

SLOW HEBREWS

We have no idea who wrote *Hebrews*. The assumption that Paul was its author, evidenced by the mention of Timothy (13:23), Italy (13:24) and prison (13:3), is no longer held because of the fundamental discrepancies of literary style and argument between *Hebrews* and Paul's extant letters. Origen is quoted as saying 'God alone knows who wrote Hebrews', and we can safely leave it at that, while feeling free to do a certain amount of speculation. Whoever wrote it was well-versed in the Old Testament, with contacts in Italy (13:24) and known to his potential readers, who may have been in a single church or group of churches. Nor do we know where, geographically speaking, those readers lived. All we can deduce from the letter itself is that its recipients were inheritors of the Jewish tradition, that strong pressure was being put on them to abandon their faith in Jesus Christ and return to a Pentateuchal form of the law and its ceremonies, possibly mixed with a doctrine of angelic mediation that has to be knocked on the head in the opening verses. In addition, they were facing physical persecution, social ostracism and material loss as Christians. Time and again the writer to the Hebrews emphasises the need to stand firm and not abandon their hard-won faith in Jesus Christ. There is also more than a hint that the temptations of the world and the flesh were proving too strong for some of the readers. As for the date of *Hebrews*, it has been argued from the tenses used in eg 10:1-4 and 10:11, which imply that the priestly system was still in operation, that the Temple at Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed at the time of writing and that therefore this letter must come from the sixties AD at the latest.

The other point that needs making is that there was considerable resistance to *Hebrews* being included in the New Testament canon. This may reflect a feeling, held by some ancient commentators and still persisting today, that its 'warning passages' are difficult to square with the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. One of the major motifs of the letter is its insistence that apostasy risks forfeiting one's eternal salvation. That it was finally included, while other strongly canvassed books (such as *The Shepherd* of Hermas) were not, indicates that the Holy Spirit could use the book to bring challenge and encouragement to generations of beleaguered Christians, and that he can use it again for us today.

1:1-4 *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

Climactic revelation

[1:1] Dear fellow-Israelites wherever you are,

God hasn't been silent! He's been trying to get through to us by every possible means. He has deployed a huge army of witnesses, some well-known like Moses and Samuel, others unremembered by name, yet all of them mouthpieces of the Lord in every generation of our long history. And have we listened to his voice? Tragically, as you know, our ancestors failed to recognise the Divine call. [1:2] But now it's your turn. To your generation and mine has come the climactic revelation of God in the person of his very own Son.

Who is this Person?

Why am I writing this circular? Who am I anyway? It doesn't matter. What does matter is that you should wake up to the greatness of this unique Being who has come amongst us. Otherwise you're going to be in an even worse situation than your hapless forefathers. Let me explain who this Person is and why you should all be sitting up and taking urgent notice of what he's saying.

Firstly, he is the rightful owner of the whole estate. The earth, the stars, everything you can see (and everything you can't see) belongs to him just as surely as the first-born son has the title to his father's property. The decree to this effect has gone out from the Most High and it is totally and absolutely firm and irrevocable. Yet we slung him out of the vineyard and killed him because we wanted the vineyard for ourselves. End of story? No, he comes back from the dead and invites us to share the inheritance with him. More of that in a moment.

In case you haven't got the picture yet, here's a second point. The Son doesn't just inherit the whole lot, he brought it into being in the first place. Nothing in heaven and earth has an existence independently of him – and that includes every single one of us. He's like a Master Engineer who not only designs and builds an amazing seagoing ship, he even generates the materials from which it is made. We're used to the idea that God gave the order for the universe to happen, but now we discover it was the Son who carried out his Father's orders and did the whole job. Time and space – all down to him. Then he comes on board himself, and we tell him to get lost.

Arrived where we are

[1:3] Who is this Personage? Can we fathom the mystery of his abiding greatness? Well, just look at the sun for a brief second (any longer and you'd go blind instantly). From it streams light and warmth in superabundance. Life couldn't happen without it. Yet it only takes a single ray of dawn light to penetrate the darkness of our room for us to say 'Sunrise! Got to get up!' The sun has been there the whole time, but now it's arrived where we are. God's glorious majesty has been there from eternity, but now it has broken into our world in this one unique Man. So what do we do? We clap our hands over our eyes and pretend we've never seen him.

Or take a gold coin out of your wallet. The image of the supreme ruler is unmistakably imprinted on its face. All his (or her) authority, wisdom, personality and essential nature are represented by that image. So too, God's characteristics are stamped on the Son in human form. He himself said to his puzzled disciples, 'If you've seen me, which you have, it's as good as seeing the Father himself.' You can't get any clearer guarantee than that. This Supreme Being is God through and through, solid gold worth. Is it any wonder that when we reject him as debased currency, or even worse, as counterfeit coin, we incur the rightful displeasure of the Sovereign?

Practical role

Next, I want you to think carefully about the practical role of the Son in the Father's scheme of things. You know the story of the giant Atlas whose job was to carry the whole world on his shoulders? It's a way of expressing how incredibly powerful must be the forces that operate to keep the universe in working order. Well, this Divine Person turns that myth into reality: he holds the whole thing together, in the sense that physical matter depends for its coherence upon his declared will. If he told the universe to pack up tomorrow, it would. The principles on which it operates would cease to have any binding force. We talk about the laws of nature – well, they're his statement about how things should be for the time being. He affirms it to be fit for purpose, and so it is.

Things go wrong

But suppose things start to go wrong, thanks to the self-centred will of one of his creatures? Does he tear up the whole programme and start all over again with a new creation in which disobedience is an impossibility? Not yet he doesn't. God enters his own creation in the Person of his Son, immortality becomes mortal and the Author of life dies a physical death. But not just a physical one. He plumbs the depths of sin and evil in his own ravaged body and soul, and just as the ocean tide surges up the beach and clears off all the rubbish and human pollution of the day before, leaving it fresh and shining for a new morning, so the Son's perfect sacrifice wipes a stained world clean from its guilt. The wreckage of one unique Body on that cross, in our lifetime, achieves the restoration of all mankind to an unsullied relationship with the Father. We're going to think a lot more about this – but take a moment to breathe heartfelt thanks to the One who lovingly and willingly took that task upon himself.

In total control

So where is he now? He's back where he always belonged, inseparable from the Father, sharing his position at the centre of things, in total control of the whole operation. This isn't about 'going somewhere else,' it's about finishing one job and taking up another. If you want anything, you go through him. He's God's appointed Chief Executive. We'll be thinking about that too. [1:4] But for the time being, let's concentrate on one vital question which seems to be going the rounds. We've always

been taught that between the One Most High God and our race of earthly humans there is a class of beings known as 'angels', who get their orders from God and carry out his will, for the most part unseen and having superhuman powers. What if this Person we've been talking about is really the number one Angel, guarding the ladder or stairway to God but not actually God himself? Well, that's nonsense, and I want to hit it firmly on the head. I'm going to quote a lot of scriptures to show you that he is qualitatively different from any created being (because angels are, after all, creatures of God just as we are). The bottom line is that this Person is and always has been from eternity the uncreated Son of God, and now the time has come for him to enter upon his rightful inheritance and to be recognised for who he really is.

1:5-14 ⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? ⁶ And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' ⁷ In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire.' ⁸ But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.' ⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.' ¹⁰ He also says, 'In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.' ¹¹ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. ¹² You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.' ¹³ To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'? ¹⁴ Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

Only Son

[1:5] First point: angels don't inherit, the Son does. God couldn't have made this any clearer: when he talks about the Christ-King in the second Psalm, which I'm sure most of you can say off by heart, and tells him he's going to be heir of everything that exists, he doesn't say 'It's because you're my Top Angel' (remember that the original holder of that position fell because he tried to become something even greater) – he says 'It's because you're my Only Son, born to me in the "today" of my eternal love.' In other words, the Sonship of the Christ-King doesn't have a birth-date or a name-day, because it's always been a fact; he doesn't have to wait for his birthday presents because he's never stopped getting them. That's also the point of the parallel quotation from Nathan's oracle to Solomon where the language of filial inheritance, defeated enemies and unending rulership extends way beyond David's son to Someone far greater. God anticipates the human birth of a Christ-figure to whom he will say, 'I'm going to be your Father, and you're going to be my Son, because what has always been true timelessly will become true in historical time.' It's covenant language: when God says it will happen, it does happen. Forget angels – this is Divinity.

No less than God

[1:6] Next point: if God tells all the angels to worship someone, that Someone must be no less than God. There's no-one between the angels and God. Remember the climax of the famous song Moses wrote for the children of Israel? 'Tell the whole world (and don't forget rank outsiders) to get hold of the good news. There's a Person coming to whom every single angel will have to bow the knee – and why? Because he's going to right all wrongs and make atonement for his people.' This isn't just a general statement about the eventual triumph of good; it's a precise promise of a 'coming', fulfilled at the moment of Christ's birth into the physical universe. When Mary brings forth her first-born son, the destined world Saviour, it's God who is his Father as he has always been. No wonder the angelic choir breaks into a radically new chorus of praise!

Conventional doxology?

[1:7] Again, the language used of the Son is radically different from that used of the angels. Take a typical description of spirit beings in the Psalms: 'His angelic messengers move around the world like hundred-mile-an-hour winds, fast, unseen and devastating; they dance like flames of fire, reducing evil

to ashes, clearing the way for a new world; he made them to serve his purposes on earth, and how well they do it!' [1:8-9] Then move to another Psalm, and what do we find? The whole Psalm is addressed to a royal figure, a David or a Solomon, or a king at his wedding ceremony. However, quite early on it bursts into praise that can apply only to the King of heaven: 'You are God, the one and only Lord, reigning from your throne from everlasting to everlasting; your kingdom isn't just based on overwhelming power, it's one where right always triumphs over wrong, because at the centre of your heart there's a blazing love of goodness and a total rejection of perversity – that's why you're his very own Anointed One, it's why God himself has poured his Spirit into you, a source of joy and exultation that even those closest to you have never experienced in all its fullness.' Do you see what is happening here? It's not the singer addressing God, it's God himself addressing his unique Son, the One who is not less than God in his kingship and holiness and crazy exuberance. You thought this was a conventional doxology, and suddenly you're staring at a God who walks with his friends on earth and laughs and cries with them. A big mistake if you take this to be only another angel!

The big change is coming

[1:10-12] Once you see it, it's everywhere. Take one of the later Psalms, where the singer laments his present experience of utter desolation, then looks up and sees the Eternal One and understands that one day he's going to appear on earth in all his Messianic glory. So he makes a mighty effort of faith and addresses this future figure: 'You're no mere angel sent to help me, you're the Lord himself – you were there when everything started, it was you who made the laws that generated the physical universe, all those billions of stars were designed by you and sent into space like chips of wood flying from a carpenter's chisel, while the angels looked on and cheered. [1:11] But one day all this stuff is going on the rubbish heap, while you'll still be there; heaven and earth are going out of date like last year's wardrobe, the universe is going to be crunched up and consigned to the dirty-clothes basket, now that a new imperishable creation's coming from the hand of the Arch-Designer himself; yes, the big change is coming, but you'll never change, you'll never be out of date, you're the God Who Keeps Arriving.' What's happening here? The wretched sufferer has found himself eavesdropping on a conversation between the Father and the Son, because it's the same Son who kick-started creation who is going to be God's answer to all his problems (and ours).

Clear blue water

[1:13] Six quotations, and if you're not convinced yet about the clear blue water between the Son and the angelic host, here's the one that really clinches the argument. It's from the Psalm you all know, the Messianic Psalm *par excellence*, where Scripture uses words that couldn't possibly be addressed to any created being, however exalted. 'You're my right-hand Man at the centre of power – that supreme place is reserved for you and you alone, so come right in and sit down! The crisis isn't over yet, because I have enemies who are still in a state of rebellion – but you're my Commander-in-Chief in the war, and I solemnly promise you that very soon now you're going to accept their signature of unconditional surrender.' We're back to what I was saying in the opening paragraph. This Son Person was there first, everything came into existence through him, he is superior to any other being however mighty, he receives supreme honour from the Father, and he is in a totally different league from anyone else you can think of.

[1:14] The angelic hosts have their place of honour, of course, as long as they do what they're told. They're there to help people. Specifically, they're on a mission to support and protect believers who through faith have become inheritors of the glorious future promised them by God the Father. But we, those present and future heirs, haven't got there yet – this is terribly important and I'm going to go on at length about it. We're going to be incredibly grateful to our guardian angels, but that's nothing to the gratitude and praise we're going to bestow upon the original and only Son. I hope we're all clear about that now!

2:1-4 *We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ² For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*

We think we know it all

[2:1] Why am I going on about this? Because we don't pay attention to our Christian teachers. We think we know it all, and we switch off. We're like mountaineers climbing up a steep and slippery path, and we think we don't need the sturdy handrail provided for our safety, so we let go and begin to slide – at first imperceptibly, but then we're out of control and heading for the precipice. [2:2] Take the Ten Commandments: we've heard them *ad nauseam*, and learnt them off by heart, we've got all that old stuff sorted so we can safely ignore it – or can we? They weren't just a few pieces of advice from Moses, they arrived direct from God himself, carved by a supernatural hand (that's something else angels had a part in); they came complete with penalty clauses and dire warnings: 'Follow these instructions, and you'll find life in all its abundance; turn from them, and there will be disaster.' The whole of Deuteronomy is a detailed handbook for travelling through the wilderness of this world safely and successfully – our fathers neglected it and got what was coming to them, as every Jewish child knows. [2:3] Yet here we are, blithely (or cravenly) ignoring a far greater body of instruction, designed to lead us along the High Road to the eternal Zion. It's not locked up in some old musty volumes of the Law, it's fresh from the mouth of the Lord himself, replete with parables and pithy analogies and memorable sayings, which would be enough in themselves if they weren't reinforced by the apostles who heard them and passed them on to us reliably and faithfully. [2:4] Not only that, but our God of miracles weighed in with fresh and up-to-date evidence of his reality: there were amazing signs of his power, people were dramatically healed, bitter opponents were gloriously converted, and ordinary people found they could do amazing things for God thanks to the special ability conveyed to them through the Holy Spirit – not because they could summon up these gifts by their own willpower, but because that was the way God decided he wanted to work.

2:5-9 ⁵ *It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified: 'What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? ⁷ You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour ⁸ and put everything under their feet.' In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. ⁹ But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

Human race in control?

[2:5] Miracles never happen for their own sake; they're direct evidence of God's new creation breaking in upon the old. Do you see what I'm saying? In the present creation God may choose to act by the hand of his angelic messengers, because he has delegated the rulership of this world to them; but they have no part in ruling the world to come. Why not? Because that is the job of the Son. [2:6] It's all there in another of those famous psalms you've learnt by heart – I don't care whether it's composed by David or whoever, what matters is that it's the Holy Spirit telling us how things are and have always been. The singer starts by looking up at the heavens and marvelling at the beauty and order of the stars and planets, which proclaim the Divine nature so clearly that children can understand it and all the cynics are left with nothing to say. This leads him to ask God a question: 'Human beings are pretty unimpressive compared to the rest of your creation – how come you even notice our existence? What is it about one single member of this race, that you should turn up in their life and reveal yourself to them?' [2:7] Yet it would seem that in your scheme of things you've put only a tiny distance between them and the angelic hosts – in fact you've set a crown of kingship on their heads and allowed them to share your Divine status in majesty and splendour! [2:8] Mankind is the pinnacle of your created order, and you've

made them the arbiters of how the world should work; they walk tall and confident, and nothing is outside their rightful control.'

Well, of course this begs the question, just how far is the human race in control of the universe? If God intended their remit to extend to absolutely everything in heaven and on earth, how come there is so much chaos and disorder, rebellion and suffering? [2:9] And that's where Jesus comes in (there, I've called him by his actual name for the first time, though he's been in the narrative ever since the beginning) – if you look at the Psalm again, each time 'mankind' or 'humanity' is mentioned it's not plural, it's singular. When it says 'You've put only a tiny distance between them and the angels' it could just as easily mean, 'It was just for a short stretch of time that you gave him (the Son of Man) a lower status than the angels.' This is the Jesus we've seen walking the streets of Galilee and Jerusalem – so why is he here? Why is this human being enduring the torture and agony of terminal crucifixion, visiting the depths of what it is possible to suffer, and then rising up triumphant from death and receiving a rapturous welcome at the gates of heaven, where he is indeed even now reigning as king with every possible honour and title being bestowed upon him? That's what the Psalm is really getting at. What is the Son of God doing visiting the earth as the Son of Man?

I'll tell you why, though you shouldn't need reminding. It's because the whole human race, from Adam and Eve onwards, has made a mess of our ruling commission. In fact we've betrayed God's trust and handed the sceptre to his deadliest enemy. But Jesus has stepped in so that you and I, and every person who has ever lived or will live, doesn't have to experience the bitter sentence of exclusion from the promised life of eternity. He personally served that sentence for us. God's love and tender compassion is so great that he would willingly go to the gallows in our place – but God the Father is immortal and ever-living, he simply cannot die – so he permits God the Son to take on human flesh and go through the whole ghastly business as if it were God himself laying down his life. Which, in a very real sense, it was.

2:10-13 ¹⁰ *In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.* ¹¹ *Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.* ¹² *He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.'* ¹³ *And again, 'I will put my trust in him.'* And again he says, 'Here am I, and the children God has given me.'

Fully human and perfectly faithful

[2:10] This is just what you'd expect from such a Heavenly Father. When he became incarnate in Christ, he didn't stop being God. He is still the One who brought the entire universe into existence, indeed who dreamt up the whole crazy scheme in the first place. He remains self-sufficient and doesn't need company. Yet he decides that he wants his heavenly home populated by billions of family members all bearing his own likeness and character. So why does he have to go through this (literally) tortuous business of appointing his own Son to lead the rescue operation and testing his loyalty to destruction in the process? Why does it need to be like this? Answer: the Son has got to demonstrate that it's possible to be both fully human and perfectly faithful to the Father's will.

[2:11] This idea of 'holiness', 'moral perfection', 'absolute integrity', whatever you like to call it, is the non-negotiable characteristic of God and must therefore be true of his family as well. I'm going to use this term a lot in what follows. It lies at the heart of the whole scriptural narrative. Are the children going to be worthy of their incredible destiny? The purpose of God's sending Jesus is that he should personally make sure this happens. Our God isn't just going to watch from a celestial vantage-point – he's going to roll up his sleeves and get involved in the action, if need be at phenomenal cost, but all for the sake of this family he's bringing into being. Now, you may jibe at the idea that God could actually call human beings his brothers and sisters – but it's all there in the scriptures. Here's another little string of proof-texts (I'm assuming you're comfortable with the way Scripture can crystallise the mind of God in a single word or phrase).

[2:12] Let's start with the Psalm of the God-forsaken Man, which so vividly portrays the shameful suffering and even 'piercing' of this innocent speaker: why is he going through such horror? It's all for his 'family': 'I'm absolutely determined to show my brothers and sisters what our Father God is really like – he's the One Who Saves, and he's doing it right now, and one day when we're all assembled together at the family reunion I'm going to lead the celebration as we sing our hearts out to our incomparable King'. We know who's speaking here – it's God's own Messiah-Son we've come to know as Jesus, and he's calling us his siblings.

[2:13] If that isn't good enough, let me take you to the mind-blowing sequence of chapters early in the prophet Isaiah where a God-Man begins to take shape, Immanuel leading his little 'remnant' through the wreckage of Israel and Judah's apostasy. How are they going to stay faithful to the One True God? Well, he their leader is going to set them an example. 'Like teacher, like disciple: if I can trust the invisible God, can wait for his will to be revealed, can hang in there despite everything, then you can too.' But not just because disciples are expected to model themselves on their mentor – there's a deeper reason as well, and that is the genetic connection between Immanuel and his little flock: 'Lord, I'm absolutely at your disposal, and so are the children you've given me.' Yes, they're his faith-family, hard-wired into his likeness because his promises run in their bloodstream. They have inherited nothing less than the Divine nature, where grace and faith reciprocate with each other to produce a new heavenly humanity.

2:14-15 ¹⁴ *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil –* ¹⁵ *and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

Completely human

[2:14] Now let me show you how this applies to Christ and our family relationship with him. Some people object, 'Oh, Jesus wasn't really like us, because if he stayed God while on earth, he can't have been totally human.' I agree that there is a uniqueness about Jesus that sets him apart from the rest of mankind; however, in three essential human characteristics he was completely the same as all of us: he had a body composed of the very same elements, blood cells, nervous system, bone structure, the lot; he could meet a physical death at any time; and he felt the power of temptation just as we do. Let's spend some time looking at the last two points.

