

What it Means to be a Believer

Hebrews 11 Defines the Term

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This text has been edited from a transcript of four talks given by David Gooding at a Gospel Literature Outreach (GLO) Conference held in Castlewellan, Co Down, N Ireland in April 1989.

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: heb.002/lis

A Believer's Beliefs

Let us read from the Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 11, and we shall begin to read at verse 1:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen. For therein the elders had witness borne to them. By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which do appear. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous, God bearing witness in respect of his gifts: and through it he being dead yet speaks. By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God translated him; for before his translation he hath had witness borne to him that he had been well-pleasing unto God. And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him. By faith Noah, being warned of God concerning things not seen as yet, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; through which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. (vv. 1-7)

God use his word to strengthen and provoke the faith of each one of us.

In this study I want to talk to you about what it means to be a believer. As you see, we are about to base our study on the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, an exceedingly famous chapter in an exceedingly famous epistle. As the title tells us, this letter was written to the Hebrew people, who in earlier days had made a profession of trusting the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and Messiah. And when they had first trusted the Saviour, they had been very bold and courageous people. Many of them had endured considerable persecution. They'd had to stand by when several of their number had been hauled off to prison by monsters like the unconverted Saul of Tarsus. Their homes had been broken into, their goods smashed or stolen and some of them had suffered personal pain. They had borne the reproach, the despising, the social ostracism that had come their way very manfully and courageously. But as we read the letter, we discover that in recent times things weren't going so well.

Many of them were no longer coming to the meetings of the Christians, which is always a suspicious sign. When people who once were very keen about the Lord's Supper and preaching of the gospel, or supporting those who preach, and at the prayer meetings and the Bible studies and so on, suddenly drop off from the meetings, and when you ask them why,

they begin to make all sorts of excuses. 'Oh, I can worship the Lord at home.' Perhaps you can, but that's no reason, is it, why you shouldn't come out to the meetings anyway? And it raised in the minds of those who cared for them, the serious question of, if they weren't coming out to the meetings exactly, where were they going, and what did it mean? Were they by any chance going back to their old Jewish temple and synagogue? And if they were, what did that mean? How could they really go back if they still believed what they originally professed to believe: in the sacrifice of Christ, rather than the animal sacrifices of the temple, in the priesthood of the Lord Jesus and not the priesthood of any other mediator, and so and so. And so obviously the writer who writes his letter to them is concerned and deep down in his heart, he's very concerned because, while as he looks back he thinks he can see evidence in their lives that they were really genuine, now their behaviour is raising a problem. Raising the very serious question of were they genuine believers after all? Raises a question, doesn't it? How can you know whether anybody is a genuine believer?

You could ask me, 'Are you a believer?'

I may say, 'Of course I am. What do you think?'

Like dear old James you say, 'Yes, but it's okay for you to say so. Yes, anybody would say so. But prove to me that you're a believer.'

What should I do? Let's think together about what it means to be a believer.

Basic Doctrines

These early verses in Hebrews 11 tell us that one of the evidences that we are true believers is found in the doctrines that we believe. I don't know if you'd been writing the New Testament whether you'd have put that one first. Perhaps you would have put first that somebody's a true believer if their face shines from the nose to the ears, and if you have a glum face, you're not liable to be a believer. There could be a pinch of truth in it perhaps, but you wait until you get rheumatism, and then you'll revise your evaluation. Here in Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith, the first series of evidences of what faith is, it states that true Christians believe the basic doctrines of the gospel. This is not to say that you have to know all the doctrines of the Bible before you can be a Christian.

The dying thief didn't know many doctrines, did he? He trusted the Lord Jesus and went home to glory that day. I sometimes wish I could have done the same thing. I'm not saying that you have to get all your doctrines one hundred per cent correct in order to qualify to be a believer, because I'm sure that not all my doctrines are one hundred per cent correct, and I am a believer. But a true believer is marked progressively by this: that he or she believes the basic doctrines of the gospel. That is exceedingly important, and I want to emphasise it as hard as I can punch the old pulpit because we live in a day when so often we look to subjective emotions as an evidence of whether people are truly converted. Of course emotion is good, and joy in the Lord is good, and high and wonderful spiritual feelings are good, but they're not the first thing you would judge by. A stable Christian life and a true believer are built on a belief in the fundamental doctrines of the faith. So here in these verses you have read (Heb 11:1-7), I want to pick out four basic doctrines that true Christians believe.

Four basic doctrines

The first basic doctrine is referred to in verse 3: 'By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God.' This is the basic doctrine of creation by the word of God; it is absolutely basic. Let that go and you can't begin to be a believer.

Second, 'By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain' (v. 4). This is the doctrine of sacrifice. If, in the first place, we believe that the world was framed—created by the word of God—then of course the next thing that occurs to us is that the world as we now know it is not perfect. It is marred by all sorts of evil behaviour, and that raises the question: 'How can I find God,' and 'how can I be accepted by God?' The question, therefore, of approach to God is sacrifice, redemption and forgiveness.

So first creation, then redemption; then, the third great doctrine is the Lord's coming and the consummation of our redemption. We are reminded in verse 5: 'By faith Enoch was translated so that he should not see death.' That's old English of course. It's got nothing to do with translating English into Irish. This is translated in the old English sense in which bishops used to be translated to a higher rank and became archbishops. Moved up higher. In modern English, the word is *transferred*. Here it refers to the fact that Enoch walked with God and one day God took him, and he was taken home to heaven without dying. Pause a moment if you find that difficult to believe, because I've got a bigger miracle to tell you about now. It isn't only that some one, two or three thousand years ago, one man called Enoch was taken home to glory without dying.

I'll tell you something bigger than that: one of these days millions of people are going to be taken to heaven without dying. This is our Christian hope. This is at the heart of our Christian gospel. 'This we say unto you by the word of the Lord,' says Paul, 'we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trump' (1 Cor 15:51–52). 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first' (1 Thess 4:16). Then we who are alive and remain still physically alive on earth when the Lord comes, we shall be caught up together with the resurrected believers to meet the Lord in the air: the consummation of our Christian hope. Doctrine 1, then, is creation; doctrine 2 is approach to God through sacrifice that is redemption; and doctrine 3 is the Lord's coming and the consummation of our redemption.

Doctrine 4 is faith, which we are reminded of through Noah's example: 'By faith, Noah being warned of God concerning things not seen as yet, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; through which he condemned the world' (Heb 11:7). Noah is referred to in the New Testament in a number of contexts, but two in particular are relevant at this moment. The Lord used Noah and his flood as a warning of what's going to happen when the Lord Jesus comes in power and great glory to execute the wrath of God on this sin-soaked world. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, they built their bungalows right up to the moment that the flood came and took them all away, utterly unprepared. So shall it be, when the Lord comes in power and great glory to execute God's judgment (Luke 17:26–27).

Peter also refers to the flood in a slightly different connection (1 Pet 3:18–20; 2 Pet 3:9–12). The lesson he draws is that in Noah's day God used a constituent part of our world to destroy it; for the world is made of solid matter and water, and God used the water to destroy it. Then Peter reminds us that what God has done once, he'll do again. He will not use water to destroy the world, because he's promised he won't, but he will use the very constituent parts that make up our world to destroy it. One day, in God's good time, the basic elements of which our world is made will melt in a colossal fusion, and the world as we have known it will be a thing of the past. This is final judgment.

What does it mean to be a believer? Well these are not all the doctrines that you have to believe, but they are some of the basic ones. We need to ask ourselves: 'Am I a believer? How would anybody know? Do I believe, and do I stand for, these four basic doctrines; and first of all creation?'

The doctrine of creation

Now I have another confession to make. (I suspect I will have a lot, and even then I won't get through them all in our time together.) In my youth, in those far distant times, the turn of the century, it used to distress me a little bit that these verses make everything depend on faith. I said to myself, 'What a pity. Wouldn't it be far better and more effective if I could prove it—particularly to my fellow students who liked to think that they were eggheads?' If I'd had to tell them that everything depends on faith, well they'd have laughed. Now, if I could prove it to them they'd have to believe, wouldn't they? Why on earth does it have to be by faith? But it was not the Bible that was stupid; it was me of course.

By faith we understand

You see, there are some small things that you can prove by logic and mathematics, but when you've taken notice of all those things, they are the lowly things in life. The really big things you can't possibly prove by logic; you have to take them by faith.

I ask, 'Does your girlfriend love you?'

You say, 'Of course she does. She's going to marry me.'

'Ah yes, but that doesn't prove she loves you. Of course it doesn't. She's after your money!'

You say, 'She isn't.'

'Well,' I say, 'prove it then.'

'Does your mum love you?'

'Oh, she does. She darns my socks.'

'Well what does that prove? She's only doing that so she can keep a hold on you. You prove it to me by logic and mathematics if you can.'

You can't of course, and when it comes to that supreme thing that is love, you'll never know it unless you get to the point where you're prepared to believe.

Of course that's true of a lot of lesser things as well. How can I prove to you that a daffodil is beautiful? If I'm a chemist, I could analyse your daffodil in all its funny juices. They don't half taste horrible. I tasted one the other day. It was rotten, but you don't get very far tasting daffodils, do you? And a chemist can tell you what the chemicals are made up of.

And if you want to go deeper than that, you can go from the chemist to the old physicist, and he'll tell you all about the atoms in it. But who wants to know about the atoms in daffodils anyway? That isn't the chief thing about daffodils, is it? The chief, most important thing about daffodils is that they look beautiful. Can you prove to me they look beautiful? You can't, can you? The higher things like beauty, truth and love are things that you'll never enjoy unless you're prepared to bring an attitude of faith. That doesn't mean blind faith.

I won't say, 'How do you know your girlfriend loves you, old chap?' You'd list all sorts of things, wouldn't you? Of course you would. Yes, there's a lot of evidence around. She bought you a box of chocolates for your birthday, for instance. You've got a lot of evidence. But there comes a point where you'll have to step out in faith on that evidence, won't you? You imagine a modern prodigal son; he's wasted his goods with unrighteous living and he's now thinking about possibly coming home. He meets his millionaire father in The Ritz in London and Dad says that if he comes home, everything will be forgiven; he'll be reinstated.

The boy sits there thinking, 'Now shall I, or shan't I?'

The father says, 'Son, I really love you. I do really, and I won't bring up the past if you come home and let bygones be bygones. I'll make it worth your while, and you'll be my son and heir.'

The boy sits there thinking, 'Yes, well that sounds reasonable, but . . .'

The father gets out his chequebook. 'We can put money in your account this afternoon if you like.'

Yes, it's evidence. Then the boy thinks, 'But will Dad, when he's got me, screw me down again?'

Now he's got to weigh the evidence and take his step of faith. He will never know that his father really loves him until he's prepared, on the basis of the evidence, to take his step of faith. All the biggest things in life are like that.

Now the word of God says, when it comes to creation, 'By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God' (v. 3). In the last analysis you will not prove it by science or mathematics. Of course you won't. That doesn't mean that the doctrine of creation has no evidence at all and you've just got to take it on blind faith. No, you don't have to do that either. It's not silly, is it? Take the first part: 'By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not made out of things which do appear.' Well, very early on in Greek philosophy, the Greeks invented the atomic theory (the atomic theory was invented about four hundred years before Christ; it isn't as modern as you might imagine). They had already come to see that matter must be made up of tiny atomic particles that you cannot see, and modern science has underlined it, hasn't it? The Bible was right there: 'Things that are seen are made out of things that do not appear.' And the more we hunt to the very basis of matter, and we get down to the old quarks inside the atom and inside the nucleus, we're faced with the ultimate question: 'What on earth is matter? What is the basic stuff of the universe?' And some say, 'Well, it's energy. Packets of energy.' You can't see energy, can you? The Bible is right in that bit. It isn't talking stupidity.

Then the Bible says a very interesting thing: 'The worlds have been framed by the word of God.' Genesis 1, that famous chapter on creation, tells us about ten times: 'and God said,' 'and God said,' 'and God said'—creation by the word of God. That's a very interesting

phenomenon because, when we look at nature, we find that nature is not only made up of so much matter, but it's made up of matter plus information.

You wouldn't remember, but in the early 1950s some bright chap invented automatic washing machines. I was around then, and they worked as follows: the washing machine had a slot at the front, and you had a square piece of plastic with a lot of funny little notches along the edges, spaced at random, or so it looked. Now ladies who were experts in these things explained to me that if you wanted the linens cleaned, you used programme three; so you looked at your bit of square plastic and pushed it in the hole, and lo and behold, the old machine ran on programme three. If you wanted to wash silks and satins, you used programme eight; so you turned the thing round to a different set of notches, put it in the slot and, lo and behold, the old thing did programme eight.

Marvellous it was, but that brings up a very interesting thing, because if you took that plastic and said to somebody, 'What is this stuff here?' He would say, 'That's just plastic, old boy.' It was just stuff. Well it was stuff, but it wasn't simply that, was it? No. You say, 'Look, what about those notches?' 'Oh,' he said, 'That's nothing. That's just the shape of the thing.' No, it wasn't. Those notches on the old plastic were a kind of language. They conveyed information so that, when you put it into your machine, it conveyed the information that the old machine needed to select the right programme to do the washing. So it was stuff, plus code, stuff plus information. And you will know better than I (you've been in school since I have) that the more people study the old genetic code—you know, RNA and DNA and all those funny squiggly things that determine our growth, the colour of our hair, whether we have it or don't have it, the colour of eyes, the shape of our nose, and everything else under the sun, (except the boots we wear)—when you study that and analyse it mathematically and statistically, the claim is you can show that it bears all the marks of a language. Let me just explain what I mean by that.

Information carried by sound

Language, you know, is not so much noise. You get an old barn door blowing in the wind that makes a lot of sounds, but it isn't a language, is it? It doesn't mean anything. It's random. Whereas, if you're trying to listen to BBC radio and you keep getting a 'dot, dot, dot,' well that's not just noise; that's Morse code coming from someone or other, because it is a series of noises that can be analysed statistically and intelligently and be found to be conveying information. And when we look at the RNA or DNA code, so I am told (I'm no scientist), it bears every mark of being in that sense an encoded message or language. 'By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God,' who not only created the material, but spoke the information onto the material. And it's a very interesting thing that in America some notable scientists like Carl Sagan spent thousands and thousands of pounds trying to contact intelligent beings in other worlds. Their theory is that if evolution is true for evolutionists, then evolution must have coughed up some intelligent beings in other parts of the universe, and they live in hope that one day they will be able to receive communication from those other intelligent beings.

They have already sent out signals conveying information hoping that someone round the universe will pick them up. And they have their ear tuned, so to speak, to any messages

that will come in. If you ask them, 'How would you know? Suppose a message came from outer space somewhere, how would you know it wasn't just a load of old crackle from some star that's in the dying throes and gasping for life? How would you know that it wasn't just noise, but that it was a language coming from somebody intelligent?' Do you know, those scientists say that you'd only need one message, because if you analysed it and found it was statistically and empirically evidence of an intelligent communication, you would know it by analogy; for in our world if you have a message that is intelligible, that is, a language coming at you, we know that only comes from a person. And they say, 'If we got one message that turned out to have every evidence of being a language, we would know that there must be a personal mind behind it.' Marvellous, isn't it? And those who say that, of course, are atheists. And when we've examined the RNA and DNA, we say it shows evidence of being of the same quality as a language. What ought we to deduce from that? The sane thing to deduce is that it is no accident. It comes from an intelligent mind.

