



**Runaways, Rebels,
Redemption
and
Revival blessing**

by Ann Foster

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Dedication

Dedicated to my beloved husband, Rev. Ivan Foster, under whose ministry my knowledge and understanding of the Holy Scriptures greatly increased.

Only the Authorised Version of the Holy Scriptures is used in this publication

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that men are so prone to run away from God? One has only to read the Bible to see the great and continual hostility of man to God and His Word. We see it over and over again in the history of the children of Israel. They had witnessed the mighty works of God in Egypt, the ten dreadful plagues, only three of which affected the land of Goshen where Israel dwelt, and His ultimate deliverance of them from Egyptian bondage. They had watched the miraculous dividing of the Red Sea, the walls of water providing protection from the pursuing armies of Pharaoh as they crossed over dry-shod. These same walls of water brought destruction to the chariots and death to the horsemen, foot soldiers and the proud king of Egypt as they were totally engulfed. They were there when God came down on Mount Sinai with the glorious manifestations of His presence. They heard the thunder, saw the lightning and heard God's voice speaking out of the fire. However, despite such a demonstration of God's glory and power, they set up and worshipped the golden calf, while Moses was still in the mount receiving the tables of the law. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, accused the rebellious Israelites, under Moses' leadership, of idolatry in these words: 'Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them' (Acts 7:43). They ate daily of the manna and drank water from the rock, yet they constantly murmured against God's gracious and faithful provision. Neither miracles of mercy nor terrible judgments prevailed to turn them from disobedience to God.

The second generation of the liberated slaves witnessed the glorious victories under the command of Joshua over the Canaanite tribes. In mercy, God continued to deliver succeeding generations from their enemies, raised up by Him to chasten them for their departure from His laws and their worship of the false gods of the heathen. He raised up the judges, then David the king and his successors to lead them to victory and grant them deliverance. The besetting sin of Israel was idolatry. After the division of the kingdom into two separate entities, the northern kingdom of Israel persisted in the worship of the

golden calves, instigated by Jeroboam I. Baal worship, which was particularly abominable in the sight of God was then introduced by the wicked King Ahab. Despite God's mercy in sending them the two great prophets Elijah and Elisha and indeed many others to rebuke their sin and call them to repentance, Israel rejected their faithful witness both in word and deed and consequently was taken into captivity by the Assyrians and foreigners were sent to colonise their land. The southern kingdom had many godly kings and experienced times of revival and reformation. Then Ahaz, the king of Judah, introduced Baal worship into the southern kingdom and even sacrificed a son to Moloch, for child sacrifice was a feature of the worship of this false god. Judah was later taken into captivity by the forces of Babylon because of their sin, but God, according to His promise, led them back to their land after seventy years. He sent them prophets and faithful high priests to instruct them, yet, apart from a faithful remnant, His testimony concerning Israel was: 'All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people' (Rom.10:21). They rejected His Word and turned away their shoulder.

Hostility to Christ

While on earth, God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ was constantly confronted and surrounded by the enemies of the Gospel. Well might He have said, in the words of Psalm 118:12, 'They compassed me about like bees'. Luke 20 begins with the words: 'It came to pass on one of those days'. 'One of those days' is a phrase which has passed into daily usage in our own language. We use it to describe a day when we have been harassed by difficult circumstances. It certainly was such a day for the Saviour.

First there came the chief priests and scribes, accompanied by the elders, as He 'taught the people in the temple, and preached the gospel'. They challenged His authority to teach and preach. When He told the parable of the wicked vinedressers, they rightly perceived that He had spoken of them.

They then sent out their disciples along with the Herodians to entangle Him in His talk so that they might hand Him over to the Roman governor for uttering seditious and treasonable words. They thought they had the perfect snare to entrap Him. They asked if they should pay taxes to Caesar, expecting the answer to be a resounding No. However, the Lord, knowing their cunning craftiness, outwitted them by showing them a penny stamped with Caesar's image and superscription which indicated that taxes were certainly due to the Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, that did not prevent the Jews from accusing

Him before Pilate of ‘forbidding to give tribute to Caesar’ (Luke 23:2).

Hot on their heels came the Sadducees who affirmed that there was ‘no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit’ (Acts 23:8). They also thought they had the perfect ploy to ensnare the Lord in His words. They told an unlikely story of seven brothers who died one after the other and the widow of the first became the wife of the remaining six brothers in succession. All these marriages were childless. They wondered or pretended to wonder whose wife she would be in the resurrection, thinking in their folly that this scenario totally disproved the resurrection. The Saviour soon enlightened them to the fact that there are no marriage relationships in heaven, but the saints would be as the angels. He rebuked them saying, ‘Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God’ (Matt. 22:29). He went on to prove the resurrection by quoting what God said to Moses at the burning bush: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (Matt. 22:32). He said ‘I am’ not ‘I was’. ‘God is not the God of the dead, but of the living’. One simple little word ‘am’ was proof positive of the resurrection.

Following in the footsteps of the rebellious Israelites of the Old Testament, the hostile Jews who witnessed great miracles of healing on all kinds of diseases, who watched as devils were cast out of the demon-possessed and heard Christ’s gracious words of instruction and invitation, rejected Him and His message and wickedly delivered Him up to be crucified. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, rightly asked, ‘Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers’ (Acts 7:52). The apostles who obediently went out in response to Christ’s Great Commission to ‘teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’ (Matt. 28:19), met with great hostility, persecution and even martyrdom. Down through the ages of man’s history, God’s Word has been universally opposed and His servants persecuted and even killed.

The antagonism of sinners

We need look no further than our own hearts to discover a natural hostility to Christ and the Gospel. Believers must acknowledge to a man that we all held out, some for longer than others, against the strivings of the Holy Spirit until at last He overcame and won our hearts. Once saved from sin, the Christian engages in a lifelong battle against sin. When we feel a desire to pray, the fleshly nature opposes us and all too often hinders us from praying. When we are inclined to read the Scriptures, the old nature rises up in opposition and

often we curtail the time of Bible study. When we are prompted to witness to others, the old carnal nature powerfully asserts itself, we quench the Spirit Who moved us and we fail to speak the slightest word on our Saviour's behalf. No wonder we are urged to 'fight the good fight of faith' (1 Tim. 6:12). Paul the apostle could say as death approached: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith' (2 Tim. 4:7).

The source of man's hostility

What is the reason for man's deep inborn hostility to God, to His Word and to His Son that fills the hearts and imbues the actions of every human being, born of natural generation into this world? We must trace it to its source, the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. There we find the wellspring, the fountainhead of the iniquity of man and his aggressive antagonism to 'all that is called God, or that is worshipped' (2 Thess. 2:4). That antagonism will, of course, reach its fulness and climax in the person of the Antichrist.

Chapter two

THE FIRST RUNAWAYS

Scripture: Genesis. 2:7 - 3:24

When God created Adam and Eve, He had carefully prepared in advance a dwelling-place for them. He had spent six whole days in creating the world. The earth was indeed a beautiful place with its trees and flowers and its fascinating creatures. The sun, moon and stars set in their splendour in the canopy of the heavens were a delight to the eye. Man was God's final and most glorious creation, for he was made in the image of God, being perfectly holy and therefore perfectly happy. His body was in the form which God the Son would later adopt in His incarnation. He was endowed with intelligence and had an immortal soul. He was capable of worship. In all these he differed from and was superior to the animal creation over which he was given dominion. He was indeed the crown of God's work of creation.

The Garden of Eden

God placed Adam and Eve in a specially prepared place, the Garden of Eden. There a sparkling crystal river flowed and an abundance of fruit trees flourished, planted specially by God for man's enjoyment. Above all, God pronounced a blessing on Adam and Eve. They were to 'be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it' (Gen. 1:28). Hebrews 2:7-8 informs us clearly concerning man: 'Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him.' How blessed were our first parents and how favoured by God! Truly, they lived in an indescribable paradise.

Eden is a name synonymous with delight or pleasure and its beauty was beyond description. The trees of Eden were pleasant to the eyes. However, God did not intend that man should live in idleness, for he was instructed to dress

and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15). His occupation must have been truly a delight and pleasure. God told Adam that he could freely eat of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he broke God's commandment regarding that tree, he would most surely die. God's commandments are never grievous or arduous. Adam could eat of every single tree with the exception of only one. However, obedience is always tested.

God had supplied Adam's need for a home, his need for employment, his need for food and drink and his need for aesthetically pleasing surroundings. Only one thing was lacking. God was conscious of this need, a need for a companion, a soul mate. None such was found among all the creatures which God brought to Adam to be named by him. God then performed the first operation in history. He caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep, removed one of his ribs, closed up the opening and formed a woman from the rib. He presented her to Adam and she became his wife. Note that God provided only one wife for Adam and only one husband for Eve. It was an enduring marriage, for Adam was to live 930 years! How much happier mankind would be, if only God's rule for marriage were observed. Both man and woman were naked and in their state of innocency knew neither shame nor guilt. 'Unto the pure all things are pure' (Titus 1:15).

Sin enters the world

The third chapter of Genesis gives an account of the temptation and fall of man. Slipping stealthily and furtively into the garden there came the serpent, a creature more subtle than any other made by God. The devil is referred to as 'that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan which deceiveth the whole world' (Rev. 12:9). It is evident that this was a serpent possessed by the devil, as later in the account God cursed both the serpent and the devil. The devil attacked Eve, the weaker vessel, when she was apart from Adam and in the vicinity of the tree on which the forbidden fruit grew. It would have served Eve better if she had remained close to Adam's side, the side from which she had been taken. We too should remain close to Christ, our heavenly husband. Eve should have put distance between the forbidden tree and herself. We should stay far from that forbidden by God. It was when Peter followed afar off and engaged in conversation with the enemy that he denied his Lord. May we make the words of the following hymn, written by John Newton, our constant prayer:

Be Thou my shield and hiding-place,
That sheltered near Thy side,

I may my fierce accuser face,
And tell him Thou hast died.

In his first assault, Satan challenged the command given to our first parents by God. He insinuated that God had barred them from eating the fruit of not just one but of all the trees. Eve clearly understood the precept given by God and made it clear that there was only one tree whose fruit was forbidden to them. It is ever the strategy of the devil to contradict the command of God and exaggerate its severity, endeavouring to portray God as unkind and evil-intentioned. It was a mistake for Eve to enter into any dialogue at all with the devil. The right response to the wiles of the devil for Eve and for us all is Christ's response: 'Get thee behind me, Satan' (Luke 4:8).

Eve told the devil that they were not to eat of the forbidden fruit lest they died. By using the word 'lest' Eve appears to suggest that death was not certain upon disobedience, but a mere probability. Sensing this, the devil saw his advantage and assured her that death would not follow their eating of the forbidden fruit. He told the woman that God knew very well that upon eating the forbidden fruit, their eyes would be opened and they would be as gods knowing good and evil. In effect, he called God a liar and misrepresented Him as wishing to withhold good from them. O the wickedness and malice of the devil! He knew personally the miseries of disobeying God and coming under His condemnation. Still he employs the same tactics to this day. He contradicts the clear commandments of God and the plain teachings of the Bible. God says that 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). The Evil One reassures the troubled sinner that this is not so and deceives him into thinking that the consequences of sin are not eternal death. He set before Eve the advantages of eating the forbidden fruit. God was denying great benefits to her and Adam. In like fashion he deludes men today, convincing them that there is profit and pleasure in wickedness.

Steps to disobedience

Eve listened to the devil's lies and deceptions. That was her first step to disobeying God. She gave close attention to the tree and saw that it was good for food and pleasant to the eyes, but so were all the other trees that God had planted in Eden (Gen. 2:9). Examining the tree and its fruit was her second step in disobedience. Do not give what the devil presents as beneficial and pleasurable a second glance! In Psalm 119:37, the psalmist very wisely prayed:

‘Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way’. What made this tree and its fruit particularly desirable to Eve was its ability to make her wise. The devil had succeeded in persuading her that God did not want her to obtain such wisdom and she was content to allow him to call into question the kindness and generosity of her Maker. She coveted the fruit of the tree. Unknowingly, that was her third step to disaster. She then ate the fruit which she had plucked from the tree and gave of the fruit to Adam who also ate. The final irrevocable step had been taken!

Achan followed the same disastrous pathway to physical death at Jericho, the scene of Israel’s first great victory in Canaan. By his own admission, he first saw among the spoils the goodly Babylonish garment, the silver and the gold. Next he coveted them. Then he put out his hand and took them. Finally he hid them in his tent. His sin was exposed when God explained the reason for Israel’s ignominious defeat at Ai in their very next battle. Achan brought defeat upon Israel, death by stoning upon himself, his family and even his livestock. He never benefitted from his ill-gotten goods. Sin never pays. Can you see the pattern so clearly illustrated here? The sinner sees, covets, takes and then hides.

Consequences of their sinful disobedience

While Adam and Eve did not immediately die physically, nevertheless physical death began to work in their now mortal bodies. Eventually, disease, old age and death would overtake the body. However, they did die spiritually and that immediately. Adam was the federal head of mankind and all his descendants by natural generation were affected in his fall from grace. Question 16 of the Shorter Catechism asks the important question: ‘Did all mankind fall in Adam’s first transgression?’ The answer is clear: ‘The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression.’ The Apostle Paul writes in Rom. 5:12, ‘Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned’. God’s Word was true: ‘Thou shalt surely die.’ The devil’s word was a downright lie: ‘Ye shall not surely die.’ Whose word are you going to believe, God’s truth as revealed in the Bible, the Scriptures of truth, or the devil’s lie? The Lord Jesus Christ had this to say of His opponents, in John 8:44, ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is

a liar, and the father of it'. The devil is both a liar and a murderer. Beware of being deceived by his lies to the destruction of your soul and body in hell.

Innocence destroyed

The Devil said that their eyes would be opened, not their physical eyes, but the eyes of their minds. What an opening that turned out to be! They realised their nakedness. Their state of innocency was shattered. Shame and guilt replaced that happy condition. Their eyes were opened to the deception practised by the Evil One and to the wrath of God which they had incurred by breaking His holy law. They saw that they had brought utter ruin upon themselves and all their descendants. They realised their loss of purity of mind and heart and became painfully aware that their fellowship with their Creator was now broken. They sewed fig leaves together in a vain attempt to cover their nakedness. As all creation was affected by man's fall into sin, the fig leaves would soon wither, shrivel up and die, leaving them naked still. Try as we may, we cannot possibly manufacture an adequate or permanent covering for ourselves. What we consider as righteousness is but 'filthy rags' (Isa. 64:6) in God's sight.

The seeking Saviour

As evening drew on, Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Christ Jesus is the Voice of the Lord. We see this in John 1:1 which reads: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. We read further, in Rev. 19:13, 'His name is called the Word of God'. When Adam and Eve heard the voice of the Lord, they ran away and hid among the trees of the garden. His presence was now to be feared rather than welcomed. A sense of guilt coupled with a fear of judgment makes sinners hide from God. Three times, at least, in the Bible we read of men crying to the mountains and hills to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of God. Hosea 10:8 prophesied of the destruction of Israel's high places and altars. He foretold that the idolatrous worshippers would 'say to the mountains, Cover us; and to the hills, Fall on us'. The Lord Jesus spoke of a coming day when men would begin to 'say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us' (Luke 23:30). Rev. 6:12-16 also speaks of the dreadful day when the sun will become 'black as sackcloth of hair' and the moon 'as blood'. The stars will fall and the heavens depart as a scroll and every mountain and island will be 'moved out of their places'. Men in abject fear and despair will hide themselves in dens and caves and cry 'to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne,

and from the wrath of the Lamb.' It is sinful man's natural instinct to try to hide from God. He seeks an utterly vain thing. He may try to cover his sin with his own laboriously manufactured self-righteousness, but God says through the prophet Isaiah: 'We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away' (Isa. 64:6).

A time of reckoning

As the guilty pair remained hidden among the trees of the garden, the LORD God called out to Adam, 'Where art thou?' It is the first question in the Bible and a most important one. It requires an answer. Christ is still seeking out the sinner today. He is seeking you if you are yet in your sins. He asks the question to prompt self-examination, acknowledgment of sin and repentance towards God. Note that the Saviour seeks out the sinner in order to save him from ruin and everlasting destruction. Sinful man does not seek after God. He runs from God. Adam answered the question, saying he had heard the LORD's voice, and, fearing because of his nakedness, had hidden himself. Two more questions followed in quick succession, one after the other: Who told you of your nakedness? Have you eaten of the forbidden fruit? Man must confess his sin and his sinful condition before forgiveness can be granted by God. Adam blamed Eve, whom God had granted to him as a companion, for giving him the fruit which he had eaten. He made it sound as if it were all God's fault for giving him Eve as his companion. God then asked Eve, 'What is this that thou hast done?' It is a question which should search the soul to its very depth. Eve had just disobeyed the clear and simple command of God and brought all mankind into a state of sin and misery. However, despite the plainness of God's statement: 'thou hast done', Eve blamed the serpent for beguiling her and claimed she ate as a result of being entranced by him. How readily inclined man is to blame everyone but himself! He does not readily own up to his sin or take responsibility for it. The Lord said of His people in Jer. 8:6, 'I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course'. Be sure, sinner friend, that there is a day of reckoning and it will certainly come.

The serpent's sentence

God dealt with the serpent first. Because of his action in permitting the devil to use him as his instrument, the serpent was cursed above all cattle or beasts

of the field. He was condemned to slither in a zigzag, winding movement on the surface of the earth and to eat dust as long as he lived which he did when eating prey off the ground. Even in the millennial reign of Christ, when Satan is bound and cast into the bottomless pit, still then 'dust shall be the serpent's meat' (Isa. 65:25). In any case, these words could hardly have been uttered to the devil, an evil and malignant spiritual being, concerning as they do food eaten and length of life.

The devil's sentence

Then God addressed the devil and uttered the first glorious promise of a Saviour. 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15). Christ is the Seed of the woman for He was virgin-born. Paul explains this further in Gal. 3:16, 'Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ.' Upon the earth there have always been only two classes of people: the seed of the serpent or the children of the devil and the seed of Christ or the children of God. On the cross of Calvary, Christ bruised the serpent's head and triumphed gloriously over the adversary of our soul. Once a serpent's head is bruised it can no longer function properly. Its venomous fangs can no longer inject their fatal poison into the body of the victim. In trampling the devil under His feet, Christ robbed him of his prey and his power to deceive and ensnare His people. In so doing, He suffered the bruising of His heel. Christ's victory is the Christian's victory. In Romans 16:20, we read the amazing promise: 'And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly'. We can claim victory over the devil in Jesus' all-glorious name. 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). Let us claim our blood-bought victory by faith in the all-conquering name of our almighty Champion.

Jesus the prisoner's fetters breaks,
And bruises Satan's head;
Power into strengthless souls He speaks,
And life into the dead.

C. Wesley

Christ's victory over the Evil One will be finally consummated when Satan is

cast into the lake of fire. During the millennial reign of Christ, he is bound by an angel with a great chain and imprisoned in the bottomless pit. 'And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years' (Rev. 20:2). On his release, having learned absolutely nothing from his incarceration, he goes out to deceive the nations and gather them to battle against 'the camp of the saints . . . and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are' (Rev. 20:9-10).

Eve's punishment

No creature suffers in bearing and rearing its young as a human being does. The whole process of bearing and rearing children is beset with sorrow. 'In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children' (Gen. 3:16). Eve and all her desires were also made subject to the rule of Adam. God instituted the husband as the head of his wife and family for all time.

Adam's punishment

The LORD spoke to Adam last of all. Because he had listened to Eve and eaten the fruit which God had forbidden him, the ground would be cursed and he would eat of its fruits in sorrow. He would have to do battle with thorns and thistles in cultivating the soil. What a toilsome task compared to dressing and keeping the garden of Eden! He would labour and sweat in producing food from the resistant earth until his death and his return to the dust. Think for a moment of the digging and preparation of the soil without the mechanical aids employed today! Remember also the sowing of the seed by hand and the dealing with the profuse weeds and thistles. The harvest too involved much manual labour: the reaping by hand, the threshing of the ears of corn, the grinding of the grain to produce flour, the mixing and kneading of the dough, the baking of the bread before man could eat a single mouthful. Little wonder God told him that he would eat bread by the sweat of his brow. We see something of the result of God's curse on the ground in the words of Lamech. He called his son Noah, saying, 'This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed' (Gen. 5:29). God's curse was no light matter.

A sore reminder

Adam and Eve could never forget the ruin sin had brought upon them. Every

pang, every thorn and every thistle would cause them to think of the paradise they had so foolishly lost through their sin. Every drop of sweat, as Adam toiled to wrest food from the less productive earth, was a constant daily reminder of the luxuriant and effortless growth of the garden of Eden. Sin is indeed a dreadful thing with fearful consequences. All of these sentences would be lengthy indeed. Adam lived for 930 years, a creature of unceasing toil and labour. Despite all the technological advances and machinery of our present age, farmers still toil from early morning until late evening. Adam and Eve's posterity shared in the judgment pronounced against them, because the guilt of Adam's sin as the federal head, the representative of the whole human race, was imputed to all his descendants by natural generation. This is clearly seen in the fact that babies suffer pain and sickness and many are stillborn or die shortly after birth. Adam and Eve witnessed the increasing sin and wickedness of their descendants. Cain, their firstborn son was a murderer. He 'was of that wicked one and slew his brother' (1 John 3:12).

Redemption through the blood

Adam and Eve had plummeted from a state of perfect bliss and holiness into a state of total sin and misery. Did God leave them to perish in that dreadful state? No, a thousand, yea a million times, No. Moved by His eternal love, He redeemed them. Redemption is deliverance by the payment of a price. God slew sacrificial animals, shed their blood and made coats of skin to clothe them. It is the earliest picture in the Bible of redemption through Christ's blood shed at Calvary. God's Word states: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul' (Lev. 17:11). On the occasion of the Last Supper with His disciples before He suffered, Christ spoke of His blood being 'shed for many for the remission of sins' (Matt. 26:28). 'And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission' (Heb. 9:22). The death and blood-shedding of the animals not only typified the death and outpoured blood of Christ, but the skins, which clothed Adam and Eve speak of the garments of salvation, the robe of Christ's righteousness which provides a perfect covering for the sinner.

Restoration

Our first parents were restored to fellowship with God through the death of a sacrifice. It is only by accepting the crucified Christ as our Substitute and having our sins washed away in the cleansing blood of the Saviour that sinners

who are so very far from God can be restored to communion with Him.

Where He displays His healing power,
Death and the curse are known no more;
In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.

Isaac Watts

Chapter three

THE PROGRESS OF EVIL AFTER THE FALL

Sin abounding

After the terrible act of disobedience, committed by our first parents in the Garden of Eden, sin has increased exponentially in the world. More than the most noxious weed that defies man's control, sin has multiplied and proliferated in the earth. Murder, that most dreadful of all sins, especially the sin of fratricide when a brother is the victim, was committed soon after the Fall by Cain who slew Abel. Some time later, Lamech, one of Cain's descendants committed another murder when he killed a young man. As man multiplied and overspread the earth, so did sin. All manner of iniquity flooded the earth before God destroyed it with a flood in Noah's day. 'God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually' (Gen. 6:5). 'The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence' (Gen. 6:11). In the judgment of the great Flood only eight souls were spared, although other godly men may have died beforehand. Isa. 57:1 states that 'the righteous perisheth . . . and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come'.

Nimrod

Despite God's merciful pleadings and His repeated judgments upon wicked men, sin abounded and multiplied on every hand after the Flood. Noah's son Ham, who had witnessed firsthand the wrath of God against sin, transgressed grievously a short time after leaving the ark. Noah's great-grandson and the grandson of Ham was Nimrod, notorious as an exceptional rebel against God. He was a mighty man who set up his kingdom in the plain of Shinar. The beginning of his kingdom was Babel or Babylon. He enlarged his empire by building three other great cities: Erech (Iraq), Accad and Calneh (Gen. 10:11). His was the first kingdom to be established on earth. He sought to establish a new religion and a new way to God by building the tower of Babel. It has always been a common ploy among rulers, seeking to strengthen their domin-

ion over their subjects, to unite them in a common religion. Nimrod was a precursor and prototype of the Antichrist, the embodiment of wickedness and rebellion against God and who will be revealed in the last days before Christ's Second Coming. He will seek to consolidate his supremacy over the minds of men by exalting himself 'above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God shewing himself that he is God' (2 Thess. 2:4) and thus to be worshipped by all.

Darkness, idolatry and ignorance

The Old Testament contains a long and tragic record of the sins of Israel and the surrounding nations. Idolatry was Israel's besetting sin. They worshipped the golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai and joined themselves to Baal-Peor on the very borders of the Promised Land. Once in Canaan, they worshipped Ashtaroth, Chemosh and Baal and even sacrificed their children to Moloch. Despite a faithful remnant, the majority refused to listen to the prophets whom God faithfully and frequently sent to call them to repentance. Judgment was the inevitable result and Israel, the northern kingdom where the two golden calves set up by Jeroboam I were largely worshipped, was led into captivity by the Assyrians and the land resettled by foreigners. Judah did not learn from Israel's bitter experience and despite revival blessing in Hezekiah's day and reformation in Josiah's day, the last four kings of Judah were evildoers and were all carried into captivity, Jehoahaz to Egypt, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah to Babylon. In the last eighteen months of Zedekiah's reign, Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar and his armies. When famine prevailed and the city fell, many of all ages were mercilessly slain and the temple, palace and houses were burned and the people were carried captive to Babylon where they became servants to Nebuchadnezzar and his sons. Zedekiah was captured as he sought to flee and was brought before Nebuchadnezzar. He watched as his sons and princes were slain and then his eyes were put out, he was bound with chains, carried to Babylon and died in prison.

The Bible explains the reason for this severe judgment in 2 Chron. 36:14-16: 'Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until

the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy'. Sinners can so provoke God that judgment falls and mercy is gone.

A faithful remnant

Although spiritual darkness prevailed in the land of Israel, there was always a faithful remnant, even during the period of the captivity. We think of Daniel and Ezekiel, who prophesied in Babylon, Mordecai and Esther. We remember Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah who led three groups of returning captives back to Jerusalem and were instrumental in the temple being rebuilt and the walls of the city restored. Even in the dark days of Malachi we read 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name' (Mal. 3:16). Do you feature in the Lord's book of remembrance? After Malachi we read of no other prophet until John the Baptist, but there were still those who feared the Lord, served Him and looked for His appearing. Simeon and Anna and indeed Joseph and Mary immediately spring to mind.

Chapter four

GOD'S PLAN OF REDEMPTION

God had promised a Redeemer in the Garden of Eden. Soon He would appear on the scene. There were many prophecies of the coming Messiah in the Old Testament. Every sacrifice and offering testified of Him. In the volume of the book it was written of Him (Psalm 40:7). Isa. 60:2 prophesied: 'For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.' Suddenly light as promised arose in the darkness. The Saviour was born, 'a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel' (Luke 2:32). Zacharias spoke of 'the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:78-79).

The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin;
The Light of the world is Jesus.

Philip Bliss

The coming of the Messiah

'When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons' (Gal. 4:4-5). 'The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14). There are two simple words repeated several times in the Gospels. They are: 'Jesus came'. How sweet they are to the believer! He came to be baptised by John. He came to Jairus' house to raise his daughter from the dead. He came to Lazarus' tomb to impart life to him. He came to call Zacchaeus down from the tree and grant him salvation. He came to His disciples to comfort them after the resurrection.

In His incarnation, the eternal Son of God took to Himself a human body and a reasonable soul, thus being truly God and truly man. 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only

begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). He was the Son of God by virtue of the divine decree (Psalm 2:7) and the Son of Man by virtue of His Virgin Birth. His Virgin Birth was essential to His sinless perfection. He was not only sinless but impeccable. He could not sin because He was God.

Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to His Father's will. He obeyed the law of God in its smallest detail. His thoughts, words, actions and attitudes were completely pure. He 'knew no sin' (2 Cor. 5:21); He 'did no sin' (1 Pet. 2:22), and 'in him is no sin' (1 John 3:5). His sinless life provided garments of salvation, a spotless robe of perfect righteousness for His people. He had no need to work out righteousness for Himself for He was wholly righteous. He was righteous as the Son of God before His incarnation. On earth, He was holy in His childhood, adolescence and adulthood. His life of righteousness as the God-man is imputed to believers and is counted as theirs. 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous' (Rom. 5:19). In Gen. 15:6, we read of Abraham that 'he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness' Paul repeats the same truth in Rom. 4:3. Have you received the imputed righteousness of Christ? Are you wearing His spotless robe?

Christ's sinlessness was essential to His perfect sacrifice. Repeatedly, in the regulations regarding sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament, it was stressed that the animal offered had to be without spot or blemish. 'And whosoever offereth a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the LORD to accomplish his vow, or a freewill offering in beeves or sheep, it shall be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no blemish therein' (Lev. 22:21). Deut. 17:1 states: 'Thou shalt not sacrifice unto the LORD thy God any bullock, or any sheep, wherein is blemish, or any evilfavouredness: for that is an abomination unto the LORD thy God.' Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross to God would have been abominable in the sight of His Father, if there had been the least blemish in His life or character. Here are some more verses worthy of careful consideration:

'How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?' (Heb. 9:14).

'Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot' (1Pet.1:18-19).

Christ our Substitute

If the Lord Jesus had committed the least sin, He could not have been our

Substitute. Being perfect man, Christ was able to take man's place at Calvary. He died in our stead. He suffered all the consequences of our sin: the shame, the darkness, the thirst, the agony, the outpoured wrath of God, the separation from His Father and the eternal pains of Hell. O the heart-rending sorrow of His piteous cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1)! It was because He was made sin for us and God cannot look upon sin. Well could He say, 'All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me' (Psalm 42:7). He paid the debt we owed to God because of our original sin and our repeated and habitual disobedience of God's holy law. Who can tell the depth of suffering and woe He endured upon the Cross?

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed
through
Ere He found His sheep that were lost.

E. Clephane

The importance of the shed blood

The Son of God became man in order to suffer in the flesh and shed His precious blood for man the creature's sin. Christ poured out every drop of His life's blood at Calvary, for 'without shedding of blood is no remission' (Heb. 9:22). That means there can be no pardon, no cleansing from the pollution and filthiness of sin apart from the blood shed by the Redeemer. Money cannot purchase our redemption. Only Christ's blood can do that.

I am redeemed, but not with silver;
I am bought , but not with gold;
Bought with a price, the blood of Jesus,
Precious price of love untold.

J. M. Gray

To be redeemed is to be bought back from slavery by the payment of a ransom. Christ paid a great ransom to deliver His people from the bondage of sin, the claims of a broken law, the power of death and the grave, and the tyranny of sin, self and Satan. The blood of Christ is the ransom that secured our redemption. 'The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to

give His life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

The precious blood also enables us to enter God's holy presence and present our petitions to the Father in Jesus' name. 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say His flesh' (Heb. 10:19).

The blood also facilitates our daily walk and communion with God. 'But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth (keeps on cleansing) us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). It is the blood that brings us near to God. 'But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ' (Eph. 2:13).

So near, so very near to God, nearer I cannot be;
For in the person of His Son, I am as near as He.

C. Paget

The believer is justified by the Saviour's blood. To be justified is to be declared 'Not guilty' in the eyes of the strict law of God. It is a legal term. 'Being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath by him' (Rom. 5:9). Can you truly say that you are justified?

The blood of Christ is the answer to a guilty conscience. It purges the conscience and frees us from guilt.

The blood is the theme of heaven's song. Will you join that heavenly chorus?

The finished work

Christ fulfilled His Father's will in becoming man, enduring the reproach of men, living a life of perfect obedience on His people's behalf and dying in their place. He finished the work given Him by His Father. He preached the Gospel throughout Israel, worked miracles, made atonement for sin and paid the full price of their redemption. 'By his own blood he entered once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us' (Heb. 9:12). Hear His triumphant cry, 'It is finished!' Blessed Redeemer!

The Resurrection

After Christ's death, Joseph and Nicodemus took His body down from the tree, prepared it for burial with spices and new linen and reverently laid it in Joseph's new tomb. When God finished His work of Creation, He rested the seventh day. When Christ finished His work of redemption, He rested the seventh day, one of the three days He spent in the sepulchre. Humanly speaking, escape from that tomb was impossible because it was 'hewn out of the rock' and the entrance was blocked by a great stone. Did Christ remain in the tomb? No, emphatically No! He told His disciples: 'I lay down my life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again' (John 10:17-18). Take it again He did on the third day according to the Scriptures. The tomb was manifestly empty. Only the linen clothes and napkin remained there. It reminds us of Aaron, the high priest, who was commanded to leave his linen garments in the holy place on the Day of Atonement when his priestly work was done (Lev. 16:23). There were many who saw the risen Saviour. Paul lists these witnesses in 1 Cor. 15:5-8. Believers know that Christ is alive for evermore and because He lives they shall live also. The resurrection signified that God had accepted Christ's sacrifice on behalf of His people.

His ascension and exaltation

After appearing to many in His resurrected body, Christ ascended in victory from Mount Olivet. The golden gates were lifted up so that the all-conquering King of glory might enter heaven. His work finished, He now sits at the Father's right hand. As our High Priest He makes continual intercession for us. 'Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them' (Heb. 7:25). 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 John 2:1). It is for sinners that He acts as advocate. Unlike any earthly advocate, He does not make excuses or minimise sin. He does not deny that sins have been committed, but He presents the confessions of His people and pleads the value of His blood, shed for the forgiveness and cleansing of their sin. He pleads His full payment of the price incurred by their ' manifold transgressions' and 'mighty sins' (Amos 5:12). He pleads His spotless righteousness imputed to them and received by faith alone.

Chapter five

THE RUNAWAY FAMILY

Scripture: Ruth 1-4

The book of Ruth tells the story of a runaway family, who lived in the time of the judges. It is appropriately placed between the book of Judges and 1 Samuel, as it begins with a reference to the rule exercised by the judges and ends with a reference to David, the coming king.

Elimelech was the father of a little family group which consisted of his wife Naomi and his two sons Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech means God is my King and reminds us that Israel was a theocracy ruled directly by God. Yet how often we read in the book of Judges that 'there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25)! Israel rebelled and rejected the kingship of their God. Would that God's chosen nation had submitted wholeheartedly to the will and rule of God and made Him their rightful King! Things would have been very different for them all.

Trouble was inevitable because Israel turned away from God and served other gods. In due course, there was a famine in Israel, a land renowned for its fertility and fruitfulness, a land flowing with milk and honey. It could have been sent directly from the hand of God, as He withheld the rain needed for the grass and crops to grow. It could have come indirectly through the instrumentality of Israel's enemies as they invaded the land and, like the Midianites in the days of Gideon, destroyed 'the increase of the earth' and 'left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass' (Judges 6:4). These judgments were intended by God to turn the Israelites in mercy from their idolatry to the true worship of Jehovah. Learn the lesson that crowning the Lord as King of our heart and life makes all the difference to our happiness on earth and our reward in heaven.

Then welcome, O Lord, to the throne of my heart!
I would hail Thee my Saviour and King!
Be Thine all my service, for worthy Thou art,
And forever Thy praise I will sing.

H. E. Govan

The best option?

Elimelech decided that, in the circumstances, the best option for him and his family was to leave Israel and his God-given inheritance and go to Moab, a heathen country. His sons may well have influenced his decision. Mahlon, the name of his older son, means sickly and Chilion, the name of the younger boy, means pining. They were certainly spiritually sickly and pining for a life away from the restrictions of religious life in Israel. Elimelech, despite his name, was no longer guided by God, but did, like the rest of his fellow countrymen, what was right in his own eyes.

The family resided in Bethlehem-Judah. The name Bethlehem means house of bread. What an encouragement to stay put and resist the temptation to wander away and look elsewhere for sustenance! The right course of action would have been to look to God for deliverance. 'Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine' (Psa. 33:18-19). Did God not make provision for Egypt, Canaan and many other countries in a seven-year famine in the days of Joseph? The words of Psalm 37:3 are certainly to be relied on. 'Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed'. Elimelech did not act by faith but trusted to his own carnal reasoning and wisdom. We should learn from Elimelech's misguided action when we experience times of barrenness in our own lives and in the life of the church. We should turn from our sin, our lukewarmness and wait upon God to send times of fruitfulness. We should not be tempted to try new methods or gimmicks, to adopt new standards, to abandon the old paths of holiness and faithfulness to God, but remain true to the blood-stained banner of the cross. 'Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth' (Psa. 60:4).

Death strikes the family

Elimelech had decided merely to sojourn in the land of Moab. This suggests that he intended to spend only a short time there. But time passed and we read

that the family continued to dwell in Moab and did so for ten years. It was not long before Elimelech died. He had gone to the country of Israel's enemies to escape death in the famine, but, in a tragic irony, death overtook him in Moab. His plans all came to nothing for he left God out of his calculations. Do not reckon without God, but 'trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths' (Pro. 3:5-6). Heed this advice for it is wise counsel indeed.

Moabitish wives

His sons must have been adolescents when they went to Moab, young enough and foolish enough to learn something of the way of the heathen and to forsake the law of God. Both of them married Moabitish women which was something expressly forbidden by God. Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah. The young men were the guilty parties in these unions as the girls were ignorant of God's law. Many years later, heathen women would turn away King Solomon's heart from God. He sinned in taking many heathen wives when God had clearly prohibited this, as He knew that it would lead to a departure from Him and His worship. In Neh. 13:26, an important question is asked: 'Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.' God's law is to be obeyed to the letter. Forsake it and we will reap bitter consequences.

Death strikes again

Not only was the father of the little family group taken away in death, but the two sons died also and it appears they died childless and shortly after their marriages. God's hand had gone out against the family in sore judgment and Naomi was left a widow indeed and bereft not only of her husband but of her two sons. It looked as if the family line had come to an unexpected end. Being left a widow and the sole survivor of the little family, and finding herself in a foreign land, it is not surprising that her thoughts turned towards her own country, the land of Israel. There she had been happy, but now she lived daily in continual sorrow and misery. She also heard that God had visited His people in mercy and had given them bread. The famine was over! What an incentive to return to Bethlehem-Judah!

Naomi had a similar experience to the prodigal son in Luke 15 for it was when

he was brought low, experienced dire poverty and stared death in the face that he thought of the abundance of bread in his father's house and was moved to forsake the far country and turn his steps towards home. It is when the Lord visits His people in revival and spiritual famine finally comes to an end that sinners become painfully aware that they perish with hunger for want of the Bread of Life and seek God for the blessing of salvation and backsliders seek restoration to their former state of fellowship with God. Their experience is that of the well-known hymn.

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah! the waters failed;
E'en as I stooped to drink, they fled,
And mocked me as I wailed.

Now none but Christ can satisfy
None other name for me;
There's love and life and lasting joy,
Lord Jesus, found in Thee.

Naomi sets off for Judah

The message of 'bread enough and to spare' (Luke 15:16) caused Naomi to leave Moab, determined to return to the land of Judah. Her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, accompanied her. They followed the path that would lead them to Israel. Naomi was retracing the steps that she had previously taken to go to Moab. It is the path every backslider must take, retracing his steps back to the Saviour and to the cross of Calvary. We read of Abram when he left Egypt, where he had gone to escape the famine in Canaan, going back to an altar which he had previously built. Gen. 13:3-4 reads: 'And he went . . . even to Bethel, . . . unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the LORD'.