Firstly, as I've already pointed out, God the Father cannot die whereas God the Son can and did. The terrible power of death is that it removes the possibility of any further life. The death of the body terminates your life on earth (unless God steps in to resurrect you); the death of the soul cancels any chance of eternal life with God. How can the soul die? By wilful disobedience, which is how the prototype man and woman fell into the serpent's trap. The arch-enemy of God misused his authority as prince of this world to inject the poison of doubt and disbelief into humanity, with the settled idea of getting us all condemned as traitors and so killing off any possibility of a single human being inhabiting God's eternal home. So Jesus endures the double agony on the cross, death of the body which was as public and painful as you can get, and death of the soul as he took the penalty for our treachery and received the sentence of banishment from God's presence. [2:15] This effectively dismantles the devil's master plan, because there is Jesus standing in for us, taking our place in one devastating act of exchange. Once we were condemned to spend the whole of our lives in prison, with the sentence of final extinction hanging over us, trembling at every footfall which might herald the arrival of the executioner, utterly unable to escape from the clutches of our dreadful tyrant-master, bound hand and foot in unbreakable chains. Now, thanks to Jesus, we are gloriously free, no longer afraid of death, no longer slaves to the tyranny of sin.

2:16-18 ¹⁶ *For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.* ¹⁷ *For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.* ¹⁸ *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

Full identification

[2:16] So is Jesus just an angel in human disguise? Absolutely not. He didn't come to this earth to pull rebel angels out of the pit where they've landed themselves (they're not getting any help from our Saviour God) – he came solely and simply to reach Jews like you and me who should have known better, and through us to reach out in blessing to the whole human race, as he promised to Abraham and all his faith-children. [2:17] Don't you now see the point of this family likeness thing? It was terribly important that the Son of God should identify with his human counterparts in all essential respects, otherwise how could he understand their fragile condition, how could he consistently fulfil his role as high priest (I'm going to come back to this a little later)? If he was going to mediate between a sinful mankind and a holy God, he had to represent them fully, in order that this crucial issue of our unfitness for God's presence should be dealt with radically and decisively. [2:18] And here's the really interesting thing: you might have thought that this should involve Jesus plumbing the depths of human depravity and personally committing every sin in the book – but of course the opposite had to be the case – he would have to meet every temptation known to humanity and come through triumphantly, even if it meant the utmost in suffering. Then and only then could he hear the cries of his people under acute moral and spiritual pressure, come alongside them, and bring them the help they needed at precisely the time they needed it. So – the crucial point I'm trying to make – because he hadn't caved in, they needn't cave in either, thanks to his presence with and within them.

3:1-6 ¹ Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵ 'Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,' bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Greater than Moses

[3:1] You can see what I'm getting at, can't you? You aren't worldlings any longer, pushed around by the assumptions and ruling powers of the society you happen to find yourselves in – you're a completely new and different race, shaped by an insistent voice from the realms above which calls you by name and tells you you've been selected to enjoy the unimaginable splendour of the world to come. If you think, 'Oh, these are just fantasies of my own making,' or 'How can I possibly turn myself into someone fit for God's glory?', then stop looking at yourself and fill your vision with Jesus. You've publicly signed up with him; you've accepted him as God's Word, God's final authority; you've trusted him to lead you into God's welcoming presence – how could you possibly take your eyes off him for a single second?

[3:2] I know persuasive voices are telling you that as good Jews you ought to go back to Moses. After all, they say, he is the Founder and Architect of our faith, he's the most reliable witness to God we've ever had – you're safe with him. And they quote those extraordinary words of God to Aaron and Miriam, who are complaining that they are just as much God's mouthpieces as their brother Moses: 'I'm sorry, but I'm the Master of this household, and if I want anything done, I speak directly to Moses, because he's the humblest man I've ever known, and he's never let me down, whatever I've asked him to do for me.' Now that's even truer of Jesus, God's appointed Servant-King, and let me tell you why. [3:3] It's because he put up the whole thing in the first place, and it's because he's not just God's Chief Steward, he's God's own Son. Let me elaborate on these two points. Yes, Moses certainly deserves great honour for his faithfulness; but making him the ultimate authority is like kneeling down in front of a royal palace and saying, 'We think this building is wonderful; as for whoever designed and built it, they're rubbish.' [3:4] A building doesn't just spring up by itself – it presupposes an architect and builders. The

universe didn't just happen – it had to have a Maker, and that Maker is the One we call God, and I don't have to remind you that it was through Jesus that God created all that exists.

[3:5] Again, Moses showed incredible faithfulness to God in his leadership of God's people, but this Scripture points beyond Moses to an even greater Servant-Leader; if God spoke directly in that way all those years ago, that was only to anticipate what he has now said just as directly about listening to his own Son. [3:6] A tenant or a chief steward might have temporary or limited authority over his lord's property, but if he takes over completely, he's usurping the rightful place of the family heir, into whose power the whole thing is destined to pass. We, the faith-children of Abraham, acknowledge only one Lord of God's household, and that is his Messiah-Christ. So why abandon our confidence in the Head of the Church, who is available night and day for us to walk into his presence with heads held high? Is it so wrong to feel a fierce delight in the certainty that in Jesus our eternal future is utterly secure?

3:7-14⁷ So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice,⁸ do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness,⁹ where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did.¹⁰ That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways."¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."¹² See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

Fossilised faith

[3:7] This 'back to Moses' campaign is missing the point of what the Holy Spirit was saying then and is still saying now through scriptures such as this Psalm, written by David a few centuries after the Exodus events. Just check it out for relevance: 'God didn't just speak to our ancestors all those years ago, he's speaking to you this very day! So why aren't you sitting up and taking notice? [3:8] Your faith ought to be like a living and growing tree; instead, you've allowed it to become dead and fossilised. This is exactly what happened to the crowd around Moses, when they turned really nasty and told him to get lost. Do you remember that day in the Sinai wilderness when they hadn't had water for days and they effectively told God to prove he was worth following? [3:9-10] In fact it went on for the whole forty years of journeying, one revolt after another, constant moaning and bickering – and that's your ancestors in a nutshell! Let's hear what God thought of all this: "I've demonstrated my power time and again, I've done everything I can for them – and they still think I'm useless. I'm absolutely fed up with this lot. They are fundamentally incapable of staying on the road I've marked out for them. They've got a built-in tendency to ignore my instructions and go off after their own deluded ideas. They thought everything should be arranged for their maximum comfort, when I was trying to toughen them up for the battles ahead. [3:11] How can this generation ever inherit the Land of Peace and Prosperity I've prepared for them? I'm so furious that I'm going to cut them out of my will – I hereby terminate any relationship I've had with them.' And of course all except two of them died before they ever got across the Jordan.

[3:12] Well, these are tough words – but you make a big mistake if you think they're addressed solely to the people of Moses' day. You, my own Christian brothers and sisters, are potentially in exactly the same place. The issue is, are you going to go on trusting in Christ, or are you not? Are you being fooled into listening to your own stubborn unbelieving nature and thereby cutting yourself off from the One True God who is the great I AM? [3:13] No, you should be listening to each other and telling one another how good Jesus is, not just occasionally but every single day you see each other. Don't put off meeting with your fellow-saints until next week or next month, and don't assume that you are self-sufficient in your

walk with God, because sin has a habit of insensibly paralysing us: while it reassures us that the way we're thinking is all perfectly innocent and spiritual, it's really deadening our faith-life and atrophying our relationship with the living God. 'Oh, that couldn't happen to me,' you say – but it can happen to anyone, even the finest saints among us. [3:14] It's not enough to have set off on our journey with Christ, we've got to finish it with him. If we started with high hopes and with firm ground under our feet, it's no use if after a few miles we wander off the pathway into boggy ground and start sinking in the mire of self-indulgence or the marshes of doubt.

3:15-19 ¹⁵ *As has just been said: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.'* ¹⁶ *Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?* ¹⁷ *And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness?* ¹⁸ *And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?* ¹⁹ *So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

Brick wall of unbelief

[3:15] Let's just stay on that word coming to us from the ancient scriptures and still resonating today: 'Suppose you hear God speaking to you today (and notice how 'Today' is pushed to the front, reminding that God might be getting through to us at any time, convenient or inconvenient, and that could be *now!*) – are you going to present him with a brick wall of unbelief, just like the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness story?' [3:16] Think about it. Just who were these frightful people who dared to question God's goodness and leadership? Were they a few hardened cases who always emerged as ring-leaders? No way – it was absolutely everyone who had followed Moses out of Egypt, who had seen God acting in the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea crossing, the manna, the water from the rock and so on; they had experienced God's rescuing power at first hand, yet they still wouldn't trust him to finish the job. [3:17] Note that however gutted with them God may have been, he showed amazing patience and stood their querulous complaints for forty years, which means a full generation and then some – so he was getting the same nonsense from the children as he'd got from their parents – but in the end he'd had it up to there with their persistent disobedience, and their rotting bones are still out there in No Man's Land, buried where they fell.

[3:18] I hope you're getting the point I'm trying to make: the people to whom God declared categorically that they would never, ever be allowed to reach his promised place of settled inhabitation after their long journeying, weren't a few spectacular sinners – they were all those who couldn't accept God's statements at their face value, which was the vast majority of them. [3:19] It really couldn't be clearer: the reason why they failed to enter into God's final inheritance wasn't that they ran out of food or water, or got defeated by the enemy, or that their leaders were incompetent; it was purely and simply that they didn't think their God was big enough to deliver his promise. The key thing they needed was – faith.

4:1-5 ¹ *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.* ² *For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed (or, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers, RSV, ESV mg).* ³ *Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."' And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world.* ⁴ *For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'On the seventh day God rested from all his works.'* ⁵ *And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.'*

Automatic entry?

[4:1] This has serious implications for us all these years later. God's offer of sharing his eternal inheritance with mankind is still on the table. All of us are invited to come home. But what if you or I apparently fail to make it to the gates of the heavenly city (I say 'apparently', because God alone knows our true condition)? [4:2] It's no good claiming that you've heard the gospel, you went to that meeting

where hundreds were converted, you know what Christianity is all about – Moses’ original crowd heard it too, in a manner of speaking: they witnessed God’s saving acts, they were part of the multitude who physically walked out of Egypt. Yet they still died in the wilderness. Why? Because they never believed the saving word, that it was God who had done it and not them; or if they did, they thought he had simply brought them out of the land of slavery so they could perish from starvation in those barren wastes. In other words, you can hear the message that saves your life, and think you understand it, yet somehow it never gets interfaced with a genuine personal response. You can call God ‘the Lord’ till you’re blue in the face, and physically go along with his chosen people, and even witness miraculous things happening; but unless he becomes ‘my Lord,’ you won’t ever become one of the children of God by faith.

[4:3] Please don’t ever think that entry into the Promised Land is automatic. It’s only people who cling on to belief in the utter truth of God’s promise (even if that faith is tested to the point of destruction) who make it through. Otherwise how could God say those words we’ve been quoting, ‘I swear most solemnly that these people who have incurred my severest displeasure will never be allowed to share my Land of Rest’? If it had been automatic, then as soon as the work of creation was finished, everyone would simply be able to saunter into the kingdom of heaven and no-one would be excluded. [4:4] That would have been guaranteed by wherever it comes in Genesis, ‘God got his work over in six days, so he declared the last day of the week a holiday.’ In other words, now the universe has been created, every living soul can down tools and have completely free access to God’s palace and grounds. [4:5] Which makes nonsense of that emphatic assertion, ‘These disobedient people are never, ever going to be let in through the gates!’

4:6-10 ⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it ‘Today’. This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his.

Still on the move

[4:6] So we’ve got a historical situation where some of the Israelites (admittedly very few) could look forward to enjoying the Land of Rest, but where the great majority, despite having had first-hand experience of God’s saving and lifegiving power, were excluded from entry, because they consciously and deliberately refused to follow the Lord wherever he might choose to lead them. Could we say, then, that this was a one-off situation, applying just to those primitive people who didn’t know any better?

[4:7] In that case, why do we find a psalm by David, written hundreds of years later, appealing urgently to his contemporaries not to leave obedience to God to tomorrow, but to get on with it ‘today’, straightaway, before you leave the room? I’ve been quoting this passage *ad nauseam*, but here it is one more time: ‘Was that God speaking to you just now? What are you doing about it? If it really is the One True God telling you to get moving, why all this stubborn resistance? How come you are so reluctant to say an unconditional Yes to his command?’

[4:8] It wasn’t just those idiots getting it wrong all that time ago, after which Joshua was able to lead their successors into the Promised Land and there was no more trouble for evermore (in fact there was a lot more fighting to be done), because the day of decision isn’t a one-off event in the remote past, it comes up time and again, right up to the present day. [4:9] We, God’s new covenant people in this current generation, are still on the move, even though we are looking forward to the Great Holiday, when we finally join our Maker God in his end-of-term celebration, work over, job done, let the party begin! [4:10] I can’t put it any clearer except by saying this: making it finally into the Kingdom of Heaven doesn’t happen until you’ve done everything God requires of you on earth, and this may be different for

each person – just as God had his own unique job of creating the star-spangled universe, and he didn't go off duty until the last piece of space and time had been put in place. In fact it could be said that he is still working flat out, because the final Day hasn't arrived yet and there's quite a lot of rescuing to be done.

4:11-13 ¹¹ *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.* ¹² *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* ¹³ *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

A continuing faith

[4:11] Being a new covenant Christian isn't like receiving your ticket for the last night of the concert season, putting it on the mantelpiece then forgetting about it till the time comes to present it at the door. It should really excite us that we're going to share Christ's resurrection glory. Yes indeed, we are justified by faith, but that's got to be a continuing faith which perseveres until the day when we don't have any more work to do. Otherwise we fall into the same trap as those original Israelites, and if your attitude is, 'Oh it couldn't happen to me,' then let me tell you, nobody, however 'religious', is immune to losing their faith. [4:12] The crunch moment is when you assume God has nothing more to say to you, or when you conclude that his Word can safely be relegated to a 'Museum of Ancient Beliefs' or similar. You think it's run out of energy where you're concerned? Big mistake! I don't expect you've ever met a Roman legionary soldier in single combat, but I wouldn't recommend even thinking about it. This man has had years of training in sword-play. Not only does he know how to get through any armour he meets on the field of battle, but his weapon is precision-sharpened, honed to perfection on both blade edges. He could carve you into little pieces in a few seconds. Multiply that by about ten thousand, and you might get somewhere near the spiritual effectiveness of Scripture in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Can you distinguish between a person's character and their personality? Are you such a skilled surgeon that you can find a way between your patient's joints and bone-marrow? God is incomparably the best psychologist and surgeon around, and always has been. He uses his Word like a deft scalpel, getting through all the intervening tissue to the point of infection, knowing exactly what a person is secretly thinking, their underlying agenda, their motivational drive. Open yourself up to his insistent and intelligent probing, and you stand a chance of returning to full health. Resist or ignore his voice in Scripture, and you face certain death.

[4:13] We are so stupid where God is concerned. There isn't a single creature in the whole universe whose cell-structure isn't known in intimate detail by our amazing God. Yet we humans think we can hide ourselves from him, that he isn't really aware of what is going on in our inmost thoughts. Just accept that you can't run away from his gaze, you can't retreat behind impregnable defences where living Truth is concerned. The best thing you can do is to have a totally open and frank conversation with him now, while there's time. Otherwise you'll find yourself having one when time is over, and I can promise you that's not going to be comfortable.

4:14-16 ¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Jesus our great High Priest

[4:14] Now, Christians are regularly being told in no uncertain terms that their newfound faith is only a pale shadow of the tremendous Jewish faith they have abandoned. As an example (we are told) consider the awe in which the person of the chief priest is held, because by means of this one man going through

the curtain of the Holiest Place, sinners can come into the spotless presence of God. Well, I've already described Jesus as our High Priest, and I now want us to think about this very carefully. In fact, he is far greater than any Jewish high priest, because he is the unique Son of God; and the curtain he has gone through is in no earthly sanctuary, but the heavenly realm itself. There could be no stronger encouragement to us to hang on to our profession than this, and I'm going to explain why.

[4:15] Jesus was fully man as well as being God's Son. That means he knows what it's like to be one of us, with all our human frailties and vulnerability. He understands the strength of temptation because he's felt it himself, probably more keenly than any of us ever have, because he met it at its strongest, whereas we tend to collapse as soon as the heat is turned up. He is therefore the ideal person to represent us before the throne of God's presence! He's been through it all, and he's shown how it is possible to be completely human without giving way to sin. [4:16] Far from this making us extremely nervous about approaching the Divine Majesty in all our failure and fragility, it should give us mighty encouragement. The 'No Entry' notice has been taken down and a 'Sinners Welcome!' sign put in its place. The judgment seat has become the help desk. Thanks to Jesus having got there before us, God's presence should now be our regular resort, whether we need cleaning up after yet another compromise with evil, or urgent assistance with issues we feel unable to handle, exactly when we need it. To turn your back on the God who waits for us in the name of Jesus, you have got to be almost unbelievably wrong-headed – and even then, the door stands steadily open.

5:1-6 ¹Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴And no one takes this honour on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' ⁶And he says in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.'

God's own appointment

[5:1] 'But if Jesus is God and has never known sin, how can he really represent us at God's throne?' Let's examine what a high priest is supposed to do and how he is qualified to take this office. All chief priests share in common the fact that they are human beings, who have been given the job of dealing direct with the One Holy God on behalf of the rest of the human race. Thus they have to present gifts and sacrificial offerings in order to atone for all kinds of offences against the Divine Majesty. [5:2] This calls for a tremendous sympathy with the human condition: they can deal patiently and tenderly with people who are seriously ignorant where the things of God are concerned, or who have comprehensively gone off the straight and narrow, because they themselves have known at first hand what it is to be liable to temptation – and that's all true of the Lord Jesus Christ. [5:3] Now of course the high priest doesn't only offer sacrifices for the people's sins, as for example on the great Day of Atonement – he is making intercession for his own derelictions and shortcomings as well, and as I've already said Jesus didn't have any sins of his own to make atonement for. But that doesn't make him less effective as our Mediator – the fact that he has met and overcome temptations outside the experience of most mortals means that he has faced sin in its most devastating aspects, and indeed, as I'm going to point out, he became identified with human sin in a unique and unrepeatable way when he offered up himself. Thus it is nonsense to say that he can't represent us in the presence of God.

[5:4] Now it's a great honour to be high priest, and no sensible mortal would dream of applying for the position on the grounds of his own merits – he would wait for God to appoint him to that office, and he would need to hear an unmistakable call from on high. That was the case with Aaron, the first high priest, and with his family after him. [5:5] So what about the Christ who is to come? Does he have to present his credentials before God and show how thoroughly he deserves to be the mediator between

God and mankind? No, he waits to be designated by God's own voice, and there it is twice in Scripture! The first is in the Second Psalm, which I've quoted already, when God's decree is applied directly to the Lord's Anointed: 'I want the whole world to know that you are my unique Son and Heir, not born to me at a single point of time in the normal way, but generated by me from the beginning and therefore valid as my representative yesterday, today and for ever.' [5:6] The other 'appointment' text is similar in that it addresses the Anointed directly: 'You (says the Lord to David's Lord) are to be a priest of a very special sort: your tenure of that office will not be bounded by any kind of time-span, nor by old age or fragility, because your lineage and succession is not from Aaron but from Melchisedek.' Back to Melchisedek in a moment. But do you see how we've got two independent testimonies to the efficacy of Jesus as God's commissioned Representative? The one emphasises how his office as Son goes right back to before the beginning of creation; the other declares that his office as Priest will continue into future ages. How can anyone claim that Jesus' fitness for mediating between God and humankind is in doubt?

5:7-10 ⁷ During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus' human qualifications

[5:7] However, we must beware of highlighting the Divine aspects of Jesus' role to such an extent that we minimise his human qualifications. Become incarnate and grappling at first hand with the problem of human disobedience was never going to be easy. You will be familiar with how often the Psalmist expresses violent distress and anguish as he cries to God to save him from the deceptiveness of human nature and the very real possibility of being swallowed up by the pit of Sheol, the place of death and God-negation. The first apostles have passed on to us how Jesus' prayer-times weren't always episodes of calm meditation and rapturous worship – he was often heard yelling at the top of his voice and sobbing uncontrollably as he strove to align himself with the demands of God's plan of salvation, the most striking occasion being of course on the Mount of Olives– eventually he would reach the place of perfect acceptance of God's will, and thank his Father fervently for listening to his requests and for showing him the way he could please him most fully and completely.

[5:8] Yes, he was and never ceased to be the Son of God – but he was also and remains supremely the Son of Man, whose willingness to follow the path marked out for him by his Father, the way of perfect humanness, had to be tested to the uttermost of suffering. He learnt what it was to lose everything, even the assurance of God's presence and love, dearer to him than life itself. [5:9] It was only then, at the end of the journey, still clinging to his trust in the Father's goodness with his last breath, that the sacrifice was complete, the gate of heaven was flung open, and all who were prepared to trust him with their lives could run into the Father's arms and know they were finally safe. Who did all this for us? Jesus, the Servant-God, dead and now risen.

[5:10] That is the full outworking of that ancient and mysterious declaration of God, that 'my Lord' was to hold the permanent office of High Priest in the family line, not of Aaron but of Melchisedek, King of Salem.

