

FAITH

G. W. North

Faith

Hebrews Chapter 11

By

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The text

This edition is based on the texts of Mr North's books which first appeared on the website of Lanark Christian Fellowship many years ago.

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Chapter 10 verse 38 to chapter 11 verse 6.

The eleventh chapter of the Hebrews epistle is without doubt the greatest chapter on faith and its accomplishments in the whole Bible. Its contribution to the subject is as invaluable as it is unequalled, but its greatest value to us will be lost unless it is understood to be part of a section only and not the whole statement on the matter. The whole section commences at the thirty-eighth verse of chapter ten and ends with the second verse of chapter twelve. These forty-four verses add a new dimension to the subject, setting it in context and thereby in proper perspective. The writer's purpose is not so much to show us what can be accomplished by faith as to bring us to an understanding that men must live by faith. Realisation of this cannot fail to convince the reader of the writer's great concern for any who, having been illuminated by the gospel, draw back from true gospel living through lack of faith. There can be only one end to that he says — perdition: 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of ... God': it is a frightening warning.

The terse submission with which the section commences in chapter ten is, 'the just shall live by faith', from which faith and life no man must draw back. The most important of all the many reasons for faith is that by it a man must first be made just, that is, justified by God; secondly he must thereafter, and by the same faith, live justly before God and man. Justification is an act of sheer grace on God's part, and because this is so it can only be appropriated by faith. When God justifies a man from sin He does so because a man believes Him, and with a view to the salvation of that man's soul. Salvation, once granted, is a continuous experience which can only be accomplished as that man continues in the faith, that is, lives by faith. The first act of faith is an act of appropriation. Thereby forgiveness of sins and justification, both from God, are granted to a man through the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ; this must lead to a life of faith or else it is not valid. The writer's contention is that unless the fruit of faith develops in a man and works of faith are manifest in his life, that person is not living by faith. If a man is not living by faith he is not alive: scripture makes plain that faith without fruit and works is dead. The whole of the eleventh chapter is given up to the substantiation of this. In it the writer points out that this is so, first in the lives and works of the progenitors and elders of the human race, and then also in the lives of the acknowledged fathers of Israel.

He commences with the fact of faith. He does not argue for faith, or try to make people accept the fact that faith exists — faith simply is. As every intelligent person knows, faith is a fact of life; without it life could not possibly be. Every person on earth, whether he is a professed atheist or cynic or whatever, believes in something: it is in the nature of man to do so; we are made that way. Existence is impossible without believing in something or someone, even if it is only in our own deluded, disillusioned selves.

Having drawn attention to the fact of faith so that we cannot do otherwise than honestly acknowledge it, the writer proceeds to the next point, namely, everyone must recognise and acknowledge that, because men can do no other than believe, there must also be something or someone in which to believe. This must be so, for if there is nothing to believe and no one to believe in, what is the use of being able to believe? Our very humanity teaches this: we are all able to breathe, that is how we are made, but what would be the use or the sense of being able to breathe if there was nothing to breathe? It is the same with every one of our faculties and abilities; sight presupposes, even postulates, that there is something to see; hearing, that there is sound to hear, and so on. Further than this, it must also be true that the things which the eye sees, the ear hears and faith believes must have been before these various faculties were. If there is thirst there must have been water, if there is hunger there must have been food, if there is brain there must be and have been thought, and so we could go on. The very fact that faith "is" postulates that there is — must be — something and someone in which to believe. To say or think otherwise is either foolishness or perverseness, perhaps both.

It is not possible to believe nothing and no one; we all believe in someone and something; the only issue to be resolved is in whom and in what do we choose to believe? Faith in a man is a saving virtue; the ungodliest of men believes that he must eat and drink and breathe in order to live, so he does, and is thereby saved from dying. Faith is the law of life modified and adapted to man's estate and needs by God, in whom life and law are eternally

one; for man faith has been modified and adapted to various ends and functions, many of which operate in him quite unconsciously. In his ignorance of truth and limited knowledge of these facts man calls these functions by other names because he can only name them according to his experience and recognition of them.

Belief in eating is translated into an urge to eat; man calls it appetite or hunger; it is a law. Unknown to the flesh which does not know God and has no mind of its own, hunger is an adaptation of the law of faith; it is the same with thirst and all other basic urges in human beings. Even in the body man is compelled to live by this law according to all its variety of adaptations to conscious or unconscious need. He may not think about these things and may not be prepared to admit it if he is made aware of them, for he does not know this to be true, and as often as not prefers to believe otherwise. God says, 'man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God'. That is as absolutely true as the verse which says, 'by grace are ye saved through faith ... it is the gift of God'. Whether or not a man is prepared to believe it, everything in the physical universe is a form of God's word. Bread for instance: God spoke wheat into existence before man made it into bread; the same with water, God made it. Every basic thing from which man may manufacture anything, whether for good or for evil, all was spoken into being by God.

Because of the fall in Eden and the sin into which man entered there, sin also entered into the world, wherefore, in the realm of knowledge man became dead to God and to the knowledge of himself; he is completely darkened in understanding. Every man is a 'by faith' person of some sort; the great difference between sinners and saints lies in this following kind of situation: when the voice and call of God came to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees he listened to and obeyed it; that is how he became the saint he was. Because of this Abraham entered into a new place of faith in God — this is of the essence of truth; living faith will only rise in man when he responds to God in a similar way. Paul describes this as the faith which comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. In his natural state man hears neither the voice nor the call of God; few men ever do. The world is in this sad state because men do not use their natural faith about things they see and hear, but refuse even to believe that there is a God, or better put, that God is. By this attitude they abide in unbelief, and when God does speak to them they do not hear either His voice or His word, they are quite dead.

Proceeding from the ground that men accept the fact of faith, the writer, pursuing the truth, makes a further important point, namely this: by the acceptance of the original premise, a man reaches a plane of understanding as sensible to his mind as it is vital to his soul's salvation. This being so, it is not difficult for him to believe that things which are seen are not made of things which appear to the senses. Although he is not speaking here of things that man has made, what the writer says is as true in the realm of human accomplishments as it is in God's. Man has made many things by apparent means from apparent things, (furniture from wood and cloth from cotton or wool for example) but even so the mind that discovered these things and the skill which made them are quite invisible; the results are apparent, but not the human factors and abilities which produced them. The writer is here speaking of things visible and invisible — the earth — the universe — the real world — life itself — the aeons in which we live and move and have our being, man himself. God made them all.

God expects us to enter into understanding and by the knowledge gained from the common sense acceptance of the first truth enter into yet fuller understanding of the whole truth of which it is a part. In this case he speaks concerning creation — the unseen, unapparent, unheard word of God was the means whereby the apparent worlds were framed, he says. When He did so there were no human ears to hear, no eyes to see; God spoke and thereby created. He did it all from Himself: there was nothing to respond and obey. Moses has made clear that when God did these things there was no man in existence, either to hear the word God spoke or to observe its results. Quite simply then, all men must acknowledge that this universe and everything in it was not made by man; we are living in a miracle world wherein minor natural 'miracles' occur regularly. Even time itself, as we know it, was put in being as a framework for the order and succession of creative events. Time itself is a manifestation of God's word: the ages have been fitted together by Him that in them He should fulfil His will. If we accept the first proposition, namely that faith is, it is not difficult to accept this second one, namely that faith must lead to intelligent understanding. Outside of Christ it is not common to accept this, but he who is in Christ easily does so. Although revealing the logic of faith, the writer is not seeking to convince the atheist against his will, but seeking to demonstrate to the believer the life of faith and its results.

All the material things of the original creation now so obvious to the senses, and a vaster number of things not so obvious to the senses, God made by His word; for the fullest apprehension and appreciation of both that which is

visible and that which is invisible, faith is necessary. When faith comes (as it logically should) to the heart of the child of God, it is wonderful and revelatory, but far more wonderful than that, when understanding dawns upon him and faith becomes understanding faith, it is glorious beyond words. By this understanding faith, (that is, faith which understands) the elders obtained a good report from God — they believed and understood, and thereby obtained. We must beware of the unbelief masquerading as faith which changes the order of truth revealed here. If we do this we shall hardly believe anything and never shall obtain the good report from God which is so essential to our eternal well-being.

One of the most unsubtle of all errors common among men is, 'I will only believe what I understand', whereas the truth is quite the reverse to this thinly-veiled scepticism, namely 'I shall only understand what I first believe with my heart'. Understanding follows faith, it does not precede it. It is true that if faith first be there, understanding will lead to greater faith because understanding thus acquired will become light to the mind. The enlightened soul thereby equipped will be the more fully disposed to press on eagerly to greater truth and fuller appropriation of what it now sees and understands. Appropriating faith, that is faith which appropriates the truth revealed to the heart, is normal faith. True faith is power of appropriation and reception; believing without receiving is not faith, it is a substitute for it.

Before continuing with our theme, we should pause here awhile to note a distinction which could be quite vital to our hearts, and perhaps very illuminating also. The elders spoken of in this chapter are of two different categories: the first four, Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham, are very special men — unlike the others mentioned here they are elders of the entire human race. To miss this fact is to lose some of the blessing which God intends us to have. Adding to understanding, to these four should be added the names of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph; these seven men lived before Moses and were therefore pre-law, and pre-Israel, though not exclusively so. For the purposes of God in His creation these men became the elders of the entire human race. Every man on earth can claim Abraham as his elder, but not everyone can claim Moses to be so; God never intended that everyone should; He had other intentions by him. Moses brought the law of God on to the earth because God purposed to establish Israel, His chosen nation, in spiritual truth. Abraham was their father according to flesh, and their elder according to the spirit, but not their lawgiver. By Abraham God showed that grace and faith preceded codes of law and it is he who is the elder of us all, that is, of all who live the life of faith.

In verse six it is apparent that the writer makes the assumption that, having discovered that everything exists by unseen power, the believing heart will come to the same conclusion to which he himself had arrived, namely, that God is. Proceeding further he also assures that having made the unavoidable discovery that I am, therefore I have power, a man will believe also that, because great power is displayed in this astounding universe, there must also be a great and amazing person who is the source of that power. To believe anything other than this is illogical; how else could it be? Every man, by the very logic of his own being and power(s), must at last come to God; he can only refuse to do so by refusing to accept the testimony of his own senses and denying his own self — to be sensible man must reason thus: I am, so God is. Every man is held responsible by God for this kind of basic reasoning. Paul also is very clear about this, saying to the Romans that God will hold every responsible person capable of reason accountable to Him on two counts: (1) His eternal power; (2) His Godhead. In other words man's simple conclusion upon observing this universe should be, 'these things cannot be except by unimaginable power, therefore the one who has such power must be God'. God is, His eternal power proves that He is.

Without faith, that is without the ability and capacity to believe, man cannot be; such a man does not exist. Faith and the ability to develop that faith, as well as the basic means whereby the simplest of people may exercise it, are constitutional in man. It is also true, (and to men this is most important of all), that without the definite exercise of faith it is impossible to come to God for eternal life. The verse which declares this also contains another statement of almost equal importance, namely this, that if a man will not come to God, it will not please Him — and that is putting it very mildly. The writer phrases it this way because he is not issuing a warning or making threats, he is speaking to God's people, not atheists. When a man comes to God he is only following the law of both his own being and of God's to its logical conclusion. Faith is the law governing conscious and profitable relationship between God and man, and to deliberately stay away from God in heart and keep Him at a distance throughout life is to declare publicly that by so doing the person intends to deny both man and God. There can be no greater folly.

Drawing the whole of this great section on faith to a close, the writer says in chapter twelve that we must lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and run the race (of life) with patience. That exhortation is most vital for all men, for the sin most common to all, and which so easily besets everyone, is unbelief: this folly of refusing to act upon the law of our very being is self-imposed death. What liberation it is to a man's being when he simply believes God's word and the things that are, and moves towards God; so doing he is fulfilling his own nature, thereby he is blessed. We all must believe that God is and that what He says will — indeed must — come to pass, or, better still, come into being. Whenever the promissory side of God's word comes into being, or fruition or fulfilment as the case may be, it may be said that it has come to pass. It has not come to pass away, it cannot, it has become permanent in experience, in time, and in history. It has not become fact, it was always fact because God said it; it has become recognisable fact; it has not become true thereby, but manifestly true to man, that is all. To not believe is to be a disbeliever, and classified as an unbeliever; to be an unbeliever is to be an atheist, for unbelief denies that God is; that person has therefore done nothing but continue in that offensive state before God. To believe that God is and not to come to Him by choice is self-death, and by implication to constitute oneself an attempted destroyer of God — a very serious matter indeed. The result of coming to Him is wonderfully rewarding, and very joyous; perhaps the greatest of these joys is the delight of proving to oneself that God is. What a seal of faith this is.

When the search for God and reality has ended in complete success, the immediate outcome of it is relief and joy and the most important goal has been reached. The grateful heart will then make some offering to God — a thank-offering — a love-offering as excellent as may be possible within the scope of man's power. To do so is natural — it is the obvious thing to do. Besides this it is the only righteous thing to do, because it is the discharging of the debt of gratitude owed to God; to do so is the righteousness of faith attempting repayment for that which cannot be purchased. It is not possible to have faith and not to make such an offering; it is the perfect outworking of the fact that faith is, and God wants that faith to be made known. Paul says that the gospel is being preached to all nations for the obedience of faith. Because I am, faith is; because faith is, I am; because faith is, God is (this is man's discovery); because God is, faith is (this is God's faithfulness): because faith is, I can discover God: because God is, and I have found Him, I must make a voluntary, free-will offering to Him. If I do not respond in this manner I am ungrateful and am acting neither logically nor righteously; logic and righteousness are immortal moral twins; they act in conjunction, often in unison, and are the basis of all sanity and spirituality. It is not possible to believe and do nothing; faith is the beginning of correct attitude and correct action towards God.

Taking as an example the elder of the race who pioneered the way for all men the writer says, 'Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts ... he being dead yet speaketh'. Being the son of Adam, Abel had a fallen nature, but in spite of the fact that sin was already in the world Abel revealed his faith by doing something. This 'voice' from the dawn of history witnesses to the fact, the truth, the logic and the work of faith. Abel's work lights up to us the way of that natural righteousness which is itself the outworking of the innate principles of the nature of man. Both Paul, in Romans chapter two, and Peter, in Acts chapter ten, support this position; it is a very important one, so we will turn aside for a few moments to examine it.

In Romans three Paul says, 'We have before proved ... that ... there is none righteous, no, not one'. He was speaking the truth; he does not say however that no one has ever been righteous — note the tense. In chapter two he speaks equally clearly of those who 'do by nature the things contained in the law, these ... are a law unto themselves: which show (they have) the work of the law written in their hearts': they prove this by their works (and by patient continuance in well-doing), he adds. Faith in Christ is nowhere mentioned in connection with these people. Surprising as this may be to some, there were people like this living on earth in Paul's day, and there are people of this description living on earth still. They know nothing of Moses' law, or of the Gospel, but live by the outworking of natural faith according to conscience. As we have before seen, all men without exception are held responsible by God for this, He exempts no-one, nor does He accept excuses on this count from anyone, not even from the most primitive or the most underprivileged, or from the evangelised.

Neither nationality, culture, social conditions, lack of education, loss of privilege, heathendom nor the fact of sin affect this, and neither does the present state of spiritual death nor the deprivation of the gospel. None of these things alter the fact that originally the work of the law was written by God in Adam's and Eve's hearts, and has been passed on by heredity to every human being born since. Nothing has affected that — though there may be total depravity, there is no such thing as total ignorance. Subconsciously every man 'knows'; man is a 'knowing'

person. The gospel takes this into account and is directed to men with this in mind. The Holy Spirit is sent into the world for this purpose. He comes to a person to awaken and quicken that 'knowing' faculty to consciousness of true spiritual realities. The best news of the gospel is that from the primitive state of ignorance and the original innate knowledge of the God of whom he is ignorant, sinful man may be resurrected to a far higher position than that which he formerly had, and can know all things (I John 2 v.20 & 27).

At an earlier date Peter took this same position when addressing Cornelius and his friends at Caesarea, 'I perceive that God is no respecter of persons', he said. By a vision and certain specific commands God had shown him something which revolutionised his outlook upon the world of men; it came to him as a complete surprise. As a result of this, when the apostle went to the Gentiles at God's command, his perception of truth was profoundly changed. By the vision and the commandment he had now gained understanding of men and of God's will, and the power and extent of the work and purpose of Christ's death on the cross. As far as it is allowable for us to assume, Cornelius and his friends were originally a heathen company who had converted from idolatry to a belief in the one true and living God. Consistent with that and his human nature Cornelius was doing works according to the light and measure and kind of faith he had. As far as they had gone these people had let their 'natural' faith dominate their thinking and actions, and were, before God, as righteous as that faith could make them in His sight. This was what Peter realised and said, 'In every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him'.

God had shown Peter this by the vision, and this was also the basis of truth upon which the angel of the Lord had spoken to Cornelius on the day he visited him in his home. The parabolic implication of the vision God gave to Peter upon the housetop (when the vessel filled with every imaginable beast was lowered to him from heaven) was exactly as Peter said; that is why God commanded Peter to kill and eat. Peter was astounded at the words. Perhaps the thing that astonished him most was that these unclean creatures were not thrust up at him from the pit but lowered to him from heaven. 'Slay ... eat', said the voice — it was repugnant to him, but O what a privilege! Peter refused point blank, but God persisted and insisted that he should do as commanded. After three attempts, God made Peter see the truth and understand what He was meaning. People whom Peter called common or unclean (certainly he would not have called them righteous) actually found acceptance with God. Peter knew that God would only accept men upon the ground of righteousness, so he just had to accept what God was showing him. What else could he do? By the vision Peter learned that Cornelius and his friends were righteous. Their personal righteousness was neither the righteousness of Moses nor yet the righteousness of Christ, it was the righteousness of their proper response to the law inwrought in the heart of man by God at the beginning. The works which Cornelius had wrought in righteousness by this natural faith and with a clear conscience in the sight of God revealed it.

Cornelius was a righteous man according to his light, but he was not yet regenerate. He was not chosen by God to be a saint because of the natural faith he had, but was chosen to be the gentile upon and through whom God would pour out His Spirit that the door of faith should be opened to the whole world of gentiles. It could be thought that, being God, the Lord could have chosen to do this through the veriest sinner, but such thinking is wildest assumption, and against the whole revelation of scripture. By being faithful to God as far as he knew Him and true to himself, and by acting according to natural (God-given) faith, Cornelius had become acceptable to God, so God selected him for honour. The man who acts according to this faith naturally receives the gospel and the Christ of the gospel.

It has ever been like this since the commencement of the human era. Abel and those early elders of faith were not alone in their righteousness. Scripture makes clear that centuries after this, in Abraham's day, king Abimelech claimed before God that he and his people were a righteous nation, and neither God nor Abraham denied it. Amazingly enough in the two separate incidents in which Abimelech encountered first Abraham and then his son Isaac, Abimelech showed himself to be more righteous than either of them, and they were patriarchs of Israel the chosen race, while he was a Philistine. Abimelech was not one of the chosen race, nor was he the called of the Lord, neither was he God's friend. Was he more righteous than Abraham? In the incident, and as the incident showed, yes. It was exactly the same with Isaac when, years later, he followed his father's unrighteous example; both he and his father brought the threat of punishment upon a guiltless people. It must have been most humiliating to both Abraham and Isaac to be reprov'd by this 'heathen' king for their sin. In those days righteousness consisted in living and acting rightly according to the inbred law common to all men, instead of living and acting according to inbred sin.

