell. It tells also of a Creator whose heart was full of love for that very creature, and who was moved with compassion at the sorry state that his sinfulness has brought upon him. When God came down into the garden that he had made, almost the first word that he spoke to Adam was a word of hope. He told him that one day the whole thing would be put right again. I am proud of this story and of the God who tells it. As Adam and Eve stood there, shivering in their fig leaves and tortured in their consciences, they were beginning to be dimly aware of the terrible thing that they had done. But God told them that he would go on with the adventure, and what they had spoiled he would put right. It is a wonderful story.

It is even more wonderful! God did not merely say they were foolish creatures that had spoiled it all and he would come and put it right, God said that it would be one who should come from the human race who would put it right.

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. (3:15 KJV)

A man shall be born, the seed of the woman, and he shall put it right. A man put it wrong and a man shall put it right! This wonderful new kind of man, bigger and infinitely better than Adam was even before he fell, shall 'bruise the serpent's head.' God will not have to write off humankind as an experiment that went wrong. Man shall yet be God's great and wonderful masterpiece through that second man, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, the story of the fall is brimmed full of hope. Man put it wrong, but God is going to put it right. The story is also kind, fair and just, and we are not merely victims of chance. Listen to holy Scripture's comment upon it,

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:19)

Some people haven't read the Bible and they get wrong ideas into their heads. They say, 'It isn't fair! Why should I be judged because of what Adam did?' They will never be judged because of what Adam did. We were born sinners because we are born of a fallen race, the whole race fell when Adam its forefather fell. 'By that one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners,' but if we were born ruined because of what someone else did, we can be saved on precisely the same terms—we can be saved through what someone else has done. We sin because we are sinners, just like an apple tree will bear apples. They may be many or few, but eventually the tree bears apples because basically it is an apple tree and we sin because we are basically fallen creatures. I repeat, we are born sinners because of one man's disobedience and not because of anything we did ourselves.

This is a message of great hope. If we became sinners not through what we did ourselves but because of what somebody else has done, so we can be saved not by what we do ourselves but by what somebody else has done for us—Jesus Christ our Lord. We shall not be judged because of what Adam did; God offers us a free, complete salvation and we shall be judged if we turn our backs on it and decline it.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.' (3:7–10)

When they realised that they had to face God they tried to cover themselves and sewed fig leaves together. God is a realist, and he removed them. 'And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them' (v. 21)—God is not interested in make-

up that conceals the true state of affairs. He told them bluntly of the judgments and disciplines that would come upon them because of their sin, but he announced hope. One day a Saviour of the world would be born from the seed of the woman. God himself made coats of skins to cover the guilty pair; this is the first mention of the killing of an animal in holy Scripture. Like its successors, it pointed to the coming of the holy Lamb of God.

The fall severed the spiritual relationship between human beings and the Creator

We human beings are *spirit* and not just *animal*. But then we are animal and not just spirit. (I said animal, not animals.) There is a bit of our make-up that we share with animals, stomachs, lungs, gall bladders and so on; we have many similar functions to the animals because in one sense we are animal. Yet, unlike them, we are spirit, capable of conversing with God who is Spirit.

It was a cruel thing when Satan said to Eve that if they ate of that forbidden fruit they would rise up and be like God (3:5), for the moment they disobeyed God they fell. At the level of their spirits a great gulf came between them and the Father of spirits (Heb 12:5). Sin had broken the concourse and they tried to run away from God. Spiritually, humans had died and they discovered then that they were animal and could no longer properly control the animal.

Did God have an answer? The wonder of it is that one day God should consent to take a human body. In that properly strict sense he became human, with stomach and lungs and legs. For our sakes he would become a perfect man, the holy Lamb of God. Dying, the just for the unjust, he would offer his body to God for our fallen, sin-stained bodies. That is our ground of hope.

There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin;
There's a door that is open and all may go in.
At Calvary's cross is where you begin,
When you come as a sinner to Jesus.¹

Cain and Abel

The story does not end with God making clothes for them. It goes on to tell us about the reactions of the succeeding generation to the means of salvation that God had provided.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. (Heb 11:4)

When the Bible says that a person does something by faith, it means that he or she is doing something in response to what God has said—that is, faith in the Bible. It is desperately important that we get a hold of it. There are some folks who think that faith is a kind of self-confidence that they work up within themselves. They say, 'I have great faith that, if I try to

¹ E. H. Swinstead (1882–1950).

leave the world a happier place than I found it, all will be well.’ That isn’t faith; that’s imagination or self-confidence. To be faith at all, it has to be our response to God’s explicit word; anything else is downright presumption.

‘*By faith* Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’—how was it ‘by faith’? God had indicated that the way back to God was to be by the offering of a sacrifice and the shedding of blood; Abel believed God and he came in God’s way. How wonderful to see salvation so early on.

Why did God reject Cain’s offering?

But it was otherwise with Cain; he refused to come God’s way. The ultimate result of refusing to come in God’s way was that he murdered Abel. This is a hard story. The first murder to be committed on earth was in the context of religion. Hands that had just brought God an offering committed it and the story will remind us of the hard fact that religion itself can often be an expression of man’s enmity with God. That sounds a very curious thing, but it is true. Religion can be an expression of self-will, self-determination and independence from God. Very often it escapes detection because it is never really pushed to the issue.

That day Cain’s sacrifice and all his religious show were brought to the issue. God faced him squarely and said, ‘Cain, No thanks! You cannot come that way.’ Then the kind of religion Cain had was discovered—he defied God and murdered his brother.

If we are shocked at that it is because we haven’t taken seriously what the Bible says about the fall. We are not necessarily the nice people that we think we are. Externally, we look refined; to hear us singing our hymns there’s nothing missing but a halo! But were you to scratch beneath our skin you would find what the Bible says is true,

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:7–8)

The fall has set up within us a direct opposition to the law of God and there is no good papering over the cracks. God has a way of saving us, but he has only salvation for those who will turn round and realistically repent of the basic trouble.

How did Cain come to that attitude? I suppose in one sense it was natural enough. Cain was a worker of the ground (4:2). Why shouldn’t he be—that was what his father Adam was and he was continuing the family business? Indeed, it was God who made his father to be a worker of the ground, so there was absolutely nothing wrong with Cain doing that sort of work.

It so happened that Abel kept sheep and it was easy then for him to bring the sacrifice that God required. Because professionally he was a tiller of the ground, Cain brought the fruit of the ground to God. He meant no insult, his produce was excellent. He was not a herdsman like his brother; he spent his days producing fruit like this and he hoped that God would accept his work. He was doing it sincerely; what was wrong with bringing the fruit of the ground? In a sense there was nothing wrong with it. There are many passages of the Old Testament where in subsequent centuries God’s people are told to bring the fruit of the ground (e.g. Deut 26). Provision was made for the Israelites to bring God an offering of their first fruits and he was pleased to accept all kinds of fruits of the earth.

Of itself there was nothing wrong in bringing an offering of the fruits of the ground, but you cannot come to God that way. You cannot base your approach to a holy God on the offerings of your hands. There is no redemption, no forgiveness and no eternal life to be given in exchange for the offering of your hands. When you have been reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Christ, then you should bring all that you have and give it to God—he will be very pleased with it then. But if you would first be reconciled and forgiven and restored you cannot come to God with the fruits of the ground; there is no forgiveness in it.

This is where many people have misunderstood or been deceived. There is the busy housewife at her work, she sees after her children like a true mother. Her home is spotless, she has time to visit the neighbours and to help them, and to cook them the odd plum pudding. And she says, 'I haven't got time to read the Bible and I've not been to the church much; but I believe that God has given me work to do as a mother and if I do it sincerely I have great hopes that God will receive me in the end.' My dear mother! Yes, your work as a mother is wonderful, but God cannot accept it as a way of approach to him or as a means of salvation.

When Cain came to God with his produce as an approach offering to God, he was in fact ignoring the sorry fact of the fall. He was coming to God as though sin had not happened; as if there was no sin or as if it was no longer important.

How may we be reconciled to God?

Your work as a mother is wonderful, but it isn't perfect. You yourself would probably be the first to admit that it isn't perfect. And therefore you cannot come to God on the basis of that work. You are fallen and you have sinned like the rest of us. Before you can offer your life to God you need forgiveness, and forgiveness comes only through the sacrifice of Christ.

Busy doctor—what a noble work you are doing, healing the sick. Do I hear you say you have no time for religion? You feel it is enough to serve your fellow man through your medicine. O sir, I tremble for you. You may be the best doctor you know how to be, but you cannot come to God as though sin didn't matter, and you too have sinned like the rest of us. There is a way to God, but not through your merits. The way to God is through Christ and his sacrifice, to be forgiven through the merits of Christ's offering. Come and be reconciled through Christ, come to him and receive forgiveness. When you have been reconciled to God he will bring you into his family, and then you may give your medicine and your whole life to God. God help you to do it, but you cannot use your medicine to buy your way to God.

Does this make you feel faintly annoyed? I can understand that too. Cain felt very annoyed, and as he stood there talking to God it boiled up inside him. A very dark eye was directed towards Abel and the jealousy began. 'God has accepted him and I can't say that I am saved, though I do my very best. Who does he think he is, parading around and telling us that he is certain that God has received him!' Sir, does it annoy you if I say 'I'm saved'? Do you feel angry? If you came to Christ God's way you could be sure you were saved; there's no need to get angry about it.

Cain didn't believe that Abel could find acceptance and know himself forgiven and saved because he came not on his own merits but on the merits of a sacrifice. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?'

And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it' (4:6–7). God warned Cain that there was sin in him that is like a wild animal. At that very moment it was beginning to tense itself, getting ready to pounce. Cain would need to rule it or else it would rule him. Cain never thought he was the kind of man who would murder his brother. He hadn't taken the fall seriously, he thought earth was simply nothing but red roses and nice, innocent daffodils; he had not gauged what the fall had done to the human heart. It is an unruly, ungovernable thing, and when pushed it is an enemy of God. It will defy God and determine to have its own way. 'Rule it, Cain, or else it will rule you and destroy you.'

I would plead with you. If the preaching of the way of the cross makes you angry, then face it. Why does God's word make you angry, why does his offer of salvation make you cringe? It shows you what kind of thing you suffer from on the inside. If you let it master you, it will destroy you. Cast yourself and your misery on God, cry out for his deliverance from this evil thing called sin and self-will that lives within your person.

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
(Isa 55:6–9)

Why did God punish Cain?

Cain killed his brother, he rejected God's salvation and added insult to injury. And God punished Cain. 'I don't like that story,' someone says. 'I don't believe in a God who would punish anybody.' Hadn't you better stop just a moment and see what the punishment was? God had made man to till the ground; in the first place that was his very reason for existence. The first man had made a poor job of it, for into God's good earth the first gardener had introduced the principle of sin, and with it a multitude of thorns and thistles. Cain is following the family line, he's a gardener. That is what God set him to do. He had no other reason for existence; he didn't make himself—it was God who made him and told him to till the ground.

In the course of time he comes with his offering to God.

'No, thank you very much Cain,' says God. 'Not that today. I want this other thing today.'

And Cain says, 'Too bad, God! If you will not have what I like, you can go without. And, in fact, you won't have what Abel gives either!'

What would you do with a man like that?

Suppose you had two gardeners, Joe and Bill.

You say to them, 'I want you to understand this clearly. See that greenhouse over there? This year I want tomatoes, not cucumbers.'

'Yes sir!'

'So you've got that clear; tomatoes, not cucumbers?'

And then in the middle of the summer you come along to see the glasshouse and it's cucumbers from one end to the other and not a tomato in sight.

You call Joe and you say, 'Hello Joe, I thought I told you tomatoes, not cucumbers.'

'Well, I know you did,' he says. 'But I like cucumbers.'

'I said tomatoes.'

'I don't care what you said,' retorts Joe.

'Where's the other chap?'

'O well, he tried to grow some tomatoes, so I got rid of him.'

What, then, would you say?

I'd say, 'Joe, here are your cards, would you please go.'

God made us to do his will, and all of us have sinned. Our very *raison d'être* is to fulfil God's will. We have failed and deserve God's judgment, but God has made a way back to himself through Christ. And what if we won't have it and defy the very God who made us? What do you suppose God will do?

He'll say, 'Friend, here are your cards, you'll have to go.'

'That's not so terrible, is it?' says someone.

I have to tell you that that means hell; it will be to exist eternally without any reason for existence. To reject the God that made you is to have no meaning in life. To reject the redemption that would have saved you is to exist forever in a meaningless, pointless, purposeless eternity. That is hell and that is the choice we make when we defy the God who made us.

The mark of Cain

You say, 'You paint a very bad picture. I think the world is better than you make it out to be. There are a lot of nice people out there. Doesn't civilisation flourish?'

When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.' (4:12-14)

'When you till the ground it won't yield her strength to you. You might as well get out, man!'

'But if I get out, everybody that meets me will kill me,' said Cain.

'No they won't,' says God. 'I'll put a mark on your head so that nobody will kill you!'

And what did that lead to? It led to a splendid civilisation. As time went on they invented musical instruments; they made progress in agriculture, for which we are grateful; they invented foundry work and now we have motorcars.

But wait a minute! Cain wouldn't have the way of sacrifice with blood—it was cruel. He didn't think sin was very important. He didn't like the doctrine of sacrifice or to think of a God that would punish with death. 'All right,' says God, 'you have it your way, Cain. I'll put

a mark on you, so that you won't be killed.' And presently, as civilisation gets more advanced, a man called Lamech starts writing songs. And what's the subject of his lyrics? Violence!

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold. (4:23–24)

'Cain killed a man and got away with it. I killed a man who poked me in the ribs. I smote him and slew him and I shall get away with it too!' He sat down and wrote some lyrics in praise of violence. In the end that civilisation went down in a welter of violence.

It has uncomfortable similarities with our own civilisation. They think that sin doesn't really matter, they don't like a Saviour who died for our sins. They don't believe the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice; they don't like to believe in a God that punishes with death. They believe that you can come to God without redemption, you just bring the work of your hands. And how do they end up? They end up with a civilisation that glorifies violence on every screen in the country. The fall is a very real thing and any civilisation that won't have redemption will in the end destroy itself in violence. May God give us wisdom to face ourselves and to face reality.

Do I hear someone say, 'How can I be saved? I don't understand it. What must I do at this moment to be saved?' You can be saved right now; you don't have to understand a lot. You need simply to know that you need to be saved, that you cannot save yourself, and that Christ died for you. Do you want to be saved? You can bow your head now and call on the name of the Lord. When people began to see where civilisation was going under the descendants of Cain, some of them took fright and began to call on the name of the Lord. Do it now — call on him. Tell him you want to be saved, that you are willing to be saved and ask him right now to save you.

At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD. (Gen 4:26)

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Rom 10:13)

The Third Creation Story (Part 1)

Genesis 5:1–9:29

We now begin the study of the third creation story in the book of Genesis. So let us read some excerpts from the appropriate passages.

Adam's descendants to Noah

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived for 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died.

When Seth had lived for 105 years, he fathered Enosh. Seth lived after he fathered Enosh for 807 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died.

When Enosh had lived for 90 years, he fathered Kenan. Enosh lived after he fathered Kenan for 815 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enosh were 905 years, and he died.

When Kenan had lived for 70 years, he fathered Mahalalel. Kenan lived after he fathered Mahalalel for 840 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Kenan were 910 years, and he died.

When Mahalalel had lived for 65 years, he fathered Jared. Mahalalel lived after he fathered Jared for 830 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Mahalalel were 895 years, and he died.

When Jared had lived for 162 years he fathered Enoch. Jared lived after he fathered Enoch for 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Jared were 962 years, and he died.

When Enoch had lived for 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah for 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.

When Methuselah had lived for 187 years, he fathered Lamech. Methuselah lived after he fathered Lamech for 782 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Methuselah were 969 years, and he died.

When Lamech had lived for 182 years, he fathered a son and called his name Noah, saying, 'Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.' Lamech lived after he fathered Noah for 595 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Lamech were 777 years, and he died. After Noah was 500 years old, Noah fathered Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (5:1–32)

Noah and the flood

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterwards, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD. (6:1–8)

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him any more. (8:6–12)

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. (9:3–5)

And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.' (9:12–17)

The story tells how God instructed Noah to make an ark in order to save his family and sundry animals. When the ark was ready and the time had come, God told Noah to come into the ark and God shut the door. The flood came and 'everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died' (7:22).

Chapter 8 tells us that the flood abated after the fixed time. Noah became inquisitive to know whether it would be appropriate and safe for him to come out of the ark and begin life again on terra firma. He adopted the following plan:

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him any more. (8:6–12)

And sometime after that Noah opened the door and set foot once more upon the earth. His first act was to build an altar and sacrifice to God. God then entered into certain promises and a covenant with Noah:

I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (8:21–22)

In addition, sundry new laws were now introduced.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.' (9:3–6, 12–17)

The major lesson from this is clear, and it is a lesson that the New Testament constantly repeats, particularly in 2 Peter chapters 2 and 3.

Knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. (2 Pet 3:3–6)

Historically there was a major catastrophe

Within recorded history, earth suffered a major catastrophe. What these mockers are appealing to is what is generally called 'the law of uniformity'. Nature is so arranged that things have always happened according to definite laws and there have been no major irregularities in the course of nature and history. That 'law of uniformity' has in some quarters been elevated to a scientific theory; but it isn't true. Peter urges his critics, and us today, to observe the words of holy Scripture; within recorded history there was a major catastrophe.

God will once again destroy the world, but not with water

The next lesson Peter draws is, not only is the law of uniformity false, but what God has done once God will do again.

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the ungodly. (3:7)

God destroyed the world, using the constituent parts of the world to destroy it, and he has promised that he will never again destroy it with water. But God will once more destroy the world, using its constituent elements to effect that destruction. At the time of the flood, says Peter, the earth was formed out of water (more accurately translated, compounded of water) and God used the very means of its constituents to destroy it. The present heavens and earth are now stored with fire. With the invention of the atomic bomb we know exactly the dread significance of the fact that our earth and universe are indeed stored with fire. And one day, when God's calendar says 'Time!', God will use the constituent atoms of this universe to effect its destruction.

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matt 24:36–39)

We need to be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man

The lesson that our Lord Jesus drew from the story of the flood is that we should constantly be on our watch and ever ready for his second coming. It will come in certain respects like the flood came. When the flood came, all except Noah and his immediate family perished. It wasn't that they hadn't heard that the flood was coming, Noah had been preaching for many years. It wasn't that they didn't know of the ark and of the possibility of salvation, Noah had been building the ark for a long time. It was that deep down in their hearts they thought it was all nonsense, or at least something that didn't need be taken seriously. They gave themselves up to their daily occupations; they ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark. When he did that, the flood came and took them all away. Our blessed Lord reminds us therefore that his second coming in power and great glory (v. 30) would be like the flood in that respect. There will be no time for last minute preparations; if men would be ready for that great event they must be prepared well in advance.

For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. (Luke 17:24)

The writer of Hebrews, whoever he was, draws on this ancient lesson of the flood, to remind us that it was by faith that Noah built an ark for the saving of his house. It is a very good example of how faith joins with works,

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. (Heb 11:7)

Noah believed God while there was as yet no evidence that the flood would ever come. All he had by way of evidence was the naked word of God and because he believed that judgment was coming he did something about it. He said to himself, 'I have a wife and children here, and if I really believe that judgment is coming I should do something for my wife and family.'

We have been taught by Christ and his apostles, and know that judgment is coming. We show the reality of our faith by what we do about it. We cannot construct salvation by ourselves—salvation is a gift. What about our wives and families and children? If we really believe God's judgment is coming we should be active doing something about the salvation of those we love, and of men in general.

In building the ark Noah condemned the world

Then we observe another thing. Not only did Noah show his faith in God and his word by building the ark, but, in building that ark, 'he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.' Other Scriptures give us to understand Noah was a preacher, and doubtless he had much to say about the terrible violence and corruption that

filled the earth of his day and generation. '[God] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness' (2 Pet 2:5).

But it isn't so much his preaching that the epistle to the Hebrews is interested in. It remarks that, just building the ark, 'by this he condemned the world'. Of course he did! They asked Noah why he was building this monstrous looking object.

'It's an ark,' he says.

'What's it for?'

'God is going to flood the world. He's going to destroy it with water, and this ark is his means for our salvation.'

'So, you're going to get into that ark and you'll be saved? What about the rest of us? Are we so wicked that we shall be doomed?'

What should we think of Noah if he had said, 'No, I don't mean to say that! I wouldn't like to say you're bad or that you'll be lost.'

Did he preach that judgment was coming on the world and at the same time believe that all the world would be saved?

Even if he had never spoken a word Noah condemned the world by the very building of that ark. It is not our business to go around the world condemning people. It is said of our blessed Lord, 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17). By the very preaching of the gospel you do in a sense condemn the world; you cannot offer Christ to men as Saviour and at the same time say that they will be saved even if they refuse him. The words of Scripture are quite clear,

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:36)

These then are solemn matters. I wish simply to add one general observation from the New Testament and then come back and study our passage in its own context.

Was it a universal flood?

It is an interesting question whether the flood as recorded in Genesis was a universal flood, or whether it was in some sense confined and local. Scientifically there is a good deal of evidence on both sides. Mark that—*on both sides*. When you read certain books you would think that there is evidence for only one side but there is a great deal of evidence for both. But once more the Apostle Peter comes to our aid by his reference to that law of uniformity that I mentioned earlier.

Scoffers will say . . . 'For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation' . . . they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God . . . the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. (2 Pet 3:3-6)

He says that the flood was a catastrophe that broke nature's normal uniformity. It is common knowledge that local floods take place all over the world with frequent rapidity, in Bangladesh and the Wash in England and parts of Belfast from time to time. They are local floods; they don't break nature's great law of uniformity, because it is part of the normal scheme of things that floods will come from time to time. If Noah's flood had been nothing more than one of these local floods, it would not have broken the law of uniformity. We have Peter's inspired testimony that the flood was certainly a major catastrophe of the kind that did break nature's uniformity.

Having learned those sundry and scattered lessons from the New Testament, let's come back now to Genesis and read the story of the flood in its own context. In the second creation story we found that the main topic was *man*. In particular, that he was made of the dust of the ground and what he was made for, his *raison d'être*. We also found what is meant by *life* and what is meant by *death*.

What is the difference between what a person is made of and his constitution?

Now in the third creation story we shall move on to consider man once more. This time, it is not so much what he is made of, as what his constitution is.

Let me try and illustrate it. A motor car is made for the most part of so much metal and then it has got a bit of rubber on it here and other sundry bits of stuff there. But as to its constitution, it would not be enough to talk merely of the material that it's made of; you would have to say something about its working parts. It's no good having a nice glossy blue-coloured chassis and delightful upholstery and mats on the floor, if there isn't an engine under the bonnet. So the two great constituent parts are engine and body.

What is a human being made of—what are the constituent parts? This will be the theme of the third creation story. We shall see man, as originally he was made; then how he went wrong and how that going wrong affected not merely what he did but what he was. It left him as something quite other than what God had originally created.

We shall then see that God was obliged to destroy mankind, but how he made provision for salvation and for restoration. This is the story of the first man, Adam, and then of a second man, Noah. It is the story of a first world that grew so evil that it had to be destroyed, and the story of a second world.

And of course we are reading of historic events in the past. But, as we reminded ourselves in our first study, the stories and histories of Genesis are also in their turn prophecies. God, who designed history, stands behind it. He so ordered things that even his earliest dealings with men would be a prototype of the glorious scope of his salvation when it should reach its highest level.

To grasp what we mean by man's constitution, we had better start by having a little lesson in elementary Hebrew.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. (Gen 5:1–2)

With great courtesy the writer tells us right at the very beginning what this part of Genesis is going to be about. 'This is the book of the generations of . . .'. Now comes the Hebrew word, *adam*. And the problem is to know how to translate it, because it can mean two things. It is a noun, a common, general noun; the noun that describes the whole human species. *Adam* means 'man'. Man, as distinct from monkey or angel or rhinoceros. But as well as meaning 'man', Adam was also the personal name of the first male in the species. He was called Adam, as distinct from Eve his wife, or Cain and Abel his sons.

So Adam means two things, and you must weigh up each time in which particular sense the word is being used. 'This is the book of the generations of Adam,' or the first man, perhaps. It is going to be the story of *man*—the species man. 'Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created' (v. 2 KJV). Not Adam and Eve, but *he called their name Adam*. That is, he called them 'Man'. Generically speaking, Eve was Man as Adam was Man. She wasn't a monkey or a she-bear, or something of the kind. 'He named them Man.'

I know it's impossible, but I do wish that we could put ourselves back to those early days. What excitement and fun it must have been! We have seen so many thousands of men and women that we get bored with them sometimes, particularly in crowds. But what excitement to be with the first ones and what fun it would have been to see so many new creatures. Look at this one! It is animal; it's got flesh. And yet it wasn't just animal, it was spirit. And you would have been all agog to investigate this new kind of existence. God called his name 'Man' and said that he had made him in the image of God. He had never said that about any of the other animals.

The death of Adam

As originally made, Man was in the image of God; yet at the same time he was able to reproduce. Adam lived for so long and then he begat a son, and the son was of his own image and likeness. He lived on for many years and had more sons and daughters. And then it happened—it had happened once before, but then it was through violence; now it happened 'in the course of nature'—Adam died.

We have got so used to it. Could you imagine the puzzlement of people when they saw it happen for the first time? He was speaking only a moment ago; is he still there, or is he not still there? His face and the rest of his body are still there, but what has happened? What kind of a creature is it? In those far off days when everything was so new he hadn't been made to die. But he was made in such a fashion that it was possible for him to die and after the fall it happened with regular monotony. Beginning with Adam in 5:5 we read of all the generations, 'and he died', 'and he died', 'and he died'.

It is sad to watch a man made in the very image of God, lying there and presently going rotten. O how terrible! This was one of the few things that reduced our Lord himself to tears. After all those thousands of years, when he came at last to Lazarus's grave (even though he

knew that he was about to raise him from the dead), when he beheld the tomb and the revolting thing that death is, Jesus wept.

Enoch did not die

And so it went on until the normal event found its exception,

When Enoch had lived for 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah for 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. When Methuselah had lived for 187 years, he fathered Lamech. Methuselah lived after he fathered Lamech for 782 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Methuselah were 969 years, and he died. (vv. 21–27)

‘Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.’ The New Testament explains what that means

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. (Heb 11:5)

Enoch did not see death, and I for one believe the inspired apostle who said it. Enoch was translated bodily to God’s heaven without dying. Is it possible for man to do that kind of thing? —I mean, *is it constitutionally possible?* Was man so made that not only could he live on this planet, but live elsewhere too? Well, apparently so!

We shall not all sleep (die)

If you find it hard to believe that Enoch was an exception to the rule, and God interposed and broke that law of uniformity once more when Enoch was taken up without dying, remember what the New Testament says. It affirms that what happened to Enoch shall one of these days happen on an infinitely larger scale at the second coming of Christ.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:51–57)

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the

trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:13–17)

So the end, we now observe, was involved right in the very beginning. Man was made so that he was suited to living in this world, on this earth, but he was so made that, without ceasing to be human and without ceasing to have a body, he can be transformed and translated and made fit to dwell in that other world in the presence of God. It's the very glory of our salvation.

As in Judaism, Christianity here shows itself to be so very different from the old Platonic philosophies and the Pythagoreans. They said that man's body was a bad thing and that the really wise philosopher should practise a living death. He should keep himself as far away from the body as possible, regard it as a prison house and long to escape from the body. The goal was at last to escape from the body and perhaps never return to it again. And the Hindu religion holds the same still; people feel that if their souls get too muddled up with their bodies in this life and become stained with sin, they shall not immediately be released but shall have to come back into other bodies.

These are bad and injurious notions. The New Testament affirms this healthy doctrine, that true man in his constitution must have a body. For the Christian it isn't merely the salvation and survival of the soul; God's salvation shall involve the saving of his body. Man is not a complete man unless body as well as spirit are saved.

It may be at morn, when the day is awaking,
When sunlight through darkness and shadow is breaking,
That Jesus will come in the fullness of glory,
To receive from the world His own.

O joy! O delight! Should we go without dying,
No sickness, no sadness, no dread and no crying.
Caught up through the clouds with our Lord into glory,
When Jesus receives His own.²

How did man go so seriously astray?

But before we get on to that delectable topic we must consider how seriously man went astray and what he became. You will have to permit me again to point out exactly what the Hebrew says. Many versions read,

And it came to pass, when *men* began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of *men* that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. (6:1–2 KJV)

But that is not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew says *man*, not men. In other words, chapter 6 is continuing on with a detailed description of what happened to this new creature

² H. L. Turner (1845–1915).

called 'man'. It is the story of what happened to the whole race called man. From the beginning of chapter 6 on we are told that man began to go exceedingly wrong.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.' (6:5-7)

The Lord said, 'I will destroy man.' Not, 'I will destroy men, or some men,' but, 'I will destroy man.' 'I have finished with this new experiment, this thing called man. I will wipe out the genus and be left as before with angels and with animals.' And God summed it up in verse 3. 'Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years."'

That is a difficult verse, partly because the Hebrew is not very clear. Some versions therefore read, 'My Spirit shall not always strive with man.' That is most unlikely to be the correct meaning of the Hebrew. A better reading is, 'My Spirit shall not always abide in man — his days shall be so long, but my Spirit shall not always abide in him forever.' Why not? 'For he is flesh.' That is this verse's comment on what man is. It is commenting on his *constitution*. 'My Spirit shall not always stay in him, because he is *flesh*.'

Now this verse used to be much beloved by evangelists. They used to interpret it like this, 'My Spirit shall not always strive with man, because, if he rejects the gospel and goes on rejecting the gospel, there will come a time when my Spirit will no longer plead with him.' It was as though it read, 'My Spirit shall not always strive with man if he carries on rejecting the gospel.' It is perfectly true, so carry on preaching it; but that isn't what this verse says. It is commenting upon man's constitution — 'because he is flesh.' What is man anyway, if he isn't *spirit and flesh*?

In what sense is God saying 'my Spirit'? Let me give you another Old Testament example of that. 'When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground' (Ps 104:30). It is talking about the life that God gives to creation, 'You send forth your Spirit.' And in Genesis God said, 'My Spirit shall not always dwell in him, because he is flesh.' As we read and ponder those simple words and then go across to the New Testament, we shall find that the words have meaning at two levels, as so many of the basic simple Hebrew words do.

Even in man's early days he could observe that if someone drowns, the breath of the spirit of life goes out of him or her. What you are left with is a dead corpse of flesh, which presently goes rotten. When mankind corrupted his way upon the earth, God destroyed them; but notice how and with what methods. On a later occasion, when men would become enormously wicked, God destroys them by fire, but not on this occasion. God used a judgment that was in itself an education and an object lesson. Why drown them? If you get a man and put him in water for too long, something physical happens — the breath of the spirit of life goes out. But that 'breath of the spirit of life' is a vital constituent in man and if he loses it the flesh cannot survive by itself.

If someone drowns in a river and you lay him out on the bank, he doesn't just suddenly disappear. The body lies there; the flesh survives the departure of that physical breath, but *survive* is scarcely a word for it. It continues to exist but you can't really call it life; it is a death that rapidly leads to corruption.

Why did God destroy man that way?

At the deeper level, man in his constitution is a wonderful thing. There had been angels before, and they are spirit in the deepest and bigger sense of that word *spirit*. There had been animals before, and they were *flesh*. But in mankind you have a wonderful thing—you have a new kind of a creature that is *both spirit and flesh*. Because he is flesh he has a lot in common with the animal, and because he is spirit he will have fellowship with the very Father of spirits. In his unfallen state man's spirit was sovereign in the castle of his body. All those appetites and affections—his intellect, his aesthetics and the physical appetite that constitutes his flesh—were in subjection to his spirit. And his spirit was in subjection to the Father of spirits, able to have heavenly converse with him. Man was spiritually alive and therefore alive in every part of his body.

And then man rebelled and he fell and the ancient word was fulfilled literally, 'For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die' (2:17). And man did die—not physically at once—he died spiritually. Every single member of the human race that has been born since, except Jesus Christ our Lord, is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). We are what the Bible says; carnal, fleshly men, not having the spirit (see Rom 8:6; 1 Cor 2:14). Our spirits are cut off from fellowship with the Father of spirits and we die spiritually. Because fellowship with God's spirit is cut, the flesh starts to predominate and in the end man goes corrupt.

It is not a pleasant object lesson to look at—those floating bodies, all bloated, on the face of the waters. Neither is it a very happy prospect for God to behold. The creatures that he had made to be so magnificent, flesh and spirit in the image of God; having gone astray they became something different from what he originally intended.

But I mustn't leave you there. That is a gloomy story, and we haven't now time to finish the whole of this third creation story. We have time just to begin to consider God's salvation. What was it like? 'Well first of all, it was salvation from the judgment,' says someone. But no, not so! When God saved Noah it is not true to say he saved him from the judgment. He saved him *through* the judgment. 'Build an ark,' says God to Noah, 'and get into it.' When Noah had got in, the windows of heaven were opened and the fountains of the deep loosed; from above and from below came the mighty floods of God's wrath and *the ark went through it*. Had Noah gone through it his own bare self, he would have perished. God provided him with a salvation that could go through the flood and come out safe the other side.