When the two young women had accompanied Naomi some distance, possibly to the border of Judah, Naomi urged each of them to return to her mother's house, praying that the Lord would show kindness to them as they had done to her and her two sons. A time of parting is always a time when we should pray for blessing. There were no mother-in-law problems in this little household! These young Moabitish women would put many a Christian household to shame. There was mutual affection and kindness in the family group.

Naomi also expressed her desire that they would both find rest in the house of a husband, for he would protect and shelter them and provide for all their needs. She kissed them goodbye, as she was minded to continue her journey alone. All of them wept together with loud sobs and many tears. Both young women voiced their intention to return to Israel with Naomi. Naomi reminded them that they had no reason to accompany her as she was too old to have a husband and in any case, even if she married again and had sons, they would not wait for them to grow up into manhood.

Orpah returns to Moab

Naomi expressed her great grief that the young women were suffering on her behalf. She had lost her husband and sons because God's hand had gone out against her personally in judgment. She was poverty-stricken and had no means of helping them. She also possibly wanted to test if their desire to return with her was based not only on their affection for her, but also on a genuine esteem for Israel and reverence for Israel's God. Her daughters-in-law wept again. Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. Naomi urged Ruth to follow Orpah who had already speedily set out on the road back to Moab and was obviously bent on returning to her idolatrous people and her gods. Moab was where her heart lay, as Lot's wife's had lain in Sodom. She obviously did not wait for Ruth to accompany her as might have been expected. Poor Orpah! The pull of old habits and her idols was too great for her to resist and we never hear of her again.

Ruth's choice

Ruth refused to leave her mother-in-law, as she clearly stated in the following memorable words: 'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me' (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth obviously had a love not only for Naomi but for the God of Israel. She did not care how difficult Naomi's pathway would prove, nor how poor her lodging place would be. She had resolved to forsake the gods of Moab and worship Jehovah, the God of Israel. She was determined to forsake her native country and adopt Israel as her own country. She had no intention of going back to Moab, She would live, die and be buried in Israel. Ruth made the right choice, but sadly Orpah made the

wrong choice, choices which had eternal consequences for both. Dear reader, be very sure you make the right choice in life, for it will determine your eternal abode in Heaven or Hell. Follow the example of Ruth, cast in your lot with the people of God and make their God your God. Shun the example of Orpah who will have all eternity to rue her choice.

In times like these you need a Saviour;
In times like these you need an anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!
This Rock is Jesus, yes, He's the One;
This Rock is Jesus, the only One;
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock

R. C. Jones

Naomi no longer tried to persuade Ruth to return to Moab. Her mind was obviously made up and she was fully determined to accompany her mother-in-law to the land of Israel. What blessed fellowship these two women must have enjoyed as they made their way to Naomi's home town of Bethlehem! It reminds us of the oneness of mind and purpose seen in Abraham and Isaac as 'they went both of them together' (Gen. 22:6) to Mount Moriah.

Journey's end

Eventually the two women arrived in Bethlehem, the house of bread. God had exercised their hearts to come and He preserved and guided them all the way home. Likewise He not only stirs sinners' hearts to realise their spiritual emptiness and causes them to yearn after the Lord Who is the Bread of Life and in Whom all fulness dwells, but God draws them to Him in salvation and leads and guides them continually on their pilgrimage to heaven. Our heavenly Father Who has made the great Captain of our salvation 'perfect through sufferings' is indeed 'bringing many sons unto glory' (Heb. 2:10). No saint of God will be missing when the LORD makes up His jewels (Mal. 3:17).

And this I shall find, for such is His mind
He'll not be in glory and leave me behind.
J. Denham Smith

Naomi's personal testimony

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city was moved by the news. It was the talk of the town. The women (for the word 'they' at the end of verse 19 is feminine) crowded round them asking, 'Is this Naomi?' Well might they ask, for the grief of a triple bereavement had left its mark upon her. Much sorrow had aged her and etched many a deep furrow on her once unlined brow. She was impoverished and this would have been evident in her attire.

She expressed a wish not to be known as Naomi any longer for that name means pleasant, but wanted to be called Mara which means bitter, for the Almighty had dealt 'very bitterly' with her (verse 20). She had already acknowledged to her two daughters-in-law that 'the hand of the LORD is gone out against me' (verse 13). Naomi knew well the source of the judgments which had fallen so heavily upon her. God was the Author of all her troubles and afflictions. She had not only experienced unimaginable grief but was reduced to a state of poverty. We can deduce this from the fact that Ruth had to go out immediately to glean ears of corn in the harvest fields which surrounded Bethlehem. Naomi freely admitted, 'I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty' (Ruth 1:21). Looking back, she now realised that when she left Bethlehem for an uncertain future, she had been full, in spite of the famine. Despite all her hopes for a better life in Moab, she had been sorely disappointed. The decision to go to Moab had brought death to her husband Elimelech and her two sons Mahlon and Chilion. She came home empty, emptier than she ever could have been, had she remained in Israel during the famine. She was now a destitute widow.

Let us all learn the lesson that no good comes of deserting our God-given portion, the public worship of God, the fellowship of His people and His ordinances and seeking advancement in the company of God's enemies. Far-off fields may look green, the world may look appealing, but there is nothing but heartache and sorrow in the far country. Remember what the Lord has said of the world: 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world' (1 John 2:16). That's all there is out there in the world and we have God's Word on the matter. Don't be deceived by the lust of the eyes as Eve was to the ruin of the whole human race and Achan was to the ruin of his whole family and property. The devil knows how to paint up the tawdry pleasures of sin to make them attractive to the sinner.

Barley harvest

The two women came to Bethlehem just as the barley crop was ripe for harvesting. God in His merciful Providence had brought them home at the very time when grain could be gleaned in the fields and laid up for the winter. Barley was not regarded as highly as wheat. It was much less valuable. You will remember how the prophet Elisha told Joram, the king of Israel, in the time of famine caused by the Syrians' siege of Samaria, that a measure of fine flour would be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel in the gate of the city (2 Kings 7:1). We can deduce that fine flour was at that time twice as expensive as barley. In Revelation 6:6, when famine was foretold, a voice was heard to proclaim: 'A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny', indicating that wheat would then be three times as valuable as barley. Barley was a most important ingredient in the diet of the poor. Isn't it wonderful to consider God's provision for the returning exiles?

If only Israel and indeed Elimelech's family had obeyed God, they would have experienced the truth of His promise: 'He should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee' (Psalm 81:16).

God in His mercy had ordained that farmers were not to be over meticulous in gathering up every grain or fruit of their harvests, but they were to leave gleanings of corn and other produce for the poor. We read for instance in Lev. 19:9-10: 'And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.' Who can doubt the love and compassion of our God?

Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer

In chapter two of the book of Ruth, we are introduced to Boaz, a kinsman of Elimelech. He lived at Bethlehem and was a mighty man of wealth. Who could have possibly imagined this? It would appear that not only did Elimelech lack faith in God to provide for his and his family's need in a time of famine, but he overlooked and forgot the role appointed by God for a kinsman-redeemer in times of trouble. The kinsman-redeemer had to be the closest male relative of the person in difficulty. He had three responsibilities: to redeem a man who had sold himself into slavery to a non-Israelite; to redeem property sold or

mortgaged because of the owner's poverty; to avenge the blood of a murdered relative.

Naomi too had forgotten about Boaz. This is obvious from the fact that she urged her two daughters-in-law to return to Moab to seek husbands there.

A picture of Christ

Boaz as to his character and actions presents a clear picture of Christ our kinsman-redeemer. Just as the kinsman-redeemer had to be the closest male relative, so Christ took upon Himself our human nature. 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). He became bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. He is our Elder Brother and thus, as the incarnate Deity, He is fully qualified to redeem us. The kinsman-redeemer purchased the slave from the master who owned him and also property which had been mortgaged or sold. Christ paid the great ransom for His people to deliver them from the claims of the law which demanded death for the lawbreakers, from sin which enslaved them, from the devil who held them captive and from eternal hell, death and the grave. The great ransom He gave was His own precious blood, His life, Himself indeed. 'Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28). We are also reminded of the words of Job 33:24: 'Then he (God) is gracious unto him (the sinner), and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom.' Sinners need to beware the wrath of a sin-hating God. 'Because there is wrath, beware lest he take thee away with his stroke: then a great ransom cannot deliver thee' (Job 36:18).

Who is this that comes from Edom,
All His raiment stained with blood,
To the slave proclaiming freedom,
Bringing and bestowing good,
Glorious in the garb He wears,
Glorious in the spoil He bears?

'Tis the Saviour, now victorious,
Travelling onward in His might;
'Tis the Saviour, O how glorious
To His people is the sight!
Jesus now is strong to save,

Mighty to redeem the slave.
T. Kelly

Ruth begins to glean

Ruth asked Naomi for permission to go out and glean ears of corn in the harvest field of an owner who would show her favour. Learn from this that young people should let their parents know at all times where they are going and what they are doing. Respect and filial duty require of them that they seek parental approval for all their actions. Ruth was in the habit of showing deference to Naomi who was an older woman and also her mother-in-law, and who therefore had more experience of life in general and also greater knowledge of customs in Israel.

Under the Mosaic law, the poor were allowed to gather up stray grains which had fallen from the standing corn when it was being cut down or from the sheaves as they were being bound. Ruth did not boldly take it upon herself to exercise her rights, but first approached the supervisor and asked permission to glean after the reapers. She displayed great humility in so doing. She arrived in a part of the field that belonged to Boaz who was related to Elimelech, Ruth's late father-in law. It seemed to happen by mere chance, for Ruth did not know who owned the field nor did she deliberately choose that part. No, it was not chance but God's Providence that directed her steps.

Boaz arrives

We are told in verse four: 'Behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem'. Boaz, as kinsman-redeemer and of the royal line of David, is a wonderful type of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word 'Behold' draws our attention very specifically to the coming of Boaz from Bethlehem. We could easily substitute the name of our Saviour in the text and say, 'Behold Jesus came from Bethlehem'. C. H. Gabriel wrote:

He came from the brightest of glory;
His blood as a ransom He gave,
To purchase eternal salvation;
And O He is mighty to save!

Boaz came into his field. Matthew 13:38 tells us that 'the field is the world'.

Did not the Lord Jesus Christ come into the world, the world that was His by creation, on His mission to save sinners? We note also the first words of Boaz, who in blessing his servants uttered a prayer that the LORD would be with them in all they undertook, granting them strength and endurance in their labours. The Lord Jesus is our great and faithful High Priest Who prays continually and effectually for all who are His servants and for all those who will believe on Him (John 17:20). The servants of Boaz, who were obviously willing and cheerful in their allotted task, unanimously blessed him in return, praying that God would favour their master. What a blessed relationship there was between this master and his servants! Likewise, our heavenly Lord and Master pronounces repeated blessings on the heads of those who serve Him. Truly, the lips of our Beloved, like the lips of His bride the church, 'drop as the honeycomb' (Song of Sol. 4:11), and 'what is sweeter than honey?' (Judges 14:18). May we respond as the servants of Boaz did with heartfelt benedictions upon the head of our Saviour, 'who is over all, God blessed for ever' (Rom. 9:5).

Boaz asks about Ruth

Boaz was a diligent landowner. He came into the field to supervise the barley harvest, to see to the welfare of his workers, to ensure that their provisions were adequate and to issue further instructions as necessary. His servants would have been encouraged and refreshed by his interest in their toils and his concern for them. Boaz immediately noticed Ruth and asked the supervisor about her identity and her family background. The latter had already inquired into these matters when Ruth had asked his permission to glean among the sheaves. He was able to tell Boaz that she was the young Moabitish woman who had returned from the country of Moab with Naomi and had worked hard until that very moment, apart from resting a little in the shadow of the house provided for rest and mealtimes.

Boaz then entered into conversation with Ruth and instructed her not to glean in any other field but to abide close to his maidens. These were not gleaners but maidservants who helped in the harvest, binding the cut stalks of corn into sheaves and also reaping the standing corn. Ruth was to follow these maidens to the field where they were reaping. He also told her that he had charged the young men not to harm, push her away or hinder her in any way. When she was thirsty, as was likely in such a hot climate and with such work in hand, he invited her to drink freely of the water provided. This water had been drawn

from nearby wells by the young men. Perhaps the water had even come from the well at the gate of Bethlehem, so desirable and longed after by David, when it had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, because of its excellent quality.

Boaz spoke in great kindness to Ruth, afforded her his protection, gave her permission to go on gleaning in his field and provided her with the companionship of his maidens, which would have been welcomed by this lonely widow and would have helped preserve her reputation. What a picture of the Saviour Boaz is! How graciously the Lord Jesus has spoken to poor undeserving sinners, offered them refuge under the shadow of His wing, supplied the needed companionship of other believers and invited them to eat freely of the Bread of Life and drink freely of the Water of Life. These are both titles of the Saviour. In John 6:51, He said, 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world'. In John 4:14, He told the woman of Samaria, 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life'. Christ can truly be called the well of Bethlehem for not only was He born in Bethlehem but the well was at the city gate, illustrating how accessible He is to all those who seek to quench their spiritual thirst in Him. Starving, thirsty sinners can find all their needs met in the Saviour.

Ruth was so overcome by Boaz's kindness that she humbly bowed herself with her face to the ground. She asked him why he had shown such favour to one who was a poor widow and a stranger, for she was not of Israel but of Moab. Boaz told her that he had heard a full report of her kindness to Naomi since her own husband Mahlon had died. At a time when most young widows would have been entirely occupied with their own grief, Ruth had shown selfless care and loving consideration for her mother-in-law who had now lost her son as well as her husband. Not only that but she had left her own parents and her native country to come to a people who were complete strangers. Boaz knew all about Ruth while she knew absolutely nothing about him or his role as the kinsman-redeemer. Was not this our case before conversion? We were indeed strangers to grace and to God, 'being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12). But God knew His people from all eternity, loved them with an everlasting love and ordained them as His heirs to be the recipients of eternal life.

Boaz's prayer

Boaz prayed that Ruth would be fully recompensed for her labours and fully rewarded by the LORD God of Israel under whose wings she had come to trust. Ruth's work was a labour of love to provide not only for herself but also for her mother-in-law in their present need, and to supply them with food for the winter months. Her work did not merit her salvation or a home in heaven, but ensured many blessings in this life, as Hebrews 6:10 teaches concerning those who act as Ruth did: 'God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister'. What did secure her salvation was her fleeing to Christ for refuge and seeking shelter under His outstretched wings. Ruth replied by requesting that she might find favour in Boaz's eyes, for his benevolent and friendly words had brought her much comfort. Ruth was all too aware of her unworthiness and her need for his continued goodwill, being a complete outsider and totally unlike his own handmaidens, as regards language, dress, previous religion, national customs and appearance. Christians too should be deeply conscious of their lack of merit and constant need of God's continual favour and consequently should request with much thanksgiving His grace on a daily basis.

No works of merit now I plead,
But Jesus take for all my need;
No righteousness in me is found,
Except upon redemption ground.
Daniel Whittle

More blessings

Boaz had yet even more blessings to bestow on Ruth. He invited her to come at mealtime and partake of the bread he had provided for himself and for his workers. She was to dip her bread in the vinegar which he had also made available for his servants. It made the bread more savoury and appetising and was particularly welcome in hot climates. Boaz had provided more than enough for his own and his workers' needs and was thus able to accommodate Ruth. The Lord not only invites sinners to the Gospel feast, but receives all who respond to His gracious invitation.

There's room at the cross for you,
Tho' millions have come,
There's still room for one,
Yes, there's room at the cross for you.
Ira Stanhope

Ruth took him at his word and heeded his invitation. She sat beside the reapers, the women reapers, not among them for in all her demeanour she was consistently modest and humble and knew her place. Boaz favoured her yet again by reaching her parched corn which was considered a great dainty. How many are invited by God to come and partake of the gospel feast, but unlike Ruth refuse the gracious invitation!

We read of a great marriage feast made fully ready by a king for his son in Matthew 22. Many were called to that bountiful royal banquet, but the guests refused to come. They were too preoccupied by their earthly concerns and business affairs: their farming and livestock, their merchandise and their personal relationships. Have you responded to the gospel invitation to come and partake of God's free grace, His pardon for your sin, His peace in your heart, His imputed righteousness and a home in heaven? Every Christian is deeply aware of their unworthiness and of God's amazing grace.

Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?
Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.
Isaac Watts

Ruth returns to her work

Ruth ate of Boaz's provisions, but as soon as she had eaten enough she went back to her gleaning. She is an example to us all not to overindulge in food or abuse the kindness of our benefactors, but to be 'temperate in all things' (1 Cor. 9:25). She is also an example to us to be industrious and not to waste

a moment in lazy idleness. Boaz instructed his young men to let Ruth glean without reproach even among the sheaves. They were deliberately to let handfuls of corn fall, so she could glean them and thus increase her store of grain. What kindness Boaz showed to Ruth! It was kindness almost unequalled among men, but not only equalled but greatly surpassed by the Saviour. We can certainly say with the psalmist, 'Blessed be the Lord who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah' (Psa. 68:19).

Have you on the Lord believed?
Still there's more to follow;
Of His grace have you received?
Still there's more to follow.

Philip P. Bliss

Ruth finishes her task

Ruth worked in the field until evening. In Israel, darkness falls quickly after sunset and twilight lasts only a very short time. Like the Lord Jesus Who said 'I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work' (John 9:4), Ruth fully utilised the hours of daylight diligently, not only to glean as much as possible, but also to thresh the ears of barley to remove the inedible chaff. This was a laborious task especially when using a stick or flail. The threshing reduced the bulk and weight of what she had gleaned and made it easier to carry home. All told she had an ephah of meal, ten times what a man would eat in one day, as we learn in Exodus 16:16, when the Israelites were told to gather an omer of manna daily for each man, an omer being 'the tenth part of an ephah' (Exod. 16:36). She carried all home herself and showed the results of her labour to Naomi and gave her what she had left of the provisions Boaz had generously given her. Naomi who knew by the unexpected quantity of barley brought home by Ruth that she had been shown special favour, enquired where she had been gleaning and pronounced a blessing on the man who had shown her such great kindness. Ruth told Naomi that the man in whose field she had gleaned was called Boaz. Naomi was stirred up to pray earnestly for Boaz that the Lord would bless him in all things. He had shown kindness in the past to her family. Her memory jogged at last, she now revealed to her daughter-in-law that Boaz was in reality a near

kinsman. How could she have forgotten such a benefactor, one who was still a mighty man of wealth after years of devastating famine and one who would willingly have helped them? We could well ask ourselves a similar question. How can we forget the Lord's mercy in times past, His wealth undiminished by His oft giving and His power and willingness to help in trouble? No wonder the LORD upbraids Israel in Jeremiah 2:32, asking the all-important question: 'Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number'. May we, like David, call upon our soul to 'bless the LORD, and forget not all his benefits' (Psalm 103:2).

More favours

Boaz had already bestowed many favours upon Ruth. Is it that his generosity has been entirely exhausted, his bounty completely depleted? Not at all! In this He is like the Lord, Who 'giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.' The words of the hymn written by Annie J. Flint are a great encouragement.

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labours increase;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing;
The Father both thee and thy load will uphold.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

Ruth's obedience

Ruth told Naomi also of Boaz's instruction to keep close by his workers until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. Thus her right to glean in his field was firmly established and their food supply assured. Naomi approved this arrangement for she felt it was appropriate that Ruth should accompany the maidservants of Boaz and not appear in any other field. Ruth faithfully followed these instructions, keeping in close contact with the maidservants and gleaning only in Boaz's field.

Naomi meanwhile had been pondering Ruth's future and the back-breaking task of gleaning corn which would ever be her lot as a poor widow with a mother-in-law to support as well as herself. She felt that having a husband would provide Ruth with rest from the toil she had been engaged in and from all her present anxieties. He would take responsibility for all her needs, provide her with a home and grant her his protection. Naomi believed Boaz to be their next of kin (2:20) and as such it was his duty under the law to marry the widow. Their first child would be counted as the dead man's and would inherit the dead man's estate. Thus God ensured that each man's inheritance remained in his family.

Naomi told Ruth how she could secure Boaz's consent to act as her kinsman-redeemer. He had gone to the threshing floor to winnow the barley, that is to separate the chaff from the grain. Ruth was to wash and anoint herself with oil, leave aside her working clothes, put on her best garments and go down to the threshing floor. She was not to approach Boaz until he and his workers had finished feasting. When he lay down to sleep she was to note the exact place he had chosen. Then she was to go to his sleeping place, uncover his feet and lie down there at right angles to his recumbent form. He would tell her what to do. He had greater knowledge of the law and procedures under the law regarding redemption. Thus must we seek instruction from our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, as we lie in humble submission at His nail-pierced feet. Ruth proclaimed herself ready to fulfil all Naomi's instructions. and proceeded to do so. Her obedience and readiness to follow instructions outshine all her other virtues. May these qualities mark our lives too!

After feasting joyfully with his servants, in celebration of the harvest and the end of the famine, Boaz lay down at the end of the heap of corn. Ruth came softly, uncovered his feet and lay down there. It was a sign of submissiveness and humility. At midnight, for some inexplicable reason, Boaz was gripped by fear. He turned over and discovered that a woman was lying at his feet.

Abruptly and without preamble, for he had been startled out of his sleep, he demanded, 'Who art thou?' Her meek response was that she was Ruth his handmaid and asked him to spread the skirt of his garment over her. This would be a sign that he was taking her under his protection as a near kinsman. The word skirt also means wing and suggests the protection afforded by the mother hen to her vulnerable chicks. Boaz pronounced a blessing on Ruth for she now was showing more kindness to her husband's family than at the beginning. She had shown great kindness to her young husband as he lived and died, and to Naomi, in accompanying her to the land of Israel. There she excelled in her kindness to her mother-in-law as, at her own suggestion, she laboured in gleaning, bearing the burden and heat of the day to support the household. Now her kindness was even more marked in seeking out a kinsman-redeemer to build up her family's inheritance and perpetuate her husband's name and memory. In so doing, she had turned away from young men, whether rich or poor, and had appealed to Boaz who was an older man and must have been double her age. Boaz addressed her as 'Daughter' showing his tender care and affection for her and told her not to be afraid. He would do all that Ruth required and see that the role of kinsman was fulfilled, for she was known as a virtuous woman throughout the whole city of Bethlehem. However, he informed her that there was a nearer kinsman and he had to be granted the first opportunity under the law of God to redeem the property and the widow. Boaz said that if this man consented to act as the kinsman-redeemer that would be a satisfactory arrangement, but if not then he would do the kinsman's part. He told Ruth to lie down again until the morning. She did so remaining where she had been, lying at his feet until the dawn approached. Boaz did not want to send Ruth home while it was dark because of the dangers of the night, but he did not want others to know that a woman had come into the threshing floor lest they misinterpreted Ruth's motives. Christians must always be extremely careful of their reputation among their neighbours and friends. Boaz then told Ruth to bring her veil and while she held it he filled it with six measures of barley and laid it on her shoulders so she could carry it home to the city.

Consistent behaviour

Throughout this whole episode, Boaz, known for his integrity, was true to his character. In his first conversation with Ruth he addressed her as 'Daughter' as he did later in the threshing floor. He maintained a fatherly interest in her welfare and displayed a fatherly attitude towards this young woman who was

many years his junior. How can anyone ever charge God, our heavenly Father, with anything other than a fatherly interest and attitude towards His creatures?

Boaz spoke to Ruth in a friendly and kind fashion in the harvest field and also in the threshing floor, although as a Moabitess she was a stranger, numbered among those who are described as 'being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12). How we rejoice that Christ came as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' (Luke 2:32), bringing salvation to them as well as to the Jew. Boaz was generous in his provision for her at mealtimes, reaching her parched corn as well as freely offering her bread and vinegar. This generosity was followed by his gift of six measures of barley.

He was mindful of her reputation, telling her to stay close to his maidens and continue working in his field and not in any other. He sent her away from the threshing floor while it was not yet light, lest any should misconstrue her actions. He had arranged for her comfort as a gleaner, instructing his young men not to harm her, but to let handfuls of grain fall on purpose for her. He had also admonished them not to drive her away from the supply of water. In all his actions Boaz showed a great conformity to Christ. May God grant us such consistency of behaviour in our walk with God. Now he undertook to sound out the nearer kinsman as to his intentions regarding the role of kinsman-redeemer. He was expert in the law and relieved Ruth of the task of approaching him herself. Boaz now took on the task of mediator between Ruth and the other kinsman. What a blessed picture of Christ this is! He is the one and only Mediator between God and men. 1 Tim. 2:5 clearly states this: 'For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.' Like Ruth, the sinner does nothing to secure his eternal happiness, but leaves the work entirely to the Saviour to complete.

Ruth returns home

Ruth returned home to relate all that had happened between her and Boaz to her mother-in-law. Young people should never so speak or act that they have to conceal their actions and words from their parents. Ruth showed Naomi the six measures of barley she had been given. How frank and open Ruth was in all her dealings with others! May such qualities mark our character! Naomi advised Ruth to await quietly the outcome of Boaz's negotiations with the nearer kinsman, telling her to 'sit still'. She could do so in perfect confidence, knowing that Boaz would not rest until he had brought matters to a satisfactory

conclusion that very day. How important it is to surround ourselves with wise counsellors who will give us good advice! Follow the motto of the psalmist who said of the Lord: 'Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory' (Psa. 73:24). That means guidance all the days of our pilgrimage until we reach our heavenly home. We should sit still while we await God's answers to our prayers, knowing that He will undertake for us in all the difficulties of life.

Redemption complete

Naomi was perfectly right about Boaz. Ruth 4:1 finds him going up to the gate of the city. The gate of the city was the place where the elders met in council, where judgment was carried out, important matters discussed and business transacted. You will remember that Lot sat in the gate of Sodom (Gen. 19:1). When he reproved the men of Sodom for their evil intentions, they reproached him with the words: 'he will needs be a judge' (Gen. 19:9). Boaz took his place in the gate of the city. Lo and behold the nearer kinsman came by. The Bible uses the word 'behold' for God wants us to take note of how He worked on Ruth's behalf in His overruling Providence, for nothing, not even the smallest detail of our lives ever happens by chance.

Boaz called upon this kinsman to sit down in the gate, which he promptly did. He also called upon ten elders of the city to sit there as witnesses of the proceedings. Boaz told the other kinsman that Naomi, who had lately come from Moab, was intending to sell a portion of the ground which had belonged to her late husband, Elimelech, their common relative. He asked him to buy it in the presence of the inhabitants and elders of Bethlehem. If he wished to redeem it, he could do so, but if not he should tell Boaz who had the next claim on the property. The kinsman declared that he wanted to buy the land. Boaz then revealed Ruth's interest in the transaction and told the kinsman that he had to buy the field not only from Naomi but from Ruth, the widow of Mahlon and raise up his name on his inheritance. As soon as he heard this, the once interested kinsman reneged on his decision to buy the land, emphatically stating twice, 'I cannot redeem it' (Ruth 4:6). His reasons were entirely selfish for he was afraid he would damage his inheritance with a second marriage and a possible second family. He did not consider the fact that he was acting contrary to God's law. Disobedience to God never brings a blessing on any household.

He asked Boaz to redeem the property himself. To confirm his decision to transfer his right of redemption to Boaz, he removed his shoe and gave it to Boaz. How many refuse the offer of an eternal inheritance in heaven because they are mistakenly convinced it will damage their life and prospects on earth!

Boaz called all the people present as well as the elders to witness that day that not only had he bought all the property of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion from Naomi, but he had also purchased Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, to be his wife. He announced his intention to obey fully the commandment of God to raise up 'the name of the dead upon his inheritance' (Ruth 4:10), so that the name of Mahlon would not be forgotten among his people. All those present and the elders affirmed that they were indeed witnesses and entreated the Lord to make Ruth as Rachel and Leah, from whom, although only two in number, the tribes of Israel sprang. They exhorted Boaz, as he indeed always had done, to act honourably and gain renown through his integrity and wealth in his own city of Bethlehem. They prayed that God would make his family as numerous as that of Pharez, the son of Judah, the father of their tribe.

Promises kept

Boaz fulfilled all the promises made to Ruth in the threshing floor. He contacted the kinsman who was a nearer relation of the family. He gave him a fair opportunity to redeem the property and, on his withdrawal, fulfilled his promise to Ruth to do the kinsman's part. His word could be relied on. He was a man of high moral principles. He could well have carried out the duties of the kinsman without consulting the man with the superior claim. But Boaz was honest and upright and followed the letter of the law. No one is so faithful to His Word as our God. Has He not promised, 'My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips' (Psa. 89:34)? Joshua before his death could solemnly say, 'Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof' (Josh: 23:14). Solomon's prayer, at the dedication of the temple, contained these memorable words: 'Blessed be the LORD, . . . there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant' (1Kings 8:56). Christians can rely on all of God's promises. He will not fail. He

cannot fail for He is God and He changes not.

The Lord hath declared and the Lord will perform;
Behold! I am near to deliver,
A refuge and fortress, a covert in storm;
He keepeth his promise forever.

Forever! Forever! O not for a day!
He keepeth his promise forever!

S. C. Kirk

The family of Boaz

The Lord soon graciously granted Boaz and Ruth a son. The women of Bethlehem rejoiced with Naomi and praised the LORD that He had not left her without a kinsman. In His great mercy a grandson had been born to a woman who had lost both her husband and her two sons. They expressed their hope that this child would be as his father, renowned as a worthy man and honourable in the nation. They declared that the newborn son would restore comforts to the sorrowful widow and support her in old age, for he was born of Ruth who was better to her than seven sons, not only because her love excelled the love of seven sons, but also as the wife of Boaz she had inherited wealth and would be able to supply all her needs to a greater degree than seven sons. Naomi became nurse to the child and her neighbours called him Obed which means 'serving'. Every Christian is called upon, like David, Obed's grandson, to serve his own generation (Acts 13:36). Obed became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David. Thus Ruth became part of the royal line which led to the Messiah. She is one of the few women mentioned by name in Christ's family tree. What an illustrious family she now belonged to!

Boaz's marriage to Ruth is a beautiful picture of our union with Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom. Boaz married a stranger, a pauper, a sinful idolatress who had 'no hope, and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12). Likewise the Saviour brought us into glorious union with Himself, when we were hopeless, helpless sinners without any merit, 'wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked' (Rev. 3:17). Every earthly bridegroom chooses his bride because he sees some merit in her. We sinners had no merit in our person or works to recommend us to Christ.

The marriage union of Boaz and Ruth was fruitful and Obed was born. So

Christians should bring forth fruit as a result of our union with Christ, just like the branch which abides in the vine. 'He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing' (John 15:5).

A final glimpse of Boaz, Naomi and Ruth

Boaz is undeniably a clear picture of Christ our Redeemer and his marriage to Ruth a picture of our union with Christ which brings forth much fruit. This is further explained in Rom. 7:4, 'Ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God'.

Ruth, meanwhile, presents a picture of the church, the bride of Christ. She was 'a virtuous woman', known throughout the whole city for her virtue (Ruth 3:11). She was industrious, declining to eat the bread of idleness. She was also meek and submissive and fully obeyed all the instructions she was given by Naomi and Boaz. Hers was undoubtedly 'the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price' (1 Peter 3:4). She was modest and decorous in all her relations with others. Her great tenderness of heart and love for her family were demonstrated in her words and actions. Steadfastly she set her face towards the land of Israel and Israel's God. May we, as the bride of Christ, show these admirable qualities in our lives! May we not part company with the Saviour by day or night nor turn from following after Him, but follow in His footsteps! May we be known throughout our respective areas as virtuous! As Ruth had a deep concern for her family's interest, so may we ever seek the welfare of the people of God!

Naomi is a picture of the backslider who seeks the far country for its imagined benefits and reaps nothing but sorrow and loss. God's chastisements coupled with the news that there was bread in Bethlehem drew her back to Israel. Her story ended in incredible joy for she saw Ruth married to her kinsman-redeemer and she who had lost her sons became the grandmother of Obed. She no longer merited the name Mara for life was no longer full of bitterness, but the lines had fallen unto her once more in pleasant places (Psalm 16:6).

The future foretold

The book of Ruth is not only a record of past events but presents a view of 'the things which shall be hereafter' (Rev. 1:19). In the removal of Elimelech's fam-

ily from Israel to Moab we have a view in microcosm of the future scattering of Israel among heathen nations. There are many references to the scattering of Israel in the Psalms and writings of the prophets. In Psalm 44:11, we read: 'Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat; and hast scattered us among the heathen.' In Jer. 30:11, God speaks of 'all nations whither I have scattered thee'. The fall and diminishing of one Jewish family is representative of the future fall of the Jewish people who were widely scattered abroad after the crucifixion.

The ingathering of Gentiles

After the fall of Naomi's household, we see the inclusion of Ruth, a Gentile believer, among the people of God. Paul speaks of Israel's fall and the blessing of the Gentiles in Romans, chapter 11. He says, 'If the fall of them be the riches of the world and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?' (v. 12) 'For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?' (v. 15). The Lord Jesus instructed the disciples to go forth and teach all nations. They were to stay in Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high and then they were to be witnesses unto Him 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Paul and others went out boldly preaching the gospel to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, many of whom believed the record of Christ crucified and risen from the dead and pressed into the kingdom, while the majority of Jews rejected the message.

The restoration of Israel

Naomi was led to come back to Israel after her lengthy sojourn in Moab. So did many Jews return to their homeland when the state of Israel was declared in 1948. They came back in unbelief, still rejecting their Messiah, just as Naomi remained in ignorance of her kinsman-redeemer for some time. Only when he was eventually revealed and his help sought, did Naomi finally know restoration, security and enrichment. Her grandson was called Obed for he was to be a restorer of her life and a nourisher of her old age (Ruth 4:15). Only when the Lord comes again to deliver Jerusalem from all the nations that seek to destroy her and pours out His Spirit upon her inhabitants so that they mourn deeply because of Him Whom they pierced, will restoration be granted to Israel.

The coming King

The last word in the book of Ruth is the name of Obed's grandson: David. The book looks forward to King David, the shepherd of Israel, their champion in battle and their deliverer from their many enemies. It is interesting to note that in the genealogy of the Saviour, despite the numerous kings who figure there, only one is referred to as king, namely David the king. King David's continual and triumphant battles secured the lasting peace of King Solomon's reign. Likewise Christ's triumph over sin, death, the grave, and the great adversary the devil has secured everlasting peace for His people. Great David's greater Son is coming to reign as the glorified Lord. In Zech. 4:14, He is called 'The LORD of the whole earth.'

Chapter six

THE RUNAWAY FRIEND

Scripture: 1 Sam. 13 -2 Sam 1:27

The love of Jonathan for his friend David shines like a jewel in the record of Holy Writ. Before David comes into view or is anointed as the future king of Israel by Samuel the prophet, Jonathan, prince of the house of Saul, appears on the scene.

At that time, the Philistines had placed garrisons in the land and were in a position of strength, whilst morale in Israel was at a very low ebb. Saul made no attempt to confront the Philistines in battle, but instead sent the men of Israel to their tents and retained a mere 3,000 chosen soldiers. He allocated 1,000 of these to his son Jonathan in Gibeah, Saul's birthplace and where he resided.

Jonathan was a man of greater courage and enterprise than his father and courageously smote a Philistine garrison in Geba. Unsurprisingly, the Philistines heard of this daring act of resistance. Saul took all the credit for it, made no mention of Jonathan and summoned his people to Gilgal. Jonathan was clearly the forgotten hero of the hour.

The Philistines were mobilised in Michmash with 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen and soldiers, as innumerable as the grains of sand on the sea shore. It was a formidable host, intent on battle with Israel. The Israelites fled and hid in caves, thickets, rocks, high places and even in pits. Some also crossed the Jordan to seek refuge there. The people who followed Saul to Gilgal were without exception trembling with fear. It was a scene of utter dismay and panic in Israel. Evidently, neither the men of Israel nor king Saul himself shared the faith that Jonathan had in the God of Israel.

Samuel the prophet had arranged to meet Saul in Gilgal but arrived later than expected. Did Saul wait for Samuel to appear? No, he took it upon himself to sacrifice a burnt offering which he well knew was strictly forbidden by God and which he had no right to do, as he was not of the priestly tribe of Levi. Samuel rebuked him, told him his kingdom would not continue and God had chosen another to be the captain of His people. If things had been bad before, they were now worse because of Saul's deliberate and wilful transgression of

God's holy law. Samuel had no comfort to offer or promise to give and departed from Saul in Gilgal. Saul now had only 600 men, a sorry remnant of the 2,000 he had but recently commanded. He pitched camp along with Jonathan in Gibeah. At this time too, the Philistines had effectively disarmed the Israelites by banning blacksmiths so that they could not make themselves swords or spears. Only Saul and Jonathan had such weapons.

Action taken

Jonathan did not sit idly by, wringing his hands in abject fear. He took decisive action, motivated by his faith in God. Accompanied only by his armour bearer, he slipped unnoticed out of the camp to go over to the garrison of the Philistines. He encouraged his armour bearer, saying, 'It may be that the LORD will work for us: for there is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few' (1 Sam. 14:6). In other words, God did not need a huge army. He could deliver Israel by just two men who were willing to hazard their lives in the cause of God. How often men have looked to a simple 'may be'. King Hezekiah did when he sent messengers to the prophet Isaiah, saying, 'It may be the LORD thy God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God' (Isa. 37:4). God responded by slaying 185,000 Assyrians who were besieging Jerusalem and were determined to take it. Those who go out on a limb, pinning their hopes on God will never be disappointed. Having requested and received a sign from God, which indicated that God would deliver the Philistines into the hand of Israel, the two men, with Jonathan leading the way, clambered up the steep rock face to the Philistine stronghold. Exposed to danger as they climbed, surprisingly they were unmolested. The garrison's expressed contempt for the Israelites came to a sudden and sorry end, for Jonathan and his armour bearer soon dispatched twenty of their soldiers. God intervened, in response to Jonathan's faith, and sent a very great trembling into the host in the field, as well as into the garrison and among the raiding parties. God also spread terror in the enemy ranks by sending an earthquake, causing the very ground to quake beneath their feet.

In the resulting confusion, the Philistines turned their swords on their fellows and slew them. Israel were now encouraged to hasten to the battle. Those who had deserted to the enemy and those who had gone into hiding joined in the fray with their fellow Israelites. So the Lord saved Israel that day with a mighty deliverance.

Saul had foolishly and harshly ordered that no soldier should eat any food that

day. Thus he weakened the strength of the fighting men, prevented a greater slaughter of their enemies and also made them to sin when, extremely faint with hunger, they unlawfully ate flesh with the blood. Jonathan had not heard his father's command and, seeing honey dropping from a honeycomb in the wood, he ate some honey and was refreshed. Happy had it been for Israel if they had also been permitted to reinvigorate themselves in the same fashion. Saul was intent on pursuing after the Philistines that night and wiping them out completely. Urged by the priest, he enquired of the Lord, but God gave him no answer. He concluded that sin was the reason for God's silence and cast lots which identified Jonathan as the guilty party. Saul had already foolishly pronounced the death sentence on the one responsible, even if it should be his own son. Jonathan explained that unwittingly he had but tasted a little honey and for that he must die. The people, acknowledging Jonathan's great victory and his deliverance of Israel from their deadly foes, rescued him from certain death at the hands of his father. Isn't it strange that Saul, unhesitatingly and without fear of the consequences, had broken the express commandment of God in usurping the office of the priest and offering a sacrifice, but condemned Jonathan to die for breaking his own petty ill-considered command?

