

1 PETER FOR 'SLOW PETER'

Note. In contrast to the Pauline corpus of letters, where there is (thanks to Acts) a fairly clear historical context in which to understand them, Peter's first letter has no such context. The apostle Simon Peter disappears from Acts after his release from Herod's prison in Acts 12, and apart from the controversy with Paul referred to in Galatians 1-2 (dating to about AD 48-50), there is nothing more about him in the NT apart from the two letters under his name. This means that we either confess total agnosticism about his activities, or we accept as a working hypothesis the letter's origin in cAD 62-63 about a year or two before the Great Fire at Rome in AD 64. Books like *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz and *The Robe* by Lloyd C Douglas have shaped previous generations' Christian imagination in respect of these events. New areas of research may not be possible owing to the paucity of evidence. However, A F Walls in *IBD* (iii.1204b) says 'The theology of 1 Peter is essentially Pauline,' and finds many resemblances between Petrine phrases and the utterances of our Lord recorded in the Gospels. Beale & Carson *Commentary on NT use of OT* (1015a) notes the 'rich profusion' of quotations from and allusions to the Greek version of the OT known as the Septuagint.' So the letter taps into the mainstream Bible at many points. Even so, it is much more difficult to access the personality of Peter from his writings than it is with Paul.

I find no reason to depart from the traditional view that 'Babylon' (5:13) is a coded reference to Rome, where Peter was together with John Mark, the author of the Second Gospel (for his presence in Rome around AD 62-63 see 2 Tim 4:11). 'Silvanus' is Silas, frequently attested in Acts as a co-worker with Paul and his co-author of 1 & 2 Thessalonians; he is said to be an intermediary of the letter, whatever that means, rather than jointly responsible for its composition. The nature of the intended recipients (members of 'the Diaspora' in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia) is a conundrum: these provinces were far distant from Rome in the NE of the Empire and hardly likely to be a prime location of intense anti-Christian feeling. Carson refers to research by Karen H Jobs (2005) suggesting that all these provinces had been recolonised with Jews by the emperor Claudius – but even if they were, on the death of Claudius most of the Jews exiled out there had opportunity to return to Rome, and would have done so in great numbers. It is also unlikely that this was a coded way of directing the letter to recipients at Rome itself. Quite possibly, since we know nothing about Peter's activities between cAD 49 when he was in Jerusalem and Antioch, and his death probably in the Great Fire persecution of the mid- to later 60s, he could have been engaged in missionary activity in the NE and this letter is to reassure and prepare his converts in churches there for an intensifying of persecution. (The church historian Eusebius says in Bk 3.1 that Peter 'seems to have preached the gospel to the Jews of the Diaspora' in those regions, but this looks like an inference from this letter.) Alternatively, Silvanus/Silas may have been working as an evangelist in these areas, and has now arrived in Rome where he reports the precarious state of the churches to Peter; Peter decides to write them a letter of encouragement, for Silas to take back to them in the order the names are listed. (The fact that Silas approaches Peter for this task rather than Paul, with whom he has worked closely for many years, may indicate that Paul has been released from his first imprisonment and has left Rome for further evangelistic work elsewhere.) E Clowney (BST) maintains that the Diaspora is the new generation of Gentile Christians that has grown up in the provinces; verses like 1:18 seem to confirm this (would Peter tell Jews that their traditions were rubbish? Well, Jesus did (Mk 7)!). I'm going to hedge my bets and assume that both Jewish and Gentile readers are very much in Peter's mind. The profusion of OT quotations suggests that Peter was assuming some knowledge of the Septuagint among his readers – maybe the LXX was a potent binding force for Jews and Gentiles in the Christian churches particularly of the East.

In interpreting Peter, then, there are several 'thought contexts' that lie just below the surface of the written text. One is naturally the whole of his discipleship experience as recorded in the four Gospels. Another, more specifically, is his denial and restoration (some details of which have to be inferred from fragmentary indications like Lk 24:34). A third is his post-Ascension ministry centred on Jerusalem in Acts 1-12, including the gospel to the Gentiles as pioneered first by himself then (often painfully) by Paul and his team. Finally there is the presumed immediate context of the letter, the anti-Christian ferment in the 60's AD particularly in Rome but also (as implied in this letter) in the farthest reaches of the Empire.

Useful commentaries include: Edmund P Clowney *The Message of 1 Peter* (BST 1988); A M Stibbs *The First Epistle General of Peter* (Tyndale 1959); Karen H Jobs *1 Peter* (Baker Academic 2005); Tom Wright *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (SPCK 2011). There are a couple of passages in the letter (3:18b-20, 4:6) which commentators find impenetrable, so I've simply adopted one possible interpretation, or tried to combine more than one. On the whole, though, I've consulted commentaries only after working through it myself, so no-one else is to blame for the idiosyncrasies or plain idiocies found herein. The text of 1 Peter (NIV 2011) is printed at the head of each section for ease of reference, and to emphasise that what follows is by no possible stretch of the imagination a substitute for or replacement of the foundational version.

1:1-2 ¹*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,* ²*who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

To the new Israel

[1:1] This is a letter from Simon Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to you who live in the Roman districts in Anatolia, the extensive area directly south of the Black Sea. It's going to be read, and copies made, in as many churches as possible in a wide arc from Pontus on the shores of the Black Sea, down into Cappadocia, through Northern Galatia, into eastern parts of Asia Minor and back up into Bithynia. I am keenly aware that I am writing to people of hugely different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds – but it's very similar to the mix we have here in Rome. The one thing we all have in common is that we're all misfits, we don't belong any more to this present world – this is because God has set his calling upon us in Christ as his very own people, so we are like a new Israel of the Dispersion, scattered among many countries but all owing allegiance to our true home, the new Jerusalem.

In fact some of you, or your parents, will have been among those who heard me speak on that incredible Day of Pentecost and who travelled back home to start up a tiny church of Christian believers thirty or more years ago. Has my message changed since then? No, it certainly has not!

A Trinity of love

[1:2] You see, God hasn't changed. His plan has always been the same, conceived in his eternal wisdom and now brought to full fruition in his Son: that you should be his people, outcasts from this world perhaps, but destined for a glorious and unbounded future. And just as those tongues of fire divided and came to rest on each head, so he has given his Spirit to every one of you, to spread holiness around in your life and make you fit for life in his heavenly presence. I'm not just talking about some transient experience of power and wonder – he has called you to a daily life of steady obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, just as Moses summoned those first Israelites to carry out all the words of the covenant; and just as Moses covered the people symbolically in animal blood to signify God's merciful provision of forgiveness, so now by a far greater sacrifice, the laying down of Jesus' life covers us in our failures to live up to that obedience. If David could trust the sprinkling of blood under the old covenant to cleanse him from his dreadful actions in regard to Uriah the Hittite, how much more under the new covenant will the cross of Christ wash us clean from the persistent wrongdoing that seems to dog our footsteps.

Yes, a Trinity of love: the design of the Father from eternity, the transforming work of the Spirit and the ever-forgiving mercy of our Master all operating in the wilderness of our lives to bring us home.

Royal greeting

So it's not just a conventional greeting I and Silas are bringing you – we're going to use a royal benediction as befits messengers from the High King of Heaven, from whom goodness and generosity just keep on streaming like the rays of the sun. May you know more of his grace each day, the love that takes you as you are and endows you with all the gifts he has in store for you; and may you know his deep, deep peace, not the absence of trouble and pressure, but the settled assurance that nothing can come between you and his blessing, because the Prince of peace himself has begun his reign in your lives.

1:3 ³*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*

Wonderful Father

I want to set your hearts singing about this wonderful God we have. He's not just some impersonal First Cause, or an uncaring Fate that controls our lives, or a thunderous Jehovah delivering commandments from a mountain-top, or a capricious Zeus treating us as his playthings – he's the Father Jesus used to

pray to, who not only brought us into being but continues to be responsible for our protection and wellbeing. The Lord Jesus himself taught us to call God 'Abba,' and that means we can run into his arms at any time of the day or night and tell him our deepest secrets and longings.

Living hope

We are family. Take a good look at the people around you in your group of believers: they may seem a very disparate bunch, a motley collection of human beings of widely different ages, classes, races, personalities – yet we all have one thing in common, which is that we are God's new-born people. This is not down to any merit we might have accumulated in his sight, nor to some vivid experience of conversion, but simply and solely to his astonishing refusal to take any account of the comprehensive mess we have made of our relationship to him. Our future, which might have looked so black and forbidding, now throbs with excitement and longing for the life of heaven. All this is due to the impossible, unthinkable act of the Father in taking the broken and lifeless body of his Son and bringing him out of the grave into a new and endless resurrection existence. People will tell you you are mad to believe all this; on the contrary, it is sin and death which is madness – Christ has come through all that to bring us into the glorious sanity of the children of God.

1:4-5 ⁴... and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

It's there for you

[1:4] Children inherit from their parents. What you inherit comes to you without any effort on your part; all you have to do is to take it gratefully in both hands. The heavenly inheritance God has prepared for us in Christ isn't subject to the ravages of death and decay. It remains untainted by our failures and mess-ups. It can never be plundered by enemy forces – in fact, it's guarded night and day in the vaults of God's headquarters. And the best thing of all is that it has your name on it, it's specifically there for you in all its unique wonder and loveliness. [1:5] But you haven't got it, yet – and meanwhile down here on earth there are all kinds of assaults on your faith, from devilish agencies, from an uncomprehending world, and not least from the traitor within the gates, your own self-will and imperious passions. Your only hope of coming through the storm into the sunshine is the love that watches over you.

'So does everything depend on me keeping my faith?' You can always give up following Christ – I nearly did myself once. But never underestimate the ability of God to keep his promise. He never said believing would be easy – what he does say is that at the end of the road there's something waiting for you which will make it all worthwhile. One day, one wonderful Day, it will all become clear. You will be finally and eternally safe. And meanwhile, every step of the way, you are guarded and guided by the One whose power created the universe. So, yes, in one sense it does depend on you hanging in there; but in another sense it isn't you who is responsible for making sure you finish the journey.

1:6-7 ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Present and future

[1:6] Here's a paradox. You can be utterly exhilarated even when you're totally depressed. The sun hasn't stopped shining even when the storms are bursting over your head. The future is glorious even if the present is grim. Our Master said exactly this, didn't he? He said people would make all kinds of

dreadful accusations against you and attack you relentlessly, just as they did to the prophets – yet you could still be jumping for joy because of the compensation awaiting you.

The fire-test

[1:7] The experience of persecution varies from church to church and from Christian to Christian – but the bottom line is that our life here on earth is a series of faith-tests. This is clear from the first humans onwards: are you prepared to trust God through thick and thin, even when you can't understand what he's doing and the lies sound more plausible than the truth? Just as we put gold through the fire, to assay its purity and to leach out all the impurities, so the Lord puts his saints through the fire-test so that the solid worth of their profession can be demonstrated. And in case you should be feeling 'What's the point? My faith is fragile and imperfect even at the best of times,' God reassures his children that on the contrary their determination to go on backing him is far more precious to him than the purest and finest gold. And you're not left on your own! When the Lord warned me that my own faith would be brutally assailed, he told me in the same breath that he was going to be praying for me – and when it all happened and he gave me that look, it wasn't to say 'I told you so!', it was 'I still love you and want you on the team.'

