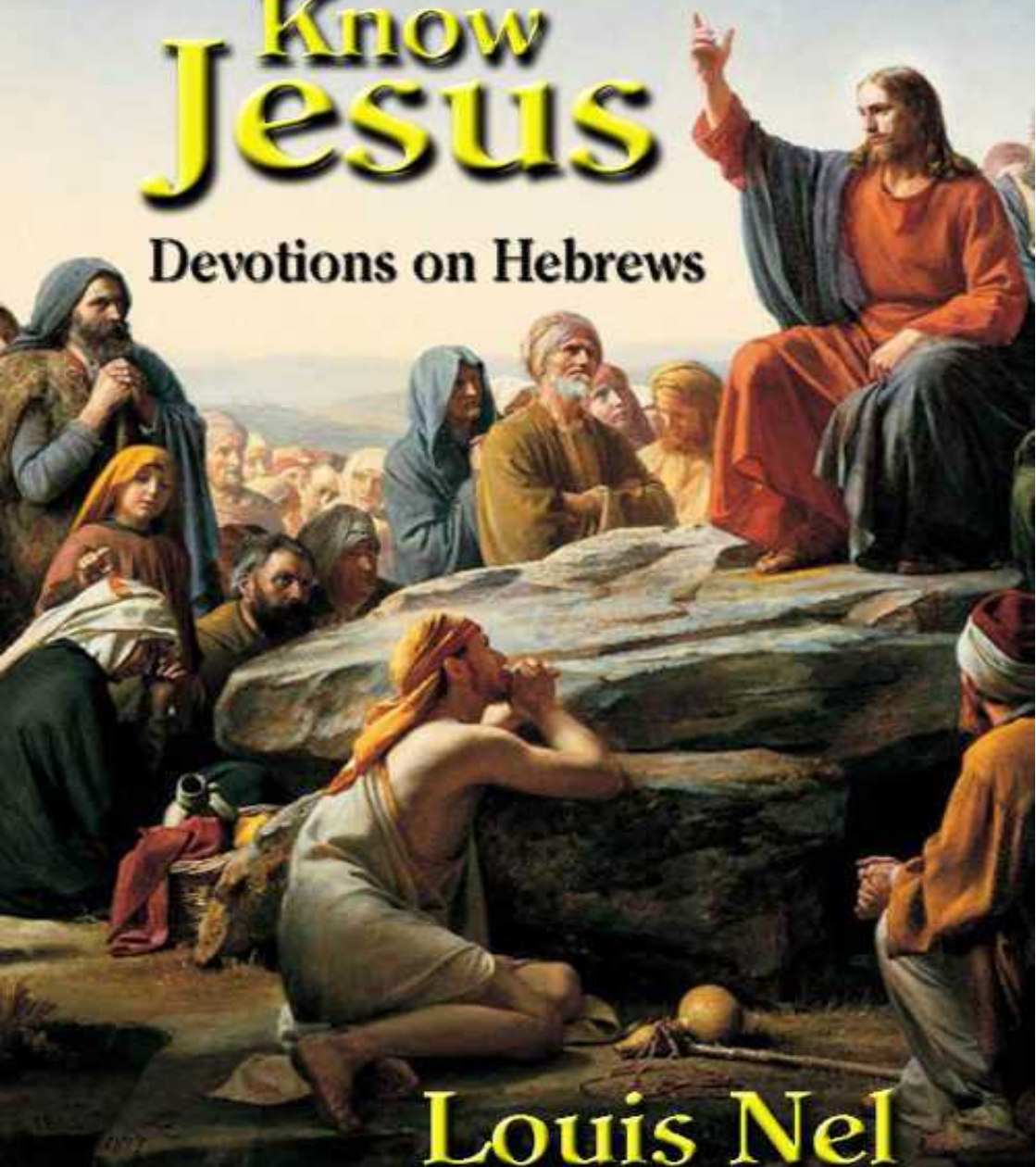


Learn To Know Jesus

Devotions on Hebrews



Louis Nel

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Meditations on Hebrews

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Cover: Painting by Carl Heinrich
Bloch, ca. 1850
Sermon On the Mount



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Renewal Pains

Hebrews Introduction

We stayed in a big house for many years, then came the day we had to sell the house and move into a one-bedroom apartment. In a sense this was a nightmare experience, because in the spacious house with it's four garages there was plenty of space to store things, things from our distant past. Yes, not just my and Mosbolletjie's things, but also our parents', and even great-grandfather's stuff. There were cupboards and cupboards full of memories from years gone by, much of it worthless.