5:11-14 ¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Theological infants

[5:11] And here, dear friends, we have a problem. I've got a lot to say about this character, some of it quite advanced in its theological complexity – but are you up to it? I get the distinct impression that you really don't want to make the mental and spiritual effort involved in getting hold of this teaching. Here I

am with insights fit for the ears of kings, and what I find is a class of good-for-nothing layabouts. [5:12] In fact, given the number of years most of you have been Christians, you yourselves ought to be passing on these precious truths to the next generation – whereas what you apparently need is a biblical ‘Back to Basics’ class, a kind of nursery school where you can learn your alphabet from coloured building-blocks! God’s word of salvation may have come to you as eager new converts, but now it’s a complete mystery to you. You ought to be wolfing down good meaty instruction, but you can’t take anything sterner than baby-food or mother’s milk. [5:13] Yes, I mean it, and in case you can’t quite take in what I’m saying, I’ll repeat it. You, my readers and hearers, are complete infants where God’s word is concerned. Just as a newborn baby is incapable of absorbing anything stronger than its mother’s milk, so you have no idea how to interpret and apply scripture in such a way that God’s great scheme of salvation results in real qualitative transformation for your lives. [5:14] By now you ought to be spiritual grownups, tucking into tough chunky discourses like the one I’m about to give you. Or to change the metaphor, now that you are (or should be) in training for God’s own long-distance race, you need to be relentlessly stripping away every ounce of fat, toning up every muscle in your body, on the alert for the slightest deviation from the arrow-straight course that will head you off from disaster and bring you unending glory.

6:1-8 ¹ Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ² instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And God permitting, we will do so. ⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ⁷ Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Still on the foundation course?

[6:1-2] To change the picture yet again, when you got on board the ship whose captain is the Lord Jesus Christ, you needed some basic instruction in things like words of command, knots, emergency drill and so on – but you can’t stay in harbour for ever, and it’s time you were out on the high seas, borne along by the exhilarating wind of the Holy Spirit, well on the way to becoming mature and experienced mariners. It’s no time to be going through the foundation course all over again, all that stuff (vital and necessary, don’t get me wrong) like:

- what sin is, how it kills your soul, how you need to wake up to the danger you’re in and alter course immediately
- how Jesus shows us a God we can know and trust, the forgiveness he won for us on the cross, what faith means in practice, how to take the first step of commitment to Christ as Lord
- what baptism is, both as an outward sign of church membership and the inward reality of new birth in the Spirit
- the gifts of the Spirit conferred by the laying-on of hands, and God’s calling to diverse ministries
- the hope of resurrection, guaranteed by Christ as the first-fruits, to be realised at the return of Christ to this earth and in the final conquest of death
- the certainty of the Day of Assessment for everyone who has ever lived, with its rewards and penalties indelibly inscribed for all eternity.

As I said, the ‘Back to Basics’ package. Haven’t you got all that wrapped up? Or is there a dreadful possibility that you may have chucked it overboard and are about to follow it into the water?

Spiritual deadness

[6:3] Because if that’s the case, I’m not sure how much we (speaking for your teachers and mentors in Christ) can do about it. Spiritual deadness of the kind I’m describing can only be dealt with by the

gracious God who does resurrection miracles according to his own will. [6:4] Here's someone who has had a genuine conversion to Christ. At some time in their past lives they have turned from the darkness of sin and received the light of Christ in their hearts. This is no nominal adherence or superficial profession: they really have been born again by the Holy Spirit and have had a first-hand experience of God's mercy, coming to them not by their own merits nor through the power of human oratory, but as a gift direct from heaven. [6:5] Has something like this happened to you? You have been sitting under the preaching of God's word, and it's as though one of his wonderful promises has been spoken specially to you, designed expressly for your particular case; you probably made a heartfelt emotional response, or even felt the supernatural touch of a power greater than your own forcing you to your knees. You will never forget that occasion. [6:6] And yet – and yet – all this now means nothing to you, because you've left the high road of discipleship and fallen into the mire of deliberate sin and error. It's useless trying to get you back on your feet again; however skilled an evangelist or spiritual counsellor one might be, there's now no possibility of bringing you to that point of realisation, that radical desire for a new quality of life, for a second time. If by the grace of God it did happen, as I said, it would be a total miracle.

The worst aspect of this is that you've gone over to the enemy. You've aligned yourself with the Roman soldiers who cynically hammered the nails through Jesus' hands and feet. You've joined the mocking scribes who joked about the so-called Son of God and his failure to save himself. You've told the world that the cross of Christ is a sham. You've given every doubter and sceptic a perfect excuse to vilify the faith you once professed.

[6:7] Some of you I'm sure have experience in agriculture or land management. Here are two farms next-door to one another. They share identical climatic conditions and have the same amounts of rain and sunshine. The land on the first farm brings forth plentiful harvests, or at least provides more than adequate sustenance for those who live and work on it; they regularly thank God for his generous provision for all their needs, and are even able in good years to help out others less fortunate than themselves. [6:8] The land on the second farm is completely different in character: it produces nothing but weeds, thistles and thorn bushes, almost as if it lies under some kind of divine curse – the farmer certainly releases a volley of curses whenever you talk to him about it. He is actively planning to up sticks and live elsewhere, and as for the estate, he will set it completely ablaze, not that the soil can ever be regenerated, but at least the area will become barren heathland or desert, and no-one else will try to make a living out of it. Got the message?

6:9-12 ⁹ *Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation.* ¹⁰ *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.* ¹¹ *We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized.* ¹² *We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

Written off?

[6:9] I'm deliberately using the most forceful language I can in order to bring some of you to your senses. Believe me, dear and beloved Christian friends, I'm not writing you out of the picture where useful service for Christ is concerned. In fact many of the reports we get about you are very encouraging; by all accounts you're not exactly heading for disaster! [6:10] It's not as if we believe in a vengeful and paranoid God who picks on the slightest dereliction and ignores all the good work you're doing. It's obvious that you love the Lord Jesus and try to witness to him as best you can; in particular, you are a

caring church which has been pastorally sensitive to the spiritual and material needs of its members, right from the time of your founding up to the present moment. [6:11] So what exactly is this letter all about? It's written out of a passion to see every single one of you – man, woman and child – one-hundred-per-cent determined to hang on to your lifeline to the future. Your hope in Christ is no pipe-dream. It's all there waiting for you, and that's a solid certainty. Don't throw it away now. [6:12] You're not completely stupid, so don't act as if you are. You're not on your own: others before you, and indeed others around you at this very moment, are going through the same trials of faith, and having their resolve tested under maximum pressure – but they've seen the glint of glory, they've laid hold on the promises of a God who means what he says, and they know it's only a matter of time before they come into their full inheritance. If you've run out of reserves, get your energy from their example, tell their heroic stories over and over again, and one day you'll meet them and be able to tell them your story in return.

6:13-20 ¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' ¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. ¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. ¹⁸ God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Abraham our faith prototype

[6:13-14] You can't get a better example of the indomitable refusal to give up than our faith-prototype, Abraham. All he had was a word of promise – but what a promise, and what a God! He, Abraham, has just passed the sternest test of obedience that anyone could be asked to go through, and now he has a confirmation from God of the original promise that has sustained him all these years of waiting, a promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the beach, who are going to be a blessing to the whole earth. Now ordinarily God's word needs no extra validation, it's rock-solid in itself, but here God goes over the top in affirming its immutability. 'I swear to you, Abraham, by – by – by MYSELF (I can't find anything bigger to swear by!), that yes and yes indeed I'm going to pile blessing upon blessing upon you, and I'm going to exhaust the multiplication table in the billions of descendants I'm going to give you.' [6:15] Do you see the point? The promise was there all the time, only poor Abraham had to cling on year after year and get tested to the point of utter despair before he could walk down that mountain again and present his resurrected son to his apprehensive followers. It was only then that he knew beyond any doubt he'd got the full blessing in his pocket.

Double security

[6:16] Now when human beings enter upon a solemn undertaking, like taking the witness stand in court or getting married, they confirm their intention by invoking some power greater than themselves, and if a dispute arises about the validity of the words that have been uttered, it is settled beyond any question by appealing to the oath. 'You swore it was the truth and nothing but the truth!' The oath (or the power invoked) is a kind of third party guaranteeing the delivery of the promise. [6:17] Well, here is God wondering how he can demonstrate beyond any possible doubt that he's totally incapable of renegeing on his undertaking: he's got this huge family coming along and they are all going to need reassuring that they are true-born children and really do have a fantastic inheritance coming to them, if only they'll hang in there for as long as it takes. So he makes himself the go-between, the mediator of his own word, the cement that seals his declaration firmly into the bedrock of reality. [6:18] Do you see what's happened? We've got a double lock as our security where delivery of the Divine promise is concerned:

there's the original statement, and then there's the incredibly powerful oath. If God were to tell an untruth, he would have to deny not only his own word but his actual self into the bargain. He would in effect be saying, 'I'm not Myself any more.' And I hope you realise he has no intention of doing that!

Now let's apply this to our own situation as believers in Jesus Christ as Lord. Like Abraham, we are refugees, a people in transit; we have burnt our boats as far as this world is concerned, and set all our hopes and aspirations on the world to come. If that's a mirage, we're done for. So we do need a double dose of encouragement to keep our eyes on the goal. Right then: we've got it! [6:19] Like a ship moored in a heavy swell, we've got an anchor from the stern and another from the bows. Our eternal destiny is secured firstly by the word of God which goes way back into the past, to that original promise to Abraham, as I've been explaining; but it's also secured by a totally bombproof line into the future which consists of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. At his death he went through the curtain which separates sinful mankind from a holy God; at his resurrection he broke through the barrier of death into a new life altogether; and at his ascension he took his place in the inner sanctum, where the King sits enthroned. [6:20] He's gone through all this as our advance courier, and he's going to come back to take us with him. You'll find all this in the Coronation Psalm I've referred to already, when God swears his unbreakable and unchanging oath and declares Christ to be 'a High Priest in the Melchisedek class, never having to be reappointed but holding his office through time and eternity.' Hold your breaths as we explore the panoramic view from this high vantage-point of scripture.

7:1-10 ¹This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ² and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means 'king of righteousness'; then also, 'king of Salem' means 'king of peace'. ³ Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever. ⁴ Just think how great he was: even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! ⁵ Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, from their fellow Israelites – even though they also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. ⁹ One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰ because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

Meeting Melchisedek

[7:1] If you don't think you've met Melchisedek before, or don't even know how to spell him, let me remind you of the story of Abraham in Genesis. Abraham has just rescued his nephew Lot from the clutches of a huge coalition of kings, and has brought him back home. At the victory celebrations this mysterious character called Melchisedek turns up bringing bread and wine (we won't go into the symbolism of that), and he gives Abraham a blessing from God. It's like royalty presenting the prizes at the final ceremony of the Olympic Games. Who is this character who is great enough to be invited to do this? Well, he is identified as the king of Salem, which of course is the city of Jerusalem, hundreds of years before it was going to become the city of David. So far so good, but he's further described as 'Priest of the Most High God' (a very rare title for God which declares how he is way bigger than anyone or anything else). [7:2] Now watch what Abraham does: after receiving this magnificent blessing, he hands over ten per cent of all the loot and plunder he's accumulated from the invading forces to this Melchisedek, who really must be some Person.

And he is! First point about his name: the initial part, *Melek*, is the standard Hebrew word for 'King' throughout Scripture. The second part, *tsedeq*, means 'justice, goodness, rightness.' Put those together and you get 'Royal Lord of Everything Right and Good'. Wow! Don't underestimate this guy just because he's got an unpronounceable name. He's someone you don't fool with. Next, as we've seen, he's king of Salem, and that gives us the everyday greeting *shalom*, meaning 'Peace be with you, you're safe

with me.' You feel good around this Person; all your suspicion and hostility evaporates in his presence. He isn't out to get you. [7:3] So you look at him a little more closely, still curious about Who he might be. Neither his father's nor his mother's names are given, so does that mean he never had parents? We look up his ancestry and find he hasn't got any forebears at all. There isn't any record of his date of birth, or for that matter his date of death. He hasn't got a tombstone. Now this is only an argument from silence, it's no proof in itself, but given the way the Holy Spirit uses one part of Scripture to cross-reference another, this unique King bears an uncanny resemblance to the only-begotten Son of God himself, the risen and glorified Prince of Peace, in his continuing and eternal mediatorial role which we call priesthood.

[7:4] Now that we've found this possible identification, we begin to see other clues appearing. Abraham, our great original ancestor, goes round the spoils of war, which tradition dictates should be piled up in heaps with the finest and costliest items reserved for the gods who won the battle for you, and he takes the best ten per cent (rather like the thank-offering at harvest-time) and offers it to – Melchisedek. Another indication that we are in the presence of someone really important here.

[7:5] This next point may sound abstruse, but those who know their Pentateuch will recall that the Lord commanded the Levites to take one-tenth from the people of Israel's agricultural produce as their living allowance, since they had no land or other means of support. So you get the Israelites, who are descended of course from Abraham, paying the one-tenth to Levites (or at least those Levites who do priestly duties), who are also descended from Abraham. Family supporting family – perfectly in order. [7:6] But here we have Abraham himself, the Israelite founder, paying a one-tenth to someone who isn't an Israelite at all (he was probably a Canaanite, but that's irrelevant)! What is going on here? Is there another line of priesthood which had always existed quite apart from the Aaronic line? Here is Abraham, the privileged receiver of God's special promises (as we've seen), getting a blessing from someone right outside the family. [7:7] There is absolutely no question whatever that if you get a blessing from someone in Scripture, like a father blessing his sons, the person who gives the blessing is of a higher status than the one who receives it. So Abraham is handing over these tithes to someone who ranks way above him. [7:8] Now this tithing business is normally conducted between people who are going to die – it's an earthly arrangement for mortals. Abraham too is going to die; but Melchisedek isn't, because all the indications are that he is immortal, everlasting, deathless. Get the idea?

[7:9-10] In fact, when you think about it, Levi and the whole tribe of Levites are directly descended from Abraham, as we've been saying. So in that sense, when Abraham has this encounter with Melchisedek and hands over the one-tenth to him, he is representing his future descendants – they are paying it too. Levi, who normally *receives* the tenth in recognition of his priestly commitment, is in effect *giving* it to an even greater Priest. Again we have to ask, who is this Person who arrives on the scene, gets the supreme honour of the tithes, and then disappears again?

7:11-19 ¹¹ *If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood – and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood – why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?* ¹² *For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.* ¹³ *He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.* ¹⁴ *For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.* ¹⁵ *And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,* ¹⁶ *one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.* ¹⁷ *For it is declared: 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.'* ¹⁸ *The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless* ¹⁹ *(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*

An effective priesthood

[7:11] This isn't just an abstruse theological point I'm making – it's all about how we are going to meet a perfectly holy God face to face. We need an effective priesthood to make this possible, and for the original Israelites this was provided through the Levitical system. So is that God's last word on the subject? Emphatically not – otherwise why do you get the Lord telling us all those years later about 'the arrangement I'm providing via Melchisedek'? Doesn't that suggest that the Aaronic arrangement isn't good enough, so we need a different and much more effective way of bringing us into God's presence? [7:12] It's not that the two systems can run side by side, so you can pick and choose which one to use: changing the nature of the priesthood involves a complete overhaul of the Law itself. [7:13] In fact it involves taking the priesthood from one tribe and transferring it to another, which is a bit of a shock when the first tribe (Levi) has been doing its stuff for hundreds of years, and then suddenly another tribe gets the job even though none of its members have ever had any experience of the sacrificial system.

[7:14] But it's not so much of a shock when you ask what tribe 'Melchisedek' really comes from. The clue is in the way the Psalm works: 'The Lord said to my Lord ... you are a priest for ever'. It's the Messiah-King who is being lined up for the ultimate priestly job; and which tribe does the Messiah come from? Judah. Now if the Lord Jesus is our Messiah, and you ask what tribe he came from, the answer is – Judah. You can search the five books of the Mosaic Law high and low, but you'll never find any mention of priests coming from the tribe of Judah. [7:15] So far from this proving that Jesus can't possibly be our High Priest, it's the other way round: it proves that Aaron and Levi don't qualify any more for that position. They are now obsolete as far as exercising any priesthood is concerned. I can't make the point any more clearly than this: the order of Melchisedek replaces the order of Aaron, permanently and 'for ever'. [7:16] Oh yes, the Law prescribes an earthly, mortal succession of priests coming from the tribe of Levi, and that's fine where temporal arrangements are concerned, because people die; but Jesus fulfils the Law in a far deeper and more powerful sense, because he rose from the dead and he's never going to die again, so he carries on being High Priest without ever having to be succeeded. [7:17] That's the fundamental truth of our scripture: 'You, Son of David, are the Royal High Priest; you've introduced a new formula entirely where priests are concerned, because you go back all the way to Melchisedek (who has no earthly genealogy), and you continue forward into eternity.'

[7:18-19] Let's face it (unpalatable though the truth may be to certain people): there are only two options. You can carry on with the Aaronic priesthood as prescribed by the Law, but you need to realise that it has failed at its job, it's no longer fit for purpose, and anyway it was only designed to point to the priesthood to come, it wasn't ever designed as a be-all and end-all in itself. The other option is for you to welcome its replacement, the Melchisedek-Messiah order of things, which opens up a much more hopeful prospect, because it actually does the job priesthood is designed to do, which is to bring sinful mankind into the presence of a holy God.

7:20-28 ²⁰ *And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath,* ²¹ *but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest for ever."'*

²² *Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.* ²³ *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;* ²⁴ *but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood.* ²⁵ *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* ²⁶ *Such a high priest truly meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* ²⁷ *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.* ²⁸ *For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.*

Jesus' credentials

[7:20-21] Again I must stress that this isn't my private idea, or some bizarre interpretation which has no basis in Scripture. The appointment of a new order of priesthood is not only there in the word of God, it's confirmed with an emphatic oath. Could I just remind you that when Levitical priests were appointed, no oath of consecration was involved; they just took over on the basis of being from a priestly family. But when the Messiah is appointed priest in this great Psalm, a resounding oath is sworn – 'The Lord God has not only said this, he has put his own credibility on the line by backing it with an oath, and there is not the slightest possibility of him ever changing his mind on the subject: you, David's Lord, are to be the only priest around for ever after, and that's final!' [7:22] (The existence of this oath, incidentally, shows that when it comes to guaranteeing the new covenant, Jesus is going to be a much better mediator than was ever possible under the old covenant – but of that, more anon.) [7:23] So we have a tremendous contrast between the two priesthoods: the first is based upon the principle of succession, because as I said, sooner or later all these priests are going to die, so none of them is going to be able to hang on to his office; [7:24] but the second, the unique Messiah-Priest, isn't ever going to die (he's been through all that and never needs to do it again), so he can continue in office for ever and a day. Wonderful!

[7:25] And this is where we come in. How can we be absolutely certain that we're going to inherit eternal life, when the state of our lives suggests very strongly that we are heading for the rubbish-heap? The answer is Jesus, the overcomer of death. We're not just wandering into the presence of the Holy God all by ourselves, we're doing it with Jesus by our side and holding our hand. We may not be allowed in there, but he is, he's the One and Only High Priest. Generation after generation of sinful humans can approach God with perfect confidence, because Jesus is always going to be there as our friend and advocate, vouching for us, presenting our credentials which aren't ours at all, but his. When Jesus asks the Father to accept someone, he does, with no questions asked.

[7:26] This matter of credentials is so important, isn't it? If someone is representing me in court, the last thing I want is for them to be guilty of the very same things that I'm being accused of. If Jesus could ever be proved to have compromised himself in relation to moral uprightness, his suitability as Great Intercessor for humanity would be called into question. But his record is absolutely impeccable (not that he couldn't have sinned, but he never did). His relationship with the men and the women with whom he came into contact was beyond criticism. There was no malice or manipulation in his dealings with people. His character was never tainted by selfishness; personal considerations never took precedence in his thinking. Even when he dined with Pharisees or tax-collectors, he saw straight through hypocrisy and had nothing in common with the crooks he sat at table with – he came as their saviour from sin, not their associate in crime. His ascension proves that not only is he free from any entanglement with earthly things, he has risen above heavenly hierarchies too; his name is higher than any other in the annals of eternity.

[7:27] Let's take a cool look at the inadequacy of the old Levitical system. Day after day these priests offer their sacrifices, and as I pointed out earlier not only are they there to present offerings for the sins of the people, they have to make atonement for their own shortcomings as well. Even Aaron, on the great Day of Atonement, is told he has to offer a bull for himself and his household, and this has been binding on all high priests ever since. Not so with Jesus: he hasn't any sins of his own to atone for, and having made the supreme sacrifice of his own body once and for all time, he never has to repeat it. [7:28] And it's not as if getting himself crucified indicates any kind of moral dereliction – the Divine Law may unerringly point out the flaws of the priests it appoints, but it can't pin anything on Jesus. That's why the Divine Oath comes along when the sacrificial programme has been running for hundreds of years, and makes the irrevocable declaration that there's only one Priest we're going to need from now on, and that's the Messiah-Son himself who hasn't a single sin to answer for and whose obedience has been comprehensively demonstrated in the sight of his Father. Jesus has taken on the job and he's never going to be fired. How can you possibly go back to the old, discredited way of doing things?