Jonathan won a great and glorious victory that day, a victory accomplished by faith alone in God, the God of battles. It was the first demonstration of faith recorded in the reign of Saul. As Daniel 11:32 states concerning the Jews in the end times under the reign of Antichrist, 'the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits'. Jonathan certainly knew his God and did exploits in His name. However, his victory would have been undeniably greater, more complete and more glorious still, had it not been hindered by his father's folly.

Jonathan makes a covenant with David

Although many years were yet to pass before David ascended the throne of Israel, Samuel was sent by God to Bethlehem to anoint him as king instead of Saul. The Spirit of God had departed from Saul and an evil spirit was sent by God to trouble him. His servants thought that music would dispel his melancholy and help to counteract the influence of this evil spirit. David who was a skilful player on the harp was recommended and brought to the royal court, where in God's providence he would become acquainted with the affairs of state and prepared for his future role as king. God had already seen to it that he, who was destined to be a shepherd to Israel, was instructed in the skills and

responsibilities of a shepherd to a despised little flock, feeding them, leading them out to pastures green and to still waters, defending them from enemy attack and slaying those who would have made of them their prey.

Soon the Philistines assembled again for battle with Israel. A wide valley, the valley of Elah, separated the two armies drawn up in battle array on two opposing hills. Goliath, their champion, a giant of great stature, aggressively and repeatedly challenged Israel to produce their champion. A duel between these two champions would decide the outcome of the battle. For forty days, morning and evening, Saul and his men had listened to the giant roaring his defiance of Israel and Israel's God. No response was forthcoming from the Israelites and their cowardly king. The story of how David, stirred by jealousy for God's honour and confident of His help, rejected Saul's armour, prevailed over the giant with a sling and a stone and cut off his head with his own sword is well-known. After the slaughter of Goliath, Abner, the captain of Israel's army, brought David to present him to Saul.

As David talked with Saul, Jonathan was nearby listening to their conversation and found his heart stirred with a genuine, deep affection for David. His soul 'was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul' (1 Sam. 18:1). Jonathan's soul was bound inextricably, in indissoluble bonds of love and friendship, to the soul of David. He loved him as he loved himself.

Jonathan must have been previously aware of David's presence in the royal court. Indeed he must have often heard the sweet melodies as David played skilfully on his harp and sang the songs of Zion, as he sought to drive away the evil spirit which tormented Saul, his father. However, he now had a new and enlightened view of David. How did this happen?

First Jonathan heard David speak and, like the Nazarenes of Luke 4:22 who heard the Saviour preach in their synagogue, he 'wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth'. Likewise, when the words of Christ come home to our hearts in all their gracious power, our hearts are drawn to love Him.

Lord, I was deaf! I could not hear
The thrilling music of Thy voice;
But now I hear Thee and rejoice,
And all Thine uttered words are dear.

W. T. Matson

Secondly, he was impressed by the comeliness of his person. 1 Samuel 16:12 tells us that David was ‘ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to’. What God values and counts lovely is not appreciated by the ungodly. Not surprisingly, Goliath despised him for these very qualities. ‘When the Philistine looked about, and saw David (as if David were so insignificant that his presence was not immediately discernible) he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance (1 Sam. 17:42).

The heathen Philistine was not in the least impressed by the beauty of David’s person or by the fairness of his countenance. We too were once the bitter enemies of God by our wicked works and were completely blind to the beauties of Christ. Not only was He ‘as a root out of a dry ground’, but Isaiah goes on to say, ‘He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him’ (Isa. 53:2). Praise God for the grace which opened our eyes His loveliness to see. When the bride in the Song of Solomon, chapter five, listed and considered the exquisite features of her beloved, she was constrained to cry out, ‘Yea, he is altogether lovely’ (v. 16).

Lord, I was blind! I could not see
In Thy marred vision any grace;
But now the beauty of Thy face
In radiant vision dawns on me.

W. T. Matson

Thirdly, Jonathan saw in David the champion of Israel who was instrumental in securing victory for Israel over the Philistines. He was filled with gratitude for Israel’s deliverance and how could he not feel a deep, strong love for him? Likewise, when we have a view of Christ as the mighty and only Deliverer from our invincible enemies of sin, Satan, the world, death and the grave, our thankful hearts overflow with love for Him.

Fairest of all the earth beside,
Chiefest of all unto Thy bride,
Fulness divine in Thee I see,
Wonderful man of Calvary!

M. P. Ferguson

David had proof positive of his great victory for he had the severed head of the giant in his hand. None could doubt or dispute that he had slain Goliath of Gath. In like fashion, we have undeniable proof of Christ's victory over all His and our enemies for 'the God of peace . . . brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant' (Heb. 13:20). The resurrection of Christ is the incontestable evidence of His triumph over all His foes. Ought we not to love Him most fervently?

A covenant of love

Jonathan and David entered into a covenant, a solemn agreement of mutual love and support. It was not enough for them to be stirred by strong feelings of affection one for the other, but they wanted to confirm this by a permanent covenant, as a couple does when entering into the marriage relationship. God loved His people with an everlasting and unfailing love and entered into a covenant with His Son to redeem them from going down to the pit. His love surpasses the love that existed between Jonathan and David which was but a feeble reflection of God's love for the sinner. Never was there a friend like the Lord Jesus. Truly it can be said of Him, 'A friend loveth at all times' (Pro. 17:17), 'and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother' (Pro. 18:24). How blessed are those words: 'There is a friend!'

When David's services were not required by Saul, he was in the habit of returning home to tend to his father's flocks. Now however, Saul wished him to remain in the palace. David had lately come from his father's house in Bethlehem to the scene of the battle with the Philistines. He had been wearing the garb of a humble shepherd and carrying his shepherd's weapons of a sling and stones when he slew Goliath. Jonathan now stripped himself of his princely robe and his other garments and arrayed David in them. He also bestowed on him his sword, his bow and his girdle. Giving David his sword was no mean gesture on Jonathan's part. Remember that Saul and Jonathan had the only two swords in Israel. (That is why David had to use Goliath's sword to cut off his head and silence his blasphemies against the God of Israel.) Now David could appear at court as a prince and soldier. It is interesting to note that when Saul bestowed his armour, a coat of mail and a brazen helmet on David, he rejected all these as he had not proved them. Saul was an unusually tall man, being 'higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward' (1Sam. 10:23).

In contrast to his father, Jonathan must have been similar to David in build and height. Because Jonathan loved David as his own soul, he wished him to appear as his equal, dressed as became a prince and equipped with appropriate weaponry.

David and Jonathan were undoubtedly kindred spirits. They were young, energetic and active on behalf of Israel, eager to confront the foe, motivated by faith in God, willing to take the initiative against the enemy and were granted outstanding victories over the Philistines.

Favour withdrawn

David's favour in Saul's eyes was short-lived. As the women came out of the cities to greet the king and his warriors returning from the battle with the Philistines and to celebrate the death of Goliath, they ascribed the slaughter of ten thousands to David and mere thousands to Saul. Saul's jealousy was immediately aroused for he had a mean, selfish and suspicious nature. The very next day, as David played the harp to banish Saul's mental unrest, far from appreciating David's efforts, he threw the javelin which he had in his hand at him, hoping to impale him and pin him to the wall. We must beware of uncontrolled jealousy for it can lead on to murder or attempted murder. We are warned, in the Song of Solomon 8:6, that 'jealousy is cruel as the grave'. Saul then removed David from the court and sought to make him a target for the Philistines by appointing him as a captain in his army and by sanctioning his marriage to his daughter Michal. He 'became David's enemy continually' (1 Sam. 18:29).

Jonathan pleads for David

Saul then instructed Jonathan and all his servants to kill David. Jonathan's love for David prompted him to warn David of his danger. He advised David to stay that night in a secret hideout in the field. Meanwhile, he would sound out his father regarding his friend and communicate his findings to him. Jonathan spoke well of David to his father and used some very cogent arguments on his behalf. David had not sinned against the king, never disobeyed his orders and never showed the slightest wish to depose him from his throne. If his father sinned against him, he would be returning evil for all the good David had done in his service. He had risked his life and slain the giant, and the Lord through him had accomplished a great deliverance for Israel which Saul initially had witnessed with great rejoicing. If David were to be slain without due reason,

innocent blood would be shed and God would not hold the king guiltless. Saul listened to Jonathan's wise arguments and solemnly vowed that David would not be put to death. Jonathan took Saul at his word, called David out of hiding and escorted him back to the palace. There he resumed his place in the court in the presence of the king. Thus Jonathan, a true friend in a time of need, effectively interceded on David's behalf, was instrumental in preserving his life for a time and in restoring him to his former position. How much more effectively the Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, intercedes on our behalf, as He pleads the infinite merit of His blood and His perfect all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. He has entered 'into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us' (Heb. 9:24). There, as our blessed Mediator, He presents the prayers of His people to His Heavenly Father. 1 John 2:1 assures us that 'if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. He 'ever liveth to make intercession for us' (Heb. 7:25).

Another attempt on David's life

War broke out once more with the Philistines, Israel's ancient and unrelenting foes. David fearlessly went out against them, slew them with a great slaughter and caused them to flee. Saul's jealousy was stirred again because of David's triumph in the battle and the praise heaped upon him by the Israelites. He sat moping in the palace as the evil spirit sent by God troubled him once more. David played the harp to distract the king and dispel his gloomy thoughts. He did not consider it beneath his dignity to perform this humble service. Saul was holding his javelin in his hand as he had done on a previous occasion. Again he violently hurled it, in an attempt to pierce David through and spike him to the wall. Nimbly and swiftly, David avoided the danger and the javelin thudded harmlessly past. Saul's oath had meant nothing to this wicked king. He had men watch David's house to kill him in the morning, but his wife Michal contrived his escape by letting him down through a window and delayed any pursuit by pretending that he was ill in bed, when she had merely placed an image there. However, David had different plans for the new day. Psalm 59, written on this occasion, records David's intentions for the morning: 'I will sing of thy power; yea I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: for thou hast been my defence and refuge in the day of my trouble' (v. 16). David fled to Samuel and they dwelt together at Naioth. Saul sent three sets of messengers to Naioth to capture David, but God confounded his efforts by causing the messengers to prophesy and when he himself went to Naioth he began to prophesy too.

David seeks out Jonathan

While Saul was engaged in prophesying all that day and all that night as well, David seized the opportunity to flee from Naioth and seek a meeting with Jonathan. He simply wanted to find out why his father was persecuting him and seeking to kill him. Had he done something to cause him offence? Was he guilty of some heinous crime of which he was unaware? It is, however, an indisputable fact that wicked men do not need logical or valid reasons to devise and carry out their wicked plans.

Jonathan refused to believe that his father was intent on slaying David. He emphatically and categorically stated, 'It is not so' (1 Sam. 20:2). He was convinced that Saul would have confided in him if this had been his base design. David countered Jonathan's firmly held opinion by stating that Saul well knew how his son favoured him and did not wish to cause him needless grief by informing him of his plan to kill his beloved friend. Jonathan believed that David was mistaken, in spite of the fact that Saul had earlier instructed him and all his servants to kill David (1 Sam. 19:1)! At that time, Jonathan had passed on this information to David, undertook to speak to his father on his behalf and obtained a temporary reprieve. He must have thought that he had succeeded in thoroughly persuading the king to abandon his murderous intentions. David, however, remained convinced of his imminent danger and rightly maintained that there was but a step between him and death (1 Sam. 20:3). He confirmed this by saying it was as certain as the fact that the Lord lived. Jonathan promised to do whatever David desired. In like manner, the Lord has promised to do whatsoever we desire in prayer. 'If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it' (John 14:14).

The feast of the new moon

At the beginning of every month, to celebrate the new moon, special sacrifices were offered in Israel and a feast was kept. David knew that he would be expected to eat at the king's table. He asked Jonathan to let him go and hide in the field until the third day. If Saul noted his absence, Jonathan was to explain that David had asked for permission to go to Bethlehem to keep the feast with all his family members. If Saul accepted this explanation, all would go well for David, but if he flew into a rage then the king was unquestionably planning evil against him. David asked Jonathan to deal kindly with him in view of the covenant they had made with each other, but if any iniquity were found in him to kill him out of hand rather than deliver him to Saul.

Far from suspecting David of any behaviour worthy of death, Jonathan assured him that if he knew for certain that his father intended evil against him, he would certainly let him know. David asked who would tell him and what would happen if the king answered him roughly, for it might not be safe for his friend to tell him in person. Jonathan suggested that they go out into the field where they could discuss the matter more fully and more privately.

Jonathan uttered his words before the Lord, deeply conscious that 'all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do' (Heb. 4:13). He promised that when he had ascertained Saul's attitude to David at any time in the course of the three-day feast, he would communicate his findings to him. If Saul's intentions were good and he failed to let David know, then God's judgment should rightly fall upon him. On the other hand, if Saul did indeed intend evil against David, he would inform him and send him away from the threat of danger. Already, despite Jonathan's genuine love for his friend David, he had no intention of sharing his hardships and sorrows. He desired that David would show kindness not only to him while he lived but also to his descendants, especially after God had cut off all David's enemies, something he obviously expected. So he made a covenant with David, enlarged to include not only himself but his posterity and caused him to swear once more, because he was as dear to him as his own soul and he wished their affectionate relationship to continue. God's people are likewise always anxious to have God's promises confirmed to them and to their family.

Jonathan's stratagem

When the three days of the feast were ended, David was to go to his previous hideaway and remain by the stone Ezel. To avoid suspicion, Jonathan would go out, armed with his bow and arrows and accompanied by a lad. He would shoot three arrows at the side of the stone as if aiming at a target. He would then send the lad to gather up the arrows. If he told the lad that the arrows were on this side of him, David could come as all was well. If, on the contrary, he told him the arrows were beyond him, he was to go his way for the Lord had sent him away. Jonathan's plan was motivated by his love for David and his desire to protect him.

David's seat is empty

On the first day of the feast, Saul noted David's absence, but thought he was unclean and debarred by the ceremonial law from partaking of the peace of-

ferings. On the second day, Saul enquired of Jonathan the reason for David's absence. Jonathan told him that David had asked his permission to go back home as his brother had commanded him to attend the family sacrifice. Saul then launched into a violent tirade of abuse against Jonathan in the presence of the assembled guests. He told him that as long as the son of Jesse lived, neither he nor his kingdom would be established. He commanded his son to fetch David for he must surely die. When Jonathan objected, his father cast a javelin at him as he had previously done on three occasions when he had targeted David. Note that when we stand alongside the Lord Jesus Christ, our coming King, and defend His cause, we will undoubtedly share in His suffering and reproach and the enmity of the ungodly.

Jonathan is convinced of Saul's base intentions

Jonathan was now persuaded that Saul purposed to kill David. He left the table in fierce anger, distressed for his friend's sake. The next morning, Jonathan put his agreed plan into action. When he shot three arrows and cried to the lad who accompanied him that the arrow was beyond him, it was the prearranged signal to David that his life was in danger and he must flee. The lad was dismissed and sent back to the city with his master's bow and arrows. Used to the vagaries of royalty, he was unaware of anything unusual. When he was gone from the field, David emerged from his hiding place, fell on his face and bowed three times in recognition of Jonathan's status as prince of the house of Saul and also in acknowledgement of his much-needed help. The two friends kissed each other and wept together. David outwept Jonathan as he felt the parting of the ways more keenly and had more to lose: his family, his wife and the comfort of attendance at God's house, not to mention the companionship of his beloved friend. Jonathan told him to go in peace because of the covenant they had made which secured their continued friendship and their goodwill to their respective families. David then departed to seek refuge as a lonely exile and outlaw. One cannot but think of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head' (Matt. 8:20). David was certainly following in what would be the future footsteps of his Lord and Saviour. Meanwhile Jonathan returned to the city of Gibeah. His loyalty to his father and the comforts of the palace outweighed his affection for his friend.

As he fled from Saul's murderous intents, David came to Ahimelech, the priest in Nob and asked for bread and a spear or sword. Ahimelech duly supplied

him with bread and Goliath's sword. For helping David in this small way, he and the priests of Nob, eighty-five persons in all, were slain and all the inhabitants of Nob, regardless of age or gender, were brutally killed at Saul's behest. They paid dearly with their lives for helping David.

It is noteworthy that Jonathan sent David away without either provisions or weapons. Indeed we never read of him succouring David or his men, as Abigail, the Carmelites freely did. However, his chosen pathway that day was to end in eventual and inevitable disaster, while David's path ended ultimately in his occupying the throne of Israel, as Christ's lonely pathway of suffering and shame ended in His sitting down with His Father on His throne.

Above thine own ambitions here
Another voice is sounding clear;
It is the call of God to thee:
O leave thy all, and follow me!

The call of God, it is so clear,
But friendships call, and home is dear;
Ah, lonely was the path He trod,
Then wilt thou not go through with God?
Noel Grant

The cave of Adullam

David sought refuge first with Achish, king of Gath, in the land of the Philistines, but Achish's subjects remembered the praises heaped on David after his victory over Goliath and objected strongly to his presence. He feigned insanity and escaped speedily to the cave of Adullam. Adullam was a royal city in Canaan, one of the thirty-one conquered by Joshua as recorded in Joshua 12:15. It became part of Judah's inheritance (Joshua 15:35) and was situated in the valley of Elah quite close to the spot where Goliath fell down slain and thirteen miles west of Bethlehem. A nearby hill, just over 150 metres high, is perforated by numerous caverns, some of which are capable of holding 200-300 men. Paul, writing of the great worthies of faith in Hebrews 11:38, gives honourable mention to those who 'wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.'

Many resorted to David in the cave of Adullam. His brethren and all his father's house joined him there, as did Abiathar the priest, sole survivor of Saul's

unjust slaughter of the priests of Nob. His cousins Joab, Abishai and Asahel, all of them mighty men, rallied to support his righteous cause. It is hardly surprising that these warriors who arrived first were the first to be mentioned in the roll of honour which listed the names of David's mighty men. However, it is a sad fact that, among those who sought out David in the cave of Adullam, no mention is made of Jonathan, the son of Saul.

On the whole, David's companions were anything but the elite of society. They formed a ragtag band of some 400 men which later increased in number to 600. All who found themselves in distress, in debt or discontent with their lot in life were drawn to the cave and were welcomed by David. They remind us of those needy souls who are drawn to the Saviour, for 'not many mighty, not many noble, are called . . . but God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen' (1 Cor. 1:26-28). What a welcome the sinner receives when he comes to the Saviour! His burdens are lifted, his distresses no longer weigh heavily upon him and he discovers with great joy that the debt of sin he owes to God has been discharged in full by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Under David's leadership, his supporters soon formed a disciplined body of fighting men, a force to be reckoned with, as the Philistines and others discovered to their cost. Remember that when we are saved, we are enlisted in the Lord's army and must learn to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3). We must 'put on the whole armour of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil' (Eph. 6:11). We continuously battle against our malicious enemy the devil and war constantly to gain the victory over sin and self.

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Since I must fight if I would reign,
Increase my courage, Lord!
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.

Isaac Watts

David's wilderness wanderings

After going to Mizpeh in Moab, where, as a loving and dutiful son, he placed his aged parents under the protection of the Moabite king to preserve them from the vengeful fury of king Saul, David was told by the prophet Gad to return to the land of Judah. It is noteworthy that Jewish believers will one day find shelter from Antichrist's persecutions by fleeing to the mountains, probably those of Moab, which will not be under the false Christ's rule. We read in Daniel 11:41, 'He (the Antichrist) shall enter also into the glorious land, and many countries shall be overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon.' These three Biblical countries are now incorporated into the country of Jordan.

Pursued constantly by Saul, who consequently neglected his royal duties of defending and ruling his people, David had to seek out strongholds in the various wildernesses of the land of Judah. David's pathway to the throne led through the wilderness, as did Israel's journey to the Promised Land. We would be very wrong to expect otherwise in our pilgrimage to glory. Many trials and afflictions await us in this life. 'We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). Like David we are pursued by an implacable enemy, the devil, who like Saul is relentless in his attempts to cause us to stumble and fall into his snares. In the wilderness, God tries us as gold is tried, and we prove God to be all that the Bible declares Him to be. The wilderness experience soon sorts out the genuine metal from the dross.

It's not an easy road we are travelling to heaven,
For many are the thorns on the way;
It's not an easy road but the Saviour is with us,
His presence gives us joy every day.

It's not an easy road; there are trials and troubles,
And many are the dangers we meet;
But Jesus guards and keeps so that nothing can harm us,

And smooths the rugged path for our feet.

J.W. Peterson

David at Keilah

Instructed by God and promised victory through the good offices of Abiathar the priest, David, the king-in-waiting, smote the pillaging Philistines at Keilah and delivered its inhabitants from their most bitter enemies. Abiathar, on again enquiring of God, informed David that the ungrateful men of Keilah were intent on handing him over to Saul, despite his fulfilling the kingly duty of defending them and defeating their enemies when Saul had totally failed. David, ever the fugitive, left Keilah to seek refuge in a wood in the wilderness of Ziph. Note that David had Abiathar the priest to counsel him and teach him the mind of the Lord, while Saul who had not only slain eighty-five priests by the hand of Doeg the Edomite, but had also killed the men, women, children, and livestock in Nob their city, had no such priest to guide him. Samuel the prophet had also left him to follow his own wicked devices. When Saul heard that David had escaped from Keilah and eluded him, he abandoned his plan to besiege the city and capture David.

Jonathan, having intelligence of David's whereabouts, left his home in Gibeath and sought out David in the wood, in order to encourage him and strengthen him in his faith and hope. He assured him that Saul would never find him. To his credit, it is obvious that out of love and sympathy for his friend, he had no intention whatever of betraying him to his father, despite his continuing and inexplicable loyalty to him. He affirmed David's right to the throne of Israel, saying, 'Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee' (1 Sam. 23:17). Sadder words were never spoken than Jonathan's expression here of his expectation to be next unto King David, for it never transpired. It reminds us that we cannot reign with Christ unless we share in His reproach and suffer with Him. As we read in Romans 8:17, 'If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together'. Jonathan did not share in David's sufferings as a hunted fugitive in the wilderness, so he could never have a part in the glory of David's kingdom. However, victorious Christians can truly say, 'I shall be next' in relation to Christ. Rev. 3:21 promises that 'to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne'.

Jonathan is to be admired, nevertheless, for his willingness not only to give

David his own princely garments and bestow on him his weapons, but also to give up the throne without a quibble to him. Humanly speaking, as Saul's eldest son, he was the rightful heir and indeed had qualities which would have fitted him to occupy the throne. He was courageous and bold, noble and generous in his character. He was totally unlike his father who was mean, cowardly, tyrannical and vengeful and completely unfit to govern. We admire him also for championing David's cause in the royal court, despite Saul's bitter animosity and facilitating his return there. It was also his deep love and compassion for his friend that prompted him later to formulate the plan which enabled David to flee for his life. Love like faith is active and will produce fruit. Jonathan's love gave rise to many acts of kindness to David.

Despite his failure to accompany David in his days of exile and suffering, David never rebuked him, never forced him to leave his father, but welcomed and received him when he sought him out. How like the Saviour David was! The Lord never forces us into service for Him, but draws us with the cords of love and seeks to enable us by His grace to count all things but loss for His sake. Casting in our lot with the despised people of God, we are empowered to follow Him willingly. Whenever we seek Him out with our whole heart, even after times of neglecting and forgetting Him He graciously permits us to have sweet fellowship with Himself as David did with Jonathan.

Renewing the covenant

At this meeting in the wood in the wilderness of Ziph, Jonathan and David renewed their covenant before the Lord. They renewed their vows of love and tenderness one for the other. This is the third covenant that they made. How sweet and reassuring it is to loving hearts to have the pledges of mutual affection repeated and solemnly confirmed! In like fashion, we should often renew our vows of love and obedience to Christ.

High heaven that heard the solemn vow,
That vow renewed shall daily hear,
Till in life's latest hour I bow,
And bless in death a bond so dear.

P. Doddridge

What comfort we can repeatedly draw from the words of Scripture which cor-

roborate His everlasting and unfailing love for us who are but unworthy and undeserving sinners!

Jonathan returns home

After this sweet but brief interlude of loving fellowship, Jonathan left David and returned home to the royal court, to his wife and family. The two friends would never meet again. There can be no doubt that Jonathan was in the wrong place, as he served the interests of his father who was so consumed with bitter hatred and unrelenting hostility towards David, God's anointed king.

Jonathan cannot have been too happy in his father's service. He had cut himself off from the constant companionship of his beloved friend. He was conscious of God's withdrawal of blessing from the nation of Israel. He was all too aware that Saul was unfit to rule as king. At times, he was forced to take defensive action against the attacking Philistines, but he was too cowardly to confront the Philistines aggressively and deliver his people from their ancient enemies. Jonathan had twice been the victim of his father's murderous rage. Saul condemned him to die for tasting a little honey which God had not forbidden and would have carried out his sentence, had not the people saved Jonathan from death. When Jonathan sought to excuse David's absence from Saul's feast, his father hurled a javelin at him to smite him. Life was not altogether easy for Jonathan. Life is never easy for those who fail to stand with God's anointed King.

A narrow escape

David's refuge in the mountain strongholds of the wood of Ziph was betrayed to Saul by the Ziphites. They were members of David's tribe, the tribe of Judah, and to their shame, showed great disloyalty to David. Saul instructed the treacherous Ziphites to scrutinise the area more carefully and when they had accurate intelligence to return to him and he would accompany them. In the Providence of God, this delay on the part of Saul gave David an opportunity to escape to the wilderness of Maon which lay further to the south. However, Saul heard this and followed him there. He and his soldiers surrounded David and his band and were on the point of capturing them, for only a mountain separated the two companies. God intervened again to deliver David and his men. How good it is to have a God Who intervenes on behalf of His people to protect and deliver them in trouble! At the very moment of David's immediate

peril, news came to Saul that the Philistines had invaded the land and he had to abandon his pursuit of David and deal with Israel's real enemies.

Engedi

David then sought shelter in the wilderness of Engedi close to the Dead Sea. It was an inhospitable, barren place with great rocks and precipices inhabited by agile wild goats. There were large caves there which served as sheep-cotes where the flocks could rest in the heat of the day. Saul turned aside into one of these caves which would have been refreshingly cool and fell asleep. David and his men were hidden in the sides of the cave. They observed Saul coming through the narrow entrance, but he could not see them in the dark interior of the cave. David's men urged him to kill Saul when such a seemingly God-given opportunity presented itself. Seemingly God-given opportunities are not always given by God at all, but are the traps of the devil. David wisely refused and merely cut off the skirt of Saul's robe. Even this affront to Saul's dignity grieved David's tender conscience, but it served as proof that David had no intention of harming the king, for he could quite easily have slain him. Saul, being sound asleep, did not hear David's conversation with his men or notice the cutting off of the skirt of his garment. When he awoke, David followed him out of the cave, skirt in hand, and reasoned with him regarding his good intentions towards him. Saul began to weep, recognising that David had spared his life while he was intent on murdering him. He declared that he knew with all certainty that David would be king and that his kingdom would be established. Saul requested that David would swear by the Lord that he would not cut off his descendants which David willingly did. This promise David faithfully kept and as king of Israel entertained Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, continually at his table. Saul returned home, but David, knowing Saul's duplicity, did not throw caution to the winds, but he and his followers wisely returned to the safety of their rocky fortresses.

History repeats itself!

David went again into the wilderness of Ziph, but the Ziphites once more informed Saul of David's whereabouts. It is clear that when David returned to the stronghold at Engedi, he showed great wisdom in distrusting Saul's insincere repentance and crocodile tears, for Saul now pursued after him with an army of 3,000 chosen men. David, accompanied by Abishai, slipped quietly into Saul's military encampment by night. The king was fast asleep, as were

Abner his captain and all his soldiers, for the Lord had caused a deep sleep to fall upon them. Abishai urged David to let him smite Saul, but David did not permit this. He was content to leave the matter in God's hands as to whether He smote Saul directly, or his appointed day of death arrived or he perished in battle. This last eventuality was indeed a prophetic word! Abishai was told to fetch Saul's spear and the cruse of water from beside his bolster. From a distant hilltop, David addressed Abner and his army, asking why they had been so negligent in guarding the king, for one had come into the camp that night intent on destroying him. Only one because David did not harbour the same intentions as Abishai. He displayed the royal spear and cruse of water as proof of his claim. Saul once more acknowledged his sin and folly, invited David to return and promised he would not harm him. David asked for one of the young men to come and recover the king's spear which was in essence his royal sceptre. Saul returned to the palace, but David went his own way, for he could not rely on the word of such a fickle and unpredictable sovereign.

David leaves Israel

David had experienced so many narrow escapes and close calls that he felt he must inevitably perish at the hand of Saul. He resolved to make his escape into the land of the Philistines to the court of Achish, king of Gath. This time David was received without any protest as he was held in such disfavour in Israel and, on his request, was allocated the town of Ziklag, which actually was part of Judah's inheritance in Canaan, but had been taken over by the Philistines. Operating from Ziklag, David wiped out many enemy settlements and pretended to Achish that he had been attacking Israelites. Achish took David at his word and felt he would faithfully serve him for ever.

David had received so many answers to his prayers, as recorded in the Psalms, especially Psalms 54, 56, 57 & 59, and so many deliverances from death at the hands of Saul that one would think that his faith would not have wavered, but waver it did. He was wrong to flee to Gath and his flight resulted in his telling numerous lies and deceiving Achish who showed him some favour. We too can lose heart and faith in God, despite many tokens for good. Fresh trials and troubles, instead of presenting new opportunities to exercise faith in God, more often than not cause us to despair of God's help and intervention. Let us pray that God would be pleased to increase our faith and may we follow His leading in the paths of righteousness, undeterred by difficulty or danger.

Timely divine intervention

After David had spent over a year in the land of the Philistines, Israel's inveterate enemies, they mustered their forces once again to make war on God's people. Achish insisted that David and his men accompany him to the battle. David agreed, but God intervened to save David from such a dire situation. Fighting alongside the Philistines would have been a permanent blot on his escutcheon and made him unfit to be ruler over Israel. The enraged princes of the Philistines objected strongly to David's presence, fearing that he would seek reconciliation with Saul by slaying their soldiers. Achish was forced to send David back.

When David returned to Ziklag, he found it burned by the Amalekites and all the wives and children taken captive. His men were so grieved they talked of stoning David, but he 'encouraged himself in the LORD his God' (1 Sam. 30:6). He enquired of the LORD, Who told him to pursue the enemy and assured him that he would recover all. This he did for God's word cannot be broken. It is always wise to seek counsel of God and ask Him to direct our steps. When he returned to Ziklag he sent of the spoil taken by the Amalekites to the elders of Judah and his friends who had been a help to him in his wanderings.

Mount Gilboa

When the two armies joined battle, it was the Philistines who led the charge. The men of Israel fled the field and were slain in mount Gilboa, a mountain range overlooking the valley of Jezreel, where the Israelites had pitched their camp. The Philistines proved unrelenting in their pursuit of Saul and his three sons. They slew Jonathan and his two brothers. Saul was badly wounded by the archers and rendered unfit to fight or flee. Fearing the mockery and abuse of the Philistines and bereft of his three sons, he asked his armourbearer to draw his sword and run him through. Obviously the armour bearer had sheathed his sword and had ceased to fight and was preparing to flee. The armour bearer refused to carry out the king's order for he was afraid, afraid perhaps of being held to account for the death of the king. Regicide was a most serious criminal act, a crime which the Jewish leaders did not hesitate to commit when they secured the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, the King of the Jews.

Saul then took a sword and fell upon it and his armour bearer did likewise, following the bad example set by his master. Saul's dying moments were made even more bitter by witnessing the death of Jonathan, the heir to his throne, and two other sons of his royal house. He seemed to have had no thought of

eternity nor the need to prepare to meet God. All Saul's multitude of fighting men fell down slain. They had served Saul in his wicked persecution of David and now judgment fell upon the king and his army. Jonathan who alone was innocent of hostile intentions regarding David perished along with those who harboured such feelings. He was in the wrong place and company when he opted to serve king Saul instead of God's King, who should have been his master. Christians should beware of choosing to serve the interests of those who are totally opposed to Christ and His rule.

The Philistines not only slaughtered Saul's forces, but occupied the cities abandoned by the Israelites who fled when they heard reports of the outcome of the battle.

The next day the Philistines visited the battle field to strip the slain of their armour, valuables and raiment. They came upon the dead bodies of Saul and his three sons in Mount Gilboa where the army of Israel had fled from the battle and had perished. An Amalekite had already taken Saul's bracelet and crown. The Philistines beheaded Saul and his three sons and fastened their bodies to the wall of Bethshan in an ignominious public display. Saul's armour and head were paraded through Philistia in triumph and placed in the house of Ashtaroth and the temple of Dagon respectively. How the Philistines exulted in their triumph over Israel and praised their gods for their great victory! What an inglorious and humiliating defeat for Israel! What a shameful end for Jonathan!

Despite the enemy's efforts to humiliate Israel, the men of Jabesh-gilead who owed Saul a great debt of gratitude for rescuing them from the hand of the Ammonites in a decisive victory at the very beginning of his reign, took down their bodies, brought them to Jabesh, burnt them and buried their bones under a tree. David later pronounced a blessing upon them for their kindness, prayed that the LORD would show kindness to them and promised to requite them.

David's lament

David lamented with heartfelt sorrow over the death of Saul and his son Jonathan. He was greatly grieved because the Philistines had such cause to rejoice over the death of Israel's king and three of his heirs. David felt keenly the shame of Israel's defeat. Learning that Saul was badly wounded by the arrows of the Philistine bowmen, David commanded that the men of Judah should be instructed and become as expert in the skill of archery as their enemies. Thus

a worthwhile lesson was plucked from the ashes of Israel's ruin.

'How are the mighty fallen!'

A king is considered an ornament to his nation, one to be admired and honoured, along with the princes of the blood, scions of the royal house, but the beauty of Israel, her king, princes and nobles and her young warriors in the flower of their age had perished on the mountains of Gilboa. David's heart-rending lament is contained in 2 Samuel 1:19-27. He exclaimed in his great grief, 'How are the mighty fallen!' David did not want the news to be published and gloated over in the Philistine cities of Gath and Askelon. The thought of the women of these cities singing their songs of triumph hurt him to the depths of his being. He pronounced a curse on the mountains of Gilboa, declaring that no dew or rain should fall on them and no produce for the offerings flourish there. To this day, despite some efforts at farming activities and tree-planting, huge swathes of the mountain ridge remain bald with only a few scattered shrubs. Saul's shield, the shield of a mighty man, was cast aside there as a loathsome thing, as if Saul were not the anointed king. Jonathan's bow and Saul's sword had been instrumental in slaying many enemies. They were 'lovely and pleasant in their lives.' They had only one bone of contention between them and that was David. They fell together and were undivided in death, as Jonathan remained in close proximity to his father. They were 'swifter than eagles', hastening to answer the call of duty and 'stronger than lions' being valiant in combat. David called on the young women to weep over Saul who had clothed them in scarlet apparel embellished with golden ornaments. For the second time, he repeated the refrain: 'How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!'

David was heartbroken over Jonathan's death. His heart-rending grief was expressed in the words: 'O Jonathan.' We hear it also in his cry of anguish: 'I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan.' Jonathan had been very pleasant to David. No greater tribute could be paid to a friend than David's tribute to Jonathan: 'Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.' Jonathan's love for David was greater than a mother's love for her child or a wife's love for her husband. David's lament ended with another repetition of the words: 'How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished!'

Jonathan's choice

How did Jonathan end up among the dead on Mount Gilboa? He was affection-

ate, generous, courageous and bold, but he simply made the wrong choice. He was even willing to give up the throne of Israel in favour of his friend, David, but he was never given the opportunity. We can pride ourselves on what we will do for King Jesus at a later date and neglect our present service for Him. Trusting in God, Jonathan won a tremendous victory over the Philistines at the very beginning of Saul's reign, but we do not read of any further exploits of faith, for he did not fulfil his potential and early promise. Despite Samuel announcing that God had rejected Saul as king of Israel, rent the kingdom from him and given it to his neighbour, who was better than he was, Jonathan cast in his lot with Saul, all the while David was wandering in the wilderness and in the dens and caves of the earth. Better had it been for Jonathan if he had vowed as Amasai did, in 1 Chron. 12:18, 'Thine are we, David, and on thy side, thou son of Jesse: peace, peace be unto thee, and peace be to thine helpers; for thy God helpeth thee'. Jonathan stayed in Saul's company and he died in his company. It could not be otherwise. Let us stand with God's despised few. Who more despised than the Lord Jesus Christ? 'Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach' (Heb. 13:13). Despite the reproach of the world, He is worth living for and He is certainly worth dying for.

Chapter seven

THE RUNAWAY PROPHET

Scripture: Jonah 1-4

It is not only sinful, ungodly wretches like the runaway slave Onesimus, who are guilty of the dereliction of their duty and shamefully fail to meet their obligations. Prophets, ministers, evangelists and ordinary Christians can abandon their calling and run away from their God-given tasks. The prophet Jonah is a case in point.

A minor prophet

Jonah was fifth in the lineup of the twelve minor prophets who conclude the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures. These men were by no means minor regarding their message or ministry. They spoke the word of the Lord and that can never be minor or unimportant. They are given this name because their writings are brief in comparison with the major prophets. The book of Ezekiel, for example, comprises forty-eight chapters, whilst the book of Jonah has a mere forty-eight verses.

The prophet of Galilee

Jonah was a native of Gath-hepher, a town on the eastern border of the territory allotted to the tribe of Zebulun and situated about five miles from Nazareth in Lower Galilee. He was undoubtedly a Galilean. We cannot but remember the assertion of the Pharisees when Nicodemus sought to speak up on behalf of the Saviour: 'Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet' (John 7:52). They were completely wrong, of course, as they were about so many other important things. Christ could say of them as He did of the Sadducees. 'Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures' (Matt. 22:29). Jonah was without doubt a prophet, for we have the clear testimony of the Old Testament in 2 Kings 14:25 as to the fulfilment of his predictions of deliverance and recovery of territory for Israel by the mercy of God in the reign of Jeroboam II. We also have the testimony of Christ concerning him on three occasions when He told the enemies of the gospel that the only sign which they would receive was the

sign of the prophet Jonas, who had spent three days and three nights in the whale's belly, foreshadowing Christ's burial for the like number of days. (See Matt. 12:39-40; 16:4; Luke 11:29-30). On each occasion, the Lord referred to him as a prophet.

His field of service

Jonah ministered in a dark and difficult day in the northern kingdom of Israel, which was given over to the worship of the golden calves. This false and abominable form of worship persisted until the Assyrian captivity, despite the ministry of two most illustrious prophets, Elijah and Elisha and many others, who were vouchsafed in mercy to an unworthy and hardhearted people. Jonah witnessed for the truth in the reign of Jeroboam II who did evil in the sight of the Lord. What we are in the sight of the Lord is all-important. We can be right in our own eyes or in the eyes of others, but that avails nothing if we are sinful in God's sight. We need to have our sins cleansed away by the blood of the only Redeemer and to be viewed by God as fully clothed in the perfect righteousness of His Son.