I'm not trying to prove to you that there is a creator, because even suppose I were to prove there's an intelligent mind behind this universe, whose mind it was would still remain a question. All I'm arguing now is that when the Bible says it's by faith, it doesn't mean that you just shut your eyes and refuse to look at any facts. It does not mean that it is silly or stupid. There is evidence galore all around us, as Romans 1 says, evidence for the great infinite power of some Godhood. On the basis of that evidence, we take a step of faith, reasonably enough, and then discover that, yes, it is true. Behind this universe, there is a personal mind, and that is the mind of our Creator.

The difference it makes

Let me just remind you how vastly important the doctrine of creation is. I have friends, I expect you have as well, who call themselves atheistic humanists. They don't believe in God. How they manage to call themselves humanists, I don't really understand, but that's supposed to mean they're interested in humanity. Just let me point out what happens to you if you don't believe in God. 'If you don't believe in God' says Ephesians 2, 'you are left without hope.' And if you don't believe in God the Creator then, of course, you are absolutely without hope, aren't you? You have no ultimate hope for the human race because your own scientists will tell you that one of these days the old sun up in the sky will blow up and become a red giant, and the moment it does so, little earth will evaporate and all that's in it. So, all the vast progress that the human race has made down the centuries will come to dust and ashes in the end. They are without hope. They're not only without hope for the human race, they're without hope for the individual, aren't they?

I like to invite my humanist friends into conversation. I say, 'Come on now, come and just meet this lady here. She's thirty-five, mother of two children, and she's just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. What would you say to her?' I say, 'I'll go first.' I tell you what I'll say to her: 'My dear, I'm so sorry to hear it. This is a broken world. I want to tell you, my dear, that you are made in the image of God. You're not just an accidental collection of atoms and molecules. You're made in the image of God like the rest of us, fallen, but God loves you still and you can be redeemed, saved, become a child of God, and be assured of a glorious future. One day you shall reign in life and reign eternally. And even in your present suffering, God

can lighten your affliction, which is but for the moment to work for you an exceeding, great, and eternal weight of glory!

'Now come on, you humanists, now you have a go. You tell her something.' What can the humanist say? He's utterly without hope. All he's got to say is, 'I'm sorry to hear it, but that's that. Your body may be of some use to the medical researchers, and it might help somebody else later on to get a cure for cancer perhaps, but as far as you're concerned, there is utterly no hope. You might as well shoot your brains out.'

There is no gospel, there is no hope if the doctrine of creation isn't true. It's not something you can keep in a watertight compartment and say, 'Well I don't bother about creation; I just preach the gospel.' Well you can go on preaching the gospel, and you should; but underneath, for your gospel to be sound, it's got to be the gospel of the blessed God, who is the Creator. May God give us who are believers the grace, the courage and the energy to study his word as well as to study our physics, our chemistry and our cosmology. We're not going to put our heads in the sand, are we? On the other hand, believers need to stand boldly in our day and age in school, at work, in college, or wherever, unashamedly for the belief in a personal Creator.

The doctrine of redemption

And then of course there's a question of redemption, isn't there? Something has gone wrong with creation that doesn't take a lot of seeing. Yes, the questions are: How can it be put right? How can I approach God? How can I be accepted by God and know I'm accepted? We take the doctrine of redemption by faith. 'Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain' (11:4), and we shall have to be careful how we interpret that. Many preachers have said at once, 'Ah, the difference was this: Cain came to God bringing his offering of the fruit of the ground. It was rejected because it was not a sacrifice involving the death of an animal. He came simply with the works of his own hands, and that's why he was rejected. But Abel came as a sinner with a blood sacrifice and found acceptance with God through the blood of the sacrifice.' Well I'm sure that is basically true, but it isn't exactly what the passages in the New Testament say, is it? So we mustn't cheat.

Cain's first mistake

Why was Cain rejected? Well if you read 1 John, the Apostle John will give you two reasons: 'He slew his brother, because his brother's works were righteous and Cain's works were evil' (3:12). That's number one. Cain came to God with his sacrifice, and you would have thought for the moment he was very religious. All the apples had been polished until you could nearly see your face in them, and the oranges were as sweet as they could possibly be—delightful! You'd have thought he was a very devoted man. He wasn't. He wasn't intending to give up his sinning either. He was just bringing God a sacrifice, like I do to the traffic warden. No, seriously; I have been known to plead innocence when stopped for a traffic violation—of course none of you have. Once I was parked on a clearway, and when I came out it was five minutes over the time. There wasn't a car to be seen in either direction for a mile, but I had to pay the fine nonetheless. No more about that. It cost quite a lot, but if I were desperate again, I might park in the same place. Wicked, isn't it? Well, I paid the fine.

Some people think like that about God, don't they? They'll bring God a present now and again, a sacrifice. That keeps him quiet. It pays a fine. No intention of doing differently or living differently.

Multitudes go by the thousands to offer the sacrifice of Christ. They've no more intention than the man in the moon of altering their lifestyle. That's not faith, you know. That's adding insult to injury. God said to Cain, 'Now, look here, Cain, I cannot accept it and I know what's happening to you now; I can see it on your face. Oh, the resentment is coming up, isn't it, when you see I've accepted Abel and I haven't accepted you!'

'Cain, my boy,' says God, 'that old sin in your heart is like a wild beast that's coiling itself up like a leopard to spring on you, and it will master you. You must get on top of that resentment, Cain. You must get on top of that sin, or else it will master you and kill you. Man, you'll have to learn to repent.'

Just coming and offering God sacrifices could be what you suppose earns the body and blood of Christ. But when it is offered without repentance, without any intention of changing your life, it's not faith.

Cain's underlying condition

The second thing about Cain was the family he had chosen. According to 1 John 3, John points out that in this universe and in our world there are two families. There are two fathers, two lots of children, two families. The one is God the Father, the other is 'your father the devil.' The one family: children of God, and the other family: children of the devil. And there are only two families, ladies and gentlemen, there are not three or four; and Cain was 'of the evil one' (v. 12). He came offering his sacrifice to God utterly unregenerate; he had never been born again and had never come out of the power of darkness into God's wonderful light. He still walked according to the power of the prince of this world. He was of the devil. It's possible to be very religious and not saved, not born again, not a *believer*.

'Abel offered . . . a more excellent sacrifice.' He offered it by faith 'through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous, God bearing witness in respect of his gifts' (Heb 11:4). We will have to be careful with that too, won't we? It doesn't say that 'by faith Abel did a lot of good works and God therefore accepted him.' No, it's the other way round. It says that by faith Abel offered a better sacrifice. That's what he did by faith, and God accepting it gave witness that Abel was righteous. He was not absolutely perfect, but he was right with God, and he lived a life consistent with that right relationship. So it started this way round—that by faith Abel offered a sacrifice.

Now that tells us volumes because, when the Bible talks about faith, it doesn't mean that I suddenly get an idea that this would do nicely for God. No, faith isn't just a lot of confidence I work up inside here that I think, 'God would like this and if he doesn't, he ought to.' No, in the Bible, faith is a response to something God has said, so if you read in the Bible that 'by faith Abel offered a sacrifice,' you may take it for granted that he was responding to some word of God. You say, 'Where did Abel get his idea of sacrifice from?' Well here surely the old preachers were right, weren't they? Perhaps when God slew an animal to make coats of skin for Adam and Eve, perhaps another time, or on many other occasions, when God taught the first sinful couple the way of approach to God through sacrifice. It was in response to

some word of God that Abel offered that better sacrifice. God will witness that Abel was right with God, and his works were consistent therewith.

What does it mean to be a believer? Firstly, it means to believe in the Creator. Secondly, it means to accept the doctrine of the fall; that all men are born under the power of Satan, all are sinners, and all need to be born again and come out of the family of darkness into God's marvellous light. It means, in our sin, to respond to God's word, and to accept the sacrifice that God himself has offered us as our way of approach to him. That's true Christianity.

The doctrine of the Lord's coming: the believer's hope

Then after creation and redemption, the way to God, comes the doctrine of our consummation: 'By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him' (Heb 11:5 ESV). That serves to remind us of our great Christian hope. The Lord's coming is not a little decoration on the Christmas cake of Christianity, one of the hundreds and thousands that decorate the icing, but that the cake would be just as good without. No, the doctrine of the second coming is an integral part of our gospel. Witness what happened to the people at Thessalonica when Paul went along and they got converted. So much was the doctrine of the second coming an integral part of the gospel, that when they got converted Paul can say of them, 'They turned to God from idols to serve the living and through God and to wait for his Son from heaven' (1 Thess 1:9-10). If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, you can be sure he's coming again. 'How's that?' you ask. Well you don't suppose that God's Son can come to our world, be spiked on a cross and thrown out, and that's the last you'll hear of him? Does that strike you as sensible? Indeed not! You'll hear of him again alright, for he's God's Son. He will come again. Oh, how marvellous.

What does it mean when it says, 'By faith, Enoch was translated ['taken up' ESV] that he should not see death'? Well it means this. You have to be a believer if you want to be taken when the Lord comes. Isn't that so? Oh, my dear friends, let's not think we're above it. Before we go to bed tonight, let's ask ourselves, 'Suppose the Lord came tonight and took all the believers, would he take me?'

You say, 'How will I be sure?'

Well, are you a believer?

'By faith, Enoch was translated.' He was a believer.

You say, 'How can you know he was a believer?'

Well, you know he's a believer because it says in the Bible that he 'pleased God,' at least that's what the Greek translation says. The Hebrew, in its quaint fashion, says he daily walked with God; he pleased God. He wasn't sinlessly perfect, but he was a believer. This is how you can see it: when he walked with God, step by step, he pleased God. Because he was a believer, you could see it if you'd have watched his life, and he was one day taken home to glory.

So, if I want to go with him when the Lord comes, I've got to be a believer. What does being a believer mean?

You say, 'It means that when I was eight-and-a-half, I trusted the Lord.'

Well I hope you did. But it means more than that. It means if I'm a believer, I certainly must be walking with the Lord.

Sometimes we get funny notions in our head. The other day a good lady was explaining to me how her life had been difficult, and as I listened to her, my heart was full of sympathy. Difficulties galore, but she wanted to ask, 'Now, look, I am saved, am I not? If I died, I would go to heaven, wouldn't I?' This was in spite of the fact that she meant, 'I'm living as I ought not to live.'

I said, 'My dear, that's a very interesting question you ask because I need to ask, do you want to go on living like this, and do you really want to go to heaven?' I continued, 'Because when you go home to heaven, do you know what heaven is like? It means walking with the Lord Jesus every second of the clock for all eternity. Do you want to do that? Why are you so keen to go to heaven? If you really want to go to heaven, you'll really walk with the Lord Jesus now.' As the Bible puts it, 'they shall walk with me in white' (Rev 3:4). If I want to go to heaven and walk with the Lord Jesus, then of course I will walk with him now, won't I? It would be a funny way of thinking, wouldn't it, to say, 'Yes, I want to go to heaven and walk with the Lord then, but dear me, I don't want to walk with him now. Goodness me, no. I want to enjoy myself first, because I've only got seventy years to enjoy myself, and then I've got all eternity to spend with the Lord. It's going to be a long time, so do let me enjoy myself before I get there!' That would be funny logic, wouldn't it? It's believers who will be taken when the Lord comes, and the mark of the believer is that she or he walks with the Lord Jesus now. And if today I have sinned and gone astray, may God in his mercy, before I go to bed, bring me back.

The doctrine of the judgment to come

Finally, when the Lord comes back to take his people home, it will be glorious. The Lord will come in power and great glory to execute the wrath of God on this evil world; how solemn that will be. Do you believe it? What does it mean to be a believer? It means you believe in a coming judgment of God. It's no good our getting sentimental about this. You say you believe in the love of God, but you don't like the thought of God judging anybody. But half a minute; you say you're saved, but what do you mean you're saved? Well you say, 'God loved me and gave his Son for me.' Whatever for? The ancient verse says he loved us and gave his Son for us so 'that whosoever believes in him shall not perish' (John 3:16). If it was necessary for God to give his Son for us so we won't perish, then by definition, those who reject God's Son will perish. You can't have the one belief without the other, can you? You can't say, 'I believe that Jesus died at Calvary to save me from perishing, but I wouldn't like to say that anybody who rejects Christ will come to much harm.' That's nonsense, and being a believer means that you believe the Lord is coming and this world is going to know his judgments. It means believing that one day the world will end and that there is an eternal heaven and an eternal hell. Do you believe that?

How can I say that I believe in the coming judgment, and that men and women all around me who reject the Saviour will be lost eternally, if I'm doing nothing about it? We can't all be missionaries. We can't all be evangelists, can we? But we can all pray. We can all do something. If I believe that judgment is coming, I shall want to be like Noah and do something about it. So that, under God, I may be used to bring the message of salvation to those who need it and to save them from eternal perdition.

What does it mean to be a believer? It means to believe the basic doctrines of creation, of redemption, of the coming of Christ to take his people home, and of the coming of Christ to inaugurate the great day of the Lord, the judgments of God, and the end of the world.

May the Lord use our time together so that we shall help one another and, amidst all the joy, fellowship and the fun, to ask God to speak to us this weekend so that, where we need it, our lives can be adjusted, and that we may more effectively give the evidence to all and sundry that we are genuine believers.

A Believer's Pilgrimage

Let's read again from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (11:8–10)

And at this verse, let me interrupt to say that there is a difficulty in text and translation, and perhaps the best text and the best translation of these verses would run as follows:

By faith, he [that is Abraham], along with Sarah herself, received power to establish seed when she was past age, since she counted him faithful who had promised. Wherefore also there sprang of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of heaven in multitude and as the sand, which is by the seashore, innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return, but now they desire a better country that is a heavenly, wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God for he hath prepared for them a city. (11:11–16)

May that same God who called Abraham, and is not ashamed to be called his God, be pleased to call us.

Now this morning I hope you will keep your Bibles in hand, because this is the time of day when it is thought most likely that people can remain awake. And therefore today we shall be studying together the holy Scripture, and you may find it convenient from time to time to refer to the actual page of the Bible. Now we are studying together in these sessions what it means to be a believer and last night we saw that one of the evidences of a true believer is that he or she believes the basic doctrines: (1) The doctrine of creation—'By faith, we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God.' (2) The doctrine of redemption, of sacrifice and approach to God—'By faith, Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.' (3) The doctrine of our Christian hope and the consummation of our hope when the Lord Jesus Christ comes. Then, not only will the dead in Christ be raised, but we who are alive and remain, like Enoch, will be called up together to meet the

Lord in the air—'By faith, Enoch was translated that he should not see death.' (4) The doctrine of the judgments of God that will descend on our world. First the Lord Jesus Christ will come in power and great glory to set up his kingdom, and then this whole planet of ours will be dissolved at the end of time and the beginning of eternity. We are reminded of this faith by Noah, who not only believed God's announcement of coming judgment, but by faith did something about it so his family could be saved and escape that judgment. So we concluded that the first mark of a true believer is that he or she believes and goes on believing the basic Christian doctrines and allows those doctrines to have practical effect in the way the believer runs his or her life.

Now consider again with me briefly that fourth doctrine. It says that Noah was warned by God that a flood was coming that would destroy the world. It reminds us that as believers we're committed to the view that the Lord Jesus is coming to execute the wrath of God on corrupt civilisations. He shall be revealed 'in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess 1:8). And as we said before, Peter tells us that at the end of our Lord's reign, the very universe as we know it now will be dissolved and there shall be a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet 3:8–13).