8:1-6 ¹ Now the main point of what we are saying is this: we do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. ³ Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. ⁴ If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'⁶ But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

True professional

[8:1] So let's recapitulate the argument so far: we've been emphasising from page one how Jesus exactly fulfils this old prophecy, rising from the dead, ascending into heaven and taking his rightful place as the Almighty's right-hand man, and so qualifying in every respect for his continuing work of being our very own High Priest. [8:2] He's a true professional where priestly duties are concerned; and let me emphasise, this ministry is for real, it's not play-acting like the old tabernacle in the wilderness, where God makes as though he's actually living among them in a holy tent while they travel through the wilderness – whereas in reality he fills heaven and earth. Do you really think that because some human being called Moses had a box made for God to live in, the Glorious One had to move out of his transcendent home which he established from everlasting to everlasting, and depend on earthly servants to minister to his holy needs? (The wonder is that in the incarnation he really did do something like that, but that's not the point here.)

[8:3] Well, you may be thinking, don't put down the high priests, they did have quite an important job to do, otherwise who was there to administer the extremely complicated programme of gifts, offerings, vows and which animal should be sacrificed for what kind of transgression; and what about the absolutely vital and unique offering made by the Head Priest on the Day of Atonement? So if we're insisting that our Messiah has now taken on the role of High Priest, exactly what offering is he supposed to be making? It doesn't make sense to have a priest who doesn't make any sacrifice to atone for sin. [8:4] Well, I'm going to answer that question in great detail in the next chapter (it's perfectly obvious what the answer is, in fact) – but can I point out an assumption which you the questioner are making, which is that it's only down here on earth that the priest's job really counts, in dealing with the messy side of human existence and the hard material reality of getting the right animal to the altar and dealing with it in the appropriate way. This is to miss the whole point of the sacrificial system. When Jesus was on earth, he wasn't a priest as such by calling, he was a carpenter then he was a rabbi; and if he were continuing his earthly ministry up to the present moment, he still wouldn't need to take a priestly role, since there are plenty of people available to fulfil all the duties that the law requires in the way of sacrificial offerings and so on.

The original reality

[8:5] You see, you're naturally assuming that what happens on earth is the hard reality and whatever goes on in the spiritual world is insubstantial and airy-fairy. Actually, it's the other way round. What happens in heaven is the original reality, the template for everything that transpires on earth. It's our relationship with the living God that is the crucial issue. The Levitical priestly system is a black-and-white outline (and a rather fuzzy one at that) of the definitive original in glorious technicolour. God couldn't have made it clearer when he reminded Moses, in the midst of all the detailed instructions he was giving him about the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle and so on, that the arrangements he was going to make down amongst the people were to be faithfully based on the master-plan being revealed to him up the mountain. In other words, the earthly should as accurately as possible duplicate

the heavenly; the temporal structure is no more than a derivative copy of the eternal truth, the way things are before God.

[8:6] So Jesus may not have been a high priest on earth, but he is one in heaven where it's all happening right now. The ministry he's currently performing is on a totally different scale of importance compared with any earthly one. It's not just a ritual performance, either. The old priestly sacrifices got their relevance and their meaning from what we know as The Covenant (I told you I was going to talk about this), the contractual arrangement between God and us humans based on certain hard-and-fast promises recorded in Scripture. When the High Priest walks into the presence of the Eternal God, he goes there on the Divine invitation, sinful though he is in the eyes of the Law. The big difference with Jesus is that he goes in there on his own merits. He hasn't ever broken the Law. He's made an entirely new contractual arrangement on our behalf, which God has bound himself to honour. Let me now explain why this was necessary.

8:7-13 ⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said: 'The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ⁹ It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' ¹³ By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.

Basis of relationship

[8:7] Basically, if the first model is working perfectly well, you don't scrap it in favour of a second model. If the old basis of man's relationship with God had been operating satisfactorily, there wouldn't have been any need for a new one. [8:8] Let's go to one of the best-known passages in all Scripture, where the prophet Jeremiah sees that the old arrangement is riddled with holes and can't possibly go on. I'm going to quote it word for word, so please bear with me. The context is God's absolutely unshakeable and everlasting love for his people of Israel; he is determined to get them back from the land of exile where they now find themselves, and he talks about a huge ransom that he has paid or is going to pay to release them from captivity. All manner of things are going to be well; but there's one problem to be settled, which is that the whole lot of them have turned their back on him and are heading for the cliff edge. So how is God going to solve that one? Listen to what he says, and he's not letting them off the hook, he's being really tough with them.

'Hey there, you dozy people! I'm utterly fed up – this can't go on any longer. This covenant, this bargain I've struck with the twelve tribes of Israel and Judah, is going to be scrapped, wound up, terminated. We need a new one, and shall I tell you why? [8:9] The old one isn't fit for purpose. Oh yes, it all started fine: there was just that little matter of getting them rescued from Egypt, but like a bridegroom joyfully taking his newly-married bride hand-in-hand down the aisle, I saw them through the Red Sea and the wilderness and got them into the Promised Land. You would have expected some signs of gratitude and trustful obedience, but not a bit of it. They were unfaithful to me time and again: they went after other lovers and comprehensively trashed the solemn agreement I had made with them. Eventually I was so choked with their attitude that I couldn't stand the sight of them any longer.

Love is caught not taught

[8:10] 'So is that it? Have I finally given them up? Not a bit of it! I'm going to try again. It may need a few centuries to expunge the old memories, but here's a new idea (says the Lord, as proactive as ever), one

that will utterly transform their relationship with me. Our previous “marriage” was based on a bit of paper – well, tablets of stone in fact – a legal document which was clear and detailed enough in its provisions but never really became part of their thinking. Why don’t I take those old laws about loving God and their neighbour and impregnate them into their brain cells, interface them with their logical processes, that kind of thing, so that thinking my way becomes as natural as breathing? Not that they’ll become mindless automata, they’ve got to retain their freedom to choose intelligently – but so that following me becomes the one desire of their lives, their gut reaction however tempted they are to do otherwise. I don’t want merely nominal acceptance or ritual performance of a prescribed routine; (and here God takes a deep breath and gives voice to the idea that originally sparked off the whole creation thing) I want to give them myself. I long to be the best God they could possibly have. I don’t want to be a remote Divinity out there where they can’t reach me; I want them here with me, living in my eternal home, my family, whom I see every day, my very own wonderful beloved people.

[8:11] ‘This love-from-the-inside (says God, trying to avoid technical jargon about the Spirit of wisdom and all that) isn’t something you learn from a textbook. You can’t simply walk up to your nextdoor neighbour and go, Here’s how you get to appreciate God – master your ABC by nine o’clock tomorrow morning and I’ll come and test you. Love is caught, not taught. This inward knowledge of what I’m really like, this Yes! of delighted response to my wake-up call, takes no account of status or education or previous record; it could happen to anyone, and it’s my plan to make it freely available to the whole human race irrespective of nation or custom or creed.

[8:12] ‘Yes, I repeat, your previous record will be totally irrelevant (there’s a big surprise for you!). I know what you’re all like. I know the best and the worst about you. It’s all here in the archives, what you’ve done and thought and said to hurt each other. You probably have only the vaguest idea of what utter failures you’ve been and still are, in terms of relating to me and your fellow human beings. But, and this is my solemn promise and full intention, I’m going to make it so that none of this will count against you. I’m going to remove the No Entry sign to my presence and replace it with a Come To The Party banner. Unconditional welcome – because I love you all.’

[8:13] End of Jeremiah quote. Do you get it? Basically this God of ours has torn up the prototype arrangement and consigned it to history. If you ask why it’s still there, let me assure you that it’s not going to be around for very much longer. It’s on its last legs. The old Moses-on-Sinai rulebook has got one foot in the grave. And if you want chapter and verse for this, bear with me as I explain how Christ has done what the Levitical priestly system has utterly failed to achieve.

9:1-10 ¹ Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. ² A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. ⁶ When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. ⁷ But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. ⁸ The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. ⁹ This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. ¹⁰ They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

The Sinai set-up

[9:1] Let me briefly summarise the set-up under the Sinai system, in case any of this isn’t familiar to you. The way the Lord is to be worshipped, and the way the physical, earthly sanctuary (the tabernacle) is to be constructed and furnished, are all carefully prescribed. [9:2] God’s Tent (remember he was literally

camping in the midst of the Israelites) has just two rooms, the outer and the inner. The outer one has things like the six-branched lamp-holder and the unique table where the sacred baked bread is set out. This section is given the name 'God's Own Dining-Room', and of course it is curtained off from the outside world. [9:3] But then there's a further curtain and an inner room, and this one is called 'God's Very Own Living-Room'. [9:4] This one contains the incense table, made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, where fragrant incense is put on a brazier of fire before the Lord; and next to this altar stands the Ark of the Covenant itself, with its testimony to God's gracious and merciful presence. The Ark is overlaid with gold top and bottom and on each of its four sides, and inside it are the golden jar with its ever-fresh specimen of manna, then you have Aaron's almond-tree staff which miraculously budded and blossomed to show that the priesthood really does belong to the tribe of Levi despite the apostasy of some of them. Finally of course inside this golden Ark are the actual stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Words from God. (I'm putting all this in the descriptive present tense even though nobody has seen them for centuries.) [9:5] On the golden top of the Ark, the place which we call the Seat of Mercy, where God as it were sits to give his judgment on sinners, you have the twin Cherubim in all their beauty and glory facing each other and spreading out their wings, providing a place of shelter where forgiveness may be found thanks to the sprinkling of blood. I wish I could go into detail on all this, because it is so wonderfully instructive, but I would run out of scroll space, and I want to get on to show how Christ fulfils this ancient symbolism.

[9:6] So now that we've got all this paraphernalia set up, what happens around it? It's not the salvation furniture in itself that is important, it's what it's there for. There is a big distinction between the front part of the Tent, God's Dining-Room, where the priests and Levites are always going in and out doing their special duties, such as offering the daily sacrifice of two male lambs, [9:7] and the inner part, God's Personal Living-Room, which is so sacred and holy that the only human being allowed in there is the High Priest, and he can go in only once every year— and it is terribly important that he goes in carrying an animal's life-blood, because something or someone has to die when sin has been committed, even if it is the result of ignorance or spiritual confusion, and especially if the Head Priest himself has been knowingly or unknowingly guilty of disregarding the will of the Most High God. We are dealing with totally serious stuff here, let me remind you. God and not-God can't sit down at the same table, end of story.

No messing with God

[9:8] So what is God's Holy Spirit trying to tell us through all these very careful arrangements? Remember he is the Author of Scripture in its totality, and he longs to impart the true understanding of God to succeeding generations. Is he saying, for instance, that any human being can simply swan into the presence of the Most High God and sit down in his most comfortable armchair? No, he most certainly is not! Those two rooms, whether they're in the wilderness inside a tent or in Jerusalem inside the Temple, confront mankind with their 'No Entry!' sign; [9:9] they are a physical and visible demonstration, right up to the present moment, that you don't mess with the Lord God. Go in there and you're dead. Oh, you (or at least your priestly representatives) can do all that play-acting and come loaded with priceless offerings of the firstfruits of your produce, and dozens of lambs with their throats cut, and you can get the prescribed rituals one-hundred-per-cent right, but you still stay dirty inside. You've still got that inner voice which we call conscience nagging away at you, telling you you're a thousand miles short of that perfect standard which we know as the Divine Love. Ask those who've got closest to God in their lives, and they'll tell you what failures they are. [9:10] How could all those special foods and potions and washings of clothes and bodily immersions do any more than freshen up your physical appearance, like putting on your party best before meeting with royalty? Underneath you're still the same egocentric, lustful, manipulative creature you've always been.

So is it all a meaningless charade, this wonderful Jewish religion of ours? In itself, yes it is; but, don't you see, it's pointing beyond itself to a time when everything is going to be put right, the catastrophic mess we've made of our relationship with God is going to be gloriously cleared away and a new era will be established. Such a relief! And that time is – now!

9:11-14 ¹¹ But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

God's home address

[9:11] Yes, the long-expected Anointed Servant-King has turned up in person. He's a totally different kind of High Priest, whose arrival means really good news. The old Tabernacle, you see, stood for something much bigger than itself: the solid reality of God's own presence in the sanctuary of heaven. That former structure we call 'God's Sacred Place', hammered together ever so carefully according to the Divine instructions, is part of the present material creation, but it's not where the Lord actually lives; his home address is where it has always been, Eternity itself, outside time and space. We can't possibly get there, but Christ has gone there for us. [9:12] Moreover, the blood he goes in there with (if you can't stand any mention of blood, you're not going to find the next few pages much fun, but I'll explain in a moment why all this talk about our basic life-fluid is absolutely essential) isn't a kind of substitute blood taken from a dead animal like a goat or a bullock – it's his own lifeblood soaked into two pieces of Roman army hardwood. What was Jesus doing there? Dying uselessly in the dust and the darkness after a travesty of justice? No, something absolutely momentous and unique was happening. The Son of God was making the decisive breakthrough, tearing down the forbidding curtain with its dire warnings of 'Death to all who enter here!' – and he was doing it for us. He was presenting his own lifeblood as the ultimate sacrifice, wiping out the accumulated debt of humanity. You and I are now free to dine at the Father's table, and the door is never going to be shut on us again.

[9:13] 'But what about that conscience you were talking about? Surely we still know we're hopelessly ungodly creatures?' Yes, but Jesus wasn't. Everything depends upon the supreme value of his sacrificial offering. Look at it like this. The point of all those goats and bulls in the old system, the point of the dead heifer that had to be burnt and its ashes used for cleansing the people, is that these creatures hadn't done anything wrong, they hadn't got any of their own sins to atone for, they were spiritually as well as physically unblemished. So the cleansing they achieved was effective in a kind of way, because it gave morally culpable people an outward respectability – it was a kind of official certificate of holiness as people who belonged to God. But it wasn't the real thing.

Sacrificial potency

[9:14] What Jesus' death achieved was infinitely more significant. He had lived a human life unblemished by sin or selfishness of any kind, because he remained in complete harmony with the Father's Spirit that indwelt him. Consequently his self-offering, his sacrificial potency as it were, was out of all proportion to what mere animals could give. It could clean out every part of the human personality infected by sin and evil. It could sluice through the guilty conscience of people who, no matter how hard they tried, always knew in their hearts (if they dared to look there) that they had utterly failed to please God. All that has been wiped clean away. We can start worshipping the Ever-living God and being usable in his service, not as a matter of dead formality, but with his very own holy dynamism coursing

through our veins. Please, please, never consign the cross of Christ to the museum of religious history. It really works!

9:15-22 ¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. ¹⁶ In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, ¹⁷ because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. ¹⁸ This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. ¹⁹ When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. ²⁰ He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ ²¹ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. ²² In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

The laying down of a life

[9:15] As I said, a new era has begun with the death of Christ, because he has brought into effect the new covenant promised in Jeremiah. I want to show you how the idea of covenant is inescapably bound up with the laying down of a life. Let’s backtrack just for a moment. God our loving Creator has called us into eternal partnership with himself. He has named us as his children and promised us an inheritance that stretches into an endless and glorious future. But we’ve all chosen to go another way, and not only have we stockpiled sins till they reach the ceiling, but we’ve got ourselves so impossibly entangled with wilful evil that we can’t break out. We’ve broken the terms of the inheritance, and it’s now out of our reach. [9:16-17] Let’s imagine that a rich relative has left you a huge sum of money in his will. He’s told you that it’s going to be all yours, but only after he has died. As we know all too well, the ‘last will and testament’ of a person can’t take effect until he (or she) has been pronounced well and truly dead; while the person is still alive, the will and all its promises are worth no more than the paper they’re written on. [9:18] So it is with God’s promises of eternal life: something or somebody’s got to die before they can be put into immediate effect. That’s the point of all this blood symbolism in the ancient Mosaic covenant rituals: right from the start, year after year, the promises are repeatedly affirmed as being valid only if a life is laid down. [9:19] Let’s look at the account in the book of Exodus. First, Moses reminds the gathered people of the commandments God expects them to keep, and the people solemnly agree that they’re going to do this faithfully, because the basis of a covenant is fidelity to its terms and conditions. Then Moses has some oxen slain, collects their blood in bowls, and (as we can infer from other scriptures) mixes it with water. He then uses scarlet wool and a branch of the plant called hyssop, to apply the blood to the written record of the law and to the people who are going to benefit from the covenant. [9:20] Then he says (and this form of words may remind you of our Lord’s Last and First Meal): ‘You may wonder why I’m throwing all this messy blood around – well, it has a special significance, because it’s applying the promises the Lord has made to you in his covenant affirmation.’ [9:21] Then he goes round the whole Living Place of God and bedaubes the whole structure, furniture, ritual bowls and implements, the lot – why? What was this ‘special significance’?

[9:22] Cleansing and forgiveness. That’s what it’s all about. When you look for it in the Law of Moses, pretty well every time something has to be made ritually clean, or someone has to be forgiven, it’s done with blood. But, you may be wanting to ask, how can blood, this messy fluid which itself is very hard to clear up whenever it’s spilt, actually make anything pure and holy? Answer: because blood represents a life laid down. Sin can’t be forgiven just like that. Sin kills, as the Lord God warned Adam from the start; it causes the death of the soul. It can only be forgiven if another dies in your place. This is the whole principle underlying the Day of Atonement: life for life.

9:23-28 ²³ It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

One-off sacrifice

[9:23] You see, God wants to live among his people; but if they persist in doing stuff which gets up his nostrils, the situation goes toxic. How can he live in a holy Dwelling-Place if it's continually being trampled by muddy feet? All this is a kind of earthly parable of the heavenly reality – that if we are going to share God's eternal Dwelling-Place, every taint of evil has got to go. If the earthly counterpart has to be purged by such elaborate rites, think how much more radical must be the sacrificial offerings needed to make us fit to inhabit God's actual home space. [9:24] That's the whole point of the Messiah plan, as I've repeatedly been trying to demonstrate. Jesus isn't a High Priest of the earthly sort, walking into a physical sanctuary which architects and craftsmen have put together; the 'Tent of Meeting', even the Temple itself, are only mock-ups of the real thing. After his death and resurrection he ascended (and the ascension itself is only a visual aid) back to where he truly belonged, his own Father's royal palace – only this time he's doing it for us, so that we can meet the Divine Love face to face, without anyone needing to ask us why we're there.

[9:25] And here's another point I need to underscore, at the risk of labouring the obvious: Jesus' sacrifice is a one-off. Your earthly high priests have to go through the curtain separating mankind from God not just once, but every year; and each time they bring blood that has flowed not in their own veins, but in another's body. [9:26] If Jesus had followed this programme, we would have had to have an annual crucifixion in a series stretching right back to the beginning of time! The glorious truth is that here in our own generation, at this climactic point in world history, the forgiveness of sins has been achieved by one single act. And what's more, it wasn't somebody else's blood that Jesus was offering, it was all his own. Take a moment to worship this amazing God, who lays himself on the line so utterly and completely.

[9:27] There is never again going to be another Divine crucifixion. Jesus has died all our deaths for us. Our future prospect is now completely different. Yes, we still face the expectation of physical death, but that's going to happen once only (there is no such thing as reincarnation, disappointing though that may be to some), then we all come before our just and all-knowing Judge for him to sort out the mess the world's got into. One death, one Day of Reckoning, and that's it. [9:28] It's the same where Christ our Saviour King is concerned. By a single offering he has taken upon himself all the consequences of human sin: guilt, judgment, the eternal death which is the severing of the life-connection with God. He now never needs to do anything like that again. When he comes to the earth a second time, it won't be to deal with sin, as if he hadn't made a proper job of it first time – it's going to be the best reunion ever, us meeting up with him and him telling us from now on everything's going to be fine. Are we looking forward to this? You bet we are. We're going home! If we aren't looking up to heaven with our tongues hanging out, longing for him to come back, then maybe we've started thinking of this world as our home. Which it isn't.

10:1-10 ¹ The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all,

and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. ⁷ Then I said, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God."' ⁸ First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them' – though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹ Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Shadow-boxing

[10:1] Here you are walking along a road in the sunshine, and your shadow stretches out ahead of you. It would be very odd if you met a friend who proceeded to address your shadow as if it were actually yourself. That's the mistake we can make with the Law God gave to Moses and the Israelites. It's not meant to be the real thing; it's just a preliminary anticipation. If you like, it's the menu card for the solid meal to follow. Your high priests can go on offering their yearly sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, getting them exactly right year after year to the end of time, but those animal offerings will never manage to do the deep, deep work needed to transform human lives and make us fit to enter the Lord's holy presence. [10:2] If they'd had that power, don't you think they'd have become redundant, because our guilt-feelings about sin would have disappeared the first time we performed those rites? We would have been permanently purified. And that clearly hasn't been the case, because they're still going on (though this may not be for much longer). [10:3-4] No – every succeeding Day of Atonement is a vivid reminder that we still haven't got rid of our sin; and that's hardly surprising, because you can slaughter as many bulls and goats and lambs and whatever till the place is knee-deep in blood, but that's not going to expunge a single act of ungodliness, just as boxing with a person's shadow is never going to land a punch on the person themselves.

