

Prepared for Glory

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Approaching a Holy God

The general title we have given to our topic this week is 'Prepared for Glory'. You will immediately see that it is taken from a delightful expression in the Epistle to the Romans used by our good brother the Apostle Paul when he describes all true believers in the Lord Jesus as 'vessels of mercy, which he has *prepared beforehand for glory*' (9:23).

Vessels of mercy

When we look at the life of Paul himself, it is obvious what the first part of that expression means. He was a vessel of mercy, and it was not merely that God had had mercy on him, though in Paul's eyes that was an astounding miracle of the grace of God, when he was the very chief of sinners (see 1 Tim 1:15 KJV). He had fought a bitter campaign to stamp out the memory of the incarnate and glorified Lord Jesus from the earth. Not content with that, as he often admitted, he persecuted the church of God. He would stand over Christians and see them so tortured that they would be compelled by their pain to blaspheme the Lord Jesus. 'I was a blasphemer myself,' he said, 'and a persecutor, and God had mercy on me' (see v. 13). Paul never forgot to his dying day that he was a vessel of mercy, nor will he ever forget it through an endless eternity.

Examples of mercy

Then we perceive that he means not merely that God had shown mercy on him, but something even more wonderful still. In making Paul a vessel of mercy, God was determined to use Paul as an advertisement of his mercy worldwide. He says, 'I was the very chief of sinners, but God had mercy on me, that in me, as an example, Christ might show the extent of his long suffering to all those who should come afterwards' (see v. 16). God's reasoning was that, if he showed mercy to the very chief of sinners, it would become a worldwide example, and men and women would learn to argue, 'If God could have mercy on that wretch, Saul of Tarsus, he surely could have mercy on me.'

If there's one thing more wonderful than experiencing the mercy of God oneself, it is when God Almighty takes someone and turns him or her into an advertisement of his mercy so that God might stimulate others to believe in the Saviour. My brothers and sisters, we're not Apostle Pauls—maybe I do you an ill; I'm not—but I trust that our experience already keeps some pace with him, for we too have been made vessels of mercy. God has shown us his amazing mercy: something we never deserved. He has then turned each one of us into

advertisements, if not to the whole world, yet to our next-door neighbours, our friends and our families, so that they might argue, 'If God saved them, surely he'd be willing to save me.'

Vessels of glory

But Paul's description doesn't stop there. He says, 'vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.' This is the most staggering thing of all. If his mercy had merely extended to putting us outside his door in the 'dog kennels' of heaven, that would have been exceeding grace on God's part. But God's intention is that he should prepare us for glory, and it is that aspect of the matter that will occupy us in these coming days together, for we are to study one of the chief ways of God in preparing us for glory.

Paul has another vivid phrase in one of his epistles. He bids us think of a stately home in the ancient world and all the vessels, cups, saucers, plates, tureens, vegetable dishes and so forth that would be in that stately home. Some are ordinary vessels and some of them have quite dishonourable jobs to do, like coping with the waste. Some are magnificent, painted, gold-rimmed, of the most delicate bone china you've ever set your eyes on. Vessels fit to be put on the table of a king, so that the king himself would not be ashamed that his guests should drink from them.

If I catch it aright, it's God's pleasure to take us earthen vessels, who once were 'vessels of wrath, even as the rest of men' — common old clay and some of us with coarse lumps — and it is God's magnificent purpose not only to forgive us and cleanse us, but by the alchemy of his grace, to turn us into vessels of glory.

Imagine what it will be for God to introduce you, my sister, and say to the archangel himself, 'Have you met Mrs O'Flaherty? Look at the design of the woman, look at the purity of the 'china' in her. Did you notice those delicate features, have you observed the theme, the motif, that's going through her and the billions of others — the underlying motif of likeness to the Lord Jesus?'

The weight of glory

As I say, we are to consider together one of the chief ways which God has provided for us by which he might fit us for glory. Well now, glory is a difficult thing to carry, isn't it? I'm an Englishman, but I don't dine with our Queen in Buckingham Palace very often. To be honest, I haven't done it at all! It's not just that I don't get invited, although, of course that is part of it; but why would a man like me want to dine with her gracious Majesty? When you sit down at the table, there's half a dozen knives to the right and half a dozen forks to the left, three or four stacks of spoons here, and plates and glasses. For an ordinary man, it would be so embarrassing to know which to use first. Imagine finding yourself sitting by a dowager duchess; how would I entertain a duchess? The sheer glory of the thing would be such a burden on me that I should be all fingers and thumbs and I wouldn't enjoy the sausages and the Heinz beans that Her Majesty put before me, let alone the venison. I prefer humbler things.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, if there's any truth in the rumour — and it's a very strong rumour, then one day you shall be seated at table in the Messiah's kingdom and, who knows, you might find yourself sitting next to Abraham. You'd better have something to talk about

when you get there. How will you support the sheer 'weight of glory', as Paul puts it? We need practice, and life itself is the practice ground where we are being prepared for glory.

There's another rumour going about, and it's found in 2 Peter 1. It says that the amount of glory we shall be able to bear there is related to the amount of progress and practice we have had here. So, we should be preparing for glory.

A thought model for our studies

One of God's ways of preparing us for glory is the ancient sacrificial system of Israel, and we're going to take it as a basis and thought model for our studies.

Then Aaron lifted up his hands towards the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (Lev 9: 22-24)

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to enquire in his temple. (Ps 27: 1-4)

On these occasions that we shall spend together, I want to encourage us all to spend them in unashamedly indulging ourselves in one of life's purest and most holy pleasures. Not afraid of our critics, we shall be contemplating the supreme beauty of our Lord God Creator. I'm just a little bit afraid that if tidings of these things were to come to the public at large, you might find them complaining just a little, if not to me, to the elders of this church.

'What are you doing, indulging yourself in such fanciful, impractical things? Why didn't you tie the preacher down to a more practical brief and get him to tell us how to run a leadership class; how to organize the church's finances; run a games facility, or something of the sort? Why allow him to spend so much time on such an impractical subject as to consider beauty?'

If I must defend myself, I shall take refuge first in the psalmist himself. As we have read, he didn't propose just to spend five times considering the beauty of the Lord; he expressed a pious ambition to spend every single day in his life in the temple of the Lord, contemplating his beauty.

An appreciation of beauty

If people were to criticize us for being self-indulgent and sitting back and positively enjoying the beauty of the Lord, I might want to claim the example of the physicists, the people who examine black holes and the insides of atoms and the way the world ticks. From time to time,

as they probe the secrets of the universe and see the marvellous way it works, their very hearts are involved, for physicists are not people of steel and cold ice. They tell us that they are overawed at the sheer beauty of it all and the way it works, and if there are two competing mathematical formulae, very often the ground upon which they will decide which formula to take is by which one is the more beautiful. They go into ecstasies over the sheer beauty of the mathematics that describes the working of the universe.

My dear brothers and sisters, if physicists may spend their time and be paid by the government to consider the glories and the wonder and the beauty of our physical world, shall anybody blame us for spending just five short sessions of study contemplating the beauty of him who made the universe?

Look at that housewife. Not only has she flowers in her house, but stand back a moment and look at the way she's got them arranged. She doesn't just lump them in a pot like we bachelors do, if ever we get flowers. She's an artist to her fingertips. Isn't that arrangement beautiful? Listen to her daughter playing the piano; it's delightful stuff. If a housewife may rejoice in the beauty of flowers and the young lady rejoice in the beauty of music, may I not spend a considerable time of my life contemplating the beauty of him who made the flowers and gave us the ears to hear the music? Will you write it off as impractical stuff that ought to be banned?

I was out today with a very knowledgeable Canadian. The secret, of course, is that he came from Ireland! We passed a bridge and, being an expert in these things, he said to me, 'Do you see that bridge?' I said, yes, I did indeed, and then he said a marvellous thing. He didn't say, 'What a practical bridge that is.' He said, 'It's the most beautiful bridge around here. Look at how slender and graceful it is.' Thank God for somebody who can appreciate beauty. And if the engineers are going to be allowed to express the wonderful beauty that God has made mankind capable of, shall we not be allowed to contemplate the divine beauty of the engineer of the whole universe?

It's going to be the chief occupation of heaven, and that won't be because they have very little better to do. There'll be work to do in heaven, won't there? What glorious things. Life's preparation will not be for nothing. The Bible says that in that great day we shall reign with Christ. Oh, I'm impatient to see it all. Do you think all the galaxies are going to be destroyed when the Lord comes and the earth ends, or do you think there'll be a galaxy or two left for people like me to go and examine? I'm hoping for time off now and again from the heavenly praise meetings to go and visit the galaxies, to see how they work. If the new heavens and the new earth are going to have their counterpart with such wonderful things, as surely they will, sometimes I can't wait to get there. What fun it's going to be!

God doesn't have to work for a living, you know.

You say, 'Then why does he have all these things?'

Not because he has to work for a living.

'Well, why does he have them?'

I nearly said, for the fun of it. Who ever thought of God enjoying anything? I'd better put that in nice theological words. I mean, it's because of his holy purpose—but that amounts to the same thing.

The beauty of the Creator himself

‘What will it be to dwell above, | And with the Lord of glory reign?’¹ But amidst those glories, the chief and the greatest occupation and the supreme privilege will be to gaze upon the face of our Creator. That beautiful face, of which it is written, ‘They will see his face’ (Rev 22:4). But when men and women shall see that face turn from them in anger, it shall be the greatest pang and terror of eternity, for it means to be lost forever. To look upon that face is the prime reason why we were ever made. The chief glory and wonder of a creature is to be allowed at last to look upon the beauty of the Creator. We are vessels prepared for glory, and that will be heaven’s chief business.

When you think of it, it ought to be life’s chief business here. But often enough it isn’t. We somehow live willy-nilly, much conditioned by the attitude of the world. We love beautiful things, but sometimes their very beauty so absorbs our time and energy that we’ve little left to contemplate the beauty of the giver.

Satan’s lie

We live in a world that’s been wrecked by the dastardly, devilishly clever lie that Satan put to the woman in the garden. God made two kinds of trees in the garden of Eden. He said the one lot were good to look at and the other lot were good for food. I wonder why Christian people sometimes put more value on the things that are good for food than the things that are good to look at. I know carrots are very necessary, and potatoes as well. You have to be a realist: you need to have something in your stomach. That is basic, surely, and all that’s concerned with getting the carrots and the potatoes, isn’t that the real thing in life?

Not always. You’ve got a friend desperately ill and she can’t eat the carrots and potatoes, but what you could do is to take her a beautiful bunch of flowers. You say, ‘What use are flowers?’ It could just be that the sight of those beautiful flowers would bring a faint stimulation to that sick mind and body, a little breath of loveliness that might give the urge at that point to fight on and enjoy life again.

What a wonderful God we have. A God who’s concerned not merely with our stomachs but also with our enjoyment of sheer beauty. Here’s where the lie came in. Satan, as you know, came to Eve with his devilishly clever exaggeration.

‘I hear you’re not allowed to eat of any of these trees in this garden.’

‘Oh, no, you’re wrong there. We can eat of all of them except this one here, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘God delights to tantalize people. He puts lovely things in front of them and then says they can’t have them. Don’t be bound by it; eat it, woman!’

‘No, no. God has warned us we mustn’t eat of this tree, for in the day we eat of it we shall surely die.’

‘You don’t believe those old stories, do you? Of course you won’t die. Look at the tree.’

So she had a look at it. She saw it was good for food—physical satisfaction; and good to look at—aesthetic satisfaction; and desirable to make one wise—intellectual satisfaction. What

¹ Joseph Swain (1761-1796).

more do you want out of life than that? Physical satisfaction, aesthetic satisfaction, intellectual satisfaction.

'Grab life with both hands. Take it, woman.'

'But what about the word of God?'

'Don't bother about the word of God. You can have life without that.'

And the woman fell for the lie. What a lie it is: trying to grasp the beauty of life, the satisfactions of life, without being interested in the giver of life, and certainly not much interested in his word.

Suppose one of these days you said, 'I'd like to meet this funny Englishman and befriend him and ask him home to dinner. He seems a curious type.' So you ask me home to dinner and you give me the place of honour by your side at your table. What can you talk about to an odd Englishman?

As we begin the soup, you say, 'It's a nice day, isn't it?'

I don't reply.

You say to yourself, 'That's odd.'

A little later in the meal you say, 'Did you have a nice holiday last year?'

And I don't reply.

In exasperation you have another go, and you say, 'Have you read any good books this year?'

I lift myself up and I say, 'Madam, I'd like you to know something. I think this dinner you've provided is absolutely marvellous, and as for the Rembrandt you've got on the wall, I'm a great admirer of Rembrandt myself. That's a beautiful picture, I do admire the art of it. But I want you to understand that I'm not interested in you. I very much doubt if you exist, and even if you do, I'm not interested. This food is enough for me, and I love the art; but you, no.'

What would you do? You'd reach for the ejector button on my seat, wouldn't you? Delightful as your cuisine is and the décor of your house, what a fool I would be if I didn't see that the supreme joy you were offering me was not the beef, but your friendship. How grievously I would be depriving myself of the significance of the dinner, if I were interested in the cuisine and the décor and not in you.

Oh, friend, what is true of the world can sometimes be true of us believers, can't it? We so much enjoy all God's lovely gifts in this life, but it's a cruel world and we'd let it deprive us of that highest thing, the cultivation of friendship and conversation with God. We sometimes think it is impracticable if we spend too much time contemplating the beauty of God.

So this week we're going to enjoy and indulge ourselves unashamedly. For a while we shall leave the practical things and contemplate the beauty of God. But, before we're finished, we shall find that contemplating the beauty of God will turn out to be one of the most practical things we shall ever encounter in life.

But now we have a problem. If we are going to set ourselves to seek God and to contemplate his beauty, how shall we possibly do it? My atheist friends have a problem there.

‘Gooding, what you have is nothing other than a dream. You’ll wake up one of these days. What you imagine to be contemplating the beauty of God is only your subjective imagination, weaving a fairy story built up of the daffodils and hyacinths and things, but having no objective reality out there. You are deceiving yourself with a very pleasant dream.’

My reply is, ‘Well, gentlemen, it is very pleasant, and better than the nightmare you have. You say that one of these days the whole affair is going to end as the sun explodes and the earth evaporates, and not only earth’s beauty, but your intelligence as well will be wiped out.’

The glory of the character of God

Israel saw his glory

Is that all there is to life? No, ladies and gentlemen. No indeed. We are not left to our subjective ideas as to what God is like, we have the witness of the Old Testament. The great God, the transcendent Lord, once came down to our planet in smoke and fire and thunder, and stood on Mount Sinai in the presence of his people until Sinai and the little planet shook under the feet of her Creator. As he spoke his will through his holy law to his ancient people, Israel, the glory of the character of God was more spectacular and more wonderful than the glory of flame and thunder and lightning. He became known to them not only as the Creator of the great forces of the universe, but he showed them what his moral character is like. He is a God of holiness, a God of truth, a God of justice and right. The law that he gave his people was so superior to anything the other nations had.

God came down to dwell among them in the tabernacle

It wasn’t only that, but the great God who deigned to come down to Mount Sinai had an immense proposal for them. They were to make him a tabernacle, and he would come down and dwell among them. We read together the impressive scene when the tabernacle was made. They had put their sacrifices on the altar, and when Moses and Aaron had come out of the tabernacle the very glory of God descended and the fire came from before the Lord and consumed the sacrifices on the altar. When Israel saw it, says the historian, they shouted (Lev 9:24). Shouldn’t they shout? It was an experience indelibly marked on the nation of Israel to the very present day; the awesome thing of the almighty transcendent God coming down within space and time to that tabernacle and letting his people see his glory. The wonder of it, as they saw the very fire of God graciously accepting the sacrifice they had put upon that altar, was that they knew themselves accepted by their Lord Creator.

As he lived among them, he not only gave them forgiveness, but now in his tremendous grace he invited them to draw near. Once they’d been a pack of slaves in Egypt, and sinners as well. God had redeemed them by sheltering them under the precious blood of the slain Lamb, so that they might be protected from his judgment. They had been redeemed from the wrath of God and set free, carried through the Red Sea by an exhibition of the almighty power of God, and here they were, going along the wilderness. But you have mistaken the scene if you forget that they were a rabble of slaves, very ill behaved, much given to grumbling and murmuring, and most of them very ill educated. Now see the stupendous grace of God. Not

only had he set them free from wrath, but when they had built that small but fabulously wealthy tabernacle he invited them to come and draw near. What days on earth they were.