The account of Abel and his offering commences the list of the earliest elders of the faith-life: his faithfulness is in sharp contrast with his father Adam's faithlessness, who for that reason is not referred to in this chapter. Adam's sin lay in the threefold fact that he acted contrary to: (1) the explicit word of God; (2) the obvious attestation to its genuineness and power displayed in all nature around him; (3) the implicit word and work of the Lord written within him: therefore Adam died. Physically he remained unchanged, but because he denied God instant spiritual death took place within him; he had acted contrary to the law of his own life. Quite different to this, years later and apparently without any instruction, Abel offered to God a sacrifice more excellent than Cain and God witnessed to those who witnessed it then and to all who observe it now that he was righteous. It is not said that by virtue of his offering he became righteous, rather it appears that Abel acted as he did because he was already righteous, and that the righteous God testified to his gifts because they were the testimony that this young man was righteous. The thing that appeared and was therefore seen was the offering, but what did not appear, and was therefore not seen by Adam and Eve and Cain, was Abel's faith and righteousness. These were apparent to God though, and He witnessed to these to Cain, and presumably to his father and mother (if they were still alive).

So it was that Abel spoke to his relatives and is still speaking to us today. Abel is the only one of whom this is said, and since he speaks from the dawn of time his voice is authentic and what he says is most important. God draws attention to Abel's gifts (to Him) because they were brought by a man who knew no gospel but the testimony of his own conscience responding to the work of the law written in his own heart. This caused him to think aright and act aright, even though no legal code of sacrifices and offerings had as yet been given to men. To this day Abel is saying that where the gospel is not preached and is therefore unknown, God looks upon and deals with men according to natural faith and natural righteousness. This could only be then (and can only be now, as it was also in both Abimelech's day and Cornelius' day), because, in foreknowledge of the fall and in anticipation of it, the Lamb of God was slain from the foundation of the world. Upon this ground of truth all those worthies whose names have been mentioned in this chapter, as well as millions more whose names and the works they have done have not been mentioned, were and are accepted by God. It is a significant fact, fundamental to salvation, that the Lamb of God Himself was slain upon the ground of His own natural faith and innate righteousness; only thereby could the redemptive will of God reign in righteousness over all and be efficacious for all.

By the devil's cunning and Adam's folly, sin had entered into the world and death by sin, but sin was not imputed to Cain by God because there was no outward form of law. At that time God had neither formulated nor given it to mankind; the words, 'Thou shalt not kill', had not been written. In that era everything turned on the work of the law written on the fleshy tables of the heart and the thoughts of their own hearts reacting to God's work therein. As conscience exercised men they either accused or excused themselves or each other before God and man; of a corporate body of law and a functional legal society the human family knew nothing. When, at a much later date, God did give the law, He formed it to cover and condemn the sins which men had already committed or were in danger of committing. The natural source of law in man, and the sole arbiter of it, had been flawed and had ceased to function correctly because man had changed; he had altered the relationship between himself and God and fellow-man. Man had become a different person from the one God had made; his spiritual nature had changed because of sin; he could not be justified in what he was doing.

Recognising this, and knowing that man could not change back to his original state, God, having raised up Moses, prohibited sin by itemising it in a plainly stated legal code and engraving it on tablets of stone and giving it to His people. To that legal code He also appended a detailed system of blood-offerings that men should make to Him; compliance with the requirements listed in this code brought men back into favour with God. Thereupon God entirely exonerated him, and justified him from his sin. The sacrifices themselves did not blot out sins; they had no power to do that, neither did they earn God's forgiveness; man was forgiven by God simply because he obeyed Him. In whatever age he lives man is only ever forgiven when he complies with God's word and the work of the law operative in that age; this compliance is called the obedience of faith. Man can never be forgiven by anything he does just by the act of doing it; he is forgiven because of the obedience of faith displayed by and inherent in that act — never by the ritual of it. Let a man's deeds, of whatever kind and calibre they may be and under whichever covenant they may be done, but become merely legal or mechanically religious, and there can be no approval of them by God; they will not be accepted by Him, and neither will forgiveness be granted by Him to that person. The natural faith of the heart of a man must be renewed and revived in that man so that he co-operates with God by believing Him for personal salvation.

This renewal and revival is effected in man by the grace of God through the word spoken unto him by God for that purpose. When God speaks to a man with that word, He also imparts the ability to hear it so that every man is without excuse. By His word God quickens and revives natural faith, and He does so because it is the faith He infused into Adam in the beginning, without which he would have been an incomplete man. Jesus had this faith; it was of a higher quality and of greater degree than in any other man: it was of this that He spoke in the temple when He exhorted men to have the faith of God. That faith which had been originally generated in man needed to be regenerated, else how could man become regenerate? This faith was in man in the beginning, but it had died, that is, the vital spiritual content of it had departed, leaving the empty shell. The gospel is preached to man for the obedience of faith; from the moment he hears the gospel everything depends upon a man's decision to obey or disobey it, doing so he either obeys or disobeys God. Exactly as in that which took place between God and Adam in the beginning, with the advent of sin man became an empty shell, a mere capacity; life had departed. Death was self-inflicted by man when he chose not to believe God. We see therefore that what is generally taken to be unbelief was really a preference for the devil's word as against God's.

Whenever the gospel is preached in the power of the Spirit man chooses life or he chooses death. Originally death came by hearing — that is, by listening to the devil; similarly, in this gospel era, life comes by listening to God with intent to believe and obey Him. Satan did not slay man, he only supplied man with the opportunity to destroy himself by that which was good, which man did. That the devil intended to destroy Adam through Eve, and thus destroy them both together, is beyond question, therefore he is guilty of murder by intention; Satan was both the initiator of the act and an accessory to it. It is sad to think that man, knowing what he was doing, deliberately slew himself, though not knowing all that death meant — man chose to die. To Adam it was a novel experience and terribly tragic; for him the act was irremediable — 'thou shalt surely die', God had said, and he did. That was the first death, it was (and still is) a spiritual one. Adam changed; from being a living man he became a dead man; his body still lived, but not his spirit; man is not a body — he has one. Choosing to believe Satan man changed his behaviour, his nature and his person and his character; he had died a death as God said he would. There are other deaths further to the first one, all of them resulting from the first one, one of which is the physical death which terminates man's existence on earth. For all the sons of men this is an inevitability — there is no avoiding it; as rivers flow to the sea so is man born to die.

Among those great elders of the race there was one exception to this — Enoch. It was not God's will for him to die; instead, in him God intended to reveal further truth: Enoch pleased God; this was God's testimony to the man. Enoch had this testimony in his heart before God and man — he was righteous and he knew it, for it was God's testimony to him. Just as God bore testimony to Abel's gifts, so He bore testimony to Enoch's life. On account of his offering to God Abel had to die; he was just as faithful as Enoch and pleased God just as much, but he was allowed of God to be slain: not so with Enoch though. He was not superior to Abel; what happened to each of them was by faith, but for righteousness' sake and for God's purposes by Enoch he did not have to die. Here then we have two extremes: by faith Abel saw death; by faith Enoch did not see death. By this we see that faith operates in and covers the two manners of departure from physical life in this world — bodily death and bodily translation. The greatness of true men of faith lies in this, they are men of understanding and do not care whether, in the will of God, they are destined to see death in this world, or not to see it. In Christ both methods of departure are exhibited: He died and departed, he also departed forty days after His resurrection without dying. Either departure is as acceptable to men of faith as it is to God. The spirit that questions God's ways, demanding from Him an answer to everything He does, is not of God. Whatever happens through grace, faith must develop in every man to that point of implicit trust in Him which complete obedience brings.

There are men whose lives and gifts are altogether pleasing to God, they somehow understand, and by the mystery of their simple faith God is free to do exactly as He likes with them. God could force His will on anybody, but it is not His purpose to do so; His desire is that men should co-operate with Him by faith so that His truth should be revealed in them. With such men God can do as He wants, use them as illustrations of truth, make them examples of His power, or through them say or do something which is vital to all mankind just as He wills; that is the kind of faith they have. It is original faith — faith as it should be, that is, faith as it is in God and was in the Lord Christ on earth. At the beginning man was made in that same likeness after the same image, but it was effaced by sin and was never displayed on earth again in all its perfections until Christ came. A hint of this is to be found in the combined lives of Abel and Enoch; the Lord Jesus, when finally made flesh, was made the fulfilment of all that Abel and Enoch exemplified. The Christ offered unto God both His life by that most excellent sacrifice and, following that, was translated to heaven: He had this testimony — He pleased God. To His own He showed

Himself alive on numerous occasions following His decease by many infallible proofs. Many times during the period between His resurrection and His final ascension to His Father He moved between heaven and earth, appearing for a while here and there for certain purposes until finally He returned bodily to home and Father, never to return again until the trumpet of the herald shall sound.

Verse Seven

Noah is the person next selected by the Spirit for honourable mention, together with his famous forebears of faith. This man did not lay down his life in a moment of time through a brother's murderous hate, neither was he whisked away from earth by God and translated into eternal bliss so that he should not see death. Noah had to live on through a dying age filled with violence and corruption, and fight daily to keep his family pure while watching others being engulfed in sin and forever ruined. He was destined to announce and testify to men of God's intention to make an end of all flesh; his message was unimaginable. Would God do that? The destruction of an entire civilisation and a whole world of creatures? No one would believe him. Compared with Noah's task Abel's and Enoch's tasks were far far easier. They did not have to toil away ceaselessly from dawn to dusk for a seemingly never-ending succession of days as did this man. He was on his own, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade for a hundred years of his life, building an ark that no one else but he and his family wanted. It may be correct to assume that his family helped him; it is certainly charitable to believe that, but there is no textual evidence to support the view. Indeed the circumstantial evidence seems rather to point the other way, for in other instances when men of faith became involved in works of faith and others joined with them their names are mentioned — Sarah with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob for instance. It may therefore be safest to assume that Noah's family did not assist him in the mammoth task of building the ark; perhaps that was the reason why it took him a hundred years to build it. We cannot be sure, but if Noah's sons did help him we are not told so and their names are not mentioned until they went in with Noah into the ark. They partook of the benefits of his labours, but that does not prove that they believed in and approved of them or of their father's works while they were in process.

When God warned Noah of the impending disaster Noah was moved by fear. Why? Was it because God spoke 'of things not seen as yet' — an ark for instance and a flood — or was it the result of his reaction to the thought of the wholesale slaughter of lives which the flood must inflict? Or was it just the fact that God had spoken to him that caused him such great fear? Of what was there to be afraid — death? Was he afraid of being drowned? Surely not; he could not have been afraid of that, for he was building an ark for his own safety. Probably what moved him most was a mixture of many things, including fear for his own family. Would they believe him at last and go with him into the ark, or would they refuse? Who knows? He was not a man of the same calibre as Paul, who, upon receiving a word from God that he was going to be caught and bound and carried away to Rome and to ultimate death, said, 'none of these things move me (Acts 20.24 — to the elders of Ephesus) I am ready to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (21 v.13. — after the prophecy of Agabus)'; and in the end did just that: but Paul was a single man. The enormity of Noah's task was beyond comprehension. Without God's help he could never have accomplished it. Beyond building the ark he had to fill it with pairs of animals and birds (and reptiles it seems); stocking in stores of food for an unstated period of time; contemplate catching them, living with them, tending them. Sanitation would have been an insoluble problem, surely insurmountable, and keeping natural enemies apart! However was he going to do that? Poor man, without God's help he surely could never have done it. God must have done unrecorded miracles upon miracles for months on end for him.

Poor Noah! Yet so blessed. What an exciting and far more exacting task was this man's than either Abel's or Enoch's. Neither of those two men were forewarned by God of what was going to happen to them; Abel was suddenly struck down and Enoch would have been translated in the twinkling of an eye; neither had any warning; theirs was instantaneous bliss. Not so with poor Noah though; he had to live with his fears as well as his faith, his mind filled with foreknowledge of all that impending doom. Noah was one lonely man living in a world of hostility and mockery and unbelief. Just about everybody else in the world would have held him in derision. He was the one man who appeared to be against everybody, yet he was building for everybody. He must at times have wondered whether he was the only man on earth who believed God. This man condemned the world, says the writer, who perhaps himself felt a bit like him at times, for he himself had some stern warnings to administer to men. Right at the beginning of this section he had censured those who draw back to perdition rather than believe to the saving of the soul. All men chosen by God to be His witnesses to an age under condemnation have this consolation, although they must condemn the world by their testimony, it is not they but God who has passed judgement upon it. Noah built in love as well as in faith; the ark proclaimed mercy and grace, but unbelief would have none of it; the ark, although a promise to Noah, was a threat to unbelievers and in the end the waters that

eventually bore up the ark destroyed them. Could Noah's thankfulness and joy have been unmixed with sadness when at last he floated out of the darkness and the downpour into sunshine? Because the window of the ark was set in the roof he had not been able to view the disastrous end which overtook his fellow-creatures, but he knew it had happened. O how beautiful must the sun have appeared after months of rain and gloom that had blotted out sun and moon and stars in a seemingly endless blur of cascading water. And when it was all over! What joy and awe to step out into a newly-washed Earth.

Like the Lord Jesus Himself, who centuries afterwards had to bear the contradiction of sinners against Himself, Noah, by his obedience and patient continuance in well-doing, appeared to his generation to be condemning them to annihilation. By patience and perseverance, and in single-minded devotion to God against all odds, Noah applied himself to do the work of God, and like Christ became heir of the righteousness which is by faith; each in his own way saved his house. Although it is not written of him as it was of his more illustrious descendant, Abraham, that he obeyed God, he did so none the less. Noah's was a work of patient endurance and single-minded obedience, and in somewhat similar words to those used of Abraham, it could have been written of him that he obeyed God, for without knowing whither it would all lead or how or where it would all end, Noah set out to build an ark. It was a unique work, begun and ended in faith — Noah had his reward on earth, but he shall receive a greater reward in heaven.

With the introduction of Abraham the writer brought in the name which, to every Hebrew was above all other names, whether of angels or men. Abraham was the most revered of all names for he was the founding father of the race. Through this man the writer brought to the Hebrews the basic emphasis of the message he was bringing to them from God. In the life of Abraham — how he responded to the call of God, what he became, and what he did — the real reason for the letter to the Hebrews is brought out with purpose; it is this: by faith the people of God are strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Although not emphasised so clearly, this is what comes through in the seven preceding verses of the chapter. Abel was certainly a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth — a pioneer of the lonely way of righteousness. How old he was when he was martyred for his faith we do not know, but in terms of the near millennium of years men lived then he was a mere beginner. Of Enoch it could be said that he just did not belong on the earth at all, he simply disappeared from it — what an example of pilgrimage — God took him away and home, he was a stranger here. Noah lived a stranger on the earth too; he was not a martyr, he did not die early, neither was he translated to heaven, but what a path of pilgrimage he trod. He was the man who deliberately went against the trend of society; everyone would have thought that he was anti-social, singular, eccentric, and most probably would have considered him to be mentally unbalanced. Bearing the contradiction of sinners against himself until the final day set by God he both contradicted and condemned the whole generation of men in which he was born. When at last he walked with his wife and family into the ark and into salvation from the earth, his labours for men were ended and his witness to men finished.

As is shown in these selected incidents, these three elders of faith exemplified the truth of the writer's words, 'here we have no continuing city'; doing so they prepared the way for Abraham whose life showed this the more plainly. True men of faith do not achieve fame because they intend to do so or because they desire it, but simply because they are faithful men. God sovereignly chooses men who will do what He wants done at the time He wants it done. He chooses the 'when' and 'why' and 'how' of everything in His kingdom of grace and faith. Reflecting on the order of this revelation of faith being unfolded in this chapter, we cannot fail to notice that: (1) before any particular man's name is mentioned the person of God is introduced; (2) then the fact of His word is declared; (3) following that the ages are mentioned; (4) then man is introduced. To the writer this is the natural and therefore the proper order he says. This he states for faith's understanding so that we should approach the truth in the right attitude of mind and heart. If we do this we shall have no favourites among the select company of people he introduces in the chapter. We must not fall into the trap into which many have fallen and exalt one name in this chapter above another. God chooses both the time-period in which He will do certain things and the one through whom He will do them.

Considering this in closer detail let us observe that, although reference has been made to Noah and his hundred years of lonely labour, it would be folly to believe that he was, in any degree, greater than either of the two men who preceded him or any that followed him in the line of faith. God could not be constantly flooding out His creation; indeed He has promised never to do it again. Abel could not have built an ark for the salvation of the

righteous family; there wasn't one. There is no ground or reason for comparing or contrasting Abel with Noah and Enoch with Abraham; these men lived in different times and were chosen to do different works. The commendation of any man is that he does God's will perfectly according to God's instructions and desires, and pleases Him: that is all that matters. To place Abraham first in the honours list is utterly wrong; all he did was to obey God — so did Abel and Enoch and Noah and Moses. It should be assumed that, had he been asked, each one of these would have done exactly the same as Abraham. As far as we know, Abel did not have a son; quite possibly — almost certainly — he did not even marry, so how could he have offered an Isaac on Moriah? Let each one of us see to it that we are as true to our understanding of God's mind as they, and obey God in our age as they did in theirs: they did as God said, whatever it was, and so must we. Ages can be made to fit together by the word of God in our lifetime if He will; what He is looking for is a man to stand in the gap which may be created as our age passes into another. Each of these four men in their day did exactly that, finding grace from God to do so in a most wonderful way worthy of recording in scripture.

Verses eight to twenty-two

'By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went'. When God calls a man He always calls him to a new place. When that place is finally reached, and only then, that man shall live as he should live: his inheritance is there and therein he shall serve God. The place to which God calls is the place of faith. To be of any proper use to God or to himself on the earth a man has to reach that place. The man who does so inherits all God has for him; not until then though. There is no mystery about this: man only inherits all things then because that is where and when God inherits all there is of him, as He so rightfully should: the inheritance of the saints is among those who are sanctified. Earlier we noted that faith is natural in man; it is quite impossible to be a man and not have it to some degree: (Paul's word to the Thessalonians is 'all men have not the faith: faith and the faith must not be confused); in order not to exercise faith man has to act contrary to his nature. Not so with Abraham though: he heard, he listened, he obeyed and his faith eventually led him to a new land (or place) of faith altogether. Natural faith, though fundamental to a man's make-up, knows nothing of this, unless God speaks to him. Saving faith cannot rise in a man as of nature because of sin; it can pass from the 'natural' to the spiritual if the heart will obey God.

With the rise of faith in Abraham's heart hope rose also. O what a place (plateau, position) is faith! God was going to give Abraham a place and an inheritance on the earth, that is on the natural plane. The spiritual position God had in mind for him was not mentioned — he must attain to the natural plane first, and then only if he would go all out for it. Abraham did just that. For God's earthly plans it was important that Abraham should first inherit the land, everything else would follow from that. This was not the most important thing though, the all-important thing was Abraham's inward heart position. To God's great joy Abraham had ascended to the position of faith even on the natural plane. At first God made no mention of the spiritual place and position He had in mind for Abraham, he was not yet ready for it, he would not have been able to receive it even if God had been ready to reveal it. Man only rises to all the greatness God has planned for him by degrees, or short steps of faith; not all at once does God give all His fullness; He always fills to capacity, but man is such a tiny being, one who knew wrote, 'of His fullness have all we received'. For Abraham God had planned a unique position in His kingdom and glory, but beyond the first command He never divulged any of that to him in the beginning.