No wonder the Apostle Peter refers back to that story and sees in it a picture of our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord, and in particular a certain similarity with our Christian baptism.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight

persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet 3:18–22)

What is baptism?

When a man or woman trusts Christ, he or she is then baptised. According to the Apostle Paul, it is a burial.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3–4)

It is a symbol. The act of baptism cannot possibly save you. Why such an elaborate symbol, and why a symbol of a burial? Why is it necessary to go through that water? Why not just cleansing? Cleansing wouldn't do any good. Take those fallen men in Noah's day, carnal men who did not have the Spirit; a few bits of water would not have been enough to cleanse them. 'No,' says God, 'I am not prepared to go on with them.' The only answer is to destroy them, so God drowned them and buried them. The very threshold of Christianity is baptism, which proclaims the same thing. As a result of the fall and our own personal sin, we are quite beyond the point of just being cleansed. Having a little stain washed away would never make us all right. It would take nothing less than accepting God's judgment, which is death and burial.

Grace does not make nature perfect. If I would be saved I must come to that basic, radical repentance that admits not merely that I do wrong, but that I am wrong. I am a fallen creature and I deserve God's judgment. I deserve to be drowned, to be got rid of.

That is why Christ died. He didn't come with merely some advice; he came to suffer the execution of God's wrath, the sentence of God upon man. Just as the ark of Noah's time was able to go through the flood and come out the other side, as Noah never could have done; so our blessed Lord was able to go through the wrath of God and come out the other side. Therein is our salvation. If I have seen the gravity of my position as a man in Adam, then the way is open for me to enter the 'ark' — to come to Christ. And when I receive Christ as Saviour, he shall ask me to confess my faith by being baptised — by being buried. I say publicly that I agree with God; I deserved God's judgment and sentence, but I have accepted his resurrection life as a sheer unmerited gift. Noah came out of the ark to a new world and those who trust Christ are saved from God's wrath and enter a new life.

That is not the whole of the salvation story. God was not prepared merely to save Noah from the judgment and just leave him as he was before. Steps were taken with Noah that he might be a different kind of man when he came out of that ark from what he had been before. In our next session we shall have to consider it.

There is salvation for us, in the sense of being delivered from the wrath of God. We may know it and glory in it. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

But in addition to that, there is salvation in the sense of making us anew; making us as God originally designed, turning us from being carnal into spiritual men and women. We shall have to consider the means to that glorious end on our next occasion.

God write his word on our heart. It has been a solemn study, but unless we see the gravity of our ruin in Adam we shall fail to enjoy the glory of our salvation in Christ.

[The Third Creation Story \(Part 2\)](#)

Genesis 5:1–9:29

This evening with God's help we will complete our study of the third creation story. We suggested that its chief point is to tell us about man's constitution. 'This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God' (5:1).

Man is different from anything that had been before. There had been angels and animals, but as far as we know there had not been man before. He was in some part *spirit*, able to have fellowship and concourse with God who is Spirit. But the other part of him was animal, he was made of *flesh*. Although he was made originally in the image of God, man fell and in consequence he died. We considered particularly his physical death and what it meant in terms of his constitution. To see a human form lying on the ground—externally all there as before and yet dead—must have been a very strange experience for people at first. They would have wondered what had actually happened to his constitution.

Then we pondered God's comments on man's constitution. 'Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh"' (6:3). We noticed that as we read Genesis we must constantly be prepared to read its terms at two levels—man was breath (or spirit, if you like), and flesh in the physical sense.

'Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died' (7:22). As a result of the flood all in whose nostrils was the breath of life died, in the sense of *expired*. If a man drowns he can no longer breathe, so he dies. You are left with the flesh minus 'the breath of life.'

But very soon holy Scripture goes deeper with its terms. Man is compounded physically of two parts: flesh, and the breath of life. At the deeper level of his constitution man is both flesh and spirit. Spirit now in the sense of the true, essential being that can hold fellowship with the Father of spirits. We reminded ourselves that when God judged this ancient generation of mankind his judgment was not arbitrary. It was exceedingly deliberate, a solemn object lesson. When a human being drowns, the whole person is not immediately destroyed; the flesh is still there, which then starts to decay and eventually it goes to corruption.

That is how God judged mankind at the flood. It becomes a tremendous object lesson for us of realities at the deeper level. Man was made as spirit and flesh, with his spirit in control. The flesh and its proper and healthy desires were subject to his spirit, as his spirit was subject to God, the Father of spirits. But when man rebelled he died spiritually. He was still walking around, but he was dead towards God. As the New Testament puts it, he was 'dead in trespasses and in sins' (Eph 2:1), spiritually dead, fleshly, carnal. 'For to be carnally minded is death' (Rom 8:6 KJV).

He was not merely fleshly in the sense that he is a prey to his lower desires. Even a man's intellect is part of his flesh and needs to be maintained in its proper health. Intellect needs to be controlled, as well as all the other desires of the body, with a spirit that is in touch with God. When man fell it was not merely that he did some wrong things, but he so injured himself that he became a different kind of thing, such as God had never designed. He became carnal, out of touch with the Father of spirits. His own spirit therefore became dead and it was inevitable that he would become corrupt. Eventually his body would go to corruption, but long before that he would find evidence of spiritual corruption; even in this life that corruption will sometimes go to very advanced stages, let alone what it shall be in the eternity beyond.

We noticed that the salvation provided for Noah was an ark, but it did not save Noah *from* the judgment; it saved him *through* the judgment. Notice the terms of God's judgment upon man as a race,

And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.' (6:13)

There is a sense in which Noah did not escape that sentence. He had to go through the flood like the rest. But whereas they went through it on their own, unprotected, Noah went through it hidden in the ark. We found in that a ready example of the glorious salvation that God has provided for us in Christ. In history Christ died for us at Calvary on a cross by himself—he died instead of me. That is gloriously true, but there is another way in which we are called upon to look at it.

When we are baptised we profess that when we received Christ we were acknowledging that the judgment of God that descended on Christ was the judgment we deserved. We acknowledge that the severe judgment under which he died (not just suffered, but he actually died) was not too severe for it was the judgment that we deserved. What would have meant eternal disaster for us by ourselves proves the very ark of salvation.

When I am baptised I say that I have accepted God's judgment. I deserve to die and be buried and got rid of underneath those waters. It is not just a little cleansing of certain spots here and there; under that watery flood it is the end. And the symbolism is true. When I receive Christ he and I become one and, legally speaking, God can count what happened to him as having happened to me. Therefore, as I look back to that symbol, I see myself going through the judgment—dead with Christ, buried with Christ. Then, just as Noah came out of the ark into a world that had been cleansed, I rise from my own baptism to walk in newness of life.

That is a wonderfully comforting thing to see. God's forgiveness is not some kind of favouritism that bends the rules to let me pass while others are judged. Indeed, my security from the fear of judgment lies in this, for me the judgment has happened, it has already taken place and has been exhausted.

Learning how to live after the flood

But now we must move on to observe that the salvation God provided for Noah was not merely to get him through the judgment. And, if I may be bold and say, it would have been of very little use if it were. God provided a salvation that not only brought him through the judgment and out into a clean world, but laid down certain principles and powers for the way that he should now live. As far as was possible in those far off days he would receive a taste of God's scheme of redemption and learn to become a spiritual man.

It is so easy for us to enjoy the glorious security and certainty that 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus,' but we may forget in practice, if not in theory, that God's salvation is not merely concerned to save me from the wrath of God and assure me there is no condemnation ahead. God's salvation is meant to restore me as a person to what I should be. Constitutionally to make me a real man, as distinct from what I used to be. God has no interest in saving rotten corpses and carnal men and women. God's salvation is to turn us once more into people that are spirit and flesh, whose spirits are in constant touch with the Father of spirits; by the power of the Holy Spirit to assume and resume control of our personality.

And because this is so tremendously important I beg leave of you now, as we begin to read, to justify my exposition.

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterwards, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. (6:1-4)

An attack on the human race by evil spirit beings

Let us notice again what was going on when mankind went wrong. They did not merely become corrupt, violent, vicious, unclean, corrupt intellectually and violent physically; at this stage it would appear that satanic evil forces, in their rebellion against God, carried their sin to such lengths as it began to turn certain parts of the human race into monstrosities.

'And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth' (v. 1 KJV). That won't do as a translation—it is this new creature, *man*, not certain men among the race. And again in v. 2, 'the daughters of *man*.' It wasn't that the sons of God saw certain daughters of certain men—the Hebrew will not allow it. 'The sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose.' The 'daughters of men' is human female; Scripture is talking here about beings other than humans. These 'sons of God' were perverting human females. It is useless to protest, using the words of our Lord that angels do not marry, 'They neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven' (Matt 22:30). That is certainly true of unfallen angels of whom he was then talking. And secondly, he didn't say they *cannot* marry. We are not now talking of unfallen holy angels, but exceedingly unholy angels.

Please turn to the passage in the New Testament that discusses this very paragraph. I would like you to check on the exposition that I am proposing, to see whether I have got it right.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 3:17–22; 4:1–11)

As we have already seen, the first paragraph in Genesis 6 is dealing with man's constitution, spirit/flesh. Man went terribly wrong; partly as a result of his own fallenness he became carnal and corrupt. Partly because of the inrush of evil fallen spirit beings the race began to get corrupted at the very level of their constitution. Let us hear in the passage what Peter thinks are the leading concepts. He is going to talk about Noah and the flood, but first notice verse 18 and our two words, 'being put to death in the *flesh* but made alive in the *spirit*.'

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to him. (3:21–22)

Who are these, if not spirits?

For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit. (4:6)

Satan's attack upon Jesus Christ our Lord

So you will see that Peter is picking up what Genesis is specifically saying about this matter of man's constitution—flesh and spirit. He is referring to this occasion when evil spirit forces tried to corrupt our human race and to that great attack of Satan and all his hosts on Jesus Christ our Lord, that second man. What a lovely specimen of humanity he was. Ever since Adam had sinned there had never walked on earth a man in the full sense of that term. No one had seen a perfect specimen of humanity until he came. Jesus Christ our Lord was true man in flesh, yet conceived and anointed of the Holy Spirit. He was perfect and unfallen, in him rested the destiny of the human race.

At the cross Satan and his evil hosts made their great attack on him and he was 'put to death in the flesh' (3:18). It is not a very nice word that Peter uses. It is not as a sacrifice, some reverent offering to God, but brutally 'done to death in the flesh'—scourged, thorn-crowned and crucified. 'Flesh' is used not in a bad sense, but in the constitutional part of him. In that very moment it was demonstrated that humans could not exist merely according to the flesh. Instead of Calvary being the end, it was the doorway into vastly bigger things. He was 'made alive in the spirit.'

The triumph of God's plan

We have a little inkling of it in those far off days. Reading down that great list in Genesis 5—'he died . . . he died . . . he died . . . he died'—we suddenly come across a man called Enoch, 'Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him' (vv. 23–24). Enoch didn't die, but went without dying into 'who-knows-where' in those days; a little hint that man can live as man in other realms. But then, see the greater wonder of a man 'done to death in flesh and made alive in spirit.' With a spiritual body he went and preached, heralding his great victory—and hence their doom—to evil spirits that had tried to destroy the race.

Then Peter adds, not as a piece of decorative icing to the cake but because it is relevant,

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (vv. 21–22)

Consider the man, Christ Jesus. What a triumph God's plan has led to. Satan may have ruined the original man, but there has been a second man and he has triumphed gloriously! He has not gone into heaven by slipping in through the door, he has gone there with all that myriad throng of vast intelligentsia and spiritual powers being made subject to him. Man has risen in the universe. Originally man was made a little lower than the angels and could die. (I have never read of an angel dying.) In Christ, manhood has been raised in the universe.

[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:20–21)

He is still a man. Just before he went, he said, 'See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke

24:39). What a comfort that is for our hearts. We are buffeted and beaten by Satan and his tricks, perhaps feeling defeated in our souls. To our great dismay and disappointment, we have lost control of ourselves. Cheer up! Our Saviour is above all principalities and powers and one day God will have us to be like him.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:23–25)

God's intention is not that we should be bodiless for all eternity. Sometimes we get into that sort of defeatist attitude and wish we could get rid of this body, having felt defeated so many times. We shall have a body eternally and shall reign in it.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil 3:20–21)

We come back to the eloquent words of Peter.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (4:1–5)

Controlling the flesh and being led by the Spirit

He has told us of the great triumph of Jesus Christ our Lord. Then he is concerned to tell us that, 'since Christ has suffered, we should arm ourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.' Peter knew something about trying to avoid suffering and wielding a sword. He wants to encourage us to 'live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.'

The flood divided life for Noah. The time past ought to have 'sufficed him,' but it didn't! One of the last things we read of Noah is of him coming under the influence of the wrong spirit. He got drunk and showed himself as desperately animal and crude. We are warned to take our salvation seriously. It is not God's intention to save us, guarantee us eternal security and then let us live as we like. There is ample provision for us to become Spirit-led men and women.

See it begin to happen. Noah was in his ark, the rains had ceased and now he wanted to know whether it was safe to come out and set his foot once more on earth. So he devised a plan, opened the window and sent out a bird or two. The raven was not much good at it, but the dove proved very reliable. She went out first and found no place to rest her foot on, so she came back to the ark. Sensible thing; it felt safe there. Then Noah sent her out again and she

came back this time with an olive leaf in her beak. Noah couldn't look through the side because there weren't any windows. He couldn't see how much mud was down there, so he didn't rely upon his own judgment. He relied on the bird coming in through the window on top.

Someone may say, 'what a funny little story!' And I must watch my critics, lest they think that I am going to interpret it as a type and they might say Genesis never could have meant that. Let's go over to the New Testament.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . I baptize you with water for repentance.' (Matt 3:1-2, 11)

He put them down under that flood, in confession of their sin—guilty tax-gatherers, hitherto pompous Pharisees and women of the street who had learned their corruption and owned that God's judgment is just.

And presently Jesus of Nazareth comes to be baptised. Says John, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' John knew the significance of his baptism; it was a confession of repentance, and this man had no sin to repent of. Why would he then be baptised? As we see him stand in the mud of Jordan along with the sinners, the poor, weak, corrupt and the vicious, we might well ask what this holy Son of God is doing there. This is God's miracle of grace. When you face up to God's judgment and put yourself where you deserve to be—down in the mud so that you can get no lower, with the waters about to go over your head—you will feel an arm coming around you. It is God's holy, sinless Son, standing in your place. That's what he did at Calvary; no person went so low, but Christ stood at his or her side.

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
'Full atonement!' can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!³

Continuing his great illustration, he came up out of Jordan.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (vv. 16-17)

And what happened next? 'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil' (Matt 4:1). Jesus, led of the Spirit, went into the wilderness where he was tempted by three great temptations. Surely there are no types here; we had better keep to the facts!

We have been saved through the judgment and come out the other side to walk in newness of life. How do we control this unruly flesh? Godly character is built by being constantly led of the Spirit, which does not necessarily mean constantly hearing voices from heaven.

³ Philip P. Bliss (1838-76), 'Man of Sorrows! What a name'.

A cook can be led by Mrs Beeton and follow her recipes; being led by the Spirit is not like that, nor is it just sensations down the spine. The Holy Spirit is a person and that person is God. He's not a thing. I'm not here to use him and switch him on like I switch on the electricity. It is for him to use me. The glorious thing about God's Holy Spirit is that he will not repress my personality, he will develop it. He will pray within me and alongside me. He will allow me to express myself the best I can, and if my expression of his desires is faltering and sometimes wrong God will read them as the Holy Spirit intended them. But he will strive against the flesh, for I am called to live according to the Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Rom 8:5–6)

Paul is not referring here to our eternal destiny; he is talking about present experience. If I would know vigorous spiritual life now, then God has made provision for it in the Holy Spirit. But if I insist on walking after my corrupt old flesh, then my practical spiritual life will die and it could become so thin that you would not know whether it was alive or dead.

If you know that you are there, don't say in your heart that you have gone too far to come back; it's been so long that you can't feel anything. Of course you can't feel much, but you can repent. You can tell God, 'I'm in a poor mess. I don't even desire you, I don't love your word, I don't love the Lord's Supper; I love evil things. But I'm willing to repent and for your Spirit to begin to bring me to sanity.' If you are prepared to pray, you can do it. You must not complain if it is costly or painful; it depends how much you mean business. His gracious work is as much about bringing believers to repentance as it is about giving us the power to walk in newness of life.

Some principles for living in the cleansed world

First, the principle of an altar and a sacrifice

So Noah came out of his ark, led by the dove and the first thing he did was to build an altar.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelt the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. (Gen 8:20–21)

When God smelled the pleasing aroma, did he say, 'Well now, Noah, you have been in the ark and you have been through the waters; I am very content with you and I now feel that I can rest'? Indeed, not! God wouldn't feel contented with Noah until he got him home to glory. Nor will he feel contented with us till he gets us home to glory either. I'm being factual. God loves us, but that is a different thing from being contented with us. Indeed, it is because he loves us that he'll be constantly trying to bring us to repentance. And we must not think he doesn't love us because he keeps pointing out things that are wrong. He won't be content until

we have lost all our wrinkles, spots and blemishes and we're like Christ. We can find rest where God already finds rest, in the great sacrifice of Christ. Our peace with God and the resting place of our hearts is not based on our attainments, it is based always and only on acceptance with God through the sacrifice of Christ.

If Satan can't get at you through your being worldly, he will trip you up by your very godliness and spirituality. He doesn't mind which way he does it. You set yourself tremendously high standards (of course, you shouldn't have low standards) and he will fill you with glory on a Monday morning. You have never felt such a good Christian. You are making the grade and now you feel you can call yourself a Christian. You were always a bit uncertain before; you weren't absolutely sure you were saved, but now you feel you are. Tuesday afternoon you come a cropper and you don't think you're a Christian at all now. All the puff has gone out of it. You feel you're no good and nobody's any good and he's got you because your feeling of contentment was based on your attainment. It will sap every bit of strength you've got, or else turn you into a hardened Pharisee. Learn that you are accepted through Christ's sacrifice and be content with him and permanently discontent with yourself. Come and celebrate it every Lord's Day morning. Have the courage to face all those things about yourself of which you have every right to be discontent.

Second, the principle of God's provision

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (8:22)

God gave Noah certain basic assurances. It had application primarily to the physical world. Generally speaking, the elements would not mock his labour; if he sowed there would normally be a harvest. Of course, there would be fluctuations in temperature and climate, but there would not be another great flood. From now on physical life would be governed by laws that he could rely on. If he sows barley, he will get barley. It would be pretty discouraging if you sowed barley and got poppies. Nature has to be fairly rigid and you reap what you sow. That way round, it is a glorious encouragement. Something to praise God for; you reap what you sow.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. (Gal 6:7-9)

This has already raised it a category. We have now left behind the law at the physical level of nature; it applies at the spiritual level too. Paul is talking in terms of practical enjoyment and God will not mock you, nor will he be mocked. If you give yourself to the hard work of following Christ and cooperating with God, being led of the Spirit, filling your mind with his word and seeking his grace and power to carry it out, you can rely on God's faithfulness. What you have sown you will reap.

But don't expect to sow barley on Tuesday and reap it on Wednesday afternoon, nor even the week following or a fortnight later. It will be a long-term process and, generally speaking, spiritual progress is a long-term operation. Dare to trust God and be patient. You will reap if you do not give up.

But there is a warning. 'The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.' We reap what we sow. God has no magic wands. If, because I'm sure I will never come into judgment, I just sow to the flesh, I shall of the flesh reap corruption. It's not necessarily vicious flesh, drinking methylated spirits every day before breakfast, but nice, cultured flesh. As sure as autumn follows summer, sowing to the flesh will inevitably reap corruption.

Even if it is in later life before we see what fools we have been, having ruined ourselves and perhaps our family, God will forgive us when we repent. There is no magic, but by his mercy he can restore those lost years that the locusts have eaten (see Joel 2:25). Nothing will ever make up for the years we waste. It's not arbitrary; it is a regular law of living.

Third, the principle of government

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (Gen 9:5-6)

For the first time now we read of government being set up and magistrates to judge. This is very important to historians and sociologists; it was the dawn of some kind of human government. But for our study we are chiefly interested in the spiritual lessons—God will expect us to exercise judgment.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matt 7:1-5)

As a believer I am not meant to go through life supposing that I am all right. I should know that in a great proportion of my life I am not all right. Ask your wife or your friend, if you think you are! Therefore, I am to judge myself. It's not to be morbid, but I should regard it as one of life's chief duties and put myself alongside God's word, asking him to show me where I should repent. Don't wait until you have blotted your copybook before you discover that nothing good dwells in your flesh. Keep constantly in the light of God's word and God will give you the assurance that he gave to Noah.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every

beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.' (Gen 9:8-17)

It must have been a comfort to Noah. If you have been through one flood, you won't forget it. When you have seen clouds rolling up, the very windows of heaven opened and the whole planet shaking underneath your feet, you don't forget it easily. In his later life, were Noah to see dark clouds coming up, he might become a bit sweaty under the collar. God said, 'I am going to give that rainbow new significance. Whenever you see a rainbow now, you will remember my covenant and there will be no more flood.' How wonderfully God put the two things together—I am to judge myself in the security of knowing that there is no condemnation for me, and God will not in daily life judge me.

So it should all have been happy, and for a while it was. Then Noah became drunk and lost his self-control. 'I wouldn't do anything like that!' you say. I sincerely hope you wouldn't. We are still animal and there is nothing wrong in that so long as the animal is under the control of our spirit by the power of God's Holy Spirit. But there is great danger if that animal gets its own way and out of control.

What do I mean by *animal*? Let's have a word with James,

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (Jas 3:7-8)

Every animal has been tamed except the tongue, the human tongue. You say, 'I didn't know that was an animal.' But you will find that it is and you have got to watch it. No human being can tame it, only the Holy Spirit can tame the animal of the tongue. When it gets loose it will tear you to shreds. People can sometimes be proud of that; many a Christian church is spoiled because of the old animal, the tongue. Under the guise of being very spiritual, the gossip of the neighbourhood is carried and everybody knows about it.

I don't want to know about Mrs Smith's shortcomings unless you think that I could help. I have enough trouble keeping my own animal in place. I want you to come and tell me about Christ and his Holy Spirit. 'But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another' (Gal 5:15).

We are in danger of confusing two things. Through the death of Christ, we have been saved from the penalty of sin, but we are not saved from its consequences. It is with my tongue that I repeat cheap gossip and minister to people's pride. If then I repent of it, there is forgiveness and there's no penalty, but there are consequences. If you sow barley when God

has told you not to sow barley, what happens? If you say, 'I am very sorry, but I have grown barley and I know you said that I shouldn't sow barley. I was a fool; I don't know what made me do it. Now there are whole fields of barley, and all from that little seed! I didn't think it would come to much. O God, I am so sorry, forgive me for sowing barley.'

God will forgive you, but he won't say, 'I'll change it into wheat!' There is no penalty; we're saved from penalty, but we're not saved from consequences. 'Watch out,' says Paul. What will happen if you 'bite and devour one another'? Will it turn out all right in the end? No, 'You will be consumed by one another.' This business is real and you will reap what you sow.

God help us respond to his wonderful salvation and triumph in the victory that he has designed for each one of us in Christ through his Holy Spirit. We shall be conformed to his image, made perfect specimens of humanity in both spirit and flesh; may we realistically and seriously cooperate with God in the ongoing development of our personal holiness.

The Rise of the Hebrew Nation from among the Gentiles

Genesis 10:1–25:11

We come now to the second half of the book of Genesis, which begins to trace God's great royal road of redemption. Not merely for men as individuals, but eventually for the world as a whole.

The road began with a man called Abraham, and from Abraham to the formation of a nation unique in the earth. This nation, which is now called Israel, was known in ancient times as the Jews, or Hebrews. To that nation we owe the Old Testament and the greatest part of the New Testament, but supremely above all else, Jesus Christ our Lord 'according to the flesh.' After much wandering the nation has now returned to its own land, but unhappily it remains unreconciled to the Messiah. Paul affirms that Israel shall yet be reconciled to Jesus as her Messiah, and when that happens there shall begin a period of blessing such as this world has never seen before.

However, we see before our very eyes that there are troublesome times ahead, as prophesied by Zechariah,

On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples. All who lift it will surely hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will gather against it. (Zech 12:3)

We shall be considering how in those ancient times God began that great royal road of redemption. The nation was brought into the land, then for a long while they were out of the land and then back again. We shall see how they rejected their early messiah (Joseph), how he came to be the saviour of the then known world, and how his brothers were reconciled to him. Under their messiah's good guardianship Jew and Gentile were able to work harmoniously together for the good of all.

As we read those ancient histories we shall be nourishing our faith and hope, for we shall see in them prophecies of things yet to be. Believers in Christ should be optimists! The Jewish nation's rejection of their Messiah has indirectly been a blessing to the Gentiles. When they crucified their Messiah and refused to have him reign over them, God set them aside and sent the gospel to the Gentiles. Millions of Gentiles have been saved.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews

jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (Rom 11:11–15)

There is vast blessing in store yet for this sorry old world and I would like you to catch some of the glory of the optimism and the enthusiasm of faith, for this is God's world and God shall yet run it as it ought to be run. God shall yet bless men as he has been aching to bless them for all these centuries.

It began with God's call of Abraham to leave idolatry

So now we must take the story right back to its original founders, to a time when there was no Jewish nation and Abraham was sunk in a mass of pagan idolatry away down in Mesopotamia. We shall read how God rescued him and made him a pattern for all others who should follow. It is the story of how God would rescue us from the burden, slavery and ultimate frustration of idolatry, and lead us to a living faith in a living God and to a glorious future.

There is a battle that lies at the very foundation of human existence, on whose outcome the external success and destiny of our soul depends. It is a battle that is waged a thousand times a day—it is the battle for the faith of a human heart. There are but two contestants. On the one side there is God; on the other side, the world and everything that is in it. Sometimes the battle seems to be between God on the one hand and vice or sin on the other, but it is unlikely that it shall be vice of some sort that will damn our souls. If I may speak frankly, it is much more likely that the thing that shall damn your soul and mine is in allowing some bit of this beautiful world to claim from us the faith that should be God's alone.

Our story takes us way back into the dim past. The world has been cleansed by the flood and Noah's descendants are busily repopulating it. They built some magnificent cities in those far off days; we must not think of them as semi-savages running around in their loincloths. With the lapse of the teaching of ancient history in our schools, some of us imagine that ours is the only Age that has seen any science or known any art. But as the archaeologists uncover the remains of some of these cities we can see what magnificent civilizations they were. Their art remains unsurpassed; their architecture is still one of the wonders of the world. It is even more marvellous than our skyscrapers because they lacked the technology that we know now. In the course of later centuries these cities were the first to develop the great arts of astronomy and mathematics. The damning thing that must be written over them all is that each one of them became idolatrous and Abraham was just as much an idolater as any.

And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.' (Josh 24:2)

God had to call Abraham out from that idolatry. He broke the grip of idolatry in that one man's life and set him free to put his faith in God and in a glorious future. This was the start of the great royal road of redemption.

What is idolatry?

We had better pause and consider what idolatry is, and ask ourselves whether any of us are still idolaters. For many people an idolater is a person who worships funny things, like the grotesque totem poles and statues that we can see in our museums. Or it is a person who paints his body, puts big things into his ear lobes and a bone through his nose, and goes out at night slaughtering his enemies. But it is much more immediate than that. Everyone who has not yet personally trusted God is an idolater, for an idolater is someone who puts his or her faith in someone or something other than God. It is right that I trust the postman to bring my post, or the newspaper boy to deliver my paper, but I am talking of faith in the absolute sense and I repeat that an idolater is someone who puts his or her faith in someone or something other than God.

There is a very popular definition of idolatry that defines it as 'loving something more than we love God.' That is true, but the heathen who serve their grotesque idols don't love those idols; they trust them and they fear them. In the last analysis their faith is in their idols for the success of their crops, for their family health, for the direction of their lives and for all their future. By that definition we live in a world that is more idolatrous than ever.

Watch these ancient people. They had a whole world in front of them, and God had told them that they were to multiply and fill the earth and develop it in fellowship with him. What happened? I cannot tell you how and when the insidious attitude crept into their hearts.

Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.' (Gen 11:4)

They said, 'We don't want to be scattered over the earth, let's make a city and a tower. Let us make a great name and keep together, trusting one another and piling our inventive skills one on top of the other.'

What was wrong with building a city? Nothing. And what was wrong with building a tower? Nothing, except the motives for doing it. Where was God, and where was their faith in God and in his plan for the development of earth? It had gone, evaporated, and it was no longer a reality to them. When men and women get to the position that faith in God is no longer an everyday living reality and is merely singing hymns, if anything at all, on Sundays, they won't go on just believing in nothing. Nature abhors a vacuum and mankind will trust something. The tragedy is that, when people leave off trusting in God, they will trust an idol.

There are very few people in this world that love test tubes. But many people trust them and believe they are our only hope. They have given up their belief that there is a God out there, their trust is in the laws of science, technology and practical psychology — anything except in the living God as a daily reality. There is nothing wrong with science and the study of psychology, they are all glorious things; but if you trust in them, rather than in the living God, you have become an idolater. Stay like that and it will damn both you and your future.

Few of us are in those walks of life where we have to decide between trusting in God and trusting in our own brains, or technology, or whatever. The issue for us comes closer to home, as we ask ourselves what is the meaning of life and where is our trust for the future?

What broke Abraham's idolatry?

For Abraham in those early days, life was simply his goods. He lived down in Ur of the Chaldeans in beautiful houses with all kinds of magnificent art and conveniences. It was a very civilized existence. For some years that was the sum total of his life. He had no sense of the living reality of faith in the living God. None whatsoever!

What broke his idolatry? As ever, God took the initiative. Sooner or later in every person's life God approaches and makes him or her conscious that there is something bigger than food and clothes. Behind this vast world there is a personal God, who has given us richly all things to enjoy in order that they may lead us to him, and to put our faith in him. It breaks his heart that men will take the glorious gifts he gives them, and instead of letting those gifts lead them to God they lead them away from him.

This is not something confined to those far off days. It happens again and again. It happened to the nation of Israel centuries later. Through the prophets, God laments over what they had done. He brought them out of one of their bondages, put them in the land of Canaan and blessed them with solid houses, beautiful fields and abundant crops. Instead of that leading them to him, it led them away.

She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.' (Hos 2:5)

God said, 'I fell in love with you, I cleansed and beautified you, adorned and educated you, and I hung the earring on your ears and the pearls around your neck. I gave you beautiful homes and wonderful treasures and you knew not that it was I.' Israel took the gifts that God had given them and went after other gods. There burns in the God of this universe a passionate but exceedingly grieved heart.

Does your heart burn with love for God? You say, 'I've got my business and my home!' Could it be that your business and the lovely home that God has given you have so swamped you that it leaves you with no time for God or any faith in him? You're not vicious, you're not wildly immoral, but sheer goods have robbed God of your faith and you have made an idol of this passing world. You say, 'I've got a future; I cannot always be thinking of God.' But there is no future without God! If you would have a future, you must learn with Abraham this basic lesson—forsake your idols and put your faith in the living God.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. (Acts 7:2)

Abraham discovered that there is something even more wonderful than the things of this world. Behind this world there is a glorious personality, the architect of it all. He is the living God. What a wonderful future began to open up to him—not merely a universe of things, but behind the things a person. He was calling for Abraham at the level of his personality, looking for his response of faith and his love. Abraham was being called to a personal relationship with the God of the universe.

How big are your horizons? When these things have slipped through your fingers, have you any future?

God not only showed himself to Abraham, he drew aside the veil and showed Abraham his programme for the world. Babylon was glorious and so were the other cities, but Abraham began to look for the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:10). Like a youth that has been building a model car and is presented with a real car, Abraham left those cities and stretched out for the city.

We don't need to be high theologians all the time; we could come down to our own humble selves. I am not ashamed to stand and confess to you that I believe our Saviour's words, 'In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?' (John 14:2). And I believe those majestic words, spoken of all who trust God, 'But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city' (Heb 11:16). By faith, walk around its bulwarks, survey its wonders as God has described them, and ask yourself how big is your future—have you claimed your right to enter in at the gate of that great city? Or is your future bounded by the Borough of Belfast and the cemetery at Roselawn?

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. (Rev 22:14)

For them there is entry at last into that eternal city which has the foundations, the goal for which the scaffolding of this earth has been erected.

Abraham's halting pilgrimage

But for Abraham it was not one constant undeviating path of faith. It rarely is for anybody. Very often it was a slow and halting pilgrimage that he made in response to God's self-revelation. After the initial vision Abraham and his father, Terah, and certain relatives set out in faith for Canaan. They got halfway there, settled down and for years they didn't move any further. I don't know what it was that kept them back. Nothing is said. I suspect it was the washing on Mondays and doing the bedrooms on Tuesdays and office work on Wednesdays, and all that kind of thing; somehow the vision had got lost.