Judgment and mercy unavailing

God's judgments and the loss of territory failed to humble the wicked king of Israel and his afflicted subjects. They persisted in their system of false worship. They clung tenaciously to the worship of the golden calves. Merciful providences had no impact on them either. Jonah had prophesied of victory at the hand of God and the restoration of their border regions which had been overrun by their enemies, especially their ancient enemies, the Syrians. God saw the affliction of Israel, pitied them in their distresses and fulfilled His word spoken by Jonah. God still acts in a similar fashion today. He sends affliction to turn our hearts to Him in repentance over sin and also mercies to draw us to Himself in grateful acknowledgement of His goodness. We could well repeat to rebellious sinners the question Paul posed, in Romans 2:4: 'Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?'

Jonah's commission

Like a thunderbolt from the blue, God's command came to Jonah to bestir himself, abandon his present occupations and go to the Tigris river valley to

the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. He was to cry out against its sin, for its wickedness had reached to high heaven and God could no longer ignore it. Jonah was not merely to send a written communication, but to go personally into the streets of the city and publicly denounce the sin of the inhabitants. Never underestimate the power of the preached Word. Even the king of Nineveh admitted the evil ways of his subjects and the violence of their hands (Jonah 3:8).

There is no doubt that Nineveh, situated on the east of the Tigris river, now part of the site of the modern city of Mosul, could justly be called great for it was a vast metropolis. It was once the largest city in the whole world. It took three days to walk right round the city (Jonah 3:3). Judging by the quantity of young children in the city, described as 120,000 who did not know their right hand from their left (Jonah 4:11), the citizens must have been numbered in hundreds of thousands. Its wealth was also great. Nahum the prophet, who foretold the ruin of Nineveh, spoke of its silver and gold and stated that 'there is none end of the store and glory' (Nah. 2:9). Sadly, it was a heathen city given over to the worship of the goddess Ishtar. There was no knowledge of God and not a single ray of gospel light in its whole dominion.

Jonah's assignment was unmistakably clear. It was the authoritative and unchangeable word of the Lord to Jonah. It was not man's word, but God's plain instruction to the prophet. He was told where he was to go and what he was to preach there. However, despite the fact that 'the king's business required haste' (1Sam. 21:8), Jonah was reluctant to fulfil his divinely appointed task. The Assyrians were the unrelenting enemies of Israel and Jonah was only too well aware that if he witnessed against their sin and warned them of coming judgment, they were likely to repent and God, in His great love and mercy, would forgive and spare them. We do not have to speculate for one moment about Jonah's reason for refusing to go to Nineveh, for he later addressed God in the following words: 'O LORD was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness and repenteth thee of the evil' (Jonah 4:2).

Jonah had been preaching in the northern kingdom of Israel and he had seen little or no success for his efforts. He would have preferred to see his fellow countrymen 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God' (1 Thess. 1:9) rather than the Ninevites. The men of Israel adamantly refused to forsake the worship of the golden calves and the false system of worship set

up by Jeroboam I with its non-Levitical priesthood and feasts on dates which were not instituted by God. Jonah rose up to go, but not to Nineveh. He determined to flee to Tarshish, far away from Israel and God Himself. He set off in the opposite direction to Nineveh, the direction in which God had pointed him. He should have known that he could not escape the presence and watchful eye of the all-seeing and omnipresent God. As David had said, in Psalm 139:7, 'Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?' Jonah would certainly have been aware of these words. We too should ever be mindful of them and the words found also in Psalm 139:2-4. 'Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.'

We read that Jonah went down to Joppa, a port on the western coast of Israel, more familiar to us now by its modern name of Jaffa, intending to take ship to Tarshish. The pathway of disobedience is always a downward path.

Apparent merciful providences

Jonah fled with the utmost haste, intending to go to Tarshish, a seaport which lay far across the Mediterranean Sea and at a considerable distance from Israel. Many of the circumstances surrounding his flight appeared to indicate God's favourable providences. Despite his haste, he safely completed the seventy mile journey from Gath-hepher to Joppa. When he arrived there, lo and behold there was a ship ready and waiting to sail to Tarshish, his chosen destination. The mariners were willing to give him passage and welcomed him aboard. He had enough money to pay the required fare. Everything seemed to be working in his favour. However, appearances can often be deceptive. We must beware of misinterpreting what seem to be favourable providences. They are not necessarily tokens of God's approval of our actions. They most definitely were not in Jonah's case. We must make God's Word our sole guide and compass. Jonah was not taking direction from the compass of God's Word and he was bound, sooner or later, to encounter disaster.

God pursues Jonah

Jonah was blissfully unaware that the Lord was pursuing him, His erring servant, and was hot on his heels. God sent out a great wind into the sea for all the elements are under His control and follow His bidding. He 'hath gathered the

wind in his fists' (Pro. 30:4). The psalmist speaks of the 'stormy wind fulfilling his word' (Psalm 148:8). As a result of God's great wind, which targeted the ship Jonah was sailing in, there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so mighty that the ship was in danger of breaking up. One moment the monstrous waves were lifting the ship to the height of the foaming crests, the next they were plunging it down suddenly to the depths of the troughs. A graphic description of a similar incident is recorded in the following verses in Psalm 107:23-31: 'They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!'

The storm was so violent and the peril so grave that these normally intrepid and highly experienced sailors were stricken and overcome with fear. This was no ordinary storm for these men were accustomed to the sea and to the most fearful Mediterranean storms and did not easily flinch in the face of danger. However, on this occasion, it seemed that shipwreck was inevitable and a watery grave awaited all the occupants of the boat. They began to cry every one on his god. There appeared to be as many gods worshipped as there were men on the ship, for many nations would have been represented among the crew and passengers. Man is a religious creature. He knows instinctively that there is a God to Whom he must pray, especially when he needs help in trouble. The sailors of Psalm 107 did this in the extremity of their fear and danger.

The mariners, receiving no answer or deliverance from their gods, who are, in truth, mere figments of man's imagination, did all they could to avert disaster. They heaved their precious cargo and stores overboard into the raging sea, for they deemed their lives much more precious than the gain they expected to make from the sale of their merchandise in the markets of Tarshish. The sailors in Acts 27 took the same action in a vain attempt to avoid shipwreck on their journey towards Rome with the apostle Paul on board. It was the same sea, a similar storm and the same tactics used by the sailors.

If physical life is more precious than earthly gain, how much more precious is

the life of the soul, which is of more value than the whole world. The Saviour asked the all-important question: 'For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' (Matt. 16:26). Men should part with anything, no matter how precious, to preserve the life of the soul.

Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below deck and was soon soundly asleep in the hold. Despite the vehement tumult of the howling wind and the thunderous roar of the surging waves, despite the loud and frantic prayers of the sailors and the other passengers, despite the commotion as the crew pounded the deck, running hastily to and fro casting out the cargo, despite the violent pitching and tossing of the ship, and the ominous creaking of its timbers, Jonah was totally oblivious of his imminent danger. He suffered absolutely no pangs of conscience. His disobedience of God's plain command caused him not one iota of guilt whatsoever. He was not only physically asleep, but spiritually asleep. The devil had turned him aside from the path of duty and then lulled him to sleep in a false sense of security.

'What meanest thou, O sleeper?' (v. 6)

Jonah was rudely awakened by the shipmaster. He did well to enquire why Jonah slept in the midst of such danger. He was the only man on board who could pray effectually for the safety of the ship and its crew and passengers, but he was not praying. He was surrounded by perishing souls and yet he slept. As with all sleeping saints who are unconscious of the need of hell-bound sinners, there are obvious reasons why Jonah slept. The terrible sin of disobedience to God's express command had resulted in a deadening effect on his mind and heart and caused the spirit of slumber to overpower him. He had yielded also to the selfish desires of the flesh. The flesh rebelled against the difficulties and dangers of a long journey to far-off Nineveh and abhorred the thought of God showing mercy to Israel's enemies. Such an attitude was conducive to spiritual sleepiness. Jonah had also surrounded himself with godless pagan idolaters. Such worldly company produced a total lack of concern for lost souls and drowsiness ensued. The devil of course had his part to play, for he loves nothing better than a slumbering watchman who fails to warn sinners of their need to repent and turn to God. These same factors: sin, the flesh, the world and the devil all play their part in reducing believers to a state of deathlike slumber. To be urged by an ungodly shipmaster, who was completely ignorant of the true God, to pray for deliverance must have been a source of deep shame to the

unfaithful prophet.

‘Awake thou that sleepest’ (Eph. 5:14)

We need to beware of such a state of spiritual slumber and be up and active in spreading the gospel while we have opportunity. We could well ask ourselves the same important question: ‘What meanest thou, O sleeper?’ Family members, our neighbours and friends are hastening on to a lost sinner’s hell as fast as time can take them and it does not seem to give us one anxious thought nor cause us to shed a single tear on their behalf. ‘We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace’ (2 Kings 7:9). May God grant us such a burden for perishing souls that sleepy complacency and inactivity will be banished for good! May we pray in the words of the following hymn:

I want an even strong desire,
I want a calmly fervent zeal,
To save poor souls out of the fire,
To snatch them from the verge of hell,
And turn them to a pardoning God,
And quench the brands in Jesus’ blood.

With sentiments like these, it is small wonder that Charles Wesley, the writer of this hymn, and his brother John were such successful evangelists. May God give us each one a like passion for souls!

Lots cast

It seems that the idea of casting lots occurred to all the sailors at one and the same time. They did not delay in voicing their opinion that this would be an excellent and foolproof way of discovering who was to blame for their present predicament. The lot fell on Jonah. It was all his fault. God had exposed him. These sailors, although heathens, recognised that judgment follows sin and does not fall without due cause for ‘the curse causeless shall not come’ (Pro. 26:2).

They then plied him with many questions as to the exact cause of the storm, his occupation, his country of origin and his nationality. He informed them that he was a Hebrew, thus identifying himself with the seed of Abraham who

‘confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth’ (Heb. 11;13). He feared and worshipped the God of heaven and earth, the living God Who had made the sea and the dry land. Was not this the very God they needed in their time of crisis, a God Who had power to control the sea and the raging elements which threatened to undo them? He also freely admitted that he had fled from the presence of the Lord, thus deserting his duty and his God. The men were afraid beyond measure, for if God dealt thus with His renegade servant, how could they possibly escape His judgment, for ‘judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?’ (1 Pet. 4:17).

The remedy revealed

The sailors enquired of Jonah, who was the self-confessed source of their distressing circumstances, what should be done to him in order to render the sea calm once more. Jonah, knowing that the great tempest had been sent on his account, told them to cast him overboard. It is to the credit of these hardened seafarers that they were unwilling to throw Jonah immediately into the seething waters. Man, even unregenerate man, despite his desperation, has a natural instinct to preserve life. They rowed with might and main to bring the ship to the shore, but their efforts were all in vain. They made no progress whatever against the mountainous waves. They cried earnestly, not now to their own gods but to the God of heaven, Whom the prophet Jonah had just revealed to them as the mighty Maker of heaven and earth, beseeching Him to spare their lives and not to count them guilty of shedding innocent blood. They acknowledged that God had acted as it pleased Him, for He is sovereign over all the affairs of men. They cast Jonah into the raging sea and immediately there was a great calm. The fury of the storm did not gradually begin to peter out, but the calm was instantaneous, for the Lord has perfect control of winds and waves. As a result of Jonah’s testimony, this demonstration of God’s power and their deliverance from shipwreck, the sailors ‘feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD and made vows’ (Jon. 1:16). Doubtless, they vowed to serve and worship Him only. Jonah who had refused to go to Nineveh to preach to Gentiles, lest they should repent and be saved, became the means of seeing these Gentile sailors ‘turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God’ (1 Thess. 1:9). How marvellous are the workings of Providence!

God did not abandon His disobedient servant, as He might well have done. He had prepared a great fish to swallow him up. It had its mouth opened wide to

receive him, as soon as he hit the water. He was to be imprisoned in the fish's belly for three days and three nights.

A downward spiral

It is interesting to note Jonah's downward progress as he fled from the presence of the LORD. The first stage of his downward flight was to leave the hill country of Gath-hepher and go down to the coastal plain of Joppa. Once in Joppa, he went down into a ship bound for Tarshish and then down into the hold where he fell fast asleep. Eventually, he was cast out of the ship and went down into the depths of the raging waters. The fish plunged to the very base of the mountains which rose from the ocean floor. Further down he could not go. The path of sin and disobedience to God is a downward road which leads to the very depths of hell. Further down the unrepentant sinner cannot go.

The LORD's doing

Jonah acknowledged that God had ordained all these events. In all the circumstances of life we should recognise the overruling Providence of God. He did not blame the mariners. It was God Who had cast him into the deep and caused all His waves and billows to pass over him. This took place as soon as he was cast into the sea and also continued after the fish swallowed him and carried him along in its belly down through the waters. It is clear that he was reminded of the psalmist's words in Psalm 42:7, 'Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.' These words, of course, have a distinct reference to the Saviour as all the waves and billows of God's wrath passed over Him in His sufferings on the cross of Calvary.

Jonah was hopeless and helpless. What would happen to him now? Would he ever reappear on earth amongst the living? Only a miracle of grace could save him. Can you imagine a more malodorous and claustrophobic prison? The fetid contents of the fish's stomach engulfed him. The weeds it had eaten were wrapped about his head.

Despair

Jonah's heart sank in deep despair. He felt he had been cast out of God's sight, the One Who had watched over him throughout his chequered career to protect him in all the changing circumstances and vicissitudes of life. He thought

there could never be any way of escape as the earth had enclosed him with her bars for ever. His very soul fainted within him as he contemplated his fearful predicament. He was convinced he was doomed to die. No one had ever encountered such circumstances before. He could not draw comfort from the experiences of others. In the depths of the stormy ocean, trapped in the dark and dank confines of the fish's belly, Jonah was brought to realise his lost and hopeless condition physically speaking. The sinner too must be brought to grasp the awful truth that he is totally and irremediably lost, far from God and bound for a Christless hell. God sometimes has to use extremely stern measures to bring a sinner to this point, just as He used exceptionally severe measures to persuade Jonah of the folly of his disobedience.

Hope

When the situation was as grim and the prospect as bleak as possible, then Jonah remembered the Lord and started to pray. He realised that 'salvation is of the LORD' (Jonah 2:9) alone. He was incapable of helping himself. He resolved to look again toward God's holy temple. He looked again to the altar where victims were slain and their blood was shed as a foreshadowing of Christ's death on the cross in the place of sinners. He could receive forgiveness and cleansing from his sin by virtue of the merit of Christ's blood to be out-poured for sinners at Calvary. He looked again to the mercy seat and the blood of sprinkling, where God had promised to answer prayer. As John Newton wrote in his well-known hymn:

Approach, my soul, the mercy seat,
Where Jesus answers prayer;
There humbly fall before His feet,
For none can perish there.

Jonah was assured that God had heard his prayer. It had ascended to the very throne of heaven. He concluded that those who 'observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy' (Jonah 2:8). Those who worship idols which are the 'lying vanities' Jonah refers to, will not find mercy. However Jonah himself had observed the lying vanities of his own heart when he deserted his post and ran away from God. Mistakenly, as so many do, he felt he could outwit and outrun God. Isa. 44:20 is a verse that springs to mind: 'He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is

there not a lie in my right hand?’

Knowing that God had heard his prayer, Jonah believed that God would most certainly deliver him, for ‘if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him’ (1 John 5:15). He demonstrated his faith by immediately planning to offer sacrifices to God with thanksgiving and to pay his vows of consecration and service to God. This he could do only on dry land.

As soon as he was restored to fellowship with God, Who is the Creator and ruler of all His creatures, God commanded the fish to regurgitate Jonah. The fish instantly complied and deposited Jonah safely on dry land. Is this not the manner of our God? He did not leave Jonah in the midst of the sea in imminent danger of drowning, but in a place of safety. He acted likewise in the case of the Syro-Phenician woman’s daughter. He cast out the devil that possessed her and the mother returned home to find her daughter laid safely upon the bed (Mark 7:25-30). It is noteworthy that the fish obeyed God immediately, whilst intelligent human beings so often disobey Him.

Sin depicted

The account of Jonah’s dereliction of duty to God and man is a remarkable portrayal of our own sinful nature and our disobedience of God. Jonah, in stubborn and self-willed defiance, disobeyed the plain command of God. We are as guilty of disobedience as he was. We are all sinners not only by nature, but also by practice and choice. We constantly defy and disobey God’s holy law. Which of the ten commandments have we not broken over and over again? Instead of serving God we have served the gods of pleasure, leisure activities, education, career, business and sport, to name but a few. While millions throughout the whole world are guilty of worshipping visible graven images, we all have set up invisible idols in our hearts. We have also taken His holy name in vain, desecrated the sabbath day by neglecting His worship and doing our own pleasure and we have also dishonoured our parents. We have become guilty of murder, if not by actual deed, by allowing anger and hatred toward our fellowman to fester in our hearts (Matt. 5:21-22). In a similar fashion, we also have become guilty of adultery by entertaining unclean and lustful thoughts (Matt. 5:28). We have taken that which is not rightfully ours from others, be it from our employers, by wasting work hours or making unpaid phone calls, and worst of all we have robbed God of His tithes, His dues of love, worship and unquestioning obedience. Have we not lied repeatedly, not

only by the falsehoods we have constantly uttered but also by pretence and deception? We have lied in the very presence of God by pretending to praise Him and pay attention to His Word. God has declared His verdict on man's dishonesty: 'The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies' (Psa. 58:3). Covetousness has often filled and ruled our hearts. We all stand accused before the holy law of God. We would not be in the least aware of our sin if God had not given us the ten commandments. 'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ' (Gal. 3:24). It teaches us our need of a Saviour.

Man's opinions

Jonah thought he knew better than God and was guided by his own foolish opinions and ideas. How often do we hear the unconverted voice their view that they are good enough to enter heaven, that they are as good as the next one and that their own good works are sufficient to merit them a place in heaven? They reject the gospel of a Saviour Who bled and died to secure heaven for sinners, by bearing their 'sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24). Dear reader, please stop for a moment and ask yourself why the Lord Jesus came down to earth, to endure the unimaginable agonies of death by crucifixion at Calvary, if you by a few good works could earn your own way to heaven.

O why was He there as the Bearer of sin,
If on Jesus thy guilt was not laid?
O why from His side flowed the sin-cleansing blood,
If His dying thy debt has not paid?

A. M. Hull

Heed the words of Galatians 3:21 which read: 'If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law'. If any such law could have been given, surely God, in His infinite wisdom, would have devised such a law and spared His Son the pain and suffering of the cross. No, it is 'not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us' (Titus 3:5). Man must forsake his own theories and obey the clear instructions God has given us in His Word about the only way to heaven.

Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Ghost must have worked mightily in Jonah's heart to cause him to remember the Lord and, in consequence, to lift up his eyes towards heaven. So too must He work effectually in the sinner's heart to cause him to look away from self and look to the Lord alone for salvation. Has God not told us emphatically, in Isaiah 45:21-22, 'There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else'? Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers who saw thousands converted through his ministry in London and further afield was saved through that text. He said later of his conversion: 'Anyone can look. Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away'. O that you too would look today to the only One Who has power to save the soul from sin and eternal death!

There is life for a look at the Crucified One,
There is life at this moment for thee,
Then look, sinner, look unto Him and be saved,
Unto Him who was nailed on the tree.

A. M. Hull

A glorious realisation

Jonah looked to the Lord for deliverance because he had come to realise that 'salvation is of the LORD' (Jonah 2:9). Helpless to save himself, he would have perished at the bottom of the ocean and the fish would have become his unmarked grave. O that this same realisation of utter helplessness and inevitable doom would dawn on the sinner and cause him to look to the Lord and be saved!

Did Jonah look in vain? No, that could never, never be, for God is true to His promise. Once he looked to the Lord, the Lord immediately spoke to the fish and it ejected Jonah from its stomach and dropped him safely on dry land. Once we cry on God, salvation is instantaneous.

Isn't it a glorious truth that we can pray anywhere and in any circumstances and God will hear us? 'He hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from heaven did the LORD behold the earth; to hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death' (Psa. 102:19-20).

A remarkable parallel

Not only is Jonah's descent into the stormy waves of the Mediterranean Sea a picture of Christ being engulfed by the waves and billows of God's wrath against sin, but his entombment in the fish's belly is an illustration of Christ's burial in the sepulchre hewn out in the rock with its exit blocked by a huge stone. The Lord Jesus said, in Matthew 12:40, that 'as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'. Escape from both these situations seemed absolutely impossible. But as Jonah was delivered from the depths of the ocean and appeared again among men on the earth, so Christ was brought again from the dead and was seen by many witnesses to have risen indeed. Thus the record of Jonah's experiences is a vivid illustration of Christ's death, burial and resurrection.

After being delivered and set down safely on dry land, Jonah was sent to preach to the Gentiles and saw many heed God's warning of coming judgment, repent of their wicked ways and find mercy and salvation. In like fashion, after Christ rose from the dead, He sent forth His servants to preach the gospel of saving grace to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Many were disinclined to share the glorious news of the gospel with the Gentiles, but their scruples were overcome and the gospel spread like wildfire through the Gentile nations.

A lesson learned

God commanded Jonah a second time to 'Arise go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee' (Jonah 3:1-2). God's command had not changed, for His Word and purpose are unchanging and unchangeable. Jonah had to preach God's message, not something of his own devising which he might have thought more suitable for the citizens of Nineveh. It is man's solemn duty to bow to the authority of the Scriptures. We cannot alter, twist or tamper with God's Word to please ourselves or others. Paul exhorted young Timothy to 'preach the word; be instant in season, out of season' (2 Tim 4:2). Paul could say of his own ministry, without fear of contradiction, when bidding farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, 'I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house' (Acts 20:20). Ezekiel was told repeatedly that he had to declare God's message whether the people would hear or forbear (Ezek. 2:4-5). A faithful minister must preach the preaching that God bids him (v. 2).

A second opportunity

God was merciful in giving Jonah a second opportunity to fulfil his commission. Did He not show like favour to John Mark who set out to accompany and assist Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey? They reached Cyprus and then sailed to Perga in Pamphylia where John Mark deserted them and returned home to Jerusalem. He 'went not with them to the work' (Acts 15:38). However, we read of him later with Paul at Rome (Col. 4:10), with Peter in Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13) and with Timothy at Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:11). Indeed Paul asks Timothy when he visits him in Rome to 'take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry'. The unprofitable servant had later become profitable and useful to God and man. Like Jonah, he was given a second opportunity to serve the Lord. Failures can be repented of and the backsliding servant forgiven and reinstated in his office. Men may write off such as Jonah or John Mark but God never does. 'So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD' (Jonah 3:3). He obeyed God's command to the letter. He did not murmur or complain or even think of running away. His strange punishment and extraordinary deliverance had reduced him to submissive obedience. Like the psalmist, he could well say, 'Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word' (Psalm 119:67).

Jonah in Nineveh

Nineveh was such a vast city that it required three whole days to travel round it on foot. Thus it was 60 miles in circumference. Immediately on his arrival, Jonah entered a day's journey into the city. He did not stop to admire the buildings and special features or to observe the customs and attire of the citizens. He did not rest or refresh himself before beginning to deliver God's message of impending doom. It was not an easy message to deliver. It certainly would not please or tickle the ears of those who heard it. But Jonah delivered his God-given message faithfully. He did not water it down or try to make it more palatable. He spoke the unvarnished truth and warned the Ninevites that their great city would be destroyed after forty days. God in unfathomable mercy always gives men space to repent. His message of coming judgment is designed to promote repentance in the sinner and thus secure forgiveness and pardon for the penitent. Jonah lifted up his voice and loudly proclaimed God's threatened judgment. In Isaiah 58:1, the prophet is instructed to 'cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgres-

sion'. What Isaiah did in Israel, Jonah did in Assyria. Like a herald going out into the streets of a city to proclaim an important royal decree, so Jonah went out into the highways and byways of Nineveh to proclaim a much more urgent message from the King of kings.

A testimony to God's judgment

Jonah was a living example of God's judgment on sinful disobedience and disregard of God's commands. While he was making the long, toilsome journey to Nineveh, mariners and merchants had opportunity to carry reports of Jonah's experiences which were so remarkable that they would have been widely broadcast. There can be little doubt also that he would have been scarred by the stomach acid of the great fish. Jonah's experience would have served as an effective warning to all those in Nineveh who lived in continual daily defiance of God and His laws. The marks of his sufferings under the judgment of God could not have failed to make a deep impression on the Ninevites. Likewise a view of Christ suffering under the judgment of God as the sinner's Substitute, 'wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities' (Isa. 53:5) and bearing the marks of Calvary, exercises a profound and powerful impact on the sinful heart, producing repentance and remorse over sin. Many a hardened and wicked heart has been melted and broken by a sight of the crucified Saviour as John Newton was. This hymn tells his story.

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object met my sight
And stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree
In agonies and blood,
Who fixed His loving eyes on me,
As near His cross I stood.

My conscience felt and owned my guilt,
And plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins His blood had shed
And helped to nail Him there.

Thus while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too.

O can it be, upon a tree
The Saviour died for me?
My soul is thrilled, my heart is filled
To think He died for me!

Belief in God's Word

The citizens of Nineveh believed that the destruction of their city which God had pronounced would most certainly take place. They humbled themselves greatly before God. Faced by the threatened catastrophe which would shortly overtake them, they proclaimed a universal fast, laid aside their normal garments and all without exception clothed themselves with sackcloth, 'from the greatest of them even to the least of them' (Jonah 3:5). Fasting and the wearing of sackcloth were a sign of mourning and this wicked people began to mourn over their sin as they had never done before.

Would God that sinners, upon hearing that eternal hell is the portion of the unrepentant, would mourn over their sin and humble themselves under the mighty hand of God. Instead, too many lightly reject the plain warnings of God's Word, ignore the sermons of faithful gospel preachers and daringly mock at the idea of everlasting damnation. The Lord Jesus warned the unbelieving Jews that the men of Nineveh would rise up in judgment to condemn them and bear witness against them, for they had repented at the preaching of Jonah and yet a greater prophet than Jonah had come to Israel (Matt. 12:41).

Jonah's message of God's coming judgment penetrated right into the royal palace. When it reached the ears of the king, he abandoned his throne, exchanged his magnificent robes for a covering of rough sackcloth and sat in ashes. He and his nobles made a decree which was published throughout the entire city that no man or animal, no herd of cattle or flock of sheep were to eat or drink or even to taste anything. A universal cry went up to heaven from both man and beast. Job 38:41 reminds us that the young ravens cry unto God, Who provides their food when they wander for lack of meat. Do not 'the young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God?' (Psalm 104:21).

Every man and every animal were to be covered in coarse sackcloth. They were to engage in earnest prayer and cry mightily unto God. The people were urged to turn from their evil way and from the violence of their hands. The king freely admitted the wickedness of his subjects. Sin needs to be confessed and put away before God will answer our prayers. There was need for a deep and genuine repentance, for if we regard iniquity in our heart, the Lord will not hear us (Psalm 66:18). None could tell if perhaps God in sovereign grace would turn away from His fierce anger and spare the city. They dared not presume, but this heathen king encouraged his people to hope in the possibility of God's mercy. They did not depend on their fasting, prayers or the wearing of sackcloth for deliverance, but looked to the living God alone and not to any of their false gods.

God's response

'God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way' (Jonah 3:10). True repentance will always show itself in works that can be seen by God and man. Did not John the Baptist urge his hearers to 'bring forth . . . fruits worthy of repentance' (Luke 3:8)? The Ninevites demonstrated genuine repentance and God rescinded the sentence of the total destruction of their city. 'He did it not' (Jonah 3:10).

Sinners can escape the justly threatened doom of an eternity in hell by repenting of their sin and receiving Christ by faith as their Saviour. These Ninevites were delivered from wrath to come by simply looking to God and casting themselves upon His mercy, just as Jonah himself had done. They were not disappointed and neither will the sinner find it vain to seek the LORD for forgiveness.

Jonah's response

Was Jonah pleased by this outcome? He most definitely was not. He was greatly displeased and very angry. He would have been exuberant with joy if God had destroyed the city and thus wiped out the enemies of Israel. He would have been much better pleased if Israel had listened to his preaching and the warnings of the numerous prophets, including Elijah and Elisha, whom God had graciously sent to the northern kingdom of Israel to turn them from their sin and idolatry. Thus the blessing of God would have been secured for the nation, but sadly, their messages had fallen largely on deaf ears.

Jonah had rightly suspected that the outcome of his mission to Nineveh would be the forgiveness of its citizens, for he well knew that God was gracious, merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness and would countermand His threatened judgment, if evidence of repentance were forthcoming. Indeed, had he not said so before he fled to Tarshish, wishing to withhold the opportunity of obtaining sparing mercy from the Ninevites? Any other missionary or preacher would have been elated at the success of his mission and rejoiced in God's great mercy to undeserving sinners. But not so Jonah. He was completely dispirited and disconsolate, feeling that death was a preferable option to life and desiring that God would put an end to his wretched existence.

His thinking was completely at odds with heaven's attitude, for the Lord Jesus Christ stated clearly, in Luke 15:7, that 'joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth'. He also repeated the same truth in Luke 15:10, emphasising the fact that 'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth'. How out of tune Jonah's heart was with God's attitude! He had not just one convert to rejoice over but a great multitude. How perverse and fractious his attitude was! Although Jonah acted very wrongly in being so out of temper due to God's merciful dealings with Nineveh and addressing God in such an irreverent and provoking fashion, the Lord very gently and mildly reproved the petulant prophet, asking him if he did well to be angry. That question was clearly designed to make Jonah consider His ways. We would do well to ask ourselves the same question when tempted to unseemly anger or actions. We would discover the power of God's probing word to quench our indignation and quell our ill temper.

A gourd prepared

Still in ill humour, despite the Lord's reproof, Jonah then left Nineveh and sat on the east side of the city. There he constructed a makeshift booth, in an effort to provide himself with some shade from the burning rays of the sun. He was waiting to see what would happen to the city, hoping perhaps that God would yet send judgment upon it. The Lord was not at all swayed by Jonah's whims or his inappropriate anger, but in merciful kindness took steps to alleviate his misery and improve his attitude and state of mind. His booth was obviously unfit for purpose and failed to provide adequate shelter from the daytime heat or the cold night air. So the Lord prepared a gourd and caused this plant to grow right up over Jonah's head to provide the shadow he so badly needed. Learn that we are totally unable to provide for our most basic of needs, but

the Lord sees all our requirements, both physical and spiritual and is able and willing to meet them all. He miraculously provided a suitable leafy plant, causing it to grow very quickly in the right place to benefit Jonah and cause him to rejoice greatly. God's purpose was 'to deliver him from his grief' (Jonah 4:6) and this He abundantly succeeded in doing, for He never fails to achieve His purposes.

A worm prepared

God Who is the Creator of the world and all things that are therein was not only able to produce the leafy plant that sheltered Jonah for a time, but also able to destroy it at will. He not only bestows on us all our multiplied creature comforts, but can remove them as He sees fit, in order to teach us valuable lessons in humility and dependence on Him alone. He prepared a worm at the dawning of the next day and it attacked the gourd and caused it to wither and perish. It perished in the cool of the morning before Jonah had any real need of its shadow.

A wind prepared

However, when the sun rose in the heavens God also prepared a strong east wind which caused the sun to beat down mercilessly on the head of Jonah. Exposed to the elements as he was, sitting in a sullen huff on the east side of the city, he fainted and wished in his heart that he would die, thinking that death was more to be chosen than life. He failed to consider that life presents us all but especially a prophet with opportunities to serve God and we should embrace these joyfully and leave the day of our death in God's hands, for as Psalm 31:15 states: 'My times are in thy hand'.

God spoke to Jonah once more, repeating His former question, this time with respect to the gourd: 'Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?' Jonah justified his attitude and maintained that he did indeed do well in being angry for the gourd even if his anger occasioned his premature death. It is a well-known fact that fits of anger can indeed lead to an early death from a brain haemorrhage, stroke or heart attack. Jonah did not ponder the fact that the God who had given him one gourd could provide him with another just as easily and as quickly. In any case, did he not have the Lord as his 'very present help in trouble' (Psa. (46:1)? No gourd could compare with that, for 'happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God' (Psa. 146:5). Jonah was obviously a man given to strong emotions and passions. He

not only was grief-stricken when God spared Nineveh but he rejoiced greatly and was 'exceeding glad of the gourd' (Jonah 4:6), when God alone should be our 'exceeding joy' (Psa. 43:4). Such extremes of emotion should be restrained by the power and grace of God.

The Lord then condescended to reason with Jonah. He had had pity on the gourd which had cost him no labour, neither had he caused it to grow. On the other hand, God had not only given life to every inhabitant of Nineveh, but had provided for their every need, supplying food and clothing, health and shelter. He had expended much labour and care on them. Were they not more worthy to be spared than a mere plant? It had a very short existence for it 'came up in a night, and perished in a night' (Jonah 4:10), whereas the people of Nineveh had an eternal existence, being immortal souls. The gourd was but a single plant, whereas there were multitudes of people in Nineveh, the very young children alone numbering 120,000 souls. These are identified as those who could not tell their right hand from their left so they were of very tender years. God not only had a regard for the little children who had not participated in the sins of the city, but also for the beasts which had worn sackcloth and gone without food and drink in the days of repentance and prayer. Both these were spared in the merciful reprieve of Nineveh.

God's dealings with men

We have a clear picture in the book of Jonah of how God deals with men. He deals with them as individuals. He dealt in mercy with the unconverted mariners, allowing them to experience the terrible storm, making them fear for their lives, yet graciously preserving them nonetheless. He afforded them a unique opportunity of hearing Jonah's testimony of His creative power and Godhead and to witness the miraculous calming of the tempestuous sea, instilling in them a fear of God and leading them to offer a sacrifice and vow to serve Him, the one true and living God.

He dealt with Jonah in a highly individual fashion. First of all, He gave to him and to him alone, out of all the prophets in Israel, the command to preach in Nineveh. When he ran away, He targeted him with a mighty tempest. There was nothing haphazard or random about this storm, for it was aimed specifically at Jonah because of his disobedience. Next God directed a specially selected fish to swallow him up and take him on a spectacular journey to the bottom of the ocean to teach him repentance and faith and cause him to look to God for deliverance. He then saw to it that the fish vomited out Jonah upon

the dry land. An amazing fact in itself! Great fish do not normally come close to the shoreline.

When God spared Nineveh to Jonah's unreasonable and angry disappointment, He took steps to renew a right spirit in His servant. He used the short-lived gourd to teach him that the threatened destruction of Nineveh and its population was more worthy of his grief and of God's mercy than the destruction of one mere perishable gourd. Thus God addressed the individual needs of the prophet. 'Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?' (Isa. 45:9).

God's armoury

God has many, varied weapons in His armoury. He can use tiny creatures like the lice, flies and locusts in the plagues of Egypt. He had such control over them that He restricted the flies and locusts to Egypt and stopped them entering Goshen where Israel dwelt. In the history of Jonah, God prepared five things to serve His purposes. First, He prepared a powerful wind which was capable of causing shipwreck. He then prepared a huge fish to swallow up the disobedient prophet. Later, He prepared a gourd to provide shadow for His fretful servant. He then prepared a little worm to destroy the gourd which had protected Jonah for a brief time from the burning heat. He also prepared a vehement east wind which concentrated the strong rays of the sun on Jonah's head. God often uses the natural things of creation to fulfil His purposes in teaching men vital lessons and humbling their proud, stubborn hearts. He sends afflictions for His own glory and man's good and they are always tempered with mercy.

God's grace

God manifested His abundant grace in the book of Jonah. He spared the mariners and the passengers on the ship from the tremendous storm. He saved Jonah from the depths of the ocean and rescued him from the fish's belly. He had compassion on the Ninevites. He showed His grace in bringing Jonah to a place of repentance, delivering all the dwellers in Nineveh and sparing their city, their lives and the lives of their livestock when they turned from their evil ways. He showed mercy and pity to Jonah in restoring him to his office as prophet and to a right frame of mind. 'Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heri-

tage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7:18-19).

Chapter eight

THE REBEL KING

Scripture: 2 Kings 21:1-12; 2 Chron. 33:1-20

Manasseh, prince of Judah and heir to David's throne, was a child of unimaginable privilege. His father, Hezekiah was a most godly king. 'Hezekiah wrought that which was good and right and truth before the LORD his God' (2 Chron. 31:20). This was a unique testimony among all the rulers of the southern kingdom for there was 'none like him among all the kings of Judah' (2 Kings 18:5). His first action as king, before consulting a single military or political adviser, was to open and repair the doors of the temple which his father, the wicked king Ahaz had closed. Of all the kings of Judah, he alone had the courage and conviction to remove all the high places which good kings like Asa and Jehoshaphat had only partly succeeded in doing. He commanded the Levites and priests to cleanse the temple from all its uncleanness. He restored temple worship, the lamps were lit once more and light as well as the fragrance of incense again filled the holy place. The burnt offerings, sin offerings and the sprinkling of the blood of atonement were all restored. The singers were reinstated as were the priests with their trumpets. The tithes were again brought in, so the priests and Levites received their allotted portions and could attend on their appointed duties. A great Passover was organised to which all Israel were invited. As a result 'there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of 'Solomon . . . there was not the like in Jerusalem' (2 Chron. 30:26). After the celebrations, Hezekiah led the people in breaking down the images, cutting down the groves and throwing down the remaining high places. He carried these reforms beyond his own borders into Ephraim and Manasseh, which the Assyrians had laid waste. He thoroughly purged the land from idolatry.

Hezekiah was a man of extraordinary faith and prayer and obtained mighty answers from God. When Jerusalem was threatened by Sennacherib and the Assyrians, he took practical steps to thwart the enemy by appointing captains of war, stopping the fountains, fortifying the city and preparing weapons, but

he knew that all these measures were vain without the LORD's intervention on behalf of His people. He could well have adopted Cromwell's future maxim: 'Trust in God and keep your powder dry!' In other words: 'Do all you can while looking to God to do what He alone can do.' Confronted by the enemy's boastful threats, Hezekiah resorted to the temple to seek God's help. He requested Isaiah the prophet to pray and received a comforting message of deliverance. Receiving more written threats from Sennacherib, Hezekiah went again to God's house, spread the letter before the LORD and gave himself to prayer. God's response was immediate and powerful. An angel was sent to cut off the Assyrian army besieging Jerusalem and 185,000 soldiers were slain in one night. Sennacherib fled to Nineveh and was murdered by his two sons as he worshipped his false god. Ironically, he who boasted that no god, not even Jehovah, Hezekiah's God, could deliver out of his hand, found no protection from his own false god. When troubles and affliction assail you, follow Hezekiah's example, seek the Lord and witness for yourself God's speedy intervention.

When Hezekiah was sick unto death, aged only 39, he cried mightily unto God for he was concerned that, having no heir and successor, Judah would have no captain to lead them in battle. God answered his prayer, healed him, extended his life by fifteen years, promised deliverance from Assyria and confirmed him as the captain of His people. He asked for a sign to confirm all this and God gave him a marvellous token by causing the shadow on the sundial to go back ten degrees. Isaiah applied a poultice of figs to his malignant boil and he recovered from his deadly disease. The poultice of figs is a picture of Christ, Who provided healing for the sinner by being bruised upon the cross of Calvary. The provision is there but it must be applied.