Mosbolletjie (my better half) and I had to make a decision about what to keep and what to throw or give away. The space we we had to move to was very small compared to our old house, so only the most important things could go with. Believe me: it was traumatic!

"We must keep this, honey!"

"And where are you going to put it?"

"No, I don't know, but I'll make room!"

"Honey, we can't throw away this thing!"

"But it's already cracked?"

"But it's a memorable thing, we bought it on our honeymoon"

Mountains of stuff were given away. The orphanage was overwhelmed, but in the Nel-home there were serious domestic problems!

Suddenly Mosbolletjie and I realized what a relief it was to live without all the baggage that we had dragged on with us for so many years!

It's not only when you move that you have to make decisions about old redundant baggage from the past. Often you just have to sit down and reconsider whether you've ever kept up with time, and whether you're hoarding!

1994 Was such a turning point in South Africa's history, and for many it was extremely traumatic. We were forced to think differently now, for nothing would be the

same again after that. The question that everyone had to ask himself was, "Which of my old values should I take with me?" For most people, it was a sacrifice to leave the old values behind and start anew. For many others, however, this renewal was a huge liberation.

The first readers of the Hebrew letter also lived in a fast-changing world, and had to adapt. They still wanted to hold on to the past, because as everyone knows, the past is the "good old days," and the present the "bad times." But is it really? Outdated old traditions were part of their lives, and they wanted to cling to this stranglehold. However, the author wanted to show them that it is liberating to adapt to the new movements of God's Spirit in this changing world.

You can quickly identify yourself with these people. When you read the book, you begin to realize how difficult it was for them to remain believers in the midst of all the chaos surrounding them. Today we also live in a time of chaos. We no longer know who to

believe or trust. State capture and corruption is part of life!

Many religious leaders in the author's time wanted to return to the old things at all cost, the convenient certainties of how things had been for years gone by.

Hebrews however, want to show readers, and of course today you and me, that the past is developing into new and surprising possibilities. If you take this letter seriously, it may just change you from a grumpy, moaning lament to an idealistic, hopeful, and loving modern man, because you are new to Jesus.

Just a few remarks about the letter to the Hebrews before we study it: If we analyze the writing, we realize that it is not a letter at all, but rather a pastoral sermon.

The author? A Professor once asked his students, "Who wrote the Apostle Paul's letter to the Hebrews?" Actually, it was a very lame joke, because it was not Paul at all! The fact is, we just don't know who the author

was. And for whom was it meant? Nor is anyone really sure about this, though the title relates to the Hebrews. We can only guess that it might have been for believers in Italy. This could mean that it was written for the congregation in Rome. The date it was written was somewhere between 80 and 90 AD. I invite you to enjoy this "sermon" with me!

Prayer:

Lord, the old things are something of the past! Please help me to accept the new you give me, with joy.

Creed

Hebrews 1: 1-4

Hebrews begin with a creed about Jesus. What do we believe about Jesus? The author wants to clarify this point before proceeding with his writing so that we will know Who he is writing about.

As believers, we are engulfed by a world of unbelief, or so we often feel. "God is dead!" Many people blurt out. We hear questions like: "How can there be a God if the world is in such a mess? Where was God on September 11, when the greatest disaster in America's history took place? And where was God when the tsunami struck the East, and sent shock waves right around the world? Do you think that if there really is a God, He would allow the devastation of the floods in Mozambique and Zimbabwe? Look at the situation in South Africa today and many other countries, where sin prevails!"