The life of a pilgrim and stranger

Now there arises a question: If I really believe that, if I really believe that one day this planet of ours will cease to exist, if I really have it in my heart that this world, at best, is only temporary, what will that do for me? What effect shall that have on my life? And the answer to that question is found in Hebrews 11:8: it will do for me what it did for Abraham. It will turn me into a pilgrim and a stranger. First of all for the very obvious reason that when it dawns on me that this planet is but temporary, and my life on this planet is but a temporary thing, it will alert me to the fact that I'm not here forever; it will raise the question of what lies beyond the temporary. It will let me get a vision in my heart that, while this world is temporary, it is leading me to a glorious and eternal city, and forever after it will start working in my heart the sense that I am but a stranger here; I am a pilgrim to God's great eternity. Now the fact that this world is temporary means that the human race as a whole on this planet is a temporary phenomenon. It doesn't take much examination to observe that of course every human being on the planet is a temporary phenomenon, as far as this planet is concerned. But you see, there's a difference between people.

It's like when you're shivering on the edge of the swimming pool or on the sands of the ocean shore in the middle of summer when the temperature is -2°C, plucking up the courage to dive in, to leave the safety of the shore and enter the swirling waters of the abyss. And as you're standing there shivering, trying to make up your mind whether you're going to dive in or not, you perceive some evilly intentioned friend of yours sneaking up behind you who is about to push you in. Now you've got a choice; either you go in willy-nilly, or you anticipate what's coming and you dive in deliberately. You see, life is temporary. For many men and women, when the end comes they'll be pushed over the side and into eternity whether they want it or not, and much to their dismay. Oh how far better it is to go in deliberately, and if we haven't started it before, start right now with the realisation in our

heart that life here is but temporary, and beyond us is a glorious eternity. If that fact grips us, it will revolutionise our attitude to life here. Instead of living as though this world were all, as though this life were everything, we become pilgrims deliberately journeying on to the great eternity beyond.

It doesn't mean that we shall not enjoy the journey. I enjoy journeying, because I never grew up. I love being on a ship and watching the captains and hearing the first mate blow the whistle. I like going by aeroplane and seeing the thing take off, and so forth. I enjoy the journey, but I would be a fool, wouldn't I, if I went to the captain and said, 'Please don't land. Just keep going round and round and round, old boy, because I do like the journeying and I don't want to arrive.' But there are a lot of people who feel like that about life, aren't there? They want life to go round in circles, year after year after year. They make jokes about the grey hairs that come and they wish they could continue journeying, but they don't want to arrive. The true believer is marked by the fact that he has become a pilgrim, and his whole philosophy, mindset and attitude to life are fundamentally changed. He sees that the things around are temporary. He enjoys life as it comes, as best he or she may, but his eyes are set on the goal in advance.

A question of home

Now this is authentic Christianity, as you will see if you listen to the apostles. Listen, for instance, to Peter in his first letter. He says to his fellow believers, 'Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your behaviour seemly among the Gentiles' (1 Pet 2:11-12). We are pilgrims and strangers. Or Paul, talking to the Corinthians, says, 'We are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord. Wherefore also we make it our aim, whether at home or absent, to be well-pleasing unto him' (2 Cor 5:8-9). '... knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord' (2 Cor 5:6). The words he uses in those verses are interesting. They are words that you would apply on the one hand to genuine citizens who belong to a certain city. They are at home in the city, as distinct from other people who may be living in that same city, but who aren't at home. They are what we would call resident aliens. There are high-powered businessmen living in Paris instead of their home town of Ballywillwill in Northern Ireland. They were not at home in Paris; they were resident aliens and couldn't wait to get back to Ballywillwill.

Paul says, 'Do you know, as long as we are in this body ...'. You say, 'Yes, as long as we're in this body, we're very comfortably at home.' No you're not. The very opposite is true. While we are in the body, we are away from home because we are absent from the Lord. We're like men and women who are on business in a strange country, away from home. We are like ambassadors who have to be here for our job, for we are ambassadors for Christ to a godless world; and being ambassadors for Christ we have to live abroad, but nonetheless, we are away from home. Paul continues, 'There is in our hearts a profound longing to get home, to be absent from the body and present with the Lord.' You say, 'How did Abraham come to see all this and become a stranger and a pilgrim?' Well as you know, Abraham's home city, Ur of the Chaldees, was a resplendent city. It wasn't some little poky, one-eared, one-eyed donkey kind of city. It led the world in its civilisation and, as we see, the archaeologists'

reconstructions of that city still leave us breathless with the tremendously high standard of culture that they achieved in that ancient city. There are still cities in some countries, I won't name them, that are not so beautiful even now as Ur of the Chaldees was those many centuries ago. Why did he leave it? Well, in the first place we are told that God called him: 'By faith Abraham, when he was called . . .'. It was the call of God that revolutionised him. Don't ask me how or when God called him.

The great motivation to go

There came a day with Abraham when he heard from the long, distant eternity, a call loud and clear that lifted up his eyes beyond Ur of the Chaldees with all its wonderful culture and made him aware of the glories of eternity. Stephen, in his address to the Sanhedrin, recorded in Acts 7, tells us that 'the God of glory appeared to Abraham,' (v. 2) and catching sight, however dimly, of the glory of the eternal, it left Abraham discontent with even the very best that he would find and experience on earth. If you ask Paul and Peter what has given them this idea that we are pilgrims and strangers, you will get a similar answer. Paul says, 'And as long as I'm in this body, I'm absent from the Lord; and I have a tremendous longing to be absent from the body and present with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:8). You would not be well advised to suppose that Paul was an escapist wanting to run away from life and the realities of it. There are some people who are escapists. They don't like facing the rough and tumble of life, they don't like facing the realities of earning their living and striving to get through this world. They retreat into their imaginations and into fairylands of one kind and another, into all kinds of novels that take them off, and other vicarious means of running away from life.

Not Paul. You look at his bruised body. This was a man who was prepared to face life with all its suffering, as well as the additional suffering that came from his serving the Lord so valiantly. He was a man who could write from prison to the Philippians, 'I have a desire to depart and be with Christ—that's far better' (Phil 1:23). He says, 'For when I think of your present spiritual needs, then I'm prepared to stay with you, even if that means being in prison' (Phil 2:17). What is it then that transformed Paul? He says now, 'He that wrought us for this very thing is God, who gave unto us the earnest of the Spirit' (2 Cor 5:5). An earnest is a partial payment. When you go to a shop and you can't afford to pay the full price, you put down a deposit on it. That secures the object, and you are promising the shopkeeper that one day you'll pay him the full amount. 'And,' says Paul, 'when God saves us, he gives us his Holy Spirit,' and that Holy Spirit forms the down payment, the part payment; it is a guarantee that one day God will give us the complete blessings of our salvation.

The Holy Spirit is, for the moment, the earnest. Now you perceive that by putting the spirit into our hearts when we trust the Saviour, God is giving us the earnest of a glorious inheritance beyond, and we begin to taste the very joys of eternity. With a taste like that in our hearts and our mouths, and with eyes open to begin to be aware of the reality of eternity, we would be very strange creatures, wouldn't we, if we didn't want to be where the great inheritance is. And that is what Peter is saying: 'You've been born again through the word of God; you have been born again by God's Holy Spirit. Now, stretching out in front of you, reserved in heaven, you have an inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled that doesn't fade away' (see 1 Pet 1:3-4). That is what makes you pilgrims and strangers. You're not

running away from life. It's the longing to be away from this temporary world, where the very best joys have their colours dulled by the grey shadow of oncoming death, where the very best pleasures are sometimes made bitter by the ugly drops of sin. It's a longing to be away to an inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled and that doesn't fade away in all the tremendous, limitless treasures of eternal life. Have you been called? When one thinks about it, it's a magnificent thing to be called, isn't it? One among uncountable millions, to wake up to the fact that God Almighty has personally considered you and called you.

One of the marvels of the world around us not yet explained is the flight of birds. How birds of certain kinds, Canada Geese for instance, at a certain time of the year become uneasy; who knows what it is, what mechanism, what kind of a call they receive, but they rise up in their flocks and travel thousands of miles to their different feeding grounds. It's a marvel of nature, isn't it? I can tell you a bigger marvel and that's a marvel of redemption. There comes a point in men and women's lives, if they are men and women who come to know the Saviour, when they sense in their hearts the very call of almighty God, and they realise that they were made for him and the call of God is on them, and they realise now that earth is not their home. They were made for God. They shall not be satisfied until they see his face.

The city that has foundations

'By faith, when Abraham was called.' The Bible talks a good deal about our call, the call to salvation, the call to discipleship, the call of God for home and eternity. That call can come in different ways, of course. We are told in these verses that Abraham looked for the city that had the foundations, and I suspect this description implies that Abraham, as he had gone about life in Ur of the Chaldees, admired its art and culture, its beautiful architecture, but had nonetheless seen that it is not just beautiful buildings that make a beautiful city.

A city is more than its buildings, isn't it? It's the people who live in it, and the thing that spoiled Ur was community life that was built on false foundations. Men and women who had given up ideas in God the Creator and therefore lived in a community that was built on false foundations, with the result of all the ugly things that alienation from God can produce in the life of the individual and in society itself. A negative side to his call was that he came to see that community life, however you tinker with it, is flawed by sin and he looked forward to a city; not just a pile of stone, but to a community of people built on the true foundation. There wasn't only the negative side to it, of course; there was the positive side, and we have thought about that. Let me say it once more; beyond the temporary joy, he saw the eternal. Do you notice what verse 8 says? Along with the other heirs of the promise—Jacob, Isaac and company—he lived in the promised land; that is Canaan, the land God had promised him. Abraham knew that his posterity would be given that land to inherit; but here for the time being, Abraham and his sons were required to live as though they didn't own it, to live as resident aliens. It was a curious situation, wasn't it?

Here was Abraham in a land promised to him. God had given it to him as a covenant and he knew that one day his descendants would possess it and enjoy it. But he lived in it as though it didn't belong to him, as a resident alien. Of course he enjoyed the plums and the pomegranates which he could buy, and he pitched his tent and fed his cattle; but it was always with a sense that it didn't yet belong to him and he must wait. What kept him from

wanting to settle down and grab it now? What kept him content to be a resident alien in the very land that was one day promised to him? It is explained to us in verse 10: he looked for this eternal city.

This analogy is true of us, isn't it? Do you know who owns Castlewellan, Newcastle, Northern Ireland, the whole of Ireland, the whole of the UK, and the whole of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and all other continents? Do you know who owns it? I own it! Ah, you smile as though I've gone crackers. But think what you like, one day you'll find out I own it, and then you'll wish you hadn't doubted it all. I shall be a somebody one day, you know, when you meet me in glory. Mark my words. 'Do you see,' says the Bible, 'that this world was promised to Abraham and his seed?'

Then, in Galatians 3 Paul says, 'And if you have been baptised into Christ and you have put on Christ, then are you Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise' (vv. 27, 29). I like those verses, being greedy of disposition. I'm not content with heaven; I'm going to have earth as well. And I don't regard myself as being unspiritual for the purpose because the Lord Jesus is going to own it. There will come a day when, according to the invitation of God himself, the Lord Jesus will make a request: 'Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession' (Ps 2:8). When the Lord Jesus rises up and asks, the Father will give him the whole of this planet. And when he comes and reigns, I shall reign with him. Won't you? And I shall own what he owns—listen: 'heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ' (Rom 8:17)—what he owns, you own as well. Now listen to Abraham again: conscious that one day his descendants would own the very land, he was content for the moment to be as though a resident alien; and so must we. When the blessed Lord was here, he knew right well the promise of the Father that someday all would be his. There was many a night when he had nowhere to lay his head; it is written that the only place he bowed his head was when the sufferings of Calvary were over. Then he bowed his head as his body was impaled on the tree.

What will keep me from impatience, from the attitude that says, 'Yes, I'm safe, but I demand to own my rights here now'? What will keep us from that is what kept Abraham from it. He looked beyond even his nation's one-day possession of Palestine, and he looked beyond all the temporary gifts of God on to the eternal. It's an attitude of heart then, isn't it?

A sense of proportion

Have you noticed that there's a difference of attitude in the way that a child of nine plays with his toys and how his father plays with the same toys? Didn't you know that's why fathers buy Christmas presents, ostensibly for a nine-year-old, but so they can play with them themselves? Did you know that? That's why they go and spend £98 on some marvellous electronic affair, so that 'Tommy can play with it' but father has to show Tommy how it should be played with. Of course he does. And not only when Tommy's there either, but when Tommy's gone to bed father has to practice to be able to show the boy the next day, doesn't he? Of course he does. But there is a difference: for Tommy it's everything; it fills the boy's horizon! That's all that Tommy's been growing up for these past nine years, to get his hands on one of these; it is the ultimate. Father plays with it too, but father is aware that there's a lot more beyond this electronic toy, and for him it isn't everything.

What will keep us as believers from becoming worldly is not that we despise God's temporal blessings—home, family, wife, children, business, job, holidays, music and literature. We don't despise God's gifts. He's given us all things richly to enjoy. But oh, God, help us to put them in their true context. The thing that will do that is a real concept and awareness of the great eternity beyond. God calls us in our joys when we begin to realise that the very best joys that we could have anticipated in this life, when we have them, don't fully satisfy. We thank thee Lord, as the hymnist put it,

For thou who knowest, Lord, how soon
Our weak heart clings,
Hast given us joys, tender and true,
Yet all with wings;
So that we see gleaming on high,
Diviner things.¹

The sacred relationship of man and wife will in the end prove itself what it was meant to be—a pointer to something infinitely bigger. Nor must we expect one hundred per cent full and final joy here in this world. It is but temporary, at its highest a pointer to bigger things, and of course, sometimes God's call is heard in life's sorrows and disappointments. The Lord calls, and the reality of eternity beyond stands out vividly in our hearts and minds.

The faith that God requires

'By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed . . . and he went out, not knowing whither he went.' We notice now that Abraham was required to take the first step in the pilgrimage in blind faith. He went out 'not knowing whither he went.' That is always so in true discipleship; but let's make a very important and necessary distinction in our thinking. When God calls us to trust his Son Jesus as Saviour and Son of God, he does not ask us to step out in blind faith, though sometimes you will hear people talking like that. God gives us evidence. The Gospel of John was written, so we are told, for the purpose of supplying evidence (20:31). These signs and miracles that were written down carry the message that presents evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. God does not ask for blind faith; he gives evidence to provoke our faith. This is very important in our gospel work.

I was talking to a young man, a delightful and noble Christian man, in one of the countries behind the Iron Curtain, and over coffee one night the conversation drifted round to this matter of evidence.

I said, 'Do you do much in your thinking and in your evangelism with the evidence of Christianity?'

'No, no,' he said. 'No, we don't.'

'Oh,' I said, 'is that so? Where have you gone then?'

'Well,' he said, 'it's the quality of our lives that talks to the unconverted, and then they make enquiries.'

¹ Adelaide A. Procter, 'My God, I thank Thee', 1858.

I said, 'That's excellent. And when it comes to saying and explaining to them that the quality of your life is brought about by Jesus Christ and you believe he's the Son of God, do you offer them any evidence that he is?'

'No, no, no, I don't offer any evidence at all.'

'Oh really, that's so interesting.' I said, 'What do you think then? That when God exalts us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that God himself doesn't offer us any evidence?'

'Yes,' he said. 'That's what I believe. There is no evidence.'

'Well,' I said, 'that's most interesting. So how do you know whether you believe in God or the devil if there's no evidence? What's the difference between the two?'