I wonder has that happened to us? It can happen. Do you remember when you were in your teens and you wanted to be a believer, but you never quite made it? The actual day didn't come when you personally trusted Christ. Now you are in middle age, and where are you? You are at a religious meeting tonight, but have you stopped halfway? Did you really get saved? Have you been born again, or did your youthful idealism run into the sand?

God mercifully pursued Abraham. When Terah died, God met him again. It's sad it had to be that way; it would have been nice if old Terah had gone on with Abraham, the old and young together. Terah could tell Abraham as they went, 'Son, I have seen the most of life. As I grow old what a tremendous comfort it is to me to know that this isn't the end, the glorious eternal city is ahead. My boy, make preparation for that city.' But poor old Terah got halfway and stopped, and he died there. It gave Abraham a jolt. With his father passing on it made him ask again, what is life about? Perhaps he realised that it was about time he took more thought about what God had originally revealed. There is this eternal city—how was he to get

there? Once more God repeated his glorious gospel message and Abraham started off on his pilgrimage again.

Now the LORD said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (Gen 12:1-3)

When he came into the land of Canaan, God spoke again, 'Then the LORD appeared to Abraham and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him' (v. 7). Abraham decided to trust God and he built an altar, but then there came a famine and Abraham went down into Egypt. As he got near Egypt he began to think,

He said to Sarai his wife, 'I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife." Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.' (vv. 11-13)

He said to Sarah, 'How do you think we are going to live down in Egypt? We don't have anything. I have hit on an idea; I will say you are my sister. It won't be all the truth, but it won't be a complete lie—it will be a kind of a white lie. So you say you are my sister and they will give me goods for you.' And that is just what the Egyptians did. They saw how beautiful Sarah was, so they took her as a wife for Pharaoh. 'And for her sake he dealt well with Abraham; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels' (v. 16).

He thought it was a good thing. It wasn't really a big lie; all he had done was to deny his wife! For goods he denied the most sacred of all human relationships—what some men will do for money.

Guarding against covetousness

But we need not stand here and criticize Abraham. I wonder what lovely things we have denied in life to escape a sneer or a jeer? By my silence, have I denied the lovely person of Christ? Idolatry can be to deny life's most sacred thing for some form of passing popularity. There was a time when you would have blushed to tell a lie, but to save your face in a business deal did you deny the truth for the sake of goods? We live in a sorry world; how can we expect its cities to be beautiful? I don't mean the streets and public cleansing department; I am thinking of cities as communities of people. What happens when people put goods before trust; before sacred things like loyalty and life; before God and Christ himself?

Earth is now full of the most blatant lack of sacredness. People don't even regard their bodies as sacred. We live in a society that has lost its basic values and is as vulnerable as it possibly can be. What truth is sacred? Everybody tells lies, politicians above all. They tell lies

when they know that you know that they know that you know that they are lying, and are thought to be clever! What kind of city can you build on a foundation that denies sacred things?

Our Lord Jesus had something to say about these matters.

And he said to them, 'Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.' And he told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. (Luke 12:15–21)

The man thought his future lay in his goods—what a mistake. 'Can you not see it?' said the Saviour, 'Life is more than goods.' 'For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?' (Mark 8:36–37).

If ever we are to be in that sacred city—the New Jerusalem, the glorious goal to which God is bringing men—we shall have to face this fundamental question. What is our relation to goods and to God? It is not that goods are wrong. If you trust his Son, God is going to give you a whole universe eventually. God is not asking you to go without goods, but he is pointing out to you that if you let anything take your faith away from him it will damn you. If you go on without Christ, without God's salvation, without a personal relationship with him—what shall it profit you, if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?

Who would be Abraham's heir?

I must cut the story short. Next time we will retrace how Abraham came to a major crisis. He was getting elderly and had many goods. Some of them had been acquired by very doubtful methods in Egypt, but he was learning his lesson. One night he suddenly woke up to the fact that he was getting older, his hair was becoming very grey and he had a bit of rheumatism. The old heartaches that had been there all the years began to speak with a voice that would not be repressed. Life was coming to an end and he had no son, no heir and no future.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abraham in a vision: 'Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abraham said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abraham said, 'Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.' And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.' (Gen 15:1–6)

Abraham said to himself, 'I have no heir, no future and presently I shall die. Then whose shall these things be?' If you can't see it now, it won't take long—it normally only takes about eighty-six years with most people to see that there is no future in goods! As with the rich farmer, so it dawned on Abraham—it's not about goods, it's about life. If he couldn't have it through his own body, couldn't he have a son somehow to continue his life, to give him some kind of future?

That's what God is trying to say. Physical life is more than goods. What's the good of earning a fortune and killing yourself in the process? Beyond physical life, beyond physical sums and orders there stands the biggest question of all—do you have eternal life? Abraham woke up to it and, with all the cravings of a human heart, he cried to God for life and for a future. God responded, for he had wanted to bring Abraham to that point. God said to Abraham, 'Your very own son shall be your heir.'

Abraham placed his faith in God

In himself Abraham felt that it was impossible. And then he thought again! These were the words of the living God—wasn't he the very source of life? Was it God now speaking to his heart and calling for his trust, promising to give him a son and countless generations of sons, way off into the future? Abraham heard the voice of God and Scripture says, 'And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.'

The war had been won. There would come many more battles, but the basic issue had been settled; Abraham believed God. And from being just a creature in a world of time and space Abraham had become a child of God, possessor of eternal life and inheritor of the very kingdom of heaven.

How wonderful if it happened right now. Life has brought us together; we are all on this rolling planet. What about the future? Do you have one? As far as these matters are concerned it doesn't really matter whether you have much in life, or little. Behind all the things and all the busyness, do you hear the voice of God offering you eternal life, a personal relationship with him here on earth, stretching to the infinite immeasurable future?

Because he wanted to share his own life with us, God gave his only begotten Son, the very vitals of the Godhead. Will you not take him? God wants to build that great eternal city from the saved and redeemed, those who are in fellowship with him. If you believe God, as best you know how, then it shall be counted to you for righteousness.

World Inheritance for Abraham's Seed

Genesis 13–15

We now have the very pleasant task of considering together how immensely rich every believer is as a result of this ancient covenant that God made with his servant Abraham.

But before that we should spend a few minutes putting this famous chapter 15 into its proper context. In the course of the covenant that God made with Abraham, he told him that his nation should be afflicted four hundred years in a strange land, and that afterwards they should come out with great substance.

Previously we considered the prominence of the theme of material goods in this section of Genesis. It is very reasonable that this first part of Abraham's experience should contain this elementary and basis lesson. The New Testament tells us that Abraham left Ur of the Chaldeans and began to look for the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:10). In leaving his home country he was plainly declaring that he was seeking another home country, a heavenly fatherland. It stands to reason that all those who profess they are pilgrims and strangers stretching forward to a heavenly fatherland should develop the right attitude to material goods early on in their experience.

God does not say that material goods are bad things and that it is wrong or unspiritual to possess them. Abraham was a wealthy man and he remained so until the end of his days. He is held up to us as a man who lived by faith, but we should be quite wrong to imagine that Abraham lived meagrely. He was wealthier than perhaps any of us here. There is nothing wrong in goods *per se* and nothing wrong with a spiritual person owning them, but it is too easy for us to get the wrong heart attitude towards goods. Instead of a steppingstone to glory, they can become a great barrier between our hearts and God. They may get a hold of our hearts, begin to pervert our behaviour and lead us from the paths of righteousness.

We saw how Abraham's father left Ur and came to Haran, but somehow his vision petered out and he stayed there. He went no further in the pilgrim path. Eventually, after the death of Terah, when Abraham left Haran, it seems that they had amassed a great deal of goods. One can't help wondering whether that was what had impeded Terah in his pilgrimage.

A question of values

Wrong values

When Abraham had occasion to go down to Egypt he fell to very sorry depths of mean and unprincipled behaviour, not merely to preserve his life but in order that he should prosper there. He denied his wife Sarah. We saw this as a very sad but clear example of how

temptation to amass wealth can lead a man to get his values wrong. He prefers goods even to the sacred relationship of marriage, to honesty, truth and principle. He can lose those very spiritual and moral lessons for which God has put the goods into his hands.

Our Lord Jesus himself warns us how easy it is to get our system of values wrong.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matt 6:25)

Food is necessary, but life is more important than food and to lose your life in order to get food is foolish. The body is more important than clothes. You need the clothes, but you wouldn't need them if you didn't have a body!

Abraham was making some very shaky and uncertain steps as he began his pilgrimage towards the eternal city. Goods still loomed far too large in his thinking. When the Egyptians discovered what Abraham had done they were so disgusted that they not only turned him out, but Pharaoh sent a squad of soldiers to escort him to the border to see he did not come back again.

He returned to his pilgrim journey, but you cannot just leave mistakes behind you like that. It is very good to see Abraham back by his altar, where he should have been anyway. However, if we fail an examination in our Christian life, God will normally make us come back and sit it again. Abraham and Lot came back into Canaan, but look what had happened. Because of their very curious business standards in Egypt, they had amassed a tremendous amount of goods. In the end it forced them to come to the decision.

The land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together . . . Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. (13:6, 9)

'We cannot dwell together,' said Abraham to Lot, 'there isn't room for us. We shall have to come to a parting of the ways.' Abraham allowed Lot to have his choice first. Lot looked around and as he had a lot of sheep and cattle it was only business sense that he should choose somewhere where there was a lot of grass.

So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. Abraham settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. (vv. 11-12)

As far as business was concerned he made a very wise, practical, level-headed decision. But for men who are pilgrims, there are bigger considerations to take into account than the lushness of the grass. Did he take into consideration the moral and spiritual welfare of his children, and whether it was safe to take his young kiddies down to such a wicked place? If he had stopped to consider the possible effect upon his children, perhaps he would have made a different choice. Business-wise it may have been a very good move, but could he afford it? He had something more than goods to maintain. Were goods more important than the lives of his children, their characters, their moral development and their eternal destiny?

If you get an offer of a tempting job in Timbuktu, you need to consider what you are going to do. You may be able to stand the spiritual loneliness; you are perhaps mature enough to live in such cities where moral standards are low. Doubtless you would make a lot of money, but could your children stand it, having no spiritual fellowship? It would be a sorry thing at the end of life, if you had made a vast fortune and your children still were not saved or had gone astray, back into the world.

Abraham took what was left and God came and spoke again his promise in his ears,

Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring for ever. (vv. 14–15)

He wasn't asking Abraham to go without; God was going to bless him immensely and for the moment Abraham dared to trust God. He still had an examination to pass and presently circumstances came about that brought Abraham to the test, precisely over his relationship to goods. In the ebb and flow of warfare in the ancient world there arose a confederacy of kings. They fought against another set of kings who ruled where Lot lived. Being successful in battle, they took the people away as captives and they took Lot.

So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abraham's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way. (14:11–12)

This is a very uncertain old world—you can be rich today and a beggar tomorrow. Someone who escaped came and told Abraham, so he armed the servants that were in his house, chased after the enemy troops by night, found them and defeated them. Now let's read together of Abraham's great success.

Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people. (v. 16)

Right values

Did you notice the thing that gets mentioned twice? The possessions! He brought back all the goods and also Lot and the women and the people, of course. Fresh from his victory, he has to face one of the major crises of his life. The king of Sodom is about to put a very tempting offer to him. Abraham has recaptured the goods and Lot; and the goods and the women; and a vast horde of goods that the enemy had taken from the cities of the plain. The king of Sodom said to him, 'You have shown yourself to be full of initiative and go, and drive and skill, Abraham—you take all the goods.' He would have become fantastically wealthy overnight, but there was a price tag. 'And the king of Sodom said to Abraham, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself"' (v. 21). 'You take all the goods, give me the lives.'

I am glad that Abraham was not left to his own devices to face that great temptation. He had to face it and be allowed to choose, that is why we have temptations. We won't find ourselves in heaven against our will; everybody in the New Jerusalem will be there because

he or she freely chose to be there. God is not going to have people up in heaven who feel that there were so many other things they wanted to enjoy. Therefore, temptations and tests must come so that we have the chance of making up our minds. We have to choose, goods or life— which would you prefer?

Melchizedek, 'priest of God Most High,' brought out bread and wine and he blessed Abraham. What a lovely and opportune ministry it was, 'Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' (14:19–20)

Who was this Melchizedek?

Scripture says just enough about him to help us to see certain likenesses between him and Christ.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever. See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him. (Heb 7:1–10)

With God-given sight he sees Abraham coming to his hour of peril and temptation, where goods from Sodom are heaped up and he is asked to choose between goods and lives. He doesn't preach a sermon saying that we all ought to go without. That might well have lost the day! With kingly majesty the king of Salem points Abraham to God and his immeasurable, limitless wealth, 'God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth.' Abraham's soul was filled to overflowing with that sense of richness and wealth that fills our hearts when we really draw near to God. And now his little heap of goods begins to look so small.

I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abraham rich.' I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share.' (vv. 22–24)

'I wouldn't take a shoelace from you!' said Abraham. He is still business-like enough to say that he would take the wages for the young men; they brought back the goods, so they ought to be paid. 'But I don't want you to give me anything; I don't need your goods; I will

take the lives. Your goods are perishable; these persons are eternal.' And another great victory was won.

Let's leave that history for a moment. Come down the centuries to a dusty road in Palestine where you will see thirteen men. One of them is Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of God and the others are twelve insignificant men, a few fishermen and such like.

And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Matt 8:19–20)

It didn't particularly worry him that he hadn't a penny in his pocket or anywhere to lay his head; he had these men, eleven of them, and they would last eternally. Please don't pity Christ; he was not poverty-stricken. He was always conscious that his Father was Lord of heaven and earth, but he thought these men were far more valuable than goods. Having a God with value judgments like that will make heaven all the more glorious. To him we are infinitely more important than goods.

Now come back to history! Having passed his examination, Abraham is now ready to go on to the next major class. And sooner or later we shall be called upon to make the same kind of decisions. We may never have to face persecution, such as the believers in the letter to Hebrews did, but we have no guarantee that we shall not live to see persecution. We need to lay these lessons to our hearts and prepare in advance. 'They joyfully accepted the plundering of their property, since they knew that they had a better possession and an abiding one' (Heb 10:34). How did they manage to do it? They had a high priest after the order of Melchizedek! By his gracious ministry he made it real to their hearts that they had a greater and more enduring substance; so that if ultimately they were pushed to the choice then they would choose life, eternal life, life in Christ—even if it meant that they lost their goods completely.

Justification by faith is the basis of our relationship with God

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abraham in a vision: 'Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' (Gen 15:1)

'What will you give me,' says Abraham, 'seeing I continue to be childless?' Abraham was getting a little bit elderly and he began to see life in its proportions. Old age is a wonderful time for getting life's values sorted out. It's a pity we cannot be old when we are young and still be young! Abraham began to see that you could have as many goods as you like but they don't give you a future. Abraham had no children and therefore, by the law of the land, all his goods would pass to his chief steward when he died.

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (15:4–6)

God had a tremendous future planned for Abraham. We do not have the time now to consider that tremendous phrase in the New Testament (Rom 4:3); but let us note in passing that 'justification by faith' is the very basis of our relationship with God. Please note what it says, 'And he believed the Lord, and he counted it (his faith, his believing) to him for righteousness.' Abraham had learned life's basic lesson, that to be right must mean to have a right relationship with God. My faith is ultimately not in my goods; my faith is in God.

God's covenant with Abraham

The rest of the chapter tells us that along with justification Abraham got a great deal more. And it shall be my task now to prove to everyone who has trusted Christ that God has not merely given to us justification, but immeasurable wealth.

And he brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be . . . I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' (vv. 5-8).

It's nice to talk about a vast inheritance, but it is even better to be able to nail it down. How could Abraham be absolutely sure of it? God's answer was to make a covenant with him.

To our modern ears it sounds strange, for we are not used to making agreements and covenants like this. But it wasn't so unusual to the ancient Hebrews. If we want to make a contract, we go along to the solicitors and they draw up a nice big legal document. There is a place for the other chap to sign and there is a place for me to sign. The contract is settled when the document is signed and sealed.

But in those ancient days when they made a covenant they did it a different way. They got some sacrificial animals, killed them, divided them in their parts and laid them out in two rows. Then the parties to the contract solemnly and ceremonially walked between the two rows of the pieces of the covenant sacrifice. When they had walked through them it was the same as if we were to sign a contract; the covenant was now legally binding.

Abraham had the common sense to say to God Almighty, 'Yes God, I believe your word that I am going to have this vast inheritance; but how shall I know that I shall inherit it?' And God was pleased to condescend and answer him by making a covenant. The promise therefore would be sure to all his seed, and none could ever doubt God's bona fides in making these promises.

I'm sorry, but I must trouble you now with legal matters. It will sound perhaps dry and tedious. But if your Uncle Malachi died in Australia and left you two farms, five hundred thousand dollars, two country estates, five Cadillacs, three Rolls Royces and some gold coins that he kept under the floor, you wouldn't mind how tedious it was! You would say, 'Go on—please be more tedious.' So I shall take no notice of your frowns as I proceed to expound the legal side of your inheritance. The more tedious it is, the wealthier you are.

First of all, we have to notice a legal matter. What kind of covenant did God make with Abraham? There are basically two kinds of covenant—there are still to this day. There are

two-party covenants and there are one-party covenants and I will do my best to explain the difference. Not being a solicitor I shall not charge you!

A two-party covenant

Suppose you want a luxury house for your retirement and you go along to the builder and say, 'I want this fifty-room mansion, standing in its own grounds, and an outdoor swimming pool.'

'Right,' he says, 'that will be five hundred thousand pounds if you pay this year, and seven hundred and fifty thousand if you pay next year.'

You say, 'OK, seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds it will be. We need to draw up a contract and do it in a business-like fashion.'

So you get the architect and the quantity surveyor and they draw up all the specifications, and then you have a contract that Builder X shall build you a house like this, true to all those details. And if he builds you a house like this, you promise to pay him his seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds. So he has a part to fulfil and you have a part to fulfil. And because you have both got a part to fulfil, you both have to sign the contract in the presence of witnesses. If he breaks his part, you can sue him and if you break your part he can sue you. For it to be satisfactory, both parties have to fulfil the obligations that they contracted to fulfil — that is a two-party covenant.

The ancient law of Moses was made on the basis of a covenant between God and Israel. It was a two-party covenant.

God said to Israel, 'I will bless you abundantly if you keep my law.'

And the people said, 'Yes, we will keep the law. You fulfil your part because we fulfil our part.'

It was a two-party covenant. Israel broke it, of course, and earned its sanctions and its curse.

A one-party covenant

But then there is another kind of covenant known to the legal world, and that is a one-party covenant. The simplest and commonest form is perhaps what they call a *will*, a last will and testament. So here is my Uncle George (if I had one), sitting himself down in his ranch in America. He is thinking about me, what a nice chap I am and all that! He is going to leave his money, his estate, cars, business and shares all to me. He hasn't got anybody else to leave it to, except the income tax inspector.

So he goes along to his solicitor and says, 'I want you to help me leave all my money, materials and assets to my nephew, Dogsboddy!' So the solicitor sets out a nice will, puts it in difficult English and makes it look good. Then comes the moment to sign it. Who signs it? Well, I don't! I don't have to sign it because there is nothing for me to fulfil. Uncle George has decided to give me this stuff, so he covenants to bind himself to do it. He is the only person with anything to fulfil, so he is the only one who signs it.

Maybe I know nothing about it until one day I see a notice in the Belfast Telegraph. 'Anybody with the name of Dogsboddy, would they please report to the solicitor where they will hear something to their advantage.' I go running off to the solicitor and he says, 'You are a fortunate man. See what it says in this will, with your Uncle George's signature.' What do I

have to do? Take it, just as simple as that! Of course, I could say to the solicitor, 'You are pulling my leg; that's only words on a page, I don't want it.' That would be foolish. If I want it, all I have to do is take it. They call that a one-party covenant.

What kind of covenant was it that God made with Abraham? Well, it all depends who signed it. But then, they didn't sign it in those days; they made two rows of animal sacrifices and the people that had something to fulfil walked between the pieces. So, who walked between the pieces? Abraham didn't—he was asleep (v. 12). 'Behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces' (v. 17). This was an emblem of the very presence of God—God walked between the pieces. Not Abraham, for Abraham had nothing to fulfil. It was a sovereign promise given by God, a one-party covenant, in which almighty God covenanted to give Abraham and his seed this vast inheritance.

The law of Moses and the promise to Abraham

What has that got to do with us? The passage tells us that this great covenant was made with Abraham and his seed. So, what has it got to do with me? It is a point that Paul himself makes.

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings', referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring', who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. (Gal 3:15–18)

Let us take it that far—it is always best to take the law very slowly! Paul says, 'I must detain you on legal matters a bit more. In ordinary business affairs, when a covenant has been signed, sealed and settled, you cannot alter it' (v. 15).

Builder X was going to build me my house for seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I wanted a fixed price contract, seven hundred and fifty thousand next year; so he signs on the dotted line. Once he has signed there is no altering it. If he managed to insert a clause that says if he cannot afford to do it for seven hundred and fifty thousand he can charge another five hundred thousand pounds, I would have to pay him. But if there is no such clause in the contract, he cannot change it.

Paul is asking, 'When did God make that covenant with Abraham? Was it before the law of Moses was given on Sinai, or after?'

Well, it's a plain answer to that one—it was made four hundred and thirty years before the law was given.

Then you must not add the conditions of the law to that original covenant.

Did it say, 'I will give you this land, if subsequently you keep the law that will be delivered to my servant Moses'?

No, it did not mention any conditions. It just said, 'I am going to give you the land.' And the covenant was settled, so you cannot add any conditions to it.

It means that Abraham and his offspring get all that inheritance as a free gift from God. Not even the law of Moses can be added as a necessary condition before they receive the inheritance.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring. (Rom 4:13–16)

It was an unconditional one party covenant. But there's a snag at this very point, isn't there? Once the covenant has been signed, sealed and settled you cannot add anything to it.

My Aunt Matilda dies and all the family are summoned to hear her will. I'm sure she has left me something; I think she liked my general appearance and manners. So there's one thousand pounds to my sister, seventy-five thousand pounds each to my three brothers, one thousand pounds to Uncle Bill, and so it goes on.

Presently the solicitor says, 'Well, that's all.'

So I say, 'No, you are not finished yet, there is something for me!'

'Who are you?'

'I'm Dogsbody!' So he has another look.

'No, sorry there is no mention of Dogsbody in this will.'

'There must be! I'm sure my Aunt Matilda would have put me in.'

'Sorry, you are not there.'

I could dispute the will. But, short of that, if my name does not appear you can't just sort of write it on the side.

I could say, 'I know what she intended, so you can put my name in,' but you can't do that sort of thing!

'The promise to Abraham and his offspring was that he would be heir of the world,' says Paul. But God made the covenant with Abraham with very clear terms—it was to Abraham and to his offspring (seed).

'Well, that is all right,' I say. 'It's to Abraham and to his seed and to David Gooding!'

No! It is to Abraham and to his seed, and there's no good saying, 'I am sure God meant to add me in.'

It is to Abraham and his seed, and that's the end of the matter. You cannot start adding names.

What has it got to do with me then? And here is the wonder of the gospel message. That 'seed' mentioned in the covenant document is Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the heir; he shall inherit that little bit of territory in the Middle East, world inheritance will be his! He is the offspring mentioned in the covenant, '... the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world . . .'. (Rom 4:13; Gen 15:18–21).

Heirs according to promise

With that, let's go back to Paul in Galatians 3—we are taking it slowly!

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (3:27–29)

Like a man could take a big, flowing robe and put it on so that it covered all his other dress, 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ,' says Paul. For this purpose, that obliterates all distinction, 'If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed; and if you are Abraham's seed you are heirs according to the promise.' Our hearts ought to be jumping for sheer joy because of the wealth we are coming into. We are Christ's, we are in Christ, we have put on Christ—as God looks at us he sees Christ, so we are heirs according to that promise.

What is the inheritance?

In Genesis 15 it is certain square mileage in the Middle East. But when we come to Romans 4, it indicates that the territory has been increased, 'For the promise to Abraham and his offspring [is] that he would be heir of the world.' It's nothing short of world inheritance!

'But,' someone will say, 'I thought you said that once a covenant is signed, sealed and settled you must not add to it. In Genesis 15 it was simply land in the Middle East and now you say it is to be increased to world inheritance. Surely you can't do that with covenants?'

That's right! When a covenant is signed, sealed and settled you cannot alter the names of the beneficiaries.

But come back to Builder X and his covenant with me. He was going to build me a house and I was going to pay him seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

When it comes to the day, he says, 'I had a few tons of bricks and some mahogany to spare. I made you your house, then I thought that I would give you a garden chalet as well as the big house!'

'Thank you very much, there's no law against that!' I would say.

When we look back again to the ancient covenant and its context we shall find Paul is not cheating. While the covenant itself mentions large areas in the Middle East, the surrounding promises indicate nothing short of world inheritance. That is what we have because we are Christ's.

Now I've got a little bit of a difficult job. It is difficult persuading people to be millionaires when they don't want to be!

There are Christians that say, 'Why should I be interested in that? That's for the Jew because it is an earthly inheritance. I belong to the church, so I am not interested in an earthly inheritance.'

You're not? Well, I'll take your share then! Do you think it's unspiritual to be interested in an earthly inheritance? Who is this seed, then, that is going to inherit it? It is Jesus Christ our Lord. He shall reign from shore to shore. 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of

me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps 2:7–8).

And do you think it is unspiritual of him to collect his earthly inheritance and reign over it? Of course not! When he comes into that great inheritance, then we who love him and trust him shall inherit with him.

Then the LORD said to Abraham, 'Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great *possessions*.' (Gen 15:13–14)

It is the same word for 'goods' that we have had all the way along. Why didn't he give the inheritance to Abraham at once? God tells him that, at the moment, the Amorites have got their hands on it (v. 16). One of these days he would take it from the Amorites and give it to him, but not yet. If God had taken the vast inheritance from the Amorites at that time and given it to Abraham, people would say that it was favouritism. The Amorites were wicked, and as the centuries go by their wickedness would increase. It would come to a point where the iniquity of the Amorites would be complete and God would judge them. God would then be just in judging the Amorites and taking world inheritance out of their hands. At that time, he would give it to Abraham.

One day, God is going to take this earth out of the hands of wicked, unprincipled, unregenerate men, who lie and cheat simply for the sake of amassing goods. And he is going to give world inheritance into the hand of Jesus Christ our Lord and those who have trusted in him. Someone may ask, 'If God is going to take it out of the hands of others because they were sinners, what will happen to me as a believer if I go on sinning? How shall God be able to give it to me?' There are riches that are our own because God has covenanted them to us. The covenant has already been made—they are already legally ours.

Imagine if I were the heir to a great estate down here on earth and it was in my name so that when I came to be twenty-one years old I should have legal entitlement to it. But if at nineteen years old I became insane, even though the estate is legally mine, nobody would give it to me. I would not know how to deal with it.

Faithful stewards of our present goods

'World inheritance is yours,' says God, 'already legally yours.' Your present goods are not yours; God has not covenanted to give you a car or a home full of lovely things. They belong to God, he has merely lent us these goods and we are his stewards. 'For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world' (1 Tim 6:7).

The goods do not belong to us; they are his in the ultimate sense. They are lent to us and we are stewards of those goods. We are expected to be faithful stewards of our present goods because they belong to somebody else; and if we are not faithful in that which belongs to somebody else, who at length will give us what is legally our own?

If he has given us this great inheritance, we shall have to be trained to know how to look after it and use it. That is what the next section of Genesis is about. God did not forget that

there would need to be a period of moral and spiritual training to prepare them to take over the inheritance when at last he gave it to them.

Faith in the Promise—or in the Works of the Flesh?

Genesis 16–19

We have been considering the first great period of Abraham's personal pilgrimage. Free from his father Terah, he moved onwards to complete his journey to the promised land. The major lesson that the Holy Spirit was teaching him was to develop a right attitude to material goods. After much initial faltering and certain grievous mistakes, Abraham learnt his lesson, faced his temptation and triumphantly passed his exam.

Now we move on to the second major period in his pilgrimage. It too is concerned with one major lesson. Not so much now a right attitude to material goods, rather, how to deal with the flesh. This particular period of Genesis is divided into roughly two halves. We shall consider the second half of the section first because there the lesson is so easily seen.

God rescues Lot

As we read the story of what happened to Lot and his family, it is not difficult to see the lesson. The story is immeasurably sad, but we must not be more severe in our judgment upon Lot than God is. Peter tells us that he was a righteous man.

And if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard). (2 Pet 2:7–8)

Like Abraham, Lot had learned to believe God and it was counted to him also for righteousness. There burned in his heart, and we have no right to deny it, a sense of the holiness of God and revulsion at the extreme wickedness of his fellow citizens. Therefore, we praise God for what we see of God in Lot's character. Moreover, within all our sadness we can rejoice at God's wonderful faithfulness to his failing servant. Peter reminds us,

The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement. (v. 9)

When he brings his judgment upon the earth the Lord knows how to distinguish quite clearly between those who are his own (who are basically righteous, because they have believed God and are right with him) and the outright ungodly who have never been regenerate and reconciled to God. And it is a triumph of the grace of God, fit to make our hearts rejoice. The judgment of God upon those ancient cities was stayed while angels came and rescued Lot, even though it was against his will.

But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city. (Gen 19:16)

Works tested by fire

The words burn in upon our memories. ‘The angels urged Lot, saying, “Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city”’ (v. 15). It is a wonderful reminder of the faithfulness of God. God promises those who trust the Saviour that they shall not come into judgment; not one drop of penal judgment shall fall upon them.

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:11–15)

All who have trusted Christ are built upon that one and only foundation, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds gold, silver and precious stone upon that foundation he shall in the coming day receive a reward. But if a believer grows so lax and careless that he builds only wood, hay and stubble, then the day will disclose it. His (or her) work shall be tested by fire, and if it is unworthy it shall be burned up and he shall suffer loss. Yet, even in an extreme case, where a believer’s works are totally burned up, nevertheless he himself shall be saved. Knowing the weakness of our own flesh, let us rejoice here in the faithfulness of God.

Lot himself was saved but his works were burned. His end remains immeasurably sad. He lost his wife, physically speaking, and who can be sure that he didn’t lose her spiritually and eternally as well? He was saved, but could we be sure about his family? As we watch his daughters’ sad behaviour there must hang a very large question mark over whether they were righteous in that basic sense, as their father was. Lot had come from Ur along with Abraham and presumably he shared the vision that had brought Abraham out. The God of glory had appeared to them in all the radiant wonder and holiness of his being. They left those ancient, gloriously beautiful cities because they had seen the vision of the greater eternal city ‘with the foundations, whose builder and maker is God.’

Lot stretched out after that eternal city and had gone some way on the road. But he ended up living in a cave, a caveman and behaving exactly like one.

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. (v. 30)

What happened to Lot’s moral judgment?

Their behaviour was worse than the ungodly in Ur of the Chaldeans. They were at least civilised and polite and sophisticated. Lot, the pilgrim to the eternal city, so lost his vision that he ended up living like a caveman, brutish, crude, immoral. But perhaps that is not the saddest thing that you could find to say about Lot.

The thing that frightens me most as I read the story is that I am no better in myself than Lot was. My flesh is no more righteous and holy than his flesh. But for the grace of God I too could fall. What frightens me most is not that he lost his goods, his testimony and his family, it is what happened to Lot himself and in particular to his moral judgment.

Something went terribly wrong. With angels in his house, he is standing outside bargaining with the crowd. In the end he offers his daughters for them to abuse and doesn't seem to think of the enormity of the sin that he is proposing.

Our moral judgment is a part of ourselves. Our salvation is directed not merely to releasing us from the guilt of sin and taking us at last to heaven, it is meant to fashion us anew, so that we shall not be conformed through ignorance to our former lusts. The development of a believer's moral judgment is high on the list of God's purposes.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practise every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:17–24)

When we first come to Christ our moral judgment is perhaps warped by years of sinning and living far from God and from his word. It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit to cleanse and exercise our moral judgment, to instruct and educate us, as he makes us into men and women fit for eternity. It is sad, and an immeasurable tragedy, when a believer wanders so far from the Lord that he or she not only does wrong, but their moral judgment becomes seriously perverted.

And as they brought them out, one said, 'Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.' And Lot said to them, 'Oh, no, my lords. Behold, your servant has found favour in your sight, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Behold, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!' (Gen 19:17–20)

Listen to the man! With judgment about to fall around his ears he is pleading with the angels not to take him too far out of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that situation you'd think that he would say, 'Don't let me stay; take me as far as you can out of this city!' But his moral judgment has become deadened.