Everything God had in mind for Abraham was in the original statement of intention He made to him: to whomsoever God speaks this is always so. He does not say everything all at once, if He did so man would be overwhelmed; He might even engender unbelief also, because of man's incredulity. God, in His wisdom, first set out to bring Abraham into the place of faith, that having arrived and proved God therein he should go on into all God had prepared for him; God's purpose in bringing Abraham into the promised land was to prepare him for all that was to follow. Abraham did not know exactly where his earthly inheritance was; he did not greatly care; in heart he had found the place of faith from which he could proceed and he went out from where he was with determination and in high hopes. God had not spoken to him of the things he hoped for but he had heart-faith, and according

to the truth of the faith in his heart he found substantial ground for all the hopes building up there too. 'After', that was the key word, both to him and to God; first the word, then faith, then obedience, then afterwards the inheritance; therein all the hopes of God and his own hopes would be fulfilled; it would be wonderful. It was, but fulfilment was gradual; it had to be, it was so vast.

Many of his hopes, those that could be, were immediately fulfilled as soon as Abraham arrived — he had come into the promised land — what anticipation. He traversed it, north, south, east, west, viewing it, enjoying it; it was his. 'All this is mine', he must have thought, 'but where is it? Where is that for which I am looking?' He could not find what he wanted, in hope of which he had left his roots; faith he had, but not yet did he realise his hopes; he was restless in the land of promise, he could not settle anywhere. If he had thought that the days of his pilgrimage would end once he reached Canaan and that he would find all he was looking for he was wrong; in various places he pitched his tent and searched around for a while, but not for long — he could not stay; hope drove him on. Where was the city of his desire and his dreams? And where was the child he felt he must have and both he and Sarah so much wanted? He had responded to the call, he now had the land, he was living in it, it was

his, he had the land rights, but he felt a stranger there; he was always moving on, looking, searching, waiting, wanting. When O when would his hopes be fulfilled? Time came when the dearest of all his natural hopes was fulfilled and Isaac was born; it took another visitation and another promise from God to bring it to pass though. Abraham and Sarah rejoiced in their son when he came, he was their chiefest delight, but still no city for him to live in. Where was the city? Time went by. Jacob was born to Isaac, but Abraham was still living in a tent, so were his son and grandson; the search was fruitless. Disappointment!

Abraham never did find the city. He expected to find it, but he never did, it was not there. The expectation of faith did not turn to bitterness in him though, instead it came to fruition; a hope kept his spirit buoyant and sweet. Faith and hope took him to the land and kept him residing there in a tent, always ready to move on. Faith and hope are constant companions wedded together by God, and as surely as faith is the substance of hope, so hope, if it be firmly grounded thereon, is the spur of faith. Hope is not fanciful, it is living; hopes that are of God are faith's goals as well as its goads; faith is the evidence that, although as yet unrealised; informed hopes, firmly rooted in faith, are of faith's substance and shall one day be fulfilled. Faith causes a man to become a pilgrim, hope keeps a man a pilgrim, it ensures that he remains a traveller, always living as a stranger, even in the land of promise God gives him for his inheritance. The hope that beckoned ahead, as well as the faith that drove him on, made Abraham great; he purposed to settle down and live in a city that had foundations, but not unless its builder and maker was God. From the splendour of his hopes, already perhaps in heart he built the city; he had the substance of it in him. He knew it was there somewhere — it just had to be.

It is impossible for a man of faith to desire a city of righteousness where all is peace and joy and love and it not be in existence; it is, and its architect and artificer is God. It is not possible for man to have high moral standards for daily living and there be no God who made a man to hold such standards. It is not possible for there to be a sun in the heavens if there be no heavens for the sun. Abraham was a pilgrim by both the law and the logic of faith; he was a stranger to the philosophies of men content to live in cities defiled by the iniquity and injustices of a degenerate culture. Abraham approached and appraised many such cities; he abominated them and abandoned them: they were cities of sin. Abraham had vision as well as taste, ideals as well as ideas; above all he had fixity of purpose. So had Abel, so had Enoch and so had Noah. There was no city for Abel to seek, no garden of Eden given to him either; his father had forfeited it. Abel sought God and found Him, and he died finding out his brother man.

Enoch's and Noah's and Abraham's spiritual heredity derived from Abel's; though he had no children of the flesh he was their 'father'. He heard no voice speaking in Eden, no man set him an example or instructed him in the ways of righteousness. From whence then came his desires for it, and who suggested to him the need of sacrifice and the way of offering to God? No one; not any man. He would almost certainly have been instructed in the words and works and ways of God by his father and mother, but always with shame and in self-reproach. The fall had not obliterated Eden from the minds of Adam and Eve, but all Abel heard from them about God was drawn from memories of former days, now long gone. God walked and talked with them in the garden then: now He never came; He had departed from them and was gone. Because of their sin against Him God had expelled Abel's parents from their paradise; they had lost Him and he had 'lost' them; they had forfeited their 'promised land', consequently Abel was born outside of paradise. What his hopes were we cannot be sure. Whether Abel believed that it was possible that he, and perhaps his father and mother and brother, would be restored to Eden's earthly paradise no one knows; we can be sure of little else than that he sought God. The fall, be it noted, and what he had inherited from his parents thereby, had not destroyed either his natural faith or the hope which was sister to it. Perhaps also he hoped for reconciliation, if not of restitution and rehabilitation with God. Who knows? Surely these hopes could not have been destroyed. Longings to know God had not been obliterated from the human heart, nor shall they ever be — sin could never do that. Knowing this, whenever God speaks to the human heart He does so with this in mind and therefore directs His word to it; He knows that man is able to believe, and this being so is able to believe God if he will. Other factors are involved in this and have bearing on the soul, affecting vital decisions; but none is as basic and as important as this.

Abel chose right, so did Enoch, and in course of time so did Noah: God brought him from the old (antediluvian) world through the flood into the new age. Generations were born and passed away between Noah's death and Abraham's birth, but it was because of Noah's faith and labours that life on earth was sustained and eventually Abraham was born and in his day became such a great man. Insofar as it is possible to be hesitantly sure, it is almost certain that, had the righteous line not been kept intact during and throughout the corruption and

violence of the pre-flood society, there might never have been an Abraham. Not knowing the mind and ways of God and what He might have done in His sovereignty, it is not possible to surmise or even assume what would have happened, but humanly speaking, except there had been an Abraham, the true faith by which men's souls are saved would not have become known. It was spoken of Abraham by the Lord Jesus that he saw His day: Abraham never had a more harrowing or more important experience than that. Wonderfully enough men of faith and understanding can see Abraham's day, and by that faith rejoice with that faithful man. He never found the city he was looking for, but he saw Christ's day and was glad; both for him and for God that was all-sufficient. Although Christ never said this of the three great men who were elders of the race before Abraham, these also saw something of the Lord's day, which is to say that to a degree they each exhibited something of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and the work He accomplished during the 'day' of His earthly life. Whether they recognised what they saw and rightly assessed it and rejoiced in it as did Abraham in his day we have no certain knowledge, but each had a part in the unfolding of the pre-incarnate revelation of the Christ.

Abel 'saw' the substitutionary death and sacrifice of the lamb and the laid-down life, wholly acceptable to and totally accepted by God: Enoch 'saw' the eternally approved, completely acceptable and translatable life of Christ: Noah 'saw' the day of grace which commenced with the coming of the Holy Spirit and shall extend throughout the day of salvation to the end of the age. In Christ all these things find fulfilment, but unto those men who never knew Him because they lived at the beginning of things so many thousands of years ago, this was the privilege given them. Although unknown to each other, between them they individually and collectively served God and His as yet undisclosed purposes in Christ. In and through them God set forth a mystic preview of Christ's great day of salvation: how necessary then is faith. Who in any age knows what great things God has laid up in store for each individual believing and obedient heart?

Perhaps one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, of all the things revealed in Abraham's life is that it is essential to live in a place where all God's purposes for a man can be fulfilled in his life. God was not prepared, nor was He able to do with Abraham what He wanted to do in the place where he was when He first spoke to him. For many reasons, which God did not disclose to Abraham while he was in his native land, he had to go to another place, a foreign land, yet he, unquestioningly, went there. Being wise after the event and having the scriptures to assist us, we may be able to set down a variety of reasons why God insisted upon Abraham leaving the place he was in and journeying to Canaan. Abraham did not have that advantage though: 'he went out, not knowing whither he went'. If anyone other than his immediate relatives knew what he was doing they might have considered him to be foolish, if not downright stupid: 'You say you do not know where you are going? You are a misguided man!' may have been the least uncomplimentary remark made to him. But although we may discover all the reasons for his departure from Chaldea, we should find nothing as important for the implementation of them as the faith which made him go: 'By faith Abraham, when he was called ...' obeyed. Everyone must realise that the call of God which reaches the heart is far more than an invitation; it is authoritative, an imperative command to be obeyed immediately. The call of God is always to a calling; Abraham was being called to a life and a lifetime work, which life and work is the calling. The calling of God is greater than the actual call, that is, the occasion and the act of calling; it is intended by God to be the introduction to the calling, a person's first awakening to it.

God's call is both an election and a selection; it is a directive as well as an attraction. According to the sovereignty of His will God calls men, but lest singularity should destroy hope in a man's heart it is essential to remember that it is not so much who is called but who is calling and to what a man is called. Definition is important here. Abram was called to a place, that was to where he was called. Abram made his calling and election sure as he fulfilled his calling when he got there. When he had been there a while he was called Abraham, 'high father of a multitude', but not until he was also called God's friend, and a prophet; that is to what he was called. See what this man would have missed if he had ignored the call! It is fatal to ignore God's call; if it is obeyed all begins there: if it is ignored all ends there. The man who ignores God's call ignores God: at best this will mean the loss of a whole lifetime on earth: at worst it could mean the loss of heaven itself — what folly! The moment God calls a man he is at crisis point, therefore at all costs he must become most serious. Paul wrote regarding his call, 'God ... called me by (or in) His grace': that God should call any man is sheerest grace, no man is worthy of calling, even the greatest of men have never deserved such favour. Paul clearly revealed his own sense of unworthiness of the favour and said he was not worthy to be called an apostle; only grace made him what he became in this world and he knew it. But when he heard it he knew that the voice which called him was the voice of authority, and his response to it was 'Lord' — the call was imperative: he obeyed and so did Abraham when he heard it.

Writing to the Romans Paul makes the call very definite by speaking of those who are 'the called', and then adding, 'according to purpose'. There are many callings and many purposes, but there are not many calls; God did not constantly call Abraham or Paul, He did not have to. By the call they were introduced to the calling into which the call led, and from that point onwards they stayed in the calling with which they were called; their calling and their life were one. Realising this, each in his day made his calling and election sure. At one point, because of what he deemed to be necessary, Abraham did depart from the place to which he was called and went down to Egypt. God allowed him to do it; He neither prevented him from following his own heart, nor did He call him back from the place to which he descended. It appeared that he had forsaken or lost his calling, but God did not call him again, nor did He recall him to the land; it was not necessary. What Abraham had done did not negate his calling: he was the called of God (perhaps the only one on the earth at that time) and that was that.

It may be that recognition and understanding of this provides a key to the understanding also of one of the mysterious passages so hard to understand in the Hebrews letter. The writer says of certain people and a certain condition that it is impossible to renew them again to repentance; the inference drawn from this (perhaps too readily) by many is that as God does not attempt to do so, neither should we, and that therefore such persons have no hope of salvation. Pursuing this thought and reading the relevant scriptures in Genesis, it appears that in process of time Abraham, without a word from God, returned to the place he had forsaken. It seems that he was forced by pressure of circumstances and an inward knowledge, to depart from Egypt in certainty of heart that needed no instruction. Under pressure from without and by conviction within he knew he must get back to the place from which he began to go wrong. Abraham was only at the beginning of his spiritual life then, a learner, but O how quickly he learned — he never did that again. The point this man made for us is that, having been called of God to go out into a place and inherit it and all God has for us there, we must not under any circumstances leave it. If we should do so He will not recall us; instead, through pressure of circumstances and sundry miracles, as well as the inward voice, He will work towards the rekindling of desire to be where we once were in hope that we will return.

In the incomparable parabolic illustration written for all to read if they wish, the Lord Jesus reveals the truth. The parable of the prodigal son is an apt illustration of this truth and no better Illustrator of it could possibly be found. In the story the son went into the far country quite voluntarily; the father did not want him to go, nor did he attempt to dissuade him from it, and what is more to the point, neither did he disown him because he went. That he went against his father's wishes cannot be doubted, but wherever he went and wherever he was he was still his son. Strange as it may seem, and contrary to many ideas, at no point in the story do we read that the father went after his son; he did not even send anyone to find him and remonstrate with him either. In his wisdom the father left his son in the far country to taste the bitterness of his folly and to drink of his own misery until he came to himself and realised who and where he was. He was the father's son, and yet and yet: his own state spoke to him and an inward voice spoke to him. His father spared him nothing whether of goodness or of remorse, until at last he was brought to nothingness, folly, poverty, desolation and squalor. At last he could bear it no longer and he rose and, as voluntarily as he left, went back to his father and home. The amazing thing is that he repented himself; no one tried to renew him to repentance; certainly his father did not, neither did his own brother; the prodigal in the story, like Abraham in real life, came back of his own free will. When no one else can renew us to repentance we can of our own selves arise and go back and find a welcome from our Father.

There are two men mentioned in scripture whose lives stand out as memorials of the path we must shun: one is Judas Iscariot and the other is Esau. The stories of these two men are so well known to us that we need not linger long on the details of the particular incidents in which they were involved. Judas sold his Lord and Esau sold his birthright. When at last Judas saw what he had done he repented himself and went out and committed suicide. What a tragedy, and what a pity; had he gone out and found his Lord — if repentance had led him to Jesus — it might have been a different story. Esau, though not so tragic a figure, similarly realised eventually what he had done, and tried to gain that primary blessing which went with the birthright, but he utterly failed, for, like Judas, he did not find the place of repentance either. He sought the inheritance of blessing carefully with tears, he may also have sought the place of repentance, but if so he did not find it; perhaps the reason for this is not hard to find: his heart was full of bitterness and revenge and murder. No heart that harbours anything evil will come to repentance or ever find forgiveness from God. When dealing with souls we must beware of trying to apply to men's needs the policies of men, however finely they may be framed and expertly applied. When counselling individuals biblical principles must be applied and righteous paths followed, but all mechanistic application of policies must be avoided; there are no party lines to follow. Broad lines of procedure may be discovered in

scripture, and as we have seen with Abraham, when seeking to help men and women into or back into fellowship with God, we do ill if we ignore these.

The simple thing spoken of Abraham in the beginning is profoundly true, and is of such great importance that we must not fail to notice its significance: Abraham 'was called to go out into a place'. The 'place' of faith must be reached by everyone; with us though 'the place' is not a geographical location as in Abraham's case. Strange though it may seem, though it was bound up with another land, it was not primarily so with Abraham either. The place of faith is a heart condition and to reach it a man has to go out into it — that is, he must respond to what God says and launch out on it without reservation. When a man does that, he and the word God has spoken become one; the man then becomes an epitome of that word and the rest of his life becomes a fulfilment of it; in other words he inherits the place. This is that place of faith which Abraham reached; he found it was the place where all God's unspoken intentions, as well as His stated promises, were abundantly fulfilled. Until he reached it and obeyed God completely, what God said lay dormant in his heart. It is said of Abraham's descendants, 'These all died in faith'; it is a remarkable assertion, unique in scripture, and who can rightly say how much credit for that is due to their father Abraham? What a pioneer he was, this one man's act of obedience affected them all; far beyond Israel it has affected every one of us also. It is said of him that 'he is the father of us all', and before God so he is. God's demand of all these children is that each should have the same kind of personal faith as father Abraham.

As we have already seen there are different kinds of faith: natural and spiritual. For our purposes here it has been necessary to point out this difference, but there is a sense in which all faith is spiritual, in that it is of spirit in whichever of those two realms it operates. This is not to say that because a man exercises natural faith he is a spiritual man in the sense in which the word spiritual is used in scripture. When a man operates natural faith he is a natural man; when he operates spiritual faith he is a spiritual man. The difference between these two states lies in this: spiritual or saving faith comes to a man when God speaks to him and he believes Him; faith of whichever order operates spontaneously. Before that he operates by natural faith and lives by it, for instance as when he eats food and drinks water, believing them to be wholesome and good. Because this latter order of faith is possible to every man he is expected by both God and man to eat and drink and live, therefore every man is held responsible to do so. Somewhat similarly the same is expected when God speaks to a man: he should (because he can) believe Him without question, as did Abraham.

Behold then the wonder of God's love that He should send Him who is The Word of God into the world that in the closing days the marvellous age of grace should be brought in and Christ be preached in all the earth for all mankind to hear and believe. The wonder lies in the simplicity of it all; God in grace has simplified His ways with mankind. Not now do we depend upon a special word to Abraham, or a special word to Moses, or an Isaiah, or a Samuel, or a David. There is no man who, above another, has the special word for this day; that has already been spoken. This Word is everything God has to say to mankind; it is extra special because it was clothed in flesh and was born a man to live out in this world the true life of faith before all. This word was from the beginning, it was, and is now, and is yet to come; only once incarnated, that word was naturally entirely spiritual both before and following the incarnation. Because of this it is more important than any other word ever spoken in this world; it is the divine, direct and eternal word of God to every man. This word was borne forth from God to Mary by an angel, that through her the Word should be born to mankind as the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Word, that Word which was ever with God and was God, which, says John, 'we have heard ... have seen ... have looked upon, and ... have handled, of the Word of life' it is the word which was lived and thereby spoken.

Therefore the writer tells the Hebrews that the days in which God spoke by the prophets are past; quite noticeably he does not mention judges or kings, though both often spoke God's word. This is not to say that what they spoke was not prophetic, it often was, but to show that by far the most important office is that of the prophet. In this connection it should be noted that when Peter quotes David on the day of Pentecost he quotes him as patriarch and prophet, and not as king. The fathers to whom God spoke are passed away, and so has 'that which was in part', (to borrow and adapt Paul's words); all that has been done away. God ended all of it simply because it was only in part, and very limited in its effect. The partial light which broke into the darkness of the world through many lights has gone, it has been eclipsed by the true Light which is now come. The darkness is past, so has partial light; God has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. To use two biblical words very much in vogue throughout

Christendom in these days, in Christ the Logos and the Rhema are one; God's personal thought, as well as His life, has been fully expressed by Him, manifested in flesh and blood.

The purposes for which God has done this are phenomenal in contemplation. 'Beloved', says John, the great apostle and prophet of the new creation, 'now are we the sons of God'; no prophet of the Old Testament ever said that of himself or of anyone. Only the prophets of the superior New Covenant spoke like this. Simply because men of the world do not know these things, they do not know us. When Christ was here the world did not know and would not recognise Him as the Son of God; they could not know it because they would not believe it. Similarly, (though by a different kind of miracle, and to a lesser degree than He), we are the sons of God now. This is so certain that we are called the sons of God by God Himself. So close is the likeness of our birth to His that we are known in heaven, (and should be known on earth also) as the sons of God. As He is known as the Son of God because of His miraculous incarnation and life and death and resurrection, so do we become known as the sons of God by an actual miraculous spiritual and individual birth; by no other means could God make us His sons. It is He, not we, who has to say we are His sons, and He has to say so in our hearts; He would not say that we are if we are not.

Taking this truth even further John says, 'as He is, so are we in this world'; John was not speaking this prophetically or hopefully or presumptuously, he knew that he was a son of God. Though not equal with Him, here and now in our flesh and blood state we are the sons of Jesus' Father just as He. Upon this solid foundation we take our stand by faith, this is our place, and hopes arise in our hearts that when at last the Lord Jesus appears we shall be like Him. Nothing in scripture could be put more plainly than this. Our wondering hearts shall be the more convinced of it when we do see Him, for then we shall be as completely like Him as it is possible and suitable that we should be. Then, although to a lesser degree, we shall undeniably be seen and known as manifestations of God's word by His Son and by His Spirit, even as He in His day was the original manifestation of The Word by the Spirit.