'Well,' he said, 'there isn't any. You have to find that out by experience. You trust in blind faith and then subsequently you find out whether it's God you believed or the devil.'

Things have come to some difficulty, haven't they, when you don't know whether it's God you're believing or the devil? No, no, no! God is not asking anybody to believe that Jesus is the Christ as an act of blind faith. Of course not. God gives the evidence. 'These [signs] are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (John 20:31). There is evidence, but once you have trusted the Saviour and he begins to call you to a path of discipleship, then he will demand that you follow his call, initially, if need be, as a matter of blind faith, obeying just because Christ says so. That is always the basic condition of discipleship.

Sometimes you hear folks say, 'I don't see reasons why I should be baptized'.

Well it's good to enquire the reasons, but suppose you don't see the reasons why you should? The question is, who commands it?

'Well, yes, I know it's in the Bible.'

'You mean you know that Jesus Christ commanded it?'

'Well, yes.'

'But you don't see the reason for it, so you're not going to do it?'

In the path of discipleship, the first reason is that he says it. If I come to him and say, 'Yes, I'll follow you, Lord, but I have my reservations,' he will say, 'Well then you don't follow.' Abraham 'obeyed and went out, not knowing whither he went' (Heb 11:8).

Why is that important? Because, in the call of God, what do you suppose is the ultimate end? Just a certain aside, just as it comes into my scatterbrain head, why are you going to heaven exactly? You say, 'Why would I want to go to heaven? What a stupid question. There's a mansion for me, and with my notions opened this week by this marvellous castle we're living in at this conference, well, if this is an earthly mansion obviously I want to go to heaven to be in a heavenly mansion. And anyway, all the Mercedes-Benzes up there run on lead-free petrol. I'm looking for a heavenly chariot, what do you think?'

Oh, I see. Well it's obvious that God will have to correct your ideas before you get there, because if you went to heaven with that notion, you might never turn up to a heavenly prayer meeting, not in all the length of eternity; you'd be occupied with your mansion and your heavenly Mercedes-Benz or something. The reason for going to heaven is to see the Lord, isn't it? And if that's our reason for wanting to go to heaven, why not start here? The point is that when God calls, you follow him, not knowing where he may lead, because the

prime point is the Lord himself. Isn't that so? And since our blessed Lord has gone to glory, we follow him wherever the call may lead. We cannot consent to be away from him.

A vision that nourishes faith

What would keep us, therefore, steadfastly moving forward to our goal? We've already noticed that many times we come back to these verses: 'He looked for the city that hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (11:10). And looking constantly for that city, he found it nourished his faith because, the more he thought of that city, the more real it became to him and the more vigour it lent to his pilgrimage. It wouldn't be a bad idea if we took a squint ourselves at this juncture. Get your telescope out and have a look with me.

The city that has foundations is described in the final chapters of Revelation. Just let me point out what its two functions will be from Revelation 21 and 22. When John had seen the city, he was told that the city will have two functions: (1) 'Behold, the *tabernacle* of God is with men' (Rev 21:3). Function number one is that it will serve as a tabernacle for God. (2) The angel comes and says, 'Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (21:9). Function number two is that the city will form the bride of the Lamb. So, for God the Father—a tabernacle; for God the Son, the Lamb of God—a bride.

Now you may ask in your mind, rightly, whether this glorious city is going to be a place, or what it is. Surely it will occupy 'place,' for one of the marvels of our Christian gospel is this: that when the Lord Jesus ascended to glory, he went with a real, though glorified, human body. The implication is that the body involves space in the technical sense, both time and space. There is a place in the universe, on the dark side of the universe that we call heaven, and that place, you can be sure, is occupied by the blessed body of Jesus Christ our Lord. He's not gone off as some disembodied spirit. And when finally you get your resurrection body, my dear fellow Christian, you won't be a disembodied spirit either. You will have a body that will occupy a certain amount of space as well. But when we think of this city, we don't merely think of it as some glorified Belfast with gold streets instead of tarmac. The city is formed of people, isn't it? It is the bride of the Lamb, and to tell you the truth, the Lord Jesus hasn't fallen in love with a lot of heaps of stone, or gold either. It's people he's fallen in love with, this great concourse of redeemed people. Its function shall first be as a tabernacle for God, a place within the creation where the transcendent Lord, who existed before there was any creation whatsoever, may condescend and come to dwell and make his presence known. It is a magnificent story told throughout the Old Testament of the early days when God came down and visited our planet and bade Moses build a tabernacle that his glory might dwell therein.

Can you imagine the scene when God came down and, as the Old Testament quaintly puts it, 'stood on Mount Sinai'? Well poor old Mount Sinai went aflame and the whole planet rocked under the feet of the transcendent Lord (see Exodus 19). He came down and his glory dwelt in that tabernacle; and if you had come near that tabernacle and had been allowed to go inside and walk around it, you would have learnt something even from the tabernacle of God. Its beautiful colours, its magnificent and eloquent rituals, the lampstand and table of showbread, and the altar with its incense all gave a sense of the beauty of God and of the holiness of God; but of course it was only made of linen, gold and copper—dead materials. It

was a prototype of the great eternal tabernacle that shall be the dwelling place of God, the centre of the universe, where men and women, nations of them who are saved, may come and find God. How? God himself will still be invisible. They will see the glory of God through the personalities of his redeemed people.

The building already begun

I'm not talking fairy tales, am I? Do you know God has already begun to build that building? Look at that dear Christian lady in your church; watch her in her daily life. You'll see and hear again a flash of beauty that's more than earthly. Watch a good Christian man and you'll see in his life an action that will set you asking, 'And what is the source of their grace, courage, sacrifice and patience?' And you will catch a gleam of a glory that's unearthly. Why? Because that man and that woman are redeemed. Their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; that's why. When God is done with them and they are totally like the Saviour, you'll be able to come across them, each one with his or her different personality, but glorified and made like the Saviour, and looking at them you will see the very beauty and glory of God himself. It shall also form a bride to the Lamb, and I must allow you full rein to develop all the romantic ideas you care to develop around that, for Christ does love the church as a man loves his wife. But even when you have had the honeymoon, you have to come down to reality. Well, not reality, but you've got to do something, don't you? You can't sit there and just look at each other twenty-four hours a day. So shall it be with the heavenly city. It shall be the bride of the Lamb, like Eve was a bride for Adam. Adam was put over this planet and told to develop it and make something of it for God, and to help him in his task he was given Eve. Our blessed Lord is going to inherit this universe, and all the other universes there may be, and his people are given to him—as Eve was to Adam, as the church is to Christ; the fulness of him that fills all in all. That's the vision.

You say, 'How do you get into that city, and what are the conditions?' Let's just check we've got them right. Abraham looked for the city that has the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. When John is finally shown the city in the book of Revelation, he tells us about it. One of the things he saw was that the city had foundations, but once more we're thinking not just of a literal city of stones, we're thinking of a city of people. This great community is built on solid foundations. One of the reasons Abraham left Ur was that it wasn't built, socially or politically speaking, on secure foundations. What is the foundation of the eternal city? We are taught about the foundation in the lives of Abraham and Sarah; put doctrinally it's this: the great foundation is justification by faith, and the other side of that story is justification by works.

Justification by faith and by works

Paul explains justification by faith in the Epistle to the Romans. It means that we cannot earn salvation in any fashion; we are utterly and completely dependent on God's grace and his justifying mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord. Guilty sinners, as the old preachers said, helpless sinners, who cannot even by our best good works merit acceptance by God. But if we're prepared to come in radical repentance, confessing that we are lost and helpless, to avoid

God's eternal displeasure, and we put our faith in God, his word and his Son, then God accepts us.

It's not just a doctrine, you know. You want to be happy in heaven? Well you'd better get the foundation right. Imagine you're invited to Buckingham Palace to spend your holidays there this year. The Queen writes and says, 'I've heard it's a little bit difficult these days in Benidorm; it's rather crowded. Would you come and spend your holidays with me?' So along you go to be with the dear Queen, living in all that splendour, and it suddenly occurs to you to ask yourself, 'Am I really welcome here? On what terms am I here? Could I, any day of the week if it didn't suit her majesty, be politely or otherwise asked to leave?' If you were uncertain it would make the holiday less than enjoyable, wouldn't it? And the more wonderful the surroundings were, and the more you liked them, the worse the torture would be. 'Could I get thrown out?' Imagine being in heaven and not quite sure what the foundations were of your being there. The foundation is justification by faith.

It is also justification by works; what does that mean? The great example is what happened to Abraham when he offered his son, Isaac, on the altar. You see God had taught Abraham early on the lesson of being justified by faith; that is, learning to put his faith solely in God. Toward the end of his life, God brought Abraham through the great test. If I might paraphrase it:

'Now Abraham, your faith for acceptance and your faith for eternity is in me and nothing else, isn't it?'

'Yes, Lord,' said Abraham. 'It is indeed.'

'Your faith for the future, Abraham, what's that in?'

'Well, you, Lord.'

'I see. It wouldn't happen to be in Isaac, would it?'

'Well now Lord, you gave me Isaac, but you know my faith is really in you.'

'Right-ho,' says God. 'We'll demonstrate that, shall we? Just to get it straight. You give me Isaac. You don't want to, Abraham? Where's your faith for the future?'

And Abraham said, 'I see it, Lord. I say I believe in you, that my faith is solely in you. Yes, Lord, take everything I have. My faith for now and forever is you' (see Genesis 22).

It's a good thing to learn, isn't it, before you finally leave this world, because one of these days you'll have to go anyway and leave everything behind? You wouldn't enjoy heaven unless you had learned the lesson of faith utterly and solely in God. Then are you eternally secure, and nothing should ever be able to shake you.

Fruitfulness and perseverance through faith

Two lessons can be passed over very quickly. We talked about Abraham as a pilgrim, a resident alien, and his attitude to this world. Once more let me point out to you that it wasn't escapism, it wasn't a negative, barren attitude to life. Far from it. By faith Abraham, along with Sarah, received strength for the establishment of seed, and from one who was as good as dead, or two of them who were as good as dead, there sprang a multitude of descendants. In other words, that life, the life of a pilgrim and resident alien, became astonishingly fruitful. It did so at the level of physical descendants, but of course it did so even more at the level of their spiritual descendants. I don't know how you got converted, whether Abraham and

Sarah had anything to do with your conversion. Did Abraham lead you to the Lord? You say, 'Goodness me, how old do you think I am?' *Abraham* really means 'of the Lord.' You, madam, has Sarah ever been of any spiritual help to you? They have to me, you know. Oh, what tremendous examples they've been to me; what stability they have given to my faith—the whole elementary lesson of justification by faith. I learnt it through Paul, and he learnt it from the Lord on the basis of Abraham's experience, and that has come down to me—Abraham and Sarah having had a positive effect on my life.

How I'm looking forward to getting home to glory; for the prayer meetings and the songs. I hope the songs don't go on all the time. I want to get round to having a word with some of those folks; I feel I know them already. I'm going to make a beeline for Sarah. I've got a lot of questions to ask her. I'll say, 'Sarah, dear, tell me if I may ask, without being rude, what was it like living with Abraham? Was it glory already, Sarah, my dear?' But when I've asked those impertinent questions, I'm going to tell her how she helped me, and how Abraham did too. And I trust he, from his eminence, will run his fingers through my heavenly curls (I'm going to have them there) and say, 'My boy, glad to see you. I'm glad if my life was of some help to you.' How fruitful those two have been. What it will be then, not only to see the Saviour, but to see the multitudes who were brought to faith as a result of their experience. Will you be able to run your fingers through anybody's spiritual curls and say, 'Glad to see you here. Glad if my example, the way I lived, was of some encouragement to you and helped you on the way to glory?' Oh, God forbid it should ever be said by anybody, 'No, you nearly wrecked me. You encouraged me to live a worldly life, and I went off far from the Lord and only came back when I was ninety-nine years old. Oh dear, what an example you set me.'

Finally, they are an example by their perseverance. You see it is said that Abraham made it clear to everybody around that he was a resident alien. You will remember the story where he came to bury Sarah, his wife (Gen 23). He decided he wanted to buy a piece of ground to bury her in, and he went to the sons of Heth and asked if he might buy from them a bit of field and a cave, and he explained he wasn't trying to buy up the whole property (he wasn't Jacob!). He was Abraham, and he was a stranger. What did he mean that he was a stranger, a resident alien? That he still hankered after Ur of the Chaldees, where he was at home? Oh, no, no, no. He could have gone back to Ur of the Chaldees if he wanted to. When he said he was a resident alien, he meant he was a resident alien in Palestine, and if he had gone back to Ur of the Chaldees, he would be a resident alien there as well. He was a citizen of the great eternal city and confessed it and lived like it, 'for those who say such things make it clear that they seek a heavenly fatherland' (11:14). And it is written that God says of them that he's not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (v. 16). Is God ashamed of me I wonder?

Just imagine you've got an uncle and aunt in America. You haven't seen them, but they are important people in their place. One is a local magistrate or something, and they're coming now to Northern Ireland, and you're going to entertain them. They're going to land in Dublin early in the morning. They're going to get a rest in a hotel, and then they're coming up to see you. You've planned a lunch for them at one o'clock, and you're inviting some of your special friends to meet these great Americans. Oh, the silver is out and the best tureens

and everything else under the sun, and the cooking is out of this world—cordon bleu stuff—and you're telling the neighbours for many weeks in advance: 'My uncle is a big chief out in America. He and his wife are coming.' You want them to know he's the governor of Honolulu or something.

So the day comes and you're expecting the big limousine to pull up outside any minute. One o'clock comes and goes, then 1:15, 1:45 and by 3:00 there's still no sign of them.

The neighbours are saying, 'Well, haven't they arrived?'

You say, 'I don't know what's gone wrong. Perhaps it's another Boeing gone down or something. I hope not. No, they haven't arrived.' Of course, the dinner is absolutely ruined.

At 4:15, here they come, and you say, 'I'm sorry you've been so delayed. Was the flight horrible?'

'No,' they say, 'we got in on time.'

'Oh, did the car break down?'

'No.'

'Oh, I thought you were going to be here at one o'clock.'

'Well no, actually,' says the wife. 'You see, we came across a very, very nice burger bar in Dundalk, and we stopped and had a look around.'

Later the neighbours ask, 'What happened? Was it that the plane was delayed?'

And you don't know whether you dare tell them, 'My uncle and aunt saw a burger bar and thought it so marvellous.'

God has provided for us a city, ladies and gentlemen. I hope he doesn't find us dawdling on our way home to glory, lest he have to explain to Michael the archangel, 'You know what's holding them up? They found a burger bar and they think they prefer that to heaven.'

The Lord, bless his word for his name's sake.

[A Believer's Warfare and Evangelism](#)

A question arising

There is a question that has been put to me that I want to answer before we begin the main theme of this study. The question is whether the attribute of omnipresence applies to the earthly life of the Lord Jesus. The answer to that and similar questions has exercised the biggest Christian brains in Europe for centuries. What I can say about it in only a brief time I really do not know. I do find it helpful, however, in my own thinking, to always remember that while Jesus Christ our Lord was truly and perfectly and completely human, he who was incarnate in Jesus Christ was nothing less than infinite God. There is necessarily a mystery about the person of our Lord, as he himself observed, that only God can and does understand. 'No one knows the Son save the Father' (Matt 11:27), and here as we contemplate such a mystery, the proper attitude is one of worship more than analysis.