It happens still to believers. It's not merely that they fall; they are caught out in a moment of sudden temptation, yielding to pressures that are almost insupportable; but something more than that happens. Men will get involved in sin that in the past would have made them shudder and when you try to talk to them you find that something has gone array with their

moral judgment. You sense no conviction of sin or any shame at what they are doing. They treat it as a very ordinary matter, just as you might expect a man of the world to do. This is a solemn thing.

Lot will arrive in eternity not merely with all his life's work burned, but he will be a far smaller man than he might otherwise have been. Instead of a large, healthy, well-developed moral judgment in the ways of God, there will come a man who had begun to grow and then forever was dwarfed. What hope has Lot for *an abundant entrance* into that eternal kingdom (2 Pet 1:11 KJV)?

When did it all start to go wrong for Lot?

We don't know the secrets of a man's heart or how to apportion blame, but you can't help seeing certain obvious contributory causes, and at least some of the blame must attach to Abraham himself. The beginning could be traced to that fatal choice of Lot's when they chose to separate. He chose the grassy plains round about Sodom and Gomorrah. From one point of view he made a very wise business-like decision. He had goods and cattle and flocks, and if you have cattle and sheep you must have grass to feed them. If God has given you thousands of cattle you cannot take them into a wilderness and let them die; that is to fail in your stewardship. If God has given you sheep, you must look after them. But Lot seems to have forgotten that you cannot decide life's big issues simply on business terms. He chose the well-watered plains, apparently knowing the evil and wickedness of the nearby cities.

The whole world is wicked, but if you are tempted to set up a sweet shop in the red light area of Soho, think again, particularly if you have children. It may be a good business deal but it could cost you everything short of your soul.

What brought Lot to the point where he had to make the decision? They had amassed so many goods in Egypt directly through Abraham's unprincipled decision to deny his wife in order to make money; it was the seeming success of that business deal that brought Lot to the decision that was so fatal in his experience.

Abraham learned his own lesson and successfully passed through his temptations. As he stands before God to intercede for Lot, we cannot help but think that some of the tears in his eyes are because in his heart of hearts he knows that Lot might never have been in Sodom if he had not led him on that questionable Egyptian enterprise. We don't live merely to ourselves. It is a solemn thing to think what our decision could do to the life of another believer.

I once had to talk to a man who had strayed from the Lord for many years. According to him it started when he was confronted with a business decision that was not one hundred per cent righteous. He knew it was wrong, but other Christian businessmen were doing that kind of thing. He was a young man and he did it too. It does not excuse him, but it reminds us that we are responsible to be our brother's keeper. We are not only responsible for our own decisions, but for at least some of the effect that they may have upon other people.

As we have said now many times, there is nothing wrong with having possessions. Had Lot exercised his stewardship in a godly fashion, he could have enjoyed those goods while he lived and used them to make for himself a good reward.

If a child is going to have a good career and be able to meet all the interesting and exciting possibilities that life will offer, he will need to be educated and trained. A wise father will think ahead and if he has the means he will save some money so that his child has a good foundation. Eternity will make demands of us, with all sorts of exciting possibilities and activities and interests, but to be able to engage in them we will need spiritual capital.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (1 Tim 6:17–19)

Lot could have used his material goods to provide himself with a spiritual foundation, from which to engage in the activities of that marvellous world. But he lost his good foundation and he lost his possessions as well. He didn't lose them without warning. God is gracious; he doesn't clobber us hard the first time we make a mistake! When Lot was living in Sodom there arose a battle of the kings and they invaded Sodom and Gomorrah.

So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abraham's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way. (Gen 14:11–12)

Lot was fortunate to get away with his life. Had it not been for Abraham, Lot would have lost everything then. But God in his mercy saved Lot and gave him back his goods. How kind God is! Lot should have learned his lesson. He could have availed himself of the ministry of this great Melchizedek, like Abraham did. Lot could have filled his heart with a sense of the wonder and greatness of God, the Possessor of heaven and earth. We shall not go into those shady things; but Lot did not learn his lesson, he went back to the same old way.

If we will not let God teach us the easy way, then he will teach us the hard way. Lot stands as an example of what the flesh can do to believers if, instead of living after the Spirit, we choose to live after the flesh. The lesson is easy to see, but it is more difficult to put it into practice.

Abraham made mistakes too

As we turn now to the beginning of this next section we shall need help from the New Testament to remind ourselves that Abraham too failed miserably here, and for precisely the same reasons. He over-rated the flesh, or shall I say he under-rated it—I don't know which way round to put it. Instead of learning immediately to rely totally on God for the fulfilment of his promises, Abraham went about it in the strength of the flesh. He believed the promises and wanted to fulfil them, but he forgot to depend on God. It was a mistake that had far longer, and perhaps far more serious, consequences than the mistake Lot made.

Why it is so difficult for us to see this? If what we do is obviously sinful, we say that it is 'of the flesh'. But if it is something good, then it is much more difficult to see that to do good *in the power of the flesh* is just as wrong. It is a hard lesson to learn.

Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abraham, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abraham's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abraham her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. (16:1-4)

Sarah's plan to fulfil God's promise

Sarah came to Abraham, and said to him, 'God has promised us that we shall have a child, and in our seed shall the nations of the world be blessed. Wouldn't it be a good thing, if somehow we contrived to have child?' Then she said a very strange thing, 'The Lord has prevented me from bearing children.' If that was what the Lord had done, she should have said, 'We shall have to wait for God's time for him to fulfil his promise!' But she added, 'Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' I don't think Sarah realised that what she was proposing was independence of God. With the very best will in the world, they decided to proceed to fulfil the glorious promise of God in their own way.

I wonder if we feel much more of an arrow of conviction here than when we were thinking about Lot. We have been justified by faith, are at peace with God and determined now to live godly lives and see that all God's purposes for us are fulfilled. How many of us have gone past the stage of simply cooperating with the power of God and have attempted to do it in our own religious flesh? We forget that a believer's flesh is no more acceptable to God than it was in his unregenerate days. It can no more accomplish things for God than it could before conversion. A great deal of the frustration and disillusionment that we experience in our Christian lives is because we act simply in the power of the flesh. We have not yet come to a radical enough assessment of the evil, wickedness, rebellion and weakness of the flesh.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. (Rom 7:18)

How many churches have been disturbed by men who thought they were standing for God's truth, but stood for it by the ugly, fleshly energies of their own powers? The resulting squabbles and Pharisaism are open evidence for all to see that it is not the work of God's Holy Spirit.

So Abraham had to be taught and the lesson was not long in coming—you might have expected it. The little slave girl suddenly saw that she was to be the mother of Abraham's child and what a madam she became overnight. Sarah was barren; how much better she was than her mistress. She looked upon Sarah with contempt. 'May the Lord judge between you and me!' said Sarah to Abraham. Was Sarah really invoking the Lord to judge them?

It is part of God's office as judge that he shall train us to agree with his judgments so that we may discover the sinfulness of the flesh. He will do it whether we ask him to or not. 'Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear' (1 Pet 1:17). Sooner or later, by pleasant lesson or by painful, God will teach us the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

Sarah thought that it could be dealt with easily. Out Hagar had to go—we shall not have any more disobedience! ‘Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her’ (v. 6). So Hagar had to go. ‘The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness’ (v. 7). Many times over we have read of ‘the angel of the Lord’. Had Sarah not asked for God as judge to settle the matter? Hagar thought that she was going to get freedom by defying Sarah; now, for sheer sake of survival, she will have to go back and be subject to her master and mistress. It would be a chaotic world if there were no masters and mistresses and nobody obeyed anybody. What a savage jungle of the flesh that would be! It is better that there should be some rule, however imperfect, than no rule.

The birth of Ishmael

So Hagar went back and presently the child was born. Into that household Ishmael was born, by the insistence of God (vv. 9–10). And God has told us what kind of a fellow he was,

You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. (vv. 11–12)

Born after the flesh this lad, in independence of God; born of a slave he shall be a wild donkey of a man. I wonder if you can imagine what life in that tent would be like for the next thirteen years. I should imagine there were many scenes! Poor old Abraham, he would have a job trying to control Ishmael. Now Sarah could see what independence of God was like. Ishmael was like a wild donkey and virtually untameable; what a struggle it was to control him and get a moment's peace.

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:7–8)

The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, be it in the most cultivated and dainty lady that you ever saw, or an outright criminal. Sarah learned the lesson, but this time God decided how long he would take to teach her—it was many long years, till Sarah and Abraham thought they must sometimes go crazy.

Wouldn't we like our spiritual lessons to be all enjoyable and lovely, and to be filled with a sense of tremendous success? Just occasionally I do hear of some Christians whose spiritual life seems to be that and I come to the conclusion that they were not altogether sinners like I was when they started. Perhaps they were made of different stuff; I know the 1925 material was pretty poor stuff. You begin to think that you have learned the lesson and you will depend on the Lord—this week it will be different. But ‘Ishmael’ is still there and we have to face it. It is unpleasant and seemingly bad for our ego, for we would like to be successful. But it is healthy having to face the old enemy and to learn that the flesh is utterly incorrigible.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do

not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:15–25)

Paul loved the law of God, he could see it was right and he wanted to do it. He told himself that he would do it. His will, his emotions and his intellect all ranged on the side of doing the will of God, only to find another law working in his members. 'Wretched man that I am!' he says. God does not enjoy seeing our failures. His very heart is made glad when he sees us beginning to come to reality and face the flesh for what it is. As we discover the incurability of the flesh we shall gradually be taught not to rely on it, even to fulfil the things of God. We shall seek God's way of making us holy.

Lessons God had to teach Abraham and the nation that came from him

Chapter 17 of Genesis contains the rite of circumcision, the cutting off of the flesh. 'For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (Phil 3:3).

Have you grown discouraged as a Christian? You thought that by now you would have made tremendous strides. You say, 'It's not as though I weren't keen. There was a period in my life when I was just about saved and couldn't care less, but now I want to please the Lord. What an up and down thing it has been. Here I am today and all I seem to know is how strong the flesh is.' That is progress! It would be extraordinary if you got home to heaven without knowing that the flesh is bad. It is a negative but necessary part of the lesson to discover, 'The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.'⁴

God took a long time to demonstrate it in Abraham's life. It wasn't until Isaac, the promised seed, was eventually born that Ishmael was cast out. Eventually it happened, the promised seed was born and the bondwoman and her son were cast out.

What God had taught Abraham for many long centuries, he had to teach to the nation that came from Abraham. He brought them out of Egypt, redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb. He met them at Sinai and offered them a covenant relationship on the basis of the law. 'Do this and I will bless you; do not do it and I will curse you.' They said that they would do it. They had to learn that there was nothing wrong with the Law, it was holy, just and good. They had to learn its function and through Israel the world would see that it is impossible for the flesh to fulfil the law of God.

They were long and bitter lessons, but one day the promised seed came and the old covenant was made obsolete. He was born in Bethlehem and died at Calvary. A new era had begun; the era of the new covenant and a new method of making people holy.

⁴ George Duffield Jr., (1818–88), 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross'.

God must teach us the negative side of the lesson; the flesh is bad and helpless. He will teach us also the positive side of the lesson, and even in Abraham's day he was beginning to do it. By early figures and institutions he was beginning to teach that it is possible to walk perfect before God. But it means abandoning all trust in the flesh—both evil flesh and religious flesh—and learning to rely directly on the power of God's Holy Spirit.

[How to Live a Life that is Honouring to God](#)

Genesis 17

We were thinking in our last session how Abraham learned to believe God. When he removed his faith from himself and everything else and deliberately put his faith in God it was counted to him for righteousness. He was made right with God and entered into that personal relationship that brings peace and a true and secure standing before God. It is the way that God has devised for us all. 'For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Rom 3:28). It is simply on the principle of faith.

Now we must move on. When he was justified, God began to teach Abraham the next necessary lessons in his spiritual pilgrimage.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abraham and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.' (17:1)

The ancient Hebrew word that we translate 'walk' is a simple word. 'Walk before me, and be blameless.' It is our responsibility and joy as believers to walk before God, conscious that his eye constantly rests on us. In our behaviour, whether in secular or sacred things, in public or in private, in business or in pleasure, we need to be conscious of all the resources we have in almighty God. It is the whole purpose of the Christian life that we should learn to walk before God and be one hundred per cent sincere, resolute and constant in our desire to please him.

We need to get it in the correct order

We need to emphasise at the outset that there are two parts to a believer's life. There is the beginning; and there is what follows. We need to get them in their proper order and not get the proverbial cart before the horse! Some people think that in order to be a Christian you begin by trying to do the things that Christians do. They are desperately trying to be Christians, honestly trying to live according to the Christian ethic. If you were to ask them, 'Are you saved? Are you a Christian?' they would say, 'Well, I hope so. I do my best!' But that is not how to become a Christian. We do not become Christians by doing our best to lead a Christian life.

First we need to enter into a relationship with God

The first starting-point of becoming a believer, being a Christian, is to enter into a personal relationship with God. We need to get ourselves right with God, or rather let God put us right with him.

That is where Abraham started. First of all, he was *justified by faith*; he was made right with God. He entered into a relationship with God and knew the peace of God flooding his heart. He knew himself accepted with God and secure in his relationship with him. Abraham was justified by faith and if we would live a Christian life then we need to listen to this glorious gospel. You don't have to strive to live in a Christian way in order to become a Christian. You become a Christian by discovering that by yourself you never could live a Christian life; you learn to quit trusting yourself and cast yourself on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. You dare to believe him and his great salvation. Like Abraham, the moment you believe God, God receives you. He accepts you and gives you his Spirit. God justifies you, regenerates you, and you become a Christian in all the fullness of that term.

The necessary next part

I was sitting recently with a colleague of mine at dinner, and he was talking about the sundry religions that had come knocking on his front door offering their goods. And when opportunity arose I said, 'Have you noticed that there is one difference between true Christianity and all other religions?' He hadn't, so I had to tell him. It comes in many different ways and forms, but it amounts to the same thing. Religion says, 'Work out your salvation, discipline yourself, do this, do that, do this other; and by doing it perhaps at length you will arrive at your goal.' Religion is a matter of *doing*.

'But you will notice,' I said, 'that when you come to Christ he offers you salvation as a free gift.' That is the great difference. 'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 6:23).

It is a simple matter, then, to tell the difference between true Christianity and religion. Religion says do, earn, merit, achieve. Christ says, '*Come and receive a gift!*'

My colleague immediately said, 'That cannot be! If salvation is a gift you can go out and do as you please!' It is understandable that unsaved people should talk like that, but it is not true. When we do believe God and enter into a personal relationship with him, something new begins. The believer is required to walk before God now, with no time off! There are no holidays from this holy occupation; we are constantly walking before God living in fellowship with him. God holds this goal out before us, 'Walk before me, and be blameless.'

Please notice which way round it is! God did not say to Abraham, 'I want you to try and walk perfect before me, and if you succeed I will receive you in the end.' It was the other way round. 'I have received you. Therefore, walk before me and be perfect.' There are those two parts, but they come in that order. It is important at the outset that we see this. Receiving salvation as a gift does not mean that we are then free to go and live as we please. Receiving salvation is entering a relationship with God that is meant to be active every moment from then on.

Let me tell a story to illustrate how important it is that we get it the right way round. Many labour under the mistake, getting it the wrong way round, thinking that they must try and walk before God as best they can, so as to earn their acceptance with him.

There was a friend of mine once who told me the following little homely story. He went upstairs one night to find his little girl in bed and deeply distressed. It turned out that she was worried at the prospect of her exams and what he would say if she did not pass. Would he be terribly angry and offended? The father was concerned that she had those thoughts in her mind. Who had put them there? She imagined that her father's acceptance of her depended on whether she passed the exams or not.

What would you have said to her? 'That's right my dear! Get down to your studies! Do that algebra one hundred per cent and the essays ten out of ten. I am not going to tell you that I accept you in my family; I'm going to leave it uncertain. If you get through your exams, I shall accept you and if you don't there is a very real possibility that I shall throw you out!'

No father would talk like that. Nor did my friend; he did the obvious thing that a father would do. He said, 'My dear good girl, I shall love it if you get through the exams, but I shall love you still if you don't.' She was a child of the father first, with a right in his home because she was his child. She would never cease to be his child and knew the strength and security of a father's love. Then she found the courage to go out and face the exams.

It is curious how there are parents who would never treat their children like that, but imagine it is how God is proposing to treat them. We need to pass all our spiritual examinations. At length finals come and the great final judgment. They imagine God is saying to them, 'It will all depend on whether you pass your final exams whether I accept you into my presence or not!'

But it is not that way round. God is not like that; he is not cruel. God's way is to give us salvation for Christ's sake. He loves us and will receive us and accept us. He will assure our timid hearts that we have been accepted. We are members of his family; we are born again children of God and heirs of his kingdom. It is because we are secure and loved for Christ's sake that we have the strength to face our spiritual training within the family and school of God.

Abraham learned the hard way

In our last study we found that Abraham discovered an unexpected difficulty. He thought that his own strength would suffice to fulfil the promises of God. But over many a bitter year he found that his flesh was insufficient to do the will of God. He discovered what Paul and many of us have discovered since we trusted the Saviour; in our flesh there dwells no good thing (Rom 7:18). Before we were saved we could not please God through the flesh, and it is just the same since we trusted Christ—we are no more able by ourselves now to please God than we were before.

We shall need to discover the great provision that God has made for us, so that we can walk before him and be perfect and the New Testament tells the provision that God has made for us,

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:16–17)

Once again we need to get it clear what it means by ‘walk by the Spirit.’ It is not merely telling us to show a little Christian spirit. Imagine it’s Christmas time and you are going down Royal Avenue with five bags of presents in your two hands, trying to be cheerful. Somebody barges into you and spills all the packages on the road and a bus runs over them; you feel like saying exactly what you think and they say, ‘It’s Christmas—show a bit of Christmas spirit!’

God will give us the desire to do his will

When God says, ‘Walk by the Spirit,’ he is not talking about that kind of thing. It’s not some sort of superficial effort to put on a nice smiling face when you are feeling very different inside. It is something bigger than that. It is a relationship with God, who is Spirit. It is waking up to the fact that when Christ received us he put us into his Spirit who is a divine person with all the resources of Godhood. We learn how to count on him and he will give us the desire and the power to do God’s will; we learn to translate it into practical Christian living.

There are folks who stand timidly on the brink of salvation, afraid to let go. They are afraid to trust Christ, to take that step of faith into Christ. In a sense their fears are reasonable. They tell you that they have known many people who profess to be saved, but they are hypocrites. So they say that they are not going to profess something that they cannot keep up. They feel sure that if they were to say that they have trusted Christ they couldn’t keep it up.

You certainly cannot keep it up! Your fears are very true. In fact, you are far weaker than you think you are. If I were to tell you from God’s word how desperately weak you are, you might at this stage be offended. Trust Christ tonight and in forty years you will agree with me; you cannot keep it up.

But there is good news. God is a realist and he has a salvation to meet your needs. Entering into a personal relationship with him is a real thing. God is a living God, and it is his Spirit coming to abide within us who provides the power to ‘keep it up’.

The emblem of circumcision

To illustrate this God has written the history of Abraham for us. The lessons God taught him had to be at a lowly level with simple illustrations. We shall use them to help us think this matter through. How can I walk before God? How can my Christian life be a genuine spiritual life and not outward pretence and a thin veneer hiding frustrations and failure within me?

And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.’ (17:9–10)

It must strike us Westerners as a very curious ritual and habit. Historically we know it was not confined to the Hebrews, many other nations in the Middle East were circumcised. What God did was to take what was a very common rite amongst other nations and invest it with special significance for Abraham and his posterity.

With the help of the New Testament we shall consider those varied significances. First of all, circumcision was a covenant between God and Abraham as to his physical posterity. When you read in the Bible of *the circumcision*, or 'those of the circumcision,' it is another way of referring to the physical descendants of Abraham the Jew. God marked them out and circumcision is a sign of the covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham.

Why did God want to mark out Abraham's physical descendants as being special? It was for a very good historical reason. It was in God's plan to send his Son into the world as our Saviour; he would choose a nation and prophesy that his Anointed One should come by physical descent from that particular nation. Christ was born of the seed of Abraham in Bethlehem, the city of David—that is why I say it is important.

Anybody can decide to be a philosopher, if he has got the brain. Many people in the course of history have decided to be philosophers. Anybody can start a religion if he has got a bit of imagination, and many people in history have decided to start a religion. But there is one thing that people cannot do—they cannot decide to be born of Abraham's physical seed. It is quite beyond men's powers, and because it is so arbitrary it becomes an exceedingly important piece of evidence. There were prophecies of Messiah that nobody could engineer. Nobody could arrange to be born of this particular physical nation. Matthew thinks it is important enough for it to be the opening verse of his Gospel, 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.'

He invites us to consider how Jesus Christ was born of that physical nation, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Our salvation is not something a human mind thought up and invented, as men invented philosophies and religions. It is God arbitrarily intervening in history and sending his Son to be our Saviour through his sovereign choice of that nation and of the virgin mother.

The Bible tells us that circumcision was more than just a sign and covenant for the physical descendants of Abraham. It was meant to be an emblem.

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless . . . This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. (17:1, 10)

We can find out how the Jews regarded it if we listen to their poets and prophets. The Jewish prophets are to be heard complaining in this fashion, 'All the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart' (Jer 9:26). 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you' (Acts 7:51).

They mean that many in Israel were born of a Jewish father and had gone through the rites of Judaism, but instead of those rites being a symbol of spiritual reality they were mere external things. Their hearts were still unregenerate, closed to God. They were worldly and as fleshly and sinful as ever. Their ears were closed—they had no time or love for the word of God. They made no attempt to obey it. They were circumcised in their flesh, but that is where it began and ended. It was a superficial and meaningless rite to them. Paul takes his fellow nationals to task,

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' (Rom 3:9–12)

He puts his rapier underneath their skin and says, 'What use is your circumcision? You profess to be the special people of God, but some of the Gentiles behave better than you do. If the Gentile that is not circumcised keeps the law and you who are circumcised do not keep the law, then he is a far better man than you!'

Emblems that point to spiritual realities

Christianity has its symbols; the symbol of baptism and the symbol of the Lord's Supper, the symbol of wearing hats or not wearing hats in church. Those symbols are good and right and helpful so long as they point us to spiritual realities. But it is all too possible to go through the symbols and to forget all about the spiritual realities. You can be baptised ten thousand times; if it does not answer to some spiritual reality it is utterly useless. You can sit at the Lord's Supper and take those sacred emblems—the bread, emblem of his body; the wine, emblem of his blood—and if there is no spiritual reality in your heart it is worse than useless.

Now I have tried to get under your skin as well. We should realise that when we talk of salvation we are talking of something so important that we cannot afford to deceive ourselves. Multitudes of people have been baptised that have never been regenerate. They never personally trusted Christ and they do not know the Saviour. It is solemn. The mere ceremony does nothing.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matt 7:21–23)

Allow me, in God's name, to ask you to examine your heart. If you have been baptised, if you take the Lord's Supper, let me ask if you are sure it represents spiritual reality. Have you been born again? Do you know Christ personally? All the ceremonies in the world are useless if they do not represent spiritual reality.

This brings us to another point. When Paul comes to talk about Abraham's experience he has a very interesting thing to say,

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' (Rom 4:1–3)

But then Paul had his eye on some of his fellow nationals because they were constantly getting this thing wrong. They were saying to themselves that they had been circumcised, so

they were the saved of the Lord. And if anybody was not circumcised they could not possibly be saved.

But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (vv. 23–25)

I remember a student who asked me to spend some time with him for several Sunday afternoons reading the Old Testament. He was a Jew. I suspect that he was highly unorthodox because he said, 'You Gentiles are absolutely hopeless and we Jews are all right! Personally, in my own moral life, I'm an absolute rotter; but I am all right because the Bible says, "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD"' (Deut 33:29). Because he was physically circumcised he thought he was saved, even though on his own confession he was a rotter!

Now what about our Christian ceremony of baptism, what does it do? When was Abraham justified by faith and when was he circumcised? Which came first? There is no doubt about it! 'And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6). Abraham's circumcision is recorded in Genesis 17:24. It was faith and justification first and circumcision afterwards.

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:9–12)

So it must be with us. If we would be saved it is no good getting baptised first. That is utterly useless; it must be personal trust in Christ first, being born again first—and then baptism as a seal of the righteousness which is by faith.

But doesn't the Bible say that his children had a right to the sign and seal, even though they had no personal faith? Yes, it does! All Abraham's offspring had to be circumcised on the eighth day and they couldn't possibly have had any personal faith on the eighth day. Someone may say therefore, 'If Abraham's children had a right to the sign of the covenant while they were still without personal faith, haven't we a right to the sign of the Christian covenant before we come personally to faith? So long as my father is a Christian and my mother is a Christian, haven't I a right to be baptised as an infant even before I come to personal faith? And the answer is no, for the following reasons:

1. The Bible never says that baptism is the equivalent of circumcision. Never!
2. Circumcision was a covenant between God and Abraham and his physical posterity.

Abraham was a believer. His little child, who could not be a believer, had a right to be circumcised because he was physically descended from Abraham. Pass on now a dozen generations; a baby boy is born, he is circumcised, he grows up and he is an idolater. An absolute apostate! Had this child a right to be circumcised? Yes, because he is a physical descendant of Abraham and the Bible agrees. Even though his parents are utter unbelievers, he has a right to be circumcised.

Would you claim that any child, even an atheist, has the right to be baptised, simply because he was a physical descendant of some remote grandfather who was a believer? I do not know of anybody who would claim that. But then, the two things are not square. The New Testament never says that baptism is the equivalent of circumcision; circumcision was primarily an indication of physical descent—it became a symbol only to those who had themselves exercised personal faith.

But come to a far deeper matter. Circumcision was meant to be an emblem. The cutting off of the flesh was the expression of a determination to walk before God and please him. Two mistakes were made about it. We have already seen one of these. People in Israel were content to be circumcised, but they didn't care how they lived. That was sad.

Then there was the other mistake. Instead of keeping the law as a result of their personal faith in God, they saw it as a means of getting salvation. How proud they were; this was the root of the trouble with many of the Pharisees whom our Lord met.

It was the trouble with Saul of Tarsus himself. Born in a religious atmosphere, he took to religion like some men take to swimming. He was good at it and so from his youth upwards he set about being religious. He learned the Old Testament; he kept the rules, the laws, the rituals and the ceremonies. He knew them by heart and was determined that he would not be just an ordinary Jew, he would be a real saint of a Jew. By elaborate and careful determination he gradually built up his ego until he felt that he had nearly arrived.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.
(Phil 3:4–6)

But he was not saved. And he discovered that, instead of circumcision and all the religious effort it stood for being a means of leading him to God, it had made him colossally independent of him. He was trying to earn salvation and improve himself, and he came to the dangerous notion that he had nearly succeeded. When he heard those Christians preaching salvation through Jesus it used to make his blood boil and his flesh creep. What do they mean by *salvation*? Wasn't he as good as anybody possibly could be; what right had they to tell him that he needed to be saved? He had kept the law and the rituals. He had been circumcised and he was of the tribe of Benjamin, who were they to tell him that he needed to be saved? And when they then dared to say that they were saved it so enraged him that he persecuted them to prison and to death. This is a very clear and extreme example of how circumcision and the law, and all the religious effort that is associated with it, can so easily become an expression of independence of God.

We can do the same with Christian things

I vividly remember talking to a friend who had been and was an alcoholic. He was in such a desperate way that he realised if something wasn't done his whole life would be ruined. He was a medical man himself, and quite properly he sought the aid of his fellow medics. But realising that his trouble was not merely physical and mental but also spiritual, he sought the help of a Christian minister. He began to pray and attend early morning church and read his Bible.

I first met him when he came up to me after a lecture. He said, 'I am an alcoholic and I have been trying to improve myself. By God's grace he has helped me a lot, but what is this being saved you talk of? What is eternal life? I haven't got that.' I said, 'You could have!'

So we met in a friend's house and he told me his story in great detail. He had a terrible fear of his life being absolutely and permanently ruined. How he had pleaded with God! He went to London to take the last course of medicine that was open to him, hoping that it would succeed. He went to church that morning and prayed for God's help. Since then he had been able to constantly go on.

'But there is still something missing,' he said. 'I don't feel that I am all I should be.'

'That is understandable,' I said. 'Are you doing your utmost to get your life right until you feel it would be good enough to please God?'

'Yes, that's it!' he said.

'You'll never make it good enough for God,' I said.

I saw his face drop. It cannot be done; the best religion in the world could never improve us to a state where at last we are acceptable with God. What can be done then? Christ can do what we cannot do.

I quoted to my friend the experience of Saul of Tarsus. He was a proud religious man, circumcised the eighth day and full of his religion, but independent of God. At last he realised that, even with all his religion, he was a sinner still and he threw away his religion.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (vv. 8-9)

I said to my friend that if he was prepared to trust Christ, Christ would receive him and grant him forgiveness and acceptance. His Holy Spirit would then begin to repair him. I thought that he was going to be saved right there and then.

'Just a minute!' he said. 'Do you know the boys that I play golf with?'

I said, 'No, I don't know them!'

'Well,' he said, 'they are not bad chaps, and what would they say if I were to receive Christ like you say?'

I said, 'You need to get this settled first!'

Turning to me and our other friend, he said, 'I can see that you have got something, but you still sin don't you?'

I said, 'We do indeed!'

'Then at night you get down by your bed and confess your sins, and God forgives them?'

'That's right!'

So he said, 'Why can't I do that without receiving Christ?'

As far as I know that is where he stands still, doing his level best to make himself accepted with God, but not prepared to receive Christ. O how easily religion and its ritual and ceremonies can become a form of independence of God.

The circumcision of Christ

We come therefore to our last lesson. There was something more in that ancient ceremony, and it was wonderful.

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

Whereas the Jews had a circumcision of the flesh, there is a deep spiritual reality that answers to it in Christianity. Please note that it is not baptism. It is a spiritual circumcision 'not made with hands'. Baptism is done with hands; you cannot do it without hands. The equivalent of circumcision in the spiritual realm is *the circumcision of Christ*. What does that mean? The trouble with us is something deeper than our external flesh. Our whole nature has gone wrong and fallen; it is always dragging us to sin, pulling us away from God. We have an evil nature within us and no knife has been made that can reach there.

Is there no deliverance then? Indeed, there is! It is through 'the circumcision of Christ'. Let me tell you what happens. When a person trusts Christ and believes God, he or she is justified. They not only receive pardon, but something happens deep down in their very being. It is a basic, fundamental thing; the very roots of their being are cut. Before this they were in the flesh, but when a person repents and trusts Christ his or her very roots are transferred and put in God's Holy Spirit. So that Paul can say to believers, 'You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit' (Rom 8:9).

That does not mean when people get saved they don't have the flesh anymore. It is still there. Shall I quote the miracle to you again? Whereas before, the roots of our beings were in the flesh, when we repent and trust Christ the very roots of our beings are put in the Spirit. That is what 'being saved' is.

Where is the basis of your life? Where are the roots of your personality? When you were born, the real 'you' had your roots in the flesh. It is fallen and corrupt. You may decorate it with religion and restrain it with ethics, but in the end it is still corrupt and doomed to perish. Are the roots of your being still in the flesh? Then you are lost and in spite of all your effort you will perish.

But if in true repentance you realise how bankrupt you are, abandon faith in self and learn to put your faith in Christ, in that very moment the divine miracle is done. Your very personality has its roots removed from the flesh and put in the Spirit, 'In putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ' (Col 2:11 KJV). What a wonderful

transaction it is. Each of us stands in one place or the other, whether religious or irreligious, respectable or not. Our personality is rooted in our flesh, or else the great change has come and we have received Christ and God has placed us in his Spirit.

Death is not going to change anything. It is not worms and the coffin that make the difference. When the Lord comes the believer shall be raised and given a body like Christ's; the old corrupt thing shall have gone forever. The great changeover took place in this life, when we were transferred from being in the flesh to being in the Spirit. If you die as you were born, with the real you still rooted in the flesh, you will be raised with it to haunt you forever. How important that we get this thing clear; it goes to the very roots of our salvation and it is the secret of our continuing Christian life.

Do you struggle to be holy? Don't expect big things of your flesh, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom 8:7-8). Admit daily to your own bankruptcy and learn not to trust in yourself. If you are a believer it is a fact that the very roots of your being are in God's Holy Spirit. Learn to lay hold of the energies of that divine and almighty person so that you might walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Rom 8:1 KJV).

Justification by Works

Genesis 22

We come now to consider the third great period in Abraham's personal pilgrimage. We have not said all that ought to be said on the second great period of his life, but we are falling desperately behind in our programme and for time's sake we must move on rapidly. It will help us nevertheless if, just for a moment, we look back over the first two periods again to remind ourselves what they were about and to see how period three follows them.

1. After the death of his father, Abraham learned that a man is justified by faith without the works of the Law. 'Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness' (Gen 15:6). That was the basic lesson, and therefore it came first.

2. But having learnt how a person is initially justified by faith, Abraham was taught the necessity of walking before God and being perfect. It follows naturally in that position, for everyone who has learned how to begin with God must next learn how to carry on with God. By daily walking before God gradually he perfects our characters.