Understanding of this may be slow to dawn upon us, and when it does, faith's grasp may be so weak that it may take a lifetime to reach fullness in us. When through grace it does, by comparison with our Lord Jesus, knowing ourselves to be utterly unworthy of it and seeing so little likeness to Him in ourselves, we cry out for more grace. The fact of it is made no less true by that though; faith is to no degree lessened because of our own or other people's opinions of ourselves. As He is The Word spoken by God for all time and peoples, so are we the word spoken by God in our time for people of our day. Paul even went so far as to say that he and his fellow-labourers were also epistles. The Lord Jesus who was and is the 'Logos' and the 'Rhema', is the Alpha and the Omega too; in fact He is both the whole alphabet of God and all the words constructed from it by God also. Well does Paul say, 'in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily', and tell us that in Him we are complete. As surely as Paul says this, so does John tell us to abide in Him and sin not, and adds an injunction to abide in Him and obey the unction which is within ourselves. This unction being an implantation from God, when obeyed develops every regenerate person's new spiritual nature in conformity to His will and in His likeness.

We have an unction from the Holy One. Given by our Father, it is a kind of second nature within us. It must not be confused with the conscience which is part of the nature of every human being's spirit, dead though he may be. Conscience is one of the many involuntary functional powers of the human being; it is one of several proofs that man is basically (a) spirit, quite distinct from the unction from the Holy One. The unction is one of the many involuntary powers of the divine nature of which Peter speaks, that is, the nature imparted to us by new birth which alone constitutes us sons of God. Man's conscience was designed by God to be the natural functional ability through which the unction should operate in him: by new birth it is adapted to become the functional vehicle of the unction. As with the human body itself, everything of human nature was designed and made by God for God Himself. Therefore, having fashioned the conscience for the unction, He made the Holy Spirit the unction unto us. The unction is the means whereby the voice and word of God is inscribed into our new nature, and is intended by Him to impart to us certainty of knowledge about all things vital to eternal life. God uses it as the instrument of His thought, that thereby the rhema, if obeyed, should become the logos within us; thus we are enabled to co-operate with Him unto the development of the full stature of Christ in us. Because of this the sons of God can live at rest and not be forever straining to know God's will, and to catch His voice, or to hear His word, or understand His meaning, as the case and needs may be. Then, as of nature, men may become the manifestation of God's word and the demonstration of His will before all men and, as of nature, effortlessly do what He says and means.

The 'land of promise', that place of faith which we all must enter (attain to), is where we must live as pilgrims and strangers on the earth. In this place all the promises of God will be fulfilled to His obedient children, that they should enjoy the inheritance which was and is in Christ for us all. The obvious sure mark of these children is that, as He Himself does, they also should live the eternal life naturally, without struggle and inward conflict; this is what God and the writer intended by the statement, 'the just shall live by faith'. The life of faith should be steady, calm, progressive and inwardly peaceful; most of the time it should be unremarkable too.

Very little is said about any of the men so far named in this chapter. From what is recorded we cannot form any kind of picture of their day to day living. We ponder with amazement the major events of their lives, the great crises, their wonderful achievements and extraordinary heroism, but, except in the case of Noah, these achievements with their attendant trials were of short duration; the rest of their days lie in the obscurity of history, unmentioned. For every extraordinary day or event there were hundreds of ordinary days when nothing remarkable happened, humdrum, repetitive, perhaps by some people's estimation even boring. The emphasis being made is that they were living by faith rather than on what they were achieving by faith, (which is not to suggest that living by faith is one whit less ignoble than working by faith). All we know about Abel is that he made an offering to God in process of time, or 'at the end of days' — just one event in a lifetime. Of Enoch we know little more than that he was a prophet and had a good testimony, but he achieved nothing which may be considered great or spectacular; it was God who did the spectacular thing, and no one but angels (and perhaps devils) observed the spectacle.

Noah built the ark; though fearful he enjoyed doing that no doubt, and it was a great and noble work worthy of unstinted praise, but think of thirty six thousand and five hundred days of monotonous toil! None of us have lived that long! How would we like to live every day of our life in total application to just one thing? Some might have called it slavery! And how about Abraham? The endless search for what was not there. He trekked, he pitched his tent, he struck his tent, he tramped to the four points of the compass, he marched to the borders of his land, he went everywhere. Day after day of disappointment; save the same old repetitive things of life nothing changed, it went on for years. Abraham was always looking for something he could not find — it did not exist — not on this earth. It was not as though he went alone either, because his heart was fixed on this and could not be diverted from it: his whole family, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, plus his entire entourage of some hundreds of persons, had to go with him. Whatever they thought and however they felt about it they just had to go; there was no restraining him; he was relentless. The search never ceased; they stayed nowhere for long, there was no final settling down. Abraham believed, therefore he hoped, and therefore he searched, believing that his hope justified all he did; to him that kind of life was the natural outcome of faith.

The strange thing about the city that Abraham was looking for was that it had no name, which, to say the least, seems fairly unusual. For a man to be looking for a city and not to be able to name it to anyone must have seemed strange to everyone of whom he may have inquired, but that is how it was with Abraham. He knew who it was that created it, of that he was sure, it was God, and because he knew that, he knew that the city would have foundations, it must have, but where it was he had no idea. He felt pretty positive he would find it in the land of promise — the land of promise — what vast possibility for faith to explore and hope to flourish. Abraham felt sure that, once in the city, he would enjoy many things of which the Lord had not yet spoken and had not specifically promised him. That they were included and intended in the promise he had no doubt; they must be, though not specified they were implied by what God said and he could expect them; the fact that he had the land assured him of that. He realised that there must be many cities there and he was determined to have a good look at every one of them. What would he find? Would it be the one? He only wanted that one, the city built by God and in which He lived. Abraham wanted to come to it at last, find out its name and live there himself and perhaps see God; he felt he belonged there. Never would he move from it again, nevermore would he pitch and strike camp; his pilgrimage would be over, finding God he would get to know Him; that was all he wanted.

He was the man to whom God had spoken; how blessed he was, it was wonderful. Imagine! A city full of people to whom God's word was law and His every wish a command. The first time God spoke to him he was thrilled; because of that he was willing to leave all, go anywhere. That was only a beginning, though; God spoke to him again and again; He had to if He wanted His will done. Abraham also knew that by reason of His original promise God must speak again, He simply had to. God had committed Himself to things which necessitated much further clarification. Abraham waited in patience looking for the word to be spoken again, and the years went by. Then one day God's priest came and spoke to him, and Abraham realised how much more there was to know. The

priest of the most high God? It was astounding! Abraham realised he was only at the beginning. Here on earth Melchizedek had come to find him to speak and minister to him! Where had he come from? Where did he live? What was his name? Melchizedek? He was a king. God's priest a king? Then whatever was God like? If His priest was king of righteousness and king of peace how wonderful must God Himself be? Glorious, unimaginably so: he must be King of kings. God's city must be the ultimate perfection unto which all men should seek and find that they should enter it as their final home. In lowly reverence Abraham bowed to receive the royal blessing bestowed upon him by the heavenly priest in the name of the King of kings. Rising to watch Melchizedek depart Abraham knew in his heart that he had been made rich beyond all earthly riches. Of the spoils of battle he wanted none; plunder taken at the point of a sword meant nothing to him. The blessings of the city had been brought to him before he had reached it, he could want no more. But where did Melchizedek live and what was the name of the city he came from? Was it Salem? Would he please direct him? He wanted to come there. But Melchizedek had gone.

If the desire to search for the city sprang up in Abraham's heart the day God first spoke to him, the appearing of Melchizedek strengthened it more, and till the day he died he went after it with all his heart. The God of the city had called him, the priest of God had visited him to give him bread and wine, to commune with him; it fed his soul. Surely the purpose of the visit was to strengthen his resolve: he was on track — now for the city. Praise God for such a husband Sarah; praise God for such a father Isaac; praise God for such a grandfather Jacob; praise God for such a master Eliezer; let all men praise God for such a leader. Blessed be God for such a man. The secret of the Lord was with him, the mystery of God and of His city was revealed to him, the knowledge of the gospel was being imparted to him, he was walking in the vision and light of a new day and another world. Later, when he was able to bear it, the mount of the Lord and the death and resurrection of Christ would be disclosed to him also. Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Eliezer and the host of men who served him were safe with the patriarch; he brought them into the covenant and led them in the lifelong search. It was not to be wondered at if they all wondered at him. Who of all those who knew him could have failed to be influenced by him and who would not have followed him? Only they who do not love righteousness and who hate peace, who want cities of their own or of other men's design and building, men who wish to abandon their pilgrimage and settle down and make their home in this world.

What a distinguished person Abraham was; the Father intended him to be distinct from everyone else mentioned in the chapter. When God called him to go out into an earthly place He also set him apart in a spiritual place of honour above everyone else and quite unique in scripture. Abraham was predestined to represent God the Father unto men, pointing forward to the manifestation of His Fatherhood planned by Him centuries ahead. Paul was very aware of this and says of Abraham that 'before God he is the father of us all'. Abraham is not the heavenly Father of us all, but before God he is our human father in that, by two promises to him, God said that on the human side both the earthly and the heavenly host of sons, should proceed from him; Abraham believed God and what He said, so Abraham became the father of the faithful. But the excellence of Abraham is greater than that: he not only believed God for multitudes; he believed Him also for one, which is often a far more difficult thing. He believed against hope, against himself and against the combined sterility of himself and his wife, and particularly against her unbelief. Abraham believed for her when she would not believe, and because he believed, through his faith God was able to reveal His own faithfulness. How immeasurably great Abraham was; he believed for heavenly things and earthly things, for multitudes and for one, for life, for death and for resurrection: herein lay his election to his own fatherhood, and to be the sign of God's Fatherhood. Others before him had believed God and had achieved great things; many also would come after him and believe God for great things, but not in such fullness — almost completeness — or for such consummate things.

Whether, or in what form, God may have manifested Himself to Adam and Eve in the garden we do not know; what we do know is that He planned to appear later to Abraham in triune form when He came to him to announce the promised seed, for that is precisely what He did. Abraham and Sarah saw three men, entertained three men, fed three men — God was determined to reveal or to manifest Himself as a trinity. This may have surprised Abraham greatly. It certainly would have done, unless knowledge that God was triune had been preserved from the beginning of time, handed down by men of faith like Noah. Certainly Moses believed it, for it was he who wrote of this incident; but because he also wrote to Israel that 'the Lord our God is one Lord', the Jews in Christ's day did not believe that He was the Son of the Father and that God is triune. How can God beget a son? they ask, it is not possible. That is exactly what Abraham thought about himself — impossible! To such an one God came as a trinity and told him that he could and would — and he did — have a son. It was all very simple

for God, but it was a mighty step for Abraham — hence his greatness. But great as it was, he was to discover it was as nothing compared with what it led to, and to what he was heading through the years ahead.

The most outstanding thing of all in which Abraham most clearly represented God the Father and became most nearly like Him happened in the hour of his greatest trial. So severe was the test that no man would have blamed him if he had failed to go through with it. God's test was so extreme and inhumane that it is almost impossible that He would make such demands — nothing could have been harder. Yet God had planned it from the very beginning and made everything work together to its accomplishment. From the very first moment he responded to the call God had led up to this; it was the prize of his high calling: everything before this had been preparation for this moment. The Lord had never told Abraham that He had chosen him to be the great father-figure of all history and to such a degree. Abraham knew he would have a son because God told him so; indeed during this period he had two sons, but the first was not the son promised by God; he was born as the tragic result of Abraham's collusion with Sarah in her faithless scheming to have a son. But Isaac was conceived by a miracle wrought by God in both Abraham and Sarah, and when he was born they knew he was the promised seed. On his birthday they rejoiced, not knowing that they were beginning to see Christ's day, nor how much more of that day they were destined to see later. Abraham begat the son by his faith and by God's power, and through grace the word of the promise became flesh; at the same time by the same power Abraham became the father.

It was a wonderful prophetic occasion, but it was only a beginning; as the years went by the day drew nearer and nearer when Abraham must fulfil his representative fatherhood to a far greater degree. Had he known it, God had changed His friend's name for this very reason. When God first called him his name was Abram; Terah his father had given him that name when he was born and who can say what was in that father's mind when he chose that name for his son? It means, 'father of a multitude'. Possibly his father had visions of Abraham begetting many sons and daughters who in turn would beget or bear many more. Certainly the name is full of hopefulness and desire, if not faith, and how unexpectedly prophetic it was! But God had other ideas for Abraham, better and higher ideas altogether, so He called him out into the place where He would bring those ideas into being. Strange as it must have seemed to Abraham at the time, this involved the changing of his name.

As far as we can tell this had not been done to anyone before; it was most unusual and of great significance. However, God did not do this until Abraham had first met Melchizedek the king, the 'priest of the most high God', who brought to Abram bread and wine and ministered it to him. 'The Most High God' had plans to bring Abram's name into line with His own, and more suited to all He had in mind for him to be and do. He did not do so upon that occasion though, but reserved it for a later time when He would bring Abraham into covenant with Himself. When this covenant of circumcision was established in the flesh of Abraham and his family, God announced to him that he was altering his name: no more would he be called Abram, 'father of a multitude', but Abraham, 'high father of a multitude'. The Most High God called His friend 'high father' because already in His heart He had made him that; it was his calling: God literalised his calling into a name. Among men Abraham became known as 'the high father of a multitude'; he was not the highest father — God was that: God is the High Father of the multitude of heaven. He called Abram and changed his name to Abraham that he might represent Him by being that to men on earth.

The Lord Jesus said to the Jews of His day, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day'; He would have spoken just as truly if He had said, your father Abraham rejoiced to see my Father's day', and what a day that was. It was because God had planned the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus that He first called and then renamed the man Abram. When Abraham first looked upon his son Isaac, although he did not know it, he began to see Jesus' day; more than that, he also caught a glimpse of the Father's day, though he would have recognised that even less. Thousands of years later Jesus said, 'he that hath seen me hath seen the Father', but they who heard it did not understand; they saw, but they did not see. Understanding comes so slowly, and to some when it comes it stays long in the state of dawning.

On a night that must have seemed endless to Abraham the most high God and Father of heaven came to the highest of all earth's fathers and in the darkness demanded of him his son: the supreme test had begun. Before the day dawned he had responded to it exactly as God knew he would. Abraham's answer was, 'Yes', Isaac was God's. How well God had chosen His man. He had watched over him and trained him for this moment. To be a true father he must beget a son; to be true to the Father he must offer up his son; to be truly like the Most High FATHER of multitudes and be the high father of a multitude he must receive his son back from the dead. Whether

or not Abraham understood all those things who can tell? He was God's friend — He might have told him. Abraham certainly fulfilled the conditions; he even believed he would welcome his son back from ashes, and in the figure of resurrection he did so. He did not know it was all only to be a figure, or that he would rise to heights of obedience and faith unknown before or since, except on Calvary. Moriah was the most marvellous of places; it was the highest place of his life. Speaking of all that happened there he said 'in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen'. He saw and — O, who can tell what emotions filled his heart? From start to finish it was the father's day. The son was involved too, he had to be. Counting ten years for a day perhaps the three days' journey to the place represented the human life span of the Lamb of God. They had a little further to go together to 'the place' where his father, acting as a god, built the altar for him. With all its human limitations what that father and son enacted during those days was prophetic to a degree, an almost wordless parable of unspeakable love, utterly godlike. Between them Abraham and Isaac went through and worked out the heart-rending of God at 'the place of a skull' centuries later. No human eye saw into the secret sacrifice there, and only God's saw into all the wonder of Abraham's great sacrifice on Moriah. Did He say, 'O man great is thy faith'?

God saw it, Abraham saw it, both fathers saw it; the One saw comprehensively without limitations, the other saw only partly; Abraham had all the limitations of our common humanity, but O how phenomenally he saw. Moriah was the mount of God; God had shown it to him, He had shown him Himself too; he had to climb the mountain to catch the vision though. What he witnessed was wonderful, and what he saw through the obedience of his own faithful heart was more wonderful still. What he entered into must have been most wonderful of all though, for through his own agony he entered into fellowship with the Father and the Son. Abraham knew the faith and the fatherhood and the feelings of God. He was the high father, he must have been, for he was one of the most humble men that ever lived. When he left the mount with his son his elation must have been impossible to express in words. Yet thoughts and promises born of conviction inwrought by experience were running through his mind: the future was wonderful. Had he been an ordinary person, or a general kind of prophet, or a normal man of faith the experience might have ruined him; pride might have said, 'I have seen it in the mount of God', or 'I went up the mount of God and saw it', but he was not a proud man. He was the greatest man on earth and surely the humblest. It was a very singular and absolutely exclusive experience and he could have boasted of it, leaving no one else the slightest hope of ever seeing it or of finding faith to attain unto it, but he was earth's high father — he said, 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen', and left the hope and faith of a humble man as a heritage for us all. How a man's language reveals him.

Abraham did not ascend Moriah to see anything; there was nothing to see, and if anyone afterwards climbed the mountain to see what Abraham saw they would have seen nothing. The remains of an altar perhaps, blood-stains perhaps, but it was unlikely — a few ashes left by the wind, but that was doubtful, a thicket with some strands of wool twisted on its branches maybe, or a twig or two scattered around, nothing else though. Traces, indications that something had taken place there sometime, that is all, but what could they have made of the things they saw? They would only have been scraps of fast-disappearing evidences of things not seen; they would not have seen the trial of Abraham's faith, nor have experienced the test of his love. Abraham went up the mountain to do something, there was nothing to see until he did it. True he expected a miracle, and what a miracle it would have been if it had happened; his Isaac would have come back to him from the smoke and the flames and the ashes, a living sacrifice. But it was not to be; his son did not die; it only happened in a figure, not in reality. Had it happened it would have been the greatest miracle of all time, greater than the death and resurrection of Christ, for He was God's Son, but Isaac was not; he was a mere man. Knowing the Lord, we are not surprised that he rose from the dead; it was not possible for the grave to hold Him, but Isaac was not God in the flesh. Had he come back from ashes it would have been the miracle of all miracles, but it was not.

When Abraham had carried through his intention as far as he was allowed to go, God intervened: He called to him again and said, 'now I know'. At the same moment Abraham's eyes were opened and he saw. The high father of a multitude was not permitted to slay his son — only the most high God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ did that. Abraham saw into something of the invisible thing that was accomplished at Golgotha, and understood at least in part what no one else, not even those who stood closest to the cross saw or understood, namely the sacrifice which both the Father and the Son made. Everybody else saw the crucifixion, but they did not understand even that. As far as humanly possible in all but the final step Abraham had been allowed to enter in to the Father's feelings; to a measure he understood the involvement of God's heart in the mysteries of the crucifixion. The sufferings of the Son are much talked about; they should be: all may be made conformable unto His death and enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, but not much is said about the sufferings of the Father.

This may be because there have been very few who have climbed their Moriah; just a few sightseers perhaps, or some servants who stay afar off 'with the ass', watching father and son dwindling away into the distance and up the mountain arid out of sight. Only a percentage of men reach even the foothills of the mountain of mystery and suffering which rise from the plains of rest and lead on to the heights, and then mount to the peak of fellowship with the Father and the Son. The challenge of Abraham is a challenge to every man's faith. His last message is both a spur and an encouragement, holding promise without definition in a world of understanding without bounds. Every man who ascends to that summit will realise why he was born, and why he is called and what life is all about. He will not see what Abraham saw though; he will certainly see anew the land of far distances and all that God wants him to see after he has done the will of God. This is the object of the call — that place within the place which only the faithful see.