Being confronted by such despondent and faithless questions and statements, the first

few verses of Hebrews are like a cool fountain, bringing relief in the scorching heat of the Namib. The Hebrew writer then wants to tell us right at the beginning of his sermon, with this creed, that we can believe in Jesus with certainty.

In the first verse of Hebrews, the writer leads us to believe that Jesus made this world. This is not an assertion made lightly. Think for a moment exactly what the extent of this claim is. If the author says that Jesus made the world, he automatically includes the universe. Today, of course, we know that the world is just a tiny speck in the universe.

But let's forget for a moment of the indescribably great space out there, and just look at the things right around us.

Mossbolletjie called me away from my computer this morning to show me something. In the acasia tree tree in front of the house are two long-crested eagles, pitch-black and proud. A metallic blue flash draws my attention to the left - some glossy starlings with their shiny-blue plumage in the

sunlight.

My heart misses a beat when I see the cuddly hoopoe with it's needle-thin bill looking for crickets on the lawn while boasting it's colourful black and orange crest in the early morning sun. A fork-tailed drongo comes and sits pryingly on a twig, his pitch-black plumage shining in the sun's rays.

I've seen these wonders of nature so many times, but each time it's an unforgettable experience. Those colours cannot be counterfeited by any artist. I have tried several times to capture it with my camera, but every time I am disappointed with the result, how can you even imitate Jesus' creation?

In spite of the fact that mankind is trying so hard to destroy Jesus' wonderful creation, He still maintains it. He is still in control! Of course, it is also our own responsibility to stop messing with His creation! On the contrary, it places a great responsibility on us to respect and nurture creation, for it is the work of Jesus!

The author speaks in awe as he describes how the glory of God radiates from Jesus. The creed of the Hebrew writer becomes a bubbling praise to Him who is above all. "He is the image of the Being of God," he rejoices.

A creed simply cannot be complete unless you also confess that Jesus is the One who brought about the cleansing of sins. Here it may just be mentioned in a single sentence, but there is much more to this thought. Our acquittal entailed that Jesus, the Almighty Ruler and Creator-God Himself had to humble himself to be born as a baby in a stinking stable full of animals. That He had to work as a carpenter and go through all the humiliations that a child was subjected to in those years. That he was driven away from his own hometown. That he was humiliated several times, falsely accused, tortured and eventually had to die the curse of death on the offended cross. So He had to pay for me and your sins, and so He accomplished the cleansing of sins.

But now He is sitting "at the right hand of the majesty in the high heaven" (verse 3). He is exalted, even above all angels.

Before Jesus we can only fall into worship, when we read how holy and exalted He is. We never dare forget that He is not just a "playmate", or someone who is just there when we are in trouble. No, Jesus is great above all, Strong Savior, Mighty Lord and Savior, Immanuel, God with us, Saving Lord, Living Word! Let us rejoice today in our praise toward Him, while at the same time knowing that He who is so exalted has mercy on me and on you.

Prayer:

Jesus, I praise You because You are great above all!

Jesus, King, God!

Hebrews 1: 1-14

Is the Old Testament relevant to us today? Don't you have to skip it and just read the New Testament? The old one has passed! Or has it really? Personally, today I get so much inspiration from both the Old and New Testament.

It is very interesting how the writer of Hebrews also uses the Old Testament. He pointed out that the verses in the Old Testament have two meanings, a literal meaning for the time in which they were written, as well as a meaning that applies to Jesus, or a deeper spiritual meaning. For example, Psalm 110 was originally written as a throne psalm which was sung when a new king ascended the throne. The Hebrew writer, however, applies it to Jesus' kingship. He is also not the only one who does it. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts all quote Psalm 110:1 to confirm Jesus' kingship and uniqueness.