Manasseh

Manasseh, Hezekiah's son and heir must have heard repeatedly of his father's great achievements, during his childhood. All the great events of his father's reign: his restoration of temple worship; the unparalleled Passover; the complete annihilation of Sennacherib's army and his remarkable recovery from a deadly disease accompanied by a miraculous token; all would have been frequently rehearsed in court circles and great glory given to the God of Israel.

Manasseh inherited the throne of David when he was only twelve. However, he did not care to follow in his godly father's footsteps. He sought to undo all that Hezekiah had ever done and pull down all that he had built up. One

would think that esteem and affection for his father as well as God's obvious blessing on his reign and the mighty answers to his prayers would have had a powerful influence on his personal life and his political decisions. Sadly, that was not so. 'He did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, like unto the abominations of the heathen' (2 Chron. 33:2), whom, as he very well knew, God had cast out of Canaan because of those very same abominations. Instead, being yet of tender years, he was strongly influenced by the wicked counsel of ungodly princes who must have been secret enemies of Hezekiah's reforms. In addition, he was easily led astray by his own sinful inclinations. It is a similar scenario to the days of king Joash who was guided by the counsel of the godly high priest Jehoiada until his death. His wife had rescued Joash as an infant from the slaughter carried out by Athaliah in her evil attempt to wipe out the seed royal. Wicked princes moved in on Joash and persuaded him to forsake God and worship idols. This led on to Joash, in base ingratitude, ordering the murder by stoning of Jehoiada's son, Zechariah, who prophesied against the sin of Judah (2 Chron. 24:20-21). Not content with that, he also murdered Jehoiada's other sons (2 Chron. 24:25).

The catalogue of Manasseh's sin is beyond belief. He restored the high places torn down by his father, raised up altars to Baalim, made groves and worshipped the sun, moon and stars. He did not hesitate to desecrate the temple, but built altars in the holy place. He also built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the LORD's house, namely the court of the priests and the court of the people. As if that were not enough, he caused his children to pass through the fire in his worship of Moloch. God said that such a wicked thing as child sacrifice had never entered His mind (Jer. 19:5; 32:35). God's mind is to give life not to inflict death. Manasseh even used enchantments, involved himself in witchcraft and had dealings with a familiar spirit and with wizards. In Deut. 18:10, God had declared, 'There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.' But what did Manasseh care about the righteous laws of God? Not a fig!

A downhill path

Manasseh continued on his evil way. He went on to make a carved image and set it up in the temple, in the very place where God had set His holy name. What impudence and daring defiance of Almighty God! What contemptuous insult and disparagement he heaped on the house of God! God has pronounced a terrible woe upon such bold, presumptuous sinners who, impeni-

tent and hard of heart, cannot seem to get enough of sin or drink their fill of iniquity. Isa. 5:18 has this to say: 'Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.' They do not merely fall into sin and the snare of the devil unwittingly, but actively and deliberately seek out sin and provide opportunities of sin for themselves.

They are not content to toy with sins that befall them in the ordinary course of daily life, but they must drag along a cart load of sinful iniquities to engage in at will. Manasseh added to all his other sins by shedding the blood of the innocent. He filled Jerusalem 'from one end to another' (2 Kings 21:16) with the blood of the prophets and those who refused to participate in his idolatrous practices.

It is evident from the reforms carried out later by Manasseh's son, Josiah who acceded to the throne of Judah, that there were very many other gross violations of God's holy law in the kingdom. Vessels made for Baal, for the grove and for all the host of heaven had been placed in the temple. There were idolatrous priests ordained by previous kings to burn incense in the high places, to Baal and to the sun, moon and stars. Hard by the house of the LORD, the sodomites had built their houses. Such bare-faced and shameless audacity and effrontery would be difficult to beat! Brazenness has ever been the mark of the sodomite. In today's society they seek to infiltrate the gatherings of God's people. They want to occupy not only the pew but the pulpit; they covet the position of organist, choir member and choirmaster; they present themselves as soloists so that they can occupy centre stage in the house of God. At the very entrance to the temple, there were horses and chariots dedicated to the sun. These were probably used by Baal worshippers as they travelled to a vantage point to watch the sunrise.

Being king, Manasseh exercised an enormous influence on his subjects. He caused the people of Judah and the inhabitants to go astray and utterly abandon the right ways of God. They did even worse than the heathen nations of Canaan whom God had destroyed because of their abominable idolatries. Beware of ungodly associates whose baleful influence will drag you down to hell. 'Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?' (Pro. 6:27).

Inevitably, God's judgment came crashing down on Manasseh and his subjects. Judgment always follows sin. Sinners are inclined to misinterpret God's long-suffering and mercy. Because God does not strike men down immediately in their rebellion, they imagine that He is not offended. 'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men

is fully set in them to do evil' (Eccles. 8:11). Pro. 23:18 states: 'Surely there is an end'. There assuredly is an end to the prosperity of the wicked as well as an end to the afflictions of the righteous. God had been faithful to Manasseh and his subjects in sending them prophets to warn them of their sin of idolatry and His impending judgment, but they refused to listen and thrust the messengers and their message away. God gives men space to repent, but many sin away their day of grace and as one reads in Rom. 2:5, 'After thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God'.

In due time, in the twenty-second year of his reign, God sent the host of the Assyrians against Judah and Jerusalem. Manasseh sought to flee and hid himself in a thorny thicket. However, there is no hiding-place from God. No thicket, however thick or thorny, can hide from His all-seeing eye. Sinful men may run from God, but they cannot outrun His justice. Manasseh's hiding-place was duly discovered. He was taken captive, bound with fetters and carried to Babylon. Was it possible that such a wicked man could ever repent? Could a gracious God forgive his heinous sins and grant him mercy? No mortal man can possibly tell the 'breadth, and length, and depth, and height' of 'the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge' (Eph. 3:18-19). Note the four dimensions given instead of the usual three. That is because the Christian is in the centre of God's love.

Manasseh soon realised that his false gods could not deliver him. How could they? They had the appearance of eyes, ears and mouths, but they could not see, hear or speak, being completely lifeless. He looked in vain to the heavenly host which he had so ardently worshipped. No help could come from them. God brought him right down, humbled him to the very dust. He repented of his great wickedness and besought the Lord for forgiveness. The Lord heard his cry as He does the cry of every penitent. He restored him to the throne of Jerusalem. Manasseh learned the hard way that the Lord was God alone, the one and only true God. In God's wonderful mercy, Manasseh's captivity did not last long. It is not even mentioned in 2 Kings 21.

His repentance and conversion to God were apparent in his life. He no longer neglected the interests of his kingdom, but fortified Jerusalem and placed captains of war in all the fenced cities. Most importantly of all, he took away the strange gods and the idol out of the temple and cast all the altars he had built out of the city. He repaired the altar of the Lord and offered peace and thank offerings upon it. He commanded the people whom he had led so grievously astray to serve the Lord. These were certainly 'fruits meet for repentance'

(Matt. 3:8).

Manasseh's repentance was entirely personal. We can repent only of our own sins. There was no national repentance in Judah. The impenitent, who had participated with him in gross idolatry and the murder of the innocent, felt the weight of God's wrath. God sent the Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites against Judah to destroy it. 'Surely at the commandment of the LORD came this upon Judah, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh . . . and also for the innocent blood that he shed: for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; which the LORD would not pardon' (2 Kings 24:3-4). Sin has its consequences.

Lessons to learn

*We learn from this that godly parents do not always have godly children, for salvation is not transmitted in parental genes but by grace alone.

*Parents need to pray earnestly and diligently for the salvation of their children, believing that God answers prayer.

*Repentance brings forgiveness.

*Manasseh's conversion is a testimony to the long-suffering of God. God's dealings in mercy with Manasseh and Paul are a great encouragement to despairing, hopeless sinners to trust in His mercy.

*Repentance without fruits is not genuine.

*God answers parents' prayers. God answered Hezekiah's prayers for his son long after his own death.

Chapter nine

THE RUNAWAY SON

Scripture: Luke 15: 11:32

Luke 15 is one of the best-known chapters of God's Word, dealing as it does with the lost sheep, the lost silver and the lost son. All of these depict the sinner in his lost condition and his restoration, as a result of the efforts of One who diligently searched him out and found him. The One who sought is a picture of none other than the seeking and successful Saviour. The Word of God is a mirror. As we look into it we see a true picture of ourselves and our condition. Let us consider carefully the history of the lost son, as it is the Lord Who is speaking here.

The family home deserted

The chronicle begins with a brief record of the family circumstances. There is a father and there are two sons. The father is obviously wealthy as he has property, servants, flocks and cattle. As the younger son grows older, he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his lot in life. He is discontented with his home and the restrictions placed upon him. He knows that one day he will share the inheritance with his older brother, but he is impatient and wants his portion right away. He asks his father for the portion of his wealth that would one day be his. It is a demand rather than a request for there is no 'Please' nor 'I pray thee'. The father divides the inheritance, no doubt according to the Mosaic law, giving his older son the double portion and a third of his estate to the younger son. The father is obviously a loving parent as he is easily entreated and willingly divides his goods. Later we see him anxiously waiting and watching for his lost son and showing great compassion on him. He also gently entreats and reasons with his elder son when he stubbornly refuses to join the celebrations at his brother's home-coming.

There was no earthly reason why this young man should up sticks and leave his good home and kind father, apart from the evil desires of his sinful heart.

O sinner, there is no reason why you should forsake God, a merciful and gracious Father, despise the sufferings of His Son and ignore the strivings of the Holy Spirit to seek the world and its so-called pleasures which are but for a season and a very brief season at that. There is no reason why you should cast aside the instruction of godly parents, faithful pastors and Sabbath School teachers and the warnings of concerned friends.

A hasty departure

It was but a few days later that the younger son gathered all his possessions together and set off for the far country. He did not once look back or reconsider his decision. He thought nothing of his father's grief and heartache. He was not intending to go just a little distance away, for he packed up all his belongings to take with him. He had his eyes and affections set firmly on a distant land. He wanted to put as many miles as possible between himself and his godly home. The far country was a country given over to idolatry, sinful pleasures and wicked practices. It is evident that this young man sought to escape the restrictions of the law of God and abandon the worship of Jehovah. He wanted freedom to indulge the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eye and his love of the world.

Little do sinners realise that the tinsel of this world's pleasures is but Satan's lure to entice them into the devil's prison house. Do not find this out by painful experience! Heed what the Bible has to say on these matters. It is a dreadful and bitter thing to fall into the clutches of Satan and have him subtly slip on the unsuspecting sinner the cruel chains and fetters of evil habits, which cannot be broken by any one save Christ the Great Emancipator of souls. Only 'God . . . bringeth out those which are bound with chains' (Psa. 68:6).

Goodbye for good

This young man lost no time in setting out for the far country and he had absolutely no intention of returning home. He was leaving his home and the godly influence of his father for good. This is evident when he returns, destitute and in rags, and the father has to provide clothes for him. He had not left behind any garments for use on a return visit. He took all his possessions with him.

His dream was a delusion

Once in the far country, the young man began to spend, spend, spend, as if

there were no tomorrow. In foolish extravagance he wasted all his father had given him. He spent his days in 'riotous living', surrounded by like-minded companions who were only too glad to help him fritter away his wealth, eating, drinking and making merry. The elder brother even felt he had grounds for accusing him later of devouring his father's living with harlots.

Despite the visible evidence of his dwindling resources, he lived as if his money would last for ever. He paid no heed to the possibility that health and youthful vigour would fail, if he continued to abuse his body. How many fortunes have been lost and health ruined by indulging in worldly entertainments and vanities! Worldly pleasures may well appeal to the physical senses, but what of the soul? God says most emphatically, 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' (Mark 8:36-37). Sinners would do well to answer these vital, soul-searching questions.

Eventually and inevitably, his money bags were soon completely empty and he had not a single coin to his name. Sin robs a man of everything: his knowledge of divine truth; his fear of God and His judgment on sinners; his hope of heaven; any early instilled moral principles or wisdom; his happiness and his self-respect. Sin is like mire. It sucks the sinner down further and further and he is completely unable to extricate himself. Psalm 69:2 speaks of the 'deep mire, where there is no standing'. That is the sinner's experience of the horrible pit and miry clay of Psalm 40:2. It was also the Saviour's experience when He descended into that pit to rescue sinners.

Further calamity awaited the prodigal. Not only was he destitute, but he was abandoned by his erstwhile associates who had masqueraded as his friends. They had proved fair-weather friends indeed. Truly 'the way of transgressors is hard' (Pro. 13:15). However, even worse was to follow. A great famine struck the far country. It is described as a 'mighty famine' in Luke 15, verse 14. There was no sustenance for man or beast and certainly not for the foolish prodigal who had no means of purchasing the basic necessities of life. Where now were the fancy pictures he had painted of life in the far country? Too late he realised it was all a mirage, a chimera, a complete fantasy. Thus does the devil hoodwink and deceive his victims. Sinner, may you realise in time that you are the dupe of the devil who has persuaded you to reject Christ and His gospel and rush heedlessly and merrily down the broad road to everlasting damnation, as fast as time can take you.

Hungerbitten and destitute

As might well be expected, the young man began to experience great want. What could he possibly hope to do in an alien country among strangers who were themselves badly affected by the consequences of the dreadful famine? It did not yet enter his head, however, to leave the far country and return home to his father's house. He went rather and affiliated himself to a citizen of that heathen land. Perhaps he thought that as this man had fields and pigs he would give him food in return for work. However, we do not read that this citizen gave him anything to relieve his hunger, but sent him out into his fields to feed his swine. The devil is a hard taskmaster and sin brings the disobedient down to the depths of misery and woe. Feeding swine was no fit task for a son of Israel. The Jews regarded the pig as an unclean animal. They were forbidden by law to eat its flesh or touch its dead body, so they did not keep swine. The poor prodigal was indeed brought so low that he desired to fill his empty stomach with the rough husks which the swine were eating. Husks are the dry, rough, outer covering of wheat or barley grain and are totally inedible, indigestible and lacking in nourishment for human beings. No man gave him anything to satisfy his gnawing hunger. There is no one and nothing in the world or among worldlings which can relieve the hunger of the soul. There is a mighty famine of the Word and the knowledge of God in the far country. The prodigal was in a desperate condition. He had no money, no food and no means of obtaining it. Sin will strip the rebellious sinner of everything and reduce him to a state of destitution.

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah! the waters failed;
E'en as I stooped to drink, they fled
And mocked me as I wailed.

At last reason prevailed and 'he came to himself' (Luke 15:17). It is sheer madness on the sinner's part to reject the Saviour and rush pell-mell to hell. He was restored to his right mind. He began to think of his father's house and contrast the lot of his father's hired servants with his own. They had plenty of bread and to spare while he was perishing from hunger.

A change of heart

He determined to swallow his pride and go home to his father and say, 'Father,

I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants' (Luke 15:18-19). He will first confess his sin against God. While we may wrong others, sin in its final analysis is against God. David had sinned against Bathsheba, against Uriah and also against his own body, for 1 Cor. 6:18 teaches us: 'Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body'. David was moved, however, to confess in Psalm 51:4, 'Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight'.

True repentance involves a deep consciousness of our sin against God. There can be no forgiveness without such repentance. True repentance will bring about a change of direction in our lives. The prodigal no longer had his back to the land of his birth and his face set towards the far country. He was now turning his back on the far country and setting his face towards his father's house. He was intent on going in the opposite direction to the path he had previously taken.

Naomi made the same decision when she left Moab to return to Bethlehem-Judah. It was the thought of bread available in her native land which motivated her to return home, as the prodigal was motivated by the thought of the abundance of bread in his father's house. The new birth is often referred to as conversion which means a turning around, a U-turn. Have you made such a U-turn in your life? The prodigal also resolved to confess his sin against his father, a sin exacerbated by the kindness of his parent. How trivial he had considered that sin to be on leaving his father's house! His mind was now firmly made up to confess that he was no longer worthy to be called his son. The sinner who seeks pardon must have a deep sense of his own unworthiness. Jacob freely acknowledged that he was unworthy of the least of all God's mercies (Gen. 32:10). We do not deserve God's so great salvation which is freely bestowed upon the contrite sinner who repents of his sin and trusts only and wholly upon the crucified Saviour. Elvina Hall expressed it well.

For nothing good have I
Whereby Thy grace to claim;
I'll wash my garments white
In the blood of Calv'ry's Lamb.

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.

The prodigal was willing to take the lowest, meanest place in his father's household. He was content to be a hired servant as long as he could dwell under his father's roof and eat of his father's bread. The truly penitent sinner has no lofty thoughts of himself nor does he covet any high position. He has had his eyes fully opened to his vile and filthy state in the sight of a holy God. Like Job he cries out, 'I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42:6). Such is true repentance.

The prodigal not only resolved to go home but up he got, leaving the pigs to fend for themselves, and made his way back to the father's house. He had still a long way to go, but his father saw him coming, for he had been hoping and watching daily for his return. When his father saw him he recognised him, despite his ragged apparel and emaciated appearance. He was filled with compassion for his younger son who, barefoot and starving, was advancing slowly with leaden feet, while he himself ran with eager steps to meet him. He did not hesitate to embrace and kiss him, despite his filthy tatters which must have been permeated with the foul stench of the swine. What a welcome the young man received! What love his father showed! So does our heavenly Father welcome the penitent sinner.

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.

Behold the Lord upon the cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until all was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life -
I know that it is finished.

S. Townsend

Confession interrupted

The prodigal had intended to confess his sin against God and his earthly father. He wanted to express his utter unworthiness to be called his father's son and his desire to work as a hired servant. However, his father interrupted him and he was not given the opportunity to request that he work as a hired servant. Acknowledgment of his sin and unworthiness was quite enough. So it is with God. Confession of our sin is all that He requires. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). The father instructed his servants to take away his son's filthy rags and clothe him in the best robe available. They were to put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. This is a lovely picture of what happens to the penitent sinner. The filthy rags of his sin and self-righteousness are stripped from him and he is clothed in the robes of Christ's spotless righteousness. Christ lived a life of perfect obedience and unsullied righteousness while He was here on earth and that righteousness is imputed to us, counted as ours and received by faith in Him.

We are healed by His stripes:
Would'st thou add to the word?
And He is our righteousness made;
The best robe of heaven he bids thee to wear,
O couldst thou be better arrayed?

A. M. Hull

A ring was put on the young man's finger as a visible token to himself and others that he was reinstated as his father's son. It was put on his finger by others, as the best robe was put upon him, for the penitent sinner can do nothing of himself. He could look on it and rejoice in his restoration to his former position. Likewise, the Christian is given a genuine token of his adoption into the family of God. 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God' (Rom. 8:16). The Holy Spirit is also an earnest or downpayment of our future endowment in glory. 'Christ . . . in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory' (Eph. 1:12-14). He had shoes put on his feet for he was

barefoot and footsore. Again they were put on him, for the sinner is helpless and does not contribute in any way to his new estate.

When the prodigal was arrayed as befitted his father's son, the servants were required to kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast in celebration of his return. Thus the father could express his great joy that his son who had been lost and dead in sin was now alive. It is noteworthy that the recovery of all three precious lost items in Luke 15: the sheep, the silver and the son was greeted with great joy and a celebration. In concluding His account of the celebration of the recovery of the lost sheep, the Lord Jesus said, in verse 7, 'Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth'. When speaking of the festivities which followed the discovery of the lost coin, He said, 'Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth' (v. 10).

Joy not shared by all

The celebrations were in full swing when the older son returned from his work in the field. He heard the sound of music and dancing and asked one of the servants what in the world was going on. He was told that his younger brother had returned home and his father had killed the fatted calf because he had returned safely. The elder brother was angry and refused to join in the festivities. His father, gracious as ever, went out and pleaded with him to come in. He accused his father of never giving him a kid, never mind a fatted calf, to celebrate with his friends, despite the fact that he had never broken his commands and had served him for years. The elder brother had conveniently and deliberately chosen to forget that daily he ate bountifully at his father's table and had received his part of the father's goods at the same time as his younger brother did. He who proudly claimed that he had never broken his father's commands, ironically didn't seem to realise that he was now in breach of his father's command to come into the house and join the feast. He experienced absolutely no joy of heart in his younger brother's safe return from the far country. He accused him of devouring his father's living with harlots which was probably an exaggeration and a misrepresentation of his sins. He was greatly offended because the feast was prepared immediately on his brother's return. It is significant that he mentioned feasting with his friends outside of the home. It seemed he would have had greater pleasure in feasting with others than with those of his father's household. The father sought to placate him by reminding him that he enjoyed his continual presence and all that he had

was his. It was fitting that they should celebrate the prodigal's return for he had been dead and was now alive again, had been lost and was found. Note that the elder brother did not refer to the prodigal as his brother for he disowned him, but in his argument with the father called him 'this thy son'. On the other hand, the father calls him 'this thy brother'. How kindly and gently did the father reason with his older son. It reminds us of how the Lord dealt with Jonah in his sullen reaction to God's mercy on Nineveh, which was akin to the elder brother's reaction to the welcome given to his younger brother.

A common attitude

Beware of the elder brother spirit! Believers who have lived a respectable moral life sometimes find it difficult to accept and welcome those who prior to conversion have lived a disreputable and extremely sinful life. If God has pardoned them why should we indulge in an unforgiving spirit? If God holds nothing against them why should we? God has guaranteed the repentant sinner that 'none of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him' (Ezek. 33:16). O for a God-like spirit! Let us like the father in Luke 15 welcome those with open arms and hearts who have forsaken their wicked ways and turned to God. Not a single word of reproach fell from the father's lips when the prodigal returned home.

An application to Christ's hearers

These three accounts of the lost sheep, the lost silver and the lost son were given by Christ in answer to the Pharisees and scribes who objected to His eating with publicans and sinners. So there is of necessity in this account an application of Christ's words to His original Jewish hearers. Their reproachful murmurings against Him saying, 'This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them' (Luke 15:2) were spoken in severe criticism of the Saviour, but how we glory in these words which have encouraged and comforted every sinner returning from his ways! The self-righteous Pharisees were vexed when they saw the harlots and publicans being received by the Lord and when He ate with them. In Matt. 11:19, they called Him 'a friend of publicans and sinners' as a mark of opprobrium.

The Pharisees and scribes were self-righteous hypocrites. All their works were done to be seen of men. They loved to pray but only on street corners and in the synagogues where men could admire them (Matt. 6:5). When they did

alms they sounded a trumpet before them in the synagogues and streets so that others would praise them for their charitable giving (Matt. 6:2). Their religion was just an outward show. There was no inward work of God in their hearts. They showed no mercy to poor widows, cruelly devouring their substance, all the while making long prayers as a cover for their wickedness (Luke 20:47). The elder brother certainly had something of their spirit. He felt he was without reproof, asserting that he had kept all the father's commands. He was outwardly righteous, proudly boasting of his merit, while he was inwardly sinful, having no love for his brother and absolutely no pity or mercy for him. He objected to his father's compassionate treatment of the erring prodigal. Likewise, the scribes and Pharisees boasted of their virtue, but had not a single grain of compassion for needy sinners like the publicans and harlots.

A similar scenario

The Lord Jesus, accosted by the chief priests and elders as He taught in the temple, told them plainly that 'the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you' (Matt. 21:31). He prefaced this remark by setting before them a similar scenario of a father with two sons whom he sent to work in his vineyard. The first refused to go but afterward repented and went. The second son consented to go but never went. Not seemingly pious words but repentance and obedience secure us a place in heaven. The publicans and harlots knew they were sinners worthy of judgment and eternal damnation and sought God for pardon. The Pharisees, scribes, chief priests and elders had no consciousness of their sin and their need for forgiveness. Without repentance (and there were those who did repent) heaven they would never see.

Hope for the prodigal

We should not abandon hope for prodigal sons and daughters. We should continue in earnest prayer for them, for God is able to recover them from their sinful state. This parable appears only once in the Gospel record, but once is enough. It not only gives hope of forgiveness to the prodigal but hope to every parent who awaits the prodigal's return.

Once as prodigals we wandered,
In our folly, far from Thee;
But Thy grace, o' er sin abounding,
Rescued us from misery.

J. G. Deck

Chapter ten

THE RUNAWAY SLAVE

Scripture: Philemon

The book of Philemon is a brief little letter which we find tucked away between Paul's longer epistles to Titus and the Hebrews. The letter does not concern itself with church business or doctrinal matters, but rather is a personal letter about private household affairs. Perhaps, because of its seemingly harmless contents, it escaped attack and mutilation by the critics, who probably considered it as a homely little anecdote and overlooked the valuable instruction and power of its message. It was written by Paul while he was a prisoner in Rome. Although living in his own hired house and allowed to receive all who came to visit him, he was chained and under constant armed guard. The letter was addressed not only to the dearly beloved Philemon who laboured in the gospel in Colosse, but also to Apphia who was presumably Philemon's wife, Apphia being a woman's name. It was also addressed to Archippus, Paul's fellow soldier who ministered in Colosse (Col. 4:17). Faithful ministers are not only required to labour in the work of God, but to fight error and defend the faith. He also addressed the church that met in Philemon's house. These believers would certainly have encouraged Philemon to do as Paul instructed. Three men featured predominantly in the account: Paul the apostle, Philemon the master and Onesimus his slave.

Paul the Apostle

Paul was a pattern to all believers, a perfect role model for every Christian, young and old. He could wholeheartedly appeal to God's people in 1 Corinthians 11:1, 'Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ'. There are aspects of Paul's life and character revealed in this epistle which we would all do well to imitate.

Love for sinners

Paul was in prison, but by the merciful Providence of God he had been shown favour by his jailers and was allowed to rent a house which he occupied for

two whole years. During that time, he wrote letters to churches, including those at Ephesus, Philippi and Colosse, received all those who came calling and was permitted to preach the gospel freely to all, for he had, in truth, no other topic. He spent his whole energy and life after his conversion in preaching and teaching the gospel. In this he was like the Saviour. We read in Acts 1:1-2, 'of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up'. He was commanding and instructing His disciples until His very last moment on earth.

Almost immediately, at the very outset of his period of house-arrest, Paul summoned the Jewish leaders to set before them the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of sinners, be they Jew or Gentile. He spent a whole day 'persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening' (Acts 28:23). Some believed and were convinced that Jesus was their Messiah, but others, like the majority of the Jews, rejected the message.

Well could Paul affirm, in Romans 10:1, 'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved'. His burden for his own nation weighed so heavily upon his heart that he expressed his feelings in the following words: 'I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ, for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom. 9:2-3). Was ever such love manifested by any one besides Paul, other than the Saviour Himself? I can think of only one, Moses the man of God. After utterly destroying the image of the golden calf and reducing it to powder, he prayed that the Lord would forgive the people of Israel for their terrible idolatry, committed in the very shadow of Mount Sinai. 'Oh, this people have sinned a great sin . . . Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin . . . and if not, blot me I pray thee out of thy book which thou hast written' (Exod. 32:31-32). These two men would have given up, if that were possible, their own hope of eternal happiness for the spiritual well-being of others. How Christ-like these two men were! Christ, of course, not only wished to become a curse but 'redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us' (Gal. 3:13). Only He could have accomplished that!

Love for the saints

Paul showed great love for the people of God. He was truly a Great-heart in the mould of the character created by John Bunyan in 'Pilgrim's Progress'. In his epistles, he expressed his heartfelt desire that the saints would experience

the grace, mercy and peace that comes from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. He prayed constantly for them and their witness. He could honestly claim that he made mention of Philemon always in his prayers (v. 4). He agonised in prayer for the advance of holiness in the lives of those converted to Christ, saying ever so tenderly in Galatians 4:19, 'My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you'. May our hearts be filled with a Christ-like love for sinners, a love which will drive us to pray fervently for the salvation of their souls. May we have a love for God's people which will manifest itself in earnest prayer for their growth in grace and much fruit in their witness for Christ.

Tenderness of heart

It says much for the tender heart and sympathy of the great apostle, who, 'being such an one as Paul the aged' (v. 9), worn out by years of labour and missionary journeys to many different countries, and burdened still with the care of the churches and his own personal trials and afflictions, that he took the time and made the effort to attend to the needs of a runaway slave. How like the Saviour Paul was in his love and devotion to the service of others, no matter how mean and unworthy they appeared!

Paul was pleading on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who had wickedly absconded with goods or a sum of money and fled to Rome. There he had come under the sound of the gospel from Paul's lips and was gloriously saved. Paul now wanted to bring about a reconciliation between the master and his servant and wrote to that end.

Slavery

Slavery was a feature of life in Biblical times and throughout the Roman Empire. Some slaves were undoubtedly abused by cruel masters, but others were kindly treated. The little Hebrew maid was evidently kindly and lovingly treated by Naaman's wife. The Roman centurion who came to Capernaum, beseeching Christ to come and heal his servant, who lay 'at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented' (Matt. 8:5-6), was obviously greatly concerned about the health and well-being of his slave. Indeed, it must be remembered that slavery was often a benefit to the very poor. It provided them with a roof over their heads and food and clothing. There were many slaves in Israel in Old Testament times, but while God legislated for their fair treatment in the

law of Moses and ordained that after seven years all Hebrew slaves should be set free, He did not prohibit slavery. Indeed, we read of the slave who refused the offer of freedom and a liberal portion of his master's goods, because he loved his master and recognised that he was well off in his master's house (Deut. 15:12-14; 16-17).

It is a well-known fact that after President Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation in 1863, during the American Civil War, one quarter of the four million liberated slaves in the territory perished from diseases like smallpox and cholera and died slowly and painfully from starvation. They would have fared better had they remained as slaves, for no provision had been made to guarantee their survival after being set free. Under God's rule, in sharp contrast, liberated slaves were given a liberal portion of their master's goods.

Slavery did not bring mere physical benefits to some, but when owners came to faith in Christ, many of their servants also were exposed to gospel influence and were gloriously saved. There are many references to slaves in the New Testament. A slave who was converted was urged to 'abide in the same calling wherein he was called' (1 Cor. 7:20). Converted slaves were to remain as slaves. Being made brothers in Christ to their masters, slaves were exhorted to give due honour and obedience to their masters and forbidden to try and exploit their new relationship. Masters were under absolutely no obligation to set them free at any time.

Wisdom and prudence

Paul showed great wisdom and prudence in seeking to reconcile Onesimus and Philemon. He recognised the master's rights over his servants even when converted and even if they became ministers of the gospel. Onesimus was the property of Philemon and Paul would not retain him in Rome, despite his usefulness in ministering to him, without the consent of Philemon. He also recognised the need for Onesimus to make recompense for injuries done to his master. Paul proceeded to deal with Onesimus' case in a righteous and just fashion. He did not take advantage of his friendship with Philemon or put undue pressure on him. He was sending Onesimus back so that Philemon could freely decide whether to retain him in his household in Colosse or send him back to Rome where he could be of service to Paul. As Paul says in verse 14, 'Without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly'. The whole affair was conducted with the utmost propriety.

Philemon

There is no doubt that Philemon was among the choicest of God's saints. He was a Colossian and thus originally a sinner of the Gentiles, without Christ . . . having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12), but he had been saved under the faithful ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul reminded him in v. 19 that it was to him he owed his conversion, for he was the apostle to the Gentiles, even as Peter was to the Jews.

Love and faith

Philemon's name means affectionate and he certainly lived up to his name. Reports of his faith in the Lord Jesus and his love for the Saviour and all the saints had spread abroad. We cannot love God without also loving His people. 'For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another' (1 John 3:11). Paul stated that he too had heard of his love and faith for it was the topic of many conversations. Philemon was no secret disciple, hiding his light under a bushel. He was not only active in the church at Colosse, but unashamedly conducted public worship in his own home, so that all his acquaintance, friends and household members knew that he had a personal faith in Christ as His Saviour and Lord and, in love to their souls, was anxious that they too might hear and believe the gospel.

Philemon's love for the people of God was seen in his acts of charity. He was a source of refreshment to the saints in supplying their wants and in comforting them in trouble. His was no dead faith for 'faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone' (James 2:17). While faith in the heart is invisible, it shows itself in good works and the fruits of the Spirit as Philemon's did. Have you a genuine living faith which produces the fruits of the Spirit? A dead, barren faith is not saving faith. It is mere mental assent to the gospel without a work of regeneration having been done in the heart.

Paul was confident of Philemon's obedience in receiving and forgiving Onesimus. He knew that Philemon would go the second mile and do more than he requested of him. We have no reason to doubt that Paul's arguments failed to prevail with Philemon, as we find Onesimus referred to as 'a faithful and beloved brother who is one of you' in Col. 4:9. He had obviously returned to Colosse. Likewise we can be even more than confident that Christ's continual intercession prevails with the Father on our behalf.

Philemon was kind and hospitable to others. Paul asked him to prepare a lodg-

ing for him for he hoped that, in answer to the prayers of Philemon and other Christians, he would be released from prison, although it is doubtful that he ever was. Philemon was a man easy to be entreated and prepared to do favours for others.

ONESIMUS

Onesimus was a slave in Philemon's household. Philemon was a godly and devout Christian. We read that there was a church in his house. Daily devotions would have been the order of the day. Family members and household servants would have been summoned to engage in prayer and thanksgiving to God. Visiting evangelists would have been invited to address the assembled company and exhort them from the Scriptures.

Decision to run away

Without a doubt, Onesimus would have been irked by the constant faithful presentation of the gospel and the restrictions of a godly household. He decided to run away and escape the prevailing atmosphere and constant challenge of Philemon's home. He resolved to flee to Rome and planned to hide out in the squalid ghettos of that great city. Now it was well-known that Rome was a very wicked city, notorious for its immorality, brutality and bloodshed. There Onesimus would find kindred spirits among those who shared his wicked inclinations.

Of course, he would have needed money or food for the long arduous trek from Colosse to Rome, not only on the way but when he at last reached his chosen destination. So he apparently helped himself to a portion of Philemon's money or goods. It was a theft of the worst possible kind as it involved the betrayal of the trust placed in him by Philemon and also gross disloyalty to his godly master. It is evident that Onesimus enjoyed some degree of liberty in his master's household as he was aware of confidential matters regarding his money and belongings. The wickedness of Onesimus' heart and his godless inclinations were seen not only in the theft of his master's property, but in his choice of destination. He was set on going to Rome. There were other cities in Asia less flagrant in their iniquity and vice which would have been much easier for him to reach and gain ready access to. However, the debauchery and depravity of Rome were more appealing to this fugitive from justice. The vile dens of the back streets of Rome and the low life who frequented them were attractive to him.

Divine intervention

However, God in mercy stepped into the situation and His Providence overruled all Onesimus' schemes and plans. Just as God succeeded in bringing low the prodigal of Luke 15 by plunging him into a state of unexpected destitution to humble him and incline his heart to return to his Father's house, so God must have intervened in Onesimus' life to dash all his hopes and expectations and make him amenable to the Gospel. No one can fight against God and prosper. He can stop the sinner in his tracks and gain his attention, as He did with the apostle Paul himself, and as He does with every sinner whom He intends to save. It is a sad fact that when men have no changes in life's circumstances 'they fear not God' (Psa. 55:19). Their path runs smoothly downhill to the pit.

It was inevitable that Onesimus met with great disappointments in Rome and nothing turned out the way he had anticipated, for 'the way of transgressors is hard' (Pro. 13:15). Perhaps when he had spent all his stolen store of goods or money, he began to be in want and found, as the prodigal did, that no man gave unto him.

He must have known about Paul's presence in prison at Rome, for prayer would have been regularly offered for him in Philemon's home. There is no record of Paul ever having visited Colosse, for he speaks of those who had not seen his face in the flesh (Col. 2:1), but during his three-year stay in Ephesus, 'all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks' (Acts 19:10; 20:31). Colosse lay about a hundred miles east of Ephesus and Onesimus lived in Colosse. He undoubtedly would have come into contact with the Gospel message at that time as it spread abroad from Ephesus. He would certainly have heard it expounded in Philemon's home. In any case, he found himself in Paul's hired house in Rome, perhaps driven to seek help in his dire necessity by way of food or money or brought there by some individual concerned about his soul. We discover in 2 Tim. 1:17 that Onesiphorus had to seek Paul out very diligently in order to find him in Rome. Onesimus too would have found it difficult to locate the apostle. In Paul's hired house he came once again under the preaching of the glorious Gospel. God in mercy now disposed his heart to listen and, being mercifully granted faith and repentance, this wretched, vile, unworthy sinner accepted Christ as his Saviour and Lord. By the mighty power of the Gospel, the runaway slave who legally faced torture and death was now a child of God. Paul did not consider it a waste of time to preach the gospel to such a profligate, thinking that such a one could never possibly be saved. Christ saves the worst of men and there is none too

vile to be a recipient of His mercy. Did He not save Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, who sinned above all the kings of Judah and indeed of Israel? Did he not save Paul himself who considered that he was the chief of sinners? Indeed, every sinner saved by grace considers himself to be the chief of sinners, for he knows all the depths of the wickedness of his own heart, whereas he knows a mere fraction of the sins of others.

All have sinned

Onesimus was no worse than any one of us. The seeds of every depraved vice are present in all our hearts. It is only the restraining grace of God which stops these seeds from developing into full-blown wickedness. We do need to keep in view the rock from whence we were hewn and the hole of the pit whence we were digged (Isaiah 51:1). It is the same rock from which Onesimus was hewn and the same pit from which he was digged. All of us without exception are creatures of the dunghill, worms of the dust. None of us has any merit to recommend us to God. None of us has anything to boast of before Him. The fact that we all had to be hewn from the rock and digged out of the pit shows the magnitude of the labour engaged in by the Saviour, when He undertook the tremendous task of saving us from our sins.

Crimes of such horror to forgive!
Such guilty, daring worms to spare:
This is Thy grand prerogative,
And in the honour none shall share:
Who is a pardoning God like Thee,
Or who has grace so rich and free?
Samuel Davies

Paul did not leave Onesimus to his own devices once he was saved. He gave him support, acted in his best interests and advised and urged him to make reparation to his master. Older Christians should not abandon new converts to make what stumbling progress they may on their own, but counsel and encourage them on the heavenly way.

Transforming grace

When a sinner is saved there is a wonderful change takes place in his life and

outlook. A person cannot be brought into a new relationship with God without changes being clearly visible in his life. If there is no immediate and evident change, that sinner is not genuinely saved, for 'if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God' (2 Cor. 5:17-18). These changes increase and grow throughout life, due to the ongoing sanctifying grace of the Holy Ghost and the sanctifying power of the Word of God. The High Priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ, addressed to the Father in John 17:17 for those who believed in Him was: 'Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth'.

Onesimus had run away from Philemon's house, but now he was prepared to go back, face the music and make reparation for the injuries done to Philemon and his family. He was going to travel in a direction completely opposite to his previous course. That is what happens when a sinner is converted to Christ, for conversion is a complete U-turn. Henry McDaniel described it well:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart!
I have light in my soul which so long I had sought
Since Jesus came into my heart!

I have ceased from my wandering and going astray,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

What an example of sovereign grace was seen in Onesimus' conversion! God's eternal love was fixed on a dishonest, unprincipled slave, while persons seemingly more noble and worthy were passed by and left unmoved by the gospel. An eternal change was wrought in his life for Paul speaks of Philemon receiving him for ever. He would never run away again.