Ascending degrees of holiness

As they came near to the tabernacle they saw the flames on its altar, the water in the laver that spoke of the holiness of God, the great screens at the gate and then at the door, and then the veil that barred further progress and taught them the holiness of God. Some who were priests were allowed to go inside and see the awesome cherubim embroidered on the veil with all its mystery and wonder, and learn not only the holiness of God but his sheer beauty. If you were a priest, how wonderful it was to be able to go inside that tabernacle and see the golden lampstand, made like a stylized tree with life in all its forms and degrees. The bud for a cup, a flower for the beauty, and the fruit in the shape of an almond. What wonderful mysteries to contemplate; it was a copy of things in the heavens, a symbolic way of making real to Israel the tree of life in the paradise of God, which in reality we shall see one day (see Rev 2:7).

I'm not surprised to hear the psalmist say, 'One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to enquire in his temple' (Ps 27:4). But the psalmist was thinking of something more wonderful still, the reality of which that tabernacle was but a copy. One day he would dwell in the heavenly house of the Lord forever (Ps 23:6).

The Word became flesh, and we saw his glory

My answer to my humanist friends is not merely that God appeared in history and revealed himself, but he appeared in much more recent times. He appeared in that building of gold and wood and silver, but one day he appeared in an altogether more wonderful 'tabernacle'. The one through whom the whole universes were made, 'the Word became flesh and he dwelt among us' (see John 1:1-3, 14).

It's impossible to read the first chapter of John without catching the subdued excitement that springs through the pen of the apostle as he looks back on those incredible days on earth. 'We have seen his glory,' he says, as he scribes with his elderly hand across the page. 'I'm talking of God incarnate,' he said. 'We travelled in a boat with him, we touched him, we felt him' (see 1 John 1:1). The awe that came on them when they realized that the one whom they had carried in their boat, who had walked with them in their streets, who had stood at the cemetery with them and with Martha and Mary, was the Word incarnate.

'We saw his glory,' says John with baited breath, 'glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. We lived with him, we walked with him and we talked with him. We saw him die and learned that it was for our sins.'

How could it be? Can you believe the story? Is God really like that? Is that figure on a cross really God? I find this almost incredible. Take just one galaxy in our sky, the Andromeda galaxy, the scientists tell us that it contains two hundred and fifty billion stars. Can I believe it? Is that what God is like? Would the Creator of the Andromeda galaxy, all the rest combined and indescribably more, become a man and die for me? Oh, my brother and my sister, how shall we tell the sheer glory, the inexpressible wonder of God?

He rose again, ascended on high, and now he appears in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb 9:24). Not in some little tabernacle made of perishable materials in the Sinai Peninsula, but in the greater heavenly tabernacle. I need not stay outside like an ancient Israelite; I may come in spirit even now into the holiest of all and by faith gaze with open face upon the glory of the master of the universe. In this way we are being prepared for glory.

You say, 'Explain to us how all this is going to turn into something practical.'

Qualifications for approaching God

In ancient Israel

Well, let's go back to Israel for a while. When the Israelites were invited to come and meet God in his earthly tabernacle, they were to come with their gifts and they were to choose priests as the bearers of their gifts, in particular a high priest. The high priest couldn't be just anybody. He had to be absolutely sound in brain and limb, a perfect specimen of humanity (Lev 21:16–23). 'None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God' (Lev 21:17).

It's not that God is unkind to people with a disease, or people who are disabled through an accident at birth, but the high priest had to be sound physically. He also had to be dressed in the most beautiful attire (Exod 28). He was going in to the God of supreme beauty with the people's gifts. As the people drew near to God with their gifts, it was precisely at that point that they began to realize their gifts weren't good enough, and that they themselves were unfit to enter such glory. Therefore, God had to show them a whole system of sacrifices that could cover their defects of character and action so that they might come near to God to gaze upon his glory.

Nowadays

Times have changed. Our approach to God doesn't now depend on what clothes you wear. Let's hope we come decently dressed and not scruffily, because we're coming to the King of kings. Ultimately it's not the clothes we wear nor the food we eat, it's our characters. But sometimes the things we feed our minds on with our mental appetites are not good enough. It will be true of us as it was of Israel. As we respond to the call of God to come and contemplate his glory, his holiness and his beauty, we shall from time to time be automatically overwhelmed with a sense of our unworthiness, our desperate unholiness, our defect of character and our poor actions. That is inevitable, isn't it?

I remember a good lady years and years ago in England. Before she was saved, she was an exceedingly upright woman; very religious, but she didn't know she needed to be saved. Then she went to a gospel campaign somewhere and she was saved. About six months after that, she came to me. 'David, do you know what? Since I've been saved, I'm worse than I was before I was saved. Therefore, I'm not saved,' she said.

I thought the logic was marvellous. Work it out for yourself. 'Since I was saved, I'm worse than I was before I was saved. Therefore, I'm not saved.' I think I know what she meant. Personally, I thought it was a wonderful sign. You see, beforehand she was religious but she

didn't know God. She lived far from him. God was merely a formula in her prayer book. Then she came to know the Lord and began to draw near into the light of his presence, and of course the inevitable happened. Her miserable little personality and soul, the stain of sin and the pimples and the wrinkles and all such things that had been there all the time, now she began to see them. I thought it was a marvellous sign. I told her so, and today she is a delightful saint.

The story of Zacchaeus

That's how it happens, isn't it? It happened with that outrageous sinner, Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). He was born a very little chap and sometimes that brings an inbuilt kind of a complex. He determined he would show them that he would be rich, and rich he became. He was the richest of the tax gatherers, because he was the chief of them. Tax gatherers had great arts of swindling in those days, and he'd a house bunged full of furniture.

He thought it would gain the interest of people, but the more furniture he got and the more money he got, the less they liked him; and the more he tried to make them like him, the less they did. Poor little lost man, bound up with his personality defect. The synagogue leaders denounced him right, left and centre, and put him out of the synagogue, but that didn't bring him to repentance either.

One day, finding that he was getting nowhere and hearing of Jesus, he sought, just out of curiosity, to see him. To his amazement, and almost terror, when Jesus came he stood beneath the tree and looked up. 'Zacchaeus, come down,' he said. What a moment, when Zacchaeus's very Creator stood under his tree. He knew every little complex in Zacchaeus's personality, the knots he was tied in, and had come to seek him and to save him. 'Come down, Zacchaeus,' he said, 'I've got to stay at your house today.'

It appears they had scarcely got to the house, perhaps they were still in the street, when Zacchaeus took the opportunity to forewarn the Saviour.

You know what it's like when you're decorating and your house is upside down. Are you ever there? I've been there many times. You go down the road for a snack or something and there's Aunt Emilina. You think to yourself, I hope she's not coming to visit me.

'I was coming to see you. I'll come back with you,' she announces.

You think, what a perfectionist, and she's coming to my house!

You say, 'Well yes, Aunt, you're very welcome, but you'll find I'm in an awful state, an absolute pickle. I'm upside down. Shame really, to let you come.'

That was how Zacchaeus felt—our Lord hadn't said anything.

'Lord,' he said, 'excuse me, but there's just something I want to tell you before we get there. My house is twice as full of furniture as it ought to be, but I tell you now that I'm going to give half of it away. I've just got it there for the time being. If I've cheated anybody, I want to say now that I'm going to restore it fourfold.'

What had made the change? The presence of the blessed Lord had exposed his meanness and proved to be the motivation for changing him.

Steps towards being made holy

The presence of Christ exposes our sin

As it was in Israel with their ancient sacrifices, so it shall be with us. The Lord invites us to come and meet him and to worship him. As we come and consider him, we shall be exposed. Sometimes it will make us feel bad; we shall be ashamed of ourselves. We shall say, like Isaiah in the temple, 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isa 6:5). Or, like Paul, 'wretched man that I am!' (Rom 7:24). That's the first big step in making us holy, you know. And the second?

We confess our sin and come to know that God has accepted us in Christ

As we realize and confess our sin, then God points us to the blessed sacrifice of his Son, who covers our sin so that we may be at peace in the presence of God.

Ah, but more. In ancient Israel when a man brought his sacrifice, the priest had to take that sacrifice and cut it up into its parts and examine them to see that all was well and all was healthy before he put it on the altar as a sacrifice for sin or of devotion.

This too shall have its lesson for us in these coming days. As we come into the presence of the Lord and begin to see his glory, by necessary reaction we begin to see what poor creatures we are and we're ashamed of ourselves and would want to hide. But the gracious Lord points us to his sacrifice and we know ourselves forgiven and accepted because of his sacrifice.

Our appreciation of Christ will begin to grow

Then comes the next stage and the Holy Spirit will take these ancient sacrifices and point to them, point to their details and use them as a magnifying glass and a pointer to the blessed Lord Jesus, to tell us not merely that he died for us, but how he was qualified to die for us. The Holy Spirit will show us all the wonder of his lovely personality, and we shall find in all those things, where we have come short, that he is absolutely perfect.

Someone may say, 'What good will that do?'

Well two things. It will make you *want* to be like him; and as you admire him you will begin to *become* like him. We become like what we admire. That's why worship is such an important and practical thing. When you worship the Lord sincerely, you'll want to be like him.

We can become too occupied with our failures

Sometimes when believers come into the presence of the Lord and see his glory and perceive how wretched we are, then of course we confess it. But before we know where we are, we've concentrated so much on our horrible thoughts that almost every prayer is a confession of our faults. 'How wretched I am, how unworthy I am; I'm not worthy, I'm bad,' until I think almighty God gets a little bit bored and might be inclined to say, 'You told me that before. Do change the subject.'

So you see, there comes a point if we're too much occupied with our own failures, we shall become like them and push ourselves down in the mud more and more and more. So God's way is healthy. He not only shows us that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient to redeem us and cleanse us, but he shows us the wonder of the Saviour who was qualified to die for us because, in those things where we're poor and sinful, he was perfect.

It's like me and my playing of the piano. Sometimes I go somewhere and my gracious hostess beguiles me and says, 'Do you play the piano?'

I say, 'No.'

She says, 'I'm sure you do. You're only kidding.'

'I can play it with two or three fingers.'

'Well come on, play. It's all right. Play "Three Blind Mice", or some piece by Mozart.'

So I stumble over it, doing my best, and she says, 'That's wonderful.'

I say, 'Do you play it?'

'Well, yes, a little bit.'

And she sits down and out comes the sonata and I feel I could go through the floor. Have you ever had that experience? I want to run away and hide my head with shame. But if I do that, I shan't get far with music. I'd be a better man to sit and listen to her play, absorb the beauty of it, watch the technique, and imitate the good lady.

So God points us to the blessed Lord Jesus, who not only died for us, but to all the marvellous detail of his personality that equipped him to do it. As we contemplate his beauty we begin to admire him, and from admiring him we worship him, and from worshipping him we aspire to be like him and to imitate him.

How do we imitate Christ?

When I use the word 'imitate', I don't mean it in a bad sense. We can have imitation coffee, but don't drink it, ladies and gentlemen, it's horrible! It isn't the real thing. That's imitation in a bad sense, but there's a good sense of imitation, isn't there?

In my day, the great footballer in England was Stanley Matthews. It was not an uncommon sight in those days to be going round the corner of some poor, run down street in the city, and there was a little chap, he was all of thirteen. He'd got a football and, lo and behold, in his eyes he was Stanley Matthews. He was lining himself up like Stanley Matthews and kicking the ball like Stanley Matthews. As far as he could, he was imitating Stanley Matthews. He'd be a great footballer when he grew up.

God shows us his Son. 'Look at my Son,' he says. 'Don't you think he's marvellous?' We admire him and we worship him, and before we know where we are we're trying to imitate him. 'Carry on,' says God. 'Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph 5:1-2). We shall find ourselves trying to imitate the Lord Jesus, who loved us and gave himself as an offering for us.

That's going to be my thesis. As we behold the glory of the Lord we become aware of our sinfulness; and yet, as we penetrate further and watch it more closely, we find that our very sinfulness makes us more aware of his wonder. We admire him and worship him and think of his offering, and then begin to imitate him. In that way, we are vessels of mercy prepared for glory.

The Lord be pleased in these days together, that he shall reveal himself to us through his word to that end, for his name's sake.

[The Burnt Offering and the Grain Offering](#)

Part one: The burnt offering, Leviticus 1

We were considering last night that, when God got his people redeemed out of Egypt into the wilderness, he came down not only to meet them, but to dwell among them. When the tabernacle was formed and God graciously deigned to dwell in it, then he called to Moses out of the tabernacle and invited him and the people to draw near. As they came to that small but exquisitely designed and exceedingly expensive shrine, they learned of the holiness of God.

There were ascending degrees of holiness. First, you would pass the gate, and there was one area of holiness; then the door, and an even greater area of holiness; then the veil at last, and you were in the very presence of God, in a holiness that could not be exaggerated or increased here on earth. The holiness was symbolic of the very holiness of the thrice-holy God in heaven itself.

The beauty of holiness

As the people came near, they were not only struck by the holiness of God, but, as they saw the rich colours on the gate and on the door and on the veil, they were struck by the beauty of that holiness. As the priests surveyed the cherubim on the veil, it reminded them of the wonderful, mysterious beauty of the glory of God who dwelt there.

Therefore, the offerings they were to bring to God were to be the very best they could find. They would be made awesomely aware of that holiness: of its standard and of its right demands. As that glory reflected on them, they would come to see how inadequate their gifts were, how far short their devotion came, how compromised their holiness was, and their own sinfulness in personality and character and deed. So, as they learned of the holiness of God, God graciously put into their hands offerings of substitution that might cover their inadequacies and be the ground upon which they drew near to God.

Moreover, as those offerings were offered, the priests in Israel were charged with the inspection of the animals. They had to be cut into their parts, examined and carefully laid on that altar. The priests would be responsible for seeing that those sacrifices were healthy sacrifices, fit to take the place of the people, to die in their stead in this sacred ministry to God.

A thought model in our own situation

We are going to use those early prefigurements as a thought model in order to investigate and analyse the great realities of the work and ministry of our blessed Lord Jesus. We too have been redeemed. One day we shall be taken bodily into the very holiness of God in the glory,

but even now we are urged and invited to come in spirit with boldness through the veil into the very presence of God. As we do so, and are made aware of his thrice holiness and of the beauty of his character, we shall inevitably by reflex action come to see how inadequate, how spoiled, how gnarled and twisted our characters and personalities are. But we shall appreciate all the more the great sacrifice of Christ that covers our need, not only as outrageous prodigal sinners on their first return, but as stumbling apprentice saints, still failing and falling. Even though we are on our way to God and being prepared for glory, we shall be all the more grateful for the wonderful courage given to us in the glorious sacrifice of our blessed Lord Jesus.

As we consider him, we shall not only rejoice in the fact that his adequacy covers all our inadequacy, but the Holy Spirit will show us how our blessed Lord's life was supremely perfect in all those respects where we fall so intolerably short, and we shall come to admire him and then to worship.

Sometimes when I happen to be travelling by ship I go down to the engine room, with all the enthusiasm of a schoolboy, to watch the pistons go and see how it works, but really I haven't much of a clue as to what is happening. Suppose an engineer comes with me down into the bowels of the ship and stands open mouthed at this marvel of technology. He studied engines and he perceives the wonder and the skill of the engineer who made such mighty great pistons and things that work so smoothly. The more he knows about the engine the more he admires it, and the more he admires it the better engineer he becomes.

So it is with us and our blessed Lord. As we perceive our weakness and shortcoming, and the Holy Spirit directs us to the Lord Jesus, we stand open mouthed at the glory and the beauty of that lovely life that prepared him to die for us, and again there rises up within us that unanswerable question: why did God give such a splendid life for such miserable weaklings as we are?

You'll remember the remark that Peter makes in the first chapter of his first epistle: we were redeemed from our 'empty way of life' — and God knows it was empty enough. But for our empty lives God gave his Son. We were redeemed from that vain manner of life by the blood of a Lamb that was without blemish and without spot (see 1 Pet 1:18–19).

It is a question I shall be asking you when I meet you in eternity. I don't know how many times we shall meet, but it will be this: 'Why ever did God give that perfect life for us?'

The burnt offering was all for God

It is not for nothing then, that the first of these sacrifices that is mentioned in this book of Leviticus, by which Israel approached God, is the most famous of them all. It is the burnt offering, the 'offering of ascent' as it's called — the ascending offering. It is famous because it was, among all the offerings, the one that was offered entirely for God. Whereas in other sacrifices, part was given to the priest; in still others part of the sacrifice was given to the offeror as well; in this sacrifice, apart from the skin and other oddments, the whole of it was offered on the altar to God, and its symbolism is not difficult to ascertain.

The Jewish rabbis were not slow to see that one of the early times that such a sacrifice is mentioned in the Old Testament is the offering that Abraham was invited to offer on the altar at Moriah. He was asked to bring his son, his only son, and offer him up as a burnt offering to God (Gen 22). What could have been more expressive of devotion than Abraham should be asked to take his only son—virtually all he had and all his potential for the future—and offer him on the altar for God? The rabbis saw it as an example of unparalleled devotion to God. But it was not unreasonable, for, if this is the first offering that stands in the book of Leviticus, it reminds us of what, according to our blessed Lord Jesus, is the greatest of all the commandments.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Matt 22:37–39)

Of course, we shall see at once that such a sacrifice was truly prefigurative of our blessed Lord Jesus, who did it to the full.