Hebrews 1: 5-14 is a beautiful poem

composed of Old Testament quotes, most of them from the Psalms. On the face of it, it looks like a lot of quotes that just got jotted down, but if you pay close attention, you will see that it has a particular order, and that it wants to convey a particular message. Together they convey the story of Jesus, and especially how He was honoured by angels. Indeed, He was not just an ordinary baby, but the King of all kings - a King who is not merely honoured, but even the angels fall down in worship before Him. For example, think of the mighty angelic choir that sang from heaven at King's birth, and how the shepherds experienced this spectacle in amazement.

In this composition we see the transience of everything, as perishable as old pieces of clothing. But Jesus is eternal! Even though He died on the cross, and even though He was buried, He rose from the dead again, and He ascended to heaven. Today He is sitting on the throne and ruling. We are His messengers and servants. What a wonderful privilege!

Some thoughts from this beautiful poem:

- Jesus is the Son of God (v 5). Quotes come from among others Psalm 2:7.
- The angels worship Him (v. 6,7). Will the angels worship anyone other than God Himself? So Jesus is God.
- His rule is forever and He is righteous (v 8).
- Jesus loves the law and hates injustice (9).
- He is anointed as eternal King (v 9).
- He is the Creator of the universe (v 10).
- He is eternal and everlasting (v. 11).
- He is immutable (v 12).
- To no other being can the attributes above be attributed (v 13) - Ps 110: 1.
- Everyone is subordinate to Him and must worship Him (v 14).

How does the first chapter of Hebrews affect us today? We have already seen that this is a creed. Rightly, so we might be worried about the things happening around us today. Sin seems to be engulfing the world. There

seems to be fewer and fewer believers remaining. See how the gambling houses burst out of their seams! Not that gambling should be singled out as a "great" sin, but it is a "measuring instrument" that indicates the degree of decay of humanity. Brothels flourish. E-mail and social media are flooded with everything that is dirty, ugly and untrue. Fraud and corruption is the order of the day, to the very highest levels. Robbery, hijacking, murder, rape, violence and exploitation are commonplace. Often we do not even worry about it because we have become so used to it. Pollution destroys our atmosphere, soil and water resources. Global warming threatens to destroy our planet. A bitter dark picture?

We can bow down to worship Jesus just like the angels as described here, because even through all this we see Him as ruler over all. He made everything, and He is still in control. We should not be short-sighted and stare at the problems of the here and now. We must look beyond it all and see eternity, where iniquities will be wiped out, and even our own

sinful, miserable existence will turn into a life of glory with Jesus, the Ruler over all. We may just dream of the indescribably beauty of eternity, but it is a reality waiting for every believer.

Prayer:

Wonderful King, thank you for being Lord of my life. Thank you for letting me share in your rich heritage!

The Life-buoy

Hebrews 2: 1-4

Imagine: You are on a blissful holiday at the Victoria Falls. Everything is idyllic, with no worries in the world. Someone invites you for a boat trip on the mighty Zambesi. You are bustling with excitement, because the boat sails above the waterfall, and it's exciting. The skipper assures you that nothing can go wrong. His boat is absolutely safe, and he has never driven over the edge of the waterfall.

The powerful engines of the boat roar as it ventures into the big river. Closer and closer it comes to the waterfall, and you hear the mighty thunder of millions of litres of water tumbling over the precipice in clouds of water vapour. You are filled with great awe by this indescribable natural wonder. You lean comfortably on the rope railing of the boat and stare in wonder at the breathtaking scene here in front of you.

Suddenly the railing gives way! You lose your

balance – grab at something - there's nothing! You tumble down helplessly. An icy shock hits you when you end up in the stormy waters. "Help!" You still want to shout, but the cold water deprives you of your voice. Powerless you try to reach the boat, but this is a fruitless attempt. With anxiety you have to watch as you drift further from the boat, despite your efforts at swimming. A slippery rock passes by - you grab it. It slips through your fingers. You feel the thundering waterfall sucking you closer. A small branch emerges from nowhere. It crumbles when you grab frantically at it with both hands. "It's over, I'm done for!" you sob hysterically as the waterfall crawls closer.