Messianic Psalm

[10:5] If you want evidence of this from our Scriptures, take a look at one of the undisputedly Messianic Psalms of David. It might have been written a thousand years ago, or yesterday. It pictures Christ arriving in the universe he created and repeating his marching orders to his Father. 'You've told me what you intend me to do. I'm to be your one and only High Priest. It isn't an overhaul of the Law of Moses that you want me to carry out, like bringing in a better organised and more expensive system of sacrifices and Temple offerings. Instead, you've given me a human body so that I can be your final sacrifice, your Divine self-giving. [10:6] You've made it perfectly clear in your Word that all those burnt offerings and elaborate sin-cleansing rituals are something you put up with for the time being, rather than being the full and perfect expression of your world-saving plan. [10:7] And you're waiting for me to respond to your commission. So here's my reply: Yes! Absolutely! Every time I study a chapter of your Book I find something about myself, which can be summed up in a single word: commitment. You're my God, and I love you, and I'm here to find out what's closest to your heart, and to see that it gets done.'

[10:8] It couldn't be clearer. The Holy Spirit is opening our eyes to the mystery of God's saving plan. You might have thought with all this emphasis upon sacrificial rituals, burnt offerings, sin-offerings and so on, God would be saying 'Carry out this rigmarole according to the Law I've given you, and I'll be really pleased with you and not notice your sin.' Instead he's saying, 'Actually all that stuff is pretty useless and gets up my nostrils – I've found another way of doing it.' [10:9] In the next breath we find the Divine Son saying, 'Listen, everybody! I've turned up in your midst to make sure God's will is carried out perfectly.' Do you see what's happened? There's no longer any need for the prototype, because the real thing has arrived. The Incarnate God is here in person; the long waiting is over. [10:10] We've moved into Phase Two of God's plan for the world: a consecrated people utterly devoted to the Lord Jesus

Christ, who allowed his physical body to be pinned to the horns of the altar to provide one single sacrificial offering which would be valid for all time. A new era has started; nothing can ever be the same again.

10:11-18 ¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: ¹⁶ 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.' ¹⁷ Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' ¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

Signed, sealed and delivered

[10:11] 'But the old system remains very much in force! You can't ignore the fact that Temple worship still goes on as it has since time immemorial, with a succession of priests standing daily around the altar and regularly administering the prescribed sacrifices – how can you argue that it's been abolished?' I know that's what your Jewish friends are saying. But if these rituals never achieved the object of their existence, which is to remove spiritual defilement, how can repeating them day after day suddenly make them effective? [10:12-13] Whereas Jesus isn't standing there offering himself time and again – he's done it! No matter how many sins get committed, he's made a single sacrifice for the lot. He has actually fulfilled what the Melchisedek Psalm is all about: he's finished the job, he can sit down in the place allotted to him on the very throne of God, and as for the evil forces of sin and evil and everything opposed to the Divine goodness, it's only a matter of time before they bow their necks to his dominion and admit that Jesus is Lord.

[10:14] Get hold of this: it took only one act of self-offering for the eternal Son of God to achieve the full salvation we need. Yes, we aren't perfect yet, we're still toiling along the high road of holiness and many of us have got a long way to go, but as far as our acceptance with God is concerned, there's nothing more to be done. It's signed, sealed and delivered! [10:15] This isn't just the present writer finding texts to suit my case. The Holy Spirit who is the true author of Scripture got there first. That other passage I've been quoting from Jeremiah bears directly on this. It solves the double problem of our failure to fulfil the original Covenant Law of God, which is that we've done wrong, and we can't do right. He deals with this back to front, as it were, in order to highlight the wonder of the full solution. First of all he deals with our inability to love God and neighbour: [10:16] 'Here you are in exile because of your disobedience to me. I gave you simple rules to live by and you found you couldn't keep them, so you gave up trying. Well then, once your banishment is completed, we're going to have a totally new arrangement. The rules won't be something imposed on you from outside, an impossible standard which you could never reach, written on tablets of stone; I'm going to come and live in you by my Holy Spirit, and those same golden rules are going to be part and parcel of your thinking and feeling and willing. They'll be as natural to you as breathing, because you're going to be my new-born people and you'll have a heavenly nature direct from me.' [10:17] But suppose we still mess it up? What then? Won't we need to offer sacrifices like we always did? And God says, 'I'm glad you asked that one, because I'm going to solve that question too, once and for all. Yes, you may lose the way, and you will probably do hurtful things to one another; but my Way is going to come with you so you can turn half round and find him again – and as for the unspeakable injuries you may do, they're never going to get recorded, because all charges have been dropped.' And of course the prophet is looking ahead to the sin-bearing of the Lamb of God. [10:18] Because it is at the cross of Jesus that full forgiveness is achieved, and if everything is forgiven, past, present and future, why then, how could there possibly be any need for further sacrifices?

10:19-25 ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

All welcome!

[10:19] You'll be wanting to ask the obvious question: 'So can we go off and sin as much as we like?' To which there is an obvious answer. But first I want to apply what I've just been saying about full forgiveness to your lives as Christian brothers and sisters in the here and now. I repeat what I said earlier, that we can walk into God's presence with heads held high. We don't have to feel any shame as we approach the Divine Audience-chamber. Why should we, when Jesus gave his life to lay down a royal red carpet for us? We can go in and out as often as we like without feeling the slightest bit nervous or hesitant. [10:20] I'm not just talking about times of public prayer, or great occasions like Atonement Day – our whole relationship with God has been refurbished. All the dead bits in religion have been removed. Take for instance that great heavy tapestry hanging like a forbidding barrier, proclaiming 'Death to all who enter here!' It's Jesus' death, his living body offered once upon the cross, that has replaced the old curtain, and it isn't a barrier any more, it's God's 'All welcome!' sign in huge letters.

[10:21] And it's not as if Jesus has to be re-crucified every time we want to approach God. He's there in person, very much alive, right by the throne, the Supreme High Priest welcoming every member of the family with both hands outstretched. [10:22] We may arrive in a very sorry state, with our consciences telling us we've messed everything up – but anyway we've turned up (don't let anyone tell you we can't do that) because we desperately need to find him; and it doesn't matter how we're feeling, because we've got those wonderful promises of unconditional access to rely upon. Instead of having to be literally bespattered with animal blood like those Israelites of old, we're washed through and through with the purifying and reviving lifeblood of Christ. It's like standing under a continual shower of Divine mercy that will never, ever, be turned off or cease to flow.

Rock-solid promises

[10:23] So to those who are being told that to profess faith in Jesus as God's Messiah is to leave the safety of the Covenant promises, and who are tempted to step aside from the Christian Way because of trouble ahead, let me say this: hang on to your hope! It isn't trouble ahead, it's glory. You are on God's high road, and all the signposts are telling you to keep straight onward. God has spoken through his Son Jesus (how could you ever doubt that?) and his promises are rock-solid. [10:24] If you're going through the agonies of doubt, don't try to find assurance in yourself, look around at the members of your fellowship and take note of the work they're doing for the love of Christ; don't dismiss it as fanaticism, but rather treat it as a beneficial irritant to get under your spiritual skin. If they're badgering you to get involved in some practical faith-project, take a cool look at what they're doing then sign up for it yourself. [10:25] The worst thing you can do is to stop coming regularly to the weekly meetings, which I gather is happening in some cases. I'm not saying this just to bolster church attendance statistics; in critical times like these there has to be some way of distinguishing between nominal adherence and genuine conviction. The value of getting together is principally the encouragement you can give each other, whether it's through sermons based on Scripture or one-to-one faith-sharing. People may be telling you that the night is coming when Christian profession is going to cost you your lives; but that only means the morning is getting closer, because the Lord is coming as sure as the day is going to dawn, and the night won't last for ever.

10:26-31 ²⁶ *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,* ²⁷ *but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.* ²⁸ *Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.* ²⁹ *How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?* ³⁰ *For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay, and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'* ³¹ *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Apostasy from Christ

[10:26] Now for some plain speaking to those who think that God's grace and the message of the cross is an invitation to go off and break all the rules, because 'the rules don't exist any more.' We are indeed all subject to temptation even after receiving the Lord Jesus into our lives as the Way, the Truth and the Life; if we yield to sin, as sadly so often happens, we can come back to him and get it sorted out. What I'm talking about here, however, is a decisive abandonment of our faith in Christ, and a deliberate embracing of a self-willed lifestyle that refuses to acknowledge his Lordship. What have you to look forward to in terms of your relationship to God? The sacrifices under the old covenant, as I have repeatedly said, are useless for really clearing the conscience of sin; and now you've torn up the promises of forgiveness under the new covenant. [10:27] All you're left with is the inevitable judgment of God. Aren't you terrified? Have you forgotten what happened to people in the days of Moses who rejected God's express will and tried to do things their own way? All those stories of fire coming out from the Lord's presence and consuming the evildoers? Are you prepared to risk getting on the wrong side of God? [10:28] What you are doing in fact amounts to idolatry, because you either serve the One True God or you serve other substitute gods, and the penalty for that under Moses' law was to be stoned to death without any possibility of reprieve, as long as the transgression was confirmed beyond doubt and didn't just rely on the testimony of a single witness. [10:29] It doesn't get better under the New Covenant, it gets worse. In the case of apostasy from Christ the penalties are far more severe, and here are three reasons why:

- you haven't just walked away from God's one and only beloved Son, you have walked all over him – you may think of it as shifting your viewpoint, whereas it's actually breaking a precious relationship
- you have in effect proclaimed that the death of Christ and his blood shed for you under the New Covenant for the forgiveness of your sins, is no better than the most ordinary death in the natural way of things
- you have spat in the face of the Holy Spirit, who not only came into your life as a free gift from God but was your guarantee of receiving an eternal inheritance.

[10:30] It would be as if you had never had any knowledge of God our Father, nor had ever heard his Word, for instance in the Song of Moses, when the Lord declares his intention to exact full retribution from those who oppose him; and then again in the very next verse it says he is going to vindicate his covenant people, which involves a decisive rejection of anyone who refuses to belong to him. [10:31] You can't run away from this God. You can't consign him to a museum, like a once terrifying but now fossilised specimen – he's still very much alive, and one day you're going to have to face him in all his fury and accept the consequences of your 'enlightened decision'.

10:32-39 ³² *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.* ³³ *Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.* ³⁴ *You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.* ³⁵ *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.* ³⁶ *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.* ³⁷ *For, 'In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.'*

³⁸ *And, 'But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.'* ³⁹ *But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.*

Consigning it all to the rubbish-heap

[10:32] Maybe you've forgotten something, though. You really did see the light once, when the Holy Spirit opened your eyes to see who Christ was and what he had done for you. You can't say, 'Oh, all that was years ago and it was just a big mistake.' You were convinced enough to throw in your lot with those persecuted Christians and to wrestle with the unbelief of the hostile and unsympathetic crowd. [10:33] It's not as if you were always ducking away from the opposition – so why do it now? Let's open the picture-album of your past life. Here you are standing up in public, in the market-place or the theatre, acknowledging your faith and cheerfully facing all the catcalls and brickbats that came your way. Here you are again, stubbornly supporting some wretched fellow-believer who was getting similar treatment. [10:34] Here's another one of you visiting some Christians in prison and showing practical sympathy with them in their desperate need. There's even one of you having your home trashed and losing everything except the clothes you stood up in, and you're grinning from ear to ear and saying, 'You can take whatever you like; but you can't take away my hope of eternal life in Christ.'

[10:35] It simply doesn't make sense, when you've been prepared to confess Jesus as Lord, and knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that one day you would hear his 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' to consign it all to the rubbish-heap as if it never meant anything to you. [10:36] Is it so difficult to hang in there for a few more summers and winters, determined (as you always were determined) to make God's will your overriding priority and to possess the heavenly inheritance that is coming to you? [10:37] You claim that you want to be faithful to the old Scriptures you've always known – well, what about Isaiah's 'Not long now, it's just around the corner', or Habakkuk's 'It's no mere vision, it's an actual person who's coming, and even though it seems as if we've been waiting a long time, he's going to arrive right on schedule'? That's all about the Messiah, King Jesus, who is coming back for the second and last time. [10:38] And of course the prophet then gives us the well-known quote about how you can never be wrong to trust God, because that's how you get to live for ever – but, he warns in the same breath, 'There's no going back – here you are on the edge of the Promised Land, and if there are a few giants to conquer, so what? If you chicken out now, you're not going to get any sympathy from me.'

[10:39] We're all in this together. You've joined the company of an extraordinary bunch of people who simply aren't going to quit however bad it gets, because they know the alternative really would mean disaster. The lifeboat's not far from harbour, and we're soon going to feel firm ground under our feet – if we can't actually see the shore because of the mist, that's no reason for thinking it's no longer there. Faith is the name of the game. Stay with me while we look at a few examples of this crazy persistence.

11:1-3 ¹*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.* ²*This is what the ancients were commended for.* ³*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*

Faith logic

[11:1] Faith is the lens through which we see the not-yet-visible. If you've been promised something, and it hasn't happened yet, does that mean it isn't right to expect it? How do we prove that things we can't touch or see actually exist? Answer: we take them on trust. Faith is a hard-and-fast form of logic which is independent of visible evidence; it's a form of knowledge that doesn't need tangible proof. [11:2] The men and women we read about in Scripture weren't complete fools to trust in a God they couldn't see; it was what kept them going and made them the heroes they were. [11:3] Go back to the very first statement in Genesis, and you find that the physical universe came into existence because a God who was already there said something – he gave a command which kick-started matter and guaranteed its orderly development. That must mean that there's a world out there that is just as real as (or even more

real than) the material one, only it isn't physical. So there is an unseen reality about which you can have certainty without needing the confirmation of the senses. The invisible generates the visible. How crazy is that?

11:4-6 ⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Grateful not grumpy

[11:4] Let me show you how the kind of people God loves having around him all show the same characteristic: faith. The story of Abel and Cain is all about this. Just imagine if your parents were responsible for getting the human race kicked out of Paradise. The two brothers were both born outside Eden, but they had a very different attitude to God. Abel reasoned that God hadn't stopped being good even if they'd let him down, so he wanted to show his appreciation by offering him the fattest and best lamb he had in his flock. Cain had concluded that God was a mean old so-and-so, therefore you offer him the minimal gift, which you've sweated to get out of the ground but anyway here is a sheaf of corn which I won't be able to make bread out of. Not unreasonably God made it perfectly clear that he was prepared to accept Abel's gift but not Cain's. He likes grateful people, not grumpy ones. OK, Abel ended up dead, but the story speaks powerfully to us of Christ's own sacrifice, with the twist that it's God offering us the best he has, not the other way round. All we have to do is to say a heartfelt thankyou.

Enoch, God's friend

[11:5] Turn on a page or two to Enoch (not Cain's son, the later one). The odd thing about Enoch is that his family tree is stiff with relatives who live for the best part of a millennium, yet he gets to live for only (only!) 365 years, then mysteriously vanishes. They put on a massive manhunt for him, because they didn't want to lose him so early, but he's nowhere to be found. He hasn't died, he's just moved to be with God. How come? The text we use here says 'God was just so delighted with him that he wanted to have him a lot closer than he could be on earth'. Combine that with the alternative text and you find that Enoch had habitually treated God like a best friend walking by his side. That's what faith is: practising the presence of God so vividly that eternity is just a continuation of earth. That's how it was always meant to be, but disbelief mucked it up.

[11:6] There's a fundamental principle at work here. You can try to earn God's favour till you're blue in the face, but if you're deficient in the faith department, you don't stand a chance. Faith means treating God as someone who's always around, turning to him quite naturally like an old friend, telling him you can't do without him and you just want to follow his will. Nobody actually sees God, it's not a physical friendship, but for the people of faith that's no problem, because they know he's there and that he wants more than anything else to pour out his blessings on them. And they don't let anything on earth stand in the way.

11:7-12 ⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. ⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the

promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Sheer gritty faith

[11:7] Noah next. What made Noah build his ark? Was it because he was a brilliant weather forecaster, or had this obsession with boat-building even though he lived hundreds of miles from the sea? No, it was this precious thing called faith. God spoke to him quite clearly, maybe in a dream or a vision, and he sat up and took notice. (It's for God to make sure we get the message; but it's up to us what we do with it.) Even though there was no observable change in the weather, Noah got on with finishing that ark. Every stage of that complex creation was an act of sheer gritty faith. Then came the storm-flood and he and his family were safe. What happened to the disbelieving world? Inescapable judgment. So – why Noah? The text says he had found favour in God's eyes because he was 'righteous', that is, he didn't go along with the general trend of corruption and violence. But it was taking God's word seriously that really saved him. Maybe it's not enough to be basically good and decent – it's putting your faith into practice, grabbing God's offer with both hands as it were, that really gets you and your company to the dry land of heaven.

Trusting a good God

[11:8] Now for Abraham. He too got a very strange message from God telling him to do something that went counter to all his rational instincts and natural inclinations. He was to leave Ur in Mesopotamia, where his family had always lived, and set off to find a certain location that was God's inheritance gift to him. Now faith isn't blindly obeying the will of an arbitrary dictator, it is trusting a good God to know what he is doing. We want a comfortable life; God wants to bless the world. But where was this place? Abraham had no idea; but he still managed to convince his family, and even his aged father, and off they all went. [11:9] It takes some sheer cussedness to tear up your deeds to the earthly real estate you're expecting to take over and exchange it for – what? A page in a heavenly prospectus with no details or directions, not even an artist's impression to keep you interested? But that's Abraham for you. As we know, he got there and we now call it The Promised Land; but none of it actually belonged to him (apart from his burial place), he had to use tents as his home base, as did the next two generations, Isaac and Jacob and that lot, who were operating on exactly the same set of promises as Abraham's. You really have to hang in there for God's ideas to turn into solid reality!

[11:10] There's plenty to learn from Abraham. He wasn't just after a geographical area where he and his family could settle down, build houses etc. Otherwise wouldn't he have raved at God when he found he was still living under canvas? It's all a metaphor for something much more permanent and on a different scale entirely: the metropolis of heaven itself. You can pull up tent pegs and knock down earthly palaces; but the walls of God's capital city are laid on foundations that go deep down into eternity. The Lord God himself drew up the plans and supervised its construction, and what he builds never comes down, nor do those he calls to be its citizens want to live anywhere else. Abraham had a vision of the city of God, and he kept it firmly in sight. His children are faith-children, and that includes us.

Celestial joke?

[11:11] Abraham's wife Sarah modelled this faith too. Yes, it's true she thought all that stuff about her getting pregnant in her nineties was just a rather strange celestial joke; but when God tells her to take it seriously she does, and sure enough, nine months later, little Isaac turns up, conventional biology notwithstanding. The key thing for her, just as much as for Abraham, was that if God himself says something, then he really means it and it's going to happen when he decides it will. [11:12] Yet we impose limits on God. We tell him the rules (made by him, note) don't permit hundred-year-old males to procreate or females with dysfunctional wombs to carry babies. He calmly takes us out under a clear night sky when the stars are out in their billions, and says 'Count them if you can.' Or he strolls with us

along the seashore and invites us to tell him how many grains of sand there are. 'That's a fraction of the number I'm going to have with me in heaven,' he whispers. No children? Just you wait.

11:13-22 ¹³ *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.* ¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.* ¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* ¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* ¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,* ¹⁸ *even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."* ¹⁹ *Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.* ²⁰ *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.* ²¹ *By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.* ²² *By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.*

Waiting for full delivery

[11:13] And these ancestors of ours died exactly as they had lived, following the way of faith right to the end. All of them had the same epitaph inscribed on their tombstones: 'Still waiting.' Why? Because the full delivery of God's scheme was still out there in the future, it wasn't going to arrive for long centuries. They'd been given just a glimpse of the mighty mountain range before the mists closed in again; but that one sighting was enough, it transformed the focus of their vision and irradiated every detail of their lives. They cheerfully put a sign up over their tents saying, 'We don't belong here – we've just dropped in – we're on our way to somewhere else.' [11:14] They weren't travelling aimlessly, whistling in the dark to keep their spirits up; they had a destination in their faith-sights, they were longing with every cell in their bodies to get to the country they called 'Home'. [11:15] Now this didn't mean they were always dreaming of the old familiar streets and lanes of the place they had originally set out from. If they'd really wanted to go back there, there were plenty of opportunities to do a U-turn, no doubt about that. [11:16] No, you only need to look at these people to realise that they're one hundred per cent committed to reaching somewhere far bigger and better than anywhere on earth – they are citizens of God's heavenly country that lies outside space and time. Is God disappointed with the feebleness of their faith (because there are times when they do wonder what it's all about)? Not a bit! He's absolutely delighted to be known as 'The God of Israel', and he's even called his capital city 'The New Jerusalem', because he has designed it for his special people and he knows they're on the way.