A sacrifice for sin

But then let us notice that this sacrifice also was a sacrifice for sin. It is a something that has escaped some commentators, and they have said that those Old Testament sacrifices were largely in two groups.

There were sacrifices for sin, like the sin offering and the trespass offering; and they are never said to be *offerings of a sweet savour* to God. They dealt with sin. But this burnt offering and the peace offering, they point out, were offerings technically called ‘a pleasing aroma to the LORD’ (1:17). These weren’t concerning sin, they said; these were emblematic of our blessed Lord, who gave himself without spot to God—the perfect example of complete devotion to his Father.

That is true as far as it goes, but not quite far enough. This offering too was to make atonement (1:4), and sorely did the Israelites need it, and sorely do we need it too. Listen again to the standards of the law that the sacrifices answer to. ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Anything less than that is positive sin.

God’s analysis of sin

We do well to ponder God’s analysis of sin. Sometimes we fall into rather shallow notions of sin, don’t we? So long as we haven’t broken into the bank, so long as we haven’t dealt in drugs, so long as we’ve not murdered the next door neighbour nor been unkind to our maiden aunts, then we are good folks. Ask us are we one hundred percent zealous for the Lord, and we might reply as the Laodiceans did.

‘What did you say, “one hundred percent”? Well, no. we’re not against being spiritual, but there are some people who take these things to extremes. Marvellous people, like missionaries, and they’re totally devoted to the Lord. We’re not quite like that. Of course, we are not against the Lord’s work. We’re about in the middle: not too hot, but, on the other hand, not ice cold. Won’t that do?’

'No, it won't do,' says God. 'How dare you insult me? I would rather that you were either hot, boiling hot, or else ice cold. I can't stick this nauseating lack of zeal' (see Rev 3:15–16).

You say, 'Come, come, Mr Preacher, don't talk in such extreme language. Moderate your voice. And, wait a minute, there are some things in which extremism is bad, are there not?'

The church in Ephesus was reminded by the living Lord of their extremes. They were full of hate. Rightly so, because they hated the things the Lord Jesus hated. But they had lost their love: they were all hate and no love. That was a caricature of true Christianity.

The people in the middle church, Thyatira, were the converse. They were the only church commended for their love. But, using a similar verb, our Lord reminds them that they allowed that woman, Jezebel, to teach and to seduce his servants. They were all love, you see, and they didn't hate. They too were unbalanced, and, sure enough, from being unbalanced and extremists, comes one of the sources of our trouble.

So, when we come to the last church of the seven, Laodicea, the trouble with them was that they weren't extremists. They were in the comfortable middle range: neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm. God considers that sin to be the most heinous of all.

God expects all our love

What would you think of this young gentleman's attitude to the girl he was going to marry?

'I suppose you're madly in love with her?'

'Well, not exactly. I wouldn't say that. I don't believe in taking anything to an extreme. Of course, I'm not against the girl. On the other hand, I don't go overboard on these things. I mean, I'm not all *that* in love with her. Just keep it balanced, you know.'

I remember that our Lord began his ministry at a wedding. It's a reminder of what God expects from us, his people, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *mind* and with all your *strength*' (Mark 12:30). Difficult sometimes to love with all four, isn't it? We love with our heart, like Mary. Surely that's the major thing; but we have to love with our brains as well, don't we? Brains come in various sizes, but not to use our brains to think with, is to fail to love the Lord our God with all our minds.

Sometimes we can be one-sided. Full of emotional love, but not bothering to think through our faith very much. We reserve 'thinking' for our school, our university, our computer careers. With Christianity, even as adults we settle down to Sunday school level, and don't rigorously think through our faith; and it's sin, isn't it? We are to love the Lord our God with *all* our minds. Our brains differ in size: yours is a Rolls-Royce, mine a Mini Minor. I know that; but if we're not using our brains as rigorously in getting to know the Lord and his word as we use them in our physics, our stocks and shares, our computers, and don't bring up our young folks to use theirs to think through their faith, this is a serious dereliction of duty.

We're to love the Lord our God with all our minds as well as our hearts. But of course there is the ever present danger for those who attempt to do so, that they become mere theorists, and that wouldn't be enough, would it? We are to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and then to learn to do and to serve.

Ah, how we thank God for our great Sacrifice, our great Substitute. How should I appear before God even today with my meagre little love, if I couldn't come, sheltering behind him

who loved us and loved his God? He loved God and his neighbour as himself. He gave himself as an offering of a sweet smell and fragrance to God as our great burnt offering.

God's provision to forgive sin

Romans 5 reminds us of the vast wreckage of our human race that came through one man's disobedience.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . . For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (vv. 12, 19).

The Holy Spirit is saying that there is a certain parallel between what Adam did and what our blessed Lord did; but it's an unequal parallel, for out of that one transgression of Adam there came myriads of sins. If one sin should be enough to damn and ruin the whole race, what about those uncountable myriads of sins that have followed in the wake of that pestilential disaster? It's enough to think of my own: one sin of mine would have ruined the race, and how many transgressions there are to my account. Think of the wonder of this—can you measure its dimensions? By his one great act of obedience, the many who trust 'the one man', Christ, will be made righteous.

Hebrews 10 follows the same theme. God was tired of the mere symbolism of the ancient world.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me . . . I have come to do your will, O God' . . . And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb 10:5, 7, 10)

And we recall that our very salvation depends on our Lord's complete and utter devotion and obedience to death.

Three divisions in the burnt offering

But let us use the imagery of this ancient sacrifice to help us again in our thought analysis. You observe that there were three divisions mentioned in the instructions for this burnt offering. You could, if you pleased, bring an offering of a *bullock* or, if you thought otherwise, you could bring an offering of a *sheep*, or again, if you so pleased, you could bring an offering of a *bird*. I suspect the differences were allowed of God to accommodate people's means. A rich farmer could afford to bring a big bullock. A poor, unmarried woman, like Mary was, might only be able to afford to bring a bird. God indicates his awareness of our different potential; he did not expect the same of every Israelite in Israel. When we take that thought model, not merely as a guide to Israel in the past, but as a foreshadowing of our blessed Lord, it serves in another direction to help us grasp the elements in his perfect devotion. I should like to compare these three divisions with three statements made in the Gospel by John, where

our Lord says that he has come from heaven to do the will of God. Three times over he talks of doing the will of God.

The ox

The first one of them is found in chapter 4. He had spent a long time in the heat of the day, sitting on the well at Sychar, talking to the unfortunate woman of Samaria, and leading her into the wonder of salvation. When the women had left to go into the city, the disciples said,

‘Rabbi, eat.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Has anyone brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘*My food* is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.’ (4:31–34)

My mind goes racing back to that Old Testament ritual. Here was the farmer’s ox and, if I may mix my metaphors, it was the workhorse of the ancient world. It did all the jobs on the farm. It pulled the cart, it pulled the sledge in the summer to thresh the corn, it pulled the plough to plough the furrows. The ox was the workhorse of the farmer.

You say, ‘That was rough for the poor old ox: having done all the work, then to end up on an altar.’

But, be careful what you say. Conversation with oxen is very difficult; they are rather slow to perceive what’s going on! But I fancy if you could penetrate the ox’s mind and tell him that he was being offered in sacrifice to God, he would think it was the most privileged thing he ever was allowed to do.

Talking of oxen, I can’t forget that lovely story in the book of Samuel of the two milk cows that the Philistines used when they sent back the ark. The ark was causing uncomfortable disturbances in the Philistine country, you may remember, and the learned Philistines thought of an experiment to test this strange power that had their god Dagon on his face every morning. Was it by chance, or was it really the supernatural power of God that was doing it?

So they got a new cart and put the oxen on it, and they chose two cows. A very important part of the ceremony was that these cows were in milk. As they put the old cows in the shafts they said, ‘Now we’ll see what they do. Their calves are tied up at home in the stall, and if these cows go their way, and take the cart and the ark back to the land of Israel, then surely it’s a miracle and it will show that God is in it. But if nature gets the upper hand and they turn back because their new born calves are in the stall, then it will be as we thought: there’s no miracle in it.’

So they put the ark on the cart and attached the two cows. Poor old beasts, you can see them now as they started down the road. When it penetrated the bovine mind that their calves were at home, they started to low and to bellow. Any moment now, the Philistines thought, they’ll turn back. Nature and instinct will get the upper hand here. But no, it didn’t. As they lowed and bellowed, they took the ark back to Israel. When they got there, the men in Israel put the ark somewhere, took the cart and used the wood for the sacrifice, and then they got the cows and slaughtered them and offered them as a burnt offering.

I don't really expect to meet them in glory, but there was a power that could overcome nature's instincts and move those mother cows to take God's ark back and yield themselves as a sacrifice.

And we use this thought model to think of our blessed Lord as the worker ox. God's care for oxen is written into the law. It says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain' (Deut 25:4). As the ox went round and round and round on the threshing floor, treading out the corn, it was to be allowed every now and again to bow its head and munch the corn that it was threshing, and so live on the work it was doing.

Our Lord journeyed until noon in the heat of the day. He was thirsty and asked for a cup of water from the woman—did he ever get it? Why had he come there? It was for this one woman. God's own Son had come from the realms where thirst is never known because the Father sought worshippers, and the woman sought satisfaction. So he came and sat on the well. When the long, long, exhausting, draining interview was over, the disciples came and offered him food. He said, 'Thank you, gentlemen, but I have food that you perhaps don't realize. *My food is to do the will of him that sent me and finish his work.*'

Suddenly the very heart of the Son of God is made bare. Why did he do this kind of thing? Did he do it for the salary he got? No, he didn't get a salary. What did he do it for? Says he, 'Because I couldn't live without it. This is my food; I live on it. This is where I find the satisfaction more necessary than my daily bread.'

What is our attitude to the Lord's work?

Do we live on it? We shall not do the Lord's work effectively as a hobby, a thing we do when we've nothing better to do. Nor will it be up to God's standards if we do it simply as a duty. 'Oh, I suppose I must take that Sunday school class. Bother it.' We do it because we've got to do it. Well that's better than not doing it, isn't it? God be thanked for a sense of duty that keeps some of us lazy ones doing what we should do, even if it's not from the highest motives.

But just listen to the awesomeness of it. In his work to come and save the likes of us, why did our Lord do it? He tells us that he fed on it; it was his veritable food. He knows our hearts and we've got to stand before him one day. Should he ask us, 'How did you enjoy working for me down there on planet Earth?', how good it would be to be able to answer him, 'Lord, you know, I could scarcely get enough of it. It was the very food of my personality.'

The sheep

In John 5 it's going to be the sheep.

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. (v. 30)

'I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.' We notice the solemn context here. He's talking about how he shall be the judge at the final assize: 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father' (vv. 22–23). The one whom men and women will see seated upon the great white throne will be our blessed Lord Jesus. Imagine people coming that day. If somehow they could see the unseeable God it would be different, but they shall be faced with Jesus Christ our Lord.

I'm glad I don't have to sit there, aren't you? If I were charged with responsibility for the final judgment and had to deliver God's sentence of condemnation, I should be afraid of my neighbour, Mr Smith.

He might say, 'How have you the impertinence to judge me? What did you do?'

That would be embarrassing. Down here we're not so bad at judging and criticizing. You should hear what words of wisdom come from us and how stringent our criticisms can be sometimes. We have to judge, don't we? Difficulty number one about judging is knowing all the circumstances and coming to a good judgment. The other difficulty is being consistent with our own judgment and living up to it. That's the difficult bit. Do remember, my dear folks, that there's a very strong rumour going round. We won't sit on the final judgment throne of God, but one day believers of this age have to judge angels, and we've got to judge the world (1 Cor 6:2). That alarms me, I must say. How shall I prepare for that difficult task?

Hear our blessed Lord: 'My judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (5:30). Here is the sheep that never went astray, never sought his own interest, and will not, even in the final judgment. How mixed some of our judgments in life can be, because in part we are in fact seeking our own interests. Our blessed Lord never sought his own will, whereas 'all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord laid on him our iniquity and he bore it' (see Isa 53:6). Those who perish at last under his divine criticism need not have done so, had they only repented and sought his mercy.

Great things are afoot, my brothers and sisters; we are being trained to be like him. When it comes to being placed as his executives in the day to come, the measure of responsibility that he will be able to entrust to us will be in proportion to the way we have abandoned our own will and sought to do his.

The bird

There's a lovely statement in John 6 about our Lord doing the will of God. He's talking about himself as being the bread from heaven, far more nourishing bread than ever Moses gave to the people in the wilderness (v. 32).

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.
For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.
(vv. 37–38)

And now we notice the description, not merely to finish his work, but he has *come down from heaven to do the will of him that sent him*. That's going to be the equivalent of the bird that flies down from the heaven to find itself eventually on the altar.

What was God's will?

And finally, I leave with you that lovely picture:

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (v. 39)

He came down to do his Father's will and do it perfectly, and in that is a lot of my joy. *That will was that he should lose nothing.* In my naivety, I imagine to myself that august scene when the Son takes his people and presents them before the throne of his glory.

'Father, this is Abraham, the great Abraham', and the Father welcomes Abraham in.

'This is Sarah of course, his wife. You know her?'

'Oh, I've known her for a long time.'

'This is Thomas, Father.'

'He's the one that was a little bit doubting at one stage.'

'We got over that by my grace, and here he is, Father. I've got him home at last.'

Oh, what rejoicings there will be.

'This is Mrs O'Flaherty.'

'Oh, lovely.'

When at the last, the final one of the redeemed is brought in and there appear to be no more, God turns to his Son and says, 'Is that all?'

'Yes, that's all.'

'And where is Gooding?'

'Gooding?'

'Yes, Gooding, you know, him of England and Belfast.'

'Oh, he's not here.'

'What do you mean, he's not here?'

'Well, he was one of those awkward types; very self-opinionated and idle and I thought you wouldn't miss just one amongst the billions.'

In those moments heaven would grow dark, wouldn't it? For if one were lost, then the blessed Saviour would have failed to do God's will.

He shall never fail. He came down from heaven to do the will of God like that bird, and I leave the image with you. The priest had to take the bird and do various things with it, and finally he took it by its wings and rent the bird asunder, but not completely, and laid it on the altar. In my imagination I watch it there on the altar. Did the priest spread-eagle it out?

I look at those lovely wings—birds' wings are beautiful when you get near them—such a marvel of engineering, such beautiful balance. In the primitive parts from which I come, if you lived in the country you had a lot of chickens in a run. They were rather empty-headed things and they would fly away from time to time, but we had a way of coping with that. We cut one wing short so that it was unbalanced and couldn't fly. It flapped down on the ground again and that taught it to stay where it should. But a bird left to itself, the secret of its flight is that its wings are so beautifully balanced.

Here's a bird on the altar, and I say, 'Bird, do you know that you needn't have been on this altar? The priest can't fly. If only you'd kept singing your lovely song up in the tree, or soared high with your pinions, the priest would never have got you. Whatever did you use your lovely wings for to come down, near enough so that the priest could get you and bring you to that end?'

As I see our blessed Lord with open arms, nailed to Calvary, I say, 'Lord, whatever made you come down? Caiaphas would never have seized you if you hadn't. And when you came down, why did you let them take you and put you to a tree?'

The answer would be in his wings, wouldn't it? He was absolutely balanced. He loved the Lord his God with all his mind, heart, soul and strength. Yes, but he loved his neighbour as himself. God's holiness demanded that no sin could be in heaven. He loved his Father, and loved his holiness. But God's holiness must forever have kept us out of heaven, and he loved us as he loved himself. There could be no compromise—if he was going to love God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength, and love us as himself—those two 'wings' brought him inevitably and at last to Calvary, and you and I are eternally safe because of it.

How should we react?

Would someone say, 'That's marvellous! Now I'm free to go and do as I please'?

No, I think not, for I know what's springing up in your heart. You are saying, 'Oh, wretched man, wretched woman, that I am, how could I ever have taken my redeemed life and trivialized it away by doing my own will and seeking my own thing? May God help me, by his very mercies, from now on and forever to present my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God' (see Rom 12:1).

Part two: The grain offering, Leviticus 2

There is a second division in this offering. Have you noticed how odd it is? If I'd been writing it, I would have started with the corn in the ear, then the corn gathered and ground into flour, and the final product, the cake. That's the order of nature. Moses didn't. He starts with the flour, he goes to the corn baked in the cake, and then he ends up with the corn in the ear. Perhaps he's got it in the wrong order—or perhaps he hasn't? If you start with the basic constituents, body and spirit, you'll end up with the firstfruits—the resurrection of the body. And what comes in between?

The process of cooking

They were allowed to take this flour and oil and cook it into various forms, which would have improved the flavour somewhat.