Surely it is a strange thing that so little is made of Isaac's part in all this. He is referred to, and the question he asked, together with Abraham's answer to it, is recorded, but beyond this he seems to have filled a minor, even a passive role. Throughout his entire life from his birth to his death, as well as through this particular period, the son was completely overshadowed by the father: Abraham towers over everything and everyone, and justly so. It is obvious that the writer intended that the father, not the son, should be seen. This may be because, although both of them occupied focal positions of great typical significance, Abraham more nearly represented the Father than Isaac did the Son, for, although he was the seed promised to Abraham through Sarah, he was not 'the seed of the woman' promised by God in the beginning. After all, great though he was, Abraham was only a man, and miraculous as Isaac's birth was, his mother was not a virgin; neither was Moriah Golgotha, nor the altar the cross; Isaac did not die, neither did he rise again. Though the Bible episode was traumatic and dramatic, it was only figurative. But figurative of who and of what? The accepted answer to that question is, 'of Christ and of His death and resurrection'; but perhaps this may not be so, or perhaps not in quite the same way as may be thought. Consideration of a few scriptural comparisons may serve to give us clearer view and help us to fuller understanding of these things.

New Testament writers assure us there was nothing figurative about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He was so dead that He was hastily embalmed and buried and, without ceremony, sealed in a borrowed tomb (although the owner of the tomb did not loan it — he gave it — afterwards he realised that he had in actual fact only loaned it for the Lord's temporary burial). Quite contrary to this, and as already pointed out, Isaac the son did not die; there was no resurrection on Moriah; he was not buried, there was no tomb; only in a figure did the father receive him from the dead. Considering this the inquiring mind may ask, 'if Isaac did not truly represent Christ, who did he typify, and where does he fit into the New Covenant?'

Isaac does have his counterpart in the New Testament, but it is not one man, it is a company of people. Of these it may be as truly said as it was of Isaac, that in a figure the Father received them from the dead: this company is called the Church. This is a great mystery and wonderfully true, that on the day the Father received His Son from the dead He also received the whole Church, every member of it bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. All that was accomplished by the resurrection is matched by what was involved in it. The actuality of it, namely that Christ rose from the dead bodily, is equalled by the fact that, figuratively, with Him, the Church which is His body also rose. This unity, this oneness, this togetherness with Christ was taught by Paul and revealed most plainly in his Ephesian epistle. When Christ was crucified, at the same time and on the same cross, every member of the Church was crucified, and when He rose all rose with Him.

Paul wrote, 'I am (was) crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live', and completed the truth in another place, 'If ye then be risen with Christ ...'. It would have been of no more use to God to have actually slain every member of the Church on crosses and raised them up again from the dead than it would have been to Abraham if he had slain and raised up Isaac (had it been possible for him to do this latter). Had Abraham attempted it, it would have been his folly: that he was willing to have done so was his virtue. Everything which took place on Moriah, historical and actual though it was on Abraham's part, was figurative and prophetic on God's part, even to the provision of the ram caught by its horns in the bush, provided for the ultimate burnt offering. In itself the ram was no more than an animal, yet at that time it died in Isaac's place, a substitute for him even as Christ was a substitute for us. Surely this is the truest interpretation and deepest meaning of that word of Abraham to Isaac as they approached the mount, 'God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering'; the son must have pondered that most deeply. All that Abraham 'saw' by faith that day is not easy, perhaps not possible, to define. Was that word to his son a promise of life by substitution? Was it a prophecy? Was it the word of a seer? Or was it all three? He used the

future tense, 'will' — had he used the past tense, 'has provided' it could be thought he had already 'seen' the ram caught in the thicket awaiting their arrival — but then the whole enactment would have been a charade.

When together father and son left the ass and the men that day Abraham was prepared in heart to slay his son, but he did not lie to his servants when he said that he and his son would 'go yonder' and worship and come again, he knew that they would. Nothing could be a clearer declaration of faith; he was absolutely certain that God would provide. Abraham offered up his son to God; it was the supreme test and God took him to the extreme point — he stood, knife in hand, over his son, poised to deliver the death-blow when God stopped him.

He had passed the test, he had proved that all his faith and his hope and his love were in the God who gave him his son, not in the son God gave him. Abraham had been given every reason by God to believe that in his son lay all his future hopes of being the father of nations and the progenitor of kings, and he had centred all his love in him. It was because of this that God put him through the test, making special emphasis on love, 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest', it was his faith and hope and love that was being so severely tested.

How could it be? Isaac was the fruit of all his faith, the ground of all his hopes, the object and purpose of his love, the answer to his prayers, the embodiment of God's promise, the reward of his labours, the end of his long weary pilgrimage, a compensation for the great disappointment that he never found the city of God. Why Isaac? Was it just to make him a type of Christ? Did God do such things just for that? No, He did not, He did it partly for that. He did it: (1) to know whether Abraham loved Him more than anyone or anything else; (2) that Abraham may prove himself to be 'the high father of a multitude' indeed; (3) that Abraham should enter into some knowledge of God's own Fatherhood and its cost. Abraham only received his son back from the dead in a figure, but it was counted to him as though it had all been actual; only God prevented him from slaying his son. Abraham was intent to receive Isaac as a double gift, both of them miraculous, given from barrenness and given from death. Isaac was the miracle child given to him by God, but the faith that received him was greater than the gift. We all have so much yet to learn about this faith, chiefly perhaps that the faith by which we are given life and by which we maintain it, that is, the faith by which we live, works by love. Had Abraham not loved God supremely he could never have done what he did for Him that day — namely give Him back His son. Abraham knew that Isaac his son was God's son; that is why he could not withhold him. Abraham loved God supremely. We say, and rightly so, that Abraham did it by faith, but only because he loved God so much. It was love that demanded he slay his son and his faith rose equal to it, and in the sight, as well as in the reckoning of God, he did so. Thereby he doubled the gift and multiplied the blessings he first received, for he received his son back again from God. By faith Abraham was overwhelmed with God's love and by the gift of God was filled with it: 'The greatest of these is love'.

Had Abraham in reality slain his son and burned him to ashes, and Isaac had come back from that nothingness, a completely new relationship would have commenced between them — life would have changed totally. Nothing could have been quite the same again between them. Such an extreme and unthinkable experience would have changed everything utterly and permanently. Only the Father and the Son could have gone through such an unimaginable experience and retained sanity and not have been rent in two. Only that degree of unimpartable love which has bound them together from all eternity could have outlived that — and it has. Hallelujah!

But perhaps after all the verse should not be interpreted to mean or even to imply such things, for there is yet another way of looking at it all, namely this, that God was the one who received Isaac that day. Verse seventeen makes plain that in the reality of unseen things, by faith Abraham did offer up his only begotten son: there can be no questioning that. Although he did not finally slay Isaac, in heart Abraham did offer him up to God, and God did receive him from Abraham. God never asks anything of anyone without intending to receive from that person whatever it is for which He asks. In full assurance of this, may it not be true that the pronoun 'he' used in verse nineteen refers primarily to God and only secondarily to Abraham? By all the laws of grammar that is what the writer must be understood to be saying. Here is the verse, 'Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure'. The pronoun 'him' which occurs twice obviously refers to Isaac: the only name to appear is 'God': the third pronoun, 'he', can only therefore refer to God. The word 'accounting' is used of Abraham, who, though unnamed, by that word is introduced into the verse, which thus continues the statement made in verse seventeen: 'Abraham ... offered up his only begotten son ... accounting that God was able to raise him up ... from the dead; from whence also he (He) received him in a figure'. The first word could therefore be rightly changed to 'Abraham was accounting', and the pronoun 'he' be

read as referring to either Abraham or God or to both. Whichever it is may not matter greatly, for each received him. Abraham as physically, God as spiritually and representatively.

The whole episode is highly typical, and the fact that Isaac is referred to as Abraham's only begotten son immediately reveals that the writer has chosen to place it in this category, for, as scripture makes clear, Abraham had many sons, the first of whom was Ishmael, borne to him by Hagar, Sarah's maid. Isaac, whom Sarah bore to him, was his second son. Later, following Sarah's death and his marriage to Keturah, Abraham had many sons by her also. Isaac was Sarah's first and only son, not Abraham's; he was also Abraham's first and only begotten son by Sarah, that is by promise according to God's will; he was not the first begotten of all his sons. The first son was according to Sarah's and (eventually) Abraham's will. All of this reference to the only begotten is for no other reason than to point to Christ; Isaac was not his father's only begotten, but Jesus was and is the Father's only begotten. Unlike Sarah's Isaac, Mary's Jesus was not her only begotten, He was both her firstborn and the only son she ever begat from His Father, but she also bore many sons and daughters unto Joseph after she had borne God His only begotten Son on to the earth. Until then she was a virgin, which Sarah most certainly was not when she bore Isaac to Abraham.

This surprising and extraordinary statement about Isaac which does not appear to have foundation in fact is perhaps made in accordance with a principle of truth not plainly declared and not always apparent in scripture; nevertheless it governs all God's dealings with men. This principle may be stated thus; when a man in receipt of promise and under command from God steps out of line with God's will revealed by the promise and the command, whatever he does while in that condition of disobedience is counted as having not been done, and in God's mercy is blotted out. An instance of this is to be found in the dealings of God with Israel while still in the wilderness, yet drawing near to the promised land. Baalam had been hired to curse them, but he found himself unable to do so. Instead he found himself taken over by the Spirit of God, who turned his demonic intentions into a marvellous statement of intention to bless God's people. During the course of the prophecy God said He could see neither iniquity nor perversity in Jacob, which must have sounded unbelievable in the ears of everyone who heard it — including the prophet himself. Israel were in the wilderness because of those very sins, yet God could only say He saw no such thing among them. The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that, although scripture records many of the nation's sins, God in mercy had blotted out all of them and in His sight they existed no longer.

This is the ground upon which the statement about Abraham is made by the Hebrews writer. Abraham's reluctance to beget a son through Hagar is plainly shown in Genesis. He only did so under pressure from Sarah; it brought sorrow to many hearts, and both he and Sarah must have wished indeed that they had never contrived such a thing. In His grace God forgave them this wrong and did not count it against them; He allowed Abraham and Sarah to start afresh, removed Hagar and Ishmael from the scene, and true to His ways with all men, blotted out entirely Abraham's departure from the way of faith and looked upon it as though it had never existed. Isaac then became Abraham's firstborn, for according to God's intention and the promise He made to Abraham and the way He dealt with Sarah, Isaac was the firstborn. As Paul says, Ishmael was born after the flesh and Isaac was born after the Spirit, and 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called ... this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sara shall have a son

Sarah, who was entirely barren all through her life until she conceived Isaac, relapsed into her barrenness after he was born, but not so with Abraham; he retained the renewal of the powers God bestowed upon him for the birth of Isaac right into his old age. Why this difference should have been made is not revealed, but perhaps it may be explained by the fact that Sarah was next to Eve in the line of the promise made in Eden that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. Indeed Sarah is more illustrative of that woman than either Eve or even Mary, who was the vessel chosen by the Father to bear His Son. Both Eve and Mary had other children but not Sarah; she bore and brought up one only son and then died as barren as she had been before the miracle. It cannot be without some significance that we are told that Isaac lived with his wife in Sarah's tent after her decease, although it is a connection of ideas rather than of vital truth which stimulates thought about it. There is no faith principle involved in this, but it gives all Bible lovers an opportunity to marvel afresh and wonder at the skill of God. He causes well nigh invisible shades of meaning to come to light, that blended together they may enhance the marvellous pattern and contribute to the beauty of the finished work. Blessed indeed are they who see somewhat of the wondrous patterns of the divine plan, and by faith follow on through the affinities of truth to love Him and adore the perfection of His mind.

The names of Isaac and Jacob are linked in scripture with the name of Abraham, but the vision and the spirit and the drive of Abraham was not in them. God associates His name with theirs though, and says He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, coupling the names together almost as one, which is blessing enough. What a God of grace He is. Dwelling a little on this numerical idea we may also here find a Bible example of 'second and third generationism'. The phrase is quite modern, denoting spiritual degeneration; it is not found in scripture; there it is comprehended in the word 'backsliding'. 'Second and third generationism' refers to the marked spiritual loss and the resultant spiritual decline observable between one generation of God's people and the next, and the one which follows that as next in order to that. The phrase generally means that these successive generations have retained the outward forms and possibly the beliefs also of what their forebears had, and probably believe in and hold to them tenaciously, but that the truth of which those forms and tenets speak has been neglected and therefore the power of them has long since departed. 'Something' so hard to define has vanished. Here in this chapter we can see this decline extending into the fourth generation, for the writer includes Joseph, Jacob's son, in the list of the great men he chooses to mention.

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were all outstanding men in their day; God was with each of them and we all can and should learn much from the record of their lives. The comparison offered here though is not between ourselves and them but between them and Abraham. There is a most significant lack of either information or eulogistic commendation provided about them in this chapter; they were 'by faith' men, but although they were not completely overshadowed by the towering stature of Abraham they appear as dwarfs beside him; and who would not? This was not the intention of the writer but it is nonetheless so; the contrast between them is so great and so obvious. In a figure Isaac was both offered up to God and received back from the dead, that was wonderful, but all was accomplished by Abraham's faith, not Isaac's. He was born miraculously, was circumcised traditionally, was married eventually, dwelt in tents with his father and Jacob normally, farmed successfully and, before his death, blessed Jacob and Esau customarily. Sad to say though, he did this mistakenly because his wife and son acted deceitfully towards him. How different he was from his father who, in full knowledge of what he was doing, deliberately went to Moriah intending to slay his son in order to give him to God and receive him back from Him from the dead.

Jacob, at the end of his life, complained that his days were few and evil, (whose and what evil he did not say). He went down into Egypt and for the purposes of the Hebrews writer the one noteworthy thing about him was that before he died he blessed both the sons of Joseph and, leaning on his staff, worshipped the God before whose eyes, in co-operation with his mother, he had acted as a deceiver and a thief. So much for the second and third generation. Joseph, the great-great-grandson of Abraham, prophesied about the Exodus and gave commandment concerning his bones when it should come to pass. He appears to have been a greater man than his father, but who will say that he was as great as Abraham? That completes the list of their contributions to the 'by faith' statements made here by the writer, who includes them in order to point to their eldership to the Hebrews. Each of these men and the things he did by faith hold a place of importance; in their day they were all-important, but not one of them and his works is to be compared with Abraham and his accomplishments. In course of time God was to open His heart to Moses, making promises to him and giving him instructions with reference to the future of Israel in the promised land. These reveal the course of action He had decided upon, and included a statement of intent based upon a principle already shown to be operative in the human race, but not yet defined. This principle clearly emerges in the statement made by God with regard to punishment: 'visiting the iniquities of the father upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me ... showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments'.

For some reason best known to Him, but not explained, God incorporated into His dealings with men a numerical system. Undoubtedly in eternity we shall find out why He did this, and doing so discover that it is based upon a law in Himself not yet disclosed to mankind. In this numerical system each number has a specific spiritual significance also. As stated by God, hereditary punishment meted out by Him extends unto the third or fourth generation, and then only upon those who hate Him, and certainly not upon those who love Him — these find mercy. We see then that, though by law punishment can extend through four generations, it does not extend to the fifth, and herein lies the spiritual principle — five is the number of grace. So it is that the writer sets out his chapter on faith as a revelation of grace rather than of law, because the principle of grace runs through, and in the end supercedes law as God's basis of dealing with mankind. We may further observe this by casting back a reflective eye to the beginning of the chapter. Although not mentioned here, Adam, as we know, was the first man; he was the first sinner also, and through him, sin, death and judgement passed upon all mankind and the

earth on which we dwell. Next to him and in order of appearance in the chapter comes Abel, followed in succession by Enoch, and then Noah — three (a trinity) of just men: together with Adam they are four men, then the flood — the judgement. Following the flood comes the fifth man, Abraham, and a new beginning in grace. With his entrance the count begins again — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph — four men, then judgement, punishment, darkness and death, this time, by God's mercy, not universal but confined to one nation, Egypt. What a lesson to Jacob's children and to all who observe. Following this, the fifth man emerges, Moses, and by him grace. Though this may be a little surprising, it is true: God began anew with grace. It was quite a while before the law was introduced, and unexpected though it may seem it was grace that moved God to introduce it, and grace runs throughout it, bringing merciful forgiveness of all sin through the shed blood.

Contradistinctively from the bare mention of the names of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and but a spare reference to some work or word of faith each did or spoke, as soon as Moses' name appears the writer becomes more expansive again. This is done in order to enhance grace, for both Abraham and Moses were the leading men in the great eras of grace then commencing. Seeing that he is repeating what he did previously with regard to Abraham and his predecessors, it also appears that the writer's purpose at this point was to point his readers to the most highly esteemed of their national heroes as being demonstrators of faith. Closer examination however also reveals that he may also have wished to show them that, great though these men were, and wonderful their faith, they died disappointed, not having received all the promises, nor having all their hopes fulfilled. As already pointed out, Abraham never found the city, and Moses did not enter the promised land, though each of them respectively had lived in hope and expectation that his dear desire would be fulfilled. Nevertheless each receives from the writer the honour due to him, and he now speaks with admiration of Moses; but first he mentions his parents

Verses twenty-three to twenty-nine.

'By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents'. How blessed Moses was to have been born to such parents: what a heritage. Obviously a man's natural heredity is not by his own faith; the seeds of their son's greatness lay in the hearts of Moses' parents, Amram and Jochabed; they saw that Moses was a 'proper' child. Whether or not his parents lived to see the eventual greatness and glory of their famous son is not told, but this we are told that we may see that faith in their hearts enabled them to see that he was proper material for God. If he finds that in a man, God does great things with him. For love's sake and for what they saw in their son that couple risked their lives; ingrained faith in a man's heart is always coupled with great courage. Faith can never be great without great courage; fear cripples faith. Faith must either overcome fear or be overcome by it, they cannot exist together in the same heart. In the hearts of this couple, especially in the heart of Moses' mother, faith overcoming fear also overcame the world, and they defied the king and his genocidal law. This spirit was inbred in their son when he was born; he needed such parents because he was born to be the deliverer of his people. This is all the more remarkable when we realise that Moses was not the firstborn son of his parents: Aaron was the firstborn. Miriam also was Moses' senior; she was also his nursemaid from afar while he floated in the ark among the reeds on the banks of the Nile.

For all that Moses was looked upon in Egypt as a prince of the realm, when he came to young manhood he was an Israelite. How soon in his young life he realised who he was and from whence he came — whether his princess foster-mother told him, or some other person gossiped it to him — we do not know. It might have been a member of his own family or a relative or someone else of his own tribe; that is not important for us to know. The important thing is that, when Moses did become aware of his nationality, who he was and to whom he really belonged, he became a changed person. Scripture says of him, 'by faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter'. It was a bold stand to make, a risky one; some would have thought it a foolish one too, for he was in line for the throne. Moses, full of courage made his choice, it was a step of loyalty and of faith: he was identifying himself with God's people and his own. The spirit of his family was in him, he was now commencing to live by faith. How much Moses owed to the faith of his parents who can say? He may not then have realised it was the faith of Abraham too. What incalculable wealth is bred into children of men and women of character and courage and moral uprightness, whose spirits refuse to bow down to tyrants or to give in to satan's agents. Perhaps when his spirit began to rise in him and his heart began to grapple with the problems of his nationality and identity Moses realised these things and determined before God that his future should lie with the children of Abraham.

One of the amazing things about the life of faith is the variety of ways by which a man may enter into it. We must all beware of rigidity of thought and narrow viewpoint. God has more than one way of getting hold of a person. Faith can develop from a number of sources and through many circumstances and events; ways for men to enter into the blessed life are abundant and varied. A little comparative thinking will help us here. We know nothing of Abraham's parentage or of what went on in him before God called him; his father was called Terah, his brother Haran, his nephew Lot; another relative was named Laban. All those had their respective wives and children, and it seems they believed in and practised intermarriage and perhaps either polygamy or concubinage. This was certainly not the background from which Moses came. What Abraham's spiritual heredity or manner of life was in Chaldea we cannot tell; we do know however that, whatever it was, God called him out and away from it altogether. That is how it began with him, but not so with Moses.