Suddenly something splashes in the water next to you with a heavy blow. A life-buoy! Thankfully, you grab it and cling to it for dear life while you are being pulled to the safety of the boat. Tears of gratitude flow down your cheeks. You have been saved from a certain traumatic death. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" You keep babbling while you cling to the life-buoy, and hear the powerful

engines of the boat pounding.

A thriller? Perhaps, but so many people experience this situation in their spiritual lives. Several readers of this issue today are drowning in a hopeless situation, where it feels as if they are being sucked in by a thunderous waterfall of lostness. Are you one of them? Every straw is grabbed at, anything that might give a solution, but it's hopeless, and a gruesome ending awaits them.

But there is a life-buoy! "That is why we must hold on all the more firmly to the truths we have heard, so that we will not be carried away." we read in Hebrews 2:1. What do I grab? What does this rescue belt look like? If you're in trouble, grab anything that passes. Many people seize the legalism of the Old Testament: I have to go to church, read the Bible, tithing, obey the ten commandments to the finest detail, give something to beggars. Everything very beautiful and noble! But it's like slippery rocks and brittle twigs that you grab in vain. They slip through your fingers or simply crumble when you grab.

The problem is, this is a grasshopper religion! With the best of intentions in the world, you can't even live up to God's will! Every offence and every disobedience must be punished rightly by God. The problem is then: what is the answer? Is there ever some salvation? Everything looks so hopeless and lost!

The answer lies in the Word of God. Jewels from the Word are like life-buoys, for example John 3:16, Romans 3:23, etc. Grab it and hold it. When someone accepts Jesus' word, things suddenly happen. Life is changing, and where there was despair, there is suddenly hope. Now it is no longer you who are trying to save yourself with twigs and smooth stones, but Jesus who saves you. All you have to do is grab his life-buoy! He does the rest.

Now the list of "Must-Do Things" above becomes "Will-Do Things", because suddenly it's nice to go to church, read the Bible and pray. Now I no longer do it from a sense of duty, but because I want to. Suddenly I no

longer give my tithing because I have to, but because it became part of my love life with Jesus. Soon I notice that I am no longer the drowning man in the story, but that I have become part of the team of people standing on the boat and throwing life-buoys to other drowning men.

Where are you at this moment? Are you still a drowning man grabbing straw balloons, or are you throwing out life buoys?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can testify today with gratitude that You have also given me a lifeline. Help me to boldly throw out life-buoys to others.

Life Stories

Hebrews 2: 5-18

Open mouthed I sit and listen, seated flat on the ground, drinking in every word of the three old men who sit chatting about the "old days". Grandpa is there, and Grandma's two brothers, Uncle Pieter and Uncle Abe. The three of them grew up together in Machadodorp, and later all three became train drivers in Waterval Boven. Together, they got up to a lot of mischief, but they also experienced the downside of life. All three of them were already retired, and I as a little boy simply could not get enough of their stories.

"Do you still remember," Grandpa asked, "when the British boy wanted to join us in picking prickly pears?"

"Yes," said Uncle Abe, his round tummy shaking up and down from pure fun, "he wanted to know how to get them home."

"And then," Uncle Pieter chips in, "and then we told him he had to throw it in the front of

his shirt!" The three men shook as they laughed, the picture still clear in their minds. The poor "Englishman" apparently struggled for days to get the thorns out of his tummy. That was the end of their brief friendship!

Yes, it was many years ago, but I still remember many of their stories almost verbatim, jewels from my childhood. People love to tell stories about their childhood experiences and adventures. Some of the stories Grandpa had told even happened during the Anglo Boer War, when he was in Durban as a boy in the concentration camp in Jacobs. The things they got up to as children will let your hair stand upright. Funny that they always told about the things that were not embarrassing for themselves. One does not like to talk about the day when you yourself made a mess of things.

The Hebrew writer also tells a story here, the story of man. Then he tells the story of Jesus, and as you put two transparencies on top of each other, so he puts the two stories on top of each other so that it becomes one

intertwined story.