Tell me, who are you? I'll talk to you senior ladies. Here's a bright young woman; she's about seventeen and she is beautiful, in the first flush of womanhood. But when I look at you, you have something she hasn't got yet: a poise of character and a charm that is more than skin deep. How did you come by that?

'Well,' you say, 'I've been around a bit longer. It's what I have learned from life.'

And what you've learned in life has made you what you are now. I rather think it was meant to do that, don't you? To make a human being, you have to take the original ingredients that were there when the baby was born, and then you have to put it through the cookery of life: the heat of life's pleasures and sorrows and temptations and successes. It does something to the personality. Indeed, it goes a long way to creating the person. That's what the cooking does.

You're not sorry for a cake when it goes into the oven. You don't say, 'poor old cake, that's no way to treat innocent flour and cooking oil'; you say, 'come on cake, respond to the cooking and come out as a fair cake.'

That's what life was meant to do to us. It was meant to do that to our blessed Lord himself. He was perfect; listen to what it says about him.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. (Heb 2:10)

The sheer wonder of it, that our Lord's experience of life here in the human body has marked him eternally, and contributed to his glories. It has not been wasted and cast aside, but has contributed to him now and eternally, which is why he can be a merciful high priest to you and me. If life's experiences were meant to do that to him, they are meant to do it to us.

How's the cooking going, my Christian friend?

You say, 'It's going very well. I'm maturing and I taste better as the years go by.'

It doesn't always work like that, you know. I cooked a literal cake once. I weighed out the ingredients and the milk. (More or less—you can't keep to the cookery book all the time.) I put it into the oven and it was going to be a stupendous cake, but it all went wrong. It wasn't my fault; it was the stupid cake! I put it in the right oven at the right temperature, but the thing reacted wrongly. Instead of rising as a nice light cake, it came out all lumpy and sour. You couldn't give it to anybody to eat; even the dog would refuse to eat it.

That's a waste of flour, isn't it? But it's a tragedy when it happens to people, and a bigger tragedy when it happens to believers. Instead of maturing as a believer, life's trials embitter them and make them rebellious against the Lord, sour them, and thus damage their personality.

You say, 'You don't know what you're talking about; you don't know the sufferings I've been through.'

I suspect I don't. We all have our own sufferings, don't we? It's not just suffering that causes us to go wrong; too much success can cause us to go wrong and we become proud and inflated and silly. What shall keep me from turning out bad in the cooking?

God has a recipe

You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Lev 2:13)

That's it: *God's faithful covenant*. What a wonderful thing it is, when we are going through the fires of life, to know that we can stand up and we don't have to cave in and become sour and embittered, ugly and dumpy and lumpy. God's covenant guarantees that 'he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability' (1 Cor 10:13). If you give in, it will be your fault, but God is faithful.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor

anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35–39)

Have mercy on those who are in the frying pan, and if you're there don't shout too loud. It's the normal method that cakes have to go through so that they come out suitable for the palate of those who will eat them.

The next time the Lord Jesus knocks on your door, my brothers and sisters, saying 'if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me' (Rev 3:20), God grant that he will find our Christian character to his taste.

So may the Lord bless our studies.

Shall we pray.

Now, Lord, we have lingered long over these studies and we pray that thou wilt take them by thy Spirit and write them on our memories, so that, even if we forget them now, they will come afresh to our minds in days to come when we need them.

Help us, Lord. We are aware that we are on our way to glory. We haven't too much time to spend in getting ready. Help us to use our time well. Grant us the grace and a sense of thy faithfulness that shall bring us through to the maturity of true Christian personality, thus to adorn and satisfy thee forever. For thy name's sake. Amen.

The Peace, or Fellowship, Offering

Leviticus 3, part one

Under the title 'Prepared for Glory', we have been studying one of God's ways for making us ready for the glory that one day we shall have to support. Allow me just to remind you again what God's programme is for his redeemed people: 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor 4:17).

It is not merely that we shall be prepared to enter into the glories of God's great heavenly eternity by the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19); it is that we ourselves must be made capable of supporting that glory with all its tremendous weight of majesty. We ourselves must be so polished and refined and prepared, that we shall strike no discordant note amidst all the heavenly harmony, but grace the very presence of God through the great salvation of God and the preparation that he has bestowed upon us. We are therefore considering one of the chief ways that God is preparing us for glory.

We have been noticing what this particular way is. God has not only redeemed and saved us from his wrath and given us freedom, he invites us to come with boldness and draw near into the holiest of all of his presence, guided by our high priest, 'our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (Heb 10:22). As we draw near to the divine presence to bring our gifts and our worship, we are made simultaneously aware of the holiness of God, of his justice and his righteousness. At the same time, we are made aware of the beauty of God, and as we behold his beauty we find the same reaction in ourselves as Isaiah did in the temple long ago, and are apt to cry out, 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isa 6:5).

We are made painfully aware of our unholiness; of the twistedness of our character and the unsavouriness of our speech. As apprentice saints in the school of God, we are made to feel our urgent need; not merely our need as disobedient sinners needing to be reconciled, but as saints in the school of God. What shall cover our deficiencies? In those moments God points us to the death of Jesus Christ our Lord, and we begin to see what we didn't see even at our conversion: the immeasurable worth and the infinite significance of that great sacrifice of Christ, which he offered for us at Calvary. It covers our needs, not as sinners, merely, but as saints of God.

And then we progressed to considering how it was that our blessed Lord was qualified to be the great sacrifice for our deficiencies. Thinking of that, we forget ourselves and stop moaning about our sins and our shortcomings and what wretched creatures we are (God has

known it all too long), and we start being fascinated, awed, wonderstruck, amazed by the wonder of our Lord Jesus and the perfectness of his character that fitted him to die. Our amazement turns to worship and a rising desire that we shall be like him. Of course, as the Holy Spirit concentrates our attention, not on our sinful selves but on him, he is beginning to transform us and make us ever more like the blessed one whom we have learned to admire.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Cor 3:18)

To help us in that process we are using a thought model to analyse the principles that are involved in making us holy. The particular thought model we are using is the ancient Hebrew tabernacle and its God given series of sacrifices. That tabernacle and its sacrifices were arranged by God as a copy of things in the heavens by which the Hebrews of those times were taught some of the eternal realities. It was also designed, says the New Testament, to be a shadow of the good things to come (Heb 10:1).

Now we come to the third of those ancient sacrifices that God appointed to his people as the means by which they might draw near in worship before him. The very fact that God provided a number of different sacrifices with different characteristics for the ancient Hebrews shows the wealth that there is in our blessed Lord—that it takes all these prefigurements, pictures and prototypes to adequately illustrate his ministry, person and sacrifice.

The meaning of the name for this offering

Tonight we come to a sacrifice that is called in the older English translations, a *peace offering*. The Hebrew word that underlines it is still disputed by the Hebrew scholars. When the experts disagree, then laymen like myself can take our layman's privilege and make up our own minds. In any court of justice in the part of the world I come from, when the experts on both sides of the case have given their verdict and they all conflict, British justice has it that the moderately intelligent layman can make up his mind.

Peace and wholeness

I am among those who still think that the basic word is cognate with the word for *peace*, *shalom*. But then I must remember at once that the Hebrew word, *shalom*, and the verb that is connected with it, have a very wide range of meaning. The noun *shalom* certainly means peace, the opposite of hostility and enmity. But then it doesn't just mean the absence of hostility, it also means peace and *wholeness*. There are aspects of this word that have to do with completion, with wholeness.

If we trace the use of this sacrifice, we can understand why some modern scholars call this offering, not the *peace offering*, but the *fellowship offering*, because, through the blood of this sacrifice, men and women had peace with God. From their alienation from God, they were brought near to him; forgiven, they were brought into fellowship with him. This is the first and absolutely basic step in the reintegration of human character in making people whole; that is, to be rescued from their enmity with God, to be forgiven, to be reconciled with God,

to be brought into fellowship and harmony with him. No man or woman can be a whole, integrated personality unless they are in that same sense reconciled to God, brought into fellowship with God, and enjoy harmonious fellowship with him.

But again, from the usage of this sacrifice as recorded later in the law of this offering, it is evident that God was using this offering to integrate man with man, woman with woman. And so certain of its practical regulations were geared to this end, that the offering would be the basis of fellowship, not only between men and God, but between men and women, husbands and wives, families and friends.

Peace and plenty

The special feature of this sacrifice was that only certain special parts of it were ever offered on the altar. The whole animal was first offered to the Lord, but the fat of it was taken and burned on the altar. The flesh was in part given to the priest for him to eat, and then the rest of the flesh given to the offeror himself, with the rider that he must consume the flesh of this animal within three days at the most.

If you had been a wealthy farmer, and you had offered a whole bullock as a peace offering, that enforced on you a practical decision. God demanded that you gave part to the priest, and then the rest of the flesh had to be eaten within a day or two. You couldn't possibly eat a whole bullock in one or two days, even if you sat up all night trying to do it. It would have obliged you to share it with others, with your wife, family, neighbours and friends all around.

That is behind the remark of the psalmist, 'I will pay my vows before them that fear him. The meek shall eat and be satisfied' (Ps 22:25–26 KJV). This was the offering that anybody would have offered when he paid his vows to God. So the psalmist was going to bring his peace offering to fulfil his vow before God, and it was a happy occasion. It brought a sense of forgiveness from God, of wellbeing in the heart through peace with God.

But not only peace. Here we meet another meaning of the word, peace and *plenty*. *Shalom* has that connotation too. As the man was given back a huge part of this offering and was able to eat it, he had a tremendous sense not only of peace but of plenty. He had joy in his heart that overflowed to his wife and family and friends, as they ate this sacrificial meal and enjoyed the peace and harmony and plenty: the integration and the wholeness that this sacrifice had produced.

As we read the details of it, two things must stand out in our minds:

1. It was a fellowship offering, providing fellowship with God, fellowship with his priest, fellowship with family and neighbour.
2. It was in part an atoning sacrifice, for you will see the directions regarding the blood.

And he shall lay his hand upon the head of his offering, and kill it at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and Aaron's sons the priests shall sprinkle the blood upon the altar round about. (3:2 KJV)

Moreover, you shall eat no blood whatever, whether of fowl or of animal, in any of your dwelling places. Whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people. (7:26–27)

Why should they not eat the blood?

Because the blood of an animal was the material that God had chosen to use as a symbol of the cost of redemption, and therefore the blood had to be sprinkled upon the altar round about. This too in a sense was an atoning sacrifice, and reminds us of the great sacrifice of Christ and all those lovely passages in the New Testament that talk of our being reconciled to God through the blood of Christ's cross; how we have been reconciled to God by the death of his Son. 'We have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins' (Col 1:14 KJV). I mention that now because, simple as it is, our study will have largely to concentrate on this aspect of the sacrifice.

On our final session together, God willing, we shall turn to consider some of the more practical implications and lessons that we derive from this wonderful sacrifice, especially with regard to peace with our fellow men and peace within our own hearts.

God wants the best from us

As we think of the sacrifice of Christ, we ought also to notice that other injunction, many times repeated, 'You shall eat no fat . . .' (Lev 7:23; 3:17). The fat is the food of the Lord's sacrifice: all the fat must be put upon the altar for God.

In the first offering, the burnt offering, the little word 'all' is used, saying that the whole of the offering is offered to God (1:9). In the second offering, the grain offering, the word 'all' is used: 'all the frankincense must be offered to God' (see 2:16). Now in this third offering, the word is used again and this time it is 'All fat is the LORD'S' (3:16). The fat of an animal represented the richness of that animal, and the fat had to be offered to God. Incidentally, when the priest cut it up he had to give close attention to all those parts of the beast's anatomy where fat was liable to occur, because it was the prime part of the offering that the fat had to be offered to God.

Then from the sacrifice of the peace offering he shall offer as a food offering to the LORD its fat; he shall remove the whole fat tail, cut off close to the backbone, and the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. And the priest shall burn it on the altar as a food offering to the LORD. (3:9–11)

God wanted a nice, fat animal. Wouldn't you, if you'd been God? There were some miserly Israelites around about the place, particularly in later generations, who, when they came with their peace offerings and other offerings, instead of bringing God a beautiful fat and shiny bullock, obviously in good health, they brought miserable old creatures. Some broken-down old cow, some diseased ox nearly ready for the slaughterhouse, about to collapse because it was so thin and its bones stuck through his skin, coughing his heart out in the last stages of TB and other things, and they offered that to the Lord.

And God protested, 'Woe unto you that have fat cattle in your farms and you offer me a miserable beast like that. Offer it to your governor and see whether he'll accept it or not' (see Mal 1:6–8). It's bad enough not to give God any presents, but to come and offer God an old

flea-bitten cow, that's an insult to his divine majesty. Says God, 'If you're going to offer me part of that offering, you'll offer me the very best part, the fat of it.'

That meant the priest had to inspect it. In this sacrifice it didn't matter whether it was male or female. It did with some, but here what mattered was that it should be absolutely without blemish (3:1). So he had to inspect it and that means that in the regulations for this sacrifice we have three times repeated the particular part of the beast's anatomy where the fat was liable to occur.

Do I sense a horror running through the congregation? You say, 'Our preacher tonight isn't going to tell us that all these intimate, intricate bits and pieces of the anatomy of a cow are somehow significant, is he?' I fancy there is a distinct danger that he might, so I warn you in advance. Lest you think that studying such things is grotesque in the extreme, let me just leave the Old Testament and give you a little word study in the New Testament.

Because almost all of the writers of the New Testament are Hebrews, you will long since have observed how they tend to use idioms from their Hebrew language. When it comes to talking about our emotions and our psychological states, a Hebrew uses metaphorical terms, but the metaphors are based upon certain parts of our physical anatomy.

'The bowels of Jesus Christ'

The old King James' version sometimes translates these things literally, and, because it is so respectable, people aren't upset by it nor think it rude. The inspired Apostle Paul writes, 'I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:8 KJV). I suppose it would have been acceptable in 1611, but I'm not quite sure if it would be acceptable now in polite and polished Vancouver. If I enquired after your bowels, I might be an unwelcome guest in your house.

What does this mean, 'the bowels of Jesus Christ'? 'I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus,' says the ESV. It's the Hebrew term, then taken over into Greek, for all those tender compassions that our blessed Lord feels for us. Far from being grotesque, my brother, my sister, think for a moment of all those lovely, tender affections of the blessed Lord Jesus towards you.

You say, 'Why do the Hebrews refer to them as the bowels?'

I can't tell you. I'm no ancient Hebrew myself, but I imagine it is because when you are really moved with sympathy and affection sometimes it can, sort of, strike you somewhere below the midriff, can't it? As the Song of Solomon puts it, 'My bowels were moved for him' (5:4 KJV). 'My heart was thrilled within me' (ESV); 'My inmost being yearned for him' (NRSV). It means that tender yearning, that love which sometimes can have a psychosomatic effect in that nether region.

'I search the kidneys'

So also of the kidneys. 'I am he which searcheth the reins' (Rev 2:23 KJV). That's suitably disguised by our old Latinized English, and many generations have read that verse without suspecting what it means. 'I am he who searches mind and heart,' says the ESV. It has nothing to do with donkeys' reins, or horses' reins, or reins of that kind. This is old Latinized English for *rēnēs* in Latin, which means the kidneys. Some people suffer from renal failure: failure of the kidneys.

But there it is in stark, modern English, 'I am he that searches the kidneys.'² Not our literal kidneys, presumably, but with his searching eye he penetrates to the internal depths of our personalities. What are those motivations that move us, often running so deep and hidden? 'Whatever your outward actions are,' says the blessed Lord Jesus to his church in Thyatira, 'do remember that I don't just look upon your outward behaviour, I search the kidneys; I search your hidden motivations and ambitions.'

'Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened'

And then there's Paul, praying for his converts in Ephesus that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened (see Eph 1:18). In Hebrew, 'heart' can mean what we mean by heart, but more often it means our intellect, our intelligence, our perceptions. 'Give [me] . . . an understanding heart' (1 Kgs 3:9 KJV), meaning an understanding perception. So Paul prays that the eyes of the heart might be illuminated.

Do you remember that lovely parable of our Lord Jesus about the workers in the vineyard? When it came to the pay hour, their lord called those who had only worked one hour and he gave them a whole denarius. When the men who had worked twelve hours saw this, they grumbled saying, 'This is not fair. They've only worked one hour and we worked a whole twelve hours.'

'I've a right to do as I wish with my own money,' said the owner of the vineyard to the men— 'Is thine eye evil?' (Matt 20:15 KJV). 'Is your eye bad because I am good?' (ESV footnote). He wasn't referring to black magic or anything like that by *an evil eye*. He was using 'eye' in the Hebrew sense of jealousy. You can see an infant sitting at the table, can't you? If he's growing up to be an entrepreneur, you'll see him making his calculations over the cake and eyeing the others as to who's got the best chance of getting the biggest bit.