One of the surprising things arising from a comparison between Abraham and Moses is the great contrast between them. Moses' life of faith did not commence with some kind of call as did Abraham's; Moses did not receive an actual call from God until he was out in the backside of the desert. For him the life of faith began in Egypt, and he received this call from God precisely because he had already taken a stand of faith. The decisions he took one day in the land of the Pharaohs were absolutely fundamental to the call he later received in the wilderness. The writer to the Hebrews reveals that, upon that occasion, God did not call Moses: he heard no voice, he was not asked or advised or commanded to do anything or to go anywhere; his was a calculated decision, not a response to a call. There came a day when he sat down and marshalled some facts: (1) he could be

called the son of Pharaoh's daughter: that was what she wanted; (2) he could have the pleasures of sin: that was what the devil wanted; (3) he could have the treasures of Egypt: that is what all ordinary men would have wanted. On the other hand he could: (1) be a commoner and a slave instead of a prince; (2) suffer affliction with the people of God; (3) take upon himself the reproach of the as yet unknown Christ. After mature consideration of these three alternatives to his present position, he made his decision, then by faith he: (1) chose affliction instead of pleasure; (2) refused to be called the princess's son; (3) respected the reward of such a decision and the recompense it would bring to him and to God's people. Faith's refusal, faith's choice and faith's respect of reward are as vital to spiritual life as is faith's obedience to a special call.

Comparisons are odious, it is said, but only if they are intended to be offensive, or received in the wrong spirit; they are sometimes useful for clarification, that by them we may learn. Abraham's greatness lay in his initial response to God's call, but not so Moses; he was called, but not until later. His initial greatness lay in the moral courage which made him face the facts, make a calculated choice, and take a decision; he was a brave man. Although he could not claim a distinctive call, he did know he had been miraculously preserved from death; what he did not know was that he was specially chosen, and that he was marked out for greatness. Afterwards, when he was out in the desert where the call came he knew, but not at first. How men achieve greatness or become famous by doing outstanding or unique things for God varies very greatly; that distinction is affected by many things, and is therefore difficult to assess. Primarily of course it is by the will of God, but not the least factor in it is the kind of person involved, and the conditions and times in which he lives and the purposes of God for that time and for the future.

Abraham, as already noted, did not have believing parents as did Moses; nobody had defied the wrath of a king on his behalf, and there were no people of God in Ur of the Chaldees. On the other hand Moses, though born in Egypt, had a godly heritage second to none; his position was quite different from Abraham's. This is why comparisons are oftentimes made quite mistakenly and judgements passed foolishly and unwarrantably. Under no circumstances may the greatness of anybody be measured by things he or she achieves. The will of God must first be taken into consideration, for that is paramount; then the faith with which he or she sets out to accomplish it. Everyone of whom we have read so far, whether he or she achieved much or little, had a good report from God, and each one obtained it by faith. All man's spiritual life, its growth, its development, its stature and its progress is governed by faith; there is grace for all, but eternal life is the life of faith and cannot be had or lived apart from it. This is why, in the beginning, God made faith natural to us; upon hearing the gospel anyone who will exercise his will can move in faith and have salvation.

Because Paul once said, 'all men have not the faith', it must not be thought that he was saying, 'no one has faith', or 'only a few have faith'. God made Adam and then Eve by faith, and insofar as faith is part of the law of His own being He made them of faith too. This whole creation is a faith creation — everything in it that God created and made is a 'by faith' creation; this is why Jesus said that it is possible to tell a tree to be plucked up by the root and planted in the sea. Provided that it is the will of God to have it removed the tree would obey, He said. Unlike human beings the tree has no power to operate in faith, but neither has it power to resist faith. Faith was not incorporated into the makeup of a tree but faith was incorporated into the makeup of a human being. To remove a tree or a mountain requires faith only in the individual doing it. When the Lord cursed the fig tree so that it died, He commented on the faith by which He accomplished it — 'have the faith of God', He said. Such things cannot be accomplished by human faith.

Any person who has so lived that his faith has been destroyed or he has lost it, can receive faith back again if he hears the word of God from a person speaking the word of faith. For this reason Paul asked that men should pray for him that the word of God should run through him freely and be glorified. He wanted to preach the word of faith, and once said quite boldly that this was precisely what he did. He also wrote about mutual faith, making plain that they, as well as he, must have faith in order that he could impart unto them some spiritual gift. Obviously if they were without faith they could receive nothing from him, and would please neither God nor him. In order to be entirely faithless a man must quench his own natural faith and refuse to listen to God's word. Sometimes men block the way to faith in their own selves, clogging up their hearts and minds with wrong beliefs, false religious ideas, belief in material things, political notions, secular philosophies, which things all prove that they have faith, but in false things. Substitutes for the gospel abound everywhere and are held so tenaciously that souls cannot believe the truth when they do hear it.

Not so Moses though. He heard all the vain and worldly things of his day, the gossip of royal courts and popular political beliefs and the social scandals, he was trained in all the arts of the Egyptians, but he let none of this replace his faith; that remained in him indestructible. He evaluated everything, made up his own mind weighed up the 'fors and againsts', pros and cons, and arrived at the correct conclusion — he knew that whatever loss he sustained by his choice would be more than recompensed unto him by God. What he desired most of all was that he should so live that he would receive the good report from God. Whatever anyone else said about him and his beliefs mattered little to him, he wanted to please God and have His commendation, and that requires faith as much as building an ark or sacrificing a son. Moses was an ordinary man; it is faith that makes men extraordinary.

Between verses twenty-six and twenty-seven a period of forty years had elapsed, during which time Moses lived in isolation from the people of God. He was neither in his own land, that is, in the land of Egypt where he was born, nor in the promised land where he felt he and his people ought to be. He was living in the land of Midian, working as a shepherd somewhere in the back side of the desert, feeding his father-in-law's sheep. He had married the priest of Midian's daughter, who had borne him two sons, and there he had settled down to live and work and raise a family. What he believed or what communion with God and the state of his spiritual life was during this period none but he and God knew. How lonely he must have been; the culture shock must have been tremendous beyond words. Courtier to commoner, art to vulgarity, from being waited upon to waiting upon sheep! How he survived out there, learning to shepherd the sheep, having to resist the pressures put upon him to embrace the idolatry of the people among whom he lived, is not revealed. 'He endured, as seeing Him who is invisible'; to his praise he kept faith with his God of whom there can be no effigy. His only fault was that he let go of the covenant of circumcision which God had made with Abraham about living in the promised land. Had he lost the vision? Did he no longer believe in this sign that he bore in his flesh that he believed in the covenant of God? Had he lost hope that either he or his family, especially his boys, would ever see the land? Perhaps so. Who knows? But whatever it was God never forsook him, and so he endured. If he had let go of the covenant sign and would not force it upon his wife by forcing it upon her children he had not thereby forfeited his faith; he still 'saw' God, and the vision sustained him; he would endure all for His sake.

Moses bore the reproach of Christ: that to him was riches; he had wealth untold, and he treasured it. Just when he 'forsook Egypt' is not textually clear; he himself wrote that he fled the country following the death of an Egyptian with whom he had a fight. Fear gripped him, he expected retribution, he was a born, an avowed Israelite — he fled. The Hebrews writer says that he forsook Egypt not fearing the wrath of the king, he could not therefore have meant that occasion. He must have been thinking of another time. Was it out there in the loneliness of the desert when he 'saw' Him who cannot be seen and received the great commission that all his fears left him? Was that the moment he forsook Egypt in heart for ever? There are so many possibilities as to when the great forsaking took place; it might have been then that he took the step, knowing that doing so he would almost certainly incur the wrath of the king. On the other hand the writer may have been referring to the time when, overcoming all, he rallied Israel to do the will of God and led them out of Egypt in triumph on that great night of redemption. What a forsaking that was; it was nothing other than a total evacuation of the whole land of Goshen. We cannot tell the moment when all fear left him, and he lived fearless before God and all men for evermore. Most probably it was during the meeting with I AM at the bush: there he saw the fire and heard His voice and felt His anger at the excuses he made about himself. Was it there that the fear of God took the place of the fear of man?

From that time onwards Moses' faith was all-powerful, its comprehensiveness cannot be exaggerated. In a way that could not have happened in Abraham's day Moses became the great mediator for all Israel; to a degree he became all Israel to God. It is said of Abraham that by faith before God he became the father of us all, and though not so literally, before God it was rather like that with Moses. Rather unexpectedly we read that, 'Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them'. It was all Israel that kept the passover and the sprinkling of blood, yet here it is said that it was Moses who did it: such is the power and the reward of true faith. What an insight this affords us into the heart of God and into the way the good report is earned by man. O how much credit God gives to the heart of faith in whomsoever it is found; Moses was given credit for what the whole multitude of people did. Not all the credit though; each man would have been credited for responding to God's command and doing what he was told to do, but every other man did what he did because he responded to Moses' command. They all had faith to a degree, otherwise they would not have done it, and that was noted by God and credited to them, but before God Moses believed for them all! What faith he had; all fear had gone, he could believe God for everything. The king's wrath meant

nothing to Moses: he had met and believed and obeyed God. The man was beyond the power of devils or men; in his heart he had the testimony that he pleased God — that is faith's strength: faith knows that everything is fitted together by the word of God. There is difference between doing this involuntarily and doing it voluntarily; God takes note of this, and on the basis of this knowledge deals with souls with understanding and wisdom in grace. Much of God's dealing with souls turns on how each one's natural faith has been used and to what ends the natural abilities have functioned. The soul of man, being informed by the ceaseless function of these senses, forms a conscious mind giving rise to opinions, decisions, expressions, and the host of other things by which we are manifest to ourselves and to others. These things are fundamental to life, nor can they be changed at deepest levels except we become spiritually regenerate. From the moment that happens we have ability to use these powers properly, that is for God's purposes; being adaptations of original faith they are quickened and enhanced by the faith which comes by the hearing of God's word and the oncoming of God's spirit. It is by the development of these powers, which now reconnect him to God, that the measure of a man's faith is determined. Moses was a man of great faith, and so was each of his predecessors mentioned in the chapter. Moses had faith for all Israel and to him God made known His ways. By this great favour bestowed on him Moses discovered that each one of these ways was the way because it was the faith way; walking in it he went on and on, becoming greater still with every step.

The contents of this chapter furnish evidence that there are vast differences between men of faith. The author and finisher of the faith of men is the man Jesus who Moses met there at the bush. In Him faith is complete. He manifested faith fully and to the furthest degree possible to mankind; thereby He was perfected. His faith — that quality of faith — is the faith which God incorporated into man's spiritual nature when He made him; man was designed for this. Faith was adapted and fashioned to function in the form of the five sensory powers which all men have — sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell; these are man's acquisitive powers. Hence man has eyes, ears, palate, nose and the whole body area of touch and feeling (especially the finger tips). God made us like this primarily so that we should see Him, hear Him, touch Him, taste Him, smell Him. By incorporating these senses into us, the soul of man, putting them to their primary use, may attain to full stature in the sight of God; except he does this a man will not grow spiritually, but will remain a babe. All is well when a man does use these 'by faith' powers as God intended: when he uses them incorrectly, that is puts them to carnal or anti-Christ use, his spirit, if regenerate, will degenerate and lose all power to please God and gain a good report. Until a man is regenerate in spirit he can do no other than live in the flesh, function in the world, and prostitute his powers unto the devil.

All the rest of the people followed in Moses' train, and it is said of them that 'By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land'. Once the way was opened up and made clear to them every one of them passed over. It was easy to do so then; the path was nice and clean and dry, and they saw that God had made it for them. Besides this they were being chased by Pharaoh and his army, and to have stayed where they were would have meant either death or recapture, so they went over: they were very wise. The faith road was the safe road and they took it; to do so was just plain common sense. There was nothing difficult about what they did; though it was an act of faith it was by no means a great act; they did not need to exercise great faith to make that crossing, it was Moses who did the great thing, not they. God led them to the Red Sea, He saw the path through it plainly: His way for them was in that sea, hidden from their eyes as yet. 'Stretch out thine hand over the sea', He said to Moses; Moses did so and there was the way. It was Moses who had the faith though; neither he nor they saw the way; Moses saw God though — that was the way for him and Israel — God is man's way. Men of great faith are pioneers; by their ministry they show the way, opening it up for all to see; it then becomes easy for others to believe and use their faith too — it is only common sense. Faith is the implicit trust of a man's heart in God by reason of the quickening of his inbred powers through God's grace in speaking to him.

This is the purpose for which the epistle was written; on God's behalf the writer was wanting every Hebrew of his day to exercise his or her faith. He had realised something which may not be recognised at the first reading of his work, and it is of this that he is writing. Reading this particular chapter it could easily be supposed that he was intent upon impressing his readers with the exploits of a handful of very special individuals, mostly men, who accomplished marvellous things by faith. If this was so, then he has succeeded, for their names are in the chapter for all to see, and, besides this, so many sermons have been preached about them among Bible-loving people that their names are household words, and so they should be. These individuals deserve all the fame they have; they have won it, and even though their day has closed and we are in the new Christian era they are counted giants among us still. We thank God for them and are pleased to have them as our elders. However, to present these

persons to us was not the main reason for including their names in the book. Closer reading of the chapter reveals that what God wanted was a people living by faith, not just a few persons whose faith was of gargantuan proportions. He did not just want one individual person to live and work by faith, or even two or three or twenty or a hundred times that number of persons sprinkled throughout history; He wanted millions, everybody, to be living by faith.

God revealed His heart to Abraham about this right at the beginning, telling him that his seed would be as uncountable as the dust of the ground and the stars of heaven for multitude; God raised Abraham up unto this end. So down through Isaac and Jacob God pursued His purpose, multiplying the seed-faith of Abraham into a son and a family and a tribe and twelve tribes until, by Moses' day, it was a nation. That is what He wanted; it was what He promised to Abraham, and for this reason He raised up Moses to go down to Egypt and bring out His nation for Him: 'Israel is my firstborn', He said. He had Moses, and what a great man of faith he was, but He wanted a nation of faith, a great company which could not be numbered for multitude. He did not want them numbered by man either. He wanted the number of the elect to be known only to Himself. David got himself and the nation into serious trouble when he desired to know how many there were in the land. Censuses may be deemed necessary by men who claim nations of fellow-creatures as theirs, but they have no place in God's nation. 'The Lord knoweth them that are his', says Paul, 'And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity'.

God never expected great faith or marvellous works of the multitude of people, but He did insist that every one of them should, indeed must, be a man or woman of faith. It is wonderful to be so loved and wanted of God, and what a wonder it is when He brings a man to faith. It has to happen of course; He still wants a people of faith; that is why He sent His Son into the world. In times past an Abraham and a Moses would do, but now it is His only Son Jesus, not they, who is the wonder man. There came a day when Abraham died; his sons came and buried him: he did not rise again. It was the same with Moses also: he died and God Himself came and buried him. Like Abraham, Moses did not rise again. Unlike Abraham, Moses' body did not even lie in the land of promise. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Leah were buried there, but not Moses and his wife. God purposely took his body and buried it outside the land of Canaan to ensure that it was not laid there with those three great predecessors from whom Israel sprang. God granted this man this special honour above all others because of what he accomplished, and by conferring upon him this great privilege pointed a truth we all need to understand.

Moses was a distinguished man whose faith was equal to that of Abraham, and probably greater than that of Isaac and Jacob, but he was not one of the three founders of the nation; he was their deliverer and lawgiver. The three 'fathers' of Israel were pre-law; they were under grace and it was this that, above all, God wanted Israel to understand. The law for righteousness was holy and good — it was given by God to the people that they should live under it in the land. Canaan was not given to them by law and by Moses, it was given by promise through Abraham; Israel did not earn the land, it was theirs by gift. When Israel thought of the land they must think of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not of Moses. Law-keeping requires very little faith, only sufficient to be obedient, and that often is a matter of common sense. God intended law-keeping to be a way of life; He gave the law for that reason — it was a most gracious act. Having been born with the work of the law already written in their hearts, the Israelites should have found no difficulty in keeping the written law when God gave it to them. That law was both an authority and a meticulously detailed summary of the way the inner law of being should be expressed in life; it should have been recognised by Israel as such: the Mosaic law is an expression of nature and of grace. The law is not opposed to grace, law and grace being both given by God are one. It is the works of the law — chiefly the personal obligation to provide sacrifices for sin, the obligatory keeping of fasts and feasts and such things — these are the things which are now so contrary to grace, but this is only because they are insults to God and His greater grace. He gave His Son to be sacrificed for sin — that is sufficient. Salvation is God's work, not man's.

The response to grace requires a greater more living faith than doing law-works: what the Lord said to Thomas eight days after His resurrection puts it perfectly, 'because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'. Faith in the invisible Christ will bring us to God and keep us obedient in His love. It should be thoroughly understood by every man that faith is a work, believing is something a man has to do himself: it is the inward work of the soul. It is not an outward work, but it does result, indeed it is demonstrated, in outward works, as the writer is revealing in this chapter. We are saved by grace through the law of faith, certainly not by law-works lest any man should boast; grace works through faith and faith works by love.

Being love God loves, and because He loves grace works on our behalf so that faith can work in us unto our salvation by that grace.

Dear Moses never got into the promised land during his lifetime, nor did he reach it in his death. Joseph's bones entered the land, but not Moses'. He died at God's wish in the wilderness and was buried there in an unmarked grave. He had so much wished to go into the land, he must have died a greatly disappointed man. God was not unmindful of that, and had actually provided some better thing for him, of which He had not yet spoken; God's will and ways are always best. To Moses was granted the great privilege of standing with the transfigured Lord on earth, and in the sight and hearing of three apostles discussing with Him another exodus. It was wonderful beyond words; it was joy. Disappointment greater than his own former disappointment must have filled him as he talked with Christ, for the promised land for which he had lived and striven those forty years of pilgrimage had itself become Egypt and there had to be another exodus. God had been saving up His Lamb for it; Moses was standing with Him. It was all so wonderfully tragic. Great as was Moses' faith, he only came out of Egypt into the wilderness; his 'home' he never reached. Neither Abraham nor he settled down in the promised land, for neither found what they sought, though they indeed had great faith. What did the Hebrews think as they read their letter? A phrase used in this chapter embraces them all — 'These all died in faith, not having received ...'. The message to the Hebrews surely was, 'and so may you'

Verses 30-40

Commencing this section the writer ceases recounting the stories of great individuals and making points from their exploits. Names of well-known men appear in these verses and we can read about them, but their particular works, though recorded in the Old Testament, are not recorded here. The focus now noticeably shifts from the particular to the general, and with this shift there is also an equally noticeable change of the strict chronological order previously observed. Names are set down as they occur to the writer instead of in the order they appear in history: David for instance is mentioned before Samuel and the prophets. For what the writer has in mind this makes no difference, either to him or to the truth, and is a clear indication of his intentions. Having shown that the birth and constitution of the nation was by faith, the writer is now wanting to speak about the people as a whole and not just about particular persons. This immediately becomes clear when we find that Joshua, Moses' successor, great man that he was, is not even mentioned; neither he nor the people appear in the one single text referring to happenings in Canaan; here it is: 'by faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days'. Amazingly, except for Rahab, no names are mentioned; the emphasis is on faith alone; neither Joshua's nor the people's faith finds notice, but just faith.