"Yes, those were the good old days!" Often the old men sighed as their thoughts went far back. But the "good old days" were often a craving for something better. It might have been fun, but it was also really hard times. What we have now is much better, but we look forward to the perfect life.

The author's story begins with a future perspective, where everything will be perfect, and where everything and everyone is subject to Jesus. A time when even death no longer exists, and all of God's children reign with Jesus over the universe. The curtain has just been pulled open slightly, but what we see through it excites you.

However, we must realize that that prospect could never be possible if it were not for the sacrifice that Jesus had to make. The humiliation that He, the Creator of the universe, had to endure living on earth as a human being! He had to mix with the lowly! He endured terrible suffering, and even had to die the cursed death of the cross. Indeed,

this death of Jesus is also the tragic fate of every person's life story. He, the Son of God, has come to experience our well-deserved destruction on our behalf, because He died for all.

But Jesus' resurrection, ascension and glory change the course of our poor people's course of life irrevocably. Because He suffered, it brings our fate to perfection, and through His bitter suffering we are absorbed into the family of Jesus. So we become Jesus' brothers and sisters.

Throughout the ages man has tried in vain to become like God. Therefore, Jesus descended and became a human being, thus succeeding in destroying the forces that spoil our life stories. We are thus freed from the bondage of obsolete legalistic religion. Often we have tried to rectify our wrongdoing, but in vain! We were conquered by sin. As High Priest, Jesus sacrificed Himself for our sins and took them away forever.

Yes, Jesus himself was tempted, and He himself suffered, and therefore He knows

exactly what we are going through. He is therefore qualified to help us deal with those temptations and suffering in our lives. So trust Him, because He helps us persevere in temptations and trials, and He sees to it that our shaky life story has a happy ending.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can entrust my life to You, already knowing that there is a happy ending!

Jesus vs Moses

Hebrews 3: 1-6

David has always been the greatest king in history for the Jews. It is with great reverence that King David is spoken of. But there was somebody else from Jewish history who inspired much more authority than David, the great leader Moses. He was in a very different class, someone who could be associated with God, because he spoke to God, and his whole being radiated "Man-of-God".

Exodus 33 tells of Moses setting up a "tent of meeting" outside the camp of Israel. It was the predecessor of the temple. There we read that the pillar of cloud descended to the entrance of this tent when Moses went there, and that the Lord spoke directly to Moses "as a man with his friend" (Ex. 33:11). Something that few people realize is that it was Jesus with whom Moses spoke every time. He is referred to as the "Angel of God" (Ex 14:19). When speaking in the Old Testament of the Angel of God, it refers to the Son of God,

thus Jesus. So Jesus Himself was present to guide Moses in this huge task.

Moses was a remarkable man, a true leader who actively lived the will of God in his guidance. He never tackled anything if he didn't consult God in the matter. Moses was a very strong person and leader, yet he lived in deep dependence on God. No wonder the Jews had such great respect for him. In Exodus 35 to 40, we see how he succeeds in building a true place of worship in the wilderness that could travel with them to the promised land. This would have been Israel's temple for many years.

With this piece of background in mind, we read Hebrews 3. The author wants to bring to his readers attention that Moses was truly a great man of God, but that Jesus is much more honored, even as Moses, who built the first "temple." Indeed, the Old Testament religion was intertwined with a physical temple, and Moses was the one who laid this foundation. He was also the one who gave the Jews the law, and all the rituals that went

with their worship. However, what we must remember is that Moses' function as Man of God was limited. The things he did and said had to point to the future. He had to testify to the things that were to come, even long after his death.

The religion built by Moses had its limitations. It was exclusive, meant only for the Jews. In addition, it was limited to a physical building, the temple. And then there was also the danger that the rituals that were used could lead to a form-religion. Moses was just a servant who had to do what God commanded.

Jesus, on the other hand, was much more than just the servant. He served as Son of God. He was also the Apostle, the Messenger who represented God in such a way that you could not make a distinction between God and his representative. Moses was just a messenger who conveyed