The Hebrew noticed the physical action and used the term *evil eye* to express jealousy. Some people tell us that the Hebrew word *aph* for anger means 'nostrils'. I suppose it's because if you watch somebody getting very angry it's not always a pleasant sight, even for the man's face. He tends to puff and blow at his nostrils and go red in the face.

The caul

We should perhaps pause at this moment to consider one particular part of the sacrifice's anatomy. Along with the inwards, the fat that was on them, and the kidneys, there was the fat by the caul, which is above the liver, and the flank (see Lev 4:9).

For time's sake I shall not try now to prove these matters to you; I simply point out the sheer fact. I have consulted the butchers and the doctors about that word for *caul*—not that there's any connection! They tell me that in all probability this was the greater omentum³, that stores up the excess fat in an animal, so that in times of disease and ill health the animal has resources to draw upon. The word 'caul' itself means 'that which is in excess'.

² The English word 'kidneys' is used in the Jubilee Bible 2000 (JUB) Copyright © 2000, 2001, 2010 by Life Sentence Publishing, Inc.

³ The abdominal organs are supported and protected by the bones of the pelvis and ribcage and are covered by the greater omentum, a fold of peritoneum that consists mainly of fat. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

The flank

I do not know by what process it came in Hebrew to be the word that they used for 'confidence'. For example, Job said, 'If I have made gold my trust or called fine gold my confidence . . . I would have been false to God above' (Job 31:24, 28).

These then are physical terms in the animal sacrifice. In our second half we shall want to use them as thought models that point us to certain features of our blessed Lord Jesus, and how he was able to make peace with God for us sinners. They can also turn as a diagnostic tool to help us perceive where we went wrong in the past and how sometimes we still go wrong in the present.

So, if you find me poking around your kidneys, enquiring about your flanks and things, I'm sure you will understand that I mean it metaphorically and you'll find it in your heart to understand and pardon me.

Part two

After our preliminary studies, we come now to the heart of the matter this evening, for we are going to use this ancient offering and some of its details, first of all, as a diagnostic tool. Here is the sacrifice by which man had peace and fellowship with God. The blood of that sacrifice made peace, pointing forward to the blood of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ through which we are reconciled and made near to God.

But if we enquire how the beast in this particular sacrifice was qualified, the answer is because of the fat that was on its various internal organs. The rich fat was taken and offered in sacrifice to God. As we consider the internal organs of that humble beast and watch how healthy they were, we shall find indications, thought models and diagnostic tools that will help to analyse ourselves.

How did we fall out of peace with God?

Having fallen out of peace and fellowship with God, we found our very personalities beginning to disintegrate. How is it that millions of men and women have been brought into abysmal spiritual and moral poverty? Where does the cause lie? If we can diagnose the cause, then we can ask how God proposes to put it right.

The animal's flank

Can you see him there? He's the farmer's very best bullock, fed on the finest of the wheat and grass. He's had all his 'licking salt', and his coat is glossy. What a beautiful flank he's got; not some scrawny, skinny-necked beast. When the priest presently dismembers him we see the rolls of fat on his flank.

A metaphor for our confidence in God

The finger of inspired history points to that part of our spiritual anatomy where the trouble first started. It started in the garden, didn't it? See the wealth with which Adam and Eve were

surrounded. Every conceivable provision suited to their need was provided by almighty God, until one day the serpent accosted Eve in her innocence and did his sophisticated and devilish task.

'I hear you can't eat of any of these trees in this garden.'

She said, 'Oh, no, you've got it wrong there. That is an exaggeration. We can eat of any tree we like, except this one tree here.'

'I thought so. God knows that in the day you eat of it you shall be as he is. You won't have to consult him about whether you may do this or that or the other, you can make up your own mind. You'll be as God. He loves to keep people down, spoil their enjoyment and tantalize people. He puts a tree there in front of you, and look how good it is: good for food, good to make you wise. It's good for your stomach, good for your brains, and aesthetically charming. He holds it out in front of you and then says you can't have it.

'Strike a blow for your freedom, trust your own wit,' says Satan.

'But what about God's word?'

'Nobody believes God's word any more, that's old-fashioned stuff. If you trust God's word, you'll have a miserable existence. Grow up, woman, be independent.'

We lost confidence in God

So the first dart was thrown at Eve's confidence in God. And then she found that, instead of rising in God's universe, she'd fallen. She discovered she was naked and was ashamed of it. Instead of rising to the level of God, she'd sunk a good deal in the direction of being mere animal. And then, for the first time in life, she knew what a stricken conscience was and felt that God was against her. How could it be anything else? It seemed to confirm the devil's lie that God was really against them. Thus the human race went down its slippery slope, and confidence in God was destroyed.

How would you explain Israel's behaviour such as we've already mentioned from the book of Malachi? Redeemed from slavery in Egypt, given their own land flowing with milk and honey, and then, because of their sin, they were taken down to Babylon. In the exceeding mercies of God they were brought back and restored to the land that they never did deserve. With their mouths full of the milk and honey, God demands a sacrifice, and they bring him a scrawny old beast. Why would redeemed people do that? I think I can tell you. It was because they didn't trust God. They thought that to give God the best that he demanded would lead to their impoverishment.

There's many a young man and woman out in the world tonight for that very reason. They know the claims of God on them, but they fear to yield to those claims because they've no confidence in him. They think he's there to rob them of enjoying life.

We should be careful how we criticize the Jews, for it can happen to believers of long standing. There is one epistle in the New Testament where Paul describes his ministry as the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18).

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,

so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (vv. 20–6:1)

You say, 'Is it possible to receive the grace of reconciliation in vain? And for people who have been genuinely saved and converted and reconciled to God, could it all be in vain?'

Well it can turn out to be in vain in certain respects, can't it? These dear Corinthians had disobeyed Paul. They had seriously disobeyed the apostle on the notion that it was only Paul who said that. But they discovered to their cost that you cannot agree to differ with the Apostle Paul and get away scot-free, because the Apostle Paul is the apostle of our blessed Lord, and if you choose to disagree with Paul you are choosing to disagree with God.

What's the use of saying, 'I've been reconciled to God, but I don't intend to obey him in this, I'm going to agree to differ with God'? What do you suppose will happen then?

Why did the Corinthian believers take that attitude?

You're not surprised at the result, are you? In a church that was once marked by the very peace of God, there was strife hiding in every cupboard as well as out in the open. The church at Corinth was riddled with insipient denominational strife. One group said, 'We are of Paul,' and another, 'We are of Apollos,' and another, 'We are of Peter,' and yet another, 'We are of Christ.' Worse than that, converted men and women were taking other converted men and women to the law courts and washing their dirty linen in public: prosecuting their fellow believers before the pagan courts and advertising throughout the city what a curious lot the Christians were.

They were self-confident

If you had walked into their Lord's Supper, you would have found it a funny pickle. Instead of peace and harmony and integration in the church, all the worldly distinctions between rich and poor were all too evident. One brother ate his rich food and drink, and was nearly drunk; and the poor members of the church were ashamed at the little lunch they could bring.

They were at loggerheads with Paul and full of criticism. 'His bodily presence is weak; we can't have a preacher standing up there looking like him. He looks as though he's been dragged through a hedge backwards and battered all his life.'

Well, he had, of course. I don't know how many times he'd been left for dead, or in danger of dying in the sea, in danger of pirates, in danger of thieves, and imprisoned; all to bring the gospel to such as the Corinthians. And they felt he looked so bad physically that you couldn't expect them to listen to a preacher like that. 'When it comes to his presentation, his speech is contemptible' (see 2 Cor 10:10 KJV). How did it all come about?

They were self-centred

I can tell you another result of it. When Paul called for a contribution of money for the poor saints in Jerusalem, the Macedonian believers who were as poor as church mice made a large contribution immediately, and it was ready for Paul to take. The Corinthians were living in

their lovely city, but they felt, maybe, that business had gone against them and they hadn't got the money.

'Anyway,' they said, 'what is Paul doing, asking for money? We don't think he's an apostle at all. When he's here, he won't take any money. He pretends he's working for nothing and supporting himself, but then he sends Titus to get money for the poor saints at Jerusalem. Well you can believe that if you like.'

They were full of spiritual gifts, but miserable, strife-ridden and poverty stricken. Why? Because they had lost their confidence in the Lord and were putting their confidence in man, contrary to the explicit injunction of God's word,

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD. (Jer 9:23–24)

Very often it is our faith, our confidence in God, that is at the root of our troubles. Our confidence in God is broken and God seems to become the enemy. In our guilt, we think that our joy is to be found in avoiding God. God is our enemy, the greatest killjoy in the universe.

How will God put it right?

Consider with me what Paul writes in Colossians 1.

The immensity of the ruin

Not only is the trouble rampant on earth, it is rampant in heaven. Vast legions of exalted intelligences in the heavenly places have believed that same lie. The anointing cherub, Satan himself, though he stood by the very throne in the presence of God, exalted himself above all that is called God, dragging with him who knows how many legions of angels. In our own world there is not a man, woman, boy or girl who hasn't been infected by this undermining of their confidence in God. Oh, the immensity of the wreckage.

The magnitude of the task

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (vv. 19–20)

That doesn't mean that all people in heaven and on earth are going to get converted, but it does mean that, when at last God stands up to judge, the whole of heaven and earth and those who are under the earth shall bow their knees, whether they want to or not, and shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:9–11). The devil's lie *was* a lie; everyone shall justify God, and God's name shall be cleared throughout the whole universe.

The majesty of God's agent

Who did God choose to reconcile all to himself? 'In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins' (v. 14 KJV). Whose blood?

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (vv. 15–17)

His was the mind in which the plan that led to the erection of this vast universe was born and germinated. He is the beginning in whose divine mind everything had its beginning. He is the one *through whom* it was made, and the one *for whom* it was made. This vast rebellious universe was originally made for him. Every atom in every brain in every conscious intelligence in this whole universe was made for the one we call Jesus Christ, and he has a right that all should do his will.

He has the right to the best

Didn't he have the right to cream off the very fat of the universe? It was made for him. Didn't he have the right to come to every angel, to every man, to every woman, to every creature, and demand the fat—the very best of all they had? Was that the act of a tyrant wanting to spoil people's enjoyment, when he made all they had, and technically it was made for him? Consider the majesty of the agent.

The mystery of the method God used

Consider the marvel of it: 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (v. 19). It was the Father's decision that in the blessed Lord Jesus all the fullness should dwell, for in him the whole Godhead evolved. He was rich, you know, and it was the good pleasure of the Father that he should be given for the sake of us rebels, taken to a cross in his own world and nailed on it. 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor 8:9). Who shall measure the poverty of Calvary?

How will you explain it? I was the rebel, my rebellion forfeited every right I had to anything. I was made to fulfil his pleasure; he had never disobeyed his Father in anything, yet it was God's good pleasure that I, the rebel, should be spared, and he, the Lord of all, should be crucified. What for? *To make peace*; to clarify forever exactly what God is like before every sentient and intelligent being in the universe. How else would God win the battle against the serpent's lie? If you want to know the truth about God, it is Jesus Christ, Creator of the universe, nailed on a tree for us. Think what it cost him.

His love

Examine what Paul calls 'the bowels of Jesus Christ.' How he loved God, and how he loved his fellow men. Do you know how many times our Lord is on record in the Gospels as saying that he loved God?

We often do it, don't we? We sing our hymns and choruses about how much we love the Lord. In the New Testament our Lord is on record once as saying he loved God. He may have said it many times more, but this is the one time it is recorded. He had washed his disciples' feet and told them that he would love them to the end. After they had sung a hymn of praise

he rose from table; 'Come on, gentlemen, let's go,' he said. 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here' (John 14:31).

I say, 'Lord, how can you possibly love the Father now, when he's asked you to die such a shameful death for me, the rebel?'

But he says, 'I love him still.'

He must know something about God that I have not yet seen, if he can find love in his heart to love the God who has asked him to suffer at Calvary.

His confidence

Examine his kidneys: 'I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge,' he says (John 8:50). 'You'll find me genuine through and through; I seek the glory of him that sent me.' Do you perceive his confidence? That holy man, who every step of his life had put his faith in God until God's guidance led him to the tree, and in obedience to the Father he was nailed there, hand and foot. And then a cruel thing happened.

So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, "I am the Son of God."' (Matt 27:41-43)

They mocked him with his trust in God, and he was heard through the darkness to quote the words of Psalm 22, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer . . . On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God' (vv. 1-2, 10).

I say it with all the reverence in my heart: the faith of God's Son was assaulted then as never before, and we stand and ask with baited breath, 'will it hold?' To think the utterly impossible, suppose Christ's faith had given way and one single doubt in God had entered in, then the whole universe would have collapsed and gone to smithereens. In that mighty moment he held the whole universe together by his utterly unbroken confidence in God.

There's a God who can be trusted, and the whole operation was designed to get the hearts of you and me. Why should God be concerned about what we think of him? Why didn't he obliterate us? Not God. He is concerned with what you think of him; he gave his Son to Calvary to win your confidence.

How's your love?

Now you've trusted him, and you love the Lord, how did you come by that disposition? How did you come to love the Lord? I was going to say, 'how are your bowels getting on?' I mean, of course, how are your inward affections?

You say, 'They're nice and healthy, if you must know.'

So you love the Lord, and when you hear his name you feel tenderly drawn to him. How did it come about? Do tell me.

'I'll tell you,' you say. 'I love him, because he first loved me' (see 1 John 4:19).

And your inwards are nice and fat, aren't they?

And how's your confidence?

'Oh,' you say, 'once I was full of confidence in myself, in my ego, in my religious good works and whatnot.'

And you were gradually disintegrating, weren't you, and on the way to perishing? Where is your confidence now?

You say, 'Oh, my brother, my confidence is in God. "On Christ, the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand."⁴ I don't boast in my riches, or my wisdom, or my strength; my confidence is in the Lord.'

Magnificent! See how God has been restoring your personality. When people lose their self-confidence, it can precipitate a very serious psychological illness. If the unconverted man has no confidence in God, it means eternal dissolution. But if you lose your confidence in God, he rebuilds it through his word. It's not a 'hip-hip-hooray' rejoicing, it's the rejoicing word that means *confident*.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God . . . More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:1, 11)

We confidently rejoice in the hope of glory that one day we're going to be like him.

I ask, 'How can you be so confident and full of shining health? Oughtn't you to be a bit more mooney?'

And you say, 'No, I can be confident that one day I'm going to attain the glory of God. You see, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"' (see Rom 8:32).

'But you're speaking prematurely,' I say. 'What if suffering should come your way? Wouldn't you fear if tribulation should become so severe that it might break your faith in the Lord?'

You say, 'No, because the Lord says we may also have confidence in the face of tribulation, knowing God's established and guaranteed fact that, where you start with genuine faith, tribulation will work perseverance. Perseverance will therefore show you are genuine, and your genuineness will be another ground for hope, and hope doesn't let you down in the end.'

Why not?

'Because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. This is my confidence, that if, while I was an enemy, I was reconciled to God by the death of his Son, now being reconciled I shall be saved through his life' (see Rom 5:3-5, 10).

I begin to perceive that God is making a good job of you! He's restored that central pillar of your personality, which is confidence in God.

How are your kidneys getting on?

You say, 'What do you mean?'

⁴ Edward Mote (1797-1874), 'My hope is built on nothing less' (1834).

I mean the hidden motivations—what are your motives?

‘Oh,’ you say, ‘I could tell you that too. If you want to know my motives, I’m a little bit like Paul’:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor 5:14–15)

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20)

And you say with truth, ‘I was a wretched prodigal but God won and I’ve been reconciled. I’m at peace with God, my confidence restored, and though sometimes tested and dented, it’s on the way to final victory. My genuine motive is to live to please him who died for me.’

Do you know, I think I even see your face begin to shine. It’s not the result of some fat on the innards, or on the caul, or upon the kidneys, or on the flanks, is it? But then, perhaps it could be!

God give us good and super abounding spiritual health, and proceed to complete the gracious work he has begun within us.

The Sin Offering

Leviticus 4:1–12

I have to confess that sometimes when I am reading holy Scripture, it seems to me that God's word is like a grand symphony in which the composer will introduce a dominant theme during the early movements of the music, state it in simple terms, restate it a time or two and then presently let it disappear, only to bring it back later at a higher level with much more sophisticated adornment, and repeat the original statement.

It seems like that to me with this particular part of Scripture on which we launch this evening. Listen to it again as the inspired writer states his theme:

- If anyone sins unintentionally (v. 2);
- If it is the anointed priest who sins (v. 3);
- If the whole congregation of Israel sins (v. 13);
- When a leader sins (v. 22);
- If any one of the common people sins (v. 27);
- If anyone sins . . . (5:1).

With that the theme passes and is overlaid with many other themes. But watch how, centuries later, it reappears in the inspired word.

'My little children,' says John, 'I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin' (1 John 2:1). Here comes our theme, reappearing at its higher level: 'If anyone does sin.'