Now we come to the third lesson and it too follows logically. God tested Abraham and required him to justify his profession of faith by his works.

Abraham learned to adjust his system of values

Let us look back just once more and notice that, in learning his lessons, Abraham met certain outstanding difficulties. In the first period of his life he had the tendency to value goods above life itself, but at length he learned to adjust his system of values. If life is more important than goods, then his basic concern must be how he can be right with God and possess eternal life. Abraham had to face these great problems and examinations in regard to his goods. Eventually, under the ministry of Melchizedek, he was led to triumph and chose life before material goods.

He also learned that he could not please God in his own strength

In the second section we found that Abraham had another difficulty. God told him to walk before him and be perfect, but initially again he fell into the mistake that all of us fall into from time to time. He imagined that by his own power, strength and effort he could fulfil the purposes of God. He had to learn that the flesh is weak, powerless, and stubbornly rebellious. In our own strength we cannot do anything to please God. Even when it is trying to please God, the flesh is no better than when it is going its own wayward path.

And so he had to learn to abandon faith in the flesh and its powers, and to rest his faith in the power of God and in the Spirit of God. That is a lesson we all have to learn. Through much frustration and disappointment, we learn that 'the arm of flesh will fail us,' and we have to be pointed to the great lesson of spiritual circumcision. 'For we are the circumcision, who

worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (Phil 3:3). It is a question of daily learning our bankruptcy and depending upon the Spirit of God within us.

In this third lesson, we learn that sooner or later God will bring testing into our lives. It's what he calls 'justification by works'.

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:21–24)

Here we shall find that Abraham's difficulty is ours too. Our natural craving is for security, and in a way there is nothing wrong with that. But our temptation is to look for security in the wrong place. We need to be trained to find our security in God and his word, even though the whole universe is falling around our ears, and not to trust in man's word and our own devices for our ultimate security.

What does it mean to be justified by works?

Someone will say, 'It means that you are justified by faith before God, but you are justified by your works before men.' That is partly true. If we are thinking of our relationship with God at the level of salvation, the forgiveness of sins, receiving eternal life and being made right with God, then we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law and we have to show the world by our behaviour the reality of salvation. But we must not content ourselves with that definition. Whilst it is quite true that we are justified before God by faith, it is likewise true that we are to be justified before God by works. Men may wish to see our works, but sooner or later God will demand to see our works.

The test of Abraham's faith

You will see a major example of this in Genesis 22. Abraham was justified by works before God when there was no one else there to see it. Even the servants, who had helped with the journey and driven the donkey laden with wood, had been left at the foothills of the mountain. 'Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you"' (Gen 22:5). When Isaac was bound to that altar there was only Abraham and his God, not even Sarah was there to see what he proposed to do. As far as the text tells us, Abraham had not even told her. When Abraham was justified by his works he was alone before God.

You will see that a bit more clearly when I remind you of what God said on that particular occasion. When Abraham had bound his son Isaac on the altar and had the knife raised in his hand, about to plunge it in the body of his son, the Angel of the Lord called out of heaven, and said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me' (v. 12). The Angel of the Lord is none other than God, whom we now call God the Son, the 'second person of the

Trinity.' This is not an angel like Gabriel or Michael. This is none less than God himself, and he says, 'Now I know!'

But doesn't God know everything? 'The LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought' (1 Chr 28:9). He knows what we are thinking today and what we will be thinking tomorrow. Why does he say to Abraham, 'For now I know that you fear God'? Didn't he know it before—why did he need Abraham to offer his son on the altar before he knew it? Couldn't he foresee that if he asked Abraham to offer his son, Abraham would offer his son? Why did God say, 'Now I know'?

That is a very good question, and to answer it we shall need to remember that there are various ways of knowing things. I know that it is tremendously cold at the North Pole because I read about it in a book. That is one way of knowing. Or seeing it in a film is another way of knowing it. I have not stood at the North Pole and shivered until my very bones were frozen tight, so I don't know it that way round. I know it in my mind and by my intellect, but I do not know it by my experience.

God knew by divine omniscience what Abraham would do, but not yet by actual experience. He insists that Abraham offers up Isaac because God himself wants to know by personal experience what it means for Abraham to trust him.

I am glad that God insists on that kind of knowledge. He imagined me even before I was born, he foresaw the time when I would be walking on the streets of Belfast. He could foresee it all and knew exactly what I was going to do, but I am glad that he did not rest content with that kind of knowledge. If he had, I might not actually be here. I might just have remained an imagination in God's heart. It is that level of experience that God is insisting on when he requires us to be justified by works.

In what sense are we justified? If we are justified before God *by works*, how do you make sense of that other passage that says we are justified before God *without works*? 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8).

It's a little bit confusing, so let's put our thinking caps on and set to work again. When it comes to salvation, forgiveness, redemption, the clearing of guilt, the impartation of eternal life, we are justified by faith without works. These things are gifts, we receive them the very moment we trust God. And the faith that trusts God in order to receive these gifts is not itself a work, it is the very opposite of work. It is not a merit; it does not deserve the gifts. It is simply the bankrupt hand that takes God at his word and says, 'Thank you!' It takes and receives the gifts.

Justification by works is a different thing. It is now a question of justifying the profession of faith. Abraham claimed that he believed God. He feared God, all his trust was in God. How do I find out if that trust is genuine? It will have to be demonstrated. God will have to prove that when Abraham says he trusts him, he really does trust him and his profession of faith is real. When the Angel of the Lord spoke out of heaven he said, 'Now I know that you fear God.' It wasn't so much now the type of person Abraham was and how he lived his life. All those things may well be involved, but the test was to prove that he feared God.

Let's work it out a bit further. God initially told Abraham that he was going to give him a son. It would be by God's miraculous power—'and Abraham believed God and it was

counted to him for righteousness' (Gen 15:6). Then God told him, 'And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice' (22:18). 'I want you to know that in giving you Isaac I am giving you a glorious future. Do you trust me Abraham?' And Abraham said that he believed God.

The years passed by and the child was born and grew up. One day, God said to Abraham, 'Now Abraham, there is just a matter that I want to get clear. Where is your faith placed— who are you trusting for the fulfilment of this future? You say that your faith is solely in me. Is it partly in Isaac; or is it in me and nothing else? When it came to your eternal salvation you said, "My faith is in God and solely in God." What about your future, Abraham? Where is your faith now—is it in me and only in me? It's not in Isaac is it? Give me Isaac.'

That posed Abraham a tremendous problem. He was an elderly man now and all the promises were in his well-beloved son. Now he was being asked to let him go and demonstrate that his faith was solely in God. That's what it means to be justified by works; to provide by works the evidence that his faith was solely in God and ultimately in nothing else.

Now we shall see what a great success Abraham made of his examinations. He passed with flying colours and has become an object lesson to us all. But it is a comfort to my heart to realise that once more he did not pass his finals the first day he sat the lesson. He began this lesson too by making one terrible mistake, and it was not until quite some way on in his pilgrimage that he eventually had the courage and faith to demonstrate to all and sundry that his faith was really and solely in God.

Abraham's faith had wavered at the start

The thing that haunted Abraham at this stage was the question of security. This section begins by telling us that he came down among the Philistines. He took one look at those long-headed, solemn folk and said, 'These are rough boys down here!' — 'There is no fear of God at all in this place' (20:11). What was he going to do? So he thought to himself, 'I have got a very desirable wife, and if the king of this place sees her that's the end of me; he will kill me in order to get her.'

I'm not making it up; this is what Abraham eventually told Abimelech— 'There is no fear of God in this place! How can I survive in a world of sinners that haven't got any principles? It's all right being nice and good in church where everyone has exemplary principles. You could get through by trusting the Lord there. But what on earth are you going to do down in the marketplace when you are surrounded by a lot of crooks? If you are going to be honest with chaps like that, they may not slit your throat but they will slit your purse. How can you afford to tell the truth?' 'Look here, Sarah,' says Abraham, 'let's just tell part of the truth.'

What's wrong with that? Nothing, if you don't need to tell everything. But it depends on your motives and if you tell half the truth in order deliberately to deceive, then of course you are lying. Sarah was his sister, or his half-sister; she was the daughter of his father, but not of his mother. So it was a half-truth when he told the Philistines that she was his sister. But he said it in order to deliberately deceive them, so it was a lie. Was it a very serious lie? If you are supposed to be trusting in the God of truth, every lie is serious. The very denial of the character of God is a lie.

Abraham risked compromising the purposes of God

Think how serious it was for Abraham and Sarah at this stage of the proceedings. God had appeared to Abraham in his tent and told him that his wife would have a son and now some weeks, perhaps months, after this, Abraham is taking that same wife and allowing her to be taken off by the Philistines. Was he not taking a very big risk about the eventual paternity of the child and putting the whole purpose of God at risk? God's purpose was not ultimately to save Abraham's skin; it was to conform Abraham to the character of God. If I cannot fulfil the purpose of God and still keep on living, I would be better dead. I say that advisedly. To keep hold of physical life by compromising the purposes of God is a sad and sorry thing, for that is to confuse the end with the means and the means with the end.

Am I being rather hard on Abraham? I have preached it to myself first. How could he know that God would protect him in such a godless place? In that moment of tremendous communion, when God had come with the two angels and sat at Abraham's table, had God not said that when the time came round Sarah should have a son and Abraham would see it? It has not happened yet. Should not Abraham have argued with himself logically, and said, 'God has said that Sarah and I are going to have a son. His word cannot fail, so I shall not have my throat slit just yet. They cannot do it until the son is born, because God has said it!' That's the stuff that faith is made of.

Paul believed that God would fulfil his purposes

I picture another great saint of God, standing on the deck of a ship that is nearly going under the Mediterranean in the middle of a storm. He stands in front of the frightened crew and passengers and he says,

This very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. (Acts 27:23-25)

'I do not care what seas there are around me, I shall not be drowned here. God has said that I am going to preach the gospel in Rome!'

Abraham might have argued like that. God said that he was going to have a son. Therefore, it was impossible that the Philistines should slit his throat, at least before the son was born. But these were early days and Abraham's knees were a bit wobbly. It's all right meeting the Lord at his table; what giants of faith we are then. And it's wonderful what faith we can rise to in the secret place when we are interceding with God for the salvation of our relatives, as Abraham did over the salvation of Lot. It is another story in an ungodly, unprincipled, sinful world. It's not so easy then to stand for true morality and not dodge the issue by all sorts of shady things, half-truths and lies. Let me be the first to confess that I have fallen right there. Afraid, for security reasons.

God fulfilled his purposes for Abraham and Sarah

It is lovely to see that, when Abraham lost his nerve and told a half-truth in order to deceive, God himself entered in by a miracle of his providence and protected Sarah, and Abraham as

well. God talked to those wicked old Gentiles. Sometimes we think that the only people who can possibly obey God are born-again believers, but God sometimes has his ways of making the unregenerate obey him. It is God's world and sometimes when we spoil God's plan, blot our copybook and fail in his purpose, God puts his garrison around and saves us from disaster.

Abraham will have to learn how reliable the word of God is. Could he trust it and stake his future on it? Sarah produced a child and the word of God records that marvellous occasion,

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.' And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.' (21:1-7)

Three times over we are told that it happened exactly as God had said. What a wonderful feeling it was. Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me.' It was so incredible, so wonderful. The promise given all those years ago was true after all!

Those years had been long and Sarah began to wonder if God had meant it literally. The divine visitors had come to lunch and they were outside talking to Abraham. God said to Abraham, 'Your wife is going to have a son.' And Sarah collapsed with laughter. 'Don't be absurd,' she said, 'having a son at my age!' But it happened exactly as God said and the seeming delay made it all that more wonderful and impressive. He really meant it.

I don't know if you have ever had an experience like that. God has given you a promise, and over many weary months or years you begin to wonder, did he mean it? When at last it happened, you didn't know whether to be sorry or pleased, whether to cry or to laugh. It was wonderful that God actually meant it. What a tremendous sense of security; he actually meant what he said. And then you wonder why you ever doubted it. God's word is true! The happiness, the joy of it, the laughter that is in it. We will surely laugh when we get home to heaven, we shall prove that it was all true. 'It's more than true, and to think I ever doubted it! But God held on to me in spite of my doubt and he has fulfilled his word down to the very letter.' It was a lesson for old Abraham to dare to trust God's word. That is where we get our security.

Then it came to the time when Isaac had to be weaned (v. 8). In the Hebrew world it was about the age of four or so. Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac. 'That's it!' she said. And this time she was right. 'The slave boy cannot inherit with the free. You will have to turn him out Abraham!' Abraham did not like the thought of that, so God had to appear to him once more.

And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' (vv. 11-12)

Now that the promised seed has been born Abraham cannot have both. It has got to be one or the other and God said that Ishmael, the slave boy, had to go. His purposes are through the freeborn son. So with great difficulty Abraham at last did what he was told; he sent Hagar and Ishmael away.

When the Apostle Paul comes to comment upon this, he makes the same point,

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, 'Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.'

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Gal 4:22-31)

We cannot stop now to investigate the line of reasoning that underlies his interpretation. We must take what he says at its face value. Hagar represents the covenant made by God with Israel on Mount Sinai on the basis of the law. It was put in temporarily until the promised seed should come. For many years Israel related to God through that old covenant. It was a covenant of works, teaching the weakness and sinfulness of the flesh, and the wickedness of sin. It was preparing their hearts for the salvation that should come through the promised seed. At length the promised seed came, Jesus Christ our Lord. He put aside the old covenant and instituted the new covenant in his blood.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Gal 5:1-6)

There were people who said it was wonderful to have forgiveness through Christ, to have eternal life as a gift. And then certain folks came along and said, 'You are not going to stop circumcising your children, are you? Is it really safe—can you really be saved simply by trusting Christ? Hadn't you had better be circumcised as well and keep the law of Moses?'

Now that Christ the promised seed has come and the new covenant is offered, they will have to choose. It will either be Christ as a free gift without the works of the law, or it will be that they try to earn salvation by keeping the law. 'You will never do it!' says Paul. 'The law

condemns you. And you cannot have both! It will either be Christ or your ceremonies and works. You will have to face the decision that Abraham faced. He had to cast out the bondwoman and her son and dare to be left with the free-born child, the heir of salvation, totally by grace.'

Now that might be a very easy step for you to take, having been brought up in your particular tradition. It is a very difficult step for some. I was visiting a country recently where there are many dear true believers. If you pressed them they would say that they trust Christ, and only Christ, for salvation.

And you ask, 'Why did you get your infant baptised?'

'Well, we don't believe that there is anything in it, but . . .'

'Well, what?'

They are a little bit like some Irishman, and the priest says that he could turn him into a mouse! All the way home he says, 'I don't believe it, he's not going to turn me into a mouse. I don't believe that nonsense.' And when he gets to the front door he says to his wife, 'Go on in and put the cat out please, just in case!'

You want to have it both ways. Yes, you trust Christ. But, just in case, then you trust your works, your ceremonies, your infant baptism or something. But you cannot do that. If I ask you in the name of God to give up your trust in works and ceremonies, you begin to feel insecure. To take your stand wholly on the word of Christ seems to be asking a tremendous lot. You scarcely can dare do it. We have all felt that way and know exactly how you feel. But what a funny situation it is when we dare not trust the word of God and have more security in the words of men. To find true security — indeed, if we would find salvation — we must cast out 'the bondwoman and her son, the slave with his works.' We must trust Christ, and only Christ, for salvation.

Hagar and Ishmael

Just a little interlude. When Hagar and Ishmael were put out, it wasn't because God didn't have a place in this particular scheme of things for them. In a sense Ishmael should not really have been there. He was the result of Abraham's own foolish mistake and rash behaviour. But notice the tenderness of God. For the spiritual principle involved Hagar and Ishmael must be turned out, but they were God's creatures and he loved them. The God of heaven was interested in giving security to Abraham and Isaac. But at the level of sheer practicalities in daily life he gives his great security to Hagar and Ishmael too.

God pays the expenses of our spiritual education! I think sometimes of the people I have wronged through my mistakes and wish that I could undo it. I take comfort that God will compensate them for the wrong that his foolish student did, lest his very name would be brought into dishonour.

We must move on quickly to the climax.

The oath with Abimelech

At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, 'God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.' And Abraham said, 'I will swear.' (21:22–24)

Abraham owned no end of servants and cattle and camels and donkeys and sheep and oxen. He was a great sheikh, a miniature king. With such a powerful nomad prince living so near, Abimelech wanted to make sure that there was safety for his family. How could he be absolutely sure about this Hebrew man? If he were to die, would Abraham take over their land? He went to Abraham, and said, 'Let us make a covenant, so that when I am gone I can be sure you will not do any damage.' With men an oath is the end of strife, and the Philistine king wanted security for his son. So Abraham swore an oath that he would never harm those lads in any way at all. 'Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath' (v. 31). And they called the name of the well, 'The well of the oath'.

So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. (vv. 32–24)

The historian emphasises the significance of it. 'The well of the oath' was an oath of security for the Philistine's son.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' (22:1–2)

What man or woman doesn't long for security? 'You want security for your son, Abraham, and a guaranteed future for him? Of course you do! Well then, I had better put you in the place where security is to be found. In the last analysis it is in me and in my word,' says God. 'Have you learned that, Abraham? Have you learned to trust me and only me? You are thinking of security for your boy and for the future beyond. Abraham, give me your boy – give him to me!'

I wonder what thoughts raced through Abraham's mind during the first few moments. All the future was in Isaac. Feeling utterly naked and bereft at his age in life, he had to hand over the lot. He stands at the top of Mount Moriah. On one side there is God, on the other side everything else. Deliberately he gives up everything else and dares to trust God. O happy man!

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' (vv. 9–12)

Fellow believer, if you think that is hard, do please remember that one of these days you will have to leave everything. It won't be at Mount Moriah—it may be at the bottom of your stairs. How sadly distressed you would be if that was where your security was placed. Learn it now; security, eternal security, is found in God and in his word.

I don't think Abraham went up the mountain singing, 'I am H-A-P-P-Y!' I'm sure he did a bit of thinking. He had come to the great crisis of life and he must decide. How should he decide it? 'By logic,' says holy Scripture,

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb 11:17–19)

This lets us into the secret of the man's heart. He reasoned it out. God had told him, 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called . . . in thee and in thy seed shall all the nations of the world be blessed.' God had said it and now if he asks him to offer Isaac on that altar he will have to raise him from the dead. 'It's not my responsibility,' says Abraham, 'I trust God's word. If it is a lie, then I have lost everything; but so long as God tells the truth I can put that knife into Isaac and God's word shall yet be fulfilled.'

Abraham decided it with the logic of faith, whatever his emotions felt like. (How terribly fraught they must have been.) He raised the knife—and God said, 'No, Abraham. You have learnt your lesson.'

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.' (vv. 13–14)

But there was a bigger lesson

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.' So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba. (vv. 15–19)

With that oath in his ears Abraham returned to 'the well of the oath'—God's oath this time.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6:13–20)

The person who has learned to trust God and his word finds a security that cannot be shaken. The word of God and the oath of God —

His oath, his covenant, and blood
Support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul give way,
He then is all my hope and stay.⁵

If we learn to trust God and his word like that then we will stand unafraid, though the very universe dissolves around us. Where can anybody get faith like that? You cannot work it up. Think about the passage of Genesis that we have been studying, about one father and one son; beyond it there is a deeper story, of another Father and another Son.

In the garden of Eden, the devil asks, 'Has God said? God could do better for you than this, Eve. He hasn't provided all he could; he leaves you without one tree!'

'Has God said? Does God provide?' How often the slander has been whispered in our ears. Do we dare to trust God's word, and if we do will God really provide? The place to get faith is on another mountain (or is it the same mountain?).

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32)

I think of that first man in the garden where all was delightful and crowded around with God's gifts and his presence. He disobeyed God. Then I see that second man, walking by faith all his life long. God led him to a cross. As he hung there they mocked him for his very trust in God, 'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires. For he said, "I am the Son of God"' (Matt 27:43).

'That's what happens to people like him who trust in God — let God deliver him now if he will have him!' Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 46). There was no answer, only the very blackness of hell.

⁵ Edward Mote (1797–1874), 'My hope is built on nothing less'.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. (Ps 22:1–6)

The Father's knife was raised and the Son with perfect obedience offered himself to God. What happened to faith like that? Christ had settled it before it all began,

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you . . . I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.' (John 17:1–5)

Before he went to the cross he prayed, 'Father, I have finished your work. You will glorify me, won't you? You won't let me down! You will honour my faith.' The third day God raised him from the dead and gave him glory.

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Pet 1:20–21)

The Lord help us to sense the tremendous practical nature of these things and bring us to that glad place where we find unshakeable security and faith in God and in his holy word.

[The Death of Sarah and a Bride for Isaac](#)

Genesis 22–24

We have now reached one of the climaxes in the book of Genesis and the story begins to change and take another road.

In our last study we came to chapter 22, that vivid and well-known story when Abraham demonstrated the reality of his faith. He proved that his faith was in God and ultimately in nothing and no one else. He was justified by works; that is, his faith proved to be genuine.

God's promises to him were all bound up in Isaac. Nevertheless, at God's call and command, he was prepared to hand Isaac back to God. Abraham demonstrated that his faith for himself, for Isaac and for all his future was not in Isaac but in God and his word. We tasted something of the triumph of Abraham. As he stood on Mount Moriah he remembered that God had given his word that in Isaac all the nations of the earth would be blessed. If God were now asking Abraham to sacrifice him on the altar, then he would raise Isaac from the dead; God could not contradict his word or fail in his promise. Staunch and immovable in his faith in God and his word, Abraham prepared to offer Isaac on the altar. When Abraham demonstrated the attitude of his heart, then God spared Isaac and provided a ram for a burnt offering.

News from Ur

That day Abraham found an increased security as he returned from the mountain. Twice over we are told he dwelt at Beersheba. To dwell constantly by the 'well of God's oath' is a blessed place indeed for all those who are on their pilgrim way to the eternal city. What a source of refreshment and nourishment it is; it maintains our hope and spiritual verve and vigour.

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba. Now after these things it was told to Abraham, 'Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidphah, and Bethuel.' (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. (22:19–24)

So we are told that Milcah and Nahor, Abraham's brother, had these children. Anyone who has a sense for the flow of a narrative must have often stopped at these verses and wondered, why now? After those tremendous spiritual heights of Abraham's experience on the top of Mount Moriah, we suddenly descend to an apparently innocent, if not boring, list of names.

It is because, as I say, the history of Genesis has reached a turning point. Hitherto we have been concerned with Abraham's experience in his pilgrimage. He left Ur of the Chaldeans, responding to the call and vision of God. As far as we know his relatives were still pagan idolaters in Mesopotamia. Abraham set out on his pilgrim pathway, not knowing where he was going. We are subsequently told that he looked for the city with foundations, whose builder and maker was God.

Those Gentile cities—Babel, Nineveh, Ur, Resen and so forth—no longer contented Abraham's heart. Glorious and sophisticated as those cities were, they left so much to be desired, for they were built upon false foundations of idolatry. God called Abraham out so that he would become the father of a special nation in history, the Hebrew nation, and father of the pilgrims. As he journeyed geographically so he journeyed spiritually and we have followed his progress as he learned his lessons in the school of God over these three major periods of his spiritual pilgrimage.

Now he has reached the climax. The promised seed has come, and father and son have walked together to the altar and the son has been offered there. Then God, who has been watching the progress, immediately takes our minds back to those Gentiles. His plan was not to turn Abraham into a monk—it was that through Abraham and his seed all the nations of the world might be blessed. God never forgot his purpose.

You can see that the tide has turned. The focus now changes, and Abraham hears about his relatives living in Ur. Presently we shall read how God instituted another great movement. A messenger would go back to the Gentiles and there would come another great pilgrimage. A Gentile girl would be prepared to take a similar step and journey of faith so that she might be joined to Isaac, the true seed, and form him a bride. There hangs a very eloquent tale.

The death and burial of Sarah

But first we must notice two steps in the developing programme. Sarah died and they laid her body to rest. She wasn't always perfect, and some of her schemes were based on fleshly notions that had to be corrected over years of discipline. But she was a woman of faith, 'By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised' (Heb 11:11).

As she contemplated the faithfulness of God and the certainty of his promise, she received new strength and became the mother not only of Isaac but of countless thousands, numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore. Indeed, the spiritual mother of those who dare to take God at his word. 'Sarah lived for 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan' (23:1-2).

Now her body is worn, tired, broken, and she falls asleep. We are treated to quite a lengthy chapter, as Abraham goes about buying a field for a burying place for Sarah. Quite a fuss is made about it, with all the associated customs of the ancient East. It was the only little bit of ground that Abraham ever bought in the land of Canaan. It was not that he was hard up for money, he was a nomad prince and exceedingly wealthy. He had the assurance from God that one day this land would be his, but for the moment he was asked to be a pilgrim. Therefore, he did not own so much as a footprint in all that wide land of Canaan.

Sarah has died and her body must be buried. The only piece of ground that Abraham purchased in Canaan was for a grave. That mortal frame was exceedingly dear to him. Sarah had gone into the eternal world, but her bodily remains should not be counted cheaply, as though they did not matter. God's design for humankind is that they should be both spirit and body. Therefore, great pains are taken to buy this field where that body shall lie and go to dust. One day his posterity will come back again and claim that field, and therefore that body.

As Christians we should notice the value that God places on our bodies. In the Middle Ages Christendom began to be infected by Platonism, which had earlier been infected by Pythagorean philosophy. Christians got it into their heads that our bodies are somehow unimportant; in fact, they are a positive hindrance in spiritual things. Plato urges us to treat our bodies like prison houses and keep our souls as far away from our bodies as we can, because the body will defile the soul. The philosopher's aim is to keep as far as possible from the body now and wait for the day when his soul shall be released from the body. If he has been successful in keeping his soul pure then he might not have to be reincarnated in his body. But if he has allowed his soul to get infected by his body, says Plato, then the soul will have to be reincarnated in another body and condemned to another cycle of life on earth.

What nonsense it was! It affected Christendom, both Catholic and Puritan; they went miserably through life, despising the body as though it were evil. But God's idea for men and women is that the body is an important and integral part of our personality. Even though the body feels the consequences of sin and eventually dies and goes to dust, it is in God's programme that our bodies should be raised.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil 3:20-21)

Now in my imagination I stand with Abraham, weighing out his silver carefully. Who could put too much value on it? It was only a small field and a few trees—if you have ever stood there you will know what I mean—yet it was valuable beyond anything money could buy.

As I watch him pay the silver for the burying ground, I think of another—the seed, promised originally to the woman in the garden, who should bruise the serpent's head and rob him of his power over death. He paid something vastly more valuable than silver for the body of Sarah and all the faithful.

You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Pet 1:18-21)

God keeps watch over that sacred spot where Sarah's body lies and over every little bit of ground on this alien earth where the redeemed are buried, awaiting that great day.

Until the trump of God be heard,
Until the ancient graves be stirred,
And, with the great commanding word,
The Lord shall come.⁶

‘These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth’ (Heb 11:13). God has received their spirits. One day he shall receive their very bodies.

A bride for Isaac

The days of mourning for Sarah were eventually accomplished. One day Abraham was sitting in his tent. ‘Somebody told me about Nahor and Milcah way down in Ur. It’s a long time since I saw them. I wonder how they are getting on. I hear they have a child, Rebekah, and she is growing up too. It’s time Isaac got married; he’s nearly forty! I am getting very old and Sarah has gone home, it would be nice to see Isaac settled before I go. She would have to be a girl of equal faith, sharing his vision—the unseen and the eternal would have to be a vivid reality to her. I wonder if God would do it again, like he did it for me. Could he bring another lot out? He might move their hearts too.’

You know the story. Abraham commissioned his servant to go back to the Gentiles and seek a bride for Isaac.

But at this point my task is getting very difficult. Much as I might try to keep this at the level of past history, many of you are going to get impatient with the history and see it as a prophecy, so I had better give in to you. I do believe in the validity of the story as ancient history and I have been doing my best to preach these chapters as practical straightforward lessons. We must not allow typology to rob us of the rich practical, historical lessons, nor pseudo-intellectualism of those rich double-meanings of holy Scripture. As we said in our first study, behind the actual history with all its valid practical lessons, there stood a God designing those ancient events that they might be prototypes of bigger things.

The history again

So, let’s go right back to the beginning of Abraham’s experience. Let’s read the history again, but this time with an eye on Abraham’s future. He was called out of the Gentiles and came into the land of Canaan, but then he went down and lived in the land of Egypt for a while. God brought him back again into the promised land, he agreed to Sarah’s suggestion and took Hagar and Ishmael was born. The slave woman and her son were now imposed on Abraham’s family until the promised seed came. But Ishmael began to persecute Isaac and God commanded that Ishmael and Hagar had to be turned out. Immediately, as far as the record is concerned, father and son climbed the hill of sacrifice and the promised seed was offered on the altar. Figuratively speaking, Abraham received him back from the dead (Heb 11:19).

⁶ George Rawson (1807–89), ‘By Christ redeemed, in Christ restored’.

The promised seed was offered and raised again. Sarah died and was buried, and what next? God began once more to take from the Gentiles a people for his name.

You would be rather dull if you could read that without your imagination being drawn to the bigger story — the great story of the nation that came from Abraham. They eventually went down with Jacob into Egypt and came out again with massive substance. They received that ancient covenant of the law at Sinai.

The bigger story

Paul is at hand to tell us how Hagar and Ishmael help us to understand some of the basic principles of that old covenant (Gal 4:21–31). Just as Hagar and Ishmael were in Abraham's home until the promised seed was born, the Jews were under the law until Jesus Christ our Lord came. When he came two things happened.

1. The nation as a whole began to persecute the true seed and they hunted him to his death;
2. God's answer was to set aside that old covenant and a new covenant was instituted.

Following the Genesis pattern, the true seed came and went to Calvary. 'God spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all' (Rom 8:32) so that his death should form the basis of a new covenant. Then God did what he always intended to do from the time he chose Abraham; he began another movement, a vaster, bigger movement. He sent his Jewish missionaries to the four corners of the earth to preach again the gospel of the glory of God and bring out from the nations a vast host of Gentile believers as a bride for his Son, the promised seed.

Why do we bother with things like that? Personally, it has a double effect on me. As I read those ancient stories and see how they form prototypes of that bigger movement in history that leads to Jesus Christ our Lord, I say to myself, 'There is more than a human brain behind Genesis and this bit of history.' I find my faith being strengthened, not merely by the inspiration of Scripture, but in the truth of this great plan. Its purpose and fact of history was the coming into our world of the promised seed. He came through that singular and special nation, the nation of the Jews. They rejected their Messiah and in consequence the gospel went to the Gentiles. What is that but a fulfilling of those ancient prophecies? And my faith grows stronger; 'We did not follow cleverly devised myths' (2 Pet 1:16). Here is God's historic watermark in his word of his unique plan for the blessing of the nations of men.

The servant goes to find a bride

With the tide thus turned we will have to return to Genesis 24. For Abraham it was a practical thing, and perhaps at this point I should preach a very practical sermon to my young fellow believers. If you are going to walk closely with somebody through life, do make sure that they share your same vision. Make sure that they know God, the unseen is a reality to them and they are travelling the same direction as you to that great eternal city. It will be a difficult pilgrimage if one of you is walking one way and one another way. One of you by faith can see the new Jerusalem and its foundations and the other cannot see beyond the streets of Belfast.

Theologians have seen deeper and double meanings galore in this chapter. The father sent a servant to get a wife for Isaac. When Abraham thought about getting this girl to be a wife

for Isaac he did not send her a photograph and a map; he sent his servant down to that land, and when the girl said 'yes' he accompanied her all the way home. What a lovely gospel message, in its historical and practical sense. It was not every day in Mesopotamia girls got an offer like that.

I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell, but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son.' (Gen 24:34–38)

As we see the message of the servant to the woman, we cannot help remembering another message, from the serpent to the woman. What a difference! 'I will tell you why God forbids you to eat of that tree,' said the serpent. 'If you were to eat of that tree you shall be as God, knowing good and evil. You would rise in God's universe, attain your independence and no longer need to be dependent on God and his judgment about things. You could make up your own mind and be free—you would be as God.' The woman listened, it sounded good and she took the fruit and ate of it. At once she knew she was naked—she didn't rise in the universe.

Then there came a servant from the father. He said, 'My master is very rich.' It was true! It's God's answer to the slander of the serpent, 'The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand' (John 3:35). Mortals made of clay shall rise to the level of God's incarnate Son and become his bride forever.

It was a great step of faith for Rebekah. It meant believing on someone she had never seen and loving somebody she would not be able to see for days and months ahead. 'And the servant brought out jewellery of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah' (v. 53). To help her in her faith, the servant clothed her.

My dear young friend, Satan is not interested to enhance your personality, to make of it something dignified and glorious. How he degrades even human relationships and turns them nearer to the mere animal. But your God who made you has the most fantastic design for your personality. He longs to clothe your nakedness, banish your shame and make you a glorious personality, fit to be part of the bride for his own Son.