Seeing Jesus again

Because one day he's coming back, with no possibility of mistaking him for someone else. And he'll be looking round for people to say thankyou to. There'll be folk who laid their lives on the line for him, together with their reputations and comfort and earthly advantage, and he'll want to honour them. There are going to be some quite extraordinary people singled out at that prizegiving, believe me! Everything's going to be utterly clear when we see Jesus again. No questions left unanswered. 'Why did you let us go through all that?' 'Look at the view!'

1:8-9 ⁸ *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,* ⁹ *for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

Whether we see him or not

[1:8] Meanwhile we have to accept that he's not visible and tangible to our mortal senses. He told us quite clearly that this would be the case. There will be a short period of time, he says, when I won't be around and you'll get taunted for believing in a God who isn't there. We thought when he came back from the dead that he was referring to that, but then he went off again and we realised he was operating to a different timescale: 'I'm coming back the day after tomorrow' could mean several thousand years. But it makes no difference whether we see him or not; we can still express our hearts' desire for him. If someone you love goes away, you don't stop longing for them and thinking about them, in fact you do so even more, if possible. Except that in the case of Jesus, he's still around; in fact, through his Spirit, he's closer to each of us than he ever was on earth.

Singing in the wilderness

So there's every reason for being absurdly happy. Oh, I know there'll be real tears, but he said no-one would take our joy from us. Again this paradox. We may not be able to put our feelings into words, or explain why we are still singing in the wilderness; but it's our experience that while we may not be enjoying the present life, we find at the very same time an unaccountable lightening of our spirits. [1:9] This is for a very good reason: the bits of us that are perishing don't matter, the bits that do matter are going on for ever. That's the whole point of faith – it's God's highway to Life with a capital 'L'. And not just life for ourselves, life for others as well. The kingdom grows soul by soul. We're not just getting out of the burning building ourselves, we're bringing others with us.

1:10-12 ¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

God's plan all along

[1:10] Don't let people tell you that this is some newfangled invention dredged up by a few out-of-work Galilean fishermen. It's been God's rescue plan all along. It's all there in the Scriptures you may or may not have had ingrained in you since childhood. It's like a mighty underground river of which people have caught only occasional glimpses, until it forces its way into the open right next to where you're standing – the river of God's grace in his Son Jesus, foretold in the centuries-long prophetic tradition and now revealed in your day and generation. Yet it's not as if those old prophets were totally unaware of what they were proclaiming. They knew God was trying to say something huge, not only to Israel but to every nation throughout history. Do you think that the stories of Abraham offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah, or the incredible escape from Egypt, or Jonah emerging from his sea-monster, or Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, didn't generate the most intense discussion every time they were retold? What is God going on about here?

Unified story

[1:11] A prime example, of course, is that incredible sequence in Isaiah where nations and kings witness the sufferings of the Servant (identified with the coming Messiah). Who is this Person? What is happening to him? What is God doing in causing him such terrible grief? Who are these 'offspring', this multitude of people whose sins he is bearing? And strangest of all, when it is all over, does he stay dead?

Or when you turn to David's Psalm of Abandonment, all the same questions come up and more. What is all this about the piercing of hands and feet and the casting of lots for clothes? How can such a terminal experience issue in a triumphant shout to generations yet unborn, that 'he has done it!?' This isn't David and Isaiah or some unknown editor having their separate fantasies – it's the Christ-Spirit telling a unified story, setting out God's game plan, telling us that he knows exactly what he's doing: humiliation and vindication, descent then ascent, suffering before timeless glory.

Passing on the message

[1:12] No, there are lots of questions these men of God must have posed both to themselves and to their own generation; and they aren't told the answers. All they know is that this is going to happen one day, and they are the messengers preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Well, now it has happened, and you and I have witnessed it; at least, I have and I'm telling you about it. We're all part of the same relay team, passing the baton from one hand to another. Once again I emphasise that this isn't a fishermen's tale – it's the same Holy Spirit (God's messenger-boy from heaven) opening our eyes to the Divine world rescue. But you have to get off your high horse to see it. When John and Mary and I went to the tomb on that unforgettable Easter morning, before we could see that there was just a heap of old burial-cloths and nothing else in there, and start working out the implications of that, we needed to get right down low on our knees. Don't wait for an angel to turn up and tell you Christ is risen, find out from stupid humans like us, because we've crawled into that forsaken grave, we've seen the physical evidence of what God has done at the climax of history. Angels couldn't do that, not even the good ones; they're the shining ones, they haven't got anything to be forgiven for, they didn't need Christ to die for them.

1:13-16 ¹³ Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had

when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

A far greater deliverance

[1:13] If, as I said, you're running in a race as part of a team, each one of you needs to wear the appropriate clothing. Athletes don't perform well in the kind of flowing garments you might put on for a party or for relaxing at home by the fireside; they strip to the minimum for sustained and strenuous action. I'm talking about intentionality here. When the Lord told us to be watchful and ready for his return, he wasn't recommending that we go around in a state of dreamy spirituality, vaguely hoping that everything's going to come right in the end. We need to be like those Israelites on the night before their release from Egypt, ready to go as soon as the signal's given. All the more so, because we are eagerly anticipating a far greater deliverance, not just from the guilt and power of sin but from its very presence. That's the ultimate gift of God's love and grace, to see him with nothing in between.

[1:14] That means instant obedience to his will. Children shouldn't hang around arguing with their father – they should do exactly as he says without hesitation. Don't listen to what the world tells you; don't be pushed around by the seductive suggestions of a society that doesn't know what true pleasure is. You may have acquired habits of thinking, 'there's no harm in that' or 'try it just once', but look where those landed you.

New genetic code

[1:15-16] No, your lives have been turned right round by hearing a wake-up call from heaven itself. God is saying, 'Don't mess with sin in any shape or form, because I don't either.' But he doesn't just tell you and leave you to get on with this unfamiliar holiness business as best you can. He wants to be involved at every point in making us into new people. So he makes a promise: 'You're going to be different, because I'm going to write into your characters and personalities a new genetic code straight from my Son. Because he's like me, you are going to be like me as well, from the inside out. But it's going to need your full cooperation.'

1:17-21 ¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

God has no favourites

[1:17] Do you see what being members of God's family involves? It doesn't mean you can do anything you like and get away with it. Yes, of course you can turn to your heavenly Father and talk to him at any time of the day or night, for comfort or help or forgiveness or whatever else you need. But you're responsible to him for what you do with the answer. He wants your life to count for the kingdom, and he doesn't have any favourites, in the sense that everyone gets credit for what they do, whoever they are.

Don't be fooled by the unbelieving world around you: you may have lived with them for a long time, but now you're a stranger to them. They will try to scare you into following their agenda, but there's only one person you should be scared of, and that's God himself.

Our value in God's eyes

[1:18] When I say 'scared', I don't mean you should go about constantly terrified that he's going to come down on you like a ton of bricks for not being absolutely perfect. He's not that kind of Father. Yes, he's perfect himself, but he knows you aren't, and that's why he has paid such a massive price to win you back. A really valuable slave, or work of art, or palatial mansion, would cost their would-be owner an

eye-watering outlay of gold or silver – yet all these things have only temporary worth, as they are inevitably going to perish one day in the future. Apply this to the price God has set on you. Not that you have any intrinsic value in yourselves – whether we are Jewish or not, you and I are overwhelmingly the product of a whole line of ancestors who had muddled ideas about God and thought their religious traditions and family customs were incredibly important, whereas their eternal value was nil. Yet he was prepared to pay for your ransom with the ultimate sacrifice. [1:19] His own chosen Son and beloved Messiah went willingly to the cross and offered his life-blood, so that you wouldn't be thrown on the rubbish-heap.

All according to God's plan

Let's think about this a bit. Those who witnessed the crucifixion had varying impressions. Some saw it merely as a shameful and humiliating way to die, as indeed it was. Some couldn't help being affected by the pain and agony the crucified one had to endure. Others dwelt on the flagrant injustice inflicted upon a person who had lived his life for others and done so much good for those in need. Still others interpreted his plight as demonstrating the displeasure of God the Judge against someone who had claimed a special relationship with him as Messiah.

Yet we now know the full significance of that dreadful scene. Jesus was acting out that part foretold in the prophets and foreshadowed in the Law: the offering of a sacrificial lamb to God, in all its innocence and spotlessness and purity, and very precious and costly to the owner. The Messiah, slaughtered for the sins of the people? Inconceivable – yet true, and all according to God's plan.

No, it wasn't all a terrible mistake or a senseless miscarriage of justice. God knew what he was doing to his Son. It was all part of the contingency operation worked out even before the universe came into being. And now, after countless years of anticipation, it has now happened in your and my lifetimes, it's right out in the open – not for us to be passive spectators, but for us to embrace it wholeheartedly and play our full part. [1:21] Faith in God isn't just an intellectual exercise or a religious performance – it is welcoming Jesus as Lord, as the one whom God allowed to go down into the depths of the grave and then called out into the bright sunshine of new life, to be King over all creation and sharer of his throne.

You can be absolutely sure of this God. His intention is irreversible, his promise utterly reliable. He really means you to live for ever. That's what I meant when I talked about resurrection hope. If Jesus is still in that tomb in Jerusalem, your faith collapses and it's curtains for any expectation you might have of eternal life. Do you see how it doesn't depend on you, and never has? It all depends on what God has purposed and done through Christ.

1:22-25 *²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures for ever.' And this is the word that was preached to you.*

The company of the resurrected

[1:22] In the past you needed all kinds of rituals and sacrifices to wipe the stain of wrongdoing from your record before God. Now all that's changed, because as soon as you heard what Jesus was really up to on the cross, you couldn't embrace it fast enough. Holiness isn't setting up your own sin-free account with heaven, it's exchanging accounts with Christ: he takes yours, you take his. Wonderful! But that doesn't mean you insulate yourself from the rest of humankind. The whole idea is not that you ride to heaven on a triumphal chariot, but that you spread love around like imperial largesse. Particularly towards your new Christian friends. I can't emphasise enough how vital it is for Jesus-followers to spend and be spent in caring genuinely for one another and taking every opportunity to help each other.

[1:23] You are the company of the resurrected, dry bones come to life through the Spirit's work. You're not the product of the natural order of things which was never intended to last very long, you're God-born – so start working out this eternal life-force that now indwells you with its dynamic of love.

You're members of a new human race, a new created order. Don't underestimate the enduring power of God's word. Just as he himself is the essence of Life, so everything he says has a transforming energy.

[1:24] Isaiah puts it like this: 'Walk through this meadow abundant with waving grass and spring flowers – enjoy its fragrance and natural loveliness. Yet these grasses will soon lie withered and lifeless, these delicate petals become shrivelled and ugly. So it is with humanity: we build our far-flung empires, and create wonderful works of beauty and skill; but all too soon they become a chapter in a history book, a few battered images gathering dust in a museum. By contrast, the Lord's voice continues to sound through time and eternity, promising and fulfilling, judging and forgiving, creating and recreating.' Don't underestimate the power of the Christ story; its messengers may be unimpressive, but its effects are permanent and indestructible. This word is ours, and now it's yours too. Whatever you may have to go through, nothing can change all that.

2:1-3 ¹Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Resurrection qualities

[2:1] Let me spell out in detail what these new resurrection people are meant to be like. If you think I'm being hopelessly idealistic, because the church you know isn't like that (and I should know, I was one of Jesus' disciples for three years), ask yourself, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if every church fellowship were full of these kinds of qualities?'

For a start, there would be no ill-feelings, none of that settled animosity between individuals or factions which make unity and harmony impossible. When the love of Jesus is let loose among human beings, hatred and bitterness are things of the past.