Sacrificing Isaac

[11:17-18] We'll stay with Abraham for one more story, because he's the prototype for these people of faith. He faced the toughest test any father could face. He's now got a son called 'Smiler' Isaac, a healthy growing lad, and every time he sets eyes on him he rhapsodises, 'You're living evidence that God never lets us down.' Then one day there comes one of those unmistakable messages straight from the Most High, 'I know how much you love this son of yours; but do you love him more than me?' 'You're the first and only One,' says the old man unhesitatingly. 'Then give him to me,' says God. 'Certainly, Lord – he's yours – after all, he's your gift to me.' 'No, I mean sacrifice him on a mountain-top. You say you love me best of all – prove it.' There must be some mistake! What about the word he heard so clearly all those years ago, 'Your family line is going to travel directly through your natural-born son,' and to make sure there was no mistake, the name is added, 'Isaac'. So what is going through Abraham's mind, as he makes the agonising decision to go ahead with it, gets the equipment together and so on? What does he think about on that long slow journey to the mountain? [11:19] How can a father be asked to take a knife to his own son? Especially if the hopeful future of the whole human race is concentrated on that single boy? It simply doesn't make sense – unless (and here Abraham's faith makes its supreme, absurd leap into Divine logic) God is going to bring him back from the dead. The question hinges, not on God's ability to do this thing, but what sense there is in it: sacrifice, then resurrection? What is achieved? We

know the story: the intervening angel, the substitute king of the flock, the joyful reunion. What we also know, but they didn't then, is that it points beyond itself to a God who will not intervene in the slaughter of his own Son, but who then presents him alive again, the double act bringing undying blessing to the human race.

A terrible mistake?

[11:20] There are other stories where the whole thing seems like a terrible mistake; for instance the blessing Isaac (now old and blind) gives to Jacob instead of to Esau. Well, he does bless Esau as well, but it's a mockery of the one he should have had. Isn't this merely an example of misplaced faith, or at worst culpable gullibility? Actually, not so: Isaac will never trust his own judgment nor his scheming son Jacob ever again, but he clings desperately to the rock below the shifting sand, that God knows what he is doing and he can redeem this appalling snarl-up to serve his predetermined purpose. For some strange reason, God wants to be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and *Jacob*. He isn't fazed by human duplicity. Maybe he's thinking ahead to a botched trial, false witnesses, a travesty of justice, all other actors in the drama getting it utterly wrong – yet as surely as Jacob gets renamed Israel, so Black Passover becomes Good Friday.

God of the loser

[11:21] You've got to go on believing when God confounds all your natural expectations. When Jacob is near his day of death and is asked to bless his grandsons, he crosses his hands over so that he can give the number two child the number one blessing. So Joseph their father tries to intervene in order to avert another family disaster. Yet Jacob has thought about it all these long years. God is the God of the underprivileged, the loser, the unblest. In his kingdom the last become the first. How to demonstrate to these quarrelsome children of his that human priorities do not constrain God when his saving plan is at stake? There is a symbolic action here that says it all. Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) can't walk properly due to that old injury so he has to support himself on his patriarchal walking-stick; yet he pours out his heart in praise to God (the words aren't recorded). He's led a pretty miserable life, by his own reckoning; yet God has led him to this point, as he promised he would. Losers can become princes – so he wants his own grandchildren never to forget that truth, even at the cost of upsetting traditional conventions.

Temporary hiccup

[11:22] And what about Joseph himself – does he provide any faith stories? Plenty – but there's just one, right at the end of his life, that I want to highlight. Joseph was naturally going to be given an Egyptian burial, because that was where his whole family was now living – yet God had specifically told Abraham that Canaan would be the land his descendants would inherit. He had even given him advance notice of a temporary hiccup in the arrangements, namely a 400-year residence in a different land from which they would need rescuing in due course. So Joseph reckoned God hadn't changed his mind about all this, and he gave his kith and kin stern instructions to pass on through the generations, about his physical remains being taken to the Land of Promise and buried there (which they duly were). If you believe something's going to happen because God says it will, organise the practical side of things accordingly.

11:23-31 ²³ By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. ²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls

of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. ³¹ *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.*

Disregarding official instructions

[11:23] Now for Moses who deserves a really large niche in the Faith pantheon (well, they all do). Let's start with his birth. His parents had faith in spades. Pharaoh (technical name for the Emperor of Egypt) had issued a command for every male child born to an Israelite family to be thrown into the river Nile, which would effectively mean that this troublesome nation would be wiped out in a generation or so. The girls could be kept alive and married off to Egyptians. Moses' parents realised as soon as they saw him that besides being a handsome little fellow, there was something exceptional about him; so they had no hesitation in practising civil disobedience and concealing him for a nail-biting three months – I needn't tell the rest of the well-known story. Have you been given official instructions which you simply can't obey? Trust God to show you the way through, because he's bigger than any Pharaoh or Roman emperor.

Deliberate choice

[11:24-26] So far so good; but when Moses had grown into a sturdy lad, the time came for him to be adopted by Pharaoh's daughter – was he after all to lose his Hebrew identity and succumb to the pagan atmosphere and decadent lifestyle of the royal court? No – when his call came, he turned his back on all that and made the decision to throw in his lot with the despised and oppressed Jehovah followers. It had to be a deliberate choice between the materialistic hedonism of Egyptian culture, which could anyway only be temporary, and the unpopularity and social ostracism associated with being a God-bothering Hebrew. So Moses invested in the future, seeing quite clearly (with the eyes of faith) that the ultimate dividend was infinitely greater than any short-term pay-off. He made exactly the same choice facing any Christian today: do I go along with the swing of the crowd, or take the narrow road with the journeying people of God?

Exodus and Passover

[11:27] So we come to the Exodus. There are two points I want you to notice here. Firstly, the courage it took to emigrate en masse from the land of Goshen. For Moses, trusting God's word meant standing up to the semi-divine authority of Pharaoh (who was also his own adoptive grandfather), who was growing steadily more short-tempered and would undoubtedly visit terrifying vengeance on the apostate when he caught up with him. Courage of this sort isn't a natural attribute of most people. Moses could see with his own eyes the massed ranks and bristling weapons of the formidable Egyptian army, while the horses and chariots of God's host remained out of sight. But the secret of his indomitable attitude was to look behind the visible and tangible world to God's unseen kingdom reality. Fear is not an option when you've got your sights firmly fixed on what is beyond time and space.

[11:28] The second point concerns the supreme significance of what we call the Passover. The instructions Moses gave about the slaying of the lamb and the daubing of its blood on the door-frame of each household have relevance for all believers up to the present day and beyond. Moses' obedience to God's commands in that particular crisis showed faith enough, but it was also highly prophetic, and I'm sure you understand why. God's judgment on persistent defiance of his will was, in the case of Pharaoh's Egypt, local and partial: only (only!) the firstborn were slain by the destroying angel. His final judgment upon mankind is going to be universal and total. In the former case, the lamb's death protected just the eldest Hebrew child; but in our case all these centuries later, the blood of Jesus the Lamb of God avails for the safety of absolutely anyone, Jew, Gentile, Roman, barbarian beyond the pale. Moses perpetuates the vision of Abraham: from among his descendants will come eternal blessing for the whole world.

Three more faith-portraits

[11:29] Just three more panels from our gallery of faith-portraits. Here we have the dry-shod crossing of the Red Sea by the entire host of Israelites, with the Egyptian army perishing as the waters closed around them. This was a collective act of faith in the face of an apparently impossible situation: the hostile army pursuing, the implacable sea blocking their way. Only God could find them a way through, but God did, and all they had to do was to follow where he led. That's still the core attitude of the Christian church faced with overwhelming forces: God will find us a way through, past, over or under the situation. Even if he leads us into the heart of the storm, we're safe in his will.

[11:30] Let's move on to the fall of Jericho. Normally to besiege and capture a powerful city requires formidable armaments and may take many months or even years; yet Jericho fell after seven days, and all the Israelites had to do was to keep marching round it. Here's a lesson for the church's mission: it's not massive resources or special individuals that are going to spread Christ's kingdom, it's faith-walking by the whole people of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

[11:31] Now for the most puzzling story of all: Rahab the loose woman who lived on immoral earnings. Surely she was the last person who should have been let off the hook in the general slaughter of Jericho's inhabitants? But no: the fact that she didn't turn Joshua's agents over to the police, and the reason she gives for that, show God's mercy towards those who throw themselves on his mercy. Whatever your lifestyle is or has been, you can come to Christ just as you are, and he will give you sanctuary among his forgiven people and use you as a living demonstration that faith really works.

11:32-40 ³² *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,* ³³ *who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,* ³⁴ *quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.* ³⁵ *Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.* ³⁶ *Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷ *They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—* ³⁸ *the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.* ³⁹ *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,* ⁴⁰ *since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

The heroes of old

[11:32] I could go on and on, but we're running out of time. In fact time itself would hardly suffice to tell the full stories of people like Gideon with his wet and dry fleeces, or Barak who beat off the mighty Sisera, or Samson and his Spirit-given strength, or Jephthah who stood up to the Ammonites; then we could go on to the shepherd-king David, who despite his flaws had a singleminded devotion to God; or there's Samuel who responded to God's call in the darkness and trusted the Lord rather than his own insight. There are long galleries full of prophets, kings, generals and very ordinary people too – [11:33] and what tales of faith we find here! Let's be inspired by these heroes of old, whatever we're called to face in our own generation.

- Are we up against the might of an empire determined to crush us? Take courage from the faith of David or even someone like Ahab, who took on opponents far stronger than themselves and wrestled them to the ground.
- Do we see corruption and injustice all around us and wonder how we can make any difference? Individuals such as Elijah and the young king Josiah took their stand against the evils of their society and achieved amazing results in their time.

- Do we read the Bible out of a sense of duty or do we really claim its promises as being directly from God? Do we model ourselves on king Hezekiah who, in the face of the Assyrian threat, rested his trust on ‘the mere words’ of the Lord; not to mention the Psalmist who loved God’s ‘well-trying promise’?
- Do we treat the records we find in the book of Daniel as just Sunday-school stories, like God shutting the lions’ mouths or [11:34] his three friends walking around unharmed in the bonfire? If we faced the same things today (as we might even have to), would we be determined to serve Christ no matter what we have to go through? Remember how Elisha faced the threat of being beheaded in the assurance that God was able to turn the situation right around if he so chose?
- Are we feeling weak and under pressure from forces far stronger than ourselves? Let our perspective be corrected by promises such as those in the book of Isaiah, and examples such as Gideon with his inferiority complex or the vacillating king Amaziah. God can turn human frailty into Divine energy; he can demolish huge invading armies, as he did for Jehoshaphat, and sometimes we can just stand there and watch him take total charge of the battle.
- [11:35] With God, death never has the last word – there is always resurrection hope. This may come literally true, as when Elijah and Elisha bring back children from the dead. But suppose it doesn’t? What if standing for Christ in a hate-filled world really does lead to martyrdom, as our Lord warned us it might? Here too the Scriptures provide examples of unwavering faith and determination never to compromise.
- The records closest to home are found in the Maccabean books, for instance the torture and death on the rack of the old Eleazar, and the sufferings of the mother with her seven sons, all for refusing to eat pork. They were offered the chance of release by king Antiochus, but refused, with one of the brothers saying he didn’t mind departing from this present life because God would raise them up to a better one. [11:36] But for someone who endured the shame of being put in the stocks and mocked mercilessly, as well as being beaten and whipped, we need look no further than the prophet Jeremiah (and of course our Lord himself, and his apostles). Chaining and imprisonment were part of the experience too, with people like Joseph or Jeremiah getting locked up or thrown into stinking cisterns, simply for staying faithful to God’s word. [11:37] Stoning to death was a common form of execution, particularly if like Naboth with Ahab you resisted a tyrant’s will. Tradition has it that Jeremiah died in this way in Egypt, while Isaiah the greatest prophet of them all apparently got sawn in half. I’m quoting these examples in case you think that God would never allow this to happen to his children – but that idea simply isn’t scriptural. People like the prophets of Elijah’s day or the later Uriah the prophet were put to the sword like sheep being slaughtered for the next festival. And even if they didn’t actually get put to death, they had to endure outlawry and exile, clad in sheepskins and goatskins (think of the indignity and the smell!), starving and resourceless, maltreated and aching in every limb. [11:38] It seemed as if the world of their day had rejected them, though the opposite was the case – their unbelieving generation was demonstrating its unworthiness in the eyes of God. They were refugees in every sense of the word, with no homes to go back to, condemned to trekking through endless deserts and over barren mountains, finding what shelter they could in caves or holes tunnelled into the hillside.

[11:39-40] You may be asking what kind of a God could allow all this to happen to his beloved people. The only possible answer is that he is wiser than we are, and he’s looking to the long term. There is no quick-fix solution to the problem of human evil. God has singled out these people to be outstanding examples of faith in their day and generation; he has asked them to go through the ultimate in suffering with nothing but his faithful promise to sustain them. He has said all along that there’s a new age coming, a time of blessing like nothing the world’s ever known – so they’ve got to wait in hope. And now it’s arrived! You and I are living at the apex of history, at the very fulfilment of God’s promises in Jesus. Those saints of old were hanging on in naked trust, until the company of Christ’s people should arrive on the scene, and they could go on to perfection along with us. If that

was their attitude, is it too much to ask that we also should endure whatever is thrown at us, until God's purpose comes to its glorious fruition at his chosen time? Isn't that far better than just giving it all up?

12:1-3 *¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Taking God seriously

[12:1] 'So here we are in our own day, which you say is radically different because God's promises of blessing are now being delivered; and yet we're getting just as persecuted and marginalised as all those heroes of faith were. What's new?' If you think this, you've missed the point. If 'blessing' for you means a trouble-free pathway to heavenly glory, then you're dangerously deluded. You're like athletes entering for the next Olympic games who expect they can win all the medals without going through a punishing regime of training or making any personal sacrifice. The point of all these faith portraits I've been giving you isn't so that you can move on from them – it's so that you can carry them around with you like an ever-present reminder of God's reality, much as the Israelites of old were given the pillar of cloud to lead them through the wilderness.

You need to take God seriously, as Abraham and the prophets did. And that means strict personal discipline. Let's pursue the Olympic analogy. Our names are down for a long-distance race and there's keen competition. So how are we going to prepare for it? (Actually we've already started running, but that doesn't affect the point.) We need to develop a lean, muscular body, which involves getting rid of any excess flab. In spiritual terms we're talking about keeping the will of God central to our thinking, speaking and acting. It's so easy to slip into a self-indulgent frame of mind where we allow a 'just this once' mentality to become habitual. The flesh screams out for momentary satisfaction or relief; but if we're going to reach the finishing-line, we need to begin as we mean to go on, and to go on as we mean to end.

The Christian race

[12:2] So far I've merely stated what should be a matter of common sense. Now we are competing in the specifically Christian race, where the goal isn't to cross some line drawn in the sand, it's to end up in the arms of Jesus and hear his 'Well run, faithful soul!' Have we got him in our mind's eye and at our heart's core? Or is our vision distracted by earthly things? In fact this Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for our starting the race of faith in the first place, and he's been the strength in our legs all along; if it wasn't for him, we'd be flat on our faces in the dust. He knows what it takes to stay on track. The only way he could square up to the cross with all its agony and humiliation was to keep his vision fixed on the great glad moment when he meets his Father face to face again, when he walks (maybe a little unsteadily) into the throne-room and is escorted to the seat of honour right next to the King.

[12:3] Pictures and analogies can take us so far, as long we keep Jesus himself firmly at their centre. He understands what it's like to have not only the world against you, but apparently God as well. He knew his opponents (so right in their own eyes) were wrong, wrong, wrong – yet every cynical word, every sneering put-down was like a blow in the ribs. He knows what it's like to feel completely down and out, to have your spiritual knees buckle under you and to wonder whether you can take any more of this. Yet he came out the other side of death – and he'll help you to get back on your feet again. He is not in the business of letting his saints reach total meltdown. It's when we think we've reached rock-bottom that we find our feet are on the Rock.

12:4-11 ⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.' ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

God is tough as nails

[12:4] Now if Scripture teaches us one thing about God, it's that he's not sentimental, he's as tough as nails. The example of those who've gone before us should teach us that sin and evil are formidable adversaries, and if we're to wrestle them down we may get deeply scarred in the process. Has that happened to you yet? Are you prepared for it to happen? [12:5] Let me remind you of those verses you probably had to learn by heart from the book of Proverbs, where God is speaking to people he calls his 'sons' (including of course his 'daughters'). He's not a schoolteacher lecturing his class, he's a Father talking quietly and reasonably to his own children – and that includes us all these years later. Here's what the Holy Spirit, the wellspring of encouragement at our very centre, is saying right now to his church family: 'Please remember that you're my heaven-born children; I'm not tearing into you as if you were just temporary labourers working on the estate – so when I start correcting you and putting you through rigorous training, don't get resentful or cynical, don't conclude that everything's going wrong so you may as well give up. [12:6] It's because I love you and want to bring out the best in you that I'm letting you go through all this stuff. Yes, I know I'm the sovereign Lord who could so easily make everything come painlessly right for you – but I'm also your heavenly Father who needs to deal sternly with you, if you're going to grow into the likeness of my beloved Son – and that's my aim for every single one of you!'

[12:7] Do you see what he's saying? The obstacle course he's putting you through isn't sadistically designed to break you – it's to toughen you up, to make you fighting fit and ready for anything. God isn't a brutal army officer, he's your dad who is treating you exactly the same as all his offspring. Do you want to be the only one who misses out on the hard graft? [12:8] If someone doesn't get put through the regime that's normal for God's true-born family members, perhaps it's because they never were actually his child in the first place (I'm speaking theoretically, of course, because as I've said I know what you've been up against).

Parental discipline

[12:9] Here's another very simple point: look back to your own childhood. Most of us can remember getting disciplined by our parents; we may have resented it at the time, but we respected them for it and subordinated our own inclinations to their superior wisdom. Doesn't that suggest strongly that when our heavenly Father, who looks after our whole lives both here and hereafter, asks us to submit to his special will for us, we do so gladly, knowing that he's leading us on the pathway to Life with a capital L? [12:10] We had only a few years of parental discipline, and I realise some of it may have been intemperate or even bullying, but it was basically meant for our good; can't we trust the Lord of our lives to know what's the very best for us, particularly when the goal he has in view isn't our comfort or convenience, but conformity to the perfect selflessness of his own Son? [12:11] Don't believe those who tell you that your Christian experience should always be joyous and pain-free, because that's rubbish; there may be times when we feel anything but happy about what we're having to go through, even when we know deep down that it's God who's allowing this to happen to us for our character training. But when we get to the other side of it, we'll be able to look back and heave a sigh of relief: it was all

worthwhile, because all the time God was turning us into Olympic athletes, he was equipping us for the life beyond life where everyone is solid gold through and through.

12:12-17 ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. ¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

Highway of holiness

[12:12] Just to continue my athletic analogy a little further, we have a double duty, both to make sure we're fit ourselves and to enable others to grow physically strong. We're not in competition with our Christian brethren – we're all together in the business of glorifying God on earth, as Isaiah reminds us when he's talking about the transformation of this present wilderness into a fantastic new creation. We're on the highway of holiness which leads to the eternal new Jerusalem (I'll be talking about that in a moment), so we need to 'strengthen those limp-wristed arms' (do some spiritual weight-lifting!) and 'firm up those wobbly knees that tend to buckle under us' (do regular workouts on the treadmill of faith). There's an atmosphere of infectious optimism about this heavenly training-ground, because the God who saves is on his way, and fear or discouragement simply aren't on the agenda. [12:13] But let's combine Isaiah's visionary genius with a dose of realism, for instance when the practical book of Proverbs tells us to 'check your appointments diary for the path your feet are going to follow today: are there any slippery sections or loose paving-stones that might trip you up?' Let's keep a pastoral lookout for the less sure-footed among us, who limp along spiritually and may need patient tending if they're going to turn into healthy athletes for Christ.

[12:14] I'm not saying we should go around upsetting everyone with our moral policing, in fact quite the opposite: people are very sensitive, and they respond far better to a quiet, tactful approach. You don't have to compromise your own standards of integrity; in fact you should keep them steadily in view at all times, remembering that the Lord himself has taught us that it's only those whose hearts are transparently single-minded who will be able to feast their eyes upon God's beauty. [12:15] Having said that, we all have a duty of intelligent care towards each other, to make sure each of us is growing into the royal likeness, into the grace-filled person God intends us to be.

Sexual temptation

It will be no surprise to you that I'm talking about sexual temptation. God's covenant intention is to create a people who are holy and dedicated to him alone. Look at the fifth book of the Law, where Moses has been graphically illustrating the blessing of holiness and the curse of idolatry that are always going to confront the people of Israel. The Lord, he says, is like a farmer growing a good, wholesome crop of wheat, who is horrified to discover that a poisonous plant has taken root in its midst, and if he doesn't do something about it the whole harvest-field is going to be infected and corrupted. This will happen, Moses explains, if you follow the fertility gods of the nations round about you with their immoral practices. If you think you're going to be safe because you belong to the covenant people, not only are you dangerously deluded but you're going to lead others astray as well. [12:16] This, my friends, happens when someone starts sleeping around; they may be a man or a woman, they may come from a good Christian family, they may think what they're doing is perfectly acceptable; but they're actually stepping right outside God's will for his people. They're doing exactly what Esau did when he came in from hunting and found his younger twin brother Jacob cooking a goulash for supper: Esau made physical hunger his overriding excuse, and exchanged his precious birthright for a single tasty dish.