What happens then? Times were, when we couldn't have cared less what happens if anyone sins. It was a matter of complete indifference and triviality to us. Perhaps we scarcely understood the concept of sin at all. It is different now, isn't it? We're not a bunch of rebel slaves recently extradited from Egypt; we stand as the people of God, redeemed. Like this priest of whom we have read, we have been exalted to high office, for we too are priests. Every single believer is a priest and privileged to exercise that ministry even now in the presence of God. And, what is more, as we exercise our ministry as priests, anointed by the Holy Spirit, serving the blessed Lord in the very holiest of all, we are simultaneously being trained to exercise our priestly ministry in courts above. It is written of the Lord's people in the last book of holy Scripture that they shall be priests of God and of Christ (Rev 20:6). It becomes apparent therefore that, however important our priesthood is here, it pales into insignificance before the great priesthood we shall exercise then.

And it becomes obvious that, if we are to act as priests to God and to the Lamb throughout the successive ages of eternity, and if it is true that our present ministry of priesthood here is

a training for that priesthood there, we need to grasp every minute that is available to us to see that we are progressing in the holy art and function of priesthood, so that when we arrive in the divine courts we might be well prepared.

Priesthood is not some little sideshow in which we engage when we have not such big and important things to do. Our present priesthood, exercised privately, or corporately in the church, is the training ground for one of our prime ministries in the great beyond. Therefore, this particular question that now confronts us in Leviticus 4 is exceedingly pointed and relevant.

What happens if the person who sins is the anointed priest?

We must find an answer to that, primarily of course from the New Testament, but we are to learn lessons also from the Israelite priests of bygone centuries. They were not so privileged as we are. Many of the rituals that were given then, although copies of things in the heavens, were pointers to the greater realities: 'a shadow of the good things to come' (Heb 10:1). Tonight, as in our imagination we accompany some of those ancient priests on their tours of duty, we shall see more in what they saw than they did themselves. For them, their rituals were copies of things in the heavens. Eloquent in their symbolism, their colour and their form, they brought down the great eternal realities of heaven within their imaginative grasp.

But they would not have realized what you and I are privileged to realize: that their rituals were foreshadowings of the good things which now have come through Jesus Christ our Lord. As our hearts grasp again our great privilege in this age, we ought in fact to be dancing for joy. 'For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (Luke 10:24). King David would have given his right arm to know what you know, my good sister in Christ.

Imagine, if you can, going along to King David in those far-off days—I picture myself doing it sometimes.

'Good morning, Your Majesty. It is gracious of you to give me an audience, and I want to say humbly that the recent song you wrote is very popular, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered"⁵. I admire it, and I know what it's about. Let's go and sit in the holiest of all in the temple, and you play your harp and I'll sing.'

His Majesty would have gone white round the gills. 'What did you say, "into the holiest of all"? I play my harp in the holiest of all? You can't do that!' And certainly they couldn't.

But *you* can! Not in the little back room of a tiny sanctuary in the middle of the desert. Tonight as priests we may enter the very holiest of all, into the divine presence of the transcendent Lord, and there exercise our ministry of worship. David would have given his right hand to know what you know, and he didn't know it. Well he knows it now; he dwells among 'the spirits of just men made perfect' (Heb 12:23 KJV). Our priesthood is much more privileged than theirs, but as we listen to their regulations we shall not be above learning lessons from those ancient priests.

⁵ Psalm 32.

The function of the sin offering

Our first task is to determine what exactly and in particular was the function of the sin offering in ancient times. Many theologians and students of Old Testament, when they have been considering the sacrifices of the Old, have made a broad distinction between two categories of sacrifice. On the one hand, they say there were offerings of a fragrant aroma, or 'a sweet savour' (KJV).

These are often described as *offerings of a sweet savour*:

- The burnt offering;
- The grain offering;
- The peace offering, or fellowship offering.

And then there come *offerings that dealt with sin*:

- The sin offering;
- The trespass offering.

They say that these were not offerings of a sweet aroma to God. Whereas the burnt offering was an offering of dedication, expressive of the nation's dedication to God, these dealt with sin.

And to some extent they are right. The New Testament uses them both metaphorically of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,' says Paul (Eph 5:2). Other New Testament Scriptures will remind us that 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor 5:21); 'By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin . . .' (Rom 8:3). 'For sin' is the technical phrase for a sin offering. Our blessed Lord Jesus, therefore, was the final fulfilment both of the burnt offering and of the sin offering.

But if we make that distinction, we shall have to be careful not to push it too far. Some parts of the sin offering could be an offering of a sweet savour.

And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar *for a pleasing aroma* to the LORD. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. (Lev 4:31)

So there it is in black and white, the sin offering itself could be an offering of sweet savour to God. Conversely, if we look back to 1:4, where it is said '[The priest] shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering', it adds that the burnt offering 'shall be accepted for him *to make atonement for him*.' So, while a sin offering could be an offering of sweet savour, of pleasant aroma, the burnt offering itself was an offering for sin. It was an offering made to make atonement, and we saw the point of it in an earlier study.

The burnt offering in relation to falling short in devotion to God. It speaks of entire devotion to God, reminding us that if we fall short of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, that is a sin. Sin is not just refraining from murdering your mother-in-law or being unkind to your maiden aunts or robbing a bank, or something of the order; sin is

falling one hundred percent short of devotion to God in one's mind, in one's intellect, in one's body, with one's energy, with one's heart, and with one's soul. Therefore, the burnt offering was an offering that made atonement for those who came short in their devotion.

The sin offering in relation to cleansing the stain of sin

Well, if the burnt offering was an offering in that sense for sin, what was this other offering that is technically called *the sin offering*, why was that needed, and what did it do? The answer to that is that the sin offering had this special function. It was aimed, not so much as a substitute for our defective devotion; it was aimed at cleansing away the stain of sin. And that is one of the ugly things about sin, isn't it? Sin stains, sin defiles, sin is dirty, and it pollutes us. Sin is what takes the colour out of the fabric of life, staining it with filth and dirt and mess. Sin stains and defiles our consciences.

In discussing the question of whether it is right to eat food offered to idols, Paul points out to his fellow believers that, if you bring pressure to bear on a believer to eat some of this food and he has a conscience about it, he'll think that he would be sinning against the Lord if he eats it. If you prevail upon him, you push him, so that in the end he gives in, he will eat it with a bad conscience— 'their conscience, being weak, is defiled,' says Paul (1 Cor 8:7).

How could any priest with a conscience stained and defiled go properly about his ministry before the thrice holy God? That's why the question is relevant to us tonight. How shall we as priests exercise our ministry before God, who is all holy, if our conscience is stained?

It's no use talking about the fact that forty-five years ago I came to the Lord and was forgiven. If my conscience is polluted and defiled today, how shall I serve as a priest? That can be why our voices are sometimes mute in church. We have seen our conscience defiled and we say to ourselves, 'No, I'm not going to be a hypocrite and get up there with my mouth full of the praise to the Lord. I'll sit silent on the bench.' But that's no answer either, is it?

From your reading of the regulations for the great Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, which Jews in the present time consider the chief of all their religious festivals, you will remember that the central purpose of the Day of Atonement was not so much to cleanse Israel, it was to *cleanse the tabernacle of God*. To quote the words of Scripture,

He shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. (Lev 16:16)

In other words, when Israel sinned it did not merely stain their conscience, it stained the very holy dwelling place of God itself. I say it with reverence, an almighty God could almost not tolerate to stay any longer and have his dwelling place defiled by contact with the uncleanness of Israel—what a thought that is. We should be miserable in our priesthood if we had no answer to this problem: what happens if a priest sins? How should I appear in the holiest of all, if my sin stained the lovely purities of the presence of God? It is with relief therefore, that we read the exact comments of the writer to the Hebrews:

It was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites [animal sacrifices], but the heavenly things themselves [the real and eternal tabernacle] with better sacrifices than these. (9:23)

In the sin offering we have that double cleansing. *Cleansing of the priest* and the stain of a polluted conscience; *cleansing of the very tabernacle* in which he was to minister, that was liable to be defiled by the uncleanness of the people who lived around it.

So then, as we listen to the instructions for the ancient priests, our hearts are going to be solemnized somewhat by very definition of our topic, the stain of sin; though inevitably we shall rejoice because of the glorious provision that is made for our forgiveness. Lest I become over solemn and depress you, let me again quote the words of John, the apostle of love:

I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 2:1)

And the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. (1:7)

The priest's own personal need and what he had to do

Like anybody else, when the priest sinned he could bring his sacrifice, and the ancient text emphasizes more than once that, when he had completed his sacrifice in true repentance and faith, he would be forgiven. The forgiveness those ancient men had was real: they were actually forgiven. I know you will tell me that their sacrifices were only symbols, they didn't put away sin whatsoever, and that is perfectly true. 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins' (Heb 10:4); but they were tokens in advance of the sacrifice of our blessed Lord that should put away sin. They were like IOUs, as we call them in England, or promissory notes. They were like bits of paper on which a person writes, 'I owe you £10,000. I can't pay it now, but I will pay later on.' Every promissory note, every IOU, had to be paid for in the end, and thus redeemed.

Meanwhile the priest had his forgiveness, but there was a danger lurking there. Perhaps the man would get it into his head, 'Never mind if I sin, it's a pretty easy affair. I've been there a thousand times, and this is the thousand and first. You sin, and then all you have to do is to bring a little sacrifice, you slit its throat, its blood is shed and, hey-presto, you're forgiven.'

It could happen to us too, couldn't it? The glorious message of forgiveness through the blood of Christ could become such a familiar thing, we could get the impression that sin doesn't matter that much. All you have to do is to confess it, the Lord forgives you and everything's clear—an easy business indeed. It would be for our grave loss if we got that idea into our heads, because, in one sense, if forgiveness is easy for us, then sin doesn't matter.

How did God arrange it for the ancient Israelite priests so that they didn't get the idea that sin didn't matter? He gave them a ritual; but you can abuse anything and eventually they abused it exceedingly. Anybody can abuse anything. We could abuse the Lord's Supper and Christians could come carelessly to the Lord's Supper with unconfessed sin. You don't, of course, do you? But it would be possible.

If the priests took notice of the ritual that God gave them, in the very moments of getting forgiveness they would have been taught a profound lesson about the sorrow and sadness of

sin. First of all, shall we notice *the seriousness of sin* as it was brought home to the individual priest? It comes in the sacrifice that he was obliged to give.

If it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, then he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull from the herd without blemish to the LORD for a sin offering. He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD and lay his hand on the head of the bull and kill the bull before the LORD. (Lev 4:3–4)

If one anointed priest sinned, he had to bring a whole bullock. Now that was extraordinary. The rest of the chapter tells us what was to happen if an individual person sinned. For instance, if a woman sinned she was to bring a goat or a lamb, and it could be a female goat. If a ruler sinned as an individual, he had to bring a male goat. If the whole nation sinned—I don't know how many millions of them—they had to bring a whole bullock. A goat or a lamb for an individual; nothing short of a whole bullock would do for the whole nation; but if an anointed priest sinned—just one priest—he had to bring a whole bullock. You perceive the rating, don't you?

The sin of a priest was very serious

Firstly, *because of his office*. He wasn't some old pagan, or even a layman who was ignorant of the things of God and stumbled easily into sin. He was a priest on whose head had been poured the holy anointing oil of God, and to mix that with the stain of sin was to bring an ugly reproach upon the sacredness of his office. Let my heart listen to that: privileged position brings greater responsibility.

Watch an unregenerate man wobbling down the street, vomiting out his evil vomit and making a beast of himself. Poor man, have compassion on him. I tell you, his sin is not so serious as the sin of a believer who's been anointed with the Holy Spirit and may enter the very presence of God, who then stains himself or herself with sin.

Secondly, *because it brings guilt on the people*. 'If it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people . . .' (4:3). That's the magnitude and seriousness of the sin. The Lord Jesus is going to come and judge this world, and Peter warns, 'It is time for judgement to begin at the household of God' (1 Pet 4:17). That's the dastardly result when it's a sin done by a priest—an act of carelessness or a positive defilement—for it could so easily have an effect upon the people to whom he ministers.

To refer to the drunkard once more. If your Sunday school children see him going down the road, they'll probably take it as a warning of something that's to be avoided. Suppose they see you drunk. You taught them in Sunday school; they might begin to think that it doesn't matter, if their Sunday school teacher does it. You could bring sin on the child, and then you might even begin to wish that God hadn't put you in the priesthood. What if, as a priest, I teach God's word falsely and misrepresent God? If I make him out to be hard and unkind, or lax and careless, just ponder the damage I could do. Is that not serious?

Therefore, this ancient priest must bring a whole bullock for his sacrifice; he must bring it to the door of the tent of the tabernacle and there kill it before the Lord. It is interesting to

notice here, perhaps for the first time in this series of sacrifices, that the bullock is described as a young bullock (KJV), and there is a certain poignancy about that. Israel was a farming community; even in the desert they were keepers of herds and cattle, so they knew about these things. The priest had to bring a young bullock and kill it.

For four years in my youth I had to work on a farm. I shall never forget seeing the young bullocks, and what a beautiful sight they were. If you let them out of their pens the youngsters would jump on all fours all over the place, for the sheer *joie de vivre*. They were not staid old two or three-ton bulls, but young bullocks. They enjoyed life and were full of the joys of Spring. What a lovely expression of nature's life.

It must have been a sorry business to take a young bullock, put in the knife and slaughter it. Its days had scarcely begun; it was in the full flush of youth and enjoyment, an innocent little bullock. If the priest was not desensitized by having done it so many times, the pulling of the knife through the throat of that young animal must have brought home to him the dreadful fact, that sin kills. Says James, 'Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death' (1:15). When it starts, what a tasty morsel it can be, to be rolled under the tongue; but when it is finished it brings death.

The priest was not to kill it just anywhere, he had to kill it *before the Lord*. Had he been attending to his task, he would have been mindful of the eye of the most holy God on him as he did it. Our Israelite background fades and we come into the present. My brothers and sisters, if as priests of God we sin, there is forgiveness. Where is the forgiveness? Forgiveness is in Christ. Says God, 'Come and stand once more at Calvary by the great altar, and, with my eye on you, put your knife into the sacrifice.'

You say, 'God, how could I do it? It's not for me, surely, to plunge the steel into the side of the blessed Lord Jesus?'

No, that wasn't ours to do; but it might well have been. There is immediate forgiveness, my brother, my sister, but let us pause for a moment and remember again what it cost. Stand before almighty God and watch our sin take the life of his Son, and as we do it perhaps we shall never sin quite so lightly again.

What the priest did with the blood and the body of the sacrifice

Then for this priest there started a journey. He had now to take the blood in a basin and walk from the altar into the tabernacle, through the door—the first veil, and into the Holy Place. If he was an ordinary anointed priest he never got into the holiest of all; but on this occasion he would come into the Holy Place, right up to the veil. That is very interesting, for as an ordinary priest this is as near as he ever did get to God. He could go no further than that veil.

He was to come in and sprinkle part of the blood seven times in front of the veil. Then he was to turn round and put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense. He came out to the court again and poured all the rest of the blood at the base of the altar in the court. As the final part of his journey he went through the gate, and the body of the beast was taken outside the camp and burned in a clean place, where the ashes were poured out (4:5–12).

Let's briefly follow him on his journey.

The veil

First, the interesting bit of the ritual. There was forgiveness from the moment the priest put the knife into that sacrifice and the blood was shed. Immediately God invited, indeed commanded, him to come as far as he was allowed into the presence of God, to stand in front of the veil.

I hope the dear man hadn't lost his sensitivity, nor his sense of beauty. Tiny though that tabernacle was, it was a delightful work of art. In the Holy Place there was the veil, and behind it was hidden the immediate presence of the thrice-holy God. What a glorious sight it was, even in its sheer art and aesthetic glory, the wonderful blend of colours, the cunning workmanship, the mysterious cherubim; and not just a work of art, but full of awe and mystery, shrouding the presence of him who sat enthroned above the cherubim. I wonder what the priest felt like; fresh from the scene of his sin, to be asked to come so near to the glories and holiness and the beauty of the presence of God?

I'll tell you a little thing about myself. Sometimes, when I have had a tiff with somebody and we've had strong words, after I've had time for my blood to cool and my head to simmer down, I have the uncomfortable feeling that I was in the wrong and I manage to say a grouchy, 'I'm sorry.' But then, if I see the person coming, I cross the street so that I don't have to talk to them. After a mighty great bust-up, perhaps it wouldn't be the wisest to go straight in and start talking as though nothing had happened. Do you ever feel like that? Perhaps you don't, because you're absolute saints. I keep forgetting that; you don't feel like that at all. The very next minute you're on good terms, saying, 'How are you, old fellow? Pleased to see you,' as though nothing had happened. I don't. Sometimes I think it might be the better part of wisdom to let things cool off a bit, keep at a distance, and then, sort of, come in gradually.