People wouldn't be manipulative or play upon one another's credulity or gullibility. None of us possess full insight into the real state of things, but that's no excuse for deliberately twisting the truth or being dishonest with one another – particularly, I have to say, in the marriage relationship.

Christians are regularly accused of being hypocrites, and sometimes the mud sticks. We behave very differently in our daily lives from what we say and profess in our fellowships. We put on a mask of piety and spirituality which slips as soon as we come under pressure in everyday society. Here's a business executive who leads the singing in church and yet is known for his ruthlessness towards his employees during the week. Here's a lady who prays fervently in the prayer-meeting yet flirts shamelessly at parties. How the Holy Spirit must yearn for consistency and transparency of character among his redeemed people!

We are especially prone to comparing ourselves with others. If we think we're better than they are, we secretly despise them or even find satisfaction in exposing their failings; but more often, I'd say, we see their good qualities or God-given gifts and we can't help envying them. They must be God's favourites – if only we had been dealt such a generous hand in life's lottery! Why is so-and-so possessed of such serenity and radiance? Why is that person used to help loads of people when nobody comes to me for support? (There may be a good reason!)

And, best of all, there would be none of that devilish talk which dissects characters and shreds reputations. It takes various forms, but as Moses found in the wilderness it is so often directed against the leadership (and worse still, against God himself). Nothing more speedily destroys the unity of God's people; it creates an atmosphere of grumbling and complaining, and makes it impossible for a church to move forward together into Christian maturity.

Childlike simplicity

[2:2] The antidote to all this, as the Lord himself taught us, is a childlike simplicity and wonder in all matters relating to the kingdom of heaven. A child at its mother's breast only wants one thing, and that is to squeeze out and swallow as much of that delicious milk as it can. I'm not suggesting we should become squalling infants – I'm talking about the attitude we should all have to the word of God, which not only gives us new birth as I've just been saying, but which feeds our spirits regularly with an uncomplicated and open-hearted faith. Are you really hungry and thirsty for that meeting with Jesus you could have as Scripture is unfolded to you? Or are you so busy picking holes in the speaker that you miss God's message entirely?

We have so much growing up to do. We aren't perfect yet, not by a long chalk. Our little boat is so prone to drift off course at the mercy of the winds and waves, while the ultimate safety of the quayside is still a long way off. [2:3] I've been reading one of the David Psalms, where he talks about his experience of God's help when he was in a really tight spot. 'I've been having a wonderful mouthful of Divine goodness!' he says. 'It's simple: all you have to do is get to the end of your own resources and depend utterly on him to save the situation.' This is the secret of Christian growth: telling Christ he is all you need or could ever need, and enjoying his immediate presence and sufficiency. Deal directly with him. Never let your experience of God become second-hand.

2:4-8 ⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' ⁸ and, 'A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

God is available

[2:4] Yes, coming to Jesus is the all-important thing. The Master told us repeatedly to do this, and warned us in no uncertain terms that we'd perish if we didn't. Just as he constantly made himself available on earth, so he still does on his heavenly throne. But people don't come, and that's the puzzle and the pity of it. Throughout the history of Israel, by means of tabernacle and Temple, God is there with his people and is constantly available to them even when they don't want him. Finally he takes flesh and moves visibly in our midst. If you like, his human body becomes a living and breathing Temple to which everyone may come for access to the One True God. Or, to change the idea slightly, he (Jesus) is the single most important stone that holds the whole structure together, whether it's the keystone of the main arch or the massive block which joins the sides together at the corner angle. The point is that he is infinitely precious to God, God's chosen Person as we were repeatedly told. So why has the human race taken one look at him and thrown him out as so much unwanted rubble? It would be understandable for pagans not to realise who Jesus was, but for the nation specially trained to recognise God and understand his ways to reject their promised Messiah – why, it beggars belief!

A Temple on the move

[2:5] Well, he tells us before he goes, my body is going to be the new temple. This is his way of saying that even though he has gone into heaven, his presence on earth, and his activity among the nations of the world, is going to be continued by the community of believers of which he is the Head. Ever since Pentecost this has been the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is building a new Temple, in the sense that as each believer joins the company of Christ and is born again through the Spirit, they're like living and breathing stone blocks being added to the ever-growing structure.

This is incredibly exciting. This Temple is on the move! And it's not just a 'building', it's where people can meet with God and receive all he has for them. This was the function of the old priesthood, providing a mediation service between humanity and a holy God. It's all too easy to get fixated on literal buildings and liturgies and offerings – what God is designing is a fellowship where true worship in the Spirit will take place, where the members aren't only living components of the set-up, which is enough in itself to take your breath away, but each one also has the priestly role of ministering the knowledge of God to one another. Not because they have some special virtue or are good enough to be allowed to do this, but because of their faith-connection with Jesus who died and rose again to bring them into intimate first-hand touch with God. That should give an entirely new dimension to the word 'service'!

The centrality of Christ

[2:6] Yes, Jesus is central to the whole edifice, so don't let anyone tell you that faith in him is a waste of time. Let's run with this Stone idea for a bit longer. There's an extraordinary chapter in Isaiah which graphically anticipates the utter collapse of Jerusalem on account of the corruption and falsity of its leaders. But in the midst of the torrent, as everything is being swept away, God points to a great Rock standing firm. 'Just look a little more closely!' the Lord says. 'Not everything is going to rack and ruin. I'm putting a Cornerstone in Jerusalem which no flood is ever going to shift. It's not just any old lump of rock, it's specially selected and tested to destruction, and it holds the whole thing together. Those who clamber up on it and cling to it for dear life will find that their faith hasn't been misplaced – it's never going to let them down.' This must refer to the Messiah, and of course the Master referred to himself as this Stone as we'll see in a moment; but just notice that word 'special'. [2:7] It means everything to God, it is supremely valuable to him; and it's uniquely lifesaving to those who throw their whole weight upon it. How precious is Jesus to you? Have you trusted him completely, or are you still hedging your bets? Is he just an insurance policy, or would your whole life collapse without him?

Let's go back to the temple idea. Jesus was actually teaching in the Temple courts when he drew the comparison between God's cornerstone and himself. He was telling the story of how the vineyard tenants ended up killing the owner's beloved son and throwing his body outside the boundary wall to show their utter contempt for the owner. It couldn't have been a clearer prediction of what was going to happen to Jesus himself. Then he pointed to a huge block of masonry, which was vital for the stability of the whole architectural masterpiece, and quoted the bit in the famous 'Royal Procession into the Temple' Psalm: 'That single lovingly-carved Rock is designed to carry the weight of the whole structure. The architect has selected it to concentrate all the diverse lines of energy and counter-forces into one unshakeable unity. So what's it doing lying around on the floor for people to trip over and hurt themselves? What do the workmen think they are doing, marking it as Not Wanted On Site?' Three days later he was hanging on a cross outside the city limits.

There's another Stone analogy earlier in Isaiah. The people have a clear choice. Either they can trust God to hold the nation together; or they can seek foreign alliances and hatch their own little plots, in which case the Lord who should be their Rock will turn into a very different kind of masonry. 'He will block their path and cause them all sorts of trouble. But you, the believing remnant, will find him utterly trustworthy and you will have nothing to fear.' My friends, Jesus is that Rock for you. There is a

relentless Divine logic at work: now that the Chosen One has come, every single human being on earth is confronted with the question of what to do with him. No-one can just step over him and get on with their everyday business. Rest the whole weight of your life upon him and he'll never let you down; trip over him and you'll fall flat on your face. These people who are giving you such a hard time about your faith are directly contravening the Maker's instructions, and they haven't bothered to read the penalty clause. They deserve what's coming to them.

2:9-10 ⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

These privileges are for you

[2:9] 'But, Peter, the accusation that stings most is that we are renegades, traitors to our race – to our Abrahamic nationality if we are Jews, and if we are non-Jews to our ancestral identity or social grouping. They call us a "third race". How do we cope with this?' Physical birth origins count for nothing in God's sight; what counts is spiritual birth into his people by faith in Christ, and you, my dear friends, as I've already explained, are full members of that twice-born race.

God is that kind of God. What he once said long ago to his people in the Scriptures, he now says to you. He looks at the exiled families of Israel and Judah, scattered among the nations, thirsty for spiritual food and drink (just like you!), and he calls them his 'chosen people'. He listens to the grumbling and moaning of the children of Israel, only three months after he's majestically rescued them from Egypt, and says, 'I've appointed you to be my royal courtiers, who can come in and out of my presence at any time and ask me for anything you want, whether it's for yourself or for those who don't know me.' These privileges are now available for everyone who has faith in Christ. In the same breath he says to this dispirited rabble who remember all too vividly how they were oppressed by a pagan nation and made to obey alien gods, 'I've made you my own special race, separate from all other peoples, bearing my character and sharing my loathing for the contamination of sin.' And he compares himself to a great mother eagle who has swooped down to rescue her errant chicks from the iron claws of their predators and is bringing them back to the nest which is their true home, and he says, 'It's me you belong to, you're my jewels, my precious ones. Just do what I tell you, that's all!' All this applies to the Jesus-followers of today just as surely as it applied to the Messiah people of God in time past.

Exodus and exile, rescue and return. Songs of deliverance. The Lord's overriding aim is to create a people who will not only dwell with him everlastingly, but who on the way will tell everyone else how great he is. I don't care what trouble it lands you in with your neighbours, just look out for every opportunity to recommend this wonderful God to them. Talk to them in pictures if you like: life and death, freedom and slavery, health and sickness, or the best one of all, darkness and light. Whether your experience has been the slow and steady dawning of day after the long night, or the sudden arrival of sunlight when your window curtains are pulled back, there's no mistaking the qualitative difference between once not being able to see the truth, and now being able to see it.

[2:10] Tell them about the new family you belong to. There's this unforgettable drama played out in the book of Hosea, where the prophet marries a beautiful woman who is consistently unfaithful to him. She produces children, but he can't be certain whether some of them are his or not, so he rejects them, and names them accordingly – 'Unloved,' 'Illegitimate' and so on. It's all too horrible – but it reflects how God feels about the broken relationship between his people and himself. Yet he holds out the hope of their friendship being restored, and promises that when it is, their names will be changed to 'Beloved'

and 'My Very Own'. That's what's happened to you. However religious you have or haven't been in your past life, your acts and attitudes have made you unfit to appear in God's presence; but now that God has put his Spirit of adoption into your hearts, you've become full members of a glorious worldwide family, children of a Father who knows you fully and loves you to the uttermost. You've joined a community whose defining characteristic is that they've been forgiven everything, by a God who desires mercy and not sacrifice – and this applies to Jew and non-Jew alike.

2:11-12 ¹¹ *Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.* ¹² *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

Relating to our culture

[2:11] You may have been surprised when I began this letter by calling you 'misfits'! I want to spend a few minutes analysing the way we relate to the society we belong to on earth, or the culture we were born into, humanly speaking. We may in the past have been entirely comfortable with it and felt we were part of it, but now we don't, because the Lord we have come to know and love has called us out of it, then sent us back into it again. We're like resident aliens, living (like Abraham) in a country not our own, showing by our behaviour and speech that our origin and destiny lie somewhere else. Maybe this is the basic human condition anyway, but it is certainly the defining characteristic of Christians. We can't help being different, and people pick it up very quickly. Some societies are quite happy with immigrants and temporary residents, and generally welcome them, but others may find it difficult to get along with them.