Elevating grace

Grace not only transforms but elevates the sinner. God took Onesimus from the very lowest ranks of society and made him a profitable servant, one who ministered to Paul's need; one who was regarded as a 'faithful and beloved brother' in the church at Colosse. In like fashion, the blind beggar Bartimaeus was taken from the gutter and had his place in the jubilant throng who accompanied Christ on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. 'Who is like unto the

LORD our God? He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people' (Psa. 113: 5, 7-8). Like the psalmist, Hannah spoke of this in 1 Sam. 2:8 when she also referred to God raising 'up the poor out of the dust' and lifting 'up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory'. This should be the constant theme of the praises of all the saints. Dear believers, once beggars and creatures of the filthy dunghill, do you fully realise that the Lord Jesus has made us 'kings and priests unto God and his Father' (Rev. 1:6), and we shall sit with Christ on His throne even as He presently sits with His Father in His throne (Rev. 3:21)?

Think, O my Soul, if 'tis so sweet
On earth to sit at Jesus' feet,
What must it be to wear a crown,
And sit with Jesus on His throne?

Frederick Keene

It is to be noted that David gathered together the strangers in Israel to work in preparing materials to build the temple (1 Chron. 22:2) and when Solomon built the temple, the hard manual labour of hewing the cedar trees, bearing burdens and cutting the great stones was done by foreign labourers, while the Israelites were promoted as officers and rulers to oversee the work. Christian, rejoice today in the fact that God had mercy on you in your wretched, low and miserable condition, lifted you from the gutter of sin and degradation, employed you in His service and will one day glorify you.

Behold th' amazing gift of love
The Father hath bestowed
On us, the sinful sons of men,
To call us sons of God!

High is the rank we now possess;
But higher we shall rise;
Though what we shall hereafter be
Is hid from mortal eyes.

A profitable servant

The name Onesimus means profitable but he had not lived up to his name. He had not profited from the godly instruction, privileges and opportunities he had enjoyed in Philemon's home. Few slaves had such a master, for the majority of slaves lived and served in wicked, pagan households. As Paul says, he had been unprofitable in time past, but now was profitable both to Philemon and Paul (v. 11). Paul refers to Onesimus as a 'faithful and beloved brother' in Colossians 4:9. He along with Tychicus was sent to Colosse to report on what was happening in Rome regarding Paul's affairs and to take Paul's epistle to the church, for he was now a trustworthy Christian. Grace enables the new convert to live a profitable life. On his return to Philemon's house, he would be a better slave and serve his master more faithfully. Are you a profitable servant, contributing to the work and advance of the Gospel?

A picture of salvation

In the story of Onesimus we have a marvellous picture of God's grace in the salvation of unworthy sinners. As Onesimus robbed his master, so had we robbed God. We were under an obligation to love God, keep His commandments, serve Him and cleave to Him with purpose of heart. We failed in all these our obligations and thus robbed God of what was His due, including our tithes. He gave us talents to employ in His service, but we frittered them away in pointless pursuits. He gave us health and strength to work for Him but we devoted all this to promoting our own selfish interests.

Perhaps, like Onesimus, you have lived in a truly Christian home and been privileged to hear the gospel and the record of God's mercy to sinners in sending His only Son to be the Saviour of the world and pouring out His anger against sin upon Him that sinners might be spared from the wrath to come. Do remember God's wrath is always wrath to come. It is unending and eternal.

Like Onesimus you have shut up your ears, hardened your heart and spurned the offer of mercy. You have been unmoved by Christ's agonies on the cross and despised the prayers and tears of God's people. Perhaps you are the only unrepentant sinner in your household and have managed to hide your sin and fleshly desires from others. One day that sin will break forth into open rebellion against God and His holy law and you will commit sins you never dreamed you were capable of committing. Sin always takes you further than you mean to go. You cannot control sin; it controls you. You are in a horrible pit full of miry clay and in spite of all your efforts you cannot possibly extricate

yourself. You are like someone in quicksands and you will sink down deeper and inevitably 'into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition' (1 Tim. 6:9). Only God Almighty can bring you up out of that horrible pit, out of the miry clay and set your feet upon the rock Christ Jesus (Psa. 40:2). Like Onesimus you too can experience God's mercy for there is forgiveness with Him and a free pardon for all of your sins. Fanny Crosby wrote:

The vilest offender who truly believes
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

God can change your life completely, make you a new creature in Christ Jesus and direct your steps in an entirely different direction, on your way to heaven instead of hell. You can begin to live a profitable life serving God and man, as Onesimus did. What God did for a wretched, miserable slave like Onesimus, who fully deserved the death penalty which was meted out without mercy to all runaway slaves, who were easily identified by the mark made by the piercing of their ear, He can do for you.

It is no secret what God can do.
What He's done for others He can do for you.
With arms wide open He'll welcome you.
It is no secret what God can do.
Stuart Hamblen

The work of the Substitute

In the account of Onesimus' conversion, Paul's role gives us a clear picture of the work of Christ as man's Substitute with God. Who can read those blessed words in verses 18-19: 'If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it', without hearing an echo of the Saviour's words to His Father? He voluntarily undertook to pay all the debts of His sinful people by making them His own debts. They were put to His account. The law demands the death of the sinner, but Christ died in the sinner's place. He bore our punishment, and discharged all our debts. Just as Onesimus found in Paul a settler of his debts, so we find in the Saviour a settler of all of our debts. Regarding every debt incurred by our sins, Christ has said, 'Put that on my account. I will repay it'.

He took my sins and my sorrows.
He made them His very own;
He bore the burden to Calvary,
And suffered and died alone.

Charles Gabriel

A holy life

We must never forget that Christ was not only our Substitute in bearing the punishment for all of our sins but also by living a holy life on our behalf. He was perfectly holy and did not have to work out righteousness for Himself but for His people. As God the Son, He was perfectly righteous before His incarnation. On earth He lived a perfectly holy life in the stead of His people. He was holy in His sinless childhood. He did not sin or act in a thoughtless or foolish fashion. He did not sin in thought, word or deed as a child or adult. When it came to worship, He was never careless, inattentive or lacking in zeal. He was never guilty of the sin of prayerlessness, as we so often are. He was never hard of heart or lacking in tenderness and compassion. He did not display a trace of self-will as we constantly do. We are guilty of pride but he was ever meek and lowly of heart. We are often ungrateful and thankless for God's constant mercies, but Christ's heart overflowed with praise and thanksgiving to His Father continually. We grieve the Holy Spirit but Christ honoured Him. The Lord Jesus had a passion for lost souls which led Him to endure the unspeakable agonies of Calvary's cross. All His obedience and virtue are put to our account as if it were our own. How glorious is the robe of perfect righteousness in which He has arrayed His undeserving people! God accepts us as perfectly righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone. (See Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 33 and the answer given).

The work of the mediator

There is also a very clear picture, in the Epistle to Philemon, of Christ as the only mediator between God and man. A mediator is one who acts as a go-between or peacemaker between two parties. In His High Priestly ministry, the Lord Jesus intercedes for us with His Father, presenting His precious blood as an unassailable argument as to why we should be accepted of Him. How earnestly and continually Christ pleads for His people! In like fashion, Paul presented the case of Onesimus and pleaded his cause with Philemon. He heaped up argument upon argument. Let us look at some of those arguments and see in them something of our Saviour's entreaties on our behalf.

The most cogent argument used by Paul was the fact that Onesimus was now his son in the faith, just as much as Timothy ever was. Christ pleads for those who are the sons of the Father, by virtue of the new birth and their adoption into the family of God. 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God. Beloved, now are we the sons of God' (1 John 3:1-2). God cannot and will not refuse or reject Christ's prayers on behalf of those whom He has adopted as His children.

Paul also pleaded the fact that Onesimus was now 'a brother beloved' (v. 16). Paul regarded him as such and knew Philemon would do likewise. Christ who is our Elder Brother also pleads for those who are His brethren. How fervently and faithfully He reminds the Father that we are His sons and also the Saviour's brethren beloved!

Paul pleaded his present circumstances, being aged and a prisoner in bonds for the cause of the gospel. So does the Lord Jesus plead most effectively on the basis of His great sufferings on behalf of His people. His death as the Substitute of His people cannot be ignored by the Father. God speaks of the voice of Abel's blood crying to Him from the ground (Gen. 4:10). Christ's precious blood shed on Calvary's tree likewise has a voice and strongly pleads for us. Charles Wesley wrote:

Arise, my soul, arise,
Shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice
In my behalf appears;
Before the throne my Surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.

He ever lives above,
For me to intercede,
His all redeeming love,
His precious blood to plead;
His blood atoned for this our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Paul besought Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself, to welcome him as he would welcome Paul. God the Father sees us in Christ for

we are 'accepted in the well-beloved' and receives us as such. We are welcomed as Christ is welcomed.

Sympathy for the sinner

Paul spoke with sympathy of Onesimus. He described his criminal absconding from Philemon's home with his property as a departure for a season. He speaks of Onesimus wronging his master, not robbing him. He did not wish to minimise the sin of the runaway slave, neither did he want to emphasise it. When God forgives sin, He remembers it no more against us. 'And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more' (Heb 10:17). Ezek. 18:21-22 speaks of the wicked man who turns from all his sins to do that which is lawful and right and declares that all his transgressions shall not even be mentioned unto him. How gracious is our God!

His mercy is great above the heavens. It is as infinite as God Himself and endures for ever. 'Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!' (Psa. 107:8).

Chapter eleven

THE POTENTIAL RUNAWAY

Scripture: Mark 11:1-10

As the Lord Jesus made His last journey to Jerusalem on the way to the cross of suffering and shame, He came to the Mount of Olives close to Bethphage and Bethany, two villages which were situated on its slopes. He sent two of the disciples into the village which lay opposite. There they would find a colt on the very outskirts of the village. We are given several very significant details about this colt. Being a potential runaway, he was tethered as one might expect. It was outside, beside a door in a place where two paths converged. The disciples were to loose him and bring him to the Saviour. No doubt they wondered why Christ sent them on this strange errand. Apart from boat journeys across the Sea of Galilee the Saviour went everywhere on foot. Why ever did He want a colt? However, they obeyed without question, an example we all ought to follow. Despite initial objections, the owners permitted them to take the colt, being told that the Lord had need of him. That was reason enough to let him go. On their return, the disciples spread their garments over him and set Christ on his back. Many spread their garments on the roadway, while others cut down branches from the trees and strewed them along the Saviour's route. Those who preceded the procession and those who followed after cried, 'Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest' (vv, 9-10).

What a vivid picture the young colt presents to us of the work of salvation and God's eternal purpose!

Chosen in eternity

This colt had been chosen from all eternity to carry Christ on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We find him mentioned in Zechariah 9:9. 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King

cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.' He was written in God's book. We learn from Scripture that God's redeemed people were written in the Lamb's Book of Life from before the foundation of the world. Is your name inscribed there? He was the only colt in the whole world since it was created to have the great honour of bearing the Messiah, the King of Israel, amid the jubilation of the crowd into Jerusalem, the city of the great king. We can learn many profitable lessons from the ass's colt.

Election

There can be no question that the Bible teaches the doctrine of election. Over and over again, we read verses like that found in Ephesians 1:4, 'According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.' God is the author and finisher of our faith, not we ourselves. The glorious chain of events in Romans 8:30 clearly shows God's sovereignty in man's salvation. 'Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.'

Justified, O blessed thought
And sanctified, salvation wrought
And glorified I soon shall be
And I shall stand complete in Thee.

T.J. Bittikofer

Redeemed by a lamb

After slaying the firstborn of man and beast in the last plague sent upon Egypt, the Lord had claimed the male firstborn of men and beasts in Israel as His own. The firstborn of all clean beasts were offered in sacrifice but the firstborn of men could be redeemed by paying five shekels to the priest. The firstborn of unclean animals were unacceptable as a sacrifice, but they could also be redeemed. The firstlings of such animals as the ass could be redeemed by giving a lamb to the priest as a substitute. If not redeemed the ass's foal had its neck broken. It is highly possible that this colt was a firstling. We see in the redemption of a foal how unclean sinners can be redeemed from death by Christ our blessed Substitute, Who, as God's Lamb, provided atonement for our sins and fulfilled our duty of service to God, thus procuring a perfect righteousness for

us.

The unbroken colt

This colt had never been ridden before. It was unbroken. Men spend some considerable time breaking in a donkey or horse. The animal must get used to the halter, the bridle and bit. It must learn to respond to its master's commands and eventually submit to carrying a rider. An untrained donkey is completely useless and unserviceable to man. Donkeys take longer to train than a horse or a mule. They are slow learners! Young colts are particularly frisky and skittish. However, the Lord of all creation was able to tame this colt instantly and subdue him to His will. Horses and donkeys are easily spooked by noise or unexpected events. Can you imagine the impact a noisy crowd shouting repeated Hosannahs would normally have on such a sensitive animal? Yet this young colt went steadily onward, unmoved by the presence of the crowd.

The Bible teaches us that man is 'born like a wild ass's colt' (Job 11:12). He will not submit to God's rule and refuses to be controlled by His laws. Like the kings and rulers in Psalm 2:2-3, his persistent reaction is, 'Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us'. The wild ass has an innate desire to be free from the restrictions of servitude to any master and wishes to maintain that liberty. He performs no useful service to man. God has made his home 'the wilderness and the barren land his dwellings' (Job 39:6). His desire to be free of man's rightful dominion over God's creatures drives him into the wilderness. In seeking the liberty of following his own desires, he forfeits the shelter of a stable and the right of access to the benefits of a full manger. 'The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searches after every green thing' (Job 39:8). Food is scarce out there in the barren wilderness and he has to work hard to find provender. That pictures the so-called vaunted liberty of the sinner. He desires to be free of every restraint and curb on his fleshly lusts and nature. His freedom results in life in a barren wilderness. He is like the prodigal son of Luke 15, whose high hopes of a joyful life in the far country were all dashed and who was soon reduced to absolute misery and wretchedness, envying even the pigs their diet of husks. Much better and wiser not to stray from the despised Father's house. The colt, though wild by nature and untamed by man, was instantly rendered docile and submissive to Christ, the Lord of all Creation. So too does the Lord subdue sinners, granting them a new nature by virtue of the new birth, making them obedient to His will and employing them in His service.

The colt bound

This colt was tethered. Obviously he could not be trusted to stay close to his mother or his owner's house. He would simply have run away and made a dash for freedom. He was restrained by a tether. Is this not a picture of the sinner? Even while young, as this colt was, we all have an inborn tendency to run from God and the demands of His law. The devil has us all bound with a capability only for evil. We are unable to free ourselves, struggle as we may against sin's shackles. As the colt did, we need someone to set us free.

The colt outside the door

The colt was outside. He was not in the shade or shelter of the stable. The Bible teaches us that sinners are outside of the kingdom of God. They are 'without Christ (or outside of Christ), . . . having no hope, and without God (or outside of God) in the world' (Eph. 2:12). Unless they repent of their sin and believe the gospel, they will be forever shut out of heaven and consigned to hell fire for all eternity. The five foolish virgins of Matthew 25 left it too late to buy oil for their lamps and were found unready when the Bridegroom came. The door was shut, never to be opened again. They failed to gain admittance to the marriage feast and were left outside the door. They had missed their opportunity. Will you be ready when the Bridegroom comes? The Lord Jesus warned the Jews that 'many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 8:11-12). What a tragedy for the Jewish people, the seed of faithful Abraham!

The colt beside the door

Significantly, this colt was tied beside the door which led into the property. He could have entered in, only for the fact that he was tied securely outside. The door was right there within touching distance, but the colt was unable to enter through it. Again we see the plight of the sinner. The door to heaven is presented to the sinner in the gospel, for the Saviour said, in John 10:9, 'I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture'. Freedom and satisfaction are freely offered to the needy sinner. But like the colt he is unable to enter through the door. He is tethered just as securely and effectively as the young colt.

He is bound by the devil who will do all in his power to keep him away from the Saviour. Satan will fill his mind with earthly things and draw him away through the lusts of the flesh and the love of worldly pleasure and deceive him into thinking he has plenty of time to get right with God. Time is just what the sinner does not have! Proverbs 27:1 warns us solemnly: 'Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth'. A moment's consideration will assure us of the truth of this statement. How many have been suddenly cut off without warning in the flower of their youth and been rushed suddenly and unexpectedly into eternity!

The sinner is not only led captive by the devil at his will but he is also shackled by sin which renders him unable to take one step in the right direction towards the Saviour. He has no inclination of himself to seek the Saviour and yet the door to eternal life stands ready to admit him. The Lord Jesus urged His hearers in His sermon on the mount to enter 'in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it' (Matt. 7:13-14). On another occasion, stressing the importance of this matter, He said: 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able' (Luke 13:24). O sinner, strive with all your might to enter in at the strait gate. Let none hinder or deter you. Like the harlots and publicans who knew only too well their own sinfulness, press into the kingdom while the door of mercy still stands open to you.

The colt and the two pathways

The colt was at a place where two ways met. Only one of those paths led to the Lord Jesus Christ. Two pathways are set before you in the Word of God. One is the way of life and the other is the way of death. One path leads to heaven and eternal bliss, the other leads to hell and eternal torment.

Before his death on the top of Mount Pisgah, Moses spoke his final words to Israel in the plains of Moab by Jericho, as they were on the very verge of entering the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. Last words are always impressive and much to be remembered. He said this: 'I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live' (Deut. 30:19).

Twice in the Book of Proverbs, King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived,

warns us: 'There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death' (Pro. 14:12; 16:25). Sinner friend, choose the right pathway, the pathway of blessing and life, the pathway that leads to the Saviour. Think of the colt for a moment. If he had taken the wrong pathway, what glorious experiences he would have missed as he shared in Christ's triumphal procession. If you wish to share in the glory of Christ's triumphant return to earth at His Second Coming, choose the right pathway.

The colt meets the Saviour

How did this meeting come about? The Lord sent out two of His disciples to find then loose and bring the colt to Him. The Lord follows the same pattern in bringing lost souls to Himself. He uses human instruments and sends them out to set poor sinners free through the preaching of the gospel. He directs them in their efforts as He directed the disciples here to the village where the colt was to be found and so described his circumstances that they could not mistake which animal they were to target. The Lord didn't send them to fetch any colt no matter which, but this particular animal. The Lord told them exactly what to say if anyone objected, which was a most likely outcome. There were indeed certain men standing by who queried why they were loosing the colt and leading him away when he was the property of his owner. However, as soon as they heard that the Lord had need of him, they were willing to let him go. They were probably believers who understood that the Lord needed the colt for His present purposes and sent him without further hesitation or dispute. So does God overrule and remove all objections and hindrances to men being set free under the preaching of the glorious gospel. Dear reader, have you had a personal encounter with Christ and surrendered to His will? The results will be far more marvellous for you than for the colt.

The disciples brought the colt back to the Saviour. They spread their garments over him to act as a saddle and the Saviour mounted and sat on his back in complete control of the young animal. Many spread their garments on the pathway, while others cut down branches from the trees and strewed them on the road. The people who led the procession and those who followed cried, 'Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest' (vv. 9-10). How thrilling it is to ponder that Bartimaeus who, but a short while before, had been a penniless blind beggar, sitting in the gutter, had a place in that glorious procession! We who were once sinners will also

follow in Christ's train of triumph. In spite of all the commotion and noise, in spite of the strewn garments and branches, the young colt walked steadily onward, carrying the Lord Jesus into David's royal city, the 'city of the great King' (Psa. 48:2), even the city of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, for David's city and throne are His by sovereign right.

Of all present that day, the colt maintained the closest contact and unbroken union with the Saviour. No one jostled or displaced him. His position was disputed by no one. So does the Lord bring those He has liberated and subdued to His will into close blessed fellowship with Himself. 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' (Rom. 8:35).

THE PATHWAY OF THE KING

This is the only time we ever read in the gospels of Christ riding. He was accompanied on this journey by rapturous jubilation led by His disciples for all the mighty works they had seen. However, not all in that great crowd shared the feelings of the disciples. Luke 19:39 tells us that the Pharisees who were present called on Christ to rebuke his disciples. Doubtless, they objected strongly to the disciples saying, 'Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord'. There was obviously a mixed multitude in the procession. Those who now cheered Him to the echo would soon be baying for His blood, for the sole 'crime' of rightly claiming to be the King of the Jews. The journey reached its climax in the temple where Christ quietly surveyed the scene before retiring to Bethany.

The significance of Christ's entry into Jerusalem

All this was done that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. Zechariah 9:9 was fulfilled to the letter. 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass'. Down to the details of exuberant joy and the shouts of acclamation, all came to pass exactly as Zechariah 9:9 stated it. Christ came riding into Jerusalem as the proclaimed King of Israel. Note the words of the prophet: 'Behold thy King cometh'. He was identified as the King by the fact that He was riding upon an ass's colt.

He was presented not in the glory of His Second Coming, but as the King-in-waiting in His state of humiliation, as One meek and lowly. The donkey was not a beast associated with royalty. It lacked the beauty and style of the

horse or mule, so favoured by royal riders. Although ridden by others such as Balaam, the old prophet of Bethel and Abigail, Nabal's wife, to mention but a few, it was mainly regarded as a beast of burden. With its shaggy coat, long ears and raucous braying it was often despised and even ridiculed.

When Christ comes in power and great glory, He is depicted as crowned and riding a white horse, a fitting steed for the King of all kings. There is a foreshadowing here of future events. Christ follows the route that He will one day take once more as He claims the throne of David and reigns as 'the Lord of the whole earth' (Psalm 97:5). His journey to Jerusalem in Mark 11 started at the Mount of Olives. That's where His journey to the throne will begin when He appears on earth a second time. The first part of Zechariah 14:4 reads like this: 'His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west and there shall be a very great valley.' Verse 8 continues: 'And it shall be in that day that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem.' Verse 9 contains the glorious words: 'And the LORD shall be king over all the earth.'

Jacob's prophecy

There is an interesting reference to the ass's colt in Genesis 49. Jacob, the aged patriarch, gathered his twelve sons around his deathbed and spoke to them about events in the last days. He spoke prophetically, saying to Judah: 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes' (Gen. 49:10-11).

As the Lord Jesus made His way into Jerusalem, He stopped by a vineyard. He bound the colt to the vine, showing how the child of God is bound indissolubly and inextricably to Christ, the true vine and grafted into Him, so that he partakes of the life and fulness of the vine. Christ is indeed a choice vine, excellent in His person and work. The wine and the blood of grapes speak of His shed blood, poured forth to cleanse His people from all their sins. The winepress lay between the Saviour and the throne of David. There could be no throne without the cross. At Calvary He would be crushed between the upper and nether millstones of God's wrath and His blood would flow for the remission of the sins of His people, for 'without shedding of blood is no remission' (Heb. 9:22).

One day when He appears the second time He will visit the winepress again. This time it will be the winepress of God's wrath outside the city, where Christ will trample all His enemies under His feet until their blood reaches unto the horse bridles and spreads over a distance of 1600 furlongs or 200 miles (Rev 14:20). In answer to the question posed in Isaiah 63:2: 'Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the wine fat?' the Lord replies, 'I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment' (Isa. 63:3). The day of vengeance will have arrived. The victory over Christ's enemies will be His alone. There is a terrible and heavy price to be paid for resisting and rejecting the Lord. Thomas Kelly wrote the following lines:

Why that blood His raiment staining?
'Tis the blood of many slain:
Of His foes there's none remaining -
None the contest to maintain;
Fallen they are, no more to rise;
All their glory prostate lies.

Others involved in Christ's advance towards Jerusalem

First it involved a willing, submissive donkey, made subject to the will of the Saviour and thus becoming an important tool to advance His cause in His path to the royal city. As we wholly submit our hearts and lives to the Saviour we advance His cause. The donkey was a key factor in presenting Christ as Lord over all Creation and as the King of Israel. So should we present the Lord Jesus as the One Who is coming to reign as the glorified Lord.

The obedient service of men contributed to His advance to the royal city. Christ could not have ridden triumphantly into Jerusalem without the help and cooperation of His two disciples. Though Christ's command to find and fetch the colt from the nearby village, without the leave or licence of its owners, must have seemed extremely strange to them, they obeyed without question. They did not raise the least objection as they were wont to do. Though they did not understand, they simply obeyed. They were told what to say if anyone disapproved of their action. They were to say, 'The Lord hath need of him' and Mark 11:6 records that 'they said unto them even as Jesus had commanded';

neither more nor less. We must learn to do exactly as the Lord says. We may not understand how it fits in with God's overall scheme of things, but we can be sure that our unquestioning obedience advances the cause of Christ. 2 Peter 3:12 tells us that we are to be 'looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God'. As we seek to evangelise the lost, for 'this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come' (Matt. 24:14), we hasten the day of the Lord, for we work more quickly through the prerequisites of His coming.

The owners of the colt also played their part in advancing Christ's cause and purpose. They surrendered to the will of the King. Their resistance overcome by the power of His Word, they yielded to His request. The King could have the donkey! The Lord takes another step towards the place of David's throne.

Timing of these events

Christ is surrounded by a joyful, exuberant people, as He will be when He appears in glory. Glad Hosannahs will resound far and near. 'And the LORD my God shall come, and all the saints with thee' (Zech. 14:5). All His holy angels will also accompany Him as He descends from heaven to earth. While here on earth, joyful triumph in the coming King is not the continual experience of God's people. However, we do need to keep our eyes on Christ's coming which is visible only to the eye of faith. That will gladden our hearts and lift our spirits as nothing else can.

The Lord grants a view of His coming glory to the disciples as they are about to enter into the darkness and sorrow of Gethsemane and the hour of the crucifixion. That is also the pattern of the Book of Revelation. Previews of heaven and of the Lamb upon the throne are given prior to descriptions of the terrible judgments coming on the earth, in order to strengthen and comfort God's people. Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies follow the same pattern. Details of God's dreadful judgments on idolatrous and apostate Israel are accompanied by promises of mercy and restoration.

The end of the journey

Christ ended His journey to Jerusalem in the temple. Prophesying of His Second Coming, Malachi 3:1 proclaimed that 'the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts'. Again we read, in Isaiah 59:20, 'And the redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn

from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD'. Christ Who had first cleansed the temple at the Passover close to the beginning of His public ministry (John 2:13-16), then cleansed the temple for the second time at the last Passover, casting out the merchants and the sellers of animals and overthrowing 'the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of them who sold doves' for they had converted the 'house of prayer' into 'a den of thieves' (Matt. 21:12-13). Thus will He judge the actions and hearts of men when He returns. His triumphant entry into the royal city did not mark His coronation or indeed the beginning of His royal reign. No, He is still the King-in-waiting, but nonetheless the King.

After this He retired to the quiet obscurity of Bethany. Luke 20:9 speaks of a householder who 'went into a far country for a long time'. Christ has returned to heaven, 'the land that is very far off' (Isa.33:17) and He will remain there for a lengthy period of time. Note the words of Acts 3:21, 'whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things'. However, there will eventually come the momentous occasion when in heaven Christ is brought before the Ancient of Days and formally invested with the kingdom. 'And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed' (Dan. 7:13-14). Let us rejoice and be joyful in our King!

Christ as Judge

'The Father judgeth no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son' (John 5:22). Christ is coming not only as King and 'Governor among the nations' (Psa. 22:28), but as Judge of all the earth. This was the title given Him by Abraham when he pleaded for Sodom in Genesis 18:25. The title given and the question asked by Abraham are just as relevant today as they were then. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' As Abraham knew, it is indeed far from Him 'to slay the righteous with the wicked'.

We have a foreshadowing of His role as Judge as He returned the following day from Bethany to Jerusalem. As He left the seclusion of Bethany, so the period of His withdrawal from earth will end and He will visit Jerusalem again. As He retraced His steps that morning, He was hungry and saw 'a fig tree afar off having leaves' (Mark 11:13). He came to it and, having searched it, found nothing but leaves. It is a curious feature of the fig tree that the fruit appears before the leaves. This tree gave the impression that it had fruit even though 'the time of

figs was not yet'. It was a telling picture of the false professor of faith in Christ. 'They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate' (Titus 1:16). Like the fig tree, the mere professor of a form of religion is 'afar off' from God. This fig tree was cursed and death quickly followed. There is nothing that Christ yearns and longs for more in the believer than the fruits of the Spirit, that likeness to Him that is seen in the life and brings satisfaction to Him. Professing believer, are you a fruitful Christian or a barren fig tree? It is a question you must answer in the light of the day when you will stand before God, as stand before Him you most certainly will.

The fig tree came under the close scrutiny of the Saviour. This was no cursory examination. Every leaf, every twig and every branch were thoroughly searched. Its false claims to be fruitful, pressed upon the attention of all those who passed by, called for investigation. This will be the case when Christ comes and separates the sheep from the goats. These would-be sheep, intermingled with the true flock of God and masquerading as genuine Christians, will be rigorously examined. Exposed as false professors who rendered no service either to God or His people, they are pronounced accursed and consigned immediately to eternal death in the everlasting fires of hell (Matt. 25:41). 'Judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?' (1 Peter 4:17). We see the same principle at work in Ezekiel 9. When God sent out six men to slay the wicked in Jerusalem, sparing only those who mourned over the sin of the city, He instructed them, 'Begin at my sanctuary' (Ezekiel 9:6). The Lord will deal first with His professing people when He comes. They are top of the list for judgment. There were many dens of iniquity in Jerusalem, but Christ stepped first into the temple to examine it.

The incident involving the fig tree was a prelude to what happened next in the temple, the professed centre of the true worship of God. Christ looked for physical fruit in the fig tree, but looked for spiritual fruit, the fruits of repentance and righteousness, in the temple. The evening before He had gone into the temple and 'had looked round about upon all things' (Mark 11:11). This was no cursory inspection either. All the temple activities were included in the all-encompassing scope of His gaze. His eyes are as 'a flame of fire' (Rev. 1:14). Could He not say to every one of the seven churches in Asia, 'I know thy works'? He knew what they did not know about themselves! In Hebrews 4:12, we read that 'the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any

twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.' The eyes of the Lord penetrate to the very depths of the human heart.

In the final phase of His ministry and at His last Passover, Christ cleansed and purged the temple, as He had done at the first Passover of His public ministry. Before facing the unfathomable agonies of the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus kept the Feast of the Passover with His disciples. This Feast looked back to the deliverance of Israel through the shed blood of the Paschal Lamb. Seamlessly, He instituted the Lord's Supper which looked forward to His body being broken and His blood being poured out on the cross. When He comes again in glory, He will sit down with all His redeemed people at another feast, the great Marriage Supper of the Lamb. We will eat and drink with Him in His Father's kingdom. Dear reader, will you be ready when He comes or will the door be shut against you, excluding you for ever from the glories of heaven. Ever keep the day of judgment, when you will give account to God, in your view. Make sure you are truly in Christ, saved by His grace and washed in His blood. Live every day as if it were your last.

Then, O my Lord, prepare
My soul for that great day;
O wash me in Thy precious Blood,
And take my sins away.

Horatius Bonar

Chapter twelve

GOSPEL LIGHT PRESERVED

When Christ ascended into heaven, after forty days, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all those disciples who had been praying in the upper room. They began to speak in tongues which were real languages, for Jews from every nation then dwelling at Jerusalem heard them speak in their own languages (Acts 2:5-6). This greatly assisted in the spread of the Gospel. And spread it did throughout Judaea, Samaria and on into Asia and Europe. Thousands were converted to Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. Churches were formed and it was a time of great blessing.

Sadly, corruption began to develop in the early churches. We find Paul dealing with many impurities in various assemblies. The Roman Emperor Constantine with his spurious embracing of Christianity forced many to profess faith and to be baptised at the point of the sword and decided that he would be head of the Church. The churches had rest, but worldliness and worldly men infiltrated the assemblies of God's people. Apostasy and heresy soon manifested themselves. The elevation of the Bishop of Rome to a position of eminence and the subsequent rise of the papacy led into a darkness that soon enveloped Europe. The Middle Ages became known as the Dark Ages when the flame of Gospel light was well-nigh extinguished. Islam, the religion established by the false prophet Mohammed in the early seventh century was responsible for destroying thousands of churches or converting them into mosques.

God's faithful remnant like the Waldenses in Italy and the Albigenses in France was greatly persecuted, but their missionary zeal led to the sowing of the seeds of the glorious Reformation.

Forerunners of the Reformation

Against the backcloth of man's wickedness, rebellion against God and rejection of His Word and of His Christ, the mercy of God shines forth with matchless radiance. We read in Romans 5:20: 'Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound'. Throughout the ages of this world's history, God has been drawing both Jews and Gentiles, to Himself in saving mercy and grace. He has never left Himself

without a witness.

There were faithful men who were forerunners of the Reformation: John Wycliffe of England, John Huss of Bohemia and Savonarola of Italy, who sought to reform the church of Rome. Wycliffe and Huss denounced the doctrinal errors of Rome, whereas Savonarola attacked the immoral living of her adherents. Wycliffe was the first to translate the Latin Vulgate Bible into English. He is rightly called 'The Morning Star of the Reformation'. So hated was he by Rome that in 1428, forty years after his death, his bones were dug up and his ashes thrown into the River Swift, a tributary of the River Avon which flows into the Severn. In 1415, John Huss was burned, along with his books, and his ashes were flung into the river Rhine. In 1498, Savonarola was burned and his ashes cast into the river Arno which flows through the city of Florence. Thus the three reformers suffered a similar fate at the hands of Romanists.

The glorious Reformation

By the fifteenth century, profound darkness prevailed in the Roman church. Pomp and outward show had replaced the simple faith and worship of the early church. God's Word was not preached and sermons were in Latin which the laity could not understand. Thus the bread of life was withheld from the common people. The church had invented the doctrine of purgatory and introduced the veneration of relics and prayers to the saints. Popery has continued to invent erroneous doctrines and practices to this present day. The sale of indulgences provided a licence to sin and iniquity and consequently evil abounded. 'But God', a phrase which appears frequently in the Bible, was about to intervene in might and power. When the Jews' enemies caused the work of rebuilding the temple in Ezra's day 'to cease by force and power' (Ezra 4:23), God moved through the preaching of His Word with even greater force and power and the work recommenced, and could not be stopped. Light was about to arise in the thick darkness which prevailed in Europe. In 1516, Erasmus edited the first printed Greek New Testament. The gospel of free grace was being rediscovered and the New Testament was translated into various European languages. God was paving the way for the Reformation.

The monk who shook the world

God began to move in the life of a German monk called Martin Luther. He had entered a monastery, hoping to find peace with God, but was bitterly disappointed. No matter how he prayed or fasted, confessed his sins or tortured

his body, he could not find peace. Then God graciously enlightened him and taught him that salvation is 'not by works of righteousness which we have done' (Titus 3:5), but by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ upon the Cross. 'The just shall live by faith' became his watchword and the foundation stone of the Reformation. He yearned to preach this great truth to others. In 1510, he was sent on a mission to Rome and saw there the wickedness and evil practices, the superstitions and ignorance that were prevalent in the city. He rightly commented, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it'.

On his return home, he began to preach in Wittenberg where he had been made professor of theology in the university. At that time, a monk from Leipzig called Tetzel was going throughout Germany selling special indulgences in order to raise funds for the rebuilding of St. Peter's church in Rome. These indulgences permitted men to buy a 'pardon' in advance for a sin they intended to commit and were thus a licence to sin. Luther was greatly incensed and preached against Tetzel. He wrote 95 theses proving the evils of indulgences and nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31st 1517. These theses were not only read, but copied, printed and spread all over Germany and throughout Europe. The invention of the press was a great aid to the dissemination of the truth. The Reformation had begun.

Luther, when summoned to the Diet of Worms to appear before the Emperor Charles V, was asked to retract his writings. He said he could not do so as his conscience was captive to the Word of God and uttered the famous words: 'Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God'. On his way back to Wittenberg, he was kidnapped by some friends for his own protection and taken to a castle called the Wartburg. There he translated the Scriptures and copies were bought up very quickly indeed. He was a prolific writer and his works were translated into other languages and are still available today.

The Diet of Spires in 1526 granted religious liberty, but this was reversed in 1529 and submission to the papacy insisted on. Six German princes protested and they and their followers became known as Protestants.

Other reformers

Ulrich Zwingli, who preached in Zurich, spearheaded the Reformation in Switzerland. Protestants were persecuted and some were even put to death. An army of Roman Catholics numbering 8,000 soldiers invaded the canton of Zurich. A small opposing army of 2,700 was raised, accompanied by Zwingli as a chaplain. He was slain and his body was quartered by a hangman, then

burned and his ashes were scattered to the four winds.

When Luther died in 1546, John Calvin became the leader of the Reformation. His city Geneva became a refuge for persecuted Protestants. John Knox of Scotland was among these. It was in Geneva that some English and Scottish refugees engaged in the task of translating the whole Bible into English and the first edition of the Geneva Bible was printed in 1560. The whole city was organised to promote Biblical doctrine and practice. Calvin was anxious to lead the citizens in the paths of righteousness. He provided for the education of the young and the schools gave an important place to the teaching of the Scriptures. Some students then pursued their studies at the university. The many students who attended Calvin's lectures returned home to spread the truths of the Gospel. His commentaries and treatises are still printed and studied today. He did not enjoy good health and died when only 54 in March 1564 and, at his own request, was buried in an unmarked grave.

It is a forgotten fact that the Reformers, including Luther, were committed to the schooling of the young. Indeed the sixteenth century witnessed the greatest concerted effort ever to reform schools according to the standards of the Word of God in order to promote a godly society and benefit both rich and poor.

England

The teachings of the Reformation soon reached England, where King Henry VIII, a bitter enemy of the Protestant Faith, occupied the throne. Wishing the Pope to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and unwilling to wait any longer for a decision, he broke off relations with the Pope and the Church of Rome and declared himself the head of the Church in England. He beheaded Thomas More and John Fisher who opposed him, dissolved the monasteries and effected a political reformation. Influenced by Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, he had a Bible in English placed in every parish church and the churches left open to allow the public access to it. In his reign, over sixty martyrs were burned, including Thomas Bilney and Anne Askew. After Henry's death, Edward VI ascended the throne and the Reformation in England and Wales made rapid progress. Images were removed from the churches and Cranmer replaced the Roman Missal with the English Prayer Book. Bloody Mary succeeded Edward and vainly set about restoring Roman Catholicism in England. Protestants were persecuted and almost 300 men and women were burnt at the stake, including Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cran-

mer, John Bradford and Robert Ferrar. England was greatly perturbed by the burning of the martyrs. Their cruel deaths coupled with the wickedness of their persecutors caused many to turn away from the darkness of Rome and embrace the truth of God's Word. A copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs was placed in all the parish churches in the reign of Elizabeth I so that all could read the record. Of greater effect than the burning of the martyrs, however, was the wide circulation of Tyndale's translation of the Bible from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek into English. Due to the opposition of the Roman Church, he could neither translate nor print the Bible in England, so he went to Germany and completed his translation of the New Testament in 1525. Copies were smuggled into England in bales of merchandise and widely circulated. The Roman church burned every copy it could find and then burned Tyndale in 1536 before he could finish his translation of the whole Bible.