He enticed the girl with an earnest of the riches that were at home. You will not need me to interpret the parable! The Holy Spirit has come; his chief object is to glorify the Lord Jesus and to remind us of what he said before he went,

He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:14–15)

They called him the carpenter of Nazareth, but Jesus is Lord of all creation and he holds it together by the word of his power; he is the heir of all things. The offer is that you should be part of that blessed community that shall be his bride eternally. It will mean stepping out in faith, counting the unseen as something real. That's what faith is, 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11:1).

But, thank God we are not left to go it alone, any more than Bethuel's daughter was. No mere map and a photograph—the servant travelled with her every step until he got her home.

The coming of the Holy Spirit

Please observe what it means when it says that the Holy Spirit has now come. It doesn't mean that he never visited earth before Pentecost; he visited earth many times and did many things. But when our Lord Jesus went back the Holy Spirit came in the sense that he had never come before.

Let us help ourselves to understand it by an analogy. As the Angel of the Lord, our blessed Lord visited the earth many times before Bethlehem, but Bethlehem was different and distinct. At Bethlehem the word of God came and stayed. He became incarnate and stayed here in human flesh; in that sense he was absent from heaven. When our Lord went back to heaven the Holy Spirit came to stay; not incarnate himself in his own human body, but incarnate in ours.

Is the path we tread home to heaven merely chronological? 'I got saved when I was seventeen and a half, and I shall not be quite ready until I am eighty-three and three quarters; so I will be around until the Lord calls me, just filling the years!'

It's something more than that. The distance between us and glory is not measured merely in years and certainly not merely in geographical miles. There is a moral and a spiritual difference. My dear fellow believer, think what it will mean to have to act as the bride of God's own Son, to entertain the intelligentsia of heaven and to help him run earth as it ought to be run. The Holy Spirit has come to indwell every believer and, footstep by footstep, to walk with us the whole way home to glory.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:29–30)

The work of the Holy Spirit in us

It is God's purpose that we should be conformed to the image of his Son. The Holy Spirit within us starts his gracious work of getting us to that glory. What changes there must be; what advances in spirituality there must come. Left to myself, my own wayward heart would be chasing baubles, getting lost in the wilderness and making no progress, but rather going backwards.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26–27)

How do I know whether the next step in the journey will be sunshine and blessing or difficulty and puzzlement, or even bereavement? I don't know, but he who dwells within me knows, and he prays. Yet he will not wipe out my personality, for he wants my prayers to be

my prayers. He does not want to get a dummy home to Christ. When I long to be like Christ, it is really me who does the longing; he prays alongside my weakness, inspiring my desires so that they really become my desires. 'He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit' (v. 27). As we search for words, scarcely knowing what to say or how, he reads our desires by this holy fellowship and brings us those advancing steps of spiritual progress through life till he sets us down in the presence of Christ.

But when you start to talk of God's present purpose, calling out of the Gentiles a bride for his Son, the story begins to change. It is as though the train were running over the points about to take a curve in another direction. What are we going to do when we get home to heaven? There will be the marriage supper of the Lamb, but then what shall we do? That is where the newspaper stories of weddings fall short. They tell you what the bride wore and who the best-man was and bridesmaids and all that, and then the couple eventually left for a honeymoon in Majorca. Then they got back.

What are we going to do as the bride of Christ?

For this we shall have to recur to our textbook and to God's original purpose. He made man, giving him not only life but dominion, telling him to develop the earth, to subdue it, organise it and make something glorious of it. 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18). So he gave him Eve to help him to rule and to make something of earth for God.

When they sinned they lost two things:

1. *They lost their lives:* the day they sinned they began to die.
2. *They lost a good deal of the dominion:* they became defeated and slaves to death.

1. *They lost their lives*, and we have been thinking about the great story of reconstruction, how God is in process of giving man back his life. We have seen it in Abraham. Life has been the dominant theme—life from the dead, the son offered on the altar and given back to God. 'Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men' (Rom 5:18).

The death of Abraham

Abraham and his seed were made right with God, and entered into this eternal relationship with him. After Isaac got his bride Abraham married again and Keturah his wife had six children. He had learned his major lessons in life and there is very little more said about Abraham. Then he died and he was buried. 'After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi' (25:11).

I suppose you would call it dying, but the chapter tells us that Isaac dwelt by *Beer-lahai-roi*. This is funny sounding Hebrew for simple English, 'the well of him that lives and sees'. Abraham died as to his body, but he was alive to God.

When our Lord was here on earth they asked him about the resurrection.

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. (Matt 22:31–32)

'*I am* the God of Abraham.' Not, '*I was* the God of Abraham.' For in that man's lifetime God entered into a relationship with him, and he with God. God's relationships are eternal. O the wonder of that! God is not like some people who are pleased to know us for a while and then forget us. When we see them in the street one day, we say, 'There's so-and-so, I haven't seen him for years. I remember the days when we were good friends, but we don't meet now.' God is not like that. You enter into a relationship with God through faith in Christ; it is a relationship that shall never cease, never be broken. It is *eternal life* to know God. And when Abraham died and was buried, his son lived for a while by 'the well of him that lives and sees.' Abraham's pilgrimage is all concerned with the topic of life.

2. Now the train goes over the points again and we are coming to another big section of Genesis. And what is that going to be about? Well, it is going to be about the other thing — *they lost a good deal of the dominion*; they became defeated and slaves to death.

When man sinned he lost a great deal of his dominion. God is not content to only restore man's life, but now begins the great process of restoring his dominion. This section of Genesis is the period during which the Hebrews became Israelites. Once upon a time Abraham was not even a Hebrew, he was a Gentile. Coming into personal experience of the living God and stepping out as a pilgrim, he became a Hebrew. Now the next big stage: Hebrews are turned into Israelites. What does that mean?

A preview of the story of Jacob

Do you remember the story of how Jacob wrestled with the angel, and the angel with him? Jacob's name was changed from Jacob to Israel because 'he had power with God' (Gen 32:28 KJV). He became father to the Israelites. We cannot go far into that story now, but to prepare our minds for our future studies let me remind you of some of the salient features of the next period of Genesis and what kind of things happened.

Jacob went out to get a job, fell asleep on his stony pillow and had a vision. He saw a ladder set up on earth and the top of it reached to heaven.

And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'
(Gen 28:13–15)

Jacob looked and he saw the angels of God in their myriads ascending and descending. And Jacob woke from his sleep, and said,

Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'
(vv. 16–17)

We had better remember that he was an ancient Semite. He was not thinking so much of the gate as a way in. He did not try to get in, he had a lot of business yet to do. He was thinking rather of the gate in its ancient Eastern sense, as the place where the elders of the city would meet—they used to sit in the gate. When Abraham came to buy the plot of land for Sarah's burial-ground he met them in the gate. (At the great excavations at Dan last year they discovered not only the gateway, but the old bench on which the elders used to sit in the gate of Dan.)

Jacob saw that vast civil service, God's great administration. The angels of God were ascending and descending on a ladder connecting earth and heaven, bringing the very government of heaven down to earth. He said, 'This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'—'This is the spot where heaven centralises its government for the control of the affairs of earth.' Yes, he was tricky, but before God is finished with Jacob he will have a part in that very city and that gate.

Genesis tells us that Jacob went down to Paddan-aram and worked for Laban, Rebekah's brother. He had two wives and two concubines, and sons were born to him. We are treated to a list of their names and what their names meant. 'Abraham looked for the city that hath the foundations whose builder and maker is God,' and what did Jacob do? He supplied the boys' names that should go on the gates of that eternal city.

'Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Rev 21:9–14)

The new heavenly city

When John the apostle was given a vision of the new Jerusalem he looked at the foundations on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The foundation of the city is the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God, and we shall enter that city through personal faith in him. The city shall be God's centre of administration; the nations of the earth shall come and bring their glory to it (vv. 24–26). Those whose task it will be to govern shall meet them at the gates, 'and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed' (v. 12).

What a story! This life presents us with the opportunity to be saved, justified, to be at one with God. It also presents us with the opportunity to walk with God and to be trained by his Holy Spirit so that we are prepared in character to take over the government of earth with Christ and reign with him in that coming day. That is what it means to be his bride.

We must give heed to these exceedingly practical lessons. They will not hesitate to enter our homes, drawing rooms, bedrooms, our workshops, businesses, our sport, recreation and our studies. Using these chapters of Genesis, the Holy Spirit will point out how sacred

ordinary life is; how sacred our day to day jobs are; how sacred our human relationships are, because in these things we are being trained for our part in the government of the age to come.

Two earthly cities, Babylon and Jerusalem

Come back to the point when Abraham was brought up in Ur of the Chaldeans, in that general area where man built those great cities. The most famous of all those cities was Babel, we know it better as Babylon—it was already an idolatrous city. He left it to walk with the living God and look for 'the city'. Abraham's offspring came to Jerusalem city and down the centuries the cities of Jerusalem and Babylon stood over against each other. Jerusalem stood for faith in the living God against idolatry and Babylon stood for the counterfeit and idolatry. By the time we come to the last book of the Bible these two literal cities have become figures of something infinitely bigger. There is the great new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, of which all are Christ's, and there is still Babylon, full of false religions and idolatry that eventually shall be completely apostate. And all who are religious are working for one or the other.

When you think of Babylon, 'Babylon the great' (Rev 17:5), don't throw too many bricks over the community divide; apostate Protestantism with its Freemasonry is more idolatrous than Rome knows how to be, denying the deity of the Lord Jesus, his virgin birth, his pre-existence, his atonement, his literal resurrection, his second coming. That is Protestantism in the part that has become apostate, 'Having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power' (2 Tim 3:5).

If we have trusted the Saviour and believe that one day we shall form part of his bride, we must be loyal to our absent Lord and cooperate with his Spirit in the lessons of daily life. May we so weave those garments of our personal righteousness that we shall be allowed to wear them when we are presented to him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Maintenance of the Hebrews' Vision and their Development into Israelites

Genesis 25:12–35:29

The salvation that God has provided for us in Jesus Christ our Lord is gloriously large. It meets the needs of individuals, and indeed it is as individuals that we must enter into the benefits of God's salvation. We cannot enter in as families, nations, or groups of people; we must enter into the good of God's salvation as single individuals. There is enough in Christ to meet our every need as individuals.

But then God's salvation is concerned with even bigger things than the salvation of the individual person. God has designs in Christ to fill this world to overflowing with the glory of his light, peace and salvation. That is why Jesus Christ our Lord taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matt 6:9–13)

Every true Christian who prays this prayer finds his heart leaping within him, for our Lord certainly did not teach us to pray a prayer that shall find no fulfilment. The very fact he told us to pray is a guarantee that God shall fulfil our prayer and his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. I must leave to your imagination what a glorious thing it will be when God's will is done on our sorry old planet, as it is at this moment done in heaven. It shall be glory that defies description.

God's programme expands

We have been concentrating in our studies on the experience of the patriarch, Abraham, and we have seen God saving an individual man. We have followed his personal spiritual pilgrimage; how as an individual he came into personal relationship with God, was saved and found eternal security and friendship in God.

As we move further into the book of Genesis we shall find that it begins to concentrate on the other side of the story. It will still be dealing with individuals for a long time, but through

these individuals we shall see God beginning to prepare for his great programme of bringing deliverance and salvation to the world at large.

At the end of Genesis, when the story for the moment reaches its initial climax, we shall find God's great saviour and deliverer, Joseph, rescuing the then known world from famine and economic difficulties. He is one of God's prototypes of what Jesus Christ our Lord will do on a vastly bigger scale when he comes again. He shall take over the economics of our world, the problems of its currency and pollution and growing shortages, and deal with the root problem, which is sin in the heart of men. He shall dismiss those who are unfit to rule and institute his own government. By that means he shall bring in a period of unparalleled blessing to this world, as he demonstrates how it can and should be run to the glory of God and the blessing of men.

The unique nation of Israel

So, as we read the second part of the book of Genesis we shall see God taking the early steps in the great programme that would eventually bring in our Lord and Messiah. God had already made his sovereign choice of the nation of Israel as the vehicle of his blessing and all these centuries later this is a striking piece of evidence.

That nation has lived down the centuries to prove that it is indeed unique among the nations of men. Unique in their history, they have given us the Old Testament and it was into that nation that Jesus Christ our Lord was born. For centuries after AD 70 they had no secure homeland, indeed no homeland at all. Scattered among the nations without any base, they have remained a distinct nation, universally recognisable, and now in this late day they are back once more in their country.

When the Bible talks about God's sovereign choice of the Jew as his elect, special people, many find a number of difficulties. They first think that it is very unfair that God should choose somebody and give him special blessings and privileges.

But that is true of every man and woman. You are a brilliant pianist, when you sit down to play everybody stops talking and listens. How did you get that gift? Not by your merits; you were born with it. Someone else has a tremendous skill at arranging flowers, everybody gasps when they come in your front door and see your arrangements. It makes the rest of us look like amateurs. Where did they get that gift? We have read all the books on flower arranging, but we cannot do it like that; they were born with the gift. Every single man and woman born into this world has certain gifts by the sovereign providence of God.

Israel was given a special task and a high privilege to be the nation through whom God would give us the Old Testament and his Messiah, our Saviour, through whom God will eventually govern this world. It is no exception to the general rule that God's gifts are given by his sovereign choice; it is not unfair. If God has chosen you to be a daisy and not an oak tree, then thank God for being a daisy; be a good daisy and don't try to be an oak tree!

But let us think again. God's sovereign choice does not mean that those men or women are automatically 'good'. You may be a very good person as well as being a good pianist, but there are plenty of brilliant pianists that are morally very sorry people. We must learn to distinguish between a man's gifts and a man's moral character, and let us all remember that the possession of many distinguished gifts does not mean that you are automatically saved. It

does not even mean that you are especially good morally, and of course goodness is infinitely more important than gifts.

Jacob

As we follow the histories of the early children of Israel, they will become prototypes of what has happened to the nation of Israel herself. In these early days of Genesis, we read of Jacob. Destined eventually to become Israel, father of that special nation, Jacob in his early days was a thoroughly unregenerate type. He spoiled his own family relationship by his inordinate greed and ruined his life with his in-laws by his hard and ruthless business tactics. He had to flee from his own country and get lost for a while among the Gentiles. Eventually he fell out of favour and for survival's sake had to hurry back to his own land. Back in his own land the story went on the same—ruinous maltreatment of the people around and hideous perversion of religion. The name of Israel stank among all the nations around.

Alas, what happened to Jacob has happened often to his successors. We must not try and justify the wickedness of the treatment that Gentiles have sometimes meted out to Jews, in the infamous *auto de fe* of Spain, the pogroms of Russia, the infamous torture and maltreatment of the Jews in England in mediaeval times, and in Hitler's Germany in more recent days. We Gentiles must bow our heads in shame at what has happened. But, on the other hand, Scripture indicates that because Israel are God's chosen people, the vehicle for eventually bringing his blessing to men, then God must discipline them more than he disciplines anybody else. His choice of Israel is no spoilt-boy favouritism. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2).

Joseph

Just like those brothers who sold Joseph to the Gentiles, the Israelites rejected their Messiah and Saviour; their hearts were hard and their eyes blind. When their own Messiah came they failed to recognise him and spiked him to a cross. Because of it these many centuries they have wandered, lost among the Gentiles.

There has been a great deal of ordinary goodness among many Jews given to pious works and alms. Even we Gentiles must thank God for some of the wonderful institutions that good Jews have created in our society. But there is the other side of the story. Many Jews have been unscrupulous and ruthless in business, prompted perhaps by the fears that beset old Jacob, that if he was not ruthless he would not survive among the Gentiles. What happened to Jacob has happened to that nation; some mornings the Gentiles have wakened to find that all the leading banks and the capital of their nation is in the hands of Jews; they have become furiously jealous and the Jews have had to get out in a hurry.

There is some gladness here as well. His brothers were eventually reconciled to Joseph and it became a tremendous blessing to the world at large. One day Israel shall be converted and reconciled to her Messiah and the blessing for mankind shall be so marvellous that God's word describes it as a resurrection from the dead.

So we must keep two things distinct in our thinking:

1. God's sovereign choice and his gifts to mankind
2. The moral character of those he has chosen

And we must remember above all that, whatever gifts God has given us as Creator, we still need to admit to our spiritual bankruptcy and personally find salvation, be born again, and be reconciled to God.

Isaac's sons

We shall therefore follow this lesson in the experience of the two boys who were born to Isaac in the land. Esau and Jacob were born into a family of believers. Indeed, not only their father, but also their grandfather had been a believer. Having suffered the same thing myself I don't know whether to say it was a wonderful advantage or a disadvantage. I am sure that it was a glorious advantage to be born into a family of believers, to be saved from the deeper sides of sin; and yet I sometimes think it was a bit more difficult for Esau and Jacob.

Grandfather Abraham had had a conversion. There was no doubting Abraham's conversion because he was not born in a believer's home; his father's home was godless and idolatrous. He knew by personal experience what it was to be 'without God in the world'. He knew moments of blank hopelessness and when Abraham got saved, he got saved—he was there when it happened! He never forgot it and he did not allow many other people to forget it either. Abraham was the type of man who might get a hold of your lapel and say, 'Tell me, old chap, how are you getting on with the Lord?' and there would come a bit of an embarrassed silence! Conversion to him was real.

His son Isaac too found God as Saviour. He was not the man that Abraham was; it took him a lot of courage to confess his faith. He did manage it at times, even before the Philistines.

But then there came the third generation. They have it tough. They have heard about salvation from the cradle upwards, from Sabbath school if not Sunday school. But then they were never allowed to do this or that, because their parents kept them back from the sordid side of life and they don't know the meaning of sin in some of its more lurid senses. They were constantly urged to trust in God and have personal faith in him. They found it difficult to see the difference. Perhaps in tender years they were moved to say, 'Mum, I think I have trusted God.' They could see that it pleased their parents, but when they got to about fifteen or sixteen they were not quite sure what it all meant and whether anything had happened or not.

For all I know your grandfather had a conversion, somebody maybe even wrote a tract about it. Your dad got saved too, but you were not quite sure whether you did or not. Now real life is upon you and you are dithering. Because you have not seen the seamier side of life the world looks a decent place; you know many decent men and they are not saved, they do not believe in being saved. You say to yourself, 'Are they going to hell? Can I believe that old doctrine of hell that grandfather used to believe?' The world seems very attractive. Your grandfather had a vision of God and was forever talking about him. You mouth the phrases sometimes, you know the language, but is there any reality? It would scarcely take you to the stake if the Communists were here tomorrow. Sometimes the grandchildren of believers stand on difficult and very slippery ground.

Esau

Let us think then for a moment about Esau. I have every admiration for Esau in one sense. He was an outdoor man, rough and hairy, not one of these academics in their ivory towers. Sporty—shooting, hunting and all that kind of stuff. He was a manly man and a good-hearted fellow. He could fly into a rage, particularly with Jacob, that religious hypocrite with his underhanded deals. There was nothing underhanded in Esau. The years wore on, Jacob had his religion and here he was coming to make amends with Esau. Esau thought there was no sense in keeping up old feuds so he forgave him freely and frankly. Esau was a very decent sort of person; but that is not what the Scriptures say about him.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb 12:15–17)

The New Testament's comment is that Esau was a *profane* man (v. 16 KJV). What does that mean? He had no concept of anything sacred; no faith in God, in his word, or in his promise. He lived simply for the present and for the satisfaction of his bodily needs.

I can imagine the conversations between Esau and Jacob. 'I've had enough of it,' says Esau. 'All this talk about believing the Lord. I know I am supposed to be the firstborn, but I've heard that until I am sick of it. God has a great future for our nation and for the world; Messiah is coming and we are going to be the head of the nations—I know it all!' says Esau. 'When this Messiah comes I shall have a special place because I am the firstborn. You don't think I believe it, do you, Jacob? Live for now, enjoy yourself now, don't wait for all these empty promises of the future!'

One day Esau came in from hunting and was feeling hungry. With wild exaggeration he says to Jacob, 'I am about to die!' When there was not much else for him in life except eating and drinking, if he did not get a good square meal what was there? There are some businessmen and that's what they live for too; they have a big meal here and a big meal there and then they have a bigger meal somewhere else. Esau was like that. He had gone without breakfast and lunch and now he had no dinner. O, what was his life?

And it so happened that at this moment Jacob was cooking a little bit of pottage.

'Give me of your pottage,' he says.

Jacob was never slow to see a possible business deal. 'Yes,' he said, 'I could perhaps give you a little bit, but I shall want my price.'

'And what would you want?' says Esau.

'I would want your birthright,' said Jacob.

'Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"' (Gen 25:32). Esau sold the birthright and went away feeling supremely satisfied with a plateful of pottage, having abandoned completely all faith and hope in any future with Christ.

What is life about? Is it eating and drinking, hunting and a bit of sport and satisfying your physical needs? Don't take me up the wrong way; there is nothing wrong with satisfying your

physical needs. But is that all? What about the future and the claims of Christ? What about God's promise that Jesus shall come again? Have you any interest in his second coming, any hope to be in his kingdom—any thought of having a place of honour and dignity with him? Like that broken, disillusioned, political activist that hung on the cross beside our Lord, have you ever said, 'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom'? (Luke 23:42), or do you believe that all those hopes are nothing?

The pottage was red and the Hebrew word for red is *Edom*, so Esau was called Edom. And we may trace the influence of his choice down through the centuries with his people. Let me quote you just one famous example. In the time of our Lord there were certain rulers in his country called *Herod*. They were all 'tarred with the same brush,' and had the same outlook. Nationally they were not Jews but Edomites; the New Testament quotes their name in the Greek form, *Idumeans*. The Herods were Idumeans, that is, Edomites.

'And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod"' (Mark 8:15). Herod too had his pottage, so I say in your ears a double warning, 'Beware of Esau's pottage and beware of the leaven of Herod.'

Herod the Great

What does that mean? Let's take the first Herod, Herod the Great. He was not against religion if he got some political advantage out of it. He was not a Jew, but he had great aspirations to being king of the Jews. Now there were some Jews, even in his day, who still believed the prophecies of the Old Testament. One day the Messiah should come and he would rule from one end of the earth to the other and Israel should be God's firstborn nation. 'Let them believe it; it will keep them quiet. It's always good to have a little religion to keep the people satisfied, but I don't believe it,' said Herod.

He got himself the kingdom and a bit of religion goes well with politics, so he built the Jews a temple. Herod was a profane man; he did not believe that God had any purpose. There was no Saviour and no Christ, so he was king.

One day there came a knock at the palace door. It was some very quaint fellows. What on earth did they want? They were Babylonian scientist-philosophers; they were asking where the Christ, the King of the Jews should be born (see Matt 2:1-12).

'I am the king of the Jews!' said Herod.

'We don't mean you, we mean the great Messiah that God is going to send as the Saviour of the world. Where is he?'

'I don't believe that nonsense!' said Herod.

'But we have seen the signs of it. We have seen his star in the east and we have come to worship him.'

It is wonderful what God will do to bring some men to Christ. Those men didn't have the Bible; they had a bit of science and a good deal of 'quackery', they mixed their astronomy with astrology. Are they interested in the stars? Then God will talk to them through the stars—if by any means he might bring them to Christ.

Herod summoned the chief priests and the scribes and they hunted up the Bible. It said that the Messiah should be born in Bethlehem of Judea.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

Then Herod said, 'I would like to see him too. I don't think there's anything in it—but if you should find him, bring me word!' Then he said to himself that he would make sure that it wouldn't come true. He sent out a squad of troops and they murdered all the babies under two years old. He had lived his life without God, believing that this life is all there is. It is very disturbing then, to be faced with fulfilled prophecy, 'The Messiah is born.' That provokes a big contest and battle in a man's heart—am I the king, or is it going to be Christ?

Someone is knocking on your heart. He is not a wise man from the East, but a poor faltering preacher from Belfast. Behind his knuckles is the hand of Christ himself, knocking on your heart; he wants to come in as Lord and King and reconcile you to God. He is offering you forgiveness and salvation, a future more glorious by far than all your 'pottage' put together. His terms are that you receive him as king. Do you believe it? Open your eyes before you decide.

Consider that story, almost at the dawn of history. Israel came into the land, then they were cast out, then they were back in the land again; the final stage was the coming of the great Messiah. That was all fulfilled, then we have those extraordinary prophecies of Jesus Christ our Lord. They did not believe that he was Messiah, but when they were about to crucify him he said,

They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:24–28)

It has happened; Israel was scattered. Now after centuries and centuries Israel is back in her land. Not yet converted, but back. Before you dismiss him from your door, remember that Jesus shall come. Shall he find you trying to be a king yourself, rebelling against him and therefore against God? Or are you ready to greet him and welcome him as Lord?

Jews who had professed to be Christians

There remains one more solemn word. It comes to us from the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is addressed to people who, outwardly at least, professed to be Christians. It is doubtful that they were genuine Christians at heart and I shall tell you why.

They were Jews, Hebrews, Israelites, and the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord had been preached to them. They heard of the wonderful forgiveness through his sacrifice on the cross, peace with God, eternal life and a place in his coming kingdom. Recently Christianity had begun to get unpopular and persecution had broken out. Because of their profession of faith

in Christ, many of these good folks had lost their jobs and their homes and some of them had lost their lives. Into many of them there came that empty feeling and they had terrible doubts. Is this thing real? Once they had been good and religious, they had gone to their synagogues and to the temple in Jerusalem; they had been on good terms with everybody. Then they had professed to believe in Jesus—that he was the Son of God and one day he would come again. ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay’ (Heb 10:37).

But he had not come yet and there was this empty feeling. Their persecution and loss had raised very big questions—Is Jesus real? Was he coming again? Could they afford all this loss? What if Christianity was not true? Some of them stopped coming to the meetings of the Christians (10:25)—that is always a dangerous sign. Did they believe or not? Perhaps they were believers who had grown cold, or perhaps they had never really been saved.

What would you say to them? When their inspired shepherd and pastor takes his pen to write, his mind goes back to the Old Testament, to a boy born in a believing family. His name was Esau. He had been brought up to believe all the prophecies and promises about the coming of the great Messiah and he made his decision. He was not going to have this empty feeling, he demanded to have his stomach full now and chucked his birthright, ‘He sold his birthright for a single meal’ (Heb 12:16).

And with that birthright went the blessing. One day Esau woke up. He was not for the believing, but he wanted the blessing. Don’t we all? We want the joy of life, we want the future, we want life to have meaning and we want the blessing. So he came to his father and said, ‘Bless me!’ (Gen 27:31).

His father Isaac said to him, ‘Who are you?’ He answered, ‘I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.’ Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, ‘Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.’ As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, ‘Bless me, even me also, O my father!’ (vv. 32–34)

It is no use repenting because the thing cannot be undone. There are some things in life that once you do them they can never be undone. ‘For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears’ (Heb 12:17).

Let us get it clear. You can always repent, in the sense of trusting Christ for salvation. Though you have wandered for many years, you can come back to Christ even at the end of life in genuine repentance, as the prodigal son came to his father. The Father’s arms will receive you, but remember that there are some things that cannot be undone, no matter how much you repent. Dear Christian, you trusted Christ and now you have wandered. Come back and confess it, God will receive you. But not all the repentance in the world will give back your life that has been wasted and gone forever.

There is salvation for all those that trust Christ. There is a crown of glory for those that follow him and suffer with him. There is a place in his government with him. There are honours and occupations, offices and responsibilities that are bright with glory and joy and fascinating interest. God’s desire is not merely that we should be saved, be with Christ when

he reigns, but actually and positively to reign with him, serve in the government and execute office under Christ.

A believer can waste his or her life apart from Christ; faith in his coming grows dim and we can live for present satisfaction just like the world. When we repent he will accept us, but there will be no reigning with him, no reward. Many bitter tears cannot bring back a life that has been wasted. 'If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (1 Cor 3:15).

May the Lord write these things upon our hearts and make himself real. If needs be, let us now repent, turn to God in prayer, ask him to renew within us the reality of his promise and the glory of our Lord's coming.

The Blessing of the Lord

Genesis 26–28

We are moving on again in our study of Genesis, and you will see that the dominant theme in this part of the book is the topic of *blessing*.

What is meant by 'blessing'?

When Christians come across the word 'blessing,' inevitably our minds go to the New Testament, and we think of all those spiritual blessings with which God has blessed us in Christ. To us the blessing of God is predominantly a spiritual thing, for we live in an advanced age when the purposes of God have been very fully developed. We are taught that the reality of those spiritual blessings in the heavenlies is greater than anything that could possibly be here in this temporary world.

The promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob included more than material blessings

However, when these chapters in Genesis speak of blessing, they are thinking in particular of God's blessing in material affairs; in the provision of bread and corn, wells and water, sheep and cattle, wives and children. Yes, it is true that in the distance there are bigger blessings, some of them vaguely described but real enough, that these early patriarchs set their hopes on and embraced. They saw them afar off and welcomed them.

The great promises of God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for instance—kings would come of their offspring. One day they would have the privilege of reigning for God and the glorious prospect that through them all the nations of the world would be blessed. We can read from the beginning to the end of the book and we know what was hidden from Isaac at this stage. God's blessing for him would not merely be the provision of an odd well or two in the land of Canaan; one day his son Jacob would go down to Egypt. In the stateliness of his old age, with a lot of experience and in the consciousness of the blessing and presence of God, he would lift up his hands and bless Pharaoh himself. He would be aware that 'the lesser was being blessed by the greater.' He would be conscious that he, Jacob, was the greatest man in all the then known world. He was so much greater than Pharaoh himself that he had the right to bless Pharaoh.

And we can read on to the end of the Bible and see that when God made these great promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the far off distance there was that great omnipotent figure of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. So, even in those early days, God's blessing to these men included vast spiritual and eternal things.

While that was so, they had still to live. It was a great blessing to be the bearers of God's promises and to have faith enough to count upon them as realities. They were pilgrims on foot and pilgrims in spirit, looking for the great and eternal city. But they still had to have their porridge in the morning like everybody else, and porridge doesn't grow on trees. Whilst spiritual things are doubtless pre-eminent, you cannot have spiritual things in this world without first having physical things. And so, not unnaturally, they thought of God's blessing in terms of material things; corn, crops, water, digging wells, marrying wives, having children and all the other things that comprise life in this world.

We too can experience God's blessing in the provision of our material needs

I trust that we have got our values right; at least that we hope we have. The biggest things in life are the spiritual things, but I hope we are down to earth enough to see that we cannot even have those without being dependent on God for his blessing in material things. We still have to live. In spirit we may be 'seated with Christ in the heavenly places,' but our feet are very much on terra firma. We still need houses, we still have to pay the rates and electricity, we still have to find water and tea and milk from somewhere. These chapters are a tremendous encouragement for us also. At the very practical level we can have an experience of God, knowing his blessing in the daily provision of our material needs.

Isaac

So we are told that God blessed Isaac. He was a very timid man; brought up under the shadow of the great Abraham, perhaps that is not surprising. The sons of great fathers with tremendous personalities are often overshadowed by them, remaining for the rest of their lives rather lesser personalities. Isaac was one of those. In addition to that, he had a problem that Abraham did not have. Isaac was not called upon to pioneer some great spiritual movement. He didn't experience all the romance of setting out from Ur of the Chaldeans and coming to Haran, moving into the unknown with God in the true pioneer spirit of discovery. Isaac was just asked to stay at home and maintain the vision that Abraham had won.

Sometimes that is a harder task. It is tough, even at the spiritual level, to be a pioneer evangelist, preaching in odd places and setting up churches. But when they have been set up and the fizz and excitement has died down, to go on maintaining them calls for a different, if not a bigger, kind of patience.

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the LORD appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.' (26:1-5).

Life for Isaac would have been more difficult if he had not had these glorious promises for the future. When there came a famine, Isaac was for saying, 'I shall have to get me down to Egypt.' 'No!' says God, 'I want you to stay put and maintain the vision that I have given to your father.' But with supplies running out it wasn't so pleasant. He had to maintain this vision, but even getting his daily bread and butter was a bit more difficult.

Then there was another complication for the dear man. He was living as a pilgrim in a country where really he had no legal rights. The Philistines and their kings were well established. If they really understood Isaac's vision, they must not have been altogether pleased with him. Kings shall come of Isaac! I can imagine Abimelech saying, 'Really? Well then we had better take precautions that they do not come around here!' Ordinary everyday life for a man like Isaac was that bit more difficult than for an unbeliever like Abimelech.

The same things remain true of us

You could have it easier if you did not have to tithe your money. (Or do you do more than tithe it?) It would be easier too, if you had no responsibility to your church, to missionaries, to those around you. If you didn't have to attend weeknight and Sunday meetings and spend time as an elder in pastoral work, look at the things you could do. You would have a lot more spare cash and you could devote a lot more time to your business. But just the sheer fact that you are a believer carries extra responsibilities that the man of the world doesn't have. It makes life just that little bit more difficult. You may find that the worldly man is utterly unprincipled and the spirit of competition is so enormous that as a believer you are going to come a little bit unstuck.

That is what Isaac found. He dug a well, it was all his own effort; in fact, it was a well that Abraham had pioneered. 'And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham' (v. 18). But when the Philistines saw that he had struck something good they drove him off. If Isaac had been like some men he would have contested them, but he was not in a position to do that so he tried another well.