You may be thinking, 'Well, that's their problem,' but we have a problem too, because instinctively we want to fit in, which would mean adopting a similar mindset to those around us, for instance towards possessions, sexual relationships, self-image and so on – 'normal' human desires which seem harmless enough, but which in fact militate against our growth in Christ. Life in this world is a constant battle, with eternal destinies at stake. We need to arm ourselves with the power of Christ, and to keep continual watch on our tendency to parley with the enemy and to take the easy option. [2:12] I'm not recommending a ghetto mentality; the best way to win this particular battle is to play a constructive part in our community, to be 'salt' and 'light' as the Master put it, so that people around us may (perhaps reluctantly) be compelled to revise their opinions both about us and about God.

Dealing with wild rumours

I fully realise the power of the social media, and how wild rumours can spread which bear no relation to the truth. Christians are commonly the subject of malicious and distorted gossip, and if it's true here in Rome, it will be no less so out in the provinces where you are. It's very difficult to put the lid on stories which make out that we (for instance) conduct secret orgies or even butcher our children. But what we can do is to throw our weight behind activities which help the disadvantaged in our society, like relieving poverty or loneliness, attending to the needs of widows, visiting prisoners and so on. The Christian church has a distinctive part to play in preserving its ambient culture from going into a spiral of decline.

But if society won't recognise the reality of God's greatness and goodness in the here and now, then it might do so on 'the day of reckoning'. In the old prophets this climactic event usually referred to God's temporal or final judgment on a nation's corruption and idolatry, from which there was no escape. But now that God has visited us in the flesh we are in the age of his mercy and salvation until Christ returns. What if the gospel comes to a nation or society (as we saw in Samaria) and it is the joy and unselfishness

of Jesus' followers that tips the balance between people ignoring or vilifying God, and their paying him homage and honour?

2:13-17 ¹³ *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.*

The secular authorities

[2:13] One aspect of this salt and light business is how we react to the secular authorities. If we are God's holy nation on earth, a state within a state as it were, shouldn't we set up our own system of government? This is a particularly tricky question when the secular state, instead of providing for and protecting its own citizens, actively makes life uncomfortable for them, or for a section of them. Basically, we owe it to the Master to do what the law tells us. Everyone knows how he responded to the question about taxes by saying, 'As citizens of earth and heaven, meet your obligations to the state on the one hand and to the One True God on the other.' If we happen to be born into an autocratic system with one person at its apex, right then, as long as that person doesn't usurp the supreme honour due to God alone, give them all due fealty and obedience. [2:14] The same goes for provincial governors and military commanders entrusted with upholding the state's authority in different areas of the empire.

Behaving responsibly

Christians shouldn't be revolutionaries. Yes, the gospel of Christ is a revolutionary message, and if it were generally heeded it would bring greatly beneficial changes to a kingdom or society; but in God's providence he has ordained that everyone should have mutual responsibilities, leaders for leading wisely and well, and subjects for cooperating sensibly and doing what they're told. Those in authority over you aren't there to feather their own nests; their principal role, in God's good purpose, is to encourage and reward well-doing and to restrain and punish evil-doing. [2:15] God knows perfectly well that thanks to the Fall there are always going to be people with twisted mentalities and warped intentions; but because of his original image stamped on human beings there will be people who can see straight and act for the good of others. People like you can cooperate with him by behaving responsibly and constructively, and so limiting the amount of damage that can be done by lawless elements or mindless lunatics.

[2:16] 'But if Christ has set us free, don't we march to a different drummer? Aren't we entitled to break the law of the land occasionally, when it's over-restrictive or plain wrong-headed?' Yes, of course our freedom in Christ is very precious, and we owe our supreme allegiance to him. But here's the point: he wants his servants to witness to the society around them, by being transparently honest and having nothing to do with the corrupt practices other people consider normal. If you play fast and loose with the law, nobody is going to be able to trust you – for all they know, you might be plotting to set the town on fire. If you call yourselves the servants of God, make sure you understand your Master's instructions. And one thing we can be sure he wants is for us to be good citizens.

Good citizenship

[2:17] Let me give you a four-point summary of what I'm trying to say on this whole subject of citizenship.

One, other people matter. Everyone is entitled to a basic level of respect. If you want them to take you seriously, you've got to do the same for them. People aren't there just to be manipulated and pushed around at your whim or for your personal convenience.

Two, Christians are special. We belong to a worldwide family, and the bonds that hold us together in Christ are (or should be) unbreakable. We should be putting ourselves out for one another, praying for each other, going the second mile and so on. Outsiders should be constantly amazed at the sacrificial care we show for each other: 'Wow, these Jesus-followers really do go overboard for their fellow-members!' I don't mean that we favouritise believers over unbelievers in business matters or anything like that; what I do mean is that we could all do a lot more practical loving where our brothers and sisters in Christ are concerned.

Three (but obviously first of all), treat God as real. Don't just give him lip-service on holy days and sideline him for the rest of the month. Constantly listen out for the wisdom he alone can give. He knows you better than you know yourself – yes, he may hand out some tough discipline at times, but that's not an excuse for treating his plain commands as optional suggestions. Give him the prime slot in all the affairs of your life. God was serious enough about you to send his Son to the cross for you – how serious are you about him?

Fourth and final point: don't mouth off about your head of state, king, emperor, Caesar, whatever they're called. I realise some of them fall a long way short of the ideal ruler, but you should give them respect as supreme office-holders. There's a big difference between straightforward loyalty and cringing adulation, of course; autocrats are served better by their discerning friends than by their grovelling flatterers. It doesn't mean you have to support the government whatever they take it into their heads to do; but they've got a tough job and they deserve your willing cooperation.

2:18-21 ¹⁸ *Slaves, in reverent fear of God (or, with all deference NRSV) submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.* ¹⁹ *For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.* ²⁰ *But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.* ²¹ *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

Slaves being treated unfairly

[2:18] Now, let me apply these general principles to two groups of people who legally speaking have little or no status in earthly society, and yet because of their faith in Christ have royal status in the kingdom. Firstly, suppose you're a household slave. Are you allowed to pick and choose which of your master's instructions you feel inclined to carry out? Absolutely not. Christ didn't come into your life to free you from the normal human obligations of whatever society or culture you happen to be born into. Slaves give their masters total and unconditional deference, and that's final. It doesn't matter whether the master is decent and kind, or whether he (or she) is completely warped. [2:19] Even if you are being treated grossly unfairly and are being given all kinds of grief for something you never did, you should reason as follows: 'God knows that I've tried to keep a clear conscience in his sight; he could easily rescue me from this tyrannical master he has given me, but he doesn't. I've cast myself unreservedly upon the Lord's loving care, and he's the Master whom above all others I serve.' And Christ looks at you and says, 'Well done hanging in there! One day I'll give you the reward you deserve.'

[2:20] Naturally, you can't expect any credit if you've made a mess of things and got stuck for it – you'll just have to take what's coming to you. There's no point in running away or joining in a plot to assassinate the despot. The temptation to retaliate is far stronger if you have actually done something extremely constructive and praiseworthy, and yet you've been called into the office and had the whole book thrown at you. Are you supposed to submit to this kind of treatment? Well, what's going to please your heavenly Master most? He knows you're innocent, and he could sort out the situation in a flash, but he chooses not to. In a way it's a kind of test: do you value his opinion above all others, even if you get nothing out of it in terms of human rewards?

Easy ride?

[2:21] What did you expect when you answered God's summons and signed up with his Son? Did you think you were going to get an easy ride? The Lord Jesus told us that servants are no greater than their master – if he's going to get unjustly treated, his followers can expect exactly the same. I know it's different in the sense that Jesus' suffering is unique, it's a one-off sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, unrepeatable and eternally valid, which our little sufferings aren't – they may have some kind of redemptive value if they're endured for the sake of someone else, but they're not going to save the world. However, just as a teacher of writing puts up a series of large letters in outline for his young pupils to copy, so the Lord Jesus has left an unmistakable outline of a perfect human life for the whole world to imitate: if he laid his life on the line for others, then so should we; if he had to put up with misunderstanding, mockery and even torture, then maybe we should consider that normal for us as his followers. I don't mean we should deliberately court martyrdom for its own sake, or that God won't be really pleased with us unless we're screaming with anguish (what kind of God would that make him?); just that we shouldn't think it odd if we are being dealt the same treatment that Jesus got from an unbelieving world. And if this does happen, that we should face it with the same attitude he showed.

2:22-25 ²² *'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'* ²³ *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.* ²⁴ *'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'* ²⁵ *For 'you were like sheep going astray,'^[1] but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

Isaiah sequence

[2:22] Let me take you to that unforgettable sequence in Isaiah's book where a man whom God calls 'my Servant' is willingly accepting all kinds of painful and unjust treatment, not only from his human persecutors but, as it would seem, from his own brutal master, God himself. How does he react to all this undeserved violence? Because he certainly hasn't done anything that would merit such savagery. To quote the prophet, 'This man did nothing wrong and everything right. He never once broke the law of perfect love towards God and his neighbour; on the contrary, he lived a gloriously unselfish life and helped and healed everyone he met. The words he spoke were words of truth and mercy; yes, he often had tough things to tell people, including his own followers, but he was transparently honest and never once tried to manipulate anyone for his own ends.'

God knows what he is doing

[2:23] All this was true of Jesus, particularly when he faced Pilate and his sadistic henchmen, and endured the insults of the oh-so-saintly Pharisees and Sadducees. He was their Maker and King, for goodness' sake! He was God poured into a human frame with nothing left over. We shall never know how strongly tempted he was just to ask his Father to show them all who he really was. Yet when they mocked and insulted him, dressed him up in a purple robe and jammed a vicious circlet of hawthorn

down over his forehead, not a word of rebuke or anger passed his lips. When they tied him to the stake and lashed him to pulp with metal barbs tearing into his flesh, he could have threatened them with Divine judgment, but he stayed silent, as the prophet said he would. Even when the soldiers are banging long ugly nails through his hands and feet, all he can gasp out to his Father is, 'They never did this. They're just obeying orders.'

The bottom line for Jesus was this: my Father God hasn't suddenly gone stark raving mad. He knows what he is doing, and all his decisions are right. I can trust him with my life. He'll sort everything out in the end.

No last-minute intervention

[2:24] So, like Isaac staggering under the load of wood as he proceeded to his own sacrifice, Jesus went to the cross, only this time there was no last-minute intervention; the Father laid the weight and awfulness of the world's wrong on his own Son's shoulders. And so there he hung, suffering the double agony of physical torture and Divine rejection. We ourselves had indeed committed the treason, but it was Jesus who willingly went to execution in the place of each last traitor. So it came about that instead of our sins separating us from God, God himself removed our sins from us, a whole world's distance apart. Result: dead people come to life! Evil people can become good! A sick world begins to glow with health! All because the old prophecy has come true, and wounds inflicted on Another have made it possible for us to find full recovery.

Magic wand?

[2:25] I wish we could spend longer exploring that incredible chapter 53 of Isaiah, how so many of its details exactly fit the passion of our Lord. But I want to guard against one all too prevalent misunderstanding: the idea that God has somehow waved a magic wand over the problem of human sin and error, it's all sorted and we're on our way to heaven without any effort on our part. Isaiah knocks that kind of shallow complacency firmly on the head. 'The whole flock was out of control, wildly careering towards the cliff edge, heedless of the shepherd's repeated shouts of warning. Each sheep thought it was free to do what it liked, but in reality they had all chosen a common path to destruction. With superhuman energy the shepherd ran ahead of the crazed multitude and planted himself between the leaders and the sheer precipice. Their onrush knocked him clean over the edge; but it was enough to make the startled animals pull up short. The shepherd died; the flock was safe.'