Do you know, I've been tempted to think like that about the Lord when I've sinned against him. I'll confess my sin, but perhaps I won't make myself too prominent just yet. I'll keep at a distance. I don't feel too worthy, so I'll just work my way back to the Lord's presence by degrees, and won't try to be too holy. That's false, isn't it? If we are going to be saved from sinning again, there's only one safe place for us on earth, and that's as near to the presence of God as we can possibly get.

Here was the marvel of the blood of that sacrifice, even for that ancient priest. Once the blood was shed, he might come in as near as ever he could to the very throne of God and look again on those gorgeous symbols.

And so may we. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9). My brothers and sisters, you don't have to wait outside for a cooling off period and gradually work your way back. You may come into the holiest of all, and you'd be wise to come, for that's the safest place on earth for a saint who has sinned.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:16)

If he was paying attention to his duties, it should have had a reflex action on the priest. There he is at that lovely veil. Now he must take the blood, and what volumes the swish of it would speak in the silence of that Holy Place. The rabbis held that the blood was actually sprinkled right across that veil.

You say, 'If that was so, it would have made a mess of it.'

We may not know for sure what the priest saw in it, but we can know what our New Testament says about that veil, for here it is not uncontrolled typology but inspired comment.

The veil in the New Testament has two meanings. In Hebrews 6, it is used as the veil that divides the unseen world of the presence of God from the seen world. In Hebrews 10, it is likened to the flesh of the Lord Jesus, that is, his humanity. It is through this means that we come into the holiest of all. Some people have found that concept difficult. They say, 'How could the humanity of our Lord Jesus be a veil of the glory of God? Surely he was the expression of the glory of God, not a veil of his glory?'

But just wait a moment. The veil in the ancient tabernacle was a very kind provision of God. If it hadn't been for it veiling the glory of God, no priest in that far off day would have been able to come into the first division of the tabernacle. He would have had to stay completely outside. It was only because the veil was there, two thirds of the way along, that the priest was able to come into the first division. It was a merciful provision that enabled him to come as near as possible to God, and in that sense the writer to the Hebrews has got it right. Our Lord in the days of his flesh served as a veil.

Did you ever see such a marvellous thing? Here were the little kiddies, and they sat on his knee. I wonder did they pull his beard and coo up into his face. Oh, the miracle of God's grace, 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9). Here comes a prostitute off the street and she touches the flesh of Jesus Christ our Lord and is not consumed, though God of very God dwelled within him. Oh, the wonder of it.

Forget the tabernacle. Today I may come as a priest, my conscience so recently stained, and through the blood of Christ enter into the very presence of God and survey his incarnate Son in all his beauty—his behaviour, the artistry of his character—and find myself accepted. The humanity of the Christ of history is not against me but for me. As I stand there in my penitence before the blessed Lord, I think I hear in my ears the question he put to the adulterous woman, "'Woman . . . has no one condemned you?'" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you'" (John 8:10-11).

How could it be? We hear the swish of the blood being sprinkled by the ancient priest over against that holy veil, and the imagery helps our imaginations. Where did my sin bring the holy beautiful Christ who never sinned? It brought him to Calvary, the filthy spittle of the soldiers, the ignorance of their blindfolding, the sadism of their scourging, the thorns, the nails and the cross. 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24)—and what a mess our sins made of his body.

'Come and stand here,' says God, 'and watch it.' This is where we learn to hate the stain of sin.

The altar of incense

Then the priest turned round and came to the altar of incense and put the blood upon it: a lovely symbol that needs scarcely any interpretation. The altar of intercession points Christians to our blessed Lord. 'Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

What happens if any one sins? 'But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 John 2:1). Christ for us in his humanity here on earth in the days of his flesh; Christ in glory, interceding for us, poor, sinning, failing junior priests, so that as we go out we are not again victims to temptation. 'He is able to help those who are being tempted' (Heb 2:18).

The altar

Then the priest took all the rest of the blood and poured it out at the base of the altar—all of it (Lev 4:7). That little word 'all' is one of the keys to the instructions in these sacrifices. In the first sacrifice, it was *all the animal* that had to be offered—the whole of it on the altar. In the second offering, it was *all the frankincense*; and in the third, it was *all the fat*. Now it is *all the blood*. We cannot quantify the worth of the Saviour's sacrifice, but we can bring it home to our hearts by saying, 'teach me that if I alone had sinned, it would have taken all the blood of the Saviour to cleanse me.'

Outside the camp

The journey was not finished. The body of the beast had to be taken outside the camp and burned in a clean place. Why? When the priest was dealing with ordinary citizens, he could eat part of the sacrifice, for not all of it was burned; but not when he was dealing with his own sin. It would have been frightful for a priest to make a living out of his own sinning. No, this time he must take the animal and burn it outside the camp and reduce it to ashes; never a bit of it did he taste. There is never advantage in sinning.

The writer to the Hebrews has an inspired comment on it. He was addressing his fellow Hebrew Christians and some of them were priests. Acts tells us that a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (6:7). They still carried on their priestly ministry in the temple at Jerusalem until AD 64, as God gave time for the implication of these great events to sink into their minds. But in AD 64 God called upon Hebrew Christians, priests included, to come and take their stand outside Judaism and its ritual with their blessed Lord, who died outside Jerusalem's temple and outside their city.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. (Heb 13:10–13)

We are not Jews. We had no temple to leave, maybe, nor city either, but the next bit comes home to our hearts, doesn't it?

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (vv. 14–16)

As I see my blessed Lord crucified on planet Earth and now gone to heaven, it breaks earth's hold, doesn't it? I see this world now as the temporary thing it is. Thank God it is temporary, and we move on to a world where there shall be no sin and no stain. Nothing that defiles shall enter in (Rev 21:27 KJV).

What happened then to an Israelite priest when he himself sinned? He received forgiveness; and if he had been paying attention to the rituals he would have been moved to hate sin and urged along the road of holiness.

The Trespass, or Guilt, Offering

Leviticus 5:1–6:7

The passage for our evening meditation is long, and we shall simply read it, or parts of it, as we proceed.

Last evening, we were thinking together of the sin offering in chapter 4; of the stain that sin leaves, and the great provision that God has made for the removal of that stain to cleanse us from an evil conscience, and the glorious fact that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. Our hearts rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Yet, as we contemplated the ugly stain of sin and what it has cost God to remove it, we left with our hearts somewhat subdued.

This evening, we must turn to study another sacrifice from ancient Israel that bears great similarity to the sin offering, technically called the trespass offering or the guilt offering—so similar indeed, that scholars still debate as to where one ends and the other begins.

The damage sin does

This will not deal with the stain of sin; it will deal with the damage sin does. If our hearts were subdued as we thought of the stain of sin and we found it sombre, I must forewarn you tonight that, as we think of the damage that sin does, we shall necessarily find it even more sombre. So much so indeed, that the coward within me—and there's plenty of him around—is tempted to apologize for this part of the word of God, and to excuse myself by pleading that I didn't write it and I'm not to be held responsible for it. But then, better sense tells me that I may not apologize for God's word. That would be an impertinence against his divine majesty. I must also remind myself that I am talking to adults, and not only grown and mature adults, but members of the holy and royal priesthood, commissioned and anointed by God to do his service in this broken and fallen world, in training for eternal ministry in the higher courts above. Therefore, you would not wish me to hide from you the sterner and more solemn parts of God's holy word.

To refuse to face the realisms of life and the damage that sin does would make us into very superficial personalities, would it not? It would also tend to diminish our capabilities as God's royal priests and stop us from developing a sympathetic understanding of the need of this groaning and broken world. It might even induce in us a shallow conception of that great and wonderful salvation that God has devised to meet the need and the damage that sin has done to us all.

Therefore, without further apology, I invite you to consider with me this sacrifice of old, the trespass offering, or you may prefer to call it the guilt offering. As I say, it is very similar to the sin offering that went before. Its main difference is this: whereas the sin offering analysed sin and its seriousness according to *the persons who did the sin*, the trespass offering analyses the seriousness of sin by *the relative damage that it causes*.

For instance, when we were thinking of the sin offering, we noticed the different kinds of offering the people had to bring. If it was an ordinary individual who sinned, then that individual had to bring a goat or a sheep—a female goat or sheep. If the ruler sinned, being a more prominent man in society, he had to bring a goat—this time a male goat. If the whole nation sinned, they were required to bring not a little goat but a whole bullock—nothing less would suffice to put away the sin of the whole nation. At the top of that unfortunate grading, if the anointed priest sinned, because of the eminence of his office, his sacred ministry, and his nearness to God, that one individual anointed priest had to bring an offering equivalent in size to the offering for the whole nation. God was teaching his ancient people that the gravity of sin varies according to the person who commits it.

If a new convert, just recently rescued from alcoholism, yields to temptation and for an evening goes back to his drink and gets drunk, of course you will be sorry for him. But you will say in your heart, 'It's understandable, considering his background.' But if an elder in your assembly of forty years standing is found drunk and out of order down the street, and persists in that kind of behaviour, that alters the situation. In itself, it's the same sin, but when you have regard to the spiritual eminence of the person who is now committing it—his prominence in the service of God, his leadership in the church of God—his position obviously makes his sin all the more serious.

When we come to the guilt offering it is different. It no longer matters who does the sin. The question is what damage the sin has done. After all, if your daughter was knocked down and killed by a car, as far as the damage goes it makes no difference whether it was being driven by an elderly and incompetent driver or a foolish young person who had got drunk; the damage was done. So, as we think of why these sacrifices needed to be offered, we must be prepared to have two things in our minds and not just one:

1. The guilt of having broken one of God's laws;
2. The damage perpetrated by the breaking of that law.

One of these days, if I drive my Cadillac through the fair city of Vancouver at one hundred miles an hour down its busiest thoroughfare, I daresay I shall have broken the law of Vancouver, and if the police catch me at it I shall be fined. Even if I haven't done any damage, I shall be fined for breaking the speed limit. I have broken the law.

But if, in the course of careering down your main street at one hundred miles an hour, I smash into somebody else's Cadillac and break it to pieces, the fact that I have done damage to somebody else will aggravate my crime and considerably stiffen my sentence. Not only will the law demand a bigger fine because of what I have done, but I shall be required to pay the expense of restoring the car that I have damaged.

The damage that sin does, therefore, is a more complicated matter. Not only has God's law to be satisfied, but we shall find with this particular offering that restoration must be made where possible. So let us now examine the three sins under this particular sacrifice.

1. A sin against truth

If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity. (5:1)

Let's think of that interesting one that comes first. 'If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and . . . yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.' According to God, that person has sinned.

You see, we are not always obliged to tell everybody exactly everything that we might happen to know. Say, a serious case was before the courts and it was a question of whether someone had actually murdered a man or not. It could be therefore that, as he stood in the dock, the defendant's life was in very grave danger and the court would require evidence to be brought against him. They would call upon this man or that woman to say what they knew, but it could arise in such circumstances that they would be afraid to give witness.

We know all about that in Belfast, where people know a lot of things about bombs that have been laid, about people who have been shot, about people who have opened their houses to admit the terrorists, because they were afraid of doing anything else. But when the police call upon them and the judge summons them to court, they don't turn up. They are afraid, and you could understand that, couldn't you?

But in ancient Israel this law was made available to them in the statute book. If the case was pressing and serious, maybe somebody's life depended on it, the president of the court could adjure the witness in the name of the living God and formally say, 'I adjure you in the name of God that you speak what you know.' Cost what it may, the witness had to say what he knew. He had to stand up and be counted; he was required to stand with the truth.

If my neighbour's life is in danger, God will require that I stand publicly with the truth, for not to do so is a damage to my fellow citizen and therefore a sin against God.

'How important is the matter?' you say.

Well, it was so important for your salvation that there came a moment in which, if Christ had not spoken the truth, we probably wouldn't be saved here tonight.

You remember the occasion: he was on trial for his life in the high priest's court and they brought false witnesses against him saying this and that and the other. They couldn't prove anything, and our Lord remained completely silent. At last, the high priest grew exasperated and, going outside his powers, he put our Lord on a charge. 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God' (Matt 26:63).

A very deep hush went over that court. Everybody knew that if our blessed Lord answered and spoke the truth, 'Yes, I am the Messiah,' he was sealing his death warrant. He who had kept quiet so far, was now put on oath by almighty God. While the court listened with baited breath, clearly, unequivocally, he responded to the adjuration of God, and said, 'I am,' and it cost him his life. But suppose he had kept quiet, where would you and I have been?

Standing with the truth

I ask you to remember another case in the New Testament when a man was adjured by the living God. It comes at the end of Paul's first letter to Timothy, where he says to the young Timothy in the church in Ephesus, 'I charge [adjure] you in the presence of God . . . and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach' (1 Tim 6:13-14).

What an example to be called to follow! With the salvation of the world hanging on his every word and on his truthfulness, the blessed Lord witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate. Though it cost him his life, it procured our salvation.

'Timothy,' says Paul, 'in your function as a servant of God, responsible to declare the whole truth of God, I adjure you in the name of Jesus Christ, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed that good confession, that you *stand with the truth*. Keep it uncompromised all your days.'

I must talk to my own heart. What happens if I'm in a room with exalted academics, perhaps, and the gospel is being laughed at? Young men are having their faith in the truth of God's gospel destroyed, and their very salvation and their eternal destiny depends on this. If I keep quiet, shall I not damage them? May God forgive me for the times that I've kept quiet, because I was a coward. 'You shall stand with the truth,' says God, and not to do so is veritably a sin before him.

2. Sins against cleanliness

Or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt; or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt. (5:2-3)

And then there come sins of uncleanness. As we hear their description here, it would look as if the writer is concerned most of all with ceremonial uncleanness; not a small matter in those ancient days when God was teaching Israel the importance of holiness.

Physical uncleanness. Some of them, however, were concerned with the danger of physical uncleanness. When Israel was in camp, and millions of people jostled side by side in constricted areas, and water supply was small and the heat was terrible, it is understandable how the camp commandant would have to insist on scrupulous hygiene. Had they gone soft on hygiene, thousands of people could have been wiped out in a week.

God is concerned for the welfare of his creatures, and therefore God points out that if we grow careless in personal hygiene and thus damage our fellow men and women, it is a sin against God. I have no right to infect you with my common cold and you haven't any right to infect me with scarlet fever. That is a solemn thing, isn't it?

But, you know, I can think of things that appear to be more solemn. If God is concerned with physical cleanliness and the danger of physical uncleanness, isn't he also concerned with moral cleanliness, psychological health, and spiritual wholeness?

Listen to how the New Testament exhorts some of the early Christians. 'Be careful,' says the writer, talking to people he believes to be born again, 'lest a root of bitterness spring up among you and many be defiled' (see Heb 12:15). What a sorry thing it is, and it happens sometimes, doesn't it? You can go into a church of Christian people and you sense there's something wrong. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife. The story behind it is that there's been a vast row in the church, and as the row erupted, like Mount St Helens in its fury, all sorts of people have got embroiled in it. Tempers have risen, nasty things have been said, and the result of it is that many people are defiled. It leaves a sad stain on the memory and on the spirit. What a damage it does and this too is a sin against God.

Psychological uncleanness. What about psychological health? There's a father, he waddles home drunk and in his house there are endless outbursts of temper and violence. The little children cower, not understanding what's going on. At the very time when their psychological health demands a secure background, so that they may develop securely and healthily, their young minds are distraught with fear and tension and they grow up psychologically warped. Can you measure the damage that has been done?

He says, 'I don't mean it, you know. I just lose control of myself and I blow my top, but it's soon over.'

Yes, so is a volcano, but the damage that is done before it's soon over can last a long while.

Spiritual uncleanness. And what about spiritual cleanliness, spiritual health? Here's a teacher in a day school, such as one I heard of recently. She came into class, supposedly to teach the Bible, and she ridiculed anybody who believed in the creation story and in the Bible. There was a believer's child present and she ridiculed him before all the rest. Thankfully, he had a strong home background and was able to turn the tables on the teacher. But think of the potential damage done to the other children; their faith in Scripture broken at a small age, and they go out into the big, big world as atheists, and at last down to perdition.

'Don't you break the faith of a little child,' says Christ. 'It would be better for you if a millstone were hung round your neck and you were cast into the sea, where you can't do any trouble, than you damage the faith of one of these little ones who believes in me' (see Luke 17:2).

3. More sins against truth

Or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed. (5:4-5)

This time, not an adjuration but an oath, strictly so called. The particular sin here is swearing rashly. Ungodly people do it many times a day, as they take one of the divine names in vain. It's a serious matter, isn't it? You see, if everybody told lies, lies would be no good. It's only because the majority of people tell the truth that you can get away with telling a lie. People will believe you, and then you deceive them by telling a lie; they depend on you and are let down. What a confused world it would be if everybody consistently told lies. You wouldn't believe anybody, and what fearful insecurity would come on society.