But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, 'The water is ours.' So he called the name of the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarrelled over that also, so he called its name Sitnah. (vv. 19-21)

Life was that little bit more difficult for him, and will be for us too. In a world where competition is heavy some unconverted men are not too choosy as to what principles they will use to compete and snatch what you have. But it was in that situation that God blessed Isaac. In the years when he particularly needed it and things were very difficult, God blessed him with an unusually heavy crop, 'He reaped in the same year a hundredfold' (vv. 12-13). He didn't do it every year, but it was marvellously providential in that particular year. In spite of the unprincipled competition God made room for Isaac, provided him with water and corn and gave him a niche in the business world of the time.

God appeared to Isaac and blessed him

The biggest blessing was that, in the ordinary round of his daily tasks, Isaac had an experience of the Lord. Twice over we are told that the Lord appeared to Isaac (vv. 2, 24). He repeated his promises of blessing, but geared them now to Isaac's immediate business circumstances.

And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, 'For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.' From there he went up to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.' So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD. (vv. 22–25)

God had at last made room for them, and when they had dug the well Isaac built an altar. What a lovely thing it was for him to sit down by the well and his altar, and for God to appear to him. What a blessing! We enjoy God's provisions for us and eat our food in the knowledge that God has given it to us. There is an extra dimension that defies description and only they who have experienced it know what it is. The Lord himself appears.

Does the Lord appear to us today?

'But wasn't that a long time ago?' someone says. 'Does the Lord appear to us in business today?' I should hope so! This is an interesting term, used in the New Testament,

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. (John 14:18–21)

And Judas (not Iscariot) at once began to scratch his head, and said,

'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.' (vv. 22–24)

Recognizing him

And so that we should not be left wondering what this means, at the end of the Gospels certain illustrations are given of what it means to have the Saviour appear in the daily affairs of life. In those days before he went home to heaven he appeared bodily; he does not guarantee to do that to us and yet he has promised to appear to us. He appeared to two men as they walked on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to them in their study of the Scriptures, he appeared to them in the breaking of bread and they knew in their hearts that it was the Lord.

But think for our purposes of another occasion. Obeying the commission they had received from our Lord, Peter and the apostles went up to Galilee. The risen Lord was going to appear to them, some great spiritual experience was going to burst on them. What would you have

done—perhaps you would have prayed and sung some hymns? Says Peter, ‘I am going fishing!’ Sensible man; spirituality has never meant that £5 notes come floating down from heaven. Of course he was going to be charged with great spiritual responsibilities, but you have got to eat. Forty days is a long time to wait; was he just going to sit there and expect some dear sisters to turn up with fish? Of course not, so he goes a-fishing.

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, do you have any fish?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:1–14)

The Lord appeared to them, he was merely a stranger on the shore as far as they knew. After fruitless hours of toil, the stranger directed them and suddenly their nets were full. In that very moment they sensed that this was not an ordinary thing. There was something in their very spirits that sensed it; ‘It is the Lord!’ He appeared to them in their daily work and when they came ashore he already had breakfast cooking for them. I guarantee never had fish tasted so marvellous. That fish, cooked and handed to you by Christ, was better than any five-course dinner.

O what a wonderful thing it is, yet you could never prove it maybe, not even to your fellow believer. In your need—in your job, your child’s health, or whatever it may be—you sense in your spirit that help has come from the Lord’s hand and you sensed his presence. What a barren thing it would be to go through life without it, even though our coffers were so full that they spilled over. Someone may say, ‘But isn’t this liable to abuse? We might imagine that it was the Lord blessing us when perhaps it wasn’t him at all. It’s easy to think that it is the Lord when things go well and to doubt him when they don’t. And we can add another danger—it is so easy to think that somehow we are God’s blue-eyed favourites and he is bound to bless us before other people.

But we shall see that Jacob made those mistakes. We shall learn how, painfully at times, God had to train him and teach him the difference between his blessing and spoilt-boy

favouritism, which was a figment of Jacob's imagination. And we shall see God's hand of blessing in the crippling things of life too. That will be for our future studies. But let us just now enjoy the wonder of the reality of knowing God, knowing his blessing and his appearing to us in the details of our daily life.

Where the heart of blessing lies

But then we must move on to our second major lesson. Not as to what blessing is exactly, but where its heart lies. We come to a very sad story. Isaac, the man who experienced the blessing of God, is deceived on this very topic. Isn't it a curious thing that the men whom God used to teach the great lessons of Scripture and seem to be giants, when it comes to learning them, are the very men who make the biggest mistakes in that very topic? We need to praise God, not merely for the successes but for the mistakes of other men; we can learn from their experiences. Isaac made one tremendous mistake over this matter of blessing.

As father of the race he had now grown old and it came the time when he must bless his son. In the ancient world blessing a son was not merely saying, 'I hope you live happily ever after. God be with you!' Committing the blessing of the family to the firstborn son was an exercise of faith. It actually conferred upon him the privilege and the blessing that God had designed, so Isaac comes to do this solemn and responsible task of handing on the blessings to his posterity.

He made his mistake for two reasons, or perhaps they are one and the same. Isaac had the clear word of God to him and to his wife. While Esau and Jacob were in the womb and not yet born, God said to Rebekah,

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger. (25:23)

If Isaac had acted as he should he would have conferred the blessing directly on Jacob, but he didn't. Why not? Because he loved Esau. Esau was his older son and older boys sometimes get spoiled. Fathers think that there is none like them. But it was not merely because Esau was naturally the firstborn, there was another reason.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (25:27-28)

Did Isaac love Esau because Esau was a very spiritual lad? No. Was it because he saw Esau had great potentiality for God? No. Isaac loved Esau because Esau was very good at cooking venison as Isaac liked it. Was that the reason? Wait just a moment before you condemn Isaac too hard. Venison was a blessing from God, wasn't it? Haven't we been labouring the point that the blessing of God to them very often meant food, and water to drink? What was wrong, therefore, with enjoying venison—wasn't it the blessing of God?

If you deliberately turn away from the word of God and his written will and go down another path simply because you like venison, then you are bound to come unstuck. It is not

always our flagrant sins that take us away; it is sometimes the most innocent things that in themselves are quite good. But because we enjoy them we are all stupid enough at times to let our preferences and our enjoyments take us away from the declared word of God. Sometimes spiritual life can be fairly hard. When you are faced with a lovely big bowl of soup, the smell of delightful, tender meat and a few Brussels sprouts, what a real thing it is. God doesn't expect us to turn our backs on Brussels sprouts and just go for something that we do not like.

What do we mean by *blessing*? We need to watch, lest we think that the blessing is the gift itself—as long as we have the gift we have the blessing. That is not true; you cannot have the blessing without the giver of the gift.

Seeking first the kingdom of God

That was the first temptation put to our Lord (Matt 4:1–11). 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' There is nothing wrong with bread; 'Man shall not live simply by bread alone,' says Christ. Turning our backs on the word and will of God, we go for what we consider is the best and highest blessing. We shall find presently that the gravy loses its flavour and the tender meat gets a bit tough. That's the start of the slippery slope. Unless we very soon see our mistake and turn back to the Lord in repentance we shall then imagine that we did not enjoy that particular plate of venison because there was not quite enough of it. So we heap the venison on, only to get progressively worse indigestion. We then have a sense of God evaporating and getting more distant. The very heart of the lesson is that blessing resides in the blesser. If need be, we must learn to put aside our preferences and follow him and his word. 'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matt 6:33).

The emotion of it all

Isaac made another big mistake over his blessing. And for that I shall have to explain things a little bit in detail, so forgive a lesson or two in psychology. Let us consider ourselves for just a moment—what intricate and complicated creatures we are!

Somebody gives you a gift on your birthday. You didn't think that he was going to give you a gift because you forgot his birthday, so you wonder why he should give you a gift. And then the gift is so much more than you ever expected and just the thing you wanted. You feel overwhelmed with it, a bit of emotion flutters in your breast and perhaps a lump in your throat. Consider what is happening to you. The gift is valuable in itself; then there's the loving-kindness of the giver. You had all those emotions of joy and gladness and surprise—you got a gift and then you got the emotions.

God in his mercy has made us and given us a little extra. He made us capable of feeling emotion and when we feel emotion it spills over into sensation. Some folks feel very deeply moved and their skin goes like goose pimples, somebody else will shed a tear or two. So now we have three things. There's the original gift; the emotions it provoked; and then the sensations that were expressed as a result of the emotions.

Sensations are not the real centre of blessing

Sensations are very funny things. You hit somebody hard on the head or tread on his toe and he cries, you give him a marvellous gift and he cries again. The same sensation as before, but one time it's tears of pain and sorrow, the next time it's tears of joy. The same kind of sensation but it serves to express different things. As an outsider, if you saw a woman shedding tears, you couldn't really be guided by sensations. Is she shedding tears for joy or sorrow?

So, we have the gift, then the emotions and then the sensations. And it is important that we get the right end of the stick and know where the blessing really resides. Consider some very homely examples—I will come to more exalted spiritual things in a minute.

A man comes into the dining room and he is ravenously hungry. His wife has the place mats out and the knives and forks and the food and all the rest of the things. He eats the good food; it comes with the loving-kindness of his wife and that is even better. Between mouthfuls he thanks her, saying, 'Thank you, my darling, this is superb, I am glad that I married you!' He is enjoying it and wishes that those lovely taste sensations would last a little bit longer. So he knows that the food is doing him good physically, but it has this extra and additional gift. He has got a lovely sensation and so he gets through his dinner. Two hours later his wife comes into the dining room and the chap is still sitting at the table.

'What are you doing here? You are never still hungry!'

'No, my dear,' he says, 'I am not hungry.'

'Well then, what are you doing still sitting at the table?'

'I got such a lovely sensation when I ate that dinner that I am trying to work up the feeling again; I am worried because I have kind of lost it.'

'Don't be absurd, go to bed and rest your head a bit!' she would say.

It's daft looking for sensations like that. Sensations are things that come when you are doing something else, but to make the sensation the whole goal of the thing would be nonsense.

Let's come up a peg or two. I am told that people sometimes fall out with each other, fathers and sons, husbands and wives. It's a miserable affair, but then comes that exquisite moment when it is all over and they make up. It's a lovely feeling, you couldn't really describe it. But what would you think of a couple that constantly had rows in order to have the lovely sensation of making up?

Let's come infinitely higher. Once we were guilty sinners, burdened with feelings of guilt and distant from God. When the Holy Spirit applied his word to our hearts we felt absolutely miserable. Then came the moment of repentance and faith and we were forgiven. But it did not register merely as a logical fact; it thrilled our hearts with all sorts of emotions—the wonderful relief, the joy, the peace of it. And if our guilt had been really deep, the feeling of relief probably gave vent to a tear or two.

What would you think if you found a believer ten years later, still wishing that he could get that feeling of contrition back? It looks like the man is seeking the sensation because it was a nice sensation. I hope that you have been walking so near the Lord that you don't need those sensations of having that deep guilt complex resolved. Isn't it wonderful to be forgiven? Yes, of course it is! But the real centre of the blessing was not in the tears of repentance or the feelings when you came to Christ and he forgave you and saved you; the real centre of the

blessing was in the forgiveness and you have still got that. It was in the fact that Christ had received you and you have still got that.

If now you are not feeling goose pimples and constantly shedding buckets of tears, that does not mean you have lost the gift of forgiveness. But it happens at the spiritual level that sometimes we mistake where the real centre of the blessing lies and we go chasing feelings and sensations. God gives us plenty of feelings and sensations. If you had a great preacher come and preach so that he lifted you up to the very heavens with delight, you would go out saying, 'Isn't God good!' and 'Hallelujah!' Your blood pressure would be up a bit, your adrenalin working and you would get all sorts of sensations. And suppose God sent another preacher and he had to call you to repentance and put his finger on some sore spots, which made you squirm, that would be God's blessing too. If we were guided by pleasant sensations, we should want to avoid the nasty bits and thus avoid some of God's blessings.

Isaac deceived by his physical senses

We have been thinking of how Isaac made a desperately bad mistake over this matter of blessing. First of all he went against the word of God out of preference for his own likes. Now he is facing the task of blessing his son 'in the name of the Lord'. Surely he will have to work up a suitable sort of a feeling, get some atmosphere around it. Could he not just claim the Lord's word as meaning what it said, and say, 'God has said that I should bless Jacob'? But Isaac didn't see that that was good enough.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, 'My son'; and he answered, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.' (27:1-4)

So Esau went his way. Rebekah was listening at the door. She said, 'God said that my boy Jacob is the one who is going to have the blessing.' And you know the story, how she dressed him up and cooked a bit of tinned meat and put in the artificial flavouring to represent venison. She got it all done very quickly and Jacob went in.

Now watch Isaac and his five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. When it comes to the blessing *his eyes are dim*. 'Who are you?' he said. And the voice came back, 'I am Esau.' 'You sound like Jacob,' he said. You must make sure of these things; he didn't want to bless Jacob by mistake. It was against God's word, but Isaac was determined to bless Esau. He said, 'Come here, my boy, *let me feel you*.' 'I have got a hold of something now. I can feel it and it's nice and hairy so this must be real.' 'Give me the venison,' he said, 'so that *I can taste it*. Delicious!' And finally, just to make sure, he said, 'Come here and *let me smell you*!' If I were going to decide what blessing is, I should not like to rest it on the smell of Esau when he had just come home from hunting; that would not be my idea of blessing. Fancy being guided by your smell at such a situation!

It was sad, because all the things that convinced him that he was right were the very things that were wrong. He went by *touch*; but it was not Esau, it was Jacob. He thought he was an

expert in *tasting* venison, but it was not venison; it was cooked up in the way Rebekah knew it would deceive. And he went by *smell*, but it was not Esau. He had been cruelly deceived. Instead of resting on God's word he went by his sensations.

Blessing comes through seeking the Lord and believing his word

It seems to me that we should not be above learning the lesson. We may not have to learn it at this lowly, elementary level, but it applies at the spiritual level. If you want blessings, learn to seek the Lord and learn to believe his word. Thank God for every emotion and sensation he gives you as a result of believing his word and having fellowship with him. He will from time to time fill you with the most delightful emotions and their consequent sensations; but you will be most cruelly deceived if you base your idea of blessing on sensations.

If we use sensation as a judge of how well we are getting on, what is going to happen in the days when we are in the midst of bereavement, harassment, maybe partial nervous breakdown, with all sorts of curious sensations? How the devil could deceive! If we know that the blessing is in Christ, his declared word and his promise, and dare to believe it, we shall be saved. In those days when believing the promise and experiencing the Lord brings emotions of joy and sensations of blessing and also in days when believing God's word and trusting the Saviour does not bring great emotions of joy, but perhaps solemn sensations of difficulty. And we shall be saved in the deeper sense, for it is possible to be sinful even at the spiritual level.

In our unconverted days our feelings were generally the guide and yardstick. It was what we enjoyed, what we wanted to do—these were the yardsticks of whether life was successful. It is all too easy in spiritual life to slip into the notion that satisfaction is the final yardstick. We will come to the meetings if we enjoy them, do the Lord's work if we enjoy it. If trials should come, hard work or experiences that we do not enjoy—cut it! Before we know it, we have turned spirituality back to front. Instead of seeking God and enjoying what emotions and feelings he gives us, we turn it back to front and seek our own emotional sensations with God tacked on to the end to make it look respectable. But we then leave ourselves open to being deceived.

That was a curious sermon, but it seems to me to be practical and necessary.

God makes himself known through his gifts

Let us end on a positive note. God has redeemed us and he is concerned for our eternal blessing in spiritual things, yet he stands beside our breakfast table, our workbench, our sewing machine, longing to bless us. In the last analysis, all the gifts and paraphernalia in life are but the external things through which God is making himself known to us.

God grant us the wisdom not merely to content ourselves with the blessings we get once a week at the prayer meeting for an hour and a half; or with the blessings we get through reading his word morning and night (if we read it); may God save us from throwing away eight hours a day every day of the week. Let us endeavour to walk in his fear and expect to see him in this and that circumstance of our business life.

May the very thorn bush of the desert from time to time glow with the burning fire of the presence of the Lord, and we come in from keeping the sheep not merely glad that this year

we have got more lambs than ever, but with the sense of the very presence of God upon us. At our daily work the Lord appeared to us, we knew him plainly and felt close to him.

God's Government—His Sovereignty and Our Responsibility

Genesis 30–32

We have a very large amount of ground to try and cover in this present session. In addition, like the psalmist, I shall be exercising myself in things that are too wonderful for me.

The bulk of our study has to do with the relation of our faith in God to the way we conduct our normal daily business and really it should be an experienced businessman that stands before you, who has some good common sense in his head and not just theories. With his business experience he could put before us what holy Scripture lays down as the standards required of those who profess the name of our Lord Jesus. But you will have to put up with the preacher that you have. If I cannot give you the answers that a businessman would be equipped to give you, I can at least begin to get you going back to the word of God, thinking again of these Old Testament stories and allowing you to exercise your moral judgment. In considering such a large amount of material, we shall have to content ourselves with the broad principles that are raised by these Old Testament stories.

When the Apostle Paul comments on the passage you will notice that he chooses to point to the great sovereign choice of God in the lives of these two men. 'As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"' (Rom 9:13). Indeed, there is scarcely a scripture that is starker in its announcement of the sovereignty of God—his absolute sovereign choice. It reminds us that even before Jacob and Esau were born, and while yet they had done nothing at all, neither good nor evil, God made this sovereign pronouncement that the elder should serve the younger. It appears that his sovereign purpose was not dependent upon man's merit or choice, but he had sovereignly ordained that the elder should serve the younger.

I want to begin our study with this consideration and to let it be our guiding light throughout all these chapters. We are going to consider the government of God and the relation in his government between his sovereign will, choice and purpose on the one hand, and our human responsibility and response upon the other.

I am not going to launch into a profound theological discussion upon the merits and demerits of Calvinism or Arminianism; my purpose is much more practical. If this section of Genesis is about preparing God's people to take over the government of earth with Christ, then it is natural and very much to the point that it should tell us certain lessons about God's government; what part his sovereign will and purpose play in our lives, and what part our own choice, freedom and responsibility play. If one day we are going to be put into positions of sacred responsibility, controlling other people's lives in the name of our Lord and sovereign, God will require us in this life to know something of his government of us and our willing cooperation in learning the lessons that his wise government would lay before us.

This part of Genesis is concerned with the turning of Hebrews into Israelites, into men that have power with God. We have the great lessons of Bethel, the house of God; God as the supreme governor with his vast civil service of angels ascending and descending on the ladder. It is concerned with the very gate of heaven, the place where God's government sits to execute the daily administration of the city and its surrounds. So these two matters – God's sovereignty and our responsibility – are going to come very much to the fore.

Let us from the beginning notice these two principles:

1. God chooses one man for government and responsibility
2. He does not choose another man

This is solely a question of God's sovereign will and the reason God does it that way is explained to us in Romans 9, '(For *the children* being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth)' (v. 11 KJV).

The emphasis in the passage is on the verb, 'So that the purpose of God according to election might *stand*.' The great governor of the universe does not intend to have his own great purposes and plans for the universe altogether dependent upon the whim of his creature. I would wonder how much God would get done if in the last analysis his purposes were dependent upon us. What an intolerable slavery it would be for the Almighty. And because he is God, and he is the absolute Creator who designed it all according to his will, then he proceeds by sovereign choice and will so that his purpose may stand. In the last analysis nothing and nobody shall be able to undermine or diminish that purpose.

In that sense then, God's purpose is not according to our works. His purpose in choosing Jacob had nothing to do with Jacob's merits or with Esau's demerits. It was solely that the purpose of God according to election might stand. While that is so, let us now notice two other major principles.

God had chosen that the birthright should go to Jacob

Does that mean that Esau could not help himself; had he no say in the matter? Was Esau a puppet on strings who could do only what God had foreordained? No, it does not mean that Esau can no longer be blamed for the choice he made.

God's sovereignty is matched by Esau's complete freedom

Esau chose deliberately and he did not choose something he found unpleasant. At that moment he thought the steaming hot pottage was absolutely gorgeous. He chose completely according to his own wishes and preferences and must be held responsible for his choice.

That is true at all levels. The sinner that at last perishes forever shall never be able to say to God, 'But God, I could not help it; you did not choose me.' They shall perish, not because they were bad; they shall perish because they would not believe.

There are some theologians who would tell us that those who are not chosen (the non-elect) were going to perish anyway. They perish because they were bad sinners; because of all

the wrong things they did they deserve to perish. But that is not true. Scripture is exceedingly clear on the matter.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11–12, 15)

At the great white throne, when the dead shall be summoned at the final judgment, several different books are opened. There is a book of works from which the dead shall be judged. But then, note exactly what Scripture says, 'If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.' It is exceedingly important that we notice it does not say that if anybody's bad deeds amounted to so much he was cast into the lake of fire. How does anybody's name get written in the book of life? Not for doing good works, it is solely by God's grace as a result of our personal faith in Christ. If God judges a person because he would not believe, that in itself is evidence that he could have believed if he had chosen to. God will never condemn anyone for not doing what he could not do.

But I must come back from that digression. Esau is blamed in Holy Scripture for the choice he made,

Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb 12:16–17)

The fact that God had chosen to give the birthright to Jacob does not excuse Esau for deliberately selling and despising it.

But what about the other side? We have been concerned largely with Jacob. He wanted the birthright and was delighted when his mother told him that God's plan was for him to be the ruler and the birthright should be his. So, let us learn a third lesson.

If God chooses someone for a certain purpose and role in life, that does not mean God approves of everything the person does; not even everything he does in order to achieve God's purpose

God had destined Jacob to have the birthright and to bless him exceedingly. God adhered to his purpose; God said that in him and in his seed all the nations of the world should be blessed. There came the crowning moment in Jacob's life when he stood in the presence of Pharaoh and blessed him. In blessing the greatest monarch in the then known world, Jacob was conscious of his own superiority. God fulfilled what he said he would fulfil. Does that mean God approved of everything Jacob did in order to get the birthright? No. And it will be our task now to see two things.

1. What Jacob got up to
2. How God had to bring him at last to repentance

So let us come to the actual story. First of all, notice the way Jacob got the actual birthright.

An explanation of the birthright

Let me tell you something about birthrights. In the ancient world birthrights contained two parts. There was (in the broadest possible sense) the spiritual side of it, and there was the downright material side of it. In material terms it meant that the one who held the birthright had a double portion of the inheritance and in the ancient world you could buy and sell birthrights. We have records to that fact. At Newby there is the record of a birthright, where somebody sold half of it and whoever bought it gave three sheep for it. Birthrights differed in value. If I had one you would not obviously pay much for it, but if Onassis had one you would pay a lot for it. It was the kind of thing that was done. If a man who had a birthright was hard up for cash and he could not touch the money until his father passed away, he could sell it and get ready cash. The man who bought it would regard it as a long-term investment.

Jacob wanted to get hold of this birthright. He felt God was on his side; God had promised that he should have it. So one day Esau came in from hunting. He was very hungry, and exceedingly stupid and profane into the bargain.

‘I must have some porridge,’ he said.

‘I will do a deal with you,’ says Jacob. ‘Sell me your birthright.’

‘What will you give me for it?’ says Esau.

‘A bowl of porridge!’ said Jacob.

How’s that for a deal—a bowl of porridge for a whole birthright. I wonder that Esau did not get the stuff and slosh it over his head! Esau was in dire need—at least he thought he was. He was about to faint. He was a chap who could not control his desires and his lusts. If porridge was on the scene and he felt that he needed porridge, then he must have porridge. He didn’t have a very good sense of comparative values in life, whereas Jacob had.

Let me bring it to daily affairs. An old school friend has grown up, become a man and inherited quite a large estate. But he is an alcoholic and has drunk away quite a lot of his fortune and practically all his ready cash.

One day he asks to see you, and he says, ‘I must have one thousand pounds.’

‘Sorry, money is tight,’ you say. ‘But wait a minute, what is that picture on your wall over there? I will give you one thousand pounds for it.’

It is a Rembrandt worth two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and you know it is. You see that the man is in difficulty and now is your chance. Taking advantage of the fact that he is an alcoholic and has got himself in a mess, you get the Rembrandt for one thousand pounds. You are a clearheaded businessman on your way to glory; you think God is on your side and this is extraordinary guidance. You could not be put in jail for it, my brother. I am not a businessman, but I get the impression that you will not be expected to carry on business like that for Christ in the millennium!

It was God’s will that Jacob should have the birthright. Therefore, did God approve of the method? We shall see about that later on. The Bible only blames Esau, it does not blame Jacob. Just wait—we are only beginning the story. ‘The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding sure.’

It was God's design to give Jacob the birthright and with it the blessing. When Jacob took the blessing Esau got very upset and vowed to murder the man. He had made the bargain, sworn his oath and he knew that he was swearing away the birthright. It was quite legal that with the birthright went the special blessing, so he ought to have been prepared for Jacob to come and take the blessing.

But it was the way Jacob got the blessing that made him angry. Isaac was preparing to bless Esau, quite in disobedience to the word of God. I dare say Rebekah and Jacob got a little bit nervous.

'God said that this was to be yours, Jacob.'

'And moreover,' said Jacob, 'I paid for that birthright; I have got my rights to it.'

'God helps those who help themselves.'

So they went through this charade and pretence and told some whopping lies. Yes, they got the blessing but do you suppose God approved of it? Someone will say, 'Surely it fulfilled his purpose—God wanted Jacob to have the blessing.' But you don't have to help the Almighty to fulfil his purpose by telling a few lies, do you? The end does not justify the means; God does not expect us to further his purposes by unchristian and immoral behaviour.

Jacob leaves home

Things got a bit hot in that home. It was the way Jacob got it that so enraged Esau. 'He stole it,' he said. In a sense he did. It was his by right, but, when he got by deceit what God would have given him without deceit, he was stealing.

Esau said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.' (27:36)

So, on the spur of the moment, Esau threatened to murder Jacob. Certainly, he wouldn't be attending any gospel meetings that Jacob might be having. Then Rebekah got a sudden wave of spirituality. 'If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?' (v. 46). So she said to Isaac, 'Look at these ungodly girls that Esau married. Jacob must not marry an unbeliever.' (It would be more convincing if he did not behave like one.) 'We must send him away.' What she was actually concerned about was getting him safe out of Esau's reach, but it sounded good to father Isaac, so off he went.

Bethel

Now the great story begins. Jacob leaves home for the first time to go and get himself a job. Many a youth has been in that situation, going out on that first step in life. Their first time really away from home, standing on their own two feet to make their way in the world. How kind God was. God had not approved of what Jacob had done, but he has his purpose and he is going to fulfil it in Jacob. He will bring Jacob to the glory he promised and we shall soon find how he did it.

The first night away from home Jacob found a stone and rested his head on it. He could not scheme any more and he fell asleep. In his dreams he saw a ladder set up on the earth and its top reached towards heaven.

Notice that it was not let down from heaven with the bottom nearly reaching earth, it was set up on earth and the top reached towards heaven. The angels of God were first ascending and then descending when their task was finished. Where did God stand? Some translations say that God stood 'above' the ladder (28:13), and if you chose it no one can say that you are wrong. But the Hebrew preposition is vague and can also mean 'beside'. It is the same preposition that is used in 18:2, when Abraham was sitting at his tent door in the heat of the day. 'He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.' They came and stood by his side.

It is the same preposition here; God stood beside the ladder. When Jacob woke up, he remarked, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it' (28:16). The wonder of the revelation! It would have been no news to Jacob to have a vision that told him that God was in his heaven. Jacob had believed that for a long while. That was very convenient sometimes, if you had rather a hard bargain to push with the man next door. But it would have been more difficult if God had been at his elbow when he was all dressed up to deceive Isaac. It would have been uncomfortable to feel that God was by his side then. 'And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"' (v. 17).

'The Lord is in this place.' I do not know whether this text raises me up to heaven with delight, or casts me down on my knees in repentance. If I could write 'God is in this place' on the wall of my study, my games room, my business room, how many times should I have to add, 'and I did not know it'? Our Lord Jesus later taught us that one greater than the temple is here (Matt 12:6). What a magnificent blessing it would be to go through life knowing that wherever I am, 'God is in this place' —and I didn't forget it.

Listen to what God is saying Jacob,

And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' (28:13-15)

What a message that is for a young man leaving home to go for his first job, to know that God is with him, God has a purpose for his life and he is determined that his purpose will be fulfilled. 'I am with you . . . I will not leave you' (v. 15)—the beginning of a promise that was to be expanded as the centuries went by. In Joshua's day it was added to, 'Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you' (Deut 31:6).

When Jacob woke up and got over the shock his ready business mind saw possibilities here.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.' (Gen. 28:20–22)

There have been people who have remarked how mercenary-minded he was. We have to blame Jacob for a lot of things, but don't let's blame him where Scripture commends him. Surely he was right here to take God at his word and believe that God was interested in his business.

Listen to how the New Testament applies the lesson. This promise was first of all given to Jacob, expanded to Joshua, and again in the Psalms,

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?' (Heb 13:5–6)

In the New Testament these verses are quoted about the same exceedingly practical lesson. How are we to face this world, the need of making money, find enough clothes and food whilst 'providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men?' (2 Cor 8:21). How are we to go about it? By being practical and business like, but free from the love of money. That doesn't mean throwing all your money away; we have to be good and efficient stewards of it. But don't let it wrap its tentacles around your heart until you love it.

'It's a difficult world,' you say. I know it is a difficult world, but it is the Lord himself who said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' This is the same promise given to Jacob when he went for his first job. May we too be bold and courageous and say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'

This verse is good psychology. It is a good thing to rehearse in one's bathroom in the morning, 'I will not fear.' The Authorised Version is not quite accurate here. It is not, 'I will not fear what man shall do to me,' as though *man* was going to do something terrible but you have made up your mind not to fear it.

It is, 'Why should I fear?'

Next question, 'What can man do to me anyway?'

If you are afraid, turn round and face your fears. Don't run away from them. Look them in the face and say, 'Do your work! Now, what have you done?'

We need food and clothes and homes because God has set this life as a lesson for us. Our daily job is a practice ground in which he trains us to be loyal and faithful, true and honest and loving. These lessons are to mould our characters and fit us for our heavenly occupation. And when the lesson is finished you won't need the money and the clothes, you will go off to heaven. What can man do to you? Even if he starves you out, he merely transfers you to higher glory.

Our Saviour warns us, if we are not careful we shall let ourselves be overburdened and over-careful. 'But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with . . . cares of this life' (Luke 21:34). We shall forget that business and daily life are there primarily as an exercise

ground to teach us Christian virtue. We shall start thinking that it is something you do in church on a Sunday, and business is another thing. Well, business is not another thing; it is the very thing that God has arranged to give us practice in developing Christian virtue. If in the process we need food and clothes, our heavenly Father knows we need them. He will not leave us and he will not fail us until his purpose is done and we are ready to move on to higher glory.

Rachel and Leah

So Jacob went on his way a great deal more encouraged and less fearful. (And so might we all, if we have learned the promise.) Then he got down to his Uncle Laban's country. We know all those lovely romantic stories of how Jacob and Rachel fell in love at first sight. He was a great hero and champion to the girl and drove away the other shepherds and watered her flocks, and all the rest of it. Then came the wedding day.

Things were going well for Jacob—'God does help those who help themselves!' He had got the birthright and the blessing (maybe a little bit unpleasantly, but he had got it anyway). The Lord had promised to be with him and now he had met the prettiest girl in all the countryside and her father was willing that he should marry her. Things were going absolutely swimmingly. Of course, they always do when the Lord is in it—don't they?

But things looked different the next day when he woke up. He had the shock of his life. It was not Rachel at all, it was Leah. I will not pretend to know the words that Jacob said then, but I don't think they were very gracious. It was not Leah's fault, there's no point getting angry with her. But what would you say about her father? How could your own uncle do a thing like that; he would need to tell the uncle what he thought.

And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?' Laban said, 'It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.' (Gen 29:25-26)

'In this country there is a little thing about the firstborn—we never cheat the firstborn of their rights. I could not keep my face up before the community if the younger got married before the firstborn. We do not cheat firstborn of their rights here!'

'But you deceived me!' said Jacob.

Look who is talking! Isn't it marvellous how it looks wrong when somebody else cheats you? The Lord could not be in that, not if somebody else cheated you. 'The mills of God grind slowly,' but they do grind and God will have to show Jacob that he will never condone in a believer what he condemns in a man of the world.

It is lovely that we should take God at his word and believe that he is with us, guiding our ways. He is, of course, but that does not mean we are God's favourites and if we do a shady thing or two, well never mind, it's in the family. 'We are on God's side so he won't find fault with us.' Are you sure?

God chose Jacob, but never let us think that his sovereign choice means that he approved of the way Jacob went about things. So Jacob had to learn lesson number one, the tremendous evil of deceit. A man's love for his wife is sacred and to be cheated in it is a terrible thing. Are

some areas in life sacred and some not so sacred; some areas where it is right to cheat and others where it isn't? What about the verse that says, 'God is in this place' — does that not make the whole of life sacred?