Heartfelt response

We were all responsible for the cross, because we are all responsible for the wilful and selfish choices that led us away from God. Isaiah goes on to tell us that the shepherd will return to life to gather his flock round him and lead them back to full obedience and lifegiving pasture. But the point is that for each individual to receive the full benefits of the restored relationship, he or she must personally make a heartfelt return to their Shepherd. Their only hope of safety, indeed their very identity, lies in staying as close as possible to the One who has declared his full responsibility for them. That's what's happened to you, that's where you are now. Your future is with Jesus. Such love! Don't ever casually take it for granted.

3:1-7 ¹Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, ²when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. ³Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. ⁴Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, ⁶like Sarah,

who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. ⁷ Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Expectations for wives

[3:1] The second group I'm thinking about is you wives who have become believers in Christ Jesus. You have been taught, I hope, that in Christ all class- and gender-distinctions have been eradicated, whatever legal or social status you may have in this world. So are you now at liberty to claim absolute equality with your husbands? Again I must emphasise the need to meet the general expectations of the prevailing culture, where such expectations don't require us to compromise our faith. The traditional arrangement in our society is that the man holds ultimate authority over his own household. He is responsible for the family's security, well-being and much more; if he can't rely on his wife's full cooperation, something is seriously wrong. If the result of his wife's new-found faith is that she starts contradicting him and countermanding his orders, that's not a very brilliant advertisement for Christ!

But what if the husband doesn't happen to share his wife's acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord? Is she at liberty to disobey him, for instance if he bans the children's nurse from telling them gospel stories, or even forbids his wife to go to the early-morning Christian gathering in a neighbour's house? What if he not only pours scorn on her testimony but deliberately adopts a flagrantly immoral lifestyle? [3:2] It may seem as if all is lost; but there are cases where such a husband has been won over by the Christlike behaviour of his wife, without a single word of rebuke or entreaty having passed her lips. Ultimately, of course, he will need to hear the lifegiving message if he is to become soundly converted; but the essential work will have been done, perhaps over the course of many years, as day after day he has watched your whole life being irradiated with your devotion to Christ, and can't help noticing the contrast between your marital faithfulness and the prevailing ethos of everyday society.

[3:3] Some wives have asked me, 'Do I have to adopt a plain style of hairdo and dress, now I'm a Christian? Should I sell my jewel box?' I think you will appreciate that there's one sort of beauty which is external and another which is internal. If God has given you a certain natural attractiveness, then elaborate hairstyles, loads of jewellery and eye-catching designer clothing aren't going to add much to it – in fact, they may detract from it, as well as demanding a great deal of time and expense on your part. I don't mean that you shouldn't dress appropriately for the occasion; just ask yourself, who am I trying to impress? God delights in all he has created, but his rarest treasure is a person whose beauty is Spirit-given. This isn't produced by outward display. It's the fruit of a temperament schooled by Christ, and its evidence is an attitude of deep and consistent humility, which doesn't stand on its own rights but calmly and unfussily seeks his pleasure above all else.

God-fearing women

[3:5] I suggest you spend some time scanning the pages of Scripture for examples of women who led a God-fearing life, and whose personal trust in the Lord wouldn't allow them to disregard the clear wishes of their husbands. [3:6] A supreme example (and this may surprise you) is Abraham's wife Sarah. She was certainly a feisty character and their relationship was occasionally tempestuous, but in the matter of providing an heir for Abraham she is completely cooperative even when humanly speaking all hope has gone. She refers to him as 'my lord' and goes along with the crazy (but God-inspired) plan of starting a family when they're both in their nineties. The rest is history. If you in your generation want to be the spiritual children and heirs of Sarah, set your aim steadfastly on doing as much good as you can, and not being the slightest bit cowed by criticism, contempt or threats of violence where your faith in Christ is concerned. With the Lord at your side, what can possibly make you afraid?

Christian husbands

[3:7] 'But what if I'm suffering actual domestic abuse from my non-Christian husband?' Well, I won't pretend it's easy. But maybe this is where Christian men can set a positive example to their unbelieving friends. This woman you're sharing your life and home with and whom you know so well (if you do) – are you treating her with less than absolute consideration and respect? Do you take advantage of her not being a match for you in physical strength? Do you merely consider her a vehicle for carrying your child? Shouldn't you rather be reminding yourself that both of you equally stand, through no merit of your own, to inherit eternal life with God as his true-born sons and daughters? I'm asking you husbands these searching questions, because one of the most precious things you can do together is to unite in prayer regularly, for each other, for the church, for God's world, for your as yet unbelieving friends or family. And I have to say sadly, that marital disharmony or exploitation (so often originating from the man's side) makes such kingdom-growing prayer times impossible. What's the use of pious pleading for your unconverted colleagues, when your behaviour towards your wife gives them every excuse for not taking any notice of the faith you profess?

3:8-12 ⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For, 'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. ¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

Five-star witness

[3:8] To sum up what I've been trying to say so far: Christ-followers should be a different breed of humanity altogether. Let me give you a five-star recipe for a local fellowship that is really going to make an impact on its community:

- ❖ Agree on a common aim. You may or may not wish to adopt an actual logo or form of words to describe the basis of your organisation; but you should all be clear on what you are there for. To repeat what I've said earlier, your defining quality is that you want to recommend this wonderful God to everyone you meet. Be intentional about this, otherwise it will never happen.
- ❖ Share each other's troubles. If one member of the group is going through a difficult time, don't just say 'Thank God this hasn't happened to me!' but imagine what you would feel like if it had. When one part of the body gets injured, the whole body feels the pain. Practical sympathy can be costly, but it's an essential characteristic of anyone who professes Christ.
- ❖ Get along with each other. Don't pick and choose your friends within the fellowship as a whole. Nothing is more calculated to put off outsiders than factions, party splits, cliques and that kind of thing. You may find someone thoroughly unattractive, and in 'normal' society you might not want to be seen dead with them, but you have to make the assumption that Christ's call has come to them as it has to you. Family members should drop their differences and treat each other as special. Jesus called Judas 'Friend' and gave him the choice portion of meat – need I say more?
- ❖ Make allowances for each other. This too was a great characteristic of our Lord and Master. He had an instinctive fellow-feeling for everyone, lepers, beggars, outcasts – he never erected barriers or retreated behind a wall of protective piety. He looked on the positive side of whoever he met, and so drew out the best in them. He got involved in our lives, yet he never forced himself on anyone. It was God making himself vulnerable, sharing our burdens. Can we do any less?
- ❖ Abandon all personal pride. This is particularly difficult for those who have something to be proud about, like high birth, importance in the community or recognised gifts in some area. But in the kingdom, values are reversed. The last are first, the lowest are the highest in God's estimation. God

loves losers, because he can do something for them. The ones he can't reach are the self-righteous and self-important. Jesus said of himself, 'I am lowly in heart.' Join him there.

Responding to insults

[3:9] Here's your chance. Someone has done you a grievous wrong. They have deliberately and wilfully caused you great harm and irreparable loss. Or they have publicly insulted you and you've lost your good reputation in the community. How are you going to respond? By seeking their harm, muddying their name? Retaliating like for like? The world is waiting to see how you're going to react. They simply can't believe it when you start saying nice things about your persecutor. When Stephen was dying under a hail of stones from Saul's henchmen he asked God to overlook their sins – and who knows if that wasn't what brought Paul to Christ? This is the only way you're going to overcome the very real power of evil. That's what the Master said he wanted us to do.

Gratitude for blessing

Though actually there's another reason why you can afford to forgo personal retaliation: gratitude. It may sound pious to say that earth's troubles are nothing compared to heaven's delights, but it happens to be true. When you stepped into the circle of mercy by responding to God's call in Christ, it was like a murderer discovering they've been left a fortune in their victim's will. God has showered your life with blessings of every kind and he doesn't intend to turn off the flow. [3:10] If you don't know what I'm talking about, come back with me to that Psalm I was quoting a page or two back and which seems to me to speak powerfully into your present situation.

Remember how David found himself among Philistines who had no sympathy whatsoever for the people of God. I'm not advising you to imitate him literally and behave as if you were in the advanced stages of madness, gibbering and dribbling from the mouth and so on! The point David is making is that he prayed and God answered. The emphasis of the whole psalm is on having a relationship with the Lord that is immediate and firsthand, that is expressed in a Christlike character (particularly in the way we respond to provocation), and that results in experiencing rich blessing, starting now and never coming to an end. Let me read you a passage from the middle of the Psalm that I've always found a great help when I'm being verbally attacked. 'If you really do want to taste life in all its fullness and enjoy each day as a special gift from God, then set a watch on your tongue. It can so easily start spouting bitter, unkind or devious things that can't be recalled and that do the devil's work in the world. [3:11] However, it's not enough just avoiding saying anything nasty; you need to be proactive in releasing a cascade of good. When there's obvious dissension or a potential flare-up is brewing, get in there and do everything you possibly can to keep the peace. [3:12] You're not on your own; you can call in heavenly reinforcements from a God who sees exactly what is going on, because he never once takes his eyes off you. His ears are straining for the slightest cry for help from his beloved people. Do you think he's going to allow evil to have the last say, and won't lift a finger to stop injustice and exploitation from flourishing?' Great words – and the same Spirit who inspired them can encourage you to claim these promises when you're really under pressure.

3:13-17 ¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.' ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Penalised for doing good

[3:13] It may seem obvious, but if you're consistently laying yourself on the line for others, someone must be very twisted indeed if they're going to try to make your life a misery. What kind of society is it that penalises its best contributors? 'But people don't like do-gooders.' Yes, you sometimes hear that said; but generally underneath there's a reluctant admiration. [3:14] Well, let's suppose you really are being given a rough time because you've chosen to stick to standards that those around you can't live up to – is that a reason for throwing up your allegiance to Christ? Didn't the Lord tell us when he was giving us that list of reasons why his followers were the most privileged people on earth, that those who got beaten up for trying to put love into practice should leap for joy, because they were the most recent members of a long line of saints stretching right back to the prophets of old?

Who are you scared of?

The bottom line is, who are you scared of? Human beings, or God? Go back to that passage we quoted earlier from Isaiah where he is encouraging the 'remnant' to hold on to their faith in a God who is with them and is in control of events. 'The people around you are trying to terrify you into conformity with their view of things, but in reality it is they who are scared witless – so don't be brow-beaten, don't get upset or agitated; just reaffirm your wholehearted allegiance towards the One True God who is far, far bigger than anything or anybody.' [3:15] And who is this God for you now? Who else than Jesus himself? He's the King on the throne of your hearts and wills, the One to whom you give your non-negotiable loyalty. I'm not going to find this easy to say, because you all know how I couldn't confess my Lord in front of a few soldiers and serving-girls; but at least I know how tempting it is to keep quiet about one's faith. You should make up your minds well in advance that you're going to face your questioners steadily and fearlessly; if they challenge you to say why you believe all this stuff about Jesus and eternal life, you can explain quietly that yes, it means a lot to you, and thanks to him you can face the future unafraid.

A reputation for gentleness

[3:16] I need to add a note of caution here: try to avoid aggressiveness or triumphalism. Christians should get a reputation for gentleness and reasonableness. This isn't cowardice; it's the kind of 'fear' you ought to be cultivating, which combines respect for your interlocutors with a constant awareness of the reality and greatness of your God. Always stay sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who gives you an inner sense of just how far you can go. I needn't remind you of the kind of malicious insinuations Christ-followers tend to attract; the Master told us to expect rough treatment at the hands of unbelievers, but there's just a chance that some of them will actually feel ashamed of having gone for you when your lives are so transparently well-meaning and morally blameless. 'These Jesus people may be crazy, but they're not the monsters we expected them to be.'