So now the writer has brought us back to the essential message — faith, not men of faith. 'Live by faith', he is saying. He is not exhorting them to try and do great things, or to strive to become great men or women, but simply to live by faith. From a superficial reading of the chapter the impression could be gained that he is challenging people to attempt great things for God, but really he is not. Instead he raises the question, 'How, do you think, did Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and all the rest I have mentioned accomplish these wonderful things?' The answer immediately rises to our lips, 'by faith', which is manifestly true; but if he had answered his own question he would have said, 'they lived by faith'; each one of them proved God in daily living. Not one of them attempted to do great things and God never asked them to; what He wanted of them was that by faith each should prove His faithfulness in the humdrum things of daily life. Let every one of us learn this same lesson and attempt nothing until God tells us to do so, and when He does speak let us obey Him wholeheartedly. We may say, 'I will try', perhaps half believing we cannot do it or that we shall fail — not if God says so — no one has ever obeyed Him and failed.

Amram and Jochebed, Moses' parents, hid their son for three months before putting him in the bulrushes where he was discovered by the princess; they did it by faith says the writer. It was a work of faith, but God never told them to do it; He did not need to, they were living by faith. They saw something in their child Moses (which is not at all a surprising thing) so they decided to act in the manner now so famous; it was perfectly natural and they were not afraid of the king. How important it was that they should do that; we eulogise Moses, and rightly so, but had his parents not been living by faith it is almost certain that Moses might never have survived. What would have happened then? We need not speculate, God was overruling everything and watching over the babe to bring His purposes to pass. Who then could imagine failure? But how true it is also that, except He find faith on the earth, how shall He do His great works among the sons of men?

Unremarkable faith, that is, faith which does nothing spectacular or sensational, but patiently continues in well doing is great faith well-pleasing to God. He can raise up an Abraham or a Moses, or His great kings and prophets, to do remarkable and spectacular things if He will, but such men and events are rare; what God wants and needs is a whole nation of ordinary people living as He wants. His delight is with the sons of men, ordinary folk with no special qualifications or commendations, natural or spiritual, either in the world or in the church. It is said of the Jews in Christ's day, 'The common people heard Him gladly'. It is of great significance, perhaps of greater significance than we at first realise, that the final person whose name and particular act of faith is recorded in this section is Rahab the harlot. What a surprise! She was a bad woman and not even an Israelite! She did nothing spectacular, why should she be singled out when Joshua was entirely passed over? The answer to this question which may seem so puzzling is found in the writer's threefold purpose: (1) to emphasise the life of faith above particular acts of faith; (2) to show that this simplicity of faith is available to anybody, even the unlikeliest of persons; (3) to point to a miracle of major proportions lying in scripture mostly undiscovered but highlighted in Rahab.

The first two points need no further emphasis beyond what has already been said, but the third needs some elaboration. The phrasing of the verse preceding the one in which Rahab is mentioned is most remarkable, every bit as remarkable as that in which her name occurs; they should be read together: 'By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days. By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace'. The miracle lies as open before our eyes today as it did before the eyes of Israel on the day it happened, when the people shouted at God's command and the walls fell down. But what happened to Rahab's house? It was built on the wall. However was she saved? It was not possible — the walls fell down. She was saved by a miracle, a miracle within a miracle. There is no miracle but that there is also one or many more within it. The first major miracle was the total collapse of the walls; the second major miracle, twinned with the first, was Rahab's total preservation. How she was saved from perishing with the rest only the Lord knows. Did He demolish the rest of the walls and leave the tiny part on which her house was perched standing intact? Did He hold her up, or was she and all she had, and her father's household also, borne up on angels' wings and deposited gently down on earth well out of the battle-zone away from harm? Certainly she was not rescued by men, for all Israel were standing right back, away from the walls, (a bowshot at least) when the miracle happened. All Israel would have been on the lookout for her house on the wall, trying to discern the scarlet line in the window and believing she was going to be rescued, and wondering what would happen when the wall fell down. How was she to be preserved? They were as ignorant as she. No less than now they saw, but only through a glass darkly, and through the dust that rose over all and blotted out the whole miracle.

God had not told anybody what was going to happen about Rahab, not even Joshua apparently. Their instructions were to march in silence around the city once a day for six days, then on the seventh day they must march round it seven times; six times in silence, finalising it all the seventh time by shouting and blowing trumpets. At that the wall crumpled, falling down flat outwards; all that every man had to do was to go straight up over the rubble, sword in hand, into the city. Rahab with her family and goods were the only ones saved; no-one and nothing else was preserved from the destruction. The walls fell down by faith, but not Joshua's nor anyone else's outstanding faith; they fell as a result of corporate faith; that is, because of their obedience. Rahab was included in the miracle because she obeyed God too. Although she did not know it, in the mind of God she had made her preservation sure when she received the spies in peace, and placed the scarlet cord in the window. The miraculous preservation was only the manifestation of it. The miracle of Jericho was outstanding: God did it all, but only because everyone involved in it, and for whom it was done, did exactly as He said. God chose to do it that way.

Something else has been made increasingly clear by the writer in course of this chapter also, and we must not miss it, namely the shift from direct communication to indirect communication. At the beginning of the chapter the writer is at pains to tell us that God spoke to people directly, Noah for instance, and Abraham, but not now; God spoke to the leaders, in this case Moses and Joshua, and they relayed His word to the people. This departure from former practice was quite deliberate on God's part; it was part of the policy He was pursuing in His dealings with men. It is instructive also to note that there is no indication in the first part of the chapter that God ever spoke to either of the men of faith who lived prior to Noah. There is no record that God instructed Abel to offer the acceptable sacrifice to Him, or that He told Enoch or anyone that He was going to translate him; God just took him. It is said of Enoch that he 'walked with God and was not', so it is difficult to believe that he walked with God and that God never spoke to him, but whether or not God told him He was going to take him away from the earth we cannot know. It is the lack of positive statement about these things on the part of the Hebrews writer which draws attention to the idea that God may well prefer to use a different method than governing a multitude through one man.

With the advent of Noah into the list comes the information that God spoke to him, giving him the warning about the approaching judgement. We know from the Genesis account that the Lord also gave him instructions for the building of the ark. All this was by direct communication, there was no intermediary, it was just between Noah and God; no third party was involved. It was the same also with Abraham and with Moses, God spoke directly to them and also to Isaac and Jacob before Moses, but with the advent of Moses and the emergence of the Israel nation the pattern changes. God still continued to speak to Moses personally, and so the era of speaking to a nation through one man commenced. This began in Egypt, there the Lord spoke indirectly to the people through Moses, and after He had brought them out of Egypt He continued to do so at their request. At Sinai they begged God not to speak directly to them and asked for Moses to be their intermediary in all matters appertaining to

God. The Lord accepted the position and their request, after all it was the natural and most practicable thing to do.

From that original position of one prophet and one voice to the nation the Lord later moved to the new position of many prophets and many voices speaking in Israel, and so it continued. As the years progressed, the judges came and added their voices, and later still the kings. Some of these were good spiritual men, but not all: voices and gift multiplied, but there was very little of the word of God in the land. So bad did this situation become that Isaiah, in his day, had to cry out, 'To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them'. Anticipating such a day and to offset the damage of it, the Lord, instructed Moses to place the law and the testimony in the ark to be kept inviolable by the priests. By inscribing His own testimony into the law, writing it ineradicably into stone He ensured that to that degree it should not fade away but be everlasting. This was to be the foundation of the nation's righteousness and the ultimate test of every word that purported to be spoken in His name thereafter. But the people ignored God's law, insisting upon choosing their own kings, and ordering their own kingdoms and listening to the prophets they preferred. So the Lord took away His testimony and His law from them and ceased to raise up His own prophets and sent the people into captivity and unto dispersion, where they remain to this day.

Throughout all this time faith was scarcely to be found on earth; it still burned low in some hearts, but only a few, so to complete the chapter the writer gathers up the men and women of faith and encompasses all these in a few short verses of glorious testimony. The named and the nameless, the famous and the unknown, all are placed together and praised equally because they all obtained the good report through faith. Whoever they were they share the honours and have received the rewards of the faithful, and how well they deserve them. The world was not worthy of such people, yet the Lord continued to raise them up, each in their day, knowing that they would be hated, hounded, hurt, tried, tortured, tormented, poverty stricken outcasts, despised, rejected, and in the end many of them murdered. And what for? For a promise that was never fulfilled to them. Such is faith, and what it can accomplish in the hearts and lives of the faceless and the anonymous, as well as the famous ones.

What an ending to a chapter about faith; but that is how it started. Abel acted in faith and was killed for his pains. Of all the people mentioned in the chapter Enoch alone is the one whose life ended in what is considered to be the ultimate glory; he entered into what to the Hebrews was the promise: he was translated. All the others lived by faith, worked by faith, walked by faith, witnessed by faith, worshipped by faith; some of them obtained promises through faith, but not one of them received the promise. We are told of those who lived in the land of promise and obtained promises in that land, and of others who saw the promises afar off and were persuaded of them and embraced them, and thereby became pilgrims and strangers on the earth. But of all the promises that had ever been made to any one of them, not one received the fulfilment of the promise, though it had been made by God from the very beginning.

Quite possibly Abraham, when he received the promise from God about the seed, thought of it as the promise; we can imagine him speaking of it to Sarah as the promise of all the promises God had made him. Undoubtedly to him and eventually to Sarah it was the greatest of them all, but it was not the promise that God counted to be the promise. Promises made by God to individuals for individual blessings to be fulfilled in that person's experience only, though they are wonderful in fulfilment, and perhaps affect others also, do not and can never warrant the description 'the promise'. The promise, though in the first instance it may be made to a person, is not made to that individual only, it is made to the whole of mankind for universal acceptance. God made this kind of promise to Noah after the flood, and set His bow as a token of it in the clouds.

When, in the presence of the couple in Eden, He made the promise 'the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head', it was the same also. The promise made in Eden was for universal acceptance, but Adam and Eve misinterpreted God's meaning. They had no idea of His intentions, consequently they thought that Cain was the seed; how wrong they were. They were not to be blamed though, for beyond the bare promise God never went on to explain Himself to them. Neither Cain in the beginning, nor Isaac in his day, was the promised seed; the promise God gave, though possible of local application, was made about the coming of His Son. There is no suggestion in scripture anywhere that Abraham thought the seed promised to him was the promised seed; it was not, and he did not think it was. Possibly, if they had been asked, both he and Sarah would have said that it was the greatest promise made to them, and its fulfilment was joy unspeakable.

Although Adam and Eve made a mistake about the original promise, properly considered it was really far too clear to have been misunderstood. God spoke in such specific language; He said it was to be the seed of the woman; the man was not mentioned. It is quite understandable that Adam and Eve should have thought that God meant them to interpret the promise as they did, it was so natural, but they were wrong. Abraham's understanding would have been much clearer when God made promise to him concerning the seed: there was no ambiguity about it; 'thy seed', He said to Abraham, and Abraham knew that the seed was to be his very own. If he knew about what happened in Eden (and it is uncertain that he did), Abraham knew that, although given to him by a miracle from God, the seed would not be the seed promised in the beginning, for it would not be exclusively the seed of the woman. So then, although many of God's promises were fulfilled to Abraham, not all of them were.

From a reading of the whole epistle there can be little doubt why the writer commenced this chapter as he did, telling the Hebrews that faith is the substance of things hoped for, and then passing on almost immediately to say that by faith we understand that the ages were fitted together by the word of God. What he is saying is that by faith a man can only live in hope of some promises being fulfilled in his lifetime, because they are not all scheduled by God for fulfilment in the age in which he is living. Some promises should be, and ought to be, fulfilled in the lifetime of every man living by faith, for they are given for man's appropriation; but, however much faith he may have, others will not be fulfilled to him. Some of these may be entertained as hopes by faith, but to attempt to do anything other than believe in them as hopes, and to live by faith in the light of that hope, is to lay oneself open to bitter disappointment and sad failure, perhaps even disillusionment. Thousands of Old Testament saints lived by faith in the land of promise without receiving the promises or the fulfilment of them; this did not prevent them from accepting those promises as their inheritance though, seeing them afar off they embraced them. The man of faith takes to himself promises made in the past, and embraces the anticipated fulfilment of promises yet to be made in the future, though none of them were, or may not be made to him personally. By this men of old confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims in the earth and God is not ashamed to be called their God. Man is saved by audacious hope, as well as by courageous faith.

As pointed out earlier, this section on faith which commenced with the words, 'Now the just shall live by faith', is preceded by these words, 'ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry'. 'The promise'. Not one of those of whom the author speaks in the eleventh chapter received this promise; they received many promises, but not this one, as he so outspokenly says in the last verse. The age when it should be fulfilled had not yet been reached, so the writer tells the Hebrews that in this respect they were not being treated differently from their forebears; they just had to accept that and get on with life. To them, as to everyone else in this age, what was promise, even the promise to so many, had been fulfilled. What was promise in Eden and the promise within the promise given to Abraham, was fulfilled at Bethlehem. Similarly what was promise in the upper room was fulfilled at Pentecost. Each in its day was the promise; but, as the ages fitted together by God ran their course, what was the promise in one age ceased to be the promise in the next; God fulfilled it and another took its place. The fulfilment of a promise ends an age of hope, faith then appropriates it. God then makes another age-abiding promise, and thereby lays the foundation of another age-abiding of faith for the saints to lay hold of in their hearts. This in turn becomes the foundation of life, that they should live in that hope and never let it go — certainly not draw back from it. They and we must hold fast the confession of our faith without wavering because He who promised is faithful, and in its time He will fulfil every promise He has made.

When God makes promises of this class they are fixed in time; they are not eternal but are appointments of God for a certain period of time. Every one of these is made for the time or age which is ushered in with the promise, and each is the respective promise for that age. When an age is concluded, the promise is no more promise because it is fulfilled: this being so, hope is fulfilled with it, and by it passes into consummation. Before Christ left the earth He made two major promises which were to be fulfilled by Him at either end of the oncoming age, and would embrace it. The first was the promise of the coming of the Spirit; the second was the promise of His own coming again to earth. Each in its order and importance was the promise: (1) 'behold I send the promise of the Father upon you'; (2) 'I will come again'. The first was for the spiritual birth and life of His Church, the second was for the sequential progression of God's plan for the ages: these promises are still as important for men today as they were on the day they were made.

It is vitally necessary that everyone ensures that the first of these promises passes into his or her experience and becomes personal history; until that time the fulfilment of the promise must be that person's hope, and should be

sought wholeheartedly. The second promise can ever be only a hope until the consummation of the age. Its fulfilment will effectively close this present age and open another. God has already stated His promise for that new age, 'Behold I make all things new'; John says, 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21 v.1). Like the second of the above promises this is still future and awaits fulfilment. No person, while still on earth, expects this promise to be fulfilled to him or her as an individual; like the children of faith spoken of by the writer we embrace it and live in the light of it, pressing forward as true pilgrims and strangers should in full expectation of hope.

This life-giving hope and the determination which springs from it had apparently vanished from the Hebrews to whom the letter was written. They were second or third generation Christians and were in a very dangerous condition, which danger the writer was very concerned to make clear to them. He asks them this question, 'if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression ... received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him ...?' The Lord was the first generation, those that heard Him became the second, and those who received the letter were the third. Within so short a time the vision had faded and become lost because of neglect; the great salvation had become inconsequential to them, the concentration of their lives was on other things. Therefore they had dropped out of the race and had ceased to be pilgrims; no longer were they strangers on the earth; they belonged here. Faith had either vanished or well-nigh vanished from their hearts.

One of the major causes of this spiritual declension was disappointment; men were disillusioned, asking questions to which no answer was forthcoming. They had been fed on false hopes, misinterpretations arising from misunderstandings of promises and of prophecy, all of which give rise to wishful thinking. Peter put one of the current questions which mocking unbelievers raised in these words, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' These and others like them were rampant in their day: tragically enough the believers had most probably stumbled over the same thing also. They had become victims of the falsely engendered belief that the Lord would return within their lifetime. The kind of questions they were asking, though not in the same spirit, is, 'Why has He not come back as He promised?' Although in their minds they had not set specific dates, they did have set expectations, and expectations ungrounded in fact are dangerous. Mistakes enthusiastically propagated among the unsuspecting and the untaught become destructive fantasies: they had brought fearful damage among the saints. The Lord once said to His people that He would give them an expected end, they were therefore right to have expectations and on them to build their hopes. The important thing for us all is that we have the correct expectations, for, rightly or wrongly, expectations engender faith; people tend to believe in what they expect, and vice versa. Expectations therefore must be rightly founded; but if that which ought only to be hope is mistakenly thought to be faith, then hope becomes expectation falsely called hope, which, in process of thought, becomes 'faith', when it is no such thing. The end of this kind of misconstruction can be disastrous, almost fatal, as in the case of many of these Hebrews; hence the many stern warnings in the epistle. The scripture makes plain that faith is the substance of hope; let us all beware of trying to make hope the substance of faith.

Faith in God's long term promises should be strongly held by every faithful heart; but, unless God commits Himself in plainest language to fulfil these promises within a certain period of time, they may only be held in hope, which must never be called faith. The promise of Christ's future advent made by both Himself and the angels of the ascension carried no time element. 'I will come again', He said; 'He shall come', the angels said. The promise was real, but the time factor never entered into it. 'Yet a little while', says the writer here, but in what time scale he was thinking he does not say; he does disclose, though, that faith understands that ages are fitted together, or framed, by the word of God. This knowledge should have been sufficient to prevent the Hebrews from becoming unbalanced in their thinking. By their own experience and by the writer's words, as well as by the whole of Hebrew heredity and history, they should have concluded that the 'little while' ought to be understood to be an unspecified time of uncertain length, most probably of quite considerable duration. Certainly they had no grounds for thinking that the Lord would return in their own lifetime. He had not said so, neither had the apostles; yet, because the Lord had not come for them according to their interpretation of the promise, they gave up and, to God's grief, ceased from their pilgrimage. The consequences were sad and grave.

What if, after fifty years of toil, Noah had given up? What if Moses at seventy five years of age had given in? What if Abraham? But we are exhorted to take our eyes off all these; they are all there; they are witnesses to true faith and patience and endurance, and their united testimony is invaluable, but we must resolutely look away from them unto Jesus. He did not come and live on the earth in order to be whisked away in something akin to a secret rapture as was Enoch. He came 'to do the will of God', as He said. To Him and to this, the writer points the

Hebrews, 'after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise', he says. Enoch was translated out of the world, Methuselah (and of course thousands of others doubtless) was taken away from all the trouble by death, but not so Noah; he had to patiently go through and endure everything to the end.

Possibly the Hebrews may have thought that because the Lord was coming for 'those that look for Him', as the writer said, they were perfectly right to expect Him in their lifetime for they had been looking for Him so long and were now tired of looking. So, having referred them to Jesus and His repetition of David's prophetic words, 'Lo, I come to do thy will O God', the writer says to them, 'after ye have done the will of God ye might receive (the fulfilment of) the promise'. He is both honest and wise, he does not say, 'ye will certainly receive the promise', but holds out hope, 'ye might receive the promises. He was writing by the Spirit, he was not making false promises. The promise was given to hope; the hope of the faithful heart is that though it see death it should die in faith, for 'he that shall come will come, and will not tarry'. When He comes it will be for all those to whom and for whom the promise was made, the majority of whom have died in faith since the day the promise was made. When the time of the promise comes, (and that is calculated to the very moment of time) He will not tarry another second, but will come.