We must be careful how we speak of the Lord Jesus and what kind of rational deductions we make. He is God incarnate, but you would be wrong if you were to say, as the Old Testament does, 'Well God never slumbers or sleeps,' and then proceed to deduce that because Jesus Christ is God incarnate, he never slumbered or slept. He fell asleep in the boat (Luke 8:23). He was truly human but as far as I understand it, while our Lord was truly human, he was not merely human. He was the Word incarnate and the Word was always omnipresent and never ceased to be anything else. There's no record that the body of our gracious Lord was omnipresent, but when we talk of omnipresence, we're not tied to physical things. I simply repeat that our Lord was truly human. His body knew the limitations of our time and space, our hunger and cold, our heat and pain, and our sorrow and weakness; though not sin. But the one who was incarnate in Jesus Christ was God overall, blessed forevermore. With that, let us return to the passage for our study.

We read again from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months by his parents, because they saw he was a goodly child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to be evil entreated with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he looked unto the recompense of reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of the blood, that the destroyer of the firstborn should not touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were swallowed up.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been compassed about for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot perished not with them that were disobedient, having received the spies with peace. And what shall I more say? For the time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens. Women received their dead by resurrection: and others were tortured, not accepting their deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were tempted, they were slain with the sword: they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, evil entreated (of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves, and the holes of the earth. And these all, having had witness borne to them through their faith, received not the promise, God, having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight and the sin, which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (11:23–12:2)

Our studies so far

We have been thinking about what it means to be a true believer. We noticed that the mark of a true believer is that he or she believes, with all his or her heart, the basic doctrines of the faith: (1) The doctrine of creation, (2) the doctrine of redemption, (3) the doctrine of the second coming of our blessed Lord and of our gathering together with him when he comes, and (4) the doctrine of our Lord's coming in judgment, the setting up of his reign, the final disillusion of this earth, and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.

As we thought of that last doctrine—the solemn facts that our Lord is coming and his coming will institute the solemn day of the Lord, the final dissolution of all things—we understood more easily what the second section of Hebrews 11 is about. We found it was this: that if you have really believed in your heart, for instance like Noah did, that God is going to destroy the world, it will turn you into a pilgrim and a stranger and a resident alien. Having heard the call of God, the summons of eternity, the glory of the city that hath foundations whose builder and maker is God, the true believer begins a pilgrimage, starts out to take his first steps on the road that shall lead him through this temporary life and temporary world to the great eternity that lies beyond. And as we thought of the call and life of Abraham, we were reminded that he looked for that same city. That leads us on naturally to think of this third section of this great chapter of Hebrews 11, that deals with the next characteristic of faith; that true faith will be tested by God.

We read of Abraham and the testing of his faith and admire the logic by which he worked out that God would be true to his promise, so that even if in response to God's word, he sacrificed Isaac, the logic of faith told Abraham that God would raise him from the dead. The mark of true faith is that God will not only test it, he will, where necessary, redirect it. We will

see, eventually, that Isaac got himself a little bit muddled up over this. Anxious to enjoy God's blessing, he for a little while mistook what blessing consists in and centred his attention, not on the blessing itself, but on the joys, emotions and sensations that sometimes come when we enjoy the blessing of God. Because he centred his attention not on God's word or the blessing itself, but on the emotions and sensations that come from God's blessing, he was deceived (Gen 27), as we are likely to do if we pursue mere emotion and sensation instead of allowing the emotion to come when God is pleased to give it, and suffering any sensations that go along with it. If we concentrate on that, we shall possibly be deceived ourselves. What we must do is always to allow the Holy Spirit to redirect our faith, like the needle compass comes round always to point north.

Our attention must always be focused on the word of God, faith in his word that secures the blessing and will let God give what emotions and sensations he cares to accompany it. If our heart's direction is set on God's word and on faith in that word, we may rest secure that we have the blessing and we can say to feelings, 'Let feelings come, let feelings go. I have God's word and I stake my eternity, my present and my future on what God has said.' And we shall learn to be stable individuals and not driven around with every wind of emotion, not the prey and the victims to our moods and fancies, able to face joy and sorrow if our hearts are anchored on the rock of God's holy word.

Faith is not only tested and then redirected, but in Jacob's case we saw an evident need for faith to be refined. He was a true believer, but in his early days he got up to some funny antics. All of us should be a little bit nervous if Jacob, still uncorrected, turned up in heaven. He'd not only have his own crown, but when you weren't looking he'd have your crown as well, deposited in his heavenly bank account! You'd have to keep an eye on Jacob, and if Jacob and the rest of us are to be entrusted as stewards with unimaginable wealth as we join our blessed Lord Jesus in the administration of the world to come, then first our faith must be refined and all the dross and unworthy elements in it—selfishness, greed, deceitfulness, and so forth—be burnt out of it so that what is left is solid gold of real, unadulterated faith.

In the previous chapter we admired Joseph's triumph of faith. He rose to eminence, second only in command to Pharaoh in the whole of Egypt, and all its vast treasures were under his power. The political rearrangement of the country was in his hands, all its economic problems were for him to solve; and the record is that he solved them brilliantly. When Joseph was dying, however, he gave a commandment that he was not to be buried in Egypt (11:22 cf. Gen 50:25). He could have had his tomb in the Westminster Abby of the time, but no, he said they were to take his bones to Canaan. He said, 'God will surely visit you and take you up out of Egypt and bring you, at last, back to Canaan' (Gen 50:24). In saying that, Joseph gave evidence that he had not only maintained his devotion, but he had also maintained his hope, and we must concentrate on that now, because it is the key to the next part of this chapter.

Faith looking to the future

The hope that Joseph entertained had been given by God to his ancestor Abraham. The record of it is found in Genesis 15, where God not only justified Abraham in response to his

faith, but he made a covenant with Abraham and to his seed that he would give them this great land to inherit; and that great hope had been nurtured in the breast of succeeding generations of Abraham's children. And many a mother in Egypt, as she nursed her children and brought them up in the nursery, had told them from their earliest days onward that Egypt was not their home; that they were only there temporarily. God in that covenant had promised that, while they would be in Egypt for four hundred years, the day would eventually dawn when God himself would visit the people and he would redeem them, and they would come out of Egypt with a great substance and, at long last, come to their inheritance. The future lay with them and all the great purposes God had for Abraham and his seed.

It must have seemed an absurd thing to Joseph's colleagues in the civil service if they ever overheard his request not to be buried in Egypt.

'Hello, Joe, old chap.' (You can imagine the conversation, can't you, over coffee and other things after lunch?)

'I hear you've turned down the Pharaoh's offer of the most prominent tomb in Egypt. What's all this? I mean, what's wrong with our marble? Don't you like our building designs here in Egypt? We could have given you a beautiful old tomb; you could have had a name secured for posterity. Why are you choosing oblivion, old boy?'

Well, how would you explain a thing like that to an old Egyptian pagan? Difficult, isn't it, to explain your hope sometimes to modern Irishmen, let alone ancient Egyptians?

Joseph said, 'Well you see, I'll tell you what really I believe.'

'Oh, yes, what is that?'

'Well, I believe the future of the world lies with Israel.'

'My, my, my. Tell us a little bit more, Joe old boy! What's this you say?'

Here was Egypt, mighty Egypt, the leading political power in the Middle East in those days, if not the world. To say to Egypt that the future didn't lie with them, but rather with this little, tiny, not much more than an extended family and tribe, Israel, must have seemed absurd beyond everything.

Joseph believed the hope that God had set before him, and we, with our hindsight, can see the point of it, can't we? Joseph's hope has already been justified. Ancient Egypt crumbled to the dust but that tiny little nation that was called Israel, Abraham's seed, although remaining, as far as nations were concerned, comparatively small but, oh, the wonderful thing that has happened! Abraham's seed has turned out to be not merely Jews born physically from him; Abraham's seed has turned out to be nothing less than the Messiah—God incarnate. The future was indeed with Abraham and his seed. And I'll tell you what, Joseph is aloft where he is now and he's clapping his hands with glee. He made the right decision. His name might have been simply noted in the old, musty, fusty records of some museum, but instead it stands on the pages of holy Scripture, connected with God's central plan not only for earth, but for the whole universe.

Joseph made his choice, and so must we. The future of the world, ladies and gentlemen, does not lie with America or Dublin or London or Bonn or Moscow. The future of the world lies with Abraham and his seed, and pre-eminently with his seed, that is Jesus Christ our Lord. Though men gave him a cross,

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does its successive journeys run,
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.²

The mark of true faith is our decision, once again renewed, surely, as we consider these things, as to with what future we cast in our lot. Because your concept of the future, if it is real and genuine, will determine what your ambitions are, what your choices are, what your motivations are, what will be the goals you will set before you in life, and what will be your great objectives.

By the time Moses was born, history witnessed the beginnings of a very big change. Abraham had been promised that his seed would be a stranger in a land not theirs; they would be afflicted, but after four hundred years they would come out. That long-ago given promise; now the time had come for it to be fulfilled and God's great prophetic clock began to work once more. The time had come for Israel to be delivered and to take the next big step forward in God's plan of redemption. We are to think of some of the people who in Scripture are associated with the prosecution of that tremendous plan. The mark of true believers we will consider now is their warfare, their evangelism.

Faith's ambitions, choices and motivations

We start in Hebrews 11, verse 23 with Moses's parents. When Moses was born, it is said they saw he was 'a goodly child,' and they were under orders from Pharaoh that every male child should be thrown into the Nile. If you didn't, you risked summary execution (see Exod 1:15–2:10). Moss's parents had to make a decision. They saw, like all parents think of their children, that he was a goodly child and, like all parents, they had ambitions for their child. Surely you have? If you never were ambitious before, you become really ambitious when you have children, don't you? And Moses's parents wanted the best for him. But it was dangerous. If they didn't allow the child to be destroyed, and they kept him, the child would inevitably grow up. What then would happen, when he could no longer be hidden and Pharaoh's officers would scent him out? Not only would Moses be destroyed, but his parents would be destroyed as well. Not knowing how God would open the door of the future, nonetheless they made their decision to keep their son and not let cruel Egypt destroy him. Mercifully for us, we don't have to make that kind of decision as parents, do we? We live in a land of freedom. There's more than one way though that this world, energised by Satan himself, destroys children.

Ambition for your children

I think of friends of mine years ago in East Germany. I remember one girl of about twelve years old telling me how her teacher had once told her straight in class, 'My dear, if you don't join the Young Communist Party, there is no higher education for you.' One darkening evening I stood with friends at one part of the wall in Berlin. There were a few folks around, but up at the corner there were three or four teenagers, or early twenties perhaps, so we

² Isaac Watts, 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun', 1719.

edged across and we began to talk to them. When we found them friendly, I began to ask, 'Is it true that if you are a Christian in this country, you'll never get promotion in your work?' One lad unbuttoned his jacket, and there written right across his jersey was '*Jesus Lebt*'—Jesus Lives. 'Yes,' he said. 'And if you're engaged in young people's work, there's no promotion in your secular work, for you. It's a risky thing to do.'

In that situation, some Christian parents told their children to join the Young Communist Party. What would you have told your children, as a Christian parent? No higher education, no advancement in work if you don't join the Party. No advancement in work if you show yourself too vigorous in Christian young people's work. What would you, as a parent, have told your children to do? Some Christian parents may have said, 'Well, career is important you know,' and told their children to join the party. We shouldn't criticise them, should we?

Parents, what is your ambition for your children?

In the University of Cambridge there was a great Christian man of God named Basil Atkinson. He was deputy head of the university library, a great scholar, and an enormous help to generations of undergraduates. A delightful believer and expositor of the word, he told us once:

A Christian woman came up to me after a conference and said, 'Dr Atkinson?'

I said, 'Yes.'

'Well,' she said, 'I'd like a little advice. What career would you advise for my son?'

'Is he a believer?'

'Yes. What career?'

'Well,' I said, 'I suggest being a missionary.'

'A what?' The woman was flabbergasted.

No, no, she wanted a different career for her boy. But what bigger career could you possibly have? My dear parents, what are your values that you see for your children? What ambition do you have? We can't all be missionaries, can we? Many of us are called to serve God in secular work, but of this I'm sure, that whether our work be secular or whether our work be sacred, surely the ambition that motivates us is that we should do all—secular or sacred—for the sake of Christ and the advancement of his glory. Alas, how many young folks, though Christians, are encouraged to put first worldly success and find themselves so pressured in the battles of life that they have scarce any time at all to give to spiritual things and the promotion of God's kingdom. It's the mark of a true believer that it shapes our ambitions and that our ambition, whether secular or sacred, is to seek first the interests of our Lord.

Suffering or pleasure?

When Moses grew up he had to come to his own decision, and we're told that he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (11:24). There was, on the one side, the option to be mistreated with the people of God; and there was, on the other side, the possibility of enjoying 'the pleasures of sin for a season' (v. 25). In those words you see the things that led Moses to make his decision. Affliction with the people of God—nobody enjoys affliction, I hope. It's a bad psychological trait if you do. And even to be associated with some of these Israelites must have been a pain for a man brought up in the Egyptian court. What an

unceasing trial the Israelites were to him. How they grumbled, in spite of all he sacrificed for them; but he deliberately chose affliction with the people of God. You say, 'How on earth did the man manage to make that choice?' It was because he really believed that they were the people of God; that's why. We roll the phrase off our tongue so easily, don't we? Do you really believe it? Do you believe the person sitting by your side is part of the people of God?

It has often been said that if you saw that dear Christian lady in church sitting by your side—not as she is now, but what she will be in glory—you'd be tempted to get down on your knees and worship her. It wouldn't be a good thing to do, because not even the angels allow you to worship them, but that good lady is destined to be glorious far above the greatest angel of God that was ever invented. Part of the people of God; companions of the Messiah himself; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. I know some of them came of lowly stock and lowly occupation. So did our blessed Lord. He was a carpenter, and they're not all that lowly, but he came of humble stock. I shall reign with Christ one day. It is not being sentimental to ask how you will measure the privilege of being associated with the people of God. 'You won't discern it naturally,' says Paul. 'It will take an enlightening of the Holy Spirit in the eyes of our heart to see the exceeding riches of God's inheritance in the saints' (Eph 1:17–18).

'Love your brethren,' says Peter, 'don't love the world.' When I first hear some of the verse, sometimes I say, 'Dear Peter, my man, do be a little bit realistic. You say, "Love my brethren and don't love the world." Have you met my brethren by any chance, Peter? I know some highly sophisticated people who are not believers, and you're telling me to love these believers. Why should I?' 'Well,' says Peter, 'because the world's going to fade like the beautiful flowers and the grass. Your fellow believer was born again of the word of God, the incorruptible seed that lives and abides forever. Love your brethren. They last eternally' (1 Pet 1:15–25, 4:7–11).

Moses chose affliction with the people of God, wise man, rather than the pleasures of Egypt's court. Some of those pleasures were very real pleasures. Oh, the aesthetic delights of the art of that time and the music; they could send you into raptures. But in spite of all the beauty of their art and literature and culture, it was a culture flawed by sin, and at best it was but temporary; Moses made his choice for the people of God and the eternal. Now that you see what's come of Egypt and its so-called treasures, you can't say that Moses made the wrong decision, can you? Over fourteen hundred years later when he appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with the Lord, there weren't any pharaohs in sight.

Moses counted the reproach of Christ as greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. He'd learnt the lesson that our Lord subsequently taught; that when all sorts of wrong things are said about you for the Son of Man's sake—not because you are a difficult character to get along with, but for the Son of Man's sake—then rejoice and leap for joy, for great is your reward in heaven. They are honourable wounds that we carry for the sake of Christ. My dear brother and sister, when we get home to glory and see the Saviour's wounds, will I have any wounds to show? Will you have any wounds to show? Have we spent our time far back behind the firing line and never been wounded for the sake of Christ at all?