[3:17] Just make sure your conscience is clear. God has purposes far beyond our imaginings, and he may sometimes allow his children to endure rough handling from malicious adversaries when all along they've been helping people and have been salt and light in their community. If this happens to you, at least you can have the inner reassurance that you haven't been doing anything criminal or antisocial!

3:18-22 ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

What Jesus went through for us

[3:18a] Always think back to what the King went through for us. Of course, we can never plumb the depths of his appalling experience. It was a one-off occasion in cosmic history, God's ultimate declaration that nothing could stand between us and his friendship, his heart-rending plea to us to turn around and run into his arms. The Lord Jesus was totally innocent of any charge of wrongdoing, whether criminal, moral or spiritual. We, individually and collectively, faced a list of charges that mounted to heaven. Had we had to face them in God's tribunal, nothing could have saved us from eternal disaster. But he stood in there for us. He took full responsibility for the mess we have all made of our lives, and paid our account in full. Just stop for a moment and breathe a word of thanks. We may not understand very much about exactly what was happening on the cross, but we know he was there for us, and we can be profoundly and utterly relieved and grateful.

The generations before Christ

[3:18b] Of course, there are mysteries. Did Jesus die spiritually as he did physically? What was he 'doing' between the time he breathed his last at 3 pm on the day of crucifixion and the great moment when he came alive again some 36 hours later? You don't kill God. You can put his mortal body to death, but the life of the Spirit is unquenchable. [3:19] The whole purpose of God's interaction with mortal beings is to bring us to himself by all possible means; the only thing that stands in his way is unbelief. This has been and will be the crunch in every generation both before and after Christ.

So what has happened to the generations before Christ? There is a persistent awareness in human thinking of an existence after death, a place or state of being which has variously been termed the Underworld, Sheol, Hades, or whatever, where those who have physically died are awaiting final judgment. If you like, it's a kind of prison – as you know, in Roman law prison isn't a punishment as such, it's where you are confined until your trial comes up. It's not much fun, but there's still a glimmer of hope. And Jesus is the great hope-bringer. The Resurrection is the ultimate sign and symbol of that optimism. So before Jesus rose from the dead, he descended into the realm of the dead himself. He wasn't going to stay there, but he had a job to do there. He told them the good news they had never heard in their lifetimes. [3:20] For instance, the people who laughed at Noah building his ark (and they could have been any of us) finally perished in the Flood; God had held on as patiently as he could while his servant Noah told them repeatedly what was going to happen, but eventually the deluge had to come. And only eight human souls got on board that ark and reached safety over the waters. The rest, of course, went under.

A second chance for the unconverted?

[3:21] 'So that wasn't the end of the story? You mean, there's a second chance for the unrepentant?' Think about this carefully. Don't do God's judging for him. That Royal visit to the Underworld may have been a one-off, a demonstration of the gospel's power to reach and revivify the very dead indeed. As far as you and I are concerned, we get our chance in this life alone and we are told as plainly as anything that believing and being baptised is the vital imperative. If you like, Noah's little contingent anticipated the idea of baptism because they travelled through water to get to dry land. And I bet they needed a good wash when they got to the other end!

The resurrection changes everything

Now don't get me wrong: baptism isn't just having a ritual bath where you get rid of physical or ceremonial uncleanness. It's far deeper than that. It's a sign that your conscience has been thoroughly awakened, and that you want nothing more to do with sin, so you are turning to God with a fervent 'Yes, please give me Christ and his new resurrection life!' And God replies, 'Absolutely delighted – and now what else can I do for you?'

The point I've been trying to make all along is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes everything. It can even change the prospect of utterly dead people. Life has reached down into death and drawn its sting for ever. If you want to stay down there you can. But the whole pull of God in Christ is now upward. [3:22] I don't mean Jesus is literally up there while we're down here. I'm talking about the place of power, the centre of the action. In my first-ever sermon at Pentecost I found myself quoting the Psalm every child learns, where 'The Lord', that is God, announces to 'My Lord', that is Christ, that he can now take his seat 'at my right hand', that is the operational base of God's rescue plan. When we talk about Jesus going into heaven, we don't mean he's hundreds of miles away relaxing in his palace gardens and being serenaded by choirs of angels. No – he's in the thick of the cosmic battle, giving orders and directions, marshalling his army of incredibly potent spirit beings, making sure everyone knows what they're doing and is being properly resourced. Everything is concentrated on the mission, which is to collect billions of prodigal sons and daughters and bring them home. Oh yes, there are one or two things to sort out, like the opposition; but make no mistake, Jesus is far bigger than anyone else, no matter how impressive they seem to be – and you're on his side!

4:1-6 *¹Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body has finished with sin. ²As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. ³For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.*

Going through it for Christ

[4:1] Which is where the wheel rim hits the road. I've never made any secret of the likelihood that you will suffer for throwing in your lot with Christ's people. You know perfectly well what Jesus went through in sheer physical agony if he was to stay faithful to his Father's will. Gethsemane shows what it took to steel himself for the coming ordeal. When he said through gritted teeth, 'Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done,' he was steeling himself for the fight that lay ahead. So you too must put on that spiritual armour, that inflexible intention to stay loyal whatever it takes. Actually, many of you, probably all of you if the truth be known, have already endured quite a lot for the sake of Christ. You have gone so far in your opposition to sin and corruption that you wouldn't even think of going back to the fleshpots of Egypt.

Swimming upstream

[4:2] How much longer have you got to live? A few winters, a few summers and you'll meet the King face to face. How are you going to decide to organise those years you have left? Are you simply going to drift passively downstream, going with the flow, kicking feebly from time to time but basically offering no resistance to the prevailing *mores*? Or are you going to make up your mind that pleasing Jesus and discovering God's will is the one thing that counts, even if it means turning your head upstream and swimming against the current?

[4:3] If you still feel a pang of longing for 'the old days when we had such fun together,' visiting the brothels, whistling at the pretty girls, flirting with that dishy neighbour, getting smashed in the taverns, touching up someone else's wife or husband at the dinner table, emptying bottles till you're legless – not to mention all the cult orgies and disgusting rituals of pagan festivals – you need to ask yourself a few

questions. 'Haven't I had enough of all that stuff? Do I really want to go back to that life of degradation and shame? Is it worth it just to get the approval of a few old mates who are usually so drunk they wouldn't mind if I was there or not?' [4:4] And even if they do take offence, and decide not to include you on their next trip to the pigsty, or leave nasty messages about you being a Jesus freak or a happy-clappy hypocrite, so what? How much are such friends worth?

End-of-life examination

[4:5-6] The really sad thing is that they don't realise what's in store for them. Just round the corner is the absolute certainty of meeting a God who is going to ask them what they did with their lives. And if they can't actually remember, they're going to get their past history – everything they've ever said and done – played back to them in total clarity. Everyone who has ever lived is going to come up for that end-of-life examination, and that includes all those people I was talking about who are now very dead, but who in their lifetime had the same chance as we did to respond to their Creator God deep down in their hearts. And even if they claim they never knew about him, they're still answerable to him for the choices they made. The rock-bottom truth is, when you die, you don't die. You've no more use for your mortal body, but the essential you lives on into eternity, which is how God always intended it to be.

4:7-11 ⁷ *The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.* ⁸ *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.* ⁹ *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* ¹⁰ *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.* ¹¹ *If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

A self-controlled life

[4:7] Yes, it's all going to wind up fairly soon now. The material world as we know it is getting near its sell-by date. This doesn't mean we all panic or gather on mountain-tops to await the denouement. What it does mean is that we live self-controlled and sensible lives, and that we make our prayer-times an absolute priority. How can someone be fit for sustained and concentrated intercession if they've been on a binge the night before? [4:8] Those times when we meet together should be incredibly precious to us. We may not have a natural affinity for some in our fellowship, but the love of Christ transcends personal inclinations. We need to commit ourselves to each other unreservedly. This means refusing to hold grudges against each other; it means tearing up those lists of all the ways the other has offended us; it means unjudging friendship and acceptance for all who are united with us in Christ.

Practical love

[4:9] We can demonstrate this love in practical ways. We can open our homes to uncongenial folk without secretly wishing we hadn't got to; we can take food round to people whose lifestyle we might feel like criticising. [4:10] All of us have God-given abilities which we can use to help and support other people: gifts of friendship, understanding, practical knowhow, whatever. There's a wide range of talents we share among us, which have been downloaded by God completely free of charge, and which we in our turn are committed to passing on to others.

[4:11] Another example is public speaking: this is a hugely responsible role, as I know from my own experience. I used to say the first thing that came into my head, which could cause myself and others great embarrassment; then at Pentecost the Spirit transformed me into a mouthpiece for his inspired words, and thousands have heard the Lord's call through my preaching – no credit to me, all credit to him! The same applies to things like pastoral ministry and church management: these take a lot of time

and can be exhausting, but there's a wellspring of energy available from God's unfailing resources, and the more we give, the more we seem to receive in return.

We are such self-centred creatures that we all too easily assume any success is entirely down to us and our amazing range of talents. The universe doesn't revolve around us, it revolves around God whose inspiration and genius brought it into being. It won't be there for for ever, but he will. One day he'll get all the praise that's due to him, and what an eternity of shouting and singing and exuberance that will be! Meanwhile he reflects himself to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is no empty figurehead or trumped-up tyrant. I'll never forget that moment when the veil of his ordinary humanness was drawn aside and we saw him in dazzling splendour. There was enough power in that vision to energise a thousand suns – and yet what were they talking about? The cross. The love that controls the universe would be concentrated into a shattered body and fragmentary words of forgiveness. That's our King. We'll never tire of thanking him. Start now!

4:12-16 ¹² *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.* ¹⁴ *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* ¹⁵ *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* ¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

Going through the fire

[4:12] God got burnt when he came to earth. That's the measure of his love for you and me. Little wonder, then, that we who follow him should find ourselves going through the fire in similar fashion. I'm returning to a theme I started with: gold gets tested by being put through heat. This isn't abnormal, it's standard practice. If you ask, 'Why is this happening to me?', well, it happened to the Master you profess to follow.

[4:13] Read once again that crucial chapter of Isaiah: this man upon whom the blows are falling so relentlessly from man and God, why, it's the Messiah! And now (if God so permits) it's your turn, because you've identified yourselves with Jesus. 'Through suffering to glory': that was the rule for him, and it's the norm for us. It seems so paradoxical, this idea that persecution and pain is the gateway to a deep and settled happiness, but one day we'll understand what it was all about. One day he's coming back, and then we'll see him as he is and has been all along, and we simply won't remember the bad times. He told us himself: 'Choose the joy,' he said, 'because that's the air you'll breathe in heaven.' You're going to be leaping around like calves released from the stall. Didn't he tell us we would see him again in a little while, and no-one but no-one could take that joy from us? Free at last!