Scotland

In the fifteenth century, prior to the Reformation, many Lollards, followers of Wycliffe had already suffered martyrdom in Scotland, by being burned at the stake. Patrick Hamilton, the first Reformation martyr, who boldly preached the truths of the Bible, was arrested, charged with heresy and burned in St Andrews in 1528. He exercised a great influence in Scotland. Patrick's Pleas or points of Reformation doctrine 'became a cornerstone of Protestant theology in Scotland and England.' Five more martyrs soon suffered a similar fate. But God raised up other witnesses including George Wishart. Persecuted in Scotland he fled to England. His faith faltered for a time but he returned to Scotland determined to preach the Gospel which he did to great crowds. The cardinal had him brought to trial and he was condemned to burn at the stake. John Knox who supported Wishart's preaching became his successor. Intending to flee to the Continent to escape persecution, he was captured by the French and sent to the galleys. Once released, he went to England where Protestantism was flourishing under Edward VI. When Mary became queen he escaped to Geneva and spent four years under Calvin's ministry. On his return to Scotland he preached against idolatry and powerfully and successfully exhorted people to return to Biblical truth. Under his influence, the Presbyterian system of church government was introduced, education was encouraged and schools and colleges were set up. His chief desire, however, was to spread the gospel. He denounced the Mass and other errors of Rome. This provoked the wrath of many papists including Mary Queen of Scots who wished to hinder the advance of Protestantism. Knox died in 1572. These words were uttered at

his grave side: 'Here lies one who never feared the face of man'.

France

Francis I, king of France, had little time for Protestantism and in 1516 entered into a formal agreement with the Pope. As reformed doctrine spread, he was so enraged that he had thousands killed or burned at the stake. In the reign of his son, Henry II, persecution increased. Some fled to Geneva which was crowded with refugees. Henry prohibited the sale of books by pedlars, the discussion of religion and had printshops and packages entering France examined, but these stern measures could not stop the onward march of the Reformation. French Protestants became known as Huguenots and their leaders were Bourbon and Coligny. Bourbon was slain in battle and Coligny was one of the first victims of the horrific Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris in 1572. 70,000 Huguenots were slain in the massacre and the atrocities which followed. Coligny's severed head was embalmed and sent as a present to Pope Gregory XIII who had the church bells rung and a commemorative medal struck.

The Edict of Nantes (1598) secured some liberties for the Huguenots in the reign of Henry IV, a weak Protestant, but Louis XIV wanted all his subjects to be Roman Catholics. He persecuted the Huguenots and their pastors were forbidden to preach. Hundreds fled from France. Those caught fleeing were condemned to the galleys. In 1685 Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes. Protestant churches were demolished, Protestant worship forbidden and Huguenot children had to be brought up as Roman Catholics. It is estimated that over 300,000 Huguenots left France to seek refuge in Switzerland, Prussia, Holland and England.

The Netherlands

In the late fourteenth century, some groups in the Netherlands had begun to campaign for reform in the Church of Rome while remaining within its fold. At the beginning of the 16th century, Roman Catholicism was in control of the Low Countries which were part of the Holy Roman Empire ruled by Charles V. The Reformation doctrines reached the Netherlands via the Rhine from Germany and these were favourably received. Charles V re-established the Inquisition which had been formed, in the thirteenth century, to suppress heresy by persecution and cruel torture in northern Italy and southern France. It was one of the main instruments of the Counter-Reformation. For a period

of thirty years, Protestants were questioned and tortured. Those who would not repudiate their faith were burned at the stake, hung, strangled or buried alive. Over 5,000 people were put to death, charged with heresy, in the reign of Charles V.

Philip II of Spain succeeded his father Charles V. He it was who sent the Armada against England in 1588. Storms lashed the Spanish fleet and it was completely destroyed. 'The Protestant wind' which wrecked the Spanish galleons saved England from invasion. A commemorative medal was struck with the words: 'He blew with His winds and they were scattered'. Philip was determined to crush Protestantism in the Netherlands. However, he made his sister Margaret Regent and she was unwilling to persecute the Protestants. In 1566 Philip ordered Margaret to enforce his policy of persecution. All his subjects were to accept the doctrines of Rome. Those who did not co-operate were to be handed over to the Inquisition.

The Dutch leader, William the Silent, who had been brought up as a Roman Catholic and served Charles V, became a follower of Luther and later of Calvin and was opposed to Philip's policy of persecution. He took up arms against the Duke of Alva who led the strong Spanish Catholic army. Alva had set up the court called the Council of Blood. Thousands were put to death, thousands had their property confiscated and thousands fled to Germany, England and other countries. It was said of Alva that he was 'the incarnation of fiendish cruelty'. Some Dutchmen resolved to resist Spain on the sea and formed the Sea Beggars. Coastal towns resisted the Spanish forces, even breaching the dykes so the Sea Beggars could come to their defence. The Spanish fought well on land but were no match for the Sea Beggars. Sadly, the Dutch leader, William the Silent, who is regarded as the founder of the Dutch Republic, was assassinated in 1584. Eventually Holland obtained its freedom from Spain and the Pope.

Wars of religion

Some states in Germany were ruled by Protestant princes, while others were ruled by Roman Catholic princes. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) had decreed that the people must follow the religion of their prince. However, this applied only to Lutherans and Romanists and not to Calvinists who had no liberty of worship in any state. There was great conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Trouble flared in Bohemia, the country of the Czechs, where 90% of the popu-

lation supported the Reformation. Their king Ferdinand II persecuted the Bohemian Protestants most cruelly. Protests were made in Prague, but discussions ended when the Mayor and his councillors were thrown out of the windows of the new Town hall by the Protestants. This marked the beginning of the Thirty Years War (1616-1648). The Bohemians dethroned Ferdinand and enthroned the Calvinist Frederick I, but he was defeated in 1620 at the battle of the White Mountain by Ferdinand, now the Holy Roman Emperor, who was reinstated and persecuted his subjects with ruthless brutality. Three quarters of the population disappeared. Almost 30,000 villages were destroyed. Protestants were exiled and their lands were given to Roman Catholics. This put an end to the reformation movement in Bohemia. Bohemia was wiped off the map for over 200 years. It presently forms part of the Czech Republic.

The conflict between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism moved next to northern Germany. Christian IV of Denmark was moved to come to the assistance of the Protestants, but was defeated by Ferdinand's forces under Tilly and Wallenstein. The greater part of the Danish mainland was then occupied by the Roman Catholic army to the great joy of the Emperor Ferdinand. But God raised up a champion for the defeated and disheartened Protestant people. Gustavus Adolphus, the king of Sweden, was an evangelical Christian who desired to help forward the Protestant cause. He landed in Germany in 1630 with 18,000 men. The dispirited Protestants were reluctant to join him at first. Tilly besieged and almost totally destroyed Magdeburg. Out of a population of 30,000 only 4,000 survived the massacre. The children marched across the square, singing one of Luther's hymns and the infuriated Tilly ordered that they be put to death. The buildings were burned and only the cathedral and some homes of the poor were left. This roused the Protestants to action and they joined forces with Gustavus. Tilly was defeated at Breitenfeld and again at the River Lech where he was mortally wounded. With Wallenstein now commanding the Emperor's troops, the two armies met at Lützen in 1632. Before engaging the enemy, the Swedish army sang 'A mighty fortress is our God' written by Luther as well as Gustavus' own battle-hymn, 'Fear not, O little flock, the foe' and the whole army knelt in prayer. A thick fog came down on the field of battle, Gustavus was separated from his soldiers and fell wounded. Asked by an enemy who he was, he answered, 'I am the king of Sweden and this day I seal with my blood the liberty and religion of the German nation!' Upon hearing this statement, a soldier shot him through the head. The Protestants fought with greater determina-

tion, defeated the enemy and recovered the body of their champion. The war dragged on for several years but eventually the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648. Protestantism had won the right to exist in Central Europe.

The glorious Reformation has truly been described as ‘the greatest revival since Pentecost’. Many great stalwarts of the faith were raised up by God and baptised with the Holy Ghost and with fire. They fearlessly pressed the battle to the very gates of the enemy. The gospel light spread throughout the nations, despite man’s efforts to extinguish it. Many chose death rather than deny their faith. Many were ‘tortured, not accepting deliverance’ (Heb. 11:35). Many lost their homes and livelihoods. If God had not brought about the Reformation, what darkness would have prevailed in Europe! What darkness would have enshrouded our own nation! We would have lived in impenetrable darkness and died in dense darkness in the chains of false religion and spent eternity in the unfathomable darkness of hell. Glory to God for His great mercy!

The Puritans

The Puritan movement began in the reign of Elizabeth I. The Puritans felt that further progress was needed in the work of the Reformation. They opposed the use of vestments by the clergy and the Queen’s expressed wish to have unofficial meetings banned and those who organised them duly punished. At this time many of the Puritans were beginning to favour the Presbyterian form of church government. However, the majority of the Puritans were happy to remain in the church of England expecting further reforms. Others felt that genuine believers should separate from the Established Church and were known as Separatists. They were greatly persecuted.

It was in Elizabeth’s reign, in 1588, that Philip II of Spain, the foremost political leader of the Counter-Reformation, sent his great Armada against England, but his plans to crush Protestantism there were completely overthrown, when God intervened and his ships were wrecked by storms.

When James I became King of England, he was presented with a petition on his way to London, asking him to eradicate all remaining Romish practices from the Church. His response was to call a conference in Hampton Court. There was much debate between bishops and Puritans on disputed issues, but after the Conference broke up, 300 clergymen were expelled from their churches by the bishops. At the Conference, however, the King called for a new translation of the Bible which was published in 1611, namely the Authorised Version.

Puritanism made rapid advances, supported by many members of Parliament. William Perkins was a prominent Puritan who earned the title: 'the Calvin of England', because of his powerful Calvinistic sermons, heard by many Cambridge academics. Richard Sibbes was another Puritan whose preaching attracted large crowds of academics. His writings are still extant and known throughout the world. Of him it was said: 'Heaven was in him before he was in heaven.' Thomas Goodwin was a very influential Puritan and his republished writings exist to this day. There were many Puritans and their writings are still valued.

Charles I followed his father James on to the throne. By this time Parliament was largely Protestant and increasingly supportive of the Puritans. There were constant disputes with the king who had married a Roman Catholic. The king decided to rule without Parliament and did so for eleven years (1629-40). One of his chief advisers was Archbishop Laud who began to persecute Protestant ministers who did not conform to his demands. Some had their cheeks branded, fines were exacted and some had their ears cut off. Laud tried to impose the Church of England Prayer Book on Scottish churches. The Scots rebelled and, in 1638, signed the National Covenant which upheld Presbyterianism. Finding it financially difficult to raise an army, Charles recalled Parliament. The Long Parliament arrested Laud, accused the king of tyranny and announced that the will of Parliament should prevail. Civil War ensued in 1642 which ended in 1648 with victory for the Parliament's New Model Army and the execution of the king in 1649. The Scottish army had been brought into the conflict in 1643 by the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant and both Scotland and England now undertook to bring the churches of the three kingdoms into uniformity of religion and to root out Popery and Prelacy.

The Westminster Assembly

Consequently, in 1646, the Westminster Assembly, composed of theologians and members of the English Parliament, in order to restructure the Church of England drew up the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. These documents, subordinate to the Bible, had a great influence not only in the seventeenth century, but were incorporated into the doctrinal standards of other denominations and are still influential today. They have been most effective in preserving the Faith. The Shorter Catechism has been taught to many children and has been a great benefit in instructing them in Biblical doctrines.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth was established in 1649 and Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector until 1653. The use of the Prayer Book was forbidden by law, and Anglican clergymen were ousted from their churches and replaced by approved ministers. Protestant denominations enjoyed liberty of worship, but this was denied to Popery and Prelacy.

Cromwell, learning of the prolonged suffering of the Waldenses in North Italy, as a result of cruel persecution by the Roman Church, threatened military action and secured for them a few years of respite. He set up a relief fund to help them and half a million pounds was raised, including a donation of £2,000 from the Lord Protector himself.

Presbyterians in Ireland, however, who had opposed the execution of Charles I, suffered during the early years of the Commonwealth. Only six or so ministers were allowed to remain in Ireland when there was a refusal to sign the oath of Engagement which renounced Charles I and his dynasty and bound them to the Commonwealth. Cromwell, however, on seeing the law-abiding nature of Presbyterians, lifted the persecution. Presbyterianism began to flourish, new congregations sprang up until there were 80 churches.

The Restoration

The Stuarts were restored to the throne of England in 1660. Under Charles II, the Puritans were greatly persecuted, despite the king's pledge to afford liberty of conscience to all his subjects. The Clarendon Code which contained the Act of Uniformity compelled all clergymen to give their assent to the Book of Common Prayer. Almost 2,000 ministers refused to do so and lost their livings. They were forbidden to come within five miles of a city. John Bunyan of Bedford was imprisoned for twelve years because he would not agree to giving up preaching. He wrote sixty-eight books, the best known being 'The Pilgrim's Progress', 'The Holy War' and 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners'. His writings made him the greatest and most influential of the Puritans. The seventeenth century saw many books published by Puritan writers. William Gurnall, Richard Baxter, Joseph Caryl, John Owen and Matthew Henry featured among them.

During Charles' reign, the Scottish Covenanters suffered dreadful persecution because they refused to acknowledge the king as head of the Church,

claiming, and rightly so, that the Lord Jesus was the only rightful Head of the Church. They also opposed the king's intention to impose rule by bishops in the Church. For twenty-five terrible years, the persecution and struggle continued. It reached its peak during 1684-5, a period known as the Killing Times, when many martyrs were put to death. They 'loved not their lives unto the death' (Rev. 12:11).

When Charles II came to the throne, Presbyterians in Ireland expected fair treatment for they had opposed the execution of Charles I. They sent a delegation to greet the new king. He promised to protect Irish Presbyterianism, but proved as treacherous in his promises to them as to the Scots. The national church in Ireland was placed under the rule of bishops, pulpits were declared vacant and every Presbyterian minister who would not conform to the Established Church was ejected. Presbyterians who did not attend Church of Ireland services were fined and imprisoned and being thus impoverished were unable to support their ministers. Many emigrated to America.

James II succeeded his brother in 1685. That same year Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes which had given Protestants some liberties and thousands of Huguenots had to flee from France. James was an out-and-out papist and wished to restore Romanism in England and Scotland. As king he was head of the Church of England. He drew up Declarations of Indulgence, granting liberty of worship to all including Protestants and Romanists. He required all clergymen to read this on a certain day. Seven bishops refused and were sent to the Tower of London. They were later acquitted to the great chagrin of the king. James had two daughters whom their mother had brought up as Protestants, but when a son was born to his second wife, it was inevitable that a Roman Catholic would be the next king. An appeal was made to William, Prince of Orange, who was married to Mary, James' older daughter, to lead a Dutch invasion. He landed at Torbay with a Dutch army in 1688 and James fled to France. In 1689, James went to Ireland but was defeated by William at the Battle of the Boyne. James returned to exile and never returned. Thus England and Scotland were saved from Romanism.

Chapter thirteen

REVIVAL BLESSING

God has been pleased to revive His people on many occasions. If it had not been so, the gospel light would have been greatly diminished and well-nigh extinguished. It reminds us of the situation in 1 Samuel 3:3-4, where we read that ‘ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD . . . the LORD called Samuel’. God raised up a faithful prophet when circumstances were very bleak and dark indeed. He never leaves Himself without a witness. There were many times of revival and reformation recorded in the Old Testament, for example under the ministry of faithful prophets and godly kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah. Even in the dark days of apostasy when Malachi ministered, there was a faithful remnant. ‘They that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name (Mal. 3:16).

Under the preaching of John the Baptist, God was pleased to send revival and prepare the way for the Messiah. Christ’s ministry saw times of great blessing, not only among the Jews, but even among the Samaritans. The outpouring of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost ushered in great revival blessing, not just in Jerusalem and in Israel but in many Gentile countries. In the centuries before the Reformation, there were often times of refreshing and increase in many places.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century was a great revival of true religion and worship and its effects are still with us today. Emigrants, seeking liberty of worship according to their conscience, spread the knowledge of the Word of God in their adopted countries. The most famous of these were the Pilgrim Fathers who set off for North America aboard the ‘Mayflower’ in 1620 to settle in New England. Large numbers of Puritans, estimated at 20,000, including godly ministers, soon followed them.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, hymns were introduced into church worship. Isaac Watts, the great Independent hymn writer, rightly claimed that, by singing psalms alone, it was as if Christ had never been born or lived, had never died, risen again or ascended into heaven. Charles Wesley wrote many

hymns as did John Newton and William Cowper. The leading Baptist minister of the period was the learned John Gill. However, by and large, England was experiencing a great spiritual decline at this time. Anglican bishops were worldly and indolent, engrossed in sports, politics and other entertainments. Preaching had departed from the truths of the Gospel. Drunkenness, immorality, barbaric sports and total disinterest in the Gospel characterised the laity.

Divine intervention

But God stepped into the situation. In 1729, students in Oxford university formed the Holy Club, to promote personal holiness. They studied the Bible and involved themselves in charitable works. They were called Methodists because they lived according to a set plan. These were unconverted young men who did not understand that salvation was not by works, but by sovereign grace alone granting faith alone in Christ alone. Their leaders were John and Charles Wesley.

John Wesley

In 1734, John Wesley felt he was called of God to be a missionary to the Indians in Georgia, a new colony in America. Influenced by Moravian Christians whom he had met on the ship, he came to the startling conclusion that he was not saved. In 1738 he wrote: 'I who went to America to convert others was never converted to God myself'. On his return to England, he attended a Moravian church and heard words, written by Luther, stressing that only by faith alone can a sinner be justified before God. His heart was 'strangely warmed' and he looked to Christ alone for salvation. His brother Charles had been saved three days earlier.

John Wesley became an itinerant preacher of the gospel throughout Great Britain and Ireland. He preached pardon for sin through Christ's atoning work on the cross, justification through faith in Christ alone and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. Undaunted by the fact that most churches excluded him from their pulpits, Wesley preached in the open air, often three or four times a day in many towns and villages. Many were the converts won to Christ. Both preacher and his followers were subjected to persecution and stones were often thrown at the preacher. To avoid the stone-throwing mobs, Wesley would wisely back his horse against the town pharmacy window as he preached from his saddle. Separation from the Church of England did not take place until 1795, four years after Wesley died. Nevertheless, the Methodist movement

served to bring about a revival of true religion in the Established Church.

George Whitefield

George Whitefield was introduced to the Holy Club in Oxford University by Charles Wesley and he soon became a Methodist. Like the Wesleys, Whitefield, trusting in his own efforts, remained until 1737 in ignorance of the grace of God and the need of a God-given repentance and faith in the Saviour. He then preached for thirty-five years throughout the British Isles and several American colonies. Although he preached alongside the Wesleys at first, they later went their separate ways as Whitefield was a Calvinist and the Wesleys Arminians by conviction.

Whitefield preached to huge crowds. He led the way in open-air preaching. He had a strong voice, was an eloquent speaker and God gave him great power to preach. On one occasion he preached to a congregation of 10,000 at Kingswood near Bristol. There miners came under deep conviction of sin and tears left white streaks on their blackened faces. Many, many hundreds were genuinely converted to Christ. In 1742, he was involved in the Cambuslang revival, four miles from Glasgow. The people had been stirred up to pray, praying for days and well into the night. Thousands flocked to hear the preaching; the hunger for God's word was insatiable. Thousands came to the Lord's table to remember the suffering and blood-shedding of the Redeemer and thousands were saved. Evangelical zeal is certainly not incompatible with Calvinistic doctrine. Whitefield was the greatest evangelist of modern times. As he said himself: 'The fire is kindled in the country and, I know, all the devils in hell shall not be able to quench it'. The devil did try by stirring up mockers to attend the meetings and hurl abuse at the preacher, but, as usual, he overstepped himself and many who came to mock remained to pray.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon

After Whitefield's death, there was a decline once more in the spiritual life of the nation. However, God was about to move again in power and blessing. Charles Spurgeon was born in 1834 in Kelvedon, the Essex County town. He spent five years of his early childhood with his grandfather, Rev. James Spurgeon, who was the minister in Stambourne Congregational (Independent) Church. Life in the home was based firmly on the scriptures and prayer. Charles then moved back to his parents' home in Colchester. His father John

pastored a nearby village church in addition to secular work and his mother was a godly, prayerful woman.

Waterbeach Baptist Church

Charles, even as a child, was almost exclusively interested in books. He was an avid reader and participated eagerly and appropriately in theological discussions. He became pastor of Waterbeach Baptist Church when only 17 years of age, two years after his conversion. The congregation grew in number from 40 to 400 and many had to stand outside the church. The whole village was transformed by the power of the Gospel until drunkenness was almost a thing of the past.

Spurgeon was greatly gifted as a preacher. He was an intellectual genius, possessed remarkable oratorical skills and had a sonorous, melodious voice which was said to resemble the sound of 'silver bells.' However, he well knew that natural talents were not the key to success in the work of God, but rather the power of the Holy Ghost was essential. He was known as a man of genial disposition and had a ready supply of wit.

New Park Street Baptist Church

He was called to New Park Street Baptist Church in London in 1854 and within months it was crowded. While their church was being enlarged, the congregation moved to Exeter Hall which could accommodate 5,000, but it was still too small and hundreds were turned away. As their own enlarged building could squeeze in a mere 2,000 people, they continued to meet on the sabbath evening in the Exeter Hall. The new church members were largely new converts. Other churches experienced similar blessings and were roused to more prayer and greater activity in the Lord's work. The blessing was not of Spurgeon but of God. A new building was planned and The Metropolitan Tabernacle was completed in March 1861.

A special service of national humiliation was held during the Indian Mutiny in the Crystal Palace. 23,634 people attended. Spurgeon was the only man with a voice powerful enough to carry to the confines of the vast assembly.

Spurgeon's workload

Spurgeon preached over ten times a week. He published a sermon once a week which had to be prepared for the printer. He published a volume of sermons

once a year. 56 million copies were sold in almost 40 different languages. He compiled daily readings and a hymn book, and published a monthly magazine, 'The Sword and Trowel.' The Treasury of David was a major work. He replied personally to 500 letters every week. He founded the Pastors' College in 1865 and lectured to the student body. The College men went out to form new churches. There were eighteen new churches in London by 1866. He founded an orphanage, built almshouses for widows and aged women, a school for 400 pupils and founded the Colporteurs' Association. Spurgeon bore the burden of responsibility for all these ventures, raising money and contributing his own to support their upkeep. Money made from the sale of his publications was devoted to these projects. He engaged in controversy, exposing the falsehood of baptismal regeneration as taught in the Anglican churches. He attacked the downgrade in the Baptist Union, exposing evolutionary thinking and liberal theology. He resigned from the Baptist Union in 1887. At that time, Higher Criticism was coming in like a flood. The Fall was declared a myth, as were the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Large portions of the Bible were dismissed as fabrications. Surprisingly, Spurgeon had few to support him in his defence of the Gospel. He confided to a friend that the fight against error was killing him.

Spurgeon's health suffered as a result of his gigantic labours. Nervous exhaustion, gout and even smallpox affected him. From the late 60s, He had to make periodic visits to the warmer climate of Mentone in France to recuperate. He was unable to preach on occasions. His wife was also ill. Spurgeon struggled on despite pain and weakness and God continued to bless his ministry. He died on 31st January 1892 in Mentone, a giant in the work of God.

Chapter fourteen

REVIVALS IN ULSTER

There have been many local revivals in mainland Britain, including the Welsh Revival (1904 - 1905) and the Isle of Lewis Revival in 1949. God has also graciously revived His work in Ulster on several occasions.

The Six Mile Water revival (1625-1636)

The Six Mile Water extends from Larne to the shores of Lough Neagh. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the spiritual state of Ulster was appalling. The Reformation had exercised no influence there as the Bible had not been translated into Gaelic. Immigrants from Scotland were Presbyterians, but both they and those from England were from the lowest strata of society and many were ex-convicts.

God mercifully intervened in the situation and some notable Presbyterian ministers came from Scotland to escape persecution, including Robert Blair of Bangor, George Dunbar of Larne, John Livingstone of Killinchy, Josiah Welch of Templepatrick who was John Knox's son-in-law, John Ridge of Antrim, Robert Cunningham and James Hamilton. James Glendinning, minister in Oldstone near Antrim, preached the law and the wrath of God against sin. Multitudes were convicted, but Glendinning seemed incapable of proclaiming the Gospel message of forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ. Josiah Welch, a newcomer to Ulster, came to the rescue and preached the glorious gospel of salvation through Christ's atoning death. God was pleased to work mightily and save souls. Revival spread from Antrim to other counties. Every social class was changed and the converts had a hunger for God's Word. People prayed and fasted and the Gospel of saving grace spread throughout the whole country. People flocked to the Communion services and in 1632 Josiah Welch reported that there was an audience of 1500. However, when God moves in revival the devil without fail strikes back by stirring up many enemies to persecute the people of God, mainly Episcopalian clergymen and Roman Catholic friars. However, there were some supporters within the Episcopalian

church, among them Archbishop Ussher. Robert Blair visited Scotland in 1630 and along with John Livingstone preached at Kirk of Shotts. As Livingstone preached by popular demand on the Monday after the Communion Services, revival blessing was poured out and 500 people were saved on that one day. In 1631, Blair, Livingstone, Dunbar and Welch were suspended and, because they refused to conform to Episcopacy were ousted from their pulpits in 1632. They appealed to King Charles I, their case was retried and the suspension withdrawn for six months but then reimposed and eventually the ministers were forbidden to preach anywhere in the diocese. Welch soon passed into the presence of his Lord and Dunbar, Blair, Livingstone and others, having failed in their efforts to get to America, went to Scotland. Despite losing their leaders, God had done such a deep work in the hearts of the people that the work progressed. The revival continued for ten years or more and as a result Presbyterianism was established in Ulster.

Times of trouble often follow times of blessing. God is pleased to bless and strengthen His people to meet the onslaught of the enemy. Romanists were stirred up to wipe out Protestants in the terrible massacre of 1641 when thousands were cruelly murdered and the vilest atrocities committed.

The 1859 Revival

It is a sad fact that after times of refreshing and fruitfulness there often follow times of drought and barrenness. There is a spiritual decline and God's people become complacent and cease to wrestle in prayer. Perhaps they, in complacency and foolish pride of heart, attribute the blessings received to their own endeavours and forget that revival blessing is the sovereign work of a sovereign God. We must ever remember that the great burden to pray is the beginning of revival not its source.

Although there were many faithful ministers of the gospel in Episcopalian congregations, the 1859 revival was largely channelled through the Presbyterian Church. In the eighteenth century, Arianism or Unitarianism was infiltrating that Church. Unitarians deny the deity of Christ and the Trinity, believing that there is only one person in the Godhead. They reject the doctrine of original sin, predestination and the infallibility of the Scriptures. They refused to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith and became known as the Non-subscribers. Because of the departure from the faith on the part of many ministers in the Presbyterian Church, the Secession Church was established in Ulster and its ministers and elders were required to subscribe the Westminster Standards.

The church purged

In mercy to His people and the cause of Christ, God raised up a mighty champion to contend for the purity of the faith, Dr Henry Cooke. At first he had none to support him, but in the Synod of 1829 he utterly defeated the arguments of the Unitarian protagonist, Dr Montgomery of Dunmurry and consequently the Presbyterian Church was successfully purged from the error of Arianism. In similar fashion, Phinehas of old boldly confronted the sin which robbed Israel of God's blessing and, caring nothing for rank, position or the fallout, slew Zimri, a prince in Israel and Cozbi, a royal princess of Midian. Like Phinehas, Dr Cooke was not content to go meekly with popular opinion, but stood up fearlessly for the truth. There can be no revival blessing in a church which is tolerant of doctrinal error and sin. God does not and cannot bless apostasy. In 1835 all ministers were compelled to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith. Five years later, the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod which originated in Scotland came together to form the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The Presbyterian Church had been unified and consolidated but worship was still cold and formal. Drunkenness and immorality were a feature of society. There were, however, some who longed for an outpouring of the Spirit of God. Hearing reports of the great awakening in America in 1858, the desire for a like awakening intensified.

The prayer meeting in Kells

In November 1856, Mrs Colville, a Baptist missionary visited Ballymena in the county of Antrim. As she was in a home presenting the message of Christ and Him crucified in the place of poor sinners, a young man, James McQuilkin realised he was not saved and came under conviction of sin. He came to trust in the Saviour and experienced joy and peace in believing. While talking with James McQuilkin, another young man, Jeremiah Meneely realised that his friend had an assurance of salvation which he himself sorely lacked. Reading in John 6:37 that 'him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out' and believing in the truth of these words, he too entered into the rest of faith. James McQuilkin was the means of leading two other young men to the Saviour, Robert Carlisle and John Wallace. These four young men began to meet every Friday evening in the schoolhouse in Kells for prayer and Bible study and two other men soon joined them. The first conversion took place on 1st January 1858 and conversions followed every week. At the end of 1858 there were fifty young men meeting for prayer. Cottage meetings were held and also open

air services to which large numbers flocked. Prayer meetings multiplied until there were 100 in the Connor area, all wholeheartedly calling on God for a gracious outpouring of the Spirit. Jeremiah Meneely became the preacher of the converted band. The people had a great hunger for the Word of God and on occasions he had to preach several times at a service. He went through towns and villages preaching the gospel and with his band of converts saw revival blessing spread throughout the whole Province. Rev. Moore, the Presbyterian minister in Connor, was a leader in the revival. He was a plain preacher who saw many converted to Christ. Souls were saved in almost every meeting.

The revival then spread to Ahoghill. Samuel Campbell who had been saved as a result of hearing Jeremiah Meneely and James McQuilkin preach, visited his family in Ahoghill on Christmas Day 1858 and told them of his joyful experience of God's saving mercy and exhorted them all to flee from the wrath to come. That night his mother and sister were both convicted of their sinful state and sought God earnestly for pardon and cleansing, as did his brother three weeks later. The day following the mother's conversion she had occasion to witness to her son-in-law, Anthony Huston. Her testimony caused him to weep over his sin and six weeks later after much agonising in prayer, he too was saved. His mother was saved at a prayer meeting for revival in his home. New converts witnessed to family members of deliverance from sin through Jesus' blood and thus the message spread. Meetings were held and prayer meetings began to multiply. In March 1859, a meeting attended by 3,000 people was held, the venue being the First Presbyterian Church, but it had to be vacated for safety reasons. Jeremiah Meneely was one of the speakers. Anxious souls knelt in the muddy streets in the pouring rain as they sought forgiveness. The whole district was soon engulfed in a mighty outpouring of the Spirit of God. Soon the revival spread throughout Co. Antrim and on into Co. Down, Co. Tyrone, Co. Londonderry, Co. Armagh, Co. Donegal, Co. Monaghan and Co. Cavan. Co. Fermanagh, being largely Roman Catholic and Episcopalian, experienced little of the revival blessing.

Belfast

Rev. Thomas Toye, minister of Great George's Street Presbyterian Church, as a result of hearing of God's gracious movings in America, commenced prayer meetings specifically for revival. The converts from Connor and Ahoghill were invited to address his congregation in May 1859 and many seemed deeply impressed. The converts then visited Berry Street Presbyterian Church, where

Dr. Hugh Hanna was the minister. A few souls were saved initially, but the revival gathered pace and within a few weeks there were at least 10,000 new converts. Dr Hanna worked tirelessly to the point of exhaustion, preaching and visiting anxious souls and ministering to the new converts.

Features of the revival

The revival was preceded by a thorough purging of the Presbyterian Church from the heresy of Arianism due to the unremitting efforts of Dr. Henry Cooke. It was also preceded by the gracious outpouring of a spirit of prayer and supplication. Separation from error and earnest prayer are always the harbingers of revival. During this marvellous time of visitation by God, prayer meetings were multiplied. There were prayer meetings daily and also throughout the night. There were meetings for prayer in homes as well as in churches. People earnestly and fervently cried on the Lord for revival. Reports of God's blessing in other areas increased the intensity of longing for similar blessing.

Large crowds began to attend the preaching of God's Word. Such was their hunger that preachers were prevailed upon to preach a second and third time as the people refused to be dismissed. When buildings and churches were too small to hold the gatherings, meetings were held in the open air. On one occasion, about 6,000 people congregated near Portrush to hear Brownlow North, James McQuilkin, Jeremiah Meneely and others preach in the open air. In June 1859, a vast congregation of at least 25,000 people assembled in the Botanic Gardens in Belfast to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Ghost and the continuation of God's blessing. Eager participants came from all parts of Ulster by railway to join those from more local areas.

Converts were multiplied. After years of barrenness, souls were saved in great numbers. Some came under such deep conviction of sin that they fell prostrate on the ground, pleading with God and crying to Him to have mercy on their souls. God answered their cries and they entered into the assurance of sins forgiven within a short space of time. Many Roman Catholics were also saved during the revival, despite the strong opposition and hatred of the Gospel and its ministers, openly displayed by many of their co-religionists.

These converts were not only soundly saved, but their lives were completely transformed. They were living examples of the truth of 2 Cor. 5:17. 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' Their countenances were radiant with the joy of the Lord. They had a holy hatred of sin, a deep and genuine love for the Sav-

our and a fervent zeal for the cause of Christ. They no longer desecrated the sabbath day as had been their habit, but kept it holy as God had commanded in His law. Blasphemers ceased to swear and the worldly-minded ceased from pursuing worldly pleasures.

Open-air meetings were multiplied despite the efforts of papists to have them banned. Indeed they were suspended in Belfast for a time but God overruled the efforts of the enemies of the Gospel. Dr. Hugh Hanna, 'Roaring Hanna' as he was called, campaigned tirelessly for the right of the people to hold open-air meetings, as he did against the errors of Rome and the evils of alcohol.

Children's work flourished. The number of children attending sabbath schools and children's meetings greatly increased and there was no shortage of workers from among the new converts.

Christians also had their hearts greatly stirred to greater faith and an increased love and devotion to the Saviour. Bibles were bought and eagerly read. Dead, cold formalism was replaced by real, live, vibrant worship. Prayer was fluent and earnest as intercession was made on behalf of sinners. Interest in the foreign mission field was revived. Prior to the revival, Christians were largely unmoved by the plight of the heathen living and dying without any Gospel light. They were blind to the fields which were 'white already to harvest' and deaf to the Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. William Carey, the 'father of modern missions', had finished his forty-one years of active service as a missionary in India in 1834, shortly before revival fires began to spread. His famous words: 'Attempt great things for God and expect great things from God' have rung down the corridors of time until this very day, inspiring many to consider missionary service.

Society benefitted from the revival. Drunkenness gave way to temperance and public houses had to close for want of customers or because the publicans had been saved. Immorality received a death blow. Many houses of ill fame were closed and their inmates soundly converted. The number of prisoners facing trial declined. At the Ballymena Quarter-Sessions in early 1860 for example, not a single indictment was on record. In many instances, juries had little or nothing to do, such was the improvement in public morality.

The Year of Grace, as the 1859 revival was often called, ran its course, but its effects were felt for years to come and were strengthened by missions held by D. L. Moody, Dr. R. A. Torrey and Charles Alexander.

Rev. W. P. Nicholson

Would God graciously visit His people once again and stir the now smouldering embers by His almighty breath? He did! God graciously intervened and raised up a most unlikely man to call the people to turn to the Lord in repentance. W. P. Nicholson was born near Bangor in 1876, a Presbyterian by denomination. He went to sea when he was sixteen and lived a most ungodly and wicked life as a sailor. After working for some time in Africa on the Cape to Cairo railway where he saw innumerable men die swiftly of fever he returned home. In 1899 as he awaited breakfast in his mother's home, God smote him with conviction and realising that he must respond 'Now or Never' to the gospel invitation, he accepted Christ as Saviour. In preparation for the task God had appointed him, God soon challenged him to surrender fully to His will. He prompted him to join the little band of Salvation Army workers in their Saturday night open-air meeting in Bangor. Nicholson was prepared to do anything or go anywhere except obey God's clear instructions. Reluctantly and with leaden feet Nicholson joined the little group. As nobody seemed to be listening to their message it was suggested they get on their knees and pray. Nicholson had no option but to kneel. He was then handed a tambourine and led the march down the street. His respectability was shattered, but so was his fear of man. His unconditional surrender to God's will led to God filling him with the Holy Ghost. He then attended the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow to prepare for preaching and had many opportunities to preach in mission halls and open-air meetings. Many needy souls were converted as they heard the Gospel preached. Back home for the summer vacation, he became assistant to Rev Henry Montgomery in the Albert Street Presbyterian Church and learned much at the feet of his former minister. Open-air meetings were held after midnight on Saturdays to reach the drunkards streaming out of the public houses. These meetings, despite being often rowdy, were the means of converting many of the listeners, for 'the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth' (Rom. 1:16). In this work Nicholson was endued with a great passion for souls.

In 1903, Nicholson was invited to become an evangelist for the Lanarkshire Christian Union. Armed with a large drum and a big bell, Nicholson led the workers through the towns, advertising the meetings and preaching the gospel. On one occasion he paid the town crier for the loan of his bell. Ringing it loudly and shouting, 'Fire! Fire!', he soon drew a crowd of alarmed citizens and packed the mission hall which before had attracted only a few listeners. He was determined by all means to get sinners under the sound of the gospel.

There were all-nights and half-nights of earnest and fervent prayer for the outpouring of God's blessing. Many souls were saved and the work of God revived during the five years he spent in Lanarkshire.

Then he was invited by Dr. Chapman and Mr Alexander to join them for a series of missions. The first campaign was held in Melbourne, Australia. Buildings were filled to capacity, including the town hall which seated 2,000 people. These meetings were ignored by the newspapers until businessmen threatened to cancel their subscriptions. Reporters duly turned up at the town hall where Nicholson was preaching on 'God's Hell'. The Holy Spirit moved with power. Many were saved and some fainted under conviction and had to be carried out. The headlines the next day spoke of the appalling scenes and the lurid evangelist who preached of the horrors of hell. Subsequently, Nicholson was referred to as 'the hell-fire preacher'.

Leaving Australia, Nicholson went to Chicago where Dr. Chapman and Mr. Alexander were planning a city-wide campaign. The district called 'Little Hell', because of its lawlessness, was allotted to Nicholson, but mercifully the workers enjoyed God's protection and many were the souls won to Christ.

Nicholson then received a cable from Glasgow, asking him to take over the pastorate of the Tabernacle due to the ill health of its founder, Pastor D. Findlay. The Tabernacle accommodated 1,200 people and was well filled for the Lord's Day services. Nights and half-nights of prayer were held and God answered by fire. Close on 1,000 anxious souls entered the enquiry rooms that year and numerous were those who sought and found the Saviour.

On his return to America, Nicholson continued his gospel ministry. He was invited to hold a mission in Chicago where the building had a seating capacity of 2,200. Crowds flocked to the meetings and as a result of the faithful preaching of the gospel message, there was a great harvest of souls. Many Christians also yielded their lives in total surrender and earnest consecration to the Lord. It was Nicholson's burning desire not only to lead sinners to the Saviour but also to see Christians yield themselves entirely without reservation to God and seek the infilling of the blessed Holy Spirit.