A time for action

Then came the great moment of deliverance, and Moses was charged with the tremendous task of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. First they had to be saved from the wrath of God, for they were sinners. Then they had to be saved from the power of Pharaoh, for they were slaves. And, by faith, Moses did both. But before he did, Hebrews 11:27 says Moses 'forsook Egypt.' That surely must mean that the occasion referred to came before the Passover and before the Red Sea. 'He forsook Egypt' must be talking about that period at the beginning of his life. Moses had attempted to deliver a couple of Israelites who were being maltreated by an Egyptian, and he had slain the Egyptian. Then, a day or so later he saw two Israelites having a scrap, but when he tried to separate them they turned on him and accused him of having murdered the Egyptian. Moses was afraid, and he fled to the desert (Exod 2:11–15). So Hebrews 11:27 must refer to that fleeing from Egypt. There is a difficulty at first, because verse 27 says he fled, 'not fearing the wrath of the king,' whereas when you read Exodus, it says that 'Moses feared' and left (2:14). So what is verse 27 saying? I take it that what it is saying is that, though in one sense Moses feared the wrath of the king, it wasn't fear that dictated his movements; this was a tactical withdrawal. If he had gone in and faced Pharaoh at that stage, the people of Israel would not have been ready to back him up or to follow him, and the whole thing could have been a debacle.

So there was a tactical withdrawal and Moses went into the desert, 'not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible.' And in spite of the almost insuperable might of Egypt, Moses persisted in his belief in God's purpose and the eventual deliverance. What caused him to persist? He saw him who is invisible, notably at the burning bush, when God came down in the bush that burnt with fire and yet was not consumed; when Moses drew near it, he found it to be God himself in the middle of the thorn bush. Oh, what a vision it gave to Moses in those moments, and it gave the solution to deliverance from Egypt. Do you know what Egypt stood for?

When Moses eventually returned to Egypt and went into the presence of Pharaoh he said, 'Good morning, your majesty. I'm sent by God to tell you to let his people go.'

'Come, come, Moses,' Pharaoh said, 'is this a hangover or something? I mean, what is this you are saying?'

'Well, it's about the Israelites, your majesty. Lord Jehovah has sent me to say, "Let my people go." God has a purpose for them, you see. He's got a beautiful inheritance for them out there across the desert, and he demands that you let them go.'

'I've never heard such piffle in all my life,' said Pharaoh. 'What nonsensical God stuff you do believe, Moses—you Jews. What did you say? Inheritance out there somewhere, and the people have got to be let go to get at it. Nonsense. I tell you what, Moses, do you know what life is for you and your people? I'll tell you straight: there's no inheritance out there for you. Life is getting up in the morning, going to work, eating, more work, a bit more eating, going to bed, sleeping. Get up in the morning, go to work, eat, sleep, play the odd game of football, go to bed again. Get up in the morning, work, eat and sleep. That's life. It's all there is. There isn't any inheritance out there, and the sooner you learn to buckle down and accept that the better. For you, that's all life is. There is no future; it's just the daily round with a bit of games and TV thrown in, and that's that.'

That's a view that many moderns hold. They know nothing about an inheritance that is 'incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away' (1 Pet 1:4). Getting up on Monday morning, going to work, eating, sleeping, marrying, having children. The children grow up, they marry and they have children. Then the next lot come, and they have children. It all goes round in one colossal, great circle. Eat, sleep, work, play. That's all there is. No, that's not all there is! And Moses came in to break that bondage, that limited view, that narrow-mindedness that sees this world as all there is.

An eternal relationship

Moses came with the message that he heard again from the living God in the burning bush: 'Moses, you and your people had a past long before you came into Egypt. Moses, I had a plan and a purpose for your people, one day, through them, to bring in Abraham's seed.' And though Moses didn't know it then, (he knows it now) the seed would be God incarnate. 'They had a past and Moses, and your people have a future. I have come down to deliver them and take them to their glorious inheritance. They have a future, Moses! Go and tell my people that.'

I'm no Moses, but I'm grateful for the opportunity to stand and remind you of what your situation is for your little seventy years on the surface of this planet. This world is not all there is, my brother, my sister. Long before you came, the almighty God of eternity had a plan and a purpose for you: 'chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world' (Eph 1:4). And multi-million years from now, people will still be talking of you! You shall reign eternally with Christ. There is an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away. This is no Red Riding Hood stuff. This, our temporary planet, was built as a stepping stone from the one great eternity to the other, and you haven't understood life unless you've understood life here in the context and framework of the great eternities.

I'd love to stand with Moses at that bush and see him who is invisible as he declares himself the God of my past, the God of my future, the God of my eternal present and the I AM THAT I AM (Exod 3:14). Our Lord Jesus quoted that verse, didn't he? When the old Sadducees, sorry souls that they were, had tried to prove to him there is no such thing as the resurrection and he said, 'Have you never read what God said to Moses at the bush? "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"' (Mark 12:26). *I am, not I was.*

If you were to come to me and say, 'Gooding, you come from England, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Did you know Churchill?'

I shall say, 'No, of course I didn't.'

'Oh.'

If you went to God and said, 'God, did you know Abraham?' what do you think God would say?

'I do know Abraham. Here he is, look!'

For when God enters into a relationship with you, he gives you eternal life—all believers live to God (1 Pet 4:6). God of my past, God of my future, God of my present. He sees you not merely as you are at this moment, for he said to Moses, 'If you want a confirmation, this is it: When you come out of Egypt, you'll worship me on this mountain.' And when Moses

eventually got to the mountain, he looked back and said, 'Ah that's come true.' And God knew it all in advance, did he? He did indeed.

I tell you my brother and my sister, he sees you not as you are merely now. He sees your circumstances ten days down the road. And he sees you as you will be in glory in Christ! He's the God who designed and made you and the God who gave his Son for your redemption.

Who made our disabilities?

He's God of my disability as well. Moses began to put on the best stammer he was capable of and said, 'God, I don't really want to go because I'm not very good at speaking. I've got a bit of a stammer you know.'

God said, 'Oh, don't fool about, Moses. Get going.'

'No,' Moses said, 'I can't speak very well.'

'Look here,' said God, 'who made men blind or mute or deaf?'

That's a hard question to answer, for in one sense, we mustn't blame God for the sufferings of humanity. Mother and father have a child born with a congenital mental defect. I must be careful what I say, mustn't I? I mustn't say that God made the child mentally defective as a result of a fall; but then where shall I find comfort? Has this universe got out of God's control? Did God lose control so much that the infant was born like that? Or may I not believe that ultimately God must be answerable for what he allows and permits? Believe what you must. I find colossal comfort and I anchor my soul in this: that in spite of my disabilities—and they're not few—I'm not an accident that got accidentally spoilt in this universe. He's the God of my very disability, and the disability that he would allow he will take and use it and transform it and make it serve his eternal purpose for me. 'The very hairs of your head are numbered' (Luke 12:7). Your very disabilities, if you have any, are known. He's a God who will stand by you loyally for eternity. And Moses caught sight of that God and he persevered, and that sight took him through in the great work to which God called him.

The way of sacrifice

He taught Israel then, how to avoid the wrath of God and offer the Passover sacrifice (Heb 11:28). That took a bit of nerve; Moses had to be right, didn't he? He had to be right that offering a sacrifice like this was the way to escape the wrath of God, because if he was wrong, there were going to be a lot of people dead in Israel. It's a solemn thing to stand before somebody whose eternity is in the balance and claim to have the answer that can save them from the wrath of God. How's your courage, my friend? There are Christian churches that have lost their nerve. They dare not any longer preach the atonement because it's an unpopular doctrine. How's your courage? Do you still believe that there is no other hope for man's deliverance from the coming wrath than the atoning sacrifice of Christ? Our social engineering and our good works, though necessary, are not the answer:

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.³

He got them out as far as the Red Sea and then it was a question of getting them across or through; and by faith the waters parted and Israel went through, and the Egyptians tried to do it and were drowned (11:29). The New Testament says the Israelites 'were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor 10:2). That took a bit of nerve, don't you think, to stand at the head of the waters? What if they'd come over and drowned the whole lot, with you in charge of the nation? But Moses told them to walk through. And we're told to tell people to get baptized, aren't we? How's your courage? Some Christians have lost the nerve and taken the view it doesn't matter whether people get baptized or not. But it remains the commandment of the Lord (see Matt 28:18–20). If Peter were here and you got converted under Peter's preaching, he would command you to be baptized. Oh God, save us from becoming lax! We're servants of the Lord. We're not ashamed, are we, to require obedience to the commands of the Lord?

Faith leading to

And when the Israelites got to the other side, there were the impenetrable fortresses of evil, represented by the walls of Jericho. Faith stormed them as well (Heb 11:30). We fight similarly spiritual wickedness in high places; we are called to do battle, to cast down all kinds of imaginations and the spiritual powers that keep people in their slavery (2 Cor 10:4–5). What of our converts? Rahab is an interesting convert (Heb 11:31). What a difficult situation the woman was in. It's alright standing up in your local church and confessing our Lord; everyone will congratulate you. If you stand up in Jericho and say you've changed sides, see what happens then. I think that's why she told a lie. You say, 'Yes, I doubt whether I shall want to associate with Rahab when I get home to heaven. The woman told a lie.' And have you never? Oh, shame on me for the times when I kept quiet because of the pressures when I ought to have spoken. It isn't the popular thing in academic circles to confess faith in holy Scripture. But Rahab had to make up her mind whose side she was going to stand on. And she turned to God from idols. That meant taking a stand against the corrupt society of Jericho. God give us grace and wisdom. Our gospel doesn't require that people must give up their culture. For some, culture is neutral; it's neither here nor there. But culture may never be allowed to stand as an excuse for not taking our stand openly with Christ. Oh dear, what am I saying, for I talk beyond my experience? What would I do if I were in a Muslim country and someone professed to trust the Lord? Would I tell them to be baptized, or not? What would I do if I knew that getting baptized would cost them their lives? Big things, aren't they? But we're in the battle my brothers and sisters. Don't let's hide too far behind the line so that we never come across the very big and painful questions that have to be faced.

I leave you with Rahab in Jericho. She turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for Joshua to come across the Jordan. When Joshua came across the

³ Robert Lowry, 'Nothing but the blood of Jesus', 1876.

Jordan it was judgment for Jericho, but for Rahab it was salvation. It is in the same way that we wait (see 1 Thess 1:10).

Time fails us to tell any more of all those great worthies who entered the battle and fought in the cause of preaching the gospel and establishing the people of God in their inheritance (Heb 11:32–40). Some were successful in this life; some were apparent failures. I pick out from the long list one example: some who were being tortured did not accept deliverance so that they might have a better resurrection (v. 35). Are there degrees in glory? Scripture apparently says there are. What am I prepared to suffer to get a *better* resurrection?

And then all things fade, as finally we meet our blessed Lord, captain of our salvation. We consider not now Moses's ambitions and Moss's objectives. We consider the objectives and ambitions of our Lord (12:1–3). There was the joy set before him, and through the dusty lanes of Samaria, the stinking hovels of Palestine at the time, and the blood, sweat, and tears of Calvary, never once did the vision and objective leave him. The joy that was set before him in all its immensity, this almost incredible thing, was the joy of having me and you in his presence, eternally. Never once did the objective become dimmed; for that joy that was set before him, he endured the cross and despised the shame, and the objective shall one day be achieved.

May God use his word to stimulate us more and more to show ourselves to be men and women who are genuine believers in this regard as well, that we are involved to the hilt in the work and warfare of the Lord, in the evangelisation of the lost, and in the building up of God's people for his name's sake.

Faith's Testing and Refining

Point of clarification number 1

At the beginning of our session this evening, I have two very important questions that we did not have time to go through this afternoon and I would like to take the opportunity of answering them to the best of my ability now.

The first one is a question relating to things that I said last evening, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify any things that I said less than clearly. The question runs: 'You said last evening that when the Lord Jesus comes back for us, he will take his people who are walking with him. You did not say, "Saved—that he will take his people who are saved." You said, "He will take his people that are walking with him." Why did you say that?'

That's a very important question. Please understand what I did not mean. I did not mean that when the Lord comes there will be two groups of believers. Some believers that are walking with the Lord Jesus who he'll take them to heaven, and some believers that are not walking with the Lord Jesus and who he'll leave behind. When the Lord comes, he will take every believer that there is. Let's hear what Scripture says will happen when the Lord comes. 1 Thessalonians 4, is a key passage. It says that when the Lord Jesus comes, 'the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first' (1 Thess 4:16).

Let's think about that for a moment. Not all will be dead. Did you notice that? In that sense, the Bible does not teach a general resurrection on the last day. When the Lord Jesus comes back, he's going to first raise the dead who are in Christ Jesus. The important issue there is, if you want to be among the dead who are in Christ Jesus, you'll have to be in Christ Jesus while you're still alive. What does it mean 'the dead in Christ'? It means people who, when they were alive here on earth, personally received the Saviour. They heard him say, so to speak, 'I am the door, if any man enter in by me, he shall be saved' (John 10:9). They took him at his word; they entered in and they were saved. Forever after, they could be described as those 'in Christ.' They were in Christ from the moment they trusted the Saviour right through life. When they departed this life their bodies lay in the grave, but they themselves had gone to be with the Lord. Like the thief on the cross, you remember him, the penitent thief, the one who repented and said, 'Jesus, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,' and the Lord said to him, 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:42–43). I love those words—today, no delay, no long interval for purgation or anything like that whatsoever. 'Today,' immediately 'with me,' says Christ. Not only in paradise, which would be lovely in itself, but 'with me.' When believers in the Lord Jesus die physically, their bodies go into the grave or are cremated or something, but the persons themselves go to be with the

Lord Jesus. 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise,' said the Lord. When the Lord Jesus comes again, their bodies will be raised. Once you are in Christ, you are in him *forever*.

We see in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 that when the Lord comes there will be two groups. The first is 'the dead in Christ.' The other group is those who are described as, 'We that are alive and remain.' Paul doesn't mean every man, woman, boy and girl who happen to be alive on the earth at the time. He says, 'we,' and to be fair to his letter, you must read it all and see who the people are that are included in the term 'we.' He's writing to the Thessalonians who had been converted. They had 'turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come' (1:9–10). In other words, they were people who had been saved. They had personally trusted the Saviour and had been born again. They belonged to the Lord Jesus.

When he comes, the dead in Christ will be raised first, and then all believers who are alive on the earth at that time will be gathered them with the risen dead, and together they shall be forever with the Lord. So let me make that verse clear; every believer will go when the Lord comes. None shall be left behind. How can you tell if a person was saved or not? It is the mark of a true believer that they walk with the Lord. Listen to the Lord Jesus: in John 8:31–44 it is recorded that there were some people who came to the Lord Jesus and said they believed in him.

So our Lord said to them, 'If you continue in my word, you truly shall be my disciples, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. If you're really a disciple of the Lord Jesus, you will continue in my word and, knowing the truth, you will progressively be made free.'

They said, 'Free from what?'

'Well,' he said, 'I was talking about sin.' He explained that everyone who continues in sin, who constantly sins and doesn't intend to do anything else, is the slave of sin. 'And I was pointing out,' said the Saviour, 'that if now you really are my disciple, you will continue in my word and progressively I shall set you free from sin.'