[12:17] I expect you remember the tragic sequel to that story, when old Isaac is deceived into giving Jacob the blessing and Esau finds he has lost his whole inheritance without any hope of recovery – he is now worth absolutely nothing. Oh yes, he weeps his heart out and begs his father to bend the rules in his favour, but it's no good: the deed is done and there's no possibility of Isaac going back on his word. Is that the kind of God you want to find yourself dealing with?

12:18-24 ¹⁸ *You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;* ¹⁹ *to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,* ²⁰ *because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.'* ²¹ *The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'* ²² *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,* ²³ *to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,* ²⁴ *to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Two mountains

[12:18-19] 'But (do I hear you objecting) surely the God of the New Covenant is completely different? Why do we have to take any notice of these obsolete stories?' I was hoping you'd ask that! It brings us back to the fundamental point we've been trying to stress all along. God himself is One and unchanging. But there are two mountains presented to us in Scripture, and it matters supremely which mountain we are making our spiritual centre and our place of fellowship with God. As Jewish Christians you will be familiar with Mount Sinai (or Mount Horeb) where people like Moses and Elijah came into direct contact with the Living God and heard his word speaking to them. Sinai is a physical and earthly mountain range, which was associated in the journeying Israelites' experience with vents of blazing fire, impenetrable darkness, thick mist and cloud, furious tempests and ringing trumpet-blasts. From this awesome mountainside there came the very voice of the Lord himself bringing them the Ten Commandments and many other highly relevant precepts. It is recorded that the people were so terrified that they put a considerable distance between themselves and the mountain; they told Moses it was barely tolerable hearing him transmitting the commands in human speech, but please could he not expose them to any more of God's actual voice because that would mean certain death. [12:20] They were scared witless by the notice telling them that anyone who stepped over the rope at the base of the lowest slopes of Sinai would be stoned or shot – and that applied even to any animal which might have wandered innocently into the forbidden area. [12:21] Why do you think that even the great Moses, who was the only living being allowed onto the mountain, was (as he tells us later) shaking and quaking with fear? Was it simply because of the admittedly terrifying natural phenomena? Or was it because he had come into tangible distance of the volcanic displeasure of the Living God who is and always will be totally opposed to human pride, disobedience and self-will in all its ghastly forms? Is that the mountain where you want to end up?

Mount Zion

[12:22] Because there's another mountain, and you're familiar with it, you're already freely roaming its streets and hillsides. Its name is Mount Zion. Sinai may be where the Living Lord God camps out when he's going to war; but Zion is his permanent base, his all-year-round palace, his capital city. Now please be utterly clear that we are not talking about the physical and geographical city of Jerusalem, any more than we were envisaging an actual pilgrimage to present-day Mount Sinai. We're talking in symbolic and representational terms about a heavenly and spiritual reality (which is far more substantial than our earthly realm of the five senses), the New Jerusalem. That's God's home, and ours. It's an incredibly exciting place – I need only refer to the millions of angelic beings of great beauty and power who serve God there – but even more to the point, it's the meeting-place [12:23] and general assembly of all those who have life membership of the kingdom, through being faith-children of God and faith-siblings of Christ. Yes, I'm talking about you and me! Didn't Jesus tell his disciples (not just the Twelve, but the

seventy-two) that this was their supreme cause for joy, the fact that their names were already inscribed in the citizenship rolls of God's heavenly city and kept utterly safe until the time of their unsealing? We will come into the very presence of the Judge of all the earth, to have our lives fairly assessed (how unlike the skewed verdicts of human courts!); and we will join the massed ranks of those white-robed saints who have put their trust in Christ and have run their earthly course to the very end. [12:24] Best of all, we shall find Jesus there and at last meet him face to face. This is the One we came to at our conversion, when we realised that the old covenant of obedience was way beyond our power to keep and that only he could bring us into the presence of God.

In that connection, I can't stop thinking about the story of Cain and Abel. Scripture tells us right from the start that taking another's life would bring equivalent punishment; well, Christ has laid down his own life in order to bear our punishment. Abel's blood soaked into the very earth from which Cain had offered his harvest firstfruits to God; it was an affront to God's sense of justice, it cried out to be avenged, and it resulted in a curse on Cain's work and a life of wandering and exile. That's the old covenant. By contrast (here's grace for you!) the bodily sacrifice of Jesus not only fully meets God's demands for justice and brings forgiveness for a world's sins, but it floods our lives with renewal and blessing. That, my friends, is the new covenant.

So I ask again: where are you going to go to find the Living God? To the old Sinai, or to the new Jerusalem? The choice is yours; indeed, most of you have already made it. Why go back on it now?

12:25-29 ²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' ²⁷ The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our 'God is a consuming fire.'

The need for obedience

[12:25] One more thought, in case any of you think that becoming a Christian removes the need for keeping God's law. God's word hasn't lost its ancient power. Whatever covenant arrangement you opt for still requires obedience. No sooner had Moses been given the Commandments than the people fell into idolatry and sexual immorality, which became the default mode of their subsequent history. They defied God's consistent warnings, brought to them by earthly means (the Sinaitic law and the all-too-human prophets), and they by no means escaped the dire consequences of that disobedience. If you turn your backs on the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God's incarnate Word come to us all the way from heaven, do you imagine you'll get away with it? Won't you in fact be far worse off rejecting God's own Son and his apostolic witnesses? [12:26] The old prophets were conscious that powerful as God's voice was then, making the mountain tremble and shake, that wasn't going to be his last word – there was an even greater shaking to come which would fundamentally change the whole created order, celestial and earthly. So we find the prophet Haggai telling the temple builders that when the Lord God shakes the world, kingdoms fall and thrones collapse; and, says Haggai, this is going to happen once more time. You won't need reminding that this is exactly what the Lord Jesus promised would happen at his final coming. [12:27] The fact that this hasn't happened yet indicates that this 'one more time' is still to come. The created, physical universe isn't going to last for ever. God is going to clear it all away like yesterday's rubbish, so that what is really going to last for ever is the only thing left standing. [12:28] What is this? It's Christ's kingdom, that will never be destroyed, and this is the kingdom of which you have been invited to take up free membership.

So let's be grateful for grace! We're not serving a tyrant who is on the lookout for whatever he can punish us for – this Lord is our Friend whom we simply want to please because he's done so much for us. But let's not lose sight of how great, how awe-inspiring, how utterly pure and holy is the One we call our God. [12:29] Anything sinful or immoral instantly shrivels in his presence. Never forget those sobering words of Moses, who knew God better than most of us: if you step aside from the covenant and set up other gods for yourselves, he says, 'You will come up against God's goodness in a very different form, and you will be walking into a wall of flame.' It will be like spending eternity on the slopes of a red-hot volcano – and which of us would be insane enough to choose that future for ourselves?

13:1-8 ¹ *Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.* ² *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.* ³ *Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.* ⁴ *Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.* ⁵ *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'* ⁶ *So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'* ⁷ *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.* ⁸ *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.*

Love for one another

[13:1] So what does all this imply for our lives as Christian believers? Basically, the old selfish, individualistic attitude has got to go. You are the body of Christ: just as the members of our physical bodies work together, so your love for one another must be the abiding principle in your relationships. No in-fighting! [13:2] But this doesn't mean that you retreat into a ghetto; keep your doors open, not just for each other but for people you've never met before. I can't help thinking of that lovely story in Genesis where Abraham and Sarah find three strangers standing at their tent door, so they offer them water for their feet, and rest in the shade of their great oak tree, and a good hearty meal – totally unaware that they are angelic representatives of the Almighty, or even a visitation from the threefold Lord himself. Then Lot gives them the same open-handed welcome. You never know who might be knocking at your door! [13:3] The secret is to put yourself in the other person's shoes. It is highly likely that some members of your fellowship have found themselves imprisoned for their stand for Christ – or soon will be – so you must imagine yourselves into their situation and think what it would be like if the same thing were happening to you. By the same token, everyone knows people who are going through a really tough time, so rather than assuming that God is angry with them or something, you should be entering into their distress and getting physically and practically involved in their relief. [13:4] Not too involved, mind – I've known cases where getting close to a family in distress (e.g. when the man of the household has been thrown into jail) has led to liaisons with the 'abandoned' wife. Christians should be known for their unswerving adherence to the sanctity of the marriage bond in any and every set of circumstances; there's to be no sex except in the context of married love, and that's flat. 'Oh, everybody does it so why shouldn't I?' Maybe they do, maybe they don't – but everybody who does it, whether the relationship is non-marital or blatantly adulterous, will have to answer to God for it. And I've been trying to tell you what that experience is like.

Committed membership

[13:5] We're thinking through what it means to be committed members of Christ's kingdom. One interesting thing about Christians tends to be that money doesn't stick to their fingers. Yes, they're sensible about their finances, but they don't make an idol of wealth because they know how temporary it is. They are content whatever their circumstances, and there's a precious secret here which runs all the way through Scripture. Whether it's Jacob on the run, spending his first night away from home, or the children of Israel losing their venerable leader Moses, or the untried young general Joshua about to

launch the invasion of Canaan, God himself sends them a short text in almost identical words: 'Don't even begin to think that I will ever desert you or leave you in the lurch – I'll always be there for you.' [13:6] That is a wonderful encouragement (meaning it gives you courage on the inside) to look right through the circumstances of the present moment to the One who doesn't go away. Our response can be that of the Psalmist (probably a Davidic king) who found himself completely cut off by opponents intent on his life: 'I may feel slightly anxious, but I'm not going to be scared witless, and I'll tell you the reason: whatever human allies I may or may not have, the Almighty Helper is closer to me than anyone else – mortal enemies can do their worst, but I'm going to hang in there and trust him with my last breath.'

Taking our leaders for granted

[13:7] While we're on the subject of leaders, don't take your own church elders for granted. They need prayer as much as anyone, if not more so. They've been ministering the word of God to you right from the start, and that requires special wisdom, as well as lots of time and effort. Just keep your eyes on the lifestyle example they're passing on to you. You can't do better than model yourselves on their faith and commitment.

[13:8] And that faith is centred four-square on Jesus Christ. He deals with our past, our present and our future. He is consistent and unchanging, the God who has always been there and always will be. Do we want to be faithful to our Jewish past? Jesus is there, all Scripture reveals him, he fulfils the Law and the Prophets. Are we haunted by our moral past? He has died for sin once and for all; full forgiveness is ours through the cross. Do we need strength and comfort for today's tasks and burdens? Jesus walks with us, his Spirit is in us, encouraging, leading, empowering. What does the future hold? Will death have the last word? Are we really going on for ever? Jesus has conquered death and drawn its sting; he is our inheritance and our hope; he is coming back for us, to take us on into a full experience of his own glorious and unimaginable Life. We may tremble, but we can never be afraid, because Jesus is Lord.

13:9-16 ⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Old system replaced

[13:9] Of course, there are all kinds of weird and wonderful ideas doing the rounds: metaphysical speculations, self-help systems, esoteric cults, you can try them all and end up thoroughly confused and a hundred miles from Christ. If only there was something solid and sensible to cling to! Well, there is, and it can be summed up in one word: grace. The story of God's unconditional love and renewing power, how he has given us Christ on the cross and the Spirit in our hearts, is so much more satisfying than a taboo-ridden regime of ritual foods. Are the abstinence brigade living purer and holier lives as a result of all their rules and regulations? Don't be fooled!

[13:10] Then there are those who tell you that lay people like you have no right to approach the Most High, and only the trained priesthood can offer the correct sacrifices to allow them into God's presence. What they don't realise is that, as I've been arguing for page after page, the old system has been replaced. Our altar is the cross, where Jesus made the supreme sacrifice on our behalf; our table is the common meal where the Lord himself joins us to break the bread and bless the cup. It's they who

exclude themselves from the Holy of Holies because they won't acknowledge God's appointed High Priest. [13:11] If only they could see where the old sacrificial system was pointing all the time! Why, for instance, is the point made again and again that, when an animal has been slaughtered so that the high priest can take its blood into the Holiest Place of all to atone for sin, its remains must be carried right outside the boundaries of the Israelites' camp and reduced to ashes? Why 'right outside'? Is that just for hygienic reasons? [13:12] Watch Jesus as he staggers painfully along the streets of Jerusalem, and passes through the gates on his one-way journey to crucifixion – what is this all about? It's to give his own lifeblood for the great Purification, the ultimate Atonement for the sins of all people everywhere. And where does this happen? On the rubbish-heap called Golgotha outside the city wall. [13:13] Like Master, like disciple. He had to pass through jeering crowds and endure the worst humiliation possible, for our sakes. Shall we in our turn, when the call comes to follow him 'outside the camp,' outside the comfortable norms of our society and its religious traditions, not have the courage to join him in the shadow of the cross, and lose every shred of our reputation for his sake?

Unquenchable longing

[13:14] It all seems so solid and reliable, this present 'city' we inhabit – we are so familiar with all its little features, all the people who pass up and down its streets – and yet how flimsy and ephemeral it really is! Because we belong heart and soul to Jesus Christ, we find in ourselves an unquenchable longing for the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city which one day soon will be the only reality we know. [13:15] As for bringing a sacrifice to God, there are no further sin-offerings to make, because Christ has won our full forgiveness for us – so let's instead bring a full-throated 'sacrifice of praise', not just on special holy days, and not just when everything's going well (if it ever is!). Thanking God for being who he is and for being there. I'm thinking of the prophet Hosea's plea to Israel to speak words of contrition to the God whose name they had dishonoured; or of Job who opened his cracked lips to acknowledge God's right to send misfortune as well as good fortune, when he could so easily have cursed him. These are examples of real heart-sacrifice, which just offering a few bulls so often isn't.

[13:16] I'm not saying it's the only sacrifice we need ever make; for instance, proactively seeking to relieve another's need, or being open-handed with our time, resources or home, are equally ways of warming God's heart. Remember how the Lord Jesus spent his whole life doing that kind of thing? 'How can I thank you enough, Lord? Who can I help today for your sake? How much can I give you back for all you've given to me?' So different from our usual religious lip-service!

13:17-19 ¹⁷ *Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.* ¹⁸ *Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way.* ¹⁹ *I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.*

Supporting leaders

[13:17] I was talking about your church leaders a few moments ago and saying how you ought to be praying for them and so on. I also want to insist that you cooperate with them and give them the benefit of the doubt when it comes to differences of opinion or disagreements on practical matters. They are very likely getting up early in the morning or even praying well into the night, just as our Lord did, because they are carrying a big burden of responsibility for you all; it's no light matter that the Master is going to ask them some hard questions about how faithfully they cared for their flock. It should be a source of joy and pride to them that you are all pulling together and supporting them rather than bickering and rocking the boat; it's no fun to have a grim-faced captain and a mutinous crew, and it usually means that the ship is starting to be at the mercy of the winds and the waves. [13:18] And while

we're on that subject, I'd be grateful if you would keep sending up a few prayers for our little team of apostolic workers; we don't think we are doing anything particularly wrong at the moment, but we can always lose the way amid the complexities of our mission, and we want to keep channels open for God and model the example of Christ, both in the church and in the world. [13:19] Also, without going into detail, I need particular help at the moment so that a few tiresome obstacles can be removed and I can come back to be with you as soon as possible.

13:20-21 ²⁰ *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,* ²¹ *equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Praying for you

[13:20] Naturally I've been praying for you. It goes something like this. 'O God, you give the kind of peace that puts all our troubles into proportion. Nothing is impossible for you – you worked the ultimate miracle when you raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. During his life on earth he was the good and great Shepherd who lost none of his sheep, but laid down his life for them and sealed your covenant promise of everlasting life. [13:21] I bring before you these brothers and sisters who are finding the way of faith so hard. I ask you to make them strong and confident in the Spirit, full of practical love and putting you first in all their decision-making. But, O God, however much effort they're making to please you in their daily lives, they can't achieve anything without the intercession of the Lord Jesus and the continual supply of the Holy Spirit; so please keep that ministry going at full power. Let's all exalt and praise his name now, because that's what we're going to be doing in the eternities ahead. Lord, you can make this happen! End of prayer.'

13:22-25 ²² *Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.* ²³ *I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.* ²⁴ *Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.* ²⁵ *Grace be with you all.*

Almost finished!

[13:22] Well, dear friends, I've almost finished, you may be relieved to hear. I know I've been going on at you a bit, but I hope you'll take it all in good part. There was quite a lot more in the same vein, but I decided to spare you and send the abbreviated version. [13:23] You've probably heard by now that they've released our brother Timothy. My plans are to wait for him here – he'll need a bit of time to recover, but I hope he'll turn up sooner rather than later – then to travel in his company and come and see you. I'm not signing this letter in the interests of security – my courier will confirm who I am! [13:24] A final wave of the hand to all those hard-working elders of yours, and of course to everyone who follows Christ. The Italian contingent send their greetings.

[13:25] Don't ever think God doesn't love you. There are no exceptions. His grace is there for absolutely everyone. That means you!

CROSS REFERENCES

Hebrews is richer in reference and allusion to OT passages than any other book of the New Testament. Almost without exception the writer uses, or has in mind, the Greek Septuagint version (LXX). Our Old Testaments, however, are translations of the Hebrew Masoretic Text. Sometimes the LXX departs quite radically from the MT, so which version is the more inspired? We can shortcircuit what is a matter of highly skilled and detailed scholarship by accepting that the NT writers are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the use they make of both versions (as well as a number of others). If we didn't have that assurance, we would be trapped in a morass of competing interpretations. In their illuminating Preface and Introduction to the *Commentary on the New Testament*

Use of the Old Testament, Beale and Carson say: 'The writers of the NT books saw themselves ... as those who stood under the authority of those OT documents even as they promulgated fresh interpretations of those documents.' This applies vitally to the (as yet unidentified) author of Hebrews, as he seeks to educate his (largely Jewish) readers in the witness of the Old Testament to Jesus Christ. It is an intricate tapestry he is weaving and I'm likely to have got some of the threads in the wrong place, as well as introducing a lot of embroidery of my own. In particular, there are references and allusions to books of the OT Apocrypha, and probably to extra-biblical and rabbinical sources, that need a good commentary like Bruce or Moo to elucidate (I've introduced a few examples of these in ch 11). Art is long, but life is short. Underlined: direct quotation. *Asterisked: probable verbal allusion. LXX is referred to when the version chosen is markedly different from the MT.

1:1-4 *Moses and Samuel* Jer 15:1. *Unremembered by name* 2 Chr 25:7, 15. *Recognise the Divine call* 2 Chr 36:15-16. *Hapless forefathers* Acts 28:23-27. *Firm and irrevocable* *Ps 2:8. *Vineyard for ourselves* Mk 12:7. *Share the inheritance with him* Rom 8:17. *Independently of him* Jn 1:3. *Universe to happen* Gen 1:3. *Tell him to get lost* Jn 1:10. *Seeing the Father himself* Jn 14:9. *Depends for its coherence* Col 1:17. *Fit for purpose* Gen 1:31. *Position at the centre* *Ps 110:1. *Thinking about that too* Heb 1:13 and elsewhere. *Stairway to God* Gen 28:12, Jn 1:51.

1:5-14 *Everything that exists* Heb 1:2. *Something even greater* Ezek 28:14, Phil 2:6. *'Today' of my eternal love* Ps 2:7. *Nathan's oracle to Solomon* 2 Sam 7:14. *Someone far greater* Matt 12:42. *It does happen* Lk 1:32-35. *Atonement for his people* Dt 32:43, LXX and MT. *First-born son* Lk 2:7. *Destined world Saviour* Matt 1:21. *As he has always been* Matt 1:25, Jn 3:16, Col 1:15. *New chorus of praise* Lk 2:13-14. *Spirit beings in the Psalms* Ps 104:4 LXX. *How well they do it* Ps 103:20-21. *Another Psalm* Ps 45:6-7. *His own Anointed One* Ps 2:2. *Source of joy* Lk 10:21. *Walks with his friends on earth* Heb 2:14, 3:14. *One of the later Psalms* Ps 102:16, 18. *In all his Messianic glory* Jn 1:14. *The Lord himself* Exod 33:2-3, 15. *Looked on and cheered* Job 38:4-7. *New imperishable creation* 1 Cor 15:51. *God Who Keeps Arriving* Exod 3:14. *Kick-started creation* Heb 1:2. *Unconditional surrender* Ps 110:1. *Opening paragraph* Heb 1:3. *Was there first* Ps 110:3 LXX.

2:1-4 *Heading for the precipice* Prov 3:21. *Angels had a part in* Acts 7:38, 53, Gal 3:19. *There'll be disaster* Dt 11:26-28. *High Road to the eternal Zion* Isa 35:8-10. *Mouth of the Lord himself* Jn 3:11. *Reliably and faithfully* Lk 1:1-4. *Evidence of his reality* 1 Th 1:5. *Signs of his power* Acts 2:2-4. *Dramatically healed* Acts 3:7-8, 5:15-16. *Gloriously converted* Acts 9. *Conveyed by the Holy Spirit* Acts 11:28, 13:9ff. *God decided he wanted to work* 1 Cor 12:11.