Honourable insults

[4:14] Yes, right now they may be calling you names, but what names are they using? 'Jesus freaks' – 'Messiah mutants' – that kind of thing? Honourable descriptions! They may be intended as insults, but you can be really pleased, because they remind you of all those messianic prophecies which Jesus fulfils, like 'despised and rejected' and 'branch from Jesse's stem' on whom the Spirit of God alights and happily rests with his gifts of wisdom and understanding and so on. Why, it's the same wonderful Spirit resting on you – these are royal titles after all! [4:15] It would be very different if people called you disgraceful names because you had murdered someone, or raided a bank, or were mixed up in some shady racket, or (equally socially disreputable) went about exposing the details of your fellow-citizens' private lives. You would deserve all the mud flung at you. [4:16] But 'Christian' – is that so bad? Is it so shameful to belong to a bunch of non-conformists who are convinced that God's King has arrived on

earth? Far from committing some appalling blasphemy, you're actually giving God the credit for having fulfilled his ancient promises. Let the verbal abuse keep coming!

4:17-19 ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And, 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?' ¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

What's in store for unbelievers

[4:17] Suffering is a mystery, particularly when it happens to members of God's own family (as seems to be the case imminently in our day). Is it some kind of judgment from God, like the dreadful sequence in Ezekiel where even the saints aren't spared from the slaughter? I've already indicated that temporal trials are not a sign of God's displeasure or condemnation (how could they be, when Christ has died for us?), but a sifting of those who have genuine faith from those who merely profess it. But in case you're thinking of joining the unbelievers once again, can I remind you of what's in store for them? They've been told the wonderful news of Christ, they've been offered the full and unconditional friendship of God himself, and they've said 'No, thanks!' Are they going to get away with it? Laughing in the face of their Creator and Judge? I hardly think so. [4:18] You may be familiar with the consistent theme running through the commonsense book of Proverbs: the huge difference between those who fear God and those who don't. The 'righteous' are trees of life that bear more and more fruit; the 'wicked' are branches to be lopped off before their time. Yet in case the 'righteous' should get complacent and think life's going to be easy, there's a vivid warning: 'Don't think you can swagger into heaven – snatching you from the flames is a costly operation (just how costly, the author of Proverbs wasn't to know), and God's special people may have to pass through smoke and fire to reach safety. But what about those who choose to stay inside the burning building? Those who say God is rubbish and sin is fun? Do you think they're going to get out alive and intact?'

[4:19] It is therefore quite possible that God will allow really nasty and totally unjust things to happen to you: unpopularity, persecution, biased trials, imprisonment, betrayal, even death. But the Master promised we would come through with our souls intact. 'Not a single hair of your head will perish' was his guarantee. None of his true sheep will get lost in the wilderness. Where unreliable human beings are concerned, you may have to go around in fear for your life. But where the One True God is concerned, your Maker and rock-like refuge, you needn't be afraid he'll let you down. So you can hand over the task of taking care of you to him in perfect confidence. Then roll up your sleeves, plunge into the maelstrom of life, get on with the business of making people's existence more tolerable. If you're going to be criticised whether your influence is good or bad, why not go flat out to make sure it's good?

5:1-4 ¹ To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Wrong attitudes to leadership

[5:1] There's one more group of people to whom I want to say a special word, and that's those of you who hold the office of elder. You may have sole responsibility for your local church (or churches), or more likely you are a member of a team of equals – I too have experience of such responsibility. I've

been going on about the connection between pain and glory; well, like you, I can bear first-hand testimony to the continuing sufferings of Christ in his body, the worldwide church, and like you I look forward to the time beyond time when we will all share the joy of being in his immediate presence and acknowledging his greatness. [5:2] Meanwhile we've got a job to do, being under-shepherds for the particular flock God has placed in our charge. It's possible to have the wrong attitude to this leadership role, and I'll give a few instances of this:

- You may feel resentful because you've been given a job you didn't really feel suited to, or you've had pressure put on you to do what no-one else wanted to do. That's quite natural; but imagine you've had a letter directly from God, handwritten on palace stationery, asking you to accept this position? Wouldn't you leap at it? 'Wow, the King himself has invited me to take up this appointment!' That would change things a bit, wouldn't it?
- You're basically in it for what you can make out of it financially. I'm not saying ministers of the gospel shouldn't be paid, nor even that it's wrong to hold out for a higher rate if circumstances require it – I'm talking about attitude. When money becomes the determining factor in accepting a position, or if you back out of helping someone because there's no profit accruing to you, then you've allowed material considerations to compromise your calling. The Lord's service demands a proactive spirit, an eagerness to get in there and lay yourself on the line for other people, a cheerful willingness to go the second mile or pay the extra cost because Jesus would have done the same.
- [5:3] The leadership role has gone to your head and you've become a little tin god ordering everyone else around and insisting that the way you do things is automatically right. Now it may be true that the Lord has given you a charismatic personality and striking natural talents, and that you're the obvious person to head up this or that work for the kingdom. But now everything begins to revolve around you, and humility has tiptoed out of the door. The only corrective I know for this insidious pride (and I wasn't immune to it myself on occasion) is to look at yourself in the mirror every single day and ask, 'Would I model myself on this person? If every member of my flock were like me, what would the church look like?' Then you might realise that the biggest responsibility you have is to be completely transparent to Christ, so that he can shine through you to others.

'My flock.' Whose flock is it, really? Here's a young under-shepherd who's been tasked with guarding the sheep overnight, until the master-shepherd comes back in the morning. What questions is he going to be asked? Has he fed them properly, kept them safe from prowling wolves, tended the lame and so on? His whole outlook is coloured by the certainty of his boss's reappearance after the long night. If he does a good job, he'll be appropriately rewarded. I think you see the point. When the morning dawns, we've been promised badges of honour that we can wear throughout eternity. Let's live our lives, and conduct our ministries, backwards from that wonderful final return of the Lord Jesus, and his wise and merciful assessment of our contribution to his kingdom work.

5:5 ⁵ *In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.'*

Greatness through servanthood

[5:5] While on the subject of young under-shepherds, may I respectfully point out to those of you who feel frustrated with or overlooked by an older leadership, that your time will come. We had problems with James and John, whose ambition to be the Lord's right-hand men led to serious conflict; after Pentecost, of course, we worked together as a dynamic team. Jesus pointed out the way to greatness, through servanthood – and he led the way by his own example. Just do as you're told, even if you don't agree with it; and don't forget to pray for your leaders!

The same thing goes for absolutely everyone in the church fellowship. Just as slaves employed in the kitchen or shop wear a protective garment over their normal clothes, and keep it on throughout the working day, so every Christian should forget their own importance and adopt an attitude of unfussy cooperation. This isn't hypocrisy; it's putting Christ and others before yourself. I can't do better than quote directly from scripture: 'If you want to turn God from being your friend to being your relentless enemy, push yourself forward at every opportunity. But if you want to know his mercy and unfailing help, bin your pride and self-importance.'

5:6-7 ⁶ *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.* ⁷ *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

Pride and depression

[5:6] My last remarks apply not only to leaders, but to every Christian who wants to stay faithful to their Master when times are hard. If you are spiritually ambitious, you'll meet the Scylla and Charybdis of pride and depression. But make the Lord, the All-sufficient and ever-present God, the captain of your ship, and you'll sail through straight as an arrow.

Pride: if you try to go it alone, in the desire to prove you're someone after all, you'll hit the rocks. If you let him guide your course, and are content to be hidden under the shadow of his hand, he'll choose the right moment for you to be honoured and rewarded. It may or may not be in this life, but it's certainly going to be at the great Prizegiving at the end of time.

[5:7] Or depression: you may find the responsibility you are carrying is so anxiety-making that you're going round in circles and are in danger of being sucked under. The worries come at you thick and fast, and you're consumed by a sense of inadequacy and a haunting fear of failure. Don't try to handle it yourself. As each anxiety comes, turn it over to him to deal with. Tell the queue of badgering cares, 'Sorry, but this position is closed; try the next-door one.' You are his responsibility; don't ever think he's forgotten you for a single moment. He loves you far too much to let you go under.

5:8-9 ⁸ *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

Under constant attack

[5:8] Yes, you can get a good night's sleep under his watchful care. But don't go to sleep spiritually! We have a great Enemy of our souls who doesn't let up for one moment. We're like a traveller who has to go through the lonely and barren wilderness and who needs to set a constant watch night and day in case there's a hunger-driven lion in the vicinity. Satan is absolutely furious that you've escaped his rightful clutches and he's desperate for a chance to bring you down and swallow you morsel by delicious morsel. [5:9] There's no chance you can fight him with your bare hands – he's far too strong for that. The only way you can cope with his lethal attacks is to turn for help to the Lord. Take your stand resolutely upon the rock of his faithfulness. If you are feeling tempted in any way, whether by the antipathy of the world or the yearnings of the flesh, remember you're not alone. You're part of a worldwide fellowship that is under constant attack, brothers and sisters who are being allowed to go through similar kinds of suffering, if need be, because of their faith in Christ. This is how God's good purpose is going to be accomplished. One day we shall understand why.

5:10-11 ¹⁰ *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.* ¹¹ *To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

The logic of God's love

[5:10] 'But doesn't this mean that God is some kind of sadist? Does he really want to see us suffer?' I don't think you quite understand the principle of what we call 'grace'. This is the quality that flows out of God like light and warmth from the sun. His dealings with us are characterised totally by passionate power. He will do literally anything to bring us safely home. Let me explain the logic of God's love.

To start with, he's made sure you've heard his invitation, to join the age-long company of the Messiah who is Jesus. This isn't some odd little cult which is here today and gone tomorrow. It's the people who are going to share an unimaginably wonderful future world that will go on for ever and ever. Do you think he's going to say, when you turn up battle-scarred and exhausted, 'Sorry, but you must have misheard me – I didn't actually want you here with me'?

Next point: whatever's happening to you, it's not going to last long. The devil may seem to be having a field day, in fact it may seem as if God is powerless to rein him in, but you'll be given strength to endure for as long as it takes.

Because God has a purpose in all this. He wants you perfect, and he's personally supervising the process. He's moulding sturdy and stable characters who will model Christ to others. You may feel fragile and broken, but he'll pour strength into you from his inexhaustible reserves. He's not in the business of giving you an easy time, because he has much more serious work afoot – he's laying the foundations of a beautiful temple that's going to stand for ever.

Never underestimate the competence of this God of ours, the God who became Jesus. Never doubt the capacity of his love and goodness, to carry out what he has planned from before time to last beyond time. He's got all the staying-power and all the finishing-power you'll ever need. Start praising him now!

5:12-14 ¹² *With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.* ¹³ *She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.* ¹⁴ *Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.*

Final messages

[5:12] *[At this point the manuscript hand changes: Peter's autograph both confirms the authenticity of the letter and recommends Silas as its bearer.]* Here's my personal signature, to remove all doubt that this letter is from me and that I have commissioned Silas to bring it to your region. As for Silas, whom we know here as Silvanus, I could not recommend him more highly. He has proved his worth as a fellow-missionary of our brother Paul, and I can confirm that he has performed similarly faithful service to the churches here. As regards the letter, I've tried to condense everything I want to tell you into a few pages.

(If you think it's too long, come and listen to some of my sermons!) My aim is to give you a healthy dose of encouragement if your faith is under pressure, and to reassure you that the gospel you have believed is the genuine article. I've used the word 'grace' as often as I can to remind you that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ welcomes you unreservedly and offers you all the reinforcement you need.

You are a forest of mighty oaks; stand tall and unafraid for him. Put your roots deep down into him. Draw your nourishment daily from his constant love. And when the storms come, as come they must, you'll still be there, planted by the Lord for his glory.