The Jews got furiously angry. 'Who do you think you are?' they said. 'And who do you imagine you're talking to, coming here and telling us we're slaves of sin and we need to be set free from sin? You go and sing in the next street. We didn't ask you to come here.'

It wasn't long after that that our Lord had to tell them straight, even though they professed to be believers in the Lord Jesus and said that God was their father: 'Sorry, God isn't your father. You are of your father, the devil.' You see, it isn't enough to come to Christ, is it? Thousands of people come to Christ. The condition is, 'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin' (1 John 1:7).

Do you say, 'Does that mean I've got to be perfect as a Christian?' No, you'll not be perfect this side of glory, but the mark of a Christian is that they walk with the Lord, and when they stumble in sin—and all of us sin, every day—they don't run away from the Lord. We keep with the Lord, and we confess our sin and seek his grace to deliver us from sinning. That's the mark of a true believer.

It is always possible for true believers to wander off; and get a long way off. When true believers wander away, that raises a big question. God knows their hearts, of course he does, but it raises a question whether they are people like Peter, who are true believers at heart but have now fallen and are living inconsistently; or were they never true believers to start with? The mark of a true believer is that he or she walks in the light, walks with the Lord. I don't wish to unsettle anybody, but if you say to me, 'But, oh dear, am I hopeless then, because I thought I was a believer, but I've been living a long way away from the Lord?' Well, my dear friend, my dear brother, my dear sister, the Lord waits to welcome you back again. There is forgiveness if we confess our sin. He's faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The thing you can't do is to say, 'I'm a Christian, but I've no intention of walking with the Lord.' 'I'm a Christian, but I don't want the Lord to save me from sinning. I want to enjoy myself. I'm going on my own way; I want to keep on sinning.' 'I don't intend to walk with the Lord, but I hope to be taken to heaven when he comes.' True believers don't talk like that.

Point of clarification number 2

The second question is: 'Please enlarge on what you said about the idea that when in heaven, we will want to have been happy here to be happy in heaven. Please try and put my mind at rest and tell me that we will really be dead then and have new dispositions to enjoy heaven. Is that so?'

I think that question arises from things I said this morning. I asked: if you don't enjoy the Lord now, what does that mean? Do you really want to go to heaven? If you don't enjoy talking to the Saviour now, what makes you think you'd enjoy talking to him then? And the question we have here is: 'But what are you saying? Surely when we go to heaven, we shall lose our old, sinful nature and we shall be perfectly like the Lord?'

So let's get this clear from Scripture. Yes, every true believer saved by God's grace enjoys salvation as a gift. When the Lord comes, what will happen? 1 John 3:2 says, 'Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is.' What a lovely thing. It's true of every believer right down to the weakest; when the Lord comes and is manifested and takes us home to be with him, then we shall see him as he is, and in seeing him, we shall be transformed. We shall be perfectly like him eternally. And just like an emerging butterfly leaves the chrysalis behind, so when we go home to glory we shall leave behind forever the old fallen nature that so bothers us still, and we shall be perfectly conformed to the blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, let me affirm that. I do believe it, because Scripture teaches it. Every believer will be like the Saviour, perfectly, when he comes and they see him; so every believer will enjoy heaven of course, to the maximum of their ability.

'Well,' you say, 'you are a funny preacher. Now you're contradicting what you said this morning.' Well, no I'm not really. Listen to what John goes on to say: 'And everyone who has this hope in them purifies himself, purifies herself, even as he or she is pure' (1 John 3:3). Notice, please, that is not an exhortation; that is a statement of fact. Show me a woman who has trusted the Saviour and has hope, real certain hope that the Lord is coming, and when he comes, he's going to take her home. That's marvellous, and she knows that when she sees the

Lord, she's going to be like him. Well, I'll tell you something else about that woman; God says that if that woman really has that hope, then she will day-by-day purify herself.

All those who have the hope purify themselves. You find me somebody who says, 'Yes, I'm going home to be with the Lord, and when I see the Lord I'm going to be like him,' but then adds, 'Well, I don't want to be like him now. That would spoil my fun.' Well that person just isn't telling the truth. If he doesn't want to be like Christ now, he doesn't have the hope. That doesn't mean every believer is perfect, of course not, but you can't say with one and the same breath, 'I want to be like Christ, but I don't want to be like Christ.' If you want to be like Christ and you have the hope that when he comes you're going to be like him, you will want to be like him now. Oh, yes, so many of us get wayward and wander away, don't we? We lose sight of the goal, and we live carelessly. Scripture reminds us that dear old Peter actually denied the Lord with oaths and curses and used all the swear words he knew to prove he wasn't a believer. Underneath, he was a believer, and the Lord Jesus brought him back and restored him, but a man or woman who goes on for years and years and has no intention of trying to be like the Saviour whatsoever, well John says, 'If such a person claims to be a believer and claims that they want to be like him when the Lord comes, that person just is not telling the truth. They are not children of God. They are the very opposite.' That's important.

There's the other thing too. Every believer will be like Christ when he comes—what there is of him.

You say, 'We shall all be dead alike, of course we shall.'

No we shan't.

You say, 'Well you just said that we're all going to be like Christ; we're going to be absolutely equal.'

Shall we really? We shall be like Christ, what there is of us. I must ask the forgiveness of many of you because I've used this illustration so many times it's like a broken down old record that scratches horribly, but I can't think of a better one. So I picture myself at a Christmas party. There's a little child of one and a half years old, a boy of seven, a sweet young thing of seventeen, and there's mum and dad. They're all at the Christmas party having a whale of a time, every one of them. The lad of a year and a half is sitting in his high chair and he's managed to get hold of a soup spoon. He's dipped it into the cream and he's pouring the cream all round his hair and down on the carpet. He's having a magnificent time! Now and again he peers over the edge of his high chair and sees his brother on the floor playing trains. Hasn't got a ghost of a notion what's going on, of course, so he doesn't miss it. And when six o'clock comes, he goes to bed delighted and absolutely content. His heart is as full as his little heart could be with joy at being at the Christmas party.

The nipper on the floor, seven years old, isn't getting cream all round his head. He's playing trains on the carpet with his father. What's made the difference? Well the seven-year-old has grown up a bit. Of course, if you looked at the babe in the chair, he's like his dad. The boy of seven is also like his dad, but he's grown up a bit more; he's able to enjoy more. The sweet girl of seventeen is not putting cream on her hair, nor is she sitting on the floor playing trains. What, with that dress on? In half an hour's time some very special company is coming to the Christmas party and she's been down to a dress shop and purchased a magnificent outfit. For the rest of the evening she is sitting on the settee talking

with a young gentleman, and the child of seven can't figure it out. 'Why on earth doesn't he come down on the floor and play trains? Just sitting there talking! Can you imagine anything as boring as sitting, just looking at somebody and talking? It's nonsense.' Of course the girl of seventeen is like her dad too. She enjoys the party more than the boy of seven, who hasn't got a ghost of a notion what's going on anyway, and he goes to bed content. The difference is growth.

All believers will be in glory, every single one of them. 'Of all he has given me, I shall not lose one' (John 6:39). You can be like the dying thief if you like, come in at the last minute before twelve o'clock and, as a broken sinner, confess your sin and put your trust solely in the Saviour, and you can be guaranteed an eternal heaven; there need be no doubt. Every believer will be in heaven solely on the grounds that he has washed his robes in the blood of the Lamb. Every believer will be in glory, but it's one thing to enter and another thing to have 'an abundant entrance' (2 Pet 1:11).

You say, 'What is an abundant entrance? What do you think heaven's going to be? A big castle or something, with some sitting on comfortable seats in the middle and some having to sit by the draughts at the door? What does it mean to get a rich entry into glory?'

It means how much you're going to enjoy it. Everybody will enjoy it to *their* full. The difference will be that some will have grown a lot, says Peter, and they will by God's grace have added to their character. In the power of their faith they will have added virtue and knowledge and self-control and endurance and brotherly love and, by the Saviour's grace, they will have built up and developed their Christian character (2 Pet 1:3–11). They will get an abundant entrance and they'll have the bigger capacity to enjoy heaven. But those who have not done it, if they're true believers, will get in of course, but they won't get an abundant entrance. This life matters, doesn't it?

Faith tested

I will leave it at that, for now we come to our passage in Hebrews 11:

By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a parable receive him back. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was nigh, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones. (11:17–22)

May the Lord give us good understanding of his word.

In previous studies we've been talking about what it means to be a believer. We found first of all that the mark of a believer is that he or she believes the basic doctrines of the gospel. Then, according to the New Testament, true believers are marked by the fact that they become resident aliens in our world and are pilgrims, deliberately pressing forward to the prize that lies ahead—the high calling of God in Jesus Christ—looking for the Lord to come and for the day when they shall be conformed to the image of God's Son. Spiritual pilgrims

who, as far as this world is concerned, are here on the Lord's business; ambassadors for Christ using life and its tasks and duties, its joys and sorrows, as material through which the Lord can train them and develop them in their spiritual progress. All with their eye on the goal, looking for the Lord to come and one day to be at home with him and eternally like him.

Now we move on one stage further in our study of faith. If we are genuine believers, sooner or later our faith will be tested, and then our faith will be refined and redirected so that eventually it becomes triumphant. It is exceedingly important that our faith be demonstrated to be the genuine thing. You say, 'What for?' Well, first of all for a reason that you might not have thought of recently. God has very powerful enemies, and supreme among them is his satanic majesty. The Bible tells us how from time to time Satan comes before God in the heavenly council of God's presence and accuses believers—that is genuine believers in Christ—before God day and night (Rev 12:10). One day, Satan is going to be cast out of heaven with all his hosts. And the Bible says that true believers in Christ will be raised above angels: 'For not unto angels did he subject the world to come, whereof we speak' (Heb 2:5). That glorious position is given to Christ and all his redeemed, who shall be supreme above every name that is named not only in this age, but that which is to come (see Eph 1:18–22). His satanic majesty doesn't give up all that easily, and constantly he accuses true believers in the presence of God, aiming to show that either they're sheer humbug or that God is acting unjustly in giving them salvation and guaranteeing them a heaven.

The testing of Job's faith

According to the book of Job, he did it with Job. Satan came with the sons of God and presented himself before God.

God said to Satan, 'Satan, have you considered my servant, Job?'

'I have indeed,' said Satan, 'and I don't really think much of him anyway.'

God said, 'There's none like him in all the earth, you know, an upright man who trusts me.'

'Trusts you, my foot!' 'Oh well, if you can believe that, you'll believe anything, God. Of course Job trusts you. What do you think? You've prospered him, haven't you? He's got three or four Mercedes, a beautiful country ranch and a lovely big family. He can afford to have parties every night of the week. Well, who wouldn't trust you with all those blessings?'

Well, quite so.

Satan continues, 'You know, you'd be mistaken to take that for genuine faith. That's simply cupboard love—his real affection is for the reward he gets. I'll tell you what, if you let me have a go at him, I could soon show you what Job really believes in his heart of hearts.'

'Alright,' says God, 'you may touch his goods, but don't you touch him.'

So Satan destroyed his house and his goods, but Job's faith wouldn't wobble. So Satan said, 'Let me have another go.' And under Satan's instigation, the man was hurled into terrible illness, pain and suffering, nearly scared out of his wits, and left sitting in absolute disaster.

What for? To start with, so God might demonstrate to Satan that this man's faith was genuine. Before you get home to glory, if you are a genuine believer, God will allow your faith to be tested too so that God himself might be put into the clear before our great spiritual

accuser, his satanic majesty, and all the hosts of heaven. And God will be able to demonstrate through you as a believer that your faith is genuine faith and not simply cupboard love.

The testing of Abraham's faith

So also was Abraham eventually called on to have his faith tested. He had received the promises, and those promises were vested in Isaac, and apparently all his future was dependent on Isaac. There came a day when God said, 'Right-ho Abraham, you say you are a believer, that your whole hope for salvation is simply through faith, not your works. Nothing at all, not yourself, nobody else, your faith is solely in me. Right Abraham, we'll demonstrate the point. Please give me Isaac, and then it will be seen that your faith is in none other than me.'

An elderly Abraham walked up the mountain with all his future in his hands; it was all in Isaac. By God's grace he laid Isaac on the altar, and his faith was left with nothing but God. That is faith being justified by works, and God doesn't put us through examinations of that order every day of the week, but when we're ready, God may well allow us to pass through that kind of examination where we are called on to give evidence that our faith is in God and solely in God.

I know a good man who lived in East Germany during World War II. The horrors he went through during the war I cannot begin to relate to you. He had a beautiful family who were engaged in Christian work. His son and daughter went through the East German system of education but refused to be members of the Young Communist Party. That meant that they had to forgo good careers, because if you didn't join the Communist Party in school, very often there was no higher education for you. The teachers would tell you that to your face. But this man's children gave themselves unreservedly to the Lord's work among young people. When they were travelling to a young people's weekend, they had a car crash and both of them were killed. Imagine that, when you've done your very best to serve the Lord and you've made all the sacrifices. Well how could I stand and preach when I could see a father in the first row who had suffered that and still believed?

You say, 'Where did Abraham get the strength from? He must have worked himself up into a tremendous feeling.'

No, he didn't.

You say, 'Surely he went up the hill of Moriah, dancing and clapping and shouting hallelujah.'

No, he didn't. If I have any idea, he went up as grim-faced as a man could be grim.

You say, 'What moved him?' Well, it was the logic of faith. Did you notice what the verse says? He offered up his son, 'accounting that God is able to raise him up' (Heb 11:19). *Accounting* means logically working it out. Abraham did his sums. He went through the argument and logically worked it out that if God had promised, God would keep his promise. God had said that 'in Isaac shall your seed be called.' Now God was asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. Isaac wasn't married yet and had no sons, so if Isaac was killed that would seem to be the end of all hope, the end of any possible family, grandchildren or descendants, and Abraham had to puzzle it out in his mind.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I don’t understand it. I don’t know how God is going to do it if I’ve got to slay Isaac on this altar. I don’t know. How will that work? Well God has promised that Isaac’s going to have a family and I’m going to have descendants through Isaac. The only way I can work that out is like this: God will have to raise him from the dead, that’s all. God will keep his word, and Isaac will have children because God has said it. Alright, if God now tells me to put him on the altar, that’s God’s business. That I will do, but logic compels me to think that God will keep his promise, he’ll have to raise Isaac from the dead.’

It wasn’t emotion; it was logic that led Abraham to make his great sacrifice. And do you know, when we come to other parts of the New Testament it becomes apparent, doesn’t it, how logic lies, or should lie, behind our decisions to serve the Lord? Not great torrents of emotion necessarily, but logic. ‘The love of Christ constrains me,’ says Paul. ‘It grips me and urges me and drives me on, the love of Christ.’

You say, ‘Then how does it work, Paul? Please tell me, what kinds of feelings do you get?’ ‘Well,’ he says, ‘it isn’t a question of feelings:

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him who for their sakes died and rose again. (2 Cor 5:14–15)

Do you notice the word? The love of Christ constrains us because we *judge* this. Paul was coming to a logical conclusion, namely this; that to save Paul, Christ had to die. Why? Because if Christ hadn’t died for Paul, Paul would have died. ‘Oh,’ says Paul, ‘I begin to see what that means. If Christ had to die to save me, I wouldn’t have had a life to spend apart from Christ.’ Well then that life must be his, mustn’t it? He died for all ‘that they who live should hereafter live, not to themselves, but to him.’ It’s not a matter of great emotion. It’s a matter of coming to the only sane, logical conclusion.

Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians, doesn’t he? He says, ‘Know you not this, that you are not your own? You were bought with a price. Therefore glorify your God in your bodies and in your spirits, which are God’s’ (6:19–20). So it’s a matter of morals and sheer morality. If you take something that belongs to somebody else without getting their permission, there is a very homely word to describe the effort: you are a *thief*. Let me remind myself and you that if you are a believer, you are not your own; Christ has bought you. We wouldn’t have a life to live, would we, were it not for Christ? And for me to take my body and my person that Christ has bought, that no longer belongs to me, and use it simply to live for myself regardless of Christ, that is thieving. It is stealing. It is stealing what has been bought at the immeasurable cost of the blood of Christ.

It’s not big gales of emotion that we need; it’s some clear-headed, calm, logical thinking. And Abraham came through his test on the strength of logic, that if God had promised then God would perform; and if it meant that God would have to raise Isaac from the dead, well then God would do it.

Faith redirected

There are other ways in which God has to deal with our faith. He sometimes has to redirect it so we can learn. We can follow the hint of Hebrews 11:20, 'By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even concerning things to come.' That simple verse covers a very long story in Genesis—the story of what happened when Isaac blessed his sons, Esau and Jacob (Gen 27). It says that by faith he blessed them, and so I mustn't dispute what God says; Isaac did really believe. He believed that he'd inherited from his father, Abraham, the divine blessing and now, as a parent, it was his responsibility to pass that blessing on to his sons. He was a believer, but poor old Isaac got a little bit muddled up in the process because his faith was directed half the time in the wrong direction, and he made a mistake. God said, 'Isaac, now I want you to dwell in this land and I will bless you. I want you to come, please, Isaac, and I want you to bless your sons.' What do we mean by blessing? What is blessing?

A story to make the point

I must go aside here and use an analogy, if I may. So you'll think I've wandered from the Scripture and from the truth, but I haven't altogether. Bear with me. One day a young woman—Miranda Higginbotham—comes down the stairs to pick up the mail. There is a long envelope from the Ministry of Education, and it is her exam results. Do you know what kind of feeling takes hold of you in that situation? You don't know whether you dare open the envelope or not. It sometimes takes a little bit of courage to open the envelope. At last, she opens it, and, oh yes, it says she has passed, with good enough grades in every subject to qualify for university. So then what happens? Well, first she read the word typed on the letter; so it's the word that started it. It said she passed, and then she got the blessing. She believed the word, she got the blessing. What was the blessing? It's that she qualified for entering a university. Nothing would ever take that from her now. She'd got it, she'd passed the exam. What happened then? Well, because she got the blessing in the form of passing the exam, she felt a tremendous surge of emotion running through her; we call it joy, a marvellous feeling.

She jumped upstairs, five at a time, to tell her parents she'd passed. Then, as sometimes happens, (as it did with this Miranda, because I'm making up a story) she was so full of joy that the tears began to flow. They were tears of joy, of course. Isn't it funny? Sometimes we shed tears for sorrow, and sometimes we shed tears for joy. They're funny things, tears are. So she got a lot of things that day. First of all, she got the word. She believed it and got the blessing that she'd passed the exam. Then she got the emotion of joy, and then on top of that, she got the sensation of tears running down her face. Marvellous day she'll never forget. But later on, you know she couldn't really believe it. She had thought she'd done badly. She couldn't believe it, so how did she make sure she'd got it? Well she said to herself, 'Look, if I had this exam I should feel joyful.' She tried to work up the joy, 'And what happened when I felt really joyful? Oh, I shed a few tears.' So she tried to shed a few tears to convince her that she'd really passed the exam.

You say, 'Of course she didn't. There isn't a Miranda on the face of God's earth that would do anything so stupid. If she doubted that she'd passed the exam, she wouldn't try to feel the feelings; she'd go back to the beginning and get out the old letter and look at the

word.' To confuse the feelings with the blessing would be stupid, wouldn't it? Because if tomorrow morning she woke up and felt down, she still had the exam results. How do you know? Not because she feels joyful, but because the letter says, 'You've got it, my dear. Congratulations, you've passed.' She got the word, she got the blessing and, whether the emotion follows or it doesn't, or whether the sensation comes back or it doesn't, it doesn't matter much, does it? She's got the blessing.

Sensations or the spoken word

Do you know, old Isaac made a mistake when he prepared to bless his sons. He had received a word, or at least his wife had, what he was to do; God had chosen Jacob, and he was to give the blessing to Jacob. But Isaac must have forgotten that word of God, I think. He said to himself, 'Now I shall have to be in a suitable mood here to pass on this blessing, shan't I?' So instead of consulting the word of God, he said to Esau, 'My dear Esau, go out into the field and get me some venison that my soul loves, and I'll eat of it.'

You know what it is when you've had a good, real feast of venison and you're feeling really good and at peace with the world; you get all the lovely feelings inside you. Then Isaac would be ready to pass on the blessing, because the blessing is the feelings, isn't it? So Esau went out to get his father some venison. Now Isaac was dim of sight and nearly blind. Then his wife—I don't understand a wife doing this, but she did—his wife heard what Isaac had said to Esau, so she called in Jacob, because Jacob was her favourite, and she said,

'Your father is going to pass on the blessing to Esau. We must stop that, so come quick.' So she got a takeaway Chinese meal and spiced it up to make it taste like venison (you could get stuff from the stores in those days to make anything taste like venison). Then she said, 'You take that in to your father; he won't know the difference.'

'Wait a minute,' said Jacob. 'If I go in, he'll say, "Who are you?" If I say, "I'm Jacob," he'll recognise me. And if he were to feel me, he'd know I wasn't Esau, because Esau's all hairy and I'm smooth.'

'Ah, we can get round that,' said mama. She got a goatskin and put that on the nape of his neck and down his arms and put the stew in his hands, and in he went. So Isaac was about to give the blessing.

Isaac said to Jacob, 'I brought the venison, Dad.'

Jacob said, 'Who are you?'

'I'm Esau.'

He said, 'You don't sound much like Esau. You sound like Jacob. Are you sure you're Esau?' He couldn't see anyway, but his ears told him it was Jacob. But alas, he couldn't trust his sight because he hadn't got much. He didn't trust his hearing, so what did he do now?

Isaac said, 'Come and let me feel you.' So he felt him. I mean, that was solid enough. 'Yes,' he said, 'that's hairy.' And he trusted his sensations. Then he said, 'Tell you what, come and let me smell you.' Well, that's a funny thing to decide in blessing, isn't it? If a man's been out hunting all day it wouldn't be my concept of blessing to smell him.

He said, 'That smells right. Oh, gorgeous,' and then he got the stew and ate it. He said, 'It's the best venison I've tasted for years!'

It wasn't the best venison, it was a Chinese takeaway spiced up. Going by his sensations and his emotions, they all deceived him. He stands on the page of Scripture to be a warning to us because, from time to time, we all make that mistake, don't we? Instead of going by the word of God, resting our faith in it, and being assured that we have the blessing, we start putting our faith in our feelings and in our sensations.

At least some people who come to the Lord Jesus are sinners, and they seek salvation. They suddenly see what it is to trust the Saviour, and they trust him and get forgiveness of sins and the assurance that they have eternal life. So they get the blessing, and of course their hearts swell up, they feel full of joy, and some of them even shed tears. What a marvellous thing it is to be saved. Then, as the days and weeks go by, the sensations begin to go down, and the emotion goes down, and they don't feel so full of joy. They say to themselves, 'I don't know, I don't feel as wonderful as I did when I first came to the Lord. So what shall I do now?' So they try to wind up the joy once more and wind up the feelings. They are making the same mistake as Isaac. Instead of depending on God's word, they're depending on feelings and sensations. You know, feelings can deceive you horribly.

Our blessing doesn't depend on having marvellous feelings. How can we be sure we've got the blessing? By starting the other way round and believing God's word. And if God says it, then we have it, and we let the feelings take care of themselves. We need to take notice of that because some people organize enormous, great meetings, and what they're doing instead of preaching the word, is working up people's feelings and getting them excited and feeling they're having such a wonderful time. But that could be merely feelings, emotion and sensation, couldn't it? That's not a solid thing. If you want real blessing in life, the way is not to put your trust in feelings. The way is to take God's word and expound his word until people's faith is in God's word. If they believe God, they have the blessing that God says they have. If it works itself out in feelings, that's marvellous. If the feelings subside and don't come back, well what does that matter? If God says it, it is true, and when we pass over from this world to the next, it won't be our feelings that count. It will be God's immovable word.

Two other little lessons are taught to us. If Abraham gave us his secret in his great life of faith, he was moved to that final sacrifice by logic. Now we've seen how God redirects Isaac's faith away from feelings and to God's word.

Faith refined

Now we think briefly of Jacob; his faith had to be refined. God promised to bless Jacob, and Jacob was a true believer. But he didn't always behave as one, and God had to refine his faith because he got up to some very funny practices. He cheated his father, he impersonated Esau, he ran away and, when he got down to Laban's house, he used his business skill to empty Laban's bank account and put it into his own, until his in-laws nearly cursed him. And he thought that this was God's blessing on him. But he was terribly mistaken, wasn't he? God was determined to bless him, and he did, but God had to refine Jacob's faith, and presently God began to put Jacob through the mill. So having deceived his father, when he came down to Laban, he found Laban deceived him and gave him Leah as his wife and not Rachel. Then, when he had made a pile of money and his brothers-in-law got very angry, he had to run away. As he ran back, he found Esau was coming to meet him. Scared out of his life, he had to

give back to Esau droves of farm animals: sheep, cows, and bullocks; God made him give it all back. You see, you don't have to cheat in business to get God's blessing. And God went further still, didn't he?

Presently, Jacob lost his son Joseph. He thought he was dead. And then there arose a famine and Jacob, who'd been once so rich, was now poverty stricken and facing starvation. He had to let his sons go to obtain food in Egypt, and when they came back Simeon was gone, imprisoned down in Egypt.

The boys came back telling their father, 'Now look, Father, the next time we go, the man down in Egypt said we'll have to bring Benjamin.'

'You never will,' he said, 'I'm not going to let Benjamin go. It will kill me if Benjamin goes.'

They said, 'You'll have to, Dad.'

'No,' he said, 'I never will.'

But when famine was staring him in the face, there was nothing else to do and Jacob had to let Benjamin go. Now he'd lost three sons; a quarter of his family gone and starvation staring him in the face. Why did God do it? To refine Jacob's faith. God had promised him glory. When the whole family went down to Egypt at last, Jacob found out what God meant. He found that Joseph was still alive and second in command in Egypt. He was introduced to the Pharaoh, who Jacob blessed. 'Without any dispute the less is blessed of the better' (Heb 7:7), and Jacob lived to see the vast glory that God had designed for him and his children and, in particular, Joseph, down in Egypt.

I wonder when Jacob saw what God had really meant, whether he looked back on his life and said to himself, 'What a fool you've been, my boy.' When he saw all the glory of Egypt, I think he felt a worm for the way he had cheated in business, told lies and deceived and used his technical business know-how to ruin his family relations with Laban and his brothers-in-law. What was it all about?

Let me speak very straight to you. I have known churches ruined from one end to another by Christian men and women, brothers and sisters, falling out over businesses. Have you ever known it? I've known of believers who do some very funny things and cheat in business. Oh, they say they're on the way to glory and they're saved by faith, but in business they cheat, and then they think that God has blessed them because they make a lot of money. God will have to teach us differently from that before he gets us home. Imagine if old Jacob had gotten down to Egypt before he'd learned his lessons. He'd have had every pyramid in Egypt in his back garden, wouldn't he? He would have taken it over! God couldn't have him up in heaven before he'd taught him his lesson. He'd have bought up the whole of heaven!

One day it will be God's good pleasure when the Lord comes to take us home to be with Christ. We're going to reign with Christ, and God wants to put into our hands the solemn responsibility, the glorious responsibility, of running the whole universe along with Christ. But before he puts that into our hands, he's got to teach us what it means to be faithful stewards, and it's in our daily business that we learn to live as faithful men and women. The Lord Jesus says, according to how you act now as stewards of your life and of your Lord's goods, what you do with your life now, how you work at business, what you do in the home as servants of the Lord, according to how well you do that, so will your reward be (See Matt

25). And if we act unfaithfully here, well then we shall not get a reward there. So God has to refine our faith.

Faith undimmed

Finally, there is the triumph of faith. Joseph is a remarkable man in that he rose to tremendous heights in Egypt and became second in command to Pharaoh. Through all his life he maintained two things. First, he maintained his devotion. That's marvellous, isn't it? He rose to very high office, yet in his private life he continued his devotion to the Lord. He had his quiet time, I'm sure. He maintained his faith in the Lord. That was marvellous.

Second, he maintained his hope. That is even more marvellous. You say, 'What do you mean?' Well, when he came to die, he gave commandments concerning his bones. He could have had the biggest tomb in Egypt and a tremendous memorial. But he said to his children, 'Oh, I don't want that. God is going to visit the nation and take our nation out of Egypt and back to Palestine. God has a colossal, great future for our nation. Our nation is going to be the key to world history. That is my hope, because that is what God promised my forefathers, and when you go out of Egypt, please take my bones with you. The future of the world is with Israel.' He maintained his hope. That is a very important thing. You see, there are men and women who have prospered in the world as believers and, behind the scenes they've maintained their devotion to the Lord, but they've not always maintained their hope. Ask them what their view of the future is and you'll find they've lost the hope they once had.

Daniel didn't. He's another example of a man who rose to very high office in the civil service. He not only maintained his devotion, he maintained his hope too. He worked and was a tremendous testimony for the Lord in the civil service of Babylon and then Persia. And when old Nebuchadnezzar needed to be witnessed to, which he did from time to time, Daniel was bold enough to witness to him and tell him about the most high God who rules in the kingdoms of men. And he called on old Nebuchadnezzar to repent or he would be chastised by the Lord. You remember the stories. When Daniel looked forward to the future, you will remember that he maintained his hope. What was his hope for the future? Was his hope that now, by working in the civil service and claiming the promises of God, presently Babylon would become the kingdom of God? That it would be established in Babylon by all the believers claiming the promises of God? He believed no such thing. Daniel's hope for this world was for the coming of the Lord Jesus, and that remains our hope. One of the things that will test our hope is apparent success in this world. It is good if we maintain our devotion. It is even better if we maintain our hope. What is your hope for this world?

Might I be frank with you? You will have to watch some of the choruses you sing these days, for they are putting before you a false hope. They are preaching that the church can claim the power of the Holy Spirit and conquer all demonic opposition and human opposition, and eventually the church will be established as the biggest institution on earth and will bring in the kingdom of God on earth—a victorious kingdom, the kingdom restored on earth before the Lord comes. That is false. And if you allow yourself to entertain that hope, you are destined for a very big disappointment.

Scripture tells us plainly that in the last days, evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse (2 Tim 3:13). There will be a dominant religion at the end of this age and it won't be the

church; it will be Babylon the Great. This age shall end in the judgments of God as the blessed Lord Jesus is revealed 'from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them who know not God' (2 Thess 1:7-8). That is what our Christianity says. It's a false hope that the church is going to succeed and become the restored kingdom, that the nations shall disarm, and the church shall be supreme before the Lord Jesus comes. That is false. Our hope for this world is this: the Lord Jesus is coming. He is coming to take his people home. He is coming to execute the judgments of God. He is coming to set up his kingdom. To think the kingdom will be set up other ways is false to our Christian hope.

May the Lord use these remarks, and may they be taken in the spirit in which they are given.

About the Author

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