Jacob's family

The incident led to Jacob having four wives instead of one, which was a complication certainly! The experiences of his wives are recorded at some great length (29:31–35:18), the inner feelings of those women's hearts in the years when they had to compete for Jacob's affection. Do you think it is a nice thing to have to compete for love? Competition in business seems to be all right, but something seems to suggest to me that competing for love is not a very happy kind of thing in the family. Out of those experiences (and many of them were happy, of course) children were born. More often than not the names given to the children by their mothers expressed their feelings. They had taken the whole matter to God in prayer and felt that he had heard them, so the boys' names enshrined their experiences. When we come to the last book of the Bible and the holy city is coming down from heaven, the lovely thing is that the names of those lads are inscribed on the very gates. The experiences of those women are eternally recorded.

Isn't that marvellous! If I may say something to you mothers in the home, with a husband to please (difficult enough), children to bring up and trying to keep the family together. There are some that push strongly and others that are more sensitive, so you have all the little family upsets. Quietly you take it to God in prayer. Sometimes you feel that it is humdrum, but that experience of God that you are having in the home is built in to the eternal city. That's what the eternal city is; it is made up of men and women with their experience of God in the good things and the bad things, in the successes and the failings. Through the fire of earth's testing their characters are purified, their personalities refined and turned into jewels that shall adorn the eternal city forever. As men come to God in that coming day they shall not see God whom we call the Father; they shall see God reflected through you and through your particular personality.

God is aware of what we genuinely feel to be our inadequacies and deficiencies. Leah had some defects and the ancient world was a very cruel place. 'Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance' (29:17). She probably would not have got married if Laban had not used deceit. Think of the sensitivities and pain she must have gone through, as she looked at all the prettier ones. God knew it and he compensated her (v. 31).

Whatever natural disadvantages we start life with in this horribly competitive world, God loves us for ourselves. God loves us because he made us, he loves us because he redeemed us. He does not look on the outer person as men do, he does not love you for your gifts. Take note of that, university students—do not think any more of yourselves because you have intellectual gifts than the man who doesn't. You are no one special. God loves you because you are you and he has designs for you in glory. He made you the personality you are. There is only one of you and he needs you as a jewel to tell out something of his glory that no one else except you could tell.

The agreement with Laban

Jacob has a large family and he has been on a wage, serving his uncle Laban, since he first came down. (It is appropriate that young men should earn their living.)

Jacob said to him, 'You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock has fared with me. For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?' (30:29–30)

But he is getting older now and wants to return to his home. 'Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you"' (vv. 25–26).

'We would like you to stay with us,' says Laban. 'You are a good farmer and God has blessed us since you have been here.'

'Laban said to him, "If I have found favour in your sight, I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you. Name your wages, and I will give it"' (vv. 27–28).

So Jacob said, 'Your flocks are all different colours. There are the pure whites, pure blacks, and a mixture of speckled and spotted. I tell you what to do. You take out of your herd all the blacks, the speckled and spotted, and leave me with the pure whites. You take all the others and go as far as you can away from me, so that all I have got is the pure whites. If from time to time there is an occasional speckled or spotted one, then I will take that as my wages.'

Jacob said, 'You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.' Laban said, 'Good! Let it be as you have said.' But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in the charge of his sons. And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock. (vv. 31–36)

Laban couldn't believe his ears. Jacob, offering a bargain like that — that's incredible. If you start off with all pure white, how many black, speckled and spotted ones are you likely to get? You will scarcely get one in a thousand. 'I don't mind,' says Jacob, 'I am not looking for any great reward.'

So they sign the agreement and Laban goes home happy. He didn't know that Jacob had some trade secrets up his sleeve. Whether he had or not, or whether it was God intervening providentially, it comes to the same thing; he thought he could influence what colour the sheep would be born and he used the trade secrets. A very good percentage came out speckled and spotted and then he did a crafty thing. He said, 'There is nothing in the contract that says I have to use only the pure white ones for breeding, I'll use the speckled and spotted ones.' Of

course, it was not very many years before you could not count the speckled and spotted for multitude and there were one or two pure white just to make it look all right. 'Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys' (v. 43).

'That's business,' someone will say. Well I know that, but is business a different category from morality? Does business relieve you from acting like a Christian? There was nothing illegal in it. When I tell you what happened, perhaps that will help you to make up your mind.

It was the family business and his uncle's capital that he started with. Laban's sons, Jacob's cousins, suddenly opened their eyes. They were not so shrewd as Jacob, but it began to dawn on them what was happening. Eighty-five per cent of the business was in Jacob's hands. What do you think they said about that? 'They couldn't say anything; they had signed a contract!' you say.

Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth.' And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favour as before. (31:1-2)

Whatever they said, they said it so hard that Jacob took the hint and decided to quit. The Jews have done it many times since. They have come as strangers into a country; give them twenty-five years and they own most of the banks. It might be all right to do it in the world if you must—but do it in the family?

One night, God appeared to Jacob. 'Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you"' (v. 3). Jacob called his wives together. Good old Jacob, he could always make it sound right! 'I see that your father does not regard me with favour as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me' (vv. 5-7).—'The Lord has done it all,' he said.

Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, 'Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do.' (vv. 14-16)

I say! All over business the family relations were wrecked and they stole away. Laban had to run after them.

'Why did you flee secretly and trick me? If you must take all my goods, why did you have to steal my very heart away and why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? What kind of behaviour is this? You make a fuss about being a believer in God. I believe God too! He appeared to me last night, and said, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." If he had not appeared, things would be different now' (see vv. 27-29).

There followed the episode about the household gods that Rachel had taken and a heated argument. Then Laban suggested that they should make a covenant and come to some arrangement between them.

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsmen, 'Gather stones.' And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. (vv. 45–46)
Then Laban said to Jacob, 'See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm.' (vv. 51–52)

'We will not do each other any harm.' I say! Is that the best they could do? Then Jacob offered up a word of prayer, they all had something to eat, and settled down for the night.

Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home' (v. 55)

Peniel

So Jacob was on his way home again and he began to think about meeting Esau. Twenty odd years ago he had stolen his birthright and blessing, and we asked ourselves if God approved of the way he had got them. Jacob went away from home and now he is on his way back. Why's that! He's coming back because he behaved the same way in Laban's country and if you behave that way in the end people will kick you out.

So he had to get out; he could not stay there but where could he go? Well, he must go back; but to go back is to meet Esau. His conscience begins to get to work and he wonders how he will find favour with Esau. After all, he had stolen his birthright and the blessing.

'What shall I do? If I meet Esau, he will murder me!' So he starts to pray, 'Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau' (see 32:9–12). And of course God heard his prayer. But 'faith without works is dead,' so Jacob sent out his servants with very substantial presents for Esau. 'For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me"' (v. 20). Three huge droves of cattle went over. We must pay back the things we cheat, and it was not until they were paid back and Jacob was left alone that God visited him once more in a remarkable fashion. I wonder do we get the lesson?

Good old Jacob, he got Leah and Rachel and the other two wives and their children, their handmaids and their children and he sent them on first. If Esau is coming he will have to break through them. 'And Jacob was left alone' (v. 24). As he looked out into the dark a hand came from behind; alone and with nothing he was held in a grip like a vice, utterly dependent on the mercy of God to let him go.

And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. (vv. 24–25)

You cannot bribe God. Jacob thought that he could manoeuvre God as good as he could manoeuvre people, so he got into the wrestler's position and tried to manoeuvre God. 'That's enough of that!' said God, and he touched his thigh and that was that finished. It's maybe a pity he had not done it earlier. What was all that cheating stuff about? God had made the man a promise and one day he would fulfil it. 'So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered"' (v. 30). Jacob did not get altogether converted that night. It took a long many years.

Getting food from Joseph

Let's come now to his final lesson, beginning from chapter 37. Jacob was back in the land, long since retired, thinking that he had done very well by his efforts. Then there came a famine and a bit of inflation (chapter 42). It ate into his savings and famine and hunger stared him in the face. You can have lovely furniture in your home, but if nobody wants to buy it and you have no food where do you get some food?

He sends his sons down to Egypt and the second time they come back without Benjamin. 'You will have to go again!' said Jacob. 'Can't we get a little present up for that chap you met down in Egypt? You know, the official. People do that kind of thing, a little gift under the hand. He holds the granaries there and you need to pull the wires a bit.'

The man down in Egypt was his son, Joseph, and here is Jacob thinking that he's got to bribe him to get a mouthful of dinner. It's sad. Why couldn't he have believed what God said to start with? He was going to bless him with such untold wealth that in him and in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed — if he had believed it at the first he never would have cheated Esau or Laban.

So in the end God has to teach Jacob that his purpose is sovereign. It is not by Jacob's efforts, pulling of wires or cheating, but by God's sovereign grace. I am glad that Jacob learned it at last because if he were to turn up in the new Jerusalem unconverted, who knows what he would do; the whole world would be crooked. What a pity he didn't learn it a little bit earlier in his life.

The Difference between Being Merely Religious and Knowing God Personally

Genesis 32ff

Without any doubt, one of the great stumbling blocks in the path of those who do not believe is the way of life and the unsatisfactory personalities of some who profess religion.

Quite often people who make no profession at all outshine in their personality and behaviour those that do. I suspect we could all think of men and women that we have known; decent, honourable, worthy figures, magnanimous and generous, honest and law-abiding, always ready to do a hand's turn to their fellow man, yet with no glimmer of faith, no pretence whatever at being religious. On the other hand, we have known people who have been loud in their profession of religious faith that nevertheless have been mean, cowardly, difficult to get on with and cunning.

We have been thinking about two such men, in the lives of Esau and Jacob. For all his profanity and lack of respect for spiritual and sacred things, Esau was an honourable and generous man. When Jacob tricked and cheated him, Esau forgave him with wonderful magnanimity and generosity. He was a big enough man to do it. Jacob was one of those unfortunate people who seem to be born with a kind of fear-complex. Out of that fear came cunning, sobriety, deviousness and deceit; so that the man was not only a sinner, he was a contemptible sinner. In his sinning he was not even grand, courageous and bold, but mean, little and shameful.

Now I want to say at once that the Bible makes no attempt to hide these things or to maintain that all who have faith in God are charming people. Indeed, if anything, it goes to the other extreme and advertises publicly that some people who have professed to believe in God have at times been despicable sinners. The Bible makes no excuse for it, but it does offer reasons why that is and we shall think of them now before God. Why is it that people who profess religion and to believe in God can so often be contemptible sinners and difficult characters?

Religion is not necessarily bad

The first thing to notice is that being religious is not the same thing as being born again or regenerate. Religion is not necessarily bad, it can be a noble and virtuous thing. The higher forms of religion can be ennobling and purifying, but when it comes to that vital necessity of being regenerate, being made anew, then the highest religion is utterly bankrupt. Religion is one thing, being born again of God's Holy Spirit is another thing altogether. Moreover, the

Bible is very clear—and common sense ought to show it to us anyway—that while religion can be good, it can also be an exceedingly evil thing.

If we want evidence of that we need only to think of the barbarous practices of some ancient nations. There were those in the past who, with great religious awe and enthusiasm, worshipped the pagan god, Moloch. One form of their worship was to take their infants and put them on the outstretched hands of the great metal image, light fires under the hands of that image until they were extremely hot and the babies were sizzled to death. We do not need any persuasion to tell us that such religion is fearfully evil.

But religion can still be evil, even when outwardly it professes a high moral code. For example, take the story in Genesis chapter 34. It is a story about twelve men who professed to believe in the true God of heaven. They professed to believe in his law and in the rites of his religion and yet it is a story of such indescribable wickedness that I almost blush to relate it, and yet I must do so. We must not be holier than God, we must not fear to pull back the screens that sometimes hide the evil behind a religious heart.

Dinah and Shechem

Jacob had a daughter called Dinah. When they moved back home and came near to the city of Shechem Dinah went out to see the girls of the countryside. Shechem, the son of the prince, fell in love with her and with the impatience of youth he lay with her. For all that, he was an honourable young man and was genuinely in love with the girl. So he asked his father, Hamor, to get him Dinah for his wife. When Dinah's brothers got to hear of it they were deeply angry.

The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it, and the men were indignant and very angry, because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing must not be done. (v. 7)

They were angry because of the immorality of the thing, and because the people of Shechem were not part of their religion. The thought of their sister intermarrying filled them with religious anger.

They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we agree with you—that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to ourselves, and we will dwell with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter, and we will be gone.' (vv. 14–17)

'We could not let our sister marry your son unless you submit to our religion and go through the rites of our religion.' And what might they be? 'To join our religion, you have to be circumcised!' Do you see the terrible bankruptcy of this bit of religion? There's no word to this pagan prince of Shechem about the real true God of heaven, no word of the gospel, of the need to be regenerate inside; merely a question of changing your religion and going through some religious ceremony. 'Now you are in our gang, instead of in their gang.'

The elders of the city of Shechem thought the matter over. They were middle-aged men; it was a long time since that they had looked through the idealism of a young man in love. But they thought that they should take a sensible view of the situation and be tolerant in religious matters. There would be political advantage in it too; and possibly economic, because, if they were to submit to their religious rites and ceremony, eventually they should all be one and there would be peace. How nice it would be. 'Will not their livestock, their property and all their beasts be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will dwell with us' (v. 23). So they agreed with the sons of Jacob that the men of Shechem would submit to their religious rite of being circumcised.

It was honest as far as it went—but it did not go very far. What a ghastly thing hid behind the so-called religion of these sons of Jacob. They waited until the operation had been performed, until the men were sore and could not defend themselves, then they slaughtered every male in Shechem city. 'All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered' (v. 29). So much for their religion. Even Jacob was ashamed, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites' (v. 30).

When people are religious without being regenerate, religion can become an excuse, a cover-up, and indeed the very occasion of some of the most despicable actions of our depraved and fallen human nature. People can get it into their heads that, whatever you do to the other side, it is all right.

The Communist with his atheism believes that no lie however despicable, no cruelty however dastardly matters so long as it is done on a non-communist. But the last six years in Ulster have shown that same kind of mentality. 'It doesn't matter what you do to the other lot because we are standing for the truth. We are the true religion and, if it helps our cause, an odd lie here and an odd bit of cruelty there does not really matter.'

But the thing stinks today as it stank in Jacob's day. We have to learn that 'the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God' (Jas 1:20). Anger at immorality has to be watched very closely, as in the last analysis it could be the spiteful revenge of unregenerate religion.

Jacob takes his family to Bethel and he builds an altar

What a caricature the whole business was. When Jacob's sons behaved as they did in the name of religion, Jacob and his family had to move. It was no longer safe to remain in the area. Jacob thought it was about time he had a sort of spiritual spring-clean in his family and he called them together to Bethel to examine their hearts before God.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.' (35:2-3)

'It's time we put away the idols out of our own lives,' he said. The very same men that had butchered Shechem in support of religion were idolaters themselves, without any living faith

in the true God. They had no personal experience of him and were worshipping their own set of idols.

Knowing the Saviour personally

We need to challenge our hearts. Why is it that sometimes those who say they are religious are a stumbling block to unbelievers? It is possible to be religious and show a great deal of zeal and never to have had a personal experience of the regenerating power and grace of God. Let me say it to us all. For all your religion, if I came into your lounge, your bedroom, the inner recesses of your heart (and you to mine), what should I find there of your faith and what it is in? Is it in a Saviour known personally to you? Should I find a heart of contrition, grieved at your own sin, which acknowledges all your salvation to Christ? Or, in the last analysis, should I find you putting trust in the works of your own hands and the mere outward ceremonies of your particular church?

Israel's sons were as unregenerate as the man on the moon! Filled with envy, they betrayed and sold Joseph, the very saviour and messiah that God had sent them, all the while diligently practising their religious rites. And what happened to them, happened to their successors. When at last God sent the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, his own people and nation rejected him. They were steeped in the honourable religion of Judaism, yet moved with envy and religious pride they rejected and crucified their very God-sent Saviour.

I am not surprised at it! As a Christian preacher I say that we have no reason for pride. Christians are not any better than the Jews. How many folks there are who would say the same as the good man who came to me with great Irish courtesy after a lecture that I gave.

'I enjoyed your lecture very much, except for just one little thing. I do not like that bit about being saved. I'm a Christian of course,' said he.

'How odd!' I replied. 'You know what the name Jesus means, don't you?'

Actually, he did not. He hastened to tell me that he sent his children to Sunday School. If only he had gone himself.

I said, 'It means *Saviour*, and you say you believe in one whose name is Saviour but you don't like the idea of being saved.'

God accepts us as we are

There is a happy side to the story. Joseph's brothers were reconciled to him and found in him a saviour of the world and their own personal saviour. God's word gives us good grounds for believing that, like those early Jews, the wonderful and unique Jewish nation as a whole shall find their Messiah in Jesus. They shall own him as their national Saviour, the world's Saviour and their personal Saviour.

Under God's discipline they shall be brought to their knees to find the bankruptcy of mere religion, outward ceremony and circumcision, however revered, and the bankruptcy in itself even of their holy law of God. 'They shall look unto him whom they have pierced' (Zech 12:10), and take their place humbly beside the sinners of the Gentiles. Turning from religion to Christ they shall say,

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isa 53:5)

But there is another reason why sometimes those who profess the name of God behave less well than they should. They remain difficult characters and therefore put a stumbling block in the way of unbelievers. Real as God's salvation is, it does not immediately make them sinlessly perfect. The glory of God's salvation is that he is prepared to accept us as we are. When we come in genuine repentance wanting to be saved, with genuine willingness, God begins that great work of saving us.

He will take us as we are and give us the eternal security of his love and new life within. We become children of God, but it does not mean that we are sinlessly perfect. Many miles of spiritual pilgrimage lie in front of the believer when he comes to Christ. Therefore, as you look at a man or woman who confesses to belong to the Saviour, you need to know how far sin has wrecked them before you can judge how much progress they have made since they came to Christ. We are all sinners, but sin has wrecked some of us in different ways. You are not given to immorality and debauchery, but I am sure you would be the first to admit (I hope you would) that nevertheless you are a sinner. However, sin has not wrecked you quite in the same spot as it has wrecked that poor, bedraggled man in the doss-house.

Perhaps there is a woman who has had a most unfortunate past, her family have a long history of mental weakness. Heredity was against her from the start, she was born with an inbuilt inferiority complex. It has haunted and tortured her all her days, making her difficult to get on with, suspicious and devious. She doesn't have a pleasant personality. Perhaps she has trusted Christ and in his love and grace he has received her. One day she shall be conformed to his image. Already he has begun to pour the love of God into her heart, but his work in her is not complete. On a Monday morning, if you are not careful, you will start that old complex going again and she will bite your head off. But in her heart of hearts she has abandoned faith in herself; the miracle of regeneration has happened and her faith has been turned over to Christ.

There is another man and he was born as with 'a silver spoon in his mouth'. His family is sound in health and sound in wealth, he has none of the frustrations of poverty. He had a loving mother, a sensible father and a good education. He is a well-rounded personality and an exceedingly likeable chap. You would prefer to be in his company rather than that other woman. But simply because he is a decent chap, he has not yet realised that this is mere natural decency and he sees no need of a Saviour. He is a sinner still. What you see is the mere temporary affability of a human nature that is not too badly wrecked, but he is fallen and as yet unredeemed and unrepentant. If he finishes life like that it will be to perish forever.

We need to lay hold of these things—especially you who are such lovely people with rounded personalities. You are decent and kind and all your neighbours respect you, but have you experienced the grace of God and his salvation? Does your lovely character spring from a heart that is regenerate and indwelt by God's Holy Spirit, on its way to being conformed to Christ? Or is your niceness mere natural niceness, hiding an unregenerate heart that is away from God that one day shall perish?

Jacob was a difficult character by any standard and certainly his character was not made perfect all at once. God is not afraid to write his history in detail and tell us how faltering his steps were in his spiritual pilgrimage. But Jacob did have personal faith in God as his Saviour. God appeared to him many times, but let me retrace for you two of the special experiences of his life.

First at Bethel

He saw the angels of God ascending and descending upon the ladder that reached towards heaven. He found God standing there beside him; it was the very gate of heaven. When Jacob awoke it was to start a life of faith. It may have been very crude faith, mixed up with all kinds of dross.

That is true of everybody; it was true of the Apostle Peter. When he first believed in Christ his faith was mixed with all kinds of dross. He had constantly to be purified, but he did believe.

Jacob believed in God as a personal God who loved him and cared for him, a God who had spoken and to whom Jacob had made the response of faith. He was a God in whose word and in whose promise Jacob believed.

A New Testament Israelite

I cannot help reminding you of an occasion when our Lord quoted this very experience of Jacob to another man. He wanted to show him the difference between being merely religious and knowing God personally.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.' Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered him, 'Because I said to you, "I saw you under the fig tree," do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.' (John 1:47-51)

It was the pivotal point in Nathanael's conversion. He had been religious before. In fact, when Philip came with his excited message, he may have been reading his prayer book as he sat under the fig tree. He did not wear his religion on his sleeve; he liked religion to be dignified and he thought of God and the Messiah as great distant beings. Here was Philip talking about him as though he was his next-door neighbour, someone whom you could meet and know personally and Nathanael did not like it. He had intellectual reasons why he should not believe this gospel message, for Philip had got some of his facts wrong.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' (vv. 45-46)

And scarcely knowing why he did it, Nathanael left the protection of his fig tree to meet what he expected to be a 'hot-gospeller' from Nazareth. I cannot tell you how it happened, but suddenly Nathanael found God in a new way. Not that stylised, formal figure to whom he said his very distant prayers, but God here on the very spot focusing on him. Omniscience and omnipresence focused right on Nathanael personally through Jesus Christ our Lord. He suddenly realised that God knew him through and through: his arguments, his prejudices and his heart. 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. You shall see bigger things than these, Nathanael. You shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending.'

Do you know God like that? Has Christ made God real to you? Have you found your heart exposed and yet found yourself accepted in Christ? God has become real, his word has become real and all those glorious promises given to Jacob have become real to you. You have found the Saviour and you hope to see greater things—you are looking for his coming again. Are you a man of faith? Are you a woman who has believed? Or are you just formally religious?

When I talk of believing and salvation being not by our works but by faith, that does not mean God thinks sin doesn't matter. One of the marks of a person who has really found God and God has found him, is that into that person's life will come a growing sense of the evil of sin. The revulsion of it will come with ever-increasing force till it permeates the whole conscience. Yet corresponding to it with ever-growing force there will come the reality of God's love and his salvation and the work of his Spirit. I am not speaking of some morbid introspection, I am not even speaking of some morbid fear of hell, I am talking of genuine down to earth conviction of sin. We have to discover that sin is exceedingly sinful and cast ourselves totally on the power of God's salvation. That is what being saved is.

At Peniel

Jacob's daily lessons came to a crescendo one night in a time of stress (chapter 32). He was being led back, partly through his own sinfulness, to his homeland. He would have to meet the problems he had left behind because of his devious ways, unsolved all the years. He had mastered the business world and made himself into an economic success. Coming to meet Esau, he had sent over all that he had and Jacob was left alone. It was on that night that a hand gripped him; instinct told him who it was. You can run in all sorts of devious ways, but God will catch up with you. Before you get over the brink into eternity God will make you face him.

Jacob found himself face to face with God and he tried to wriggle (like we all do). He had always been good at wriggling, putting a good face on things and coming up with his explanations, worming himself in and out. He tried to do it with God, but you cannot wriggle with God. He tried to manoeuvre God into position as he wrestles back against him. It is instinctive!

If you are not saved and I was to face you and ask, 'Are you saved?'—I should not be surprised if you wriggled.

‘Well, I do the best I can and I am better than some folk. Look at those old hypocrites over there.’

I have done it myself, I know how you feel. But you might as well give up. When God gets a hold of you he is not interested in ‘him over there’; he is interested in you. You cannot pull wires with God, not even religious wires. You cannot persuade him by a gift or two to save you and take your side. You may do that with people like Esau, but you cannot do it with God. God is not hard up; you will never bribe him. How natural it is for us to try it. In our moments of need, anxiety and panic we tell God, ‘O God I will serve you, I will do anything you say.’ God is not in business; you cannot buy salvation or get it by your religion, your rituals or your decency.

Presently God touched his thigh. Now he found that God had got him rather than he had got God.

But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ And he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’ (32:26–30)

Said God to Jacob, ‘What is your name?’ What was his name? It could have been such a decent name, but how he had defiled it. ‘Jacob’ could have been in itself quite a pleasing name but he turned it to mean ‘a twister’. In days gone by he had pretended that he was not Jacob. Now his conscience got busy and he pictured himself back in the tent with his old father and his eyes were dim. Jacob had come in with all his paraphernalia on and in those hushed, sacred moments, father Isaac was to pronounce the blessing in the name of God.

‘Who are you?’ said Isaac.

‘I am Esau,’ he said.

You cannot deceive God like that.

‘What is your name,’ said God, ‘who are you, what are you?’

And out it came with no more excuses, no more playacting, just the bare facts — ‘Jacob!’

What was he?

‘Jacob.’

And what was that?

Despicable, cowardly, a sinner!

God saw through him.

Have you come to that place? There is no sphere in life where it is easier to playact. I know Jacob had his own reasons for disguising himself as Esau and for lying as to whom he was. It is natural to religion. In their day, it was what kept the Pharisees from coming to Christ and salvation; playacting, pretending to be something different to what they were at heart. Why do we not give it up, why do we not face God? He knows just what we are. Sinners, bankrupt!

What will God do with Jacob now? When he had faced the facts and his sinful self, he hangs as a desperate sinner on to God. God saved him, forgave him and let him live. Then he changed his name. 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel' (v. 28).

It is an interesting thing all down the ages, when men have had a real personal experience of God they have frequently changed their names. It was a custom that the early Christians adopted in some countries—particularly in Ireland. Originally when the missionaries first came and preached the gospel they found the Irish with all sorts of pagan names. When people professed to be saved they wanted to change their names and give themselves 'Christian' names. Thank God for every name that indicated a genuine conversion to God!

What is your name?

The centuries have rolled by and I suspect every one of us has got a Christian name.

What is your name? Have you got a Christian name? Is it real?

'I got it when I was baptised as an infant,' you say.

Yes you did; but is it real? Who are you?

Have you come face to face with God in Christ? If not, call on him in repentance and faith for salvation and he will save you. Has there been a change, or is your Christian name merely an old shred of a Christianized religion that means absolutely nothing?

In these solemn moments may God visit us. May he grip us, as he gripped Jacob. Let him look into my heart, let him look into yours. Let him say, 'What is your name?'

As we know our own hearts underneath all the outward disguises, in reality let us make our response to him,

'O God, what am I? My name is Sinner. I have no grounds at all to save myself, only that you have loved even me. O God, bless me, save me.'

If you call, God's word stands sure and you will not need to cover up and pretend any more.

'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom 10:13)

CHARTS

The Book of Genesis

I. THE FIRST CREATION STORY 1:1–2:3

1. Creation, not all at once, but in a progressive series of creative acts:
And God said (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26)
2. Creation by the word of God
3. Creation as distinct from subsequent maintenance and development (2:1–3)
4. The pinnacle of the series: Man, made in God's image, to be God's 'viceroy' (1:26–29)
5. Not only creation but organisation (1:4–5, 7–10, 14–18, 26–28)

II. THE SECOND CREATION STORY 2:4–4:26

The generations of (a) the heaven;
(b) the earth (2:4)

1. Unifying theme: *the ground* (2:5–6, 9, 19; 3:17, 19, 23; 4:2–3, 10–12, 14)
 - (a) 2:5–7; 3:19 man's substance: *out of the ground*
 - (b) 2:5, 15; 3:23 man's function: *to work the ground*
 - (c) 3:17–19, 23 the curse upon Adam: *cursed is the ground because of you;
... till you return to the ground*
 - (d) 4:11 the curse upon Cain: *you are cursed from the ground*
2. Descriptions of what 'life' means:
man's 'basic materials' (2:7), function, employment (2:5, 15), aesthetic sense (2:8–9),
moral sense (2:9), ability to sin and moral responsibility to God (2:16–17),
relationship to animals (2:19), faculty of language (2:19–20),
man-woman relationship (2:18–25), music (4:21), metal-work (4:22)
3. The meaning of 'life' and 'death'; the fall, its effect and consequences; sacrifice and
the values it protects
4. Cain forfeits his *raison d'être*

III. THE THIRD CREATION STORY 5:1–9:29

The generations of (a) Adam (5:1–6:8)
(b) Noah (6:9–9:29)

1. The development of the human race from Adam: its constitution (6:3), perversion
(6:1–6), the nature and effect of its destruction by water (6:13; 7:23)
2. The new beginning for the human race in Noah (6:9), the new mandate (8:15–9:17);
Noah's indiscretion (9:20–29)

The section ends with the death of Noah (9:29)

IV. THE RISE OF THE HEBREW NATION FROM AMONG THE GENTILES 10:1-25:11

The generations of (a) the sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)
and of Shem (11:10-26)
(b) Terah (11:27-25:11)

1. Nimrod and the great and famous cities:
Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Resen (10:9-12).
The building of the city and tower of Babel (11:1-9)
2. The call of Abram, the promise to make a nation of him, and the purpose of it:
in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18)
3. The Promised Seed (12:7; 15:1-6; 18:10-18):
the birth (21:1-7), sacrifice (22:1-19) and marriage (chapter 24) of the Promised Seed.
The covenants made with Abram and his seed, of inheritance (15:7-21), of
circumcision (17:1-27).
4. The three major areas in Abraham's training and testing:
 - (a) chs. 12-15 the choice between 'goods' and 'life'; the denial of Sarah,
the choice of Lot, the capture and recovery of Lot,
the ministry of Melchizedek,
justification by faith and the covenanted inheritance
 - (b) chs. 16-19 faith in the promise or the works of the flesh?
the taking of Hagar instead of Sarah and the birth of
Ishmael;
the covenant of circumcision, 'the seal of the righteousness
of faith';
the renewal of the promise;
Lot's experience in Sodom, its destruction and Lot's rescue
 - (c) chs. 20-24 the search for security; the second denial of Sarah;
the birth of the promised seed,
and the expulsion of the bondwoman and her son;
Abraham's oath granting security to the Philistine and his
son;
justification by works and God's oath
granting security to Abraham and his son;
the purchase of a burial-ground for Sarah;
the second 'calling-out' from the Gentiles—a bride for Isaac.

The section ends with the death of Abraham (25:8-11)

V. THE MAINTENANCE OF THE HEBREWS' VISION AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT INTO ISRAELITES 25:12-35:29

The generations of *(a)* Ishmael (25:12-18)

(b) Isaac (25:19-35:29)

1. The pre-natal struggle of Esau and Jacob; Jacob's election; Esau despises and sells his birthright (25:20-34), Isaac's struggle to maintain himself in the land, his denial of Rebekah, the fight for water, the renewal of the promise (ch. 26), Isaac's blessing of Jacob, Jacob's deception, Esau's anger, the nature of blessing (ch. 27).

2. Three periods in Jacob's life:
in the land of promise (25:19-27:34);
out of the land among the Gentiles (28:1-31:55);
back again in the land (32:1-35:29);
but still attended by many difficulties in his relations with the surrounding tribes.

3. The subject-matter of Jacob's training:
leaving home to make a future for himself;
the vision of the House of God, and of the Gate of Heaven;
marriage-deals; the birth and naming of his children;
the need to amass capital, trade-secrets, their use and abuse;
the jealousy and anger of the Gentiles;
Jacob's flight; problem of reconciliation with Esau;
wrestling with the Angel, the vision of the face of God, Jacob becomes Israel;
the abuse of religion by Jacob's sons.

The section ends with the death of Isaac (35:28-29)

**VI. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISRAEL'S SONS INTO A NATION
THEY BECOME A BLESSING TO THE GENTILES THROUGH JOSEPH
THE SAVIOUR OF THE EGYPTIANS AND OF THE HEBREWS 36:1-50:26**

The generations of *(a)* Esau (36:1-43)

(b) Jacob (37:2-50:26)

1. The welding of Jacob's twelve sons into a nation.

Unlike what it was with Abraham and his sons, it was not a question of taking one of Jacob's sons and discarding the rest, but of taking all twelve of his sons and welding them into a cohering nation. At first the brothers' treacherous jealousy against Joseph and his dreams of administrative supremacy, and the irresponsibility of Judah (chapter 38)—head of the tribe destined to bear the royal sceptre—and his mercenary attitude (37:25-27) threatened to divide and scatter Jacob's sons before they could be developed into one nation. But they are preserved, re-united and made a blessing to the nations through Joseph's innocent suffering and Judah's readiness to suffer vicariously (44:18-34).

2. Jacob's rediscovery of Joseph, and his recovery of his sons Simeon and Benjamin.

The preservation of the twelve sons and their families, the beginning of their multiplication into a nation in Egypt, and the maintenance of their prophetic hope in their future destiny.

**The section ends with the deaths of Jacob (49:33-50:13)
and of Joseph (50:26)**

About the Author

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