[5:13] A few greetings to end with. If you feel a bit like the twelve tribes scattered round the world, as I said at the outset, well, the church here affirms its solidarity with you as we sing the Lord's song in Babylon itself. You'll remember John Mark, whom I fathered in the gospel and who has been such a stalwart here – he sends his salutations. [5:14] Give each other hugs all round as you carry out the Master's command to love one another. And once again, may you know the deep reassurance of being united with Christ in faith; whatever happens, you've nothing to worry about if you stay close to him

1 PETER CROSS-REFERENCES

Underlined direct quotation from OT. * Probable allusion. Other references may suggest similar lines of thought elsewhere in the Bible, without implying that they were necessarily in Peter's mind when he was writing.

1:1-2 *His very own people* Isa 43:20. *Heard me speak* Acts 2:9. *Full fruition* Acts 2:23. *Unbounded future* Rom 8:29-30. *Rest on each head* Ac 2:3. *Words of the covenant* *Exod 24:3-7. *Provision of forgiveness* Exod 24:8. *Sprinkling of blood* *Ps 50:7. *New covenant* Heb 12:24. *Royal benediction* *Dan 6:25. *Deep peace* 2 Th 3:16. *His blessing* Num 6:26. *Prince of Peace* Isa 9:6-7.

1:3 *Children of God* 1 Th 5:5.

1:4-5 *Haven't got it yet* Eph 1:11, 14. *Love that watches over you* Ps 17:8. *Give up following Christ* Jn 6:66-67. *Nearly did myself once* Lk 22:31-32. *Guarded and guided* Ps 121. *Finish the journey* Phil 1:6.

1:6-7 *Said exactly this* Mt 5:11-12. *Series of faith-tests* Ps 66:10. *Through the fire-test* Job 23:12, *Zech 13:9, Mal 3:3. *Praying for me* Lk 22:31-32. *Gave me that look* Lk 22:61. *Look at the view* Ps 66:11-12.

1:8-9 *Told us quite clearly* Jn 16:16-28. *Several thousand years* 2 Pet 3:8. *Hearts' desire for him* Jn 16:27, Rev 22:20. *Take our joy from us* Jn 16:22. *Going on for ever* 2 Cor 4:16-18. *Bringing others with us* Acts 2:40-41, Jas 5:20, Jude 23.

1:10-12 *Since childhood* 2 Tim 3:15. *Valley of dry bones* Ezek 37. *Sequence in Isaiah* Isa 52:13-53:12. *Psalm of Abandonment* Ps 22. *He has done it* Ps 22:31, Jn 19:30. *In the wilderness* Isa 40:3. *Fishermen's tale* 2 Pet 1:21. *Low on our knees* Lk 24:12, Jn 20:5, 11.

1:13-16 *Release from Egypt* *Exod 12:11. *Pushed around* Rom 12:2. *I don't either* Lev 11:45. *New genetic code* Rom 8:29, Eph 4:24, Col 3:10. *From the inside out* Jer 31:33, Ezek 36:26-27.

1:17-21 *Have any favourites* Dt 1:17. *Stranger to them* Ps 120:5-7. *Religious traditions* Mk 7:8. *Eternal value was nil* Phil 3:8. *Flagrant injustice* Isa 53:8. *Displeasure of God* Isa 53:4. *Foretold in the prophets* *Isa 53:7, Jn 1:29. *Foreshadowed in the Law* Exod 12:5, *Lev 9:3. *Knew what he was doing* Acts 2:23. *Before the universe* Rev 13:8. *Resurrection hope* 1 Pet 1:3. *Of eternal life* 1 Cor 15:17-18.

1:22-25 *Record before God* Ps 51:7. *You take his* 2 Cor 5:21. *Imperial largesse* 2 Cor 2:14. *Spend and be spent* 2 Cor 12:15. *Dry bones come to life* Ezek 37:13-14. *God-born* Jn 1:13. *New created order* 2 Cor 5:17. *Isaiah* Isa 40:6-8.

2:1-3 *Moses found in the wilderness* Num 21:5. *Lord himself taught us* Mk 10:15. *Just been saying* 1 Pet 1:23. *Winds and waves* Eph 4:13-14. *David Psalms* Ps 34. *Mouthful of Divine goodness* Ps 34:8.

2:4-8 *Told us repeatedly* Mt 11:28, Jn 7:37. *Perish if we didn't* Jn 5:40. *Heavenly throne* Heb 7:25. *Visibly in our midst* Jn 1:14. *God's Chosen Person* Mk 1:11, 9:7. *New temple* Jn 2:21. *True worship in the Spirit* Jn 4:23-24. *Chapter in Isaiah* Isa 28. *Great rock standing firm* Isa 28:16. *Temple courts* Mt 21:23. *Vineyard tenants* Mt 21:33ff. *Procession into the Temple* Ps 118:22. *Earlier in Isaiah* Isa 8:14. *Should be their Rock* Ps 18:31.

2:9-10 *Already explained* 1 Pet 1:3, 23. *Just like you* 1 Pet 1:1. *His chosen people* Isa 43:20. *Rescued them from Egypt* Exod 19:6. *Mother eagle* Exod 19:4. *You belong to* Exod 19:5. *Songs of deliverance* Ps 126:1-2. *How great he is* Isa 43:21. *Darkness and light* Isa 9:2. *Being able to see it* Jn 9:25. *Unloved, Illegitimate* Hos 1:6, 9. *My very own* Hos 2:23. *Spirit of adoption* Rom 8:15. *Mercy and not sacrifice* Hos 6:6, Mt 9:13, 12:7.

2:11-12 *Calling you misfits* 1 Pet 1:1. *Back into it again* Jn 17:14, 18. *Like Abraham* *Gen 23:4. *Origin and destiny* Heb 11:13-16. *Basic human condition* *Ps 39:12. *Constant battle* 2 Pet 1:4. *Power of Christ* Rom 13:12. *Salt and light* Mt 5:13-14.

Day of reckoning Isa 10:3. Corruption and idolatry *Jer 10:15. Visited us in the flesh Lk 1:68, 78. Mercy and salvation 2 Cor 6:2. In Samaria Acts 8:14.

2:13-17 Question about taxes Mk 12:17. Mutual responsibilities Rom 13:1-2. Christians are special Rom 12:10. Wisdom he alone can give Prov 1:7. Tough discipline at times Prov 3:11.

2:18-21 Unconditional deference Rom 13:7. Expect exactly the same Jn 15:20. One-off sacrifice Heb 9:26. Same attitude he showed Phil 2:5ff.

2:22-25 Unforgettable sequence Isa 53:9. My Servant Isa 52:13. His own followers Mt16:23. Prophet said he would Isa 53:7. Obeying orders Lk 23:34. Decisions are right Dt 32:4. Like Isaac Gen 22:6. World's distance apart Ps 103:10-12. Sick world Isa 1:6. Old prophecy has come true Isa 53:5. Firmly on the head Isa 53:6. Goes on to tell us Isa 53:10-11.

3:1-7 Distinctions eradicated Gal 3:28. Elaborate hairstyles 1 Tim 2:9. Beauty is Spirit-given Prov 31:30. Occasionally tempestuous Gen 16. All hope has gone Gen 18:11. My Lord Gen 18:12. Slightest bit cowed *Prov 3:25. Make you afraid Prov 3:26, Ps 27:1-3. For God's world 1 Tim 2:2, 9.

3:8-12 As I said earlier 1 Pet 2:9. Whole body feels the pain 1 Cor 12:26. Professes Christ Jas 2:15-16. Drop their differences Phil 4:2. Friend ... portion of meat Mt 26:50, Jn 13:26. Lord and Master Mk 6:34. Sharing our burdens Mt 8:17. God loves losers 1 Pet 5:5. Lowly in heart Mt 11:30. Brought Paul to Christ Acts 26:14. Power of evil Acts 26:14. Wanted us to do Lk 6:27-28. That Psalm Ps 34. A few pages back 1 Pet 2:3. Gibbering and dribbling 1 Sam 21:3-15. In all its fullness Jn 10:10. A watch on your tongue Jas 3:8-10.

3:13-17 List of reasons Mt 5:3-12. Prophets of old *Mt 5:10-12. Earlier from Isaiah Isa 8:10-18, 1 Pet 2:8. Upset or agitated Isa 8:12. Wholehearted allegiance Isa 8:13. Master told us Lk 6:28. Morally blameless Prov 16:7. Malicious adversaries Ps 66:8-12.

3:18-22 Stood in there for us 2 Cor 5:21. Realm of the dead Eph 4:9. Stay there Ps 16:10, Acts 2:31. The good news 1 Pet 4:6. His servant Noah 2 Pet 2:5. God's judging for him Rom 9:14-18. Chance in this life alone Heb 9:27, Dan 12:2, Jn 5:25-29. Vital imperative Mk 16:16, Acts 2:38. Drawn its sting 1 Cor 15:54-56. Is now upward Phil 3:14. At Pentecost Acts 2:33-35. Quoted the Psalm Ps 110. At my right hand *Ps 110:1. Things to sort out 1 Cor 15:24-27. The opposition Eph 6:12.

4:1-6 Gethsemane Lk 22:44. Through gritted teeth Lk 22:42. The King face to face Isa 33:17. I was talking about 1 Pet 3:19. Choices they made Rom 2:15.

4:7-11 Hold grudges *Prov 10:12. Offended us 1 Cor 13:5. Feel like criticising Acts 6:1. Great embarrassment Mk 9:5-6. Receive in return Lk 6:38. Dazzling splendour Lk 9:31.

4:12-17 Theme I started with 1 Pet 1:7. Gold gets tested Zech 13:9. Crucial chapter Isa 53. The norm for us Acts 14:22, Phil 3:10, 2 Tim 2:11. We'll see him 1 Jn 3:2. The bad times Isa 65:17-19. Choose the joy Mt 5:12. Released from the stall Mal 4:2. Joy from us Jn 16:22. Despised and rejected Isa 53:3. Branch from Jesse Isa 11:2. King has arrived Acts 11:26, 26:28.

4:18-19 Ezekiel Ezek 9:6. Already indicated 1 Pet 1:6-7. Died for us Rom 8:34. Before their time Prov 11:30. Vivid warning Prov 11:31. Unjust things Lk 21:12-17. Souls intact Lk 21:18-19. Lost in the wilderness Jn 10:28. Rock-like refuge *2 Sam 22:32.

5:1-4 Shouldn't be paid Mt 10:10, 1 Cor 9:14, 1 Tim 5:17-18. Go the second mile Mt 5:41. Pay the extra cost Lk 10:35. Wasn't immune to it myself Mt 16:22, 26:33.

5:5-7 Serious conflict Mk 10:35-41. Dynamic team Acts 4:13. By his own example Mk 10:42-45. Pray for your leaders Heb 13:17-18. Directly from scripture Prov 3:34. Shadow of his hand *Isa 49:2, Ps 91:1-4. Turn it over to him Ps 55:22.

5:8-9 Good night's sleep Ps 3:5, 4:8.

5:10-11 Passionate power Jas 4:5-6a. Safely home Ps 84:11. Want you here with me 1 Th 2:12, 5:24. Not going to last long 2 Cor 4:17. As long as it takes Rev 2:10. Model Christ to others Lk 6:40. Inexhaustible reserves Eph 3:16. Stand for ever Isa 54:11-14. Start praising him now Rev 5:13.

5:12-14 Fellow-missionary of Paul Acts 15:40. 'Grace' as often as I can 1 Pet 1:2, 10, 13; 3:7; 4:10; 5:5, 10, 12. Planted by the Lord Isa 61:3. At the outset 1 Pet 1:1. In Babylon itself Ps 137:1, Rev 17:5-6. John Mark Acts 12:12.