The swearing of an oath

The last bastion of truthfulness is an oath taken in the name of almighty God. What would happen if that was treated so irresponsibly that nobody took it seriously any longer? My good friends, you are believers; you have committed your all to God. The basic security that guards your inner heart and gives you peace of mind when you lie down to go to sleep is the glorious encouragement, the strong consolation, that God has given you not only his word, but his oath. In the middle of all these ugly things, let's sit back a minute and enjoy it.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6:17-20)

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!⁶

What consternation you would be in, if you thought that God one day would swear an oath to save you eternally, and the next day conveniently forget all about it. Your heaven would turn to hell, wouldn't it? If God's character was like that, you would never feel secure, not even within the battlements of heaven. That's why God takes great exception to anybody taking an oath in his name and then not fulfilling it.

You go to your tailor and say, 'I would like a suit; could you do it for me within a month?' He says, 'Yes, of course, sir. I could do that easily.'

The dear man knows he hasn't a hope of doing it within a month, but he's afraid if he says he can't do it you'll take the business elsewhere. He's hard up for business, so he says, 'Oh, yes, sir, come back in a month.'

So you come back in a month, and of course it isn't done. He hasn't even begun.

He says, 'I'm sorry, I've been so overworked I just couldn't do it. Come back next Tuesday and it will surely be done.'

You come back next Tuesday and it still isn't done. His great aunt died, or something else happened, so he hasn't been able to do it. It accounts for not a little irritation in life, doesn't it? That too is a sin.

But what shall we say if Christian people take vows irresponsibly before almighty God? They're not thinking through what they mean, and then break them. I sometimes ask wiser heads than my own where the custom ever came from that Christian couples took vows before almighty God when they get married. It was thought to be a good thing to do, but nowadays

⁶ Priscilla J. Owens (1829-1907), 'We have an anchor' (1882).

it appears that some folks take them very easily. Why they take them, I don't know, when a few months down the road, as I heard recently, they dissolve them.

'Oh well, it didn't work out,' they say.

Isn't that sad? Then some months later they want to take another set of vows, and are most put out if people won't oblige them. I'm not here tonight to discuss the merits or demerits of divorce, but to plead for the solemn importance of vows taken before almighty God. If they become a mere decoration on the ceremony, to be broken like the icing upon a wedding cake, what understanding of God's character will people come to? If any one takes an oath irresponsibly and then breaks it, this is a solemn sin before almighty God.

You say, 'My brother, there is forgiveness, isn't there?'

Of course there is forgiveness. Where would any of us be if there was no forgiveness, for we've all sinned and done damage? At this juncture let each one of us thank God in our hearts for the blood of Christ: 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our *trespasses*, according to the riches of his grace' (Eph 1:7).

Think of him of whom it is said prophetically, 'Then I restored that which I took not away' (Ps 69:4 KJV). The first step towards forgiveness is confession and the admission that these things were sin: 'he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed' (Lev 5:5). Even if it was done unwittingly and unintentionally, it's still sin.

Three groups of sins. The first great burden of this part of the chapter is that God wanted to bring home to the ancient Israelites, and then to us, that these sins that offend our fellow men and women do not just damage them; they are sins against almighty God. Therefore, if ever the trouble is going to be put right, we must confess that these are not merely little accidental damages but sins against God himself, and if we are to get cleansing for them the first step is to admit it before him.

We must learn to confess our irresponsibility and insensitivities that damage other people. And as we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us, and there is a sacrifice bigger than any Israelite ever knew or conceived of that covers our trespasses, and on the basis of which all damage will be restored.

The cost of sinning

In the list of the sacrifices that were to be brought, the interesting thing is the grading of them. For instance, for his guilt offering one man is asked to bring a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat. But then the possibility is envisaged that perhaps he couldn't afford it; then he could bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons. Even so, God in his mercy realizes that somebody might not be able to afford so much as even a couple of birds, and he says the man can bring some flour. How merciful God was.

You say, 'Why did he grade it like that? Why didn't he let them off completely?'

Because in those far-off days God was beginning to teach his people the cost of sinning.

When we were children our parents gave us toy shops to play with. There were toy sweets, toy scales and toy money. The girls kept the shop because that was their wisdom, and we boys had to come and buy the sweets with the toy money. Even at two years old, I knew they were

toy sweets. Anyway, they tasted foul! I knew it wasn't real money either, but I obliged the learned sisters and came and paid whatever it was and got the sweets. Why the crafty parents gave us that game was in part that they were teaching us youngsters the cost of things. Even sweets have to be paid for; they don't come dropping down from heaven. So when we went out into real life we should know the value of things. Wise parents, weren't they?

In the ancient time when God asked his people to bring these symbolic sacrifices, he was beginning to teach them the cost of sinning. Here's a man, he's done damage; he ought to make restoration and he ought to pay the cost. But his means are not enough and he can't pay. Listen to that plaintive remark, 'And if his means suffice not . . .' (5:7 (ASV)).

Like me, are there things in your life that you wish you had never done; people you have hurt? They're gone now and we shall never be able to make restitution—my means suffice not. There's a young man, his mother was a godly woman and she prayed for him every day. In his youth he went off and sowed his wild oats and broke his mother's heart; in and out of jail like a door swinging on its hinges. The woman died of a broken heart and went home to heaven. Later he got converted. Too late. He'd broken his mother's heart, hadn't he? He'll never restore it.

What happens if it's a university lecturer and he's an unbeliever and a liberal? We had one in London. For generations he taught his students not to believe holy Scripture and to treat it as an imperfect book, and he broke the faith of many. He subsequently got converted and learned to repudiate his liberal views, but I wonder how many of his students of former years were broken and went out lost souls, because of what he taught them. How will he ever pay for it, if 'his means suffice not'?

Will God pay my debts? Will he make it up to the people that I have injured and I couldn't pay? Oh, I dare to believe it, friend. The prophetic word says of our Lord Jesus, 'Then I restored that which I took not away'; otherwise it would be impossible, wouldn't it?

Imagine a mother, and a drunken driver has killed her son. Lo and behold, she's coming round a pillar in the eternal city and she meets the driver.

'It's not you, is it?'

He says, 'Yes, I'm afraid it is.'

'How did you come here?'

'Well, I trusted the Saviour.'

What will the mother say? Will she go off and complain to the Lord, 'You haven't allowed him in, have you?'

Our Saviour said he was prepared to forgive us all our trespasses. There is one condition: that we forgive those who trespass against us (see Matt 18:23–35). He bids us think of the proportion of sinning. One man in his parable owed ten thousand talents, and the king forgave him. One of the fellow servants of the forgiven man owed him just a miserable amount of pence and he wouldn't forgive him. The king was angry and withdrew the man's forgiveness. Our Lord's commentary was: 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart' (v. 35).

My good sister and brother, if the Lord has forgiven the sin you did, and the damage to his glory, won't you find it in your heart to forgive me and the damage I may have done you?

So that is our Lord's condition. Let us be assured that not only will our blessed Lord clear us before the demands of a thrice-holy God, he will restore the damage that repentant people have done. What an expensive salvation it's been, hasn't it? And how dearly it has cost the Saviour.

Restoring the damage

But there's another side to the story. Where we can restore, God will hold us responsible and demand that we do it. We've been considering together that there are some cases where we could never possibly restore the damage that we have done through our sinning. And we took comfort from the fact that the sacrifice of our blessed Lord Jesus and his great salvation will not only bring us forgiveness for the damage we have done, but, for all who in sincere repentance trust him, God shall compensate for the damage that we did and could not repay. That however should not blind us to the fact that the second half of this passage tells us quite clearly that where it is possible for us to restore the damage we have done, God will require us to restore that damage.

The areas in which we could do damage are divided into two parts.

1. Damage in holy things (5:14–19)

Here we have damage done in the things of the Lord. Where we have done damage in these cases, the sacrifice is to be offered first and restoration made afterwards.

The lawgiver considers damage done in the holy and sacred things of the Lord. Damage done by omission: not knowing what ought to be done, and therefore disobeying God's word and doing damage in holy things. Or alternatively, doing things knowingly and positively against that law.

You say, 'Is it possible for somebody to do damage in the holy things?' It is indeed. In Malachi, for instance, we hear God complaining against ancient Israel in these terms, 'Will man rob God?' (3:8). God was complaining about the tithes that they should have brought to him and the sacrifices of free will that they should have given him. At best they had given him their ropey animals, their flea-bitten cows, their broken-down old bulls, and robbed God. 'Try getting away with that with your income tax inspector,' says God, 'and see what he says. You have the effrontery to rob God?'

The Corinthian church had to be reminded that it is our Christian responsibility, even with our material things, to give God his portion regularly and with rigorous accounting. Will I rob God of his time? I think of that Scripture given by the holy Apostle Peter:

If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. Knowing that you were ransomed . . . not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ . . . foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you. (1 Pet 1:17–20)

Ponder a moment what Peter is saying. He's thinking of the great eternity that was past, and then he's thinking of that tiny little bit of time that is called 'the time of your sojourning'

(v. 17 KJV). Seventy years of it, twenty of them perhaps we frittered away. Then we got saved and that left fifty. God was after that fifty years; he bought them with the precious blood of Christ. Peter is frank about it and God is exceedingly critical how we spend that time. Fifty years bought with the blood of Christ, woe betide me if I go and squander them. When those fifty years have gone, they'll never come again, and I shall be required to account for what I did with God's time, bought at such a terrific cost.

Spiritual balance

Will a man rob God? Suppose I get up and teach that baptism isn't important; it doesn't really matter whether you attend the Lord's Supper or not, and other such things. Perhaps I do it in ignorance, not knowing any better, but what an impertinence it is. God save us from becoming Pharisees, who 'tithed mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God' (Luke 11:42). But God save us from the other extreme. Shall we not remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:19). After the blessed Lord has spoken, what an impertinence it would be for me as a teacher of God's word to turn round and tell people it didn't matter. James says, 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness' (3:1). I begin to sympathize with the man.

In a country far from here, there was a prosperous work of the Lord. Two brethren had a business agreement, and when they fell out it blew the work of the Lord into fragments. After many long years, one of them came to repentance and confessed that in those days he had been determined to destroy one of his brethren. It would make your knees quake, wouldn't it?

How often have churches been destroyed by stupid little things? Who shall do the flower arrangements? Mr So-and-so was the organist; then there came an absolute genius and someone asked the genius to play. Mr So-and-so was so put out that he created a rumpus. It didn't matter that it was the work of the Lord. 'If anyone destroys God's temple,' says Paul, 'God will destroy him' (1 Cor 3:17). God give us that godly fear of heart that we should tremble to damage either an individual believer or a church of God.

Damage done in the things of the Lord—if I would have the Lord's forgiveness, I must do my best to restore what I can.

2. Damage in secular things (6:1-7)

There is a noticeable difference when we have done damage in the ordinary things of business and daily life. In these cases, we must be prepared to restore first, according to our ability, and then the sacrifice is offered.

With secular things, God is even more severe. He says, 'If you want forgiveness from me, having diddled the income tax, or done something of that order, first make good what you have stolen or misappropriated, and then you can come and have forgiveness.'

Sometimes we have confused that issue because we are afraid that it sounds like a gospel of works. So we have told people that they can come and get forgiveness without repentance, but it's not true.

Repentance

You've been preaching your heart out, pointing out that salvation is by faith. Afterwards a very well-heeled gentleman says he'd like to talk to you.

'I'm so glad to hear what you said tonight. Did I get it right—there's nothing I have to do to be saved?'

'Yes, marvellous. Nothing you have to do.'

'It's not of my works?'

'No, not at all.'

'And in spite of my sins, I can be saved?'

'Yes, there is forgiveness.'

'And if only I trust the Lord, I can be saved right now?'

'Yes.'

And you think to yourself, he's going to be saved.

Then the man says, 'I'm so pleased to hear it. There's one thing; can I speak to you in confidence?'

'Yes, of course. Nothing will go outside these four walls.'

'You see, I'm in a high executive position, and over the last ten years I've embezzled \$500,000. I want to be saved, but I don't have to give the money back, do I? That would be very embarrassing. I've got it invested, and my child is in university. I've got a big mortgage on the house, and my business would collapse if I had to give \$500,000 back at this moment. So I am delighted to hear that salvation is not by works; I can be saved and I don't have to give the money back.'

What would you say?

It is an absolute caricature of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith without works, to teach that you can be saved without repentance, and that repentance is merely a matter of words at the most.

You wouldn't have got past John the Baptist, would you? Listen to him in the wilderness. Some very respectable people, apparently, had come to where he was baptizing.

'I'm surprised to see you coming here,' says John. 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (Matt 3:7).

If you light a bonfire in your garden, and presently you see a lot of vipers emerging and running as fast as they can, don't misunderstand the situation. Don't suppose they're repenting of being vipers and are now going to turn into gracious maiden aunts. Not in the slightest. They aren't intending to repent; they're just getting out of the flames, that's all. They've no intention of being any different.

There are some people, and they want to escape the eternal flames, but they're not prepared to repent of sin. An easy going gospel that says all you have to do is to believe, and you don't even have to accept Jesus as sovereign Lord of your life—all you have to do is to believe and carry on as you did before—that's a perversion of the gospel.

John said, 'You must repent.' If you'd asked him, 'What do you mean by repent?' he would have said, 'It's not enough, ladies and gentlemen, just to say you repent. You must do works that give evidence that your repentance is genuine, or else God isn't prepared to listen to you.'

We sometimes get muddled up in this with our fellow believers, don't we? We hear people saying, 'You should forgive everybody, because even our Lord said, "Father, forgive them," and therefore we should forgive every person the moment they sin.' That is not true. What our Lord prayed was, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). He was praying for the soldiers that had put the nails through his hands. They didn't know who he was; they were doing their duty. It was for them he prayed, for they didn't know what they did. He wasn't praying for people who very clearly knew what they did.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent', you must forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4).

Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.' (Matt 18:21-22)

Yes, I must forgive my erring brother, but you can't forgive if someone doesn't repent, can you? Well, it would lead to odd situations, and it could happen in your church. A man runs off with your wife, and some months down the road he comes and says he's sorry. But you can't have your wife back yet; he loves her too much. So he's going to hang on to her a little while, but he wants you to forgive him. And you do? What, while he's still carrying on with your wife? That's nonsense, plain nonsense. That would be to condone sin. Our Lord is very clear: if your brother sins and turns again and says, 'I repent'—and of course his repentance is genuine—then you shall forgive.

And it is so in the gospel. Let me quote one last famous incident. Peter had preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost with such Spirit-given power that the crowd came around afterwards, touched in their conscience and pricked to the very quick, and they said, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent' (Acts 2:37-38).

You say, 'Why didn't he tell them to believe?'

They had believed already, of course, and that's why they were so disturbed. They had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and now perceived that they'd murdered him. That's a fearful pickle to be in, isn't it?

Realizing now that Jesus was the Messiah and they'd murdered him, they came to Peter and said, 'What must we do?'

He said, 'You'll repent, that's what you'll do.'

'And what will repentance mean?'

And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.' And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:38-41)

‘Two things: you’ll have to be baptized in the name of Jesus, and you must stand clear of the official Sanhedrin that ordered his execution.’

And suppose one of the crowd says to Peter, ‘I have repented, of course, but being baptized in the name of Jesus would be very embarrassing for me. I couldn’t take that step. My father-in-law is the high priest and that would lead to such a family ruction that I just couldn’t do it. I can be saved, can’t I, without being baptized in the name of Jesus?’

Really? No, ladies and gentlemen. A few days ago, they had stood in that city personally saying, ‘Away with him. Crucify him.’ Publicly they had denied the holy and the just, and they’re now claiming they repent? Well, God isn’t prepared just to take their say-so; nor would John the Baptist for that matter, and certainly not Peter. If they say they repent of the murder of Jesus, they can’t go on standing with the murderers of our Lord. Publicly they said, ‘Away with him’, and used his fair name with foul language. Now they say they’ve repented, but are not publicly prepared to confess their sin and publicly be baptized in his name? Peter would have said, ‘Go away and think a little bit more about what repentance means.’ If we would have forgiveness of our sin, we must first repent of our sin.

These have been very solemn things and I have kept you late. Not to burden you, my brothers, my sisters—how I would have preferred to talk about delightful things, and not to have seen the frowns on your faces and the worried looks. I’d rather that you had gone away wreathed in smiles. But this is a fallen world, and we’re learning to be priests: preparing for a day when there shall be no more sin and no more curse, and all the ugly damage is gone forever. But, as sure as there will be an eternal hell where the results of sin continue, may God give us sympathy with our fellow men and women who are damaged and broken by their sin and other people’s sinning.

And who of us shall say she or he is guiltless? We have added to the damage. May God grant us, in gratitude for our forgiveness, to face life’s realisms and be taught by the blessed Saviour, so that we shall be able to minimize the damage we do in the days that are to come, and be helped of God to make restoration and bring men and women to the Saviour.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.