Turbulence in Ulster

Ireland had merged with Great Britain in 1801 to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Throughout the nineteenth century, there was strong opposition on the part of Republicans to this Union. Two Home Rule Bills had already failed to become law and establish self-government in Ire-

land. In 1910, however, John Redmond and the Nationalist MPs held the balance of power at Westminster. They demanded a third Home Rule Bill in return for supporting the government. While 75% of the inhabitants of Ireland were Roman Catholics, the province of Ulster had a strong Protestant majority and enjoyed economic prosperity due to its linen and shipbuilding industries. They feared the prospect of Home Rule, dreading a Roman Catholic ascendancy and the resultant discrimination against Protestants. They rightly saw that Home Rule was Rome Rule. The third Home Rule Bill was introduced in April 1912. In September 1912, about half a million people, under the leadership of Sir Edward Carson, MP, signed the Ulster Covenant, determined by all means necessary to defeat Home Rule. In January 1913, Carson moved an amendment to the Home Rule Bill in Parliament to exclude all nine counties of Ulster from the Act. In March 1914 in the Curragh Camp, the main base of the British army in Ireland, a large number of army officers stationed in Ireland offered to resign or accept dismissal rather than enforce Home Rule on Ulster.

The threat of civil war

In April 1914, 24,000 rifles and ammunition were smuggled into Larne by the Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force organised from the Ulster Volunteers formed in 1912. They came in aboard the *Clyde Valley*, a coal boat renamed *Mountjoy II* by the mastermind of the operation, Major Fred Crawford. The Nationalist Irish Volunteers, later known as the Irish Republican Army, likewise smuggled rifles, 900 of them in one consignment, into Howth harbour near Dublin, courtesy of Erskine Childers and his yacht *Asgard*. Ireland was on the brink of civil war. However, the Great War broke out in 1914 and the enactment of the third Home Rule Bill was suspended in the meantime. God had intervened in the affairs of men.

As a result of the Easter Rising which took place in 1916 and the mass executions and imprisonments which followed, many were disillusioned with the Home Rule advocates. The Fourth Home Rule Bill, the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 partitioned Ireland, set up a separate Parliament for the six counties of Ulster in Northern Ireland and granted Dominion status but not full independence to the Irish Free State. Unemployment and mass emigration had followed the Great War in Ulster and consequently the population was greatly demoralised. There was also an upsurge of bitter violence especially in Belfast, the capital of the new Northern Ireland. Grisly murders, horrible atrocities

and destruction of property were common. Approximately 500 people died and many were wounded in the civil strife that followed partition. The fear and uncertainty of those days drove many to their knees, desperate for God to intervene. Days of prayer were organised by churches, Christians earnestly besought the Lord in their homes and prayer groups throughout Ulster made the situation a matter for importunate intercession. God answered in an unusual fashion by sending an evangelist to Ulster.

Revival Blessing

About this time W. P. Nicholson returned home to Bangor to recuperate from an operation. By invitation he held a mission there in 1920. Much prayer was offered to Almighty God for His blessing. Overflow crowds attended the meetings and many sinners were soundly converted. In 1921 Nicholson returned to Ulster to preach at a mission in Portadown. Nine hundred people publicly professed faith in Christ. A mission in Lurgan saw a thousand people repent of their sin and put their faith in Christ the only Saviour of sinners. On to Newtownards where over eight hundred people signed a decision card, indicating their willingness to accept Christ as Lord and Saviour. A publican, made a new creature in Christ, poured his stock down a grating in the street and closed down his public house. The gospel is certainly a life-changing message! Then to Lisburn where almost 2,000 souls pledged allegiance to the Saviour. In 1922, when the troubles were at their height, Nicholson began his missions in Belfast. He held a great mission in the Albert Hall on the Shankhill Road, close to where some of the fiercest fighting had taken place. The services were punctuated by the rattle of gunfire. Those travelling by tram had to lie on the floor at various junctions. Almost 3,000 people attended the evening meetings and over 2,260 sought God's forgiveness and salvation in the enquiry rooms. In the mission held in Newington Presbyterian Church in March 1922, two thousand people crammed into the building each evening and over a thousand people were dealt with. Londonderry was the evangelist's next port of call. He preached for three weeks on the east and three weeks on the west side of the River Foyle. Approximately 1500 enquirers sought cleansing from sin in the blood of the Lamb. Back to Belfast and a six-week mission held in the Cripples' Institute when over 400 souls were moved to enter the enquiry rooms seeking the Lord for salvation. Another mission followed in Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church where numerous souls professed faith in Christ alone for salvation. Another exceptional mission was held in St. Enoch's Presbyterian Church where counsellors dealt with 1,500 souls. Two further Gospel

campaigns were held in the east of the city in the Newtownards Road Methodist Church in January 1923 and in Ravenhill Presbyterian Church in February 1923. The wind of revival was continuing to blow. Men marched in their hundreds from the shipyard to the services. Thousands were the converts in those two missions. Ballymena was the next town on Nicholson's schedule. The venue was Wellington Street Presbyterian Church. The shipyard workers sang as they marched in their working clothes from the railway station to the meetings. Of all the missions held in Ulster, the largest total of enquirers and decisions for Christ was recorded in Ballymena. A total of 2,530 persons passed through the enquiry rooms. Charles Beattie, the writer's father, a lad of fifteen whose family attended Wellington Street Presbyterian Church, was saved at that mission. Carrickfergus First Presbyterian Church saw the final mission of the 1921-1923 campaign. Again large numbers of people sought and found the Saviour.

Nicholson returned to Ulster in 1924 to conduct a series of gospel missions across the province. Churches were revived and many were converted to Christ. In the mission in Magherafelt a particularly large number of conversions took place. In the final mission of the series, held in the Assembly Hall of the Presbyterian Church, huge crowds attended and hundreds stood in response to the Gospel appeal, signifying their willingness to accept Christ as Saviour. In November 1925, Nicholson crossed the border and held a five-week Gospel Mission in the Metropolitan Hall in Dublin. Many were the converts, both old and young, both Roman Catholic and Protestant and the churches experienced an unprecedented breath of revival. In 1925 Nicholson went to England to speak at the Golden Jubilee of the Keswick Convention. The tent which seated 2,250 people was filled to capacity for his two services on the Lord's Day. After a powerful message, many responded to the appeal and stood as a token of their surrender to Christ.

At this time, Nicholson became sadly aware of the modernism that was corrupting the Irish Presbyterian Church. The rot had set in several years previously and culminated in the exoneration of Professor Davey who had been indicted on heresy charges in 1926. Nicholson was unsparing in his attack on the apostates and their denial of Gospel truth. He used to go through the motions of lifting an imaginary trapdoor in the platform and consigning named apostates to the flames of hell. He boldly declared that the way to hell was 'paved with the skulls of Presbyterian ministers', for so many failed to preach the need for repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

He was a man earnest and fervent in prayers and supplications. One family with whom he stayed in Ulster relates how he used to grip the sheets as he wrestled in prayer until they were torn.

Many were his critics because his language was blunt and plain sometimes to the point of coarseness, but he spoke the language of common working men and they responded to his message in their thousands. He was a successful evangelist, winning many lost souls to Christ. Men sang unashamedly as they waited on the railway platforms for trains which would take them to work.

Nicholson not only preached repentance from sin but the fruits of that repentance, including ceasing from sinful habits and lifestyles and the restoration of misappropriated goods. He boldly denounced worldliness, indicting Christians for their affinity to the world, in dancing, theatre-going, card playing, cinema attendance, mixed marriages and also the masculine tendency of women in their dress and deportment. What would he say of Christians to-day? Following a mission in Belfast in 1923, a new store had to be opened in the shipyard to accommodate all the stolen goods which had been returned. The workers who had misappropriated all these goods could not be sacked, as the shipyard would have been stripped of so many workers that it could not possibly have functioned! Drunkards and gamblers were delivered from their addictions. The immoral were delivered from their immorality. Thieves were delivered from their dishonesty. Even the civil strife petered out and civil war was avoided, as gunmen were saved from their violent intentions. Revival is invariably followed by social reform.

History repeats itself

But soon spiritual decline began to manifest itself once again. Before the nineteenth century ended Higher Criticism and Modernism had been raising their ugly heads in Assembly's College, the Presbyterian College situated in Belfast. Professor W. E. Davey was the chief advocate of these errors. In 1926, a group of concerned evangelical ministers and lay members brought the following five very serious charges against Professor Davey:

- *denial of the imputed righteousness of Christ;
- *denial of Christ's perfect righteousness;
- *denial of the inspiration, infallibility and Divine authority of the Scriptures;
- *denial that the sinfulness of all sins proceeds only from the creature and not from God;

*denial that the Trinity was taught in the Bible.

Despite the abundant evidence of Davey's guilt, the Belfast Presbytery and the General Assembly exonerated Davey on all five counts by a very large majority. Their verdict showed conclusively how far the rot had spread in the Presbyterian Church, the channel of God's blessing in 1859. Apostasy and departure from the faith were now rampant.

Rev. James Hunter campaigned widely, warning the people of Davey's heretical views. He resigned his membership of the Presbyterian Church in 1927 and later that year along with James Grier he founded the Irish Evangelical Church.

Gradually, the church began to drift once more from its moorings and forsake 'the old paths, where is the good way', (Jer. 6:16). Many church ministers began to explain away the miracles and taught the people to reject the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection of the Saviour. As Peter warns in 2 Peter 2:2, 'many were happy to follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of'. Doubt was sown in the minds of the people, for if the miracles and the supernatural birth and resurrection of Christ were to be discounted as fables, then it followed that the Scriptures of truth were unreliable. If Modernism had had its way, the light of the Gospel would soon have been extinguished. What was to be done? Would God be pleased to visit His people again and vindicate His Word and His Son? God did not forsake His cause.

Another champion raised up

Again He raised up a man to defend the faith, preach the glorious Gospel and confound the apostates, Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley. Significantly, he was born in 1926, the very year when charges of heresy were brought against Professor Davey and the year before Davey was acquitted of all the charges laid against him. God always has His man for the hour.

Dr. Paisley was born in Armagh on 6th April 1926. At that time his father was the pastor of Armagh Baptist Church. In 1929, Pastor Paisley became the minister of Hill Street Baptist Church in Ballymena. Vexed by the deepening apostasy in the Presbyterian Church, both my parents, acting independently, began to attend that church. My mother came to know the Lord as her Saviour, under the powerful preaching of Pastor Paisley. In 1933, rather than have his ministry curtailed by the oversight and relinquish the freedom of the pulpit

in order to please men, Pastor Paisley resigned his pastorate, a step which meant leaving the Baptist manse with his wife and young family. Following in the footsteps of Abraham, the Father of the faithful, when God called Pastor Paisley to leave his home and living, he 'obeyed and he went out, not knowing whither he went' (Heb. 11:8). A group of believers, including my parents, went out with him. They initially met in a rented showroom in Ballymena and commenced to build the Gospel Tabernacle in Waveney Road. It opened in 1935, despite the financial constraints and difficulties caused by the Great Depression of the 1930s, the worst economic crisis in the history of industrialised nations. The principle of separation from compromise and error was firmly established.

Training for full-time service

Called of God to full-time service, the young Ian Paisley studied to prepare himself for the preaching of the Gospel at the South Wales Bible College in Barry, South Wales. This was followed by a course of study in the Reformed Theological College in Belfast. In 1946 he was ordained as the minister of Ravenhill Evangelical Mission Church, three of whose elders had signed the five charges brought against Professor Davey. In his ministry, he vehemently opposed the deepening apostasy of the mainline denominations and powerfully preached the gospel of salvation through the sufferings of Christ for poor sinners on the cross. In 1949, an open-air witness in Belfast was suggested and prayer meetings were held to ask God's blessing on this venture. On Friday, 30th September 1949, the four men involved duly met for prayer, but it was a prayer meeting very different from what they had planned. It lasted until the morning service on the Lord's Day. God had enabled them to continue long hours in earnest supplication. That prayer meeting had a dramatic impact on the life and ministry of the young preacher. There is no doubt that God baptised him 'with the Holy Ghost and with fire' (Matt. 3:11). Hundreds of people were saved in the successful Gospel campaigns which followed. Christians were also revived and strengthened in their faith and loyalty to the Saviour.

Crossgar

As a result of the effectiveness of his evangelistic endeavours, Dr. Paisley was invited to conduct a Gospel campaign in the mission hall in Crossgar in February 1951. Those who organised the mission were all members of Lissara Presbyterian Church and, feeling that their mission hall would be too small,

they requested the use of the church lecture hall for the special meetings. Their request was unanimously granted, but just one day prior to the planned commencement of the mission, the Down Presbytery rescinded that decision, unlawfully overriding the decision of the church elders. A public protest was held and the meetings took place in the mission hall. The devil overstepped himself and the ban served to stir up increased interest in the meetings. Close on one hundred souls were saved in the mission. Christians were outraged by the decision of the Down Presbytery to bar the use of the lecture hall for Gospel meetings. They wanted a church where there was liberty to preach and freedom to hear the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified. The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster was born, Crossgar Free Presbyterian Church being the first congregation and Dr. Paisley's church on the Ravenhill Road the second. Several other congregations were subsequently formed, but the congregations remained small. Dr. Paisley was a true Protestant and believed in strongly protesting against ecumenism and the desire to reverse the Reformation as announced by the World Council of Churches at its formation in 1948, a body which included the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland. He also fervently opposed ecumenical politics as promoted by the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Captain Terence O'Neill, who sought to build bridges and initiate closer relations with the strongly Roman Catholic Republic of Ireland.

The imprisonment of 1966

The prolonged prayer meeting of 1949 was undoubtedly an important turning point in the history of religious life in Ulster. The imprisonment of three ministers in 1966 was another. By 1966 ecumenism had greatly advanced in its avowed aim of union with the Church of Rome, despite its inveterate heresies and its cruel tortures and death by burning at the stake, inflicted on those who embraced the Protestant faith. In January of that year a Jesuit preached in Westminster Abbey for the first time since the Reformation. Dr. Ian Paisley led a picket protest by ministers and others to awaken Protestants to the dangers of unity with Rome. In March, Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey visited the Vatican and gave the Pope the 'embrace of peace'. (Incidentally, he attended a meeting addressed by W. P. Nicholson in Cambridge University in 1926, and was alarmed in case he stood up by mistake as others stood to signify their acceptance of Christ as Saviour. That would never have done at all!) Lambeth Palace was picketed on Friday, 18th March, by a crowd of concerned Protestants, who then marched to Buckingham Palace and 10 Downing Street

to present petitions of protest. Later that evening, a rally was held in The Metropolitan Tabernacle. Revs. Ian Paisley, John Wylie, Brian Green, Jack Glass and Councillor James McCarroll flew on to Rome on Tuesday, March 22 to hold a protest there. Revs. Paisley and Wylie were refused entry and deported. The remaining three members of the party carried on the protest.

On June 6th 1966, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster organised a march to the General Assembly of the Irish Presbyterian Church in order to protest against the Romanising tendencies in that church. The march was perfectly legal, the required advance notice having been given to the police and its route approved by police authorities. The march proceeded on its way from Ravenhill Free Presbyterian Church and then across the Albert Bridge. A Roman Catholic mob had already gathered in Cromac Square to block the procession. They had amassed quantities of stones, iron bolts and bricks to pelt the protesters. They attacked the police some time before the procession even arrived in the Square. A hail of missiles greeted the parade. One mobster with murderous intent was bent on attacking Dr. Paisley with an iron bar, but was thwarted by some of his followers. The marchers did not respond to the fury and violence of their attackers, but kept on marching. Mercifully, no one was injured in spite of the missiles and broken glass falling in a constant shower. God protected His people. Not only did the riot begin before the arrival of the procession in Cromac Square but continued long after it had passed through the area, resulting in much damage to property and vehicles. When the parade reached the Assembly Buildings, the plan was to keep circling the block. However, the police threw a rope cordon across Howard Street to allow the dignitaries attending the Assembly to cross over to the Presbyterian Hostel. This forced the protesters to stop and form a large crowd which by then was reinforced by Protestants who had heard of events in Cromac Square.

Revs. Ian Paisley, John Wylie and Ivan Foster and others were charged with unlawful assembly, despite the fact that the parade was legal and the so-called unlawful assembly was the result of the police action in placing the cordon across its path. In court, the police evidence was a mass of contradictions. The defendants were denied their right to call key witnesses. So they called no witnesses but made statements in their own defence. The magistrates did not answer any of the points they raised. Sentence was passed that all the defendants would have to sign a rule of bail to keep the peace for two years or go to prison for three months. The ministers refused to sign the bail bonds as it would curtail their right to protest and they were duly incarcerated in the Crumlin Road prison. No notice was taken of the fact that their protest against the

ecumenical apostasy and its sell-out to popery was legal and law-abiding and approved by the police authorities.

The welcome home rally

On 23rd October, a crowd estimated at 25,000 gathered in Dundonald to welcome home the three ministers who had been unjustly imprisoned. The police did all in their power to stop the rally. The tenant of the field chosen for the rally was threatened with eviction by the landlord if he allowed it to proceed. Consequently, the venue for the meeting had to be changed to a field two miles from Dundonald village, greatly inconveniencing those who were coming on foot. Half an hour before the meeting and despite the fact that parking was still available in the field, the police turned cars away to stop people going into the field. Without warning, buses refused to bring the people to a crossroads just five minutes walk from the field and dropped them off two miles away. The 'Belfast Telegraph' refused to place an advert for the rally. Despite all the efforts of those who opposed the rally, it was a great success and richly blessed by God.

God confounded the enemy

Like Joseph of old, each of the three ministers involved could truly say to the opponents of the Gospel: 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive' (Gen. 50:20). God stirred the hearts of the people of Ulster who were outraged that ministers of the Gospel should have been treated in such an iniquitous fashion. Calls came in from people across Ulster asking for Free Presbyterian churches to be formed in their locality. Presbyterian churches had been vainly trying to bolster their attendances by bingo evenings, beetle drives, daffodil teas and such like frivolities. Free Presbyterian churches increased in number and attendance as backsliders were restored to fellowship with God, converts were multiplied and God's people were drawn into a closer walk with God. This was due simply to the preaching of the plain, unvarnished truth of God's Word by ministers baptised with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

Hillsborough Free Presbyterian Church

In the summer of 1966, Rev William Beattie held a Gospel tent mission outside the town of Hillsborough. It was held outside because suitable sites in

the town were refused for such a venture. Many souls were saved and as the mission ended a number of people expressed their desire to have a Free Presbyterian Church in that locality. An application was duly made to Presbytery and accepted. The first services were held on September 4, with 50 in attendance in the morning and 70 in the evening. Numbers attending the services immediately began to increase with 70 in attendance at the morning service and 100 at the evening service on the second Lord's Day. The church was then constituted on November 24. It was the first of the three 'prison' churches. The people of Ulster were beginning to show clearly their growing repugnance for ecumenical apostasy and popery.

Ballymena Free Presbyterian Church

At this time, the Gospel Tabernacle in Ballymena, pastored for over thirty years by Rev. James K. Paisley applied to become a member of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. This was duly granted and on 4th November 1966, Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley, recently released from prison, welcomed the new congregation into fellowship. An overflowing crowd attended the service and Mr James Beggs, Rev. Paisley's brother-in-law was licensed as the minister of the new church. The congregation soon almost doubled in number and attendance at the prayer meetings increased. It was the second of the three 'prison' churches.

Moneyslane Free Presbyterian Church

Three new Free Presbyterian churches were formed while the three ministers were still in prison. Moneyslane was the last of the three 'prison churches'. On September 8, Rev. John Douglas held a Gospel meeting in Rathfriland and at the end of the meeting, about thirty people expressed their desire to have church services started in their area. They wanted to have a church that would faithfully teach the Word of God, fearlessly preach the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified and fervently oppose the ecumenical apostasy of the World Council of Churches and the now glaringly obvious Romeward trend in the mainline denominations. On Lord's Day, October 2, services commenced in Moneyslane Orange Hall which had been kindly granted. Rev. Douglas was the preacher at both services. At the morning service, 65 people met to worship the Lord and in the evening the congregation numbered 250 with some having to be turned away. The work flourished, souls were saved and the membership increased. The new Free Presbyterian Church was officially opened on November 25.

Mourne Free Presbyterian Church

In November 1966, Rev. William Beattie held special Gospel meetings in Ballvea Orange Hall. Dr. Ian Paisley preached at two afternoon services held on the Lord's Day to the crowds who were tightly crammed into the hall. Many souls were brought to Christ during the mission and the whole district was moved by God to consider the welfare of their souls and their eternal destiny. On January 6, at a meeting of the Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, a petition, signed by 61 interested parties, was presented, asking to be organised into a congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church. Their request was granted. Dr. Paisley and Rev. William Beattie were to commence services on 15th January. Rev. Beattie was put in charge of the fledgling congregation.

Lurgan Free Presbyterian Church

Many services had been conducted in the Lurgan area by Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley in previous years. Many were the souls won to Christ and many were those of God's people who were richly blessed through his preaching. Some of these people were so sickened by the apostasy of the Irish Presbyterian Church that they up and left and asked the Ulster Presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church to form a church in their area. The Presbytery gave their consent and meetings began in Clare Orange Hall where the congregation was formed on Lord's Day, February 5, 1967. Dr. Paisley preached to almost 150 people in the morning and Rev. Lawson Barr to 100 in the evening. The presence and power of God were known in great measure. A weeknight prayer meeting was also arranged. The people were enthusiastic about having a gospel-preaching, separated witness and ground was purchased in Lurgan for the erection of a church building. This, the seventeenth congregation of the denomination, was called Lurgan Free Presbyterian Church. Rev. Lawson Barr was appointed as the minister in charge of the work.

Satanic opposition

When God begins to move in a district or a nation, the Devil always stirs up intense opposition to dissuade people from attending evangelistic services and discourage Christians from taking a stand against apostasy and separating from apostate churches. Opposition had already been whipped up by ecumenical ministers and politicians. Now it took a sinister turn. As a result of the Gospel meeting held in Rathfriland on September 8, the evangelist, Rev. John

Douglas was charged with acting in a fashion likely to cause public disorder and summoned to appear before Rathfriland Petty Sessions on November 4. The Crown rested its case on a police transcript of the speech allegedly made by Rev. Douglas. It was claimed that in referring to the rioters in Cromac Square, Rev. Douglas had said they had been brought before the magistrate, an R.C. magistrate . . . who only fined them £10'. The prosecution objected to this use of R.C. Two policewomen testified against Rev. Douglas. WPC Duff affirmed that she had heard Rev. Douglas say, 'an R.C. magistrate'. WPC Neill, who had been in plain clothes, claimed she had recorded Rev. Douglas's sermon and transcribed it the following day. Her transcript was before the court. Defence Counsel, Mr. D. Boal played an actual tape recording of the service. This recording differed greatly from WPC Neill's transcript which contained many additions and omissions. This recording showed very clearly that Rev. Douglas had not used the term R.C. The prosecution then suggested that Mr. Boal's recording had been tampered with. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the magistrate found Rev. Douglas guilty. A greater travesty of justice could scarcely be imagined.

The appeal was heard in March, 1967. The tape recording made by WPC Neill could not be produced as it was no longer in existence. Surprise! Surprise! The recording placed by Mr. Boal before the court had meanwhile been forensically examined and there was no evidence that it had been tampered with. He also testified that WPC Neill's recording would have been very poor indeed, as she had concealed the microphone of her transistor recording device in a blouse pocket underneath her outer coat. The rustle of her blouse against the microphone would have caused more noise than the speaker's voice. He also stated that transistor machines were notorious for their poor quality and fidelity of recording and their microphones were of inferior quality. The appeal judge, Judge Maginnis, died before the appeal was completed and proceedings were delayed until February 1968 when Judge James Brown heard the case and the appeal was allowed.

Tandragee Free Presbyterian Church

When Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley held a mission in Tandragee, thirty-seven souls were saved and, as a result of the blessing experienced, some local believers requested that regular Free Presbyterian meetings might be commenced in Tandragee. Two services were held on Lord's Day, March 26 1967, and a congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church was formed. As might be expected, the

enemies of the Gospel did not take these developments lying down. Modernist clergymen increased their visitations to parishioners to dissuade them from supporting the Gospel. These wolves in sheep's clothing were bitter enemies of preachers who upheld the infallibility of God's Word and taught salvation by faith alone, through grace alone in Christ alone. They denounced them as 'tub thumpers' and demagogues. In a local newspaper the question was raised as to whether Tandragee needed another church. Tandragee certainly did, as none of the existing ones took a bold stand in defence of Gospel truth.

A new portable building was erected and officially opened on Saturday, June 24. There was an overflow congregation and many were given seats in the car park where they could listen to the service being relayed. In his sermon, Dr. Paisley reminded his audience of the attack upon the Divine authority of the Word of God and the Divine Sovereignty of God. These attacks came not only from the pulpit but also in the schools. He stated that Free Presbyterians are separatists who oppose the pernicious doctrine of evolution, the new English Bible and those who deny the Virgin Birth. 'We are uncompromisingly Protestant and vigorously oppose the system of Romanism. We believe that the Bible is the whole Word of God. We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and His sinless perfection. The men of Issachar, in 1 Chron: 12:32, 'had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do'. He then challenged the congregation, Do you have 'understanding of the times?'

It was a blessed day which the Lord sealed with His presence and blessing.

Lisbellaw Free Presbyterian Church

Lisbellaw is a village in Co. Fermanagh approximately four miles from Enniskillen, the county town. During the imprisonment of the three ministers, a hall was secured in Lisnaskea for a Protestant Rally. It was conducted by Revs. John Douglas, Alan Cairns and Lawson Barr. It was one of the most successful rallies held at that time. People stood for almost three hours to hear the messages brought by the three speakers. There were those who wanted to have a Free Presbyterian Church in Co. Fermanagh, but the devil's brigade sought to have every public hall closed to Free Presbyterian meetings. However, wicked men cannot long frustrate the purpose of God. A building was purchased in Lisbellaw and a mission was conducted by the three ministers who had been imprisoned, assisted by Rev. William Beattie. On Lord's Day, April 2, 1967, Rev. Alan Cairns was tasked by the Ulster Presbytery with the constituting of the church in Lisbellaw and preaching at both services which were well at-

tended. Best of all, there was a great sense of the Lord's presence.

Rev. Cairns told the people there would be no new message preached in the hall. If they wanted a Gospel that denied the Deity, Virgin Birth, Atoning Death and Bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, they would have to go elsewhere. There would be no bands playing contemporary music in the services. The message preached would be that of the Apostles and Reformers. Christians rejoiced that a church was now opened in Fermanagh dedicated to opposing the Ecumenical Movement and its Romeward trend and to the preaching of the Gospel.

Thus was formed the nineteenth congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church. Rev. Ivan Foster became its first minister. Souls were saved almost every Lord's Day and soon the hall was too small to hold the congregation. A new church building was opened in Enniskillen in 1972. Rev. Foster preached in many gospel missions and pioneered new churches in Clogher Valley, Coragary, Monaghan, Kesh and Newtown Square in U.S.A.

Londonderry Free Presbyterian Church

Hot on the heels of Lisbellaw Free Presbyterian Church, the twentieth congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church was formed one month later. The wind of revival was blowing in Ulster and like the wind it could not be controlled or stopped by man's ingenuity. At the beginning of April 1967, Revs. John Wylie and Victor Burns conducted a Gospel Mission in Milltown Band Room in Londonderry. Many attended the services, especially on the Lord's Day evenings. Fifteen souls were saved during the mission. When Rev. Wylie called for separation from the apostasy on the final Friday night, over thirty people responded and willingly stepped outside the camp with Christ, even though it meant bearing His reproach. Others were led to join them. An application was made to Presbytery requesting the formation of a Free Presbyterian Church in Londonderry and was favourably received. Due to the interest of the people, the Britannia Hall was booked for the first two weeks in May. On the final night, May 11, Dr. Paisley was the preacher and twenty people sought Christ as Saviour and ten more people resolved to leave their apostate church. Needless to say, this stirred up great opposition from the mainline churches and the apostate ministers were kept busy visiting their members and trying to persuade them not to leave their churches. Meanwhile, undeterred by the enemies of the truth of the Gospel, God's servants continued to hold services in the Milltown Hall in the morning and in the Britannia Hall in the evening.

Portadown Free Presbyterian Church

In the month of June 1967, Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley held a Gospel Tent Mission in Portadown. God mightily blessed the faithful preaching of the glorious Gospel during the three weeks of the campaign. Record numbers attended the meetings, with 500 people in the audience every weekday evening and 1,000 present on each Lord's Day. Night after night, precious souls were saved and rejoiced as they found pardon through the blood, shed by the Saviour for sinners on the cross. In total, over ninety persons publicly professed faith in Christ. On the final night of the mission, Dr. Paisley, as was his custom, preached on the issues facing God's people. Those issues were the departure from God's Word by apostate ministers who denied the fundamentals of the faith and the strenuous efforts being made by ecumenical leaders to counter the great Protestant Reformation and seek reunion with Rome. In a passionate appeal to God's people he called on them to separate from the apostasy of the World Council of Churches. About 130 people responded to that appeal signifying their determination to sever all connection with the W.C.C. The twenty-first congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster was thus formed. The congregation held its first worship service in the Town Hall in Portadown, on Lord's Day, July 9. 300 people attended and one precious soul was saved. The following Lord's Day, another soul was brought from darkness into light, as God blessed the faithful preaching of His precious Word.

Dungannon Free Presbyterian Church

A very successful tent campaign was conducted by Dr. Ian R. K. Paisley in Dungannon. Tremendous interest was stirred up in the area. On Lord's Day evenings, the congregation numbered between 1,000 and 1,200 and many were unable to get into the tent. Between three and four hundred people attended the weeknight meetings. The Gospel was clearly and powerfully preached and precious souls were saved night after night. Thirteen souls came to Christ on the final Lord's Day evening. In total, ninety people publicly professed saving faith in Christ during the mission. On the Monday evening after the campaign concluded, Dr. Paisley dealt with the issues of the apostasy. The tent was full to capacity and the whole audience applauded when the commencement of the twenty-second congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster in Dungannon was announced. On Lord's Day, September 24, Dr. Paisley preached at both the opening services, with 200 in attendance in the morning

and over 400 in the evening. Four anxious souls sought the Lord for salvation after the evening meeting and 150 applications for membership were received. To God be all the glory!

This has been but a brief resumé of the movings of God during the imprisonment and in the twelve months after the release of the three ministers from prison. The blessings of revival continued into the 70s and early 80s. Souls continued to be saved, backsliders restored and believers stirred up by the faithful preaching of God's Word and the fervent presentation of the glorious Gospel. More churches were founded, Sunday Schools increased in number, as did the number of young men entering training in the Theological Hall. Crowds flocked eagerly to prayer meetings and church services. God's people had a great burden to see souls saved and interest in missionary work and candidates for the mission field increased. In 1979, the first of seven Independent Christian Schools, was opened by the Kilskeery church to protect children from the teaching of evolution, foul language and immoral influences and to instruct them more thoroughly in the Scriptures of truth.

Decline once more

However, in the 80s the fires of revival gradually died down. It is noteworthy that after an initial burst of interest in Christian education, no Christian schools were founded after 1988. The church has entered a period of comparative barrenness and powerlessness. The reason for this is ever the same: we have sinned. Pride and complacency have affected God's people. Worldliness has turned away our hearts. As it has been said. 'I look for the church and find it in the world and I look for the world and find it in the church.' There is little or no difference between the dress, appearance, adornments and pursuits of Christians, especially of young Christians and those of the world. Worldliness has undeniably been a factor in draining the church of its energy and spiritual vitality. Another factor, however, has been the diverting of our confidence from the Lord and a looking to politics to resolve our problems instead. The enemy has indeed 'come in like a flood' but we pray that 'the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him.' (Isaiah 59:19). We would re-echo the words of the following hymn:

Revive thy work, O Lord,
Thy mighty arm make bare;
Speak with the voice that wakes the dead,

And make thy people hear.

Revive thy work, O Lord,
Disturb this sleep of death;
Quicken the smould'ring embers now
By thine almighty breath.

Revive thy work, O Lord,
Create soul-thirst for thee;
And hung'ring for the Bread of Life
O may our spirits be.

Revive thy work, O Lord,
Exalt thy precious Name;
And, by the Holy Ghost, our love
For thee and thine inflame.

Revive thy work, O Lord,
Give pentecostal show'rs:
The glory shall be all thine own,
The blessing, Lord, be ours.

A. Midlane

May God be pleased to answer the prayers expressed in this hymn for His own glory.

An unmistakable pattern

We cannot help but notice a distinct pattern in God-given revivals. A decline in church life becomes gradually more and more noticeable. God raises up preachers to identify the decline and call God's people to repentance. A purging of the church and hearts of God's people inevitably follows. God then pours out a spirit of grace and supplication and there is an earnest seeking after God. Prayer meetings are multiplied and proliferate. There is unmistakable evidence of a deep thirsting after God. Christians enter into the experience of the psalmist in Psalm 42:1-2. 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?' Preachers are baptised with the Holy Ghost, Christians are set on fire, backsliders are restored and many precious souls are saved. The number of children in Sunday schools increases

as does the number of people attending prayer meetings The number of applicants to Bible Colleges and young people volunteering for missionary work increases. Revival has broken out. O that Christians today would pay the price, go through with God and lay their all upon the altar of sacrifice!

The Future

What does the future hold for the people of God? God warns us of dark times ahead. One day God will lift His restraining hand from off this earth. Sin and abominable wickedness will overspread the world. In 2 Tim. 3:1 we are urged by the Apostle Paul to know 'that in the last days perilous times shall come' because of the evil of men's hearts. In verses 2-5 of this chapter, Paul lists nineteen transgressions of God's holy law which will be prevalent in the last days, despite men having a 'form of godliness'. 2 Tim 3:13 further warns that 'evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived'.

The Lord Jesus Christ taught during His earthly ministry that 'as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be' (Matt. 24:37-39). In the days before the flood, men were totally absorbed by earthly affairs. They had no time for heavenly matters. They lived as if they had no soul and as if God did not exist. They paid no heed to Noah's warnings of coming judgment and ignored and mocked his preparation for the impending cataclysm. Noah's day was marked by worldwide corruption and violence. Do we not see these features becoming more and more prominent in our day?

The Lord Jesus also warned His disciples that, in the days prior to His appearing in glory, it would be 'as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all' (Luke 17:28-29). The days of Lot were characterised by gross immorality and unspeakable wickedness. Such abhorrent immorality is on a global scale today. In the present day, the sin of sodomy is constantly promoted in the media. Nation after nation has voted for same-sex marriage. Sodomy, lesbianism and transgender issues are being discussed with children as young as four years of age, under the pretence of promoting understanding and tolerance. This has been hailed by those who indulge in such practices as a long-overdue right to exercise their freedom. Little account is taken of parents' rights to

teach their children what God thinks of such wicked behaviour. Always remember that God created male and female, two distinct genders and only two. He ordained marriage between one man and one woman. It is entirely due to man's inveterate and unreasonable hatred of God that he advocates such sinful and perverted lifestyles.

The Antichrist

When evil has reached its height and the old Roman Empire has resolved itself into the ten kingdoms, prefigured by the ten toes prophesied by Daniel, as he explained to Nebuchadnezzar the great image he had seen in his dream, the Antichrist will appear on the world's stage. He will make a seven-year peace treaty with Israel but break it after three and a half years. 'And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease' (Dan. 9:27). You will remember that the seven years served by Jacob for his wives, Rachel and Leah are referred to as a week in Genesis 29:27. The Antichrist is not called 'the man of sin' and 'the son of perdition' (2 Thess. 2:3) without due cause. He 'opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God' (2 Thess. 2:4). He will demand the worship of all his subjects. He will set up an idol in the temple, called 'the abomination of desolation' in Matt. 24:15. That event will be the signal for Christian Jews in Judaea, who have studied the New Testament, to flee, in order to escape the terrible persecutions of the Great Tribulation, also referred to as 'the time of Jacob's trouble' in Jer. 30:7. The wickedness of the Antichrist will surpass and outstrip the vile iniquities of all mankind. It will be the zenith of man's depravity and evil and provoke the Lord to come 'in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints' (2 Thess. 1:8-10). 2 Thess. 2:8-10, in reference to the Antichrist, has this to say: 'whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.' The fate of the Antichrist is clearly predicted. He will be cast into the lake of fire. Rev. 19:20-21 is unequivocal: 'And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him,

with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.'

Christ's Second Advent

The Second Coming of the Saviour will be preceded by great signs and wonders. 'Behold, the day of the LORD cometh . . . For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened. . . , and the moon shall not cause her light to shine' (Isa. 13:9-10).

Prior to His coming, God the Father will officially bestow on His Son 'dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed' (Dan. 7:13-14). Christ shall come in great power and glory and all the angels and all His saints with Him. At the last trumpet, those who died in Christ will be resurrected and their spirits reunited with their glorified bodies. Christians who are alive at Christ's coming will be changed into a state of glory. No longer corruptible, they put on incorruption, no longer mortal, they put on immortality. Then will death be 'swallowed up in victory'. Death will have lost its sting and the grave its victory. (1 Cor. 15:55). The glorified saints will be caught up to meet their descending Lord in the air and accompany Him on His way to the earth. His feet shall stand on the mount of Olives, the spot from which He ascended to His Father, having finished the work which His Father gave Him to do, namely the work of redemption.

The millennial reign of Christ

After His appearing in power and great glory, the destruction of all His enemies, and the confinement of Satan in the bottomless pit, Christ will take up the reins of the government of this earth and reign for a thousand years with His saints. It will be a reign of peace. 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Isa. 2:4).

Sing we the king who is coming to reign,
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain.

Life and salvation His empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is king.

All men shall dwell in His marvellous light,
Races long severed His love shall unite,
Justice and truth from His sceptre shall spring,
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is king.

All shall be well in His kingdom of peace,
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase,
Foe shall be friend when His triumph we sing,
Sword shall be sickle when Jesus is king.

C.S. Horne

Creatures will live in perfect peace and harmony. 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:6-9). What blessings will be enjoyed in those glorious years! Never king ruled as will King Jesus! He will rule with a rod of iron because the ungodly will still occupy the four corners of the earth. People will die during the millennium, although they will live much longer. Isa 65:20 teaches us that 'there shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed.

Then cometh the end

At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released from his prison in the bottomless pit. Immediately, true to his nature, that arch-enemy and arch-deceiver of mankind will go out to deceive the nations in order to gather them together for battle. It will be a huge army for the mustered host will be as great in number as the sand of the sea. They will go up and besiege the camp of the saints and the beloved city of Jerusalem, but God will send fire from heaven

and devour all these wicked adversaries. The devil will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where he will join the Antichrist and the false prophet (Rev. 20:7-10). The Great White Throne judgment of the resurrected unconverted dead will take place. All who rejected the gospel and God's offer of mercy must appear before that dread tribunal and all those whose names are not written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire.

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Ann Foster was brought up in a Christian home and was saved as a child. She has been married since 1968 to Rev. Ivan Foster, who has lately retired from the pastorate in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church. Together they founded Kilskeery Independent School in 1979 and she was Principal of the school for 28 years. During this period she was responsible for speaking in daily assemblies and teaching Scripture throughout the school, covering most of the Bible as a result. She has also produced materials for use in the classroom and published some booklets on Mark's Gospel which have been used in Sunday schools.