2:5-9 *Angelic messengers* Acts 5:4. *Rulership of the world to them* Lk 4:6, Eph 6:12. *Another of those famous Psalms* Ps 8. *Share your Divine status* Gen 1:26-27. *Rightful control* Ps 8:4-6. *The Son of Man* Dan 7:13. *Rapturous welcome* Ps 24:7. *Simply cannot die* 1 Tim 6:15-16.

2:10-13 *A lot in what follows* Heb 3:1, 7:26, 9:3, 8, 12, 13, 24, 25, 10:19, 12:10, 14, 13:24. *Personally make sure this happens* Jn 17:17, 19. *Psalm of the God-forsaken Man* Ps 22. *Piercing* Ps 22:16. *Our incomparable King* Ps 22:22. *Immanuel* Isa 7:14, 8:8, 10. *Then you can too* Isa 8:17. *At your disposal* Isa 6:8. *Children you've given me* Isa 8:18. *Run in their bloodstream* Rom 4:16, 9:8. *New heavenly humanity* Jn 1:12.

2:14-15 *Same as all of us* Phil 2:7. *Already pointed out* Heb 2:9. *Prince of this world* Jn 12:31, Eph 2:2. *Gloriously free* Jn 8:36. *No longer afraid of death* Rom 8:38-39, 2 Tim 1:10. *No longer slaves to the tyranny of sin* Rom 6:14.

2:16-18 *Faith-children* Gal 3:7-9. *Fragile condition* Ps 103:8-14. *A little later* Heb 4:14ff.

3:1-6 *Aaron and Miriam* Num 12:1ff. *Asked him to do for me* Num 12:7. *Had to have a Maker* Heb 11:3. *All that exists* Heb 1:2 and refs. *Listening to his own Son* Mk 1:11, 9:7. *Heads held high* Lev 26:13. *Utterly secure* Rom 5:2. *Abandon our confidence* Heb 4:16, 10:19.

3:7-14 *Check it out for relevance* Ps 95:8-11. *Hadn't had water* *Exod 17:2,7. *Land of peace and prosperity* *Num 14:22-23. *Exactly the same place* 1 Cor 10:1-12. *Great I AM* Exod 3:14. *Meeting with your fellow-saints* Heb 10:24-25. *Marshes of doubt* Lk 8:13-14.

3:15-19 *Ancient scriptures* Ps 95:7-8. *After their long journeying* Dt 12:10, Ps 95:11. *Big enough to deliver his promise* Num 14:11, Ps 106:24.

4:1-5 *Till you're blue in the face* Num 14:2. *Miraculous things* Mt 7:21-23. *Truth of God's promise* Num 14:9. *Last day of the week a holiday* Gen 2:2. *Let in through the gates* Ps 95:11.

4:6-10 *Choose to lead them* Ps 106:24. *Here it is one more time* Ps 95:7-8. *Put in place* *Gen 2:2. *Still working flat out* Jn 5:17. *Rescuing to be done* 2 Cor 6:2.

4:11-13 *Resurrection glory* Phil 2:8-14. *Any more work to do* Rev 14:12-13. *Immune to losing their faith* Rom 11:20, 1 Cor 10:12. *Returning to full health* Lk 5:31-32. *Hide ourselves from him* Jer 23:24.

4:14-16 *Jesus as our High Priest* Heb 2:17, 3:11. *Felt it himself* Heb 2:18.

5:1-6 As I've already said Heb 4:15. Offered up himself Heb 7:27, 9:14. True with Aaron Exod 28:1. Family after him 1 Chr 23:13. Quoted already Heb 1:5. Today and for ever Ps 2:7, Heb 13:8. From Melchisedek Ps 110:4, *Gen 14:18-20. In a moment Heb 5:10.

5:7-10 Violent distress and anguish Ps 116:1-2. Deceptiveness of human nature Ps 116:11. Pit of Sheol Ps 116:3. Mount of Olives Lk 22:39-44. Listening to his requests Ps 22:24, Jn 11:41-42. Fully and completely Jn 8:29, Rom 15:3. Uttermost of suffering Phil 2:8. God's presence and love Mt 27:46. Last breath Lk 23:46. Dead and now risen Isa 53:10-12. My Lord Ps 110:1.

5:11-14 Mother's milk 1 Cor 3:2. Spiritual grown-ups Eph 4:13-14.

6:1-8 Borne along 2 Pet 1:21. What sin is Isa 53:6. How it kills your soul Eph 2:1. Alter course immediately Mk 1:15. Know and trust Jn 14:6. On the cross Rom 3:23-25. What faith means in practice Rom 10:9. Commitment to Christ as Lord 1 Cor 12:3. New birth in the Spirit Jn 3:5. Laying-on of hands 2 Tim 1:6. Diverse ministries 1 Cor 12:4-7. The first-fruits 1 Cor 15:20. Conquest of death 1 Cor 15:23-26. Day of Assessment 2 Cor 5:10. Inscribed for all eternity Rev 20:11ff. Christ in their hearts 2 Cor 4:6. By their own merits Eph 2:8. Power of human oratory Eph 2:8, 1 Th 1:5. Direct from heaven Jas 1:17-18. Forcing you to your knees Acts 9:4. Point of realisation Lk 15:17. It did happen Jas 5:19-20. Total miracle Mk 10:27. Failure to save himself Mk 15:31. Divine curse Gen 3:18. Completely ablaze Dt 29:23.

6:9-12 Trials of faith 1 Pet 5:9.

6:13-20 Rock-solid in itself Ps 33:11. By MYSELF Exod 3:14. I'm going to give you Gen 22:16-17. Apprehensive followers Gen 22:19. On his undertaking Num 23:19. Coronation Psalm Ps 110. Referred to already Heb 5:6. Time and eternity Ps 110:4.

7:1-10 Abraham in Genesis Gen 14. Melchisedek turns up Gen 14:17-20. Anything else Num 24:16, Deut 32:8. Son of God himself Col 1:18. Prince of Peace Isa 9:6. Harvest-time Deut 14:22. Commanded the Levites Num 18:21, 26. As we've seen Heb 6:13-15. Father blessing his sons Gen 48:9ff. His future descendants Rom 5:12.

7:11-19 Ps 110:4. Priest for ever Ps 110:1,4. Judah Gen 49:10, Mic 5:2, Mt 2:6. What tribe he came from Mt 1:1-16, Lk 2:4. Jesus fulfils the Law Mt 5:17. No earthly genealogy Heb 7:3. Forward into eternity Ps 110:4.

7:20-28 Only priest around Ps 110:4. More anon Heb 8:7ff. Overcomer of death Rev 1:18. No questions asked Jn 6:37, 1 Tim 2:5. Impeccable Jn 8:46. Never did 1 Pet 2:22, 1 Jn 3:5. Pharisees or tax-collectors Lk 7:36, Mt 9:10. Associate in crime Lk 5:31-32. Above heavenly hierarchies Eph 4:10. Annals of eternity Phil 2:9. Pointed out earlier Heb 5:2-3. Own shortcomings as well Lev 9:7. Day of Atonement *Lev 16:6. His own body Isa 53:10-12. Never has to repeat it Heb 9:12. Divine Oath *Ps 110:4. Messiah-Son himself *Ps 2:7, Heb 5:5-6. Comprehensively demonstrated Heb 5:8-9.

8:1-6 Old prophecy Heb 1:13. Right-hand man Heb 1:3. Own High Priest Heb 2:17. Own tent Lev 26:11. Fills heaven and earth Jer 23:24. Something like that Jn 1:14, Heb 2:9. Day of Atonement Lev 16. Next chapter Heb 9:11-14. Plenty of people available Acts 6:7. Up the mountain Exod 25:40. I told you Heb 7:22.

8:7-13 Best-known passages Jer 31. Everlasting love Jer 31:3. Huge ransom Jer 31:11. Going to be well Jer 31:25. Turned their back on him Jer 31:18; Isa 53:6. Cliff edge Jer 31:30. Other lovers Hos 2:5. Any longer 2 Ki 23:27. Whole creation thing Exod 29:45, Rev 21:3. Spirit of wisdom Isa 11:2. Come To The Party Lk 15:22-23. I love you all Jn 3:16.

9:1-10 Lamp-holder Exod 25:31-39. Incense table Lev 16:12-13. Ark of the Covenant Exod 25:10-16. Manna Exod 16:32-33. Apostasy Num 17:8-10. Ten Words from God Exod 25:16, 40:20. Seen them for centuries Jer 3:16; NB the relief on the Arch of Titus in Rome does not depict the Ark. Seat of Mercy Exod 37:5-9. Sprinkling of blood Lev 16:14. Two male lambs Num 28:3-8. Once every year Exod 30:10. Has to die Gen 2:17, Lev 17:11. Same table Ps 5:4, Hab 1:13, Rev 3:20.

9:11-14 Eternity itself Isa 57:15. The old system Lev 16. Dead heifer Num 19:2. That indwelt him Jn 3:34, 8:29. Sin and evil 1 Jn 1:7. Dared to look there Mk 7:21-23.

9:15-22 Jeremiah Jer 31:31. Inheritance Heb 6:17. Book of Exodus Exod 24:3-8. Other scriptures Lev 14:4-6. Hyssop Ps 51:7. First and Last Meal Mk 14:24. Covenant affirmation Exod 24:8. Life laid down *Lev 17:11. From the start Gen 2:17. Life for life Lev 16:6-10, Rom 3:25.

9:23-28 Among his people Lev 26:11-12. Muddy feet Isa 1:12. Trying to demonstrate Heb 9:11. Labouring the obvious Heb 9:12. Single offering Heb 10:14. Taken upon himself Isa 53:12. We're going home Phil 3:20. Which it isn't Heb 11:13.

10:1-10 Still going on Heb 10:11. For much longer Mk 13:2. Psalms of David Ps 40:6-8. Universe he created Heb 1:2. Clear in your Word 1 Sam 15:22, Amos 5:21-24, Mic 6:6-7. Yes! 2 Cor 1:20. Something about myself Isa 50:4-6. Another way of doing it Ps 40:6. Carried out perfectly Ps 40:7-8. Horns of the altar Ps 118:27.

10:11-18 Melchisedek Psalm Ps 110:1, Heb 1:3. Jesus is Lord Phil 2:11. Signed, sealed and delivered Ps 22:31, Jn 19:30. Quoting from Jeremiah Jer 31:33, Heb 8:8-13. Natural to you Ezek 36:26-27. Have been dropped Col 2:14. Sin-bearing Isa 53:11.

10:19-25 Said earlier Heb 3:6. Audience-chamber Eph 3:12. Gave his life Rom 8:32-34. Spoken through his Son Heb 1:2. Rock-solid Num 23:19. Assurance in yourself Song 1:8. Cost you your lives see Tacitus Annals 15:44. Morning is getting closer Ps 30:5. Day is going to dawn Hos 6:3. Night won't last for ever Isa 21:11-12.

10:26-31 And the Life Jn 14:6. Sorted out 1 Jn 1:9. Days of Moses Lev 10:2, Num 11:1. Fire coming out Num 16:35. Single witness Deut 17:2-7. Only beloved Son Ps 2:7. Precious relationship Jn 6:66-68. Blood shed for you Mk 14:24. Eternal inheritance Eph 1:14. Who oppose him Deut 32:35. Very next verse Deut 32:36. Covenant people Ps 50:4. In all his fury Isa 33:14.

10:32-39 Grinning from ear to ear Jas 1:2. Heavenly inheritance 1 Pet 1:4. Just around the corner Isa 26:20. Waiting a long time Lk 18:8. Right on schedule Hab 2:3. Well-known quote Rom 1:16, Gal 3:11. Live for ever Hab 2:4. Giants to conquer Deut 1:17, 29. Firm ground under our feet 2 Th 2:14.

11:1-3 Statement in Genesis *Gen 1:1-3. Already there Jn 1:1. Orderly development Ps 33:6, 9.

11:4-6 Abel and Cain *Gen 4:1ff. Sweated Gen 3:19. Not Cain's son Gen 4:17. The later one Gen 5:18. Than he could be on earth Gen 5:24 LXX. Alternative text *Gen 5:24 MT. Follow his will Col 1:10. Stand in the way Phil 3:13-14.

11:7-12 Noah *Gen 6:8ff. Corruption and violence Gen 6:5, 8-9, 7:1. Abraham *Gen 11:27ff. Leave Ur *Gen 12:1-4.

Mesopotamia Acts 7:2-3. Includes us Gal 3:7. Celestial joke Gen 18:9-15. Carry babies Rom 4:19. Count them *Gen 15:5. Grains of sand *Gen 22:17, Rev 7:9.

11:13-22 God of Israel Ps 68:32-35. One more story *Gen 22:1-10. Isaac Gen 21:12, Rom 9:7-8. Back from the dead Gen 22:5. Blessing to the human race Jn 8:56. Jacob ... Esau *Gen 27:27-40. Number one blessing *Gen 48:8-20. Old injury Gen 32:31. Praise to God Gen 47:31 LXX. Miserable life Gen 47:6. Promised he would Gen 28:15. Egyptian burial *Gen 50:22. Canaan would be the land Gen 13:15. Rescuing in due course Gen 15:13-14. Which they duly were Exod 13:19, Josh 24:32.

11:23-31 River Nile *Exod 1:22. Pharaoh's daughter *Exod 2:10. Turned his back on all that Phil 3:7-8. Narrow road Mt 7:13-14. Caught up with him *Exod 10:28. Remained out of sight 2 Ki 6:16-17. Unseen kingdom reality 2 Cor 4:18.

Instructions Moses gave *Exod 12:21-30. Lamb of God Jn 1:29. Blessing for the whole world Gal 3:8-9, 1 Jn 2:2. Waters closed around them *Exod 14:21-30. Holy Spirit Zech 4:6. Rahab *Josh 6:25. The reason she gives for that Josh 2:8-13. On his mercy Lk 15:20, 18:13. Faith really work Jas 2:25.

11:32-40 Wet and dry fleeces Judg 6:36. Mighty Sisera Judg 4:14. Samson Judg 14:6. Jephthah Judg 11:24. Devotion to God 1 Ki 15:5. In the darkness 1 Sam 3:1. His own insight 1 Sam 8:6, 15:11, Prov 3:5. Faith of David 1 Sam 17:45-47. Ahab 1 Ki 20:26-30. Elijah 1 Ki 18:36. Josiah 2 Ki 23:24-25. The mere words Isa 36:4-5. Well-tried promise Ps 119:140. Lions' mouths *Dan 6:22. In the bonfire *Dan 3:25. Have to go through Isa 43:2. Beheaded 2 Ki 6:31-7:1. Book of Isaiah Isa 40:29-31. Inferiority complex Judg 7:21. Amaziah 2 Chr 25:8. Charge of the battle 2 Chr 20. Back from the dead 1 Ki 17:22, 2 Ki 4:35. Suppose it doesn't Dan 3:17-18. Lord warned us Jn 16:2. Old Eleazar 2 Macc 6:18-31. Mother with her seven sons 2 Macc 7. To a better one *2 Macc 7:9. Mocked mercilessly Jer 20:2, 7. Our Lord himself Mk 15:15. His apostles Acts 16:24. Joseph Gen 39:20. Stinking cisterns Jer 37:15, 38:6. Resisted a tyrant's will 1 Ki 21:13. Sawn in half Ascension of Isaiah 5:13. Prophets of Elijah's day 1 Ki 19:10. Uriah the prophet Jer 26:23. Sheep being slaughtered Ps 44:22. Outlawry and exile 1 Macc 2:29. Aching in every limb Dan 11:33. In the eyes of God Mt 12:41-42. In caves 1 Ki 19:9. Into the hillside Judg 6:2, 1 Macc 2:29-31. We also should endure Rev 2:10. Chosen time Heb 11:13, 35; 1 Pet 1:12.

12:1-3 Through the wilderness Neh 9:19. Prophets did Jas 5:10. Excess flab 1 Cor 9:24-27. Face to face again Jn 17:5. Next to the King *Ps 110:1. He understands Jas 5:11. God as well Mk 15:34. Any more of this Ps 22:14. On your feet again Mic 5:8. Total meltdown 2 Cor 4:9. On the Rock 2 Cor 12:9.

12:4-11 Wrestle them down Eph 6:12-13. Deeply scarred Gal 6:17. Well-spring of encouragement Jn 7:38-39, 14:16. Heaven-born children Jn 3:3-7. Every single one of you Prov 3:11-12. Toughen you up 2 Tim 2:3. As I've said Heb 10:32-33. Conformity Rom 8:16-17, 28-30. Go through 2 Cor 1:8-9. Character training Rom 5:3-4. Solid gold Jas 1:2-3; 1 Pet 1:7.

12:12-17 Isaiah reminds us Isa 35:1-2. Highway of holiness Isa 35:8. New Jerusalem Isa 35:10. In a moment Heb 12:22. Wobbly knees Isa 35:3. Aren't on the agenda Isa 35:4. Might trip you up Prov 4:26-27. Quite the opposite 1 Th 4:11. Has taught us Mt 5:8. God's beauty Isa 33:17, Rev 22:4. Intends us to be Prov 4:9. Limp along spiritually *Isa 35:6. Dedicated to him alone Dt 29:12-13; 1 Th 4:3-7. People of Israel Dt 27:9ff. Poisonous plant Dt 29:18. Lead others astray Dt 29:19. Good Christian family Lev 21:9. Goulash for supper *Gen 25:29-34. Tragic sequel *Gen 27:34-35.

12:18-24 Moses and Elijah Exod 19:1ff; 1 Ki 19:8ff. Certain death *Exod 20:18-19. Forbidden area Exod 19:12-13. Tells us later *Deut 9:19. Mount Zion Ps 48:2; Rev 14:1. Physical and geographical Jn 4:21. Representational terms Gal 4:24-26. New Jerusalem Rev 3:12, 21:2. Angelic beings Deut 33:2, Jude 14. Faith-children of God Jer 31:9, Jn 1:12-13. Faith-siblings

*of Christ Rom 8:29. The seventy-two Lk 10:20. Kept utterly safe 1 Pet 1:4. Unsealing Dan 12:1-4. Judge of all the earth Gen 18:25. White-robed saints Rev 7:13-14. Meet him face to face 1 Jn 3:2. At our conversion Matt 11:28. Presence of God Heb 7:19, 25. Cain and Abel Gen 4:1-16. Equivalent punishment Gen 9:6. To bear our punishment Isa 53:5, 8. Cried out to be avenged *Gen 4:10. Wandering and exile Gen 4:11-12. World's sins Mk 10:45. Renewal and blessing 1 Pet 2:24. New covenant Matt 26:28. Living God Ps 42:2. Already made it Heb 6:9.*

12:25-29 *Sexual immorality *Gen 32:1-6; 1 Cor 10:7-8. Incarnate Word Heb 1:1-2. Apostolic witnesses Heb 2:3. Tremble and shake *Exod 19:18. Haggai Hag 2:6. Thrones collapse *Hag 2:21-22. Lord Jesus promised Matt 24:29-30. Never be destroyed Dan 2:44. Done so much for us Heb 13:15. Sobering words of Moses Deut 4:24. Future for ourselves Isa 33:14.*

13:1-8 *Work together 1 Cor 12:27. No in-fighting 1 Pet 1:22. For each other 1 Pet 4:9. Story in Genesis *Gen 18:1ff. Trying to tell you Heb 12:29. Temporary Prov 23:4-5. Content whatever Phil 4:11. Away from home *Gen 28:15. Moses *Deut 31:6, 8. Invasion of Canaan *Josh 1:5. Opponents Ps 118:10-13. With my last breath Ps 118:6; Lk 21:16-19. Church elders for granted Heb 13:17. The Law and the Prophets Lk 24:44. Full forgiveness Rom 8:1ff. Spirit is in us Jn 14:16-17. Drawn its sting 1 Cor 15:55-57.*

13:9-16 *Ritual foods Col 2:16-23. High Priest Heb 9:11-14. Again and again *Exod 29:14, Lev 4:12. All people everywhere 1 Jn 2:2. Golgotha Mk 15:22. No further sin-offerings Heb 10:14. Christ has won Heb 10:18. Sacrifice of praise *Lev 7:5 LXX. Hosea's plea *Hos 14:2. Cracked lips Job 2:9-10. A few bulls Ps 50:13-14, 23. That kind of thing Jn 8:29. Religious lip-service Jas 1:26-27.*

13:17-19 *Church leaders Heb 13:7. Our Lord did Mk 1:35. Big burden 2 Cor 11:28. Cared for their flock 1 Pet 5:2-4. Apostolic workers Col 4:3.*

13:20-21 *Troubles into proportion Num 6:26, 2 Th 3:16. Lost none Jn 17:12. Confident in the Spirit Eph 3:16. Please you Rom 12:1-2. Intercession Heb 7:25. Holy Spirit 2 Cor 3:18. Full power Phil 2:13.*

13:22-25 *Absolutely everyone Tit 3:15.*

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