There is not the slightest evidence or reason to believe that because a man is looking for the Lord to come He will come. His coming will not depend upon the watchfulness of His people, but upon the decision made by His Father, and will fit in with God's great plan of the ages. When He comes He will certainly catch up all those who do look for Him, and all those who have looked for Him: both those who have lived and are living by faith in glorious hope, and those who have both lived and died in faith without realising that hope. Although it is true that God makes and keeps His promises, we all must learn to live by faith in Him and not by faith in a promise, lest we mistake His promise or miscalculate the time of its fulfilment, or misappropriate something never intended for us. Faith in Him, whatever happens, however much may be understood and whatever may be the calculations or miscalculations, will keep saints walking on in the pilgrim way and running the race unhindered. We are directed to the fact that men must live by hope as well as by faith, because that is how Christ lived.

Drawing upon the words of David and applying them to Jesus, Peter, speaking on the day of Pentecost, made this plain, 'My flesh shall rest in hope'. The Lord died in hope by faith. He neither believed nor hoped that He would not see death; His hope lay beyond the grave. Part of the fulfilment of the plan of salvation lay in what He would do during those days of physical death. His plan for those days included a personal visit to hades, wherein a great unnumbered multitude of persons were held in captivity. Who these were, when they had lived, what they had done and how long they had stayed in hades we are not told, nor for our purposes here does it matter. Though unnamed and undescribed, it would appear that most, if not all, of these persons were human, for they had to await the coming of a human being to release them. Had they been spirits only, that is, not ever having had a human body, nor been a human soul, it seems most logical to think that they would not have needed the great Human Being to come and minister to them. David once said that if he made his bed in hell God's Spirit would be there, so obviously Jesus did not have to descend into the place of the dead persons because God could not get in there; there is no place of hiding away from Him.

Little enough information is given about what went on when Christ went down to these persons, but perhaps it may be rightly assumed that one of the prime purposes of this visit was to show Himself to them and preach the gospel among them. Certain it is that a multitude responded to Him, for when He ascended up on high He led them out and away up with Him to heaven. It must have been glorious! 'In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye' He was changed and caught up to the throne, and then He came back again for people to touch Him, handle Him, see Him. This is why we are all told to look unto Jesus; this is as important as looking for Him; quite possibly it is more, perhaps even very much more important to do this than to look for Him. This is the emphasis made in the twelfth chapter where the writer continues his theme by making a very striking contrast, pointing out the great difference between all those worthies of the Old Covenant and the one incomparable Lord Jesus Christ of the new.

Great though all those famous elders of the race were, they and all the people are referred to as a 'great cloud of witnesses', an unusual description to be sure, by contrast Jesus stands out alone so unique that it would be remiss not to refer to Him. The inference to be drawn from this is that we must not, under any circumstances, for any reason or for one minute of time allow them to become the great concentration of our lives. These Old Testament worthies, great though they were and worthy of praise, must not fill our thoughts or becloud our

vision of Jesus; beside Him, significant though they are, all pale into insignificance. They, their lives and their exploits only have meaning as they are related to His life and exploits. The point being made is, seeing that the Lord Jesus was not caught up to heaven and home until He had endured the cross, none of God's children ought to think that they should not also stay here and endure the cross and all that it implies as well. The inference from the statements in chapter ten is that the Hebrews were drawing back from the persecutions that they were undergoing. 'The patient waiting for Christ', as Paul puts it, had given way to intolerance; endurance had worn thin. They were giving up the fight; joy and confidence and assurance had deserted them and they had well nigh lost their faith. There were many pressures upon them; some had suffered greatly, but so had thousands before them: at bottom it was not this: because the promise of the Lord's return had not been fulfilled, false expectation had turned sour on them. What a pity that they should have made such a mistake; by doing so they stood to lose so much, if not everything. How timely then is this letter with its massive faith content and great emphasis upon suffering. It was written in the hope that its message would strike home to hearts before it was too late for them to recover themselves.

Moving from chapter eleven to chapter twelve we must pause to take note that the end God had in view for His ancient people, whether famous or ordinary, was perfection. When He gave calls or uttered commands or made promises, all were issued for this purpose — that those to whom He spoke should be made perfect. We see then that perfection is by faith — an aspect of the purpose of faith not usually emphasised, perhaps not even noticed. No one who wishes to fulfil all God's desires and attain to the highest can afford to overlook this, it must not be neglected. The word in James' epistle, 'faith without works is dead ... by works was (is) faith made perfects, is most important. Reviewing the chapter and reading once more of the persons and all that is said about them — their greatness, their achievements, their endurance, their persecutions and sufferings, and being assured that they all obtained a good report through faith, it is both heartening and sobering to read also that not one of them received the promise. They 'obtained promises', indeed it is said of Abraham that he 'had received the promises', but great as he was (and still is, for he is not dead — God is not the God of the dead but of the living) Abraham did not receive the promise, neither did anyone else mentioned in the chapter. None of them lived in the age in which God intended to give it, and certainly not in the age He was going to fulfil it. They received the promises relevant to the age into which they were born, and the good report they received is an assurance that in heart by faith they lived in the fulfilment of these promises.

We are now living in the age of the 'better thing'. What they of the former ages had was good; the people were very blessed by what God provided for them, but great as this provision was, it was not as great as that provided for us now; this is a sobering thought. If men and women could be so great under a lesser covenant founded upon lesser promises, how great ought we to be who live in this age of privilege? God has now brought in a new and greater covenant established upon better promises into which we all may enter with Him and live. This is that covenant within which, by God's grace, all may attain unto a perfection denied those Old Testament heroes and heroines. Their lives are testimonies to the fact that, through faith, it is possible to be all that God wants a man to be when he responds to His call under the terms of the covenant he has made and is then in being. We are compassed about with them, the writer says, they are 'a great cloud of witnesses' to this truth. To the best of his ability he has taken good care to ensure that we should never forget them. We are exceedingly indebted to him for this, but more so for the exhortation with which he concludes this section of his epistle. Being a Hebrew himself he, as much as any man, loved to think of the great elders of faith of whom he had written; he had benefitted so much from the knowledge and example of their lives. But just to have done that would have been almost to commit an act of betrayal against his beloved Hebrews, and what is worse against his most beloved Jesus. The writer's intention and commission was not to extol those Old Testament saints above any other, but having pointed to them to: (1) turn the eyes of Christians away from them on to modern saints and from that survey to (2) fix their eyes permanently on Christ.

'We ... are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses' — he was certain of it; he actually spoke of 'seeing them, they were all around, but he was no mystic. Everywhere he looked he could see them; surely his fellow Hebrews could also see them — if not they must be closing their eyes. For everyone who was drawing back and thereby placing himself in danger of perdition there was another who was pressing on to perfection; they were as well aware of that as he. They needed not to look back in history to find traces or testimonies of true men and women of faith, they all knew this kind of person; probably some were living next door to them — neighbours, friends, loved ones, relatives, they were compassed about with them. By going right back to God and creation and the earliest believers, the writer was establishing the truth that there had always been those who

lived by faith, and that the very earliest of them had died in faith because he was righteous. It might have surprised his readers to realise that one out of earth's four earliest inhabitants had done just that and that just before the dreadful flood only one family (one of which was the great hero of his age) out of a whole generation, lived by faith. It was the same with Abraham also, he was the only man of his day and of his family to respond to God and start to live by faith. Those men were alone, yet they did not break under persecution, nor did they retreat under pressure, neither did they draw back and go with their contemporaries to perdition; they lived by faith and overcame all. The tale of history is the tale of the persecution of men and women of faith who in their chosen singularity lived for God. While the epistle was being written history was unfolding in much the same way as it always had.

Many of their contemporaries, the present saints, were being persecuted; all who were living by faith were strangers and pilgrims on the earth; all around them countless numbers were proving daily that faith was the vital factor of life. Faith had not vanished from the earth, only from the hearts of defectors, people such as Judas for instance, and others like him, who either could not or would not be renewed unto repentance — sons of perdition.

Considerations of people such as these greatly troubled the writer, so did thoughts of those who, like modern Esau, (whose follies he was intending to record later) would end up weeping over golden opportunities for ever lost, having to live ever after in secondary blessings when they ought to be living in the fullness of God's blessing which goes with the birthright. To people of this sort God's promises mean little or nothing; they ignore His commandments and minimise His provisions, many of them tragically. These people are dangerous stumbling-blocks because by misunderstanding and misinterpreting the promises to themselves they do the same to others. What so many do not seem to understand is that faith is given unto men for many reasons, (not all of them very spectacular such as fathering a nation or building an ark) all of which are to enable them to run the race that is set before them. This is by far the most important thing and it is the reason why those unnamed multitudes of people are included in the roll of the faithful: of these nothing much more is said than, 'these all died in faith', or, 'these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise'. It is very important that men and women commence to live by faith; it is still more important that we continue to live through faith, but it is most important of all to die in faith.

The main thing the writer is trying to make everybody understand is that everyone of whom he has spoken in chapter eleven had run the race set before them and had done so with patience: that is all. Those who had done great things had done them simply because the course they had run had been set by God to embrace those things. Each individual was persuaded in his or her heart that those things were the will and choice of God for him or her, and got on with it whatever it was. None of them made the selection — whether to make sacrifice, or build something, or start off on pilgrimage, or lead an exodus and cross a sea, or possess a land — God made the choice and they did it. They took every step as it came and thought no more of it — they were led, they obeyed, they lived by faith, they ran their race. Those of them who are considered by men to be great were not told they were great before they started, they achieved greatness. But who in the end is able to measure greatness? Who can pronounce greatness as against insignificance among men? Who? What is greatness but the achievement of God's will, and except he or she runs the race set for each to run who shall achieve that? Hence the great admonition with which the twelfth chapter commences.

Turning from all other witnesses, whether in his day he was either ancient or modern, the writer now directs our gaze to the greatest of all witnesses who have lived on this earth the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His own testimony to John, He is 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God'. Before beginning creation, God began with Him. The writer's charge to look off unto Jesus is given to us in context of 'the race', the assumption being that they to whom the epistle is written had already started running. Having brought those Old Testament worthies into view, the writer, as of necessity, now puts them into perspective. They had run their race according to the will of God; not all of them had finished triumphantly though. Dear Noah of the righteous family, who by God's grace had lived and worked so faithfully for so long, dropped out of the race at last it seems. Present runners should not get the impression that they had for ever to be looking backwards. They were witnesses but are not held out as our examples. To run looking backwards would be disastrous, and to run looking around would be equally disastrous. A runner must look forwards not backwards, for he cannot hope to reach the end of the course, leave alone earn the prize, any other way. A glance over the shoulder is

sometimes a necessity if the race is a sprint, as in some cases it is, but it must be a quick one. This race is a lifelong one though, a marathon; to look around occasionally therefore is not prejudicial to finishing the race.

So here we have it, a look back at the saints of old, but not too often, and an occasional look around at the present day saints also. Both of these can be helpful, but let it not become habitual lest we are stumbled by them: the instruction is definite, we are to run looking forwards all the time, away from everybody on earth unto Jesus. We may find types of Him in the Old Testament saints, and likenesses of Him in the saints of the New Testament, but these must not fill our eyes and hearts; we are to see Him.

The Greek word rendered 'looking' is more directive than that — 'looking off' more truly conveys the writer's thought — 'looking away from, off from, all others — unto Jesus. If we pause here awhile and ask, 'why should we do this?' the simple answer is 'because He may be seen'. None of those writers of the Old Testament can be seen, neither can any of our contemporaries. 'We see Jesus', said the writer. He is not talking of visions, or of dreams, nor is he speaking of reading about them. Most probably not one of his readers had ever set eyes on a Gospel; this very epistle may have been the only writing of the New Testament canon they had seen in their lives. This sight of which he speaks is heart-sight, and that does not mean imaginary sight, it is real 'sight' — the only real sight. Having human sight we say, 'we see', when we do not see at all. Moses was as a man who saw the invisible. He ran his race with eye undimmed to the end — what a good report. No one knows what has happened to all those great ones of former days; beyond some very general statements made about their present whereabouts we know nothing in particular about them and their position in the beyond at this moment. Not so with Jesus though, we know just what happened to Him after He died; we know where He is, where He is seated, what He is doing, what He is saying, both in general and in particular: we know so much about Him. In fact, although we have record of Him so full of details about His earthly life, we know far more of what He did by His death and what he has been doing since His death than all that has been amassed for our reading in the Gospels. Wonderful and necessary as these are, so much of their contents are repetition; it is vital corroboration of course, and absolutely indispensable for us that we should see and know how He ran His race. But all of this was preparation for His death and what lay beyond — resurrection, ascension, enthronement, anointing, priesthood, mediation, intercession. Oh how wonderful! We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour, the first great runner to run the race perfectly unto utter perfection. We must look off everybody else unto Him because we may and can and should look unto Him alone.

We see then that to look unto Jesus is the only possible thing to do, for there is no one else to whom to look. Besides this, for many reasons, all of them vital, it is the only sensible thing to do. In the context of what the writer is speaking about, namely faith, Jesus is the obvious one to whom to look, for He is its 'author and finisher'. Why look back to Abraham or Moses in order to see faith in operation when we can look to Jesus and see it in perfection? Why look at elders when we can look to and at the Head? Why look at or hunt for and try to read an edition, whether it be the first or second, when we can read the original Word? Why listen to an interpretation when we can hear and understand the language? Why look at a copy when we can see and have Him of whom every other person, great as he may be, must indeed be only but a flawed copy? Jesus' faith is perfect, it is the faith; Paul said he lived by it, 'I live by the faith of the Son of God'; at the end of his life he said, 'I have finished my course'. Like the writer and most, if not all, of that first generation of New Testament saints, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily besets us and run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus the whole time.

Pressing the point still further, the writer says, 'Consider him': to consider is to dwell upon with fixity of purpose; a glance will not do for this. A glance may serve to attract our attention, but being attracted we must then become attentive; heart and mind must settle upon Him and stay set for ever. Doing so we will discover what now is being told us, namely that viewed without faith the prize Jesus was heading for did not appear to be worth having — He ended up on a cross. Was that the reward of the life of faith? Yes. Jesus is the only one of whom it could be written, He was born by faith and He died by faith — both His birth and His death (as well as His life) were accomplished by acts of faith on His part; He chose and then willed to be born and He chose and then willed to die. Others died in faith, He died by faith; it is to this we owe our salvation. Everything of Jesus was 'by faith'; by His humanity He proved that He is its author and its finisher, because in His humanity He lived out faith effortlessly before all men. Thereby He showed that He was perfect and it is to this perfection that we are called.

In His sufferings our great Exemplar endured far greater things than any before Him, and it was therein that His faith was most greatly displayed, for it is by persecution and suffering that faith most speedily develops and is enhanced. It is outstandingly noticeable that the Lord Jesus nowhere claims that any of the works He did on earth were accomplished by faith. He gave teachings and instructions about faith; He sometimes commented about other individuals' faith or lack of it; here and there He complimented some for their faith, but never spoke about His own. He could quite easily have done, and we might properly think that He ought to have done so, but He did not think so, for if He had thought so He would have done it. Apparently to Him it would not have been proper to do that, for by so doing He would have been drawing attention to faith works instead of to the faith life. Thereby He would have blurred the real issue; the purpose for His coming was not to do miracles, but to give His life. Although He did perform wonderful works, it was because He was such a wonderful person, but He also did carpentry for the same reason. Our glorious Lord is our life, and, as the writer says at the beginning of this section, 'the just shall live by faith'.

One of the most remarkable things to emerge from this great section on faith is the amazing way in which New Testament truth is revealed in the Old Testament. Surveying once more the opening verses of chapter eleven, it is possible to trace an outline of some things basic to salvation in every age, things which are fulfilled in the New Testament by Christ and more particularly expounded by its authors. This is probably the reason why the writer commences on the note of understanding — 'Through faith we understand'. The fundamental power which enables us to understand the things of God is faith; it enables us to grasp facts in relationship to eternal truth and, by other vital graces, build them together into sure knowledge, verifiable by every spiritual man. However, God is not only concerned to inform us of this means of understanding, He is keen also to instruct us as to what He wants us to understand, namely 'that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear'.

The apparent things are the result of non-apparent things, and in most cases are of far less importance. In some instances they are of equal importance, and in others the non-apparent both precedes the apparent and also issues from it: this is always so in every case involving spiritual and moral factors. This is easily demonstrable with reference to the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross. The cross and He who hung on it, as well as His suffering and the blood He shed there, were apparent to all, but that which was not apparent, namely the love (to name but one of the spiritual graces manifest there) which both preceded it and issues from and through it, is of far greater importance than the event itself. The fact and the enactment of the cross was, and still is, indispensable for redemption and our salvation, but without the love and grace and mercy and righteousness, and all the other virtues in God's heart which preceded and engineered it, all would have been as valueless as the wood and the thorns and the nails employed by man to bring it about, apparent as they were.

Following these words about the substance (may we say reality? For without substance nothing is real) and the understanding of faith, the world's first and righteous sacrifice is introduced and the death of him that offered it. No attention is paid to creation at all; the purpose of the writer is to draw attention to invisible things, not to that which is visible. He makes as few references as possible to that which is material; in every case the un-apparent is more important than the apparent. From that sacrifice and death the writer passes on to draw our attention to the translation of a man in order that he should not see death, the reason for the miracle being that he pleased God. Then, before mentioning the next great wonder, we are informed that, when seeking God, we must come to Him in true faith and with diligence, believing that if we do so we shall be amply rewarded; and so our attention is drawn to Noah and his great work. Of all that this man accomplished, the one thing emphasised is this: he 'prepared an ark for the saving of his house', and so three major historic factors foreshadowing the person and work of Christ lie before our eyes: (1) His sacrifice, offering and death; (2) His ascension (assuming His resurrection) — He will not see death again; (3) His preparation of the ark of salvation for His family. It is but the barest of outlines, but it touches upon the three most vital points of the gospel which open up doors of access to information for every enquiring soul. Perhaps we may safely call it 'The Antediluvian Gospel'.

The reward of faith to every diligent seeker who comes to God upon the basis of the offering and death of Christ is inclusion into His house of salvation. Speaking of the ark, Peter says, 'wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved'. So it was that the righteous family abode in safety, thankfulness and joy, while the cries of the doomed died away, drowned in the relentless downpour from above and the unstoppable upsurgings from beneath. It seems that creation itself rebelled against the wickedness of men and women, heaven and earth joining with God to mete out judgement. With that flood of judgement God ended an age, and with its passing commenced another.

From these three episodes, which together present a picture of the work and experiences of the Son, our attention is turned to that one great man of scripture who represents to us the person of the Father — Abraham. This is a logical unfolding of truth which links the foregoing with all the rest and sets the whole in perspective. The emphasis so far has been upon the person and work of the son, now it is to be upon the person and work of the father. When he approaches the climax of the story of Moriah Moses uses a crucial phrase, 'so they went, both of them together', carrying all the necessities for the death of the son; the sacrifice was to be carried out by common consent — in unison. The house is the son's, He prepared it, but the family is the Father's; He begets them.

It is in this spirit that the writer exhorts us to look away from all the worthies of chapter eleven, and lift our eyes unto Jesus. He is the author and the finisher of our faith. He perfected faith in the flesh and perfected it in the Spirit also. As He was the end of the law for righteousness, so He was the end of faith for righteousness; He has fulfilled everything. He was the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, the seed of the woman and the seed of God; He was the seed of faith. Receiving Him from the dead, His Father received us in a figure also; let us then, as those who are alive from the dead, run this race with patience; it is set before us, we may move from it but we cannot move it. In the day when rewards are given, we must receive the good report. Meanwhile let us also be among the number of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises and enter into our inheritance on earth. We must live by faith and not draw back to perdition; rather let us go on to perfection, ready to make the offering, build an ark, plunge the knife, or, in God's will, be translated out and away from it all. Our sole aim must be to please Him and if without faith that is impossible, then let this so great faith be the substance of our lives, our very nature that effortlessly we shall believe, obey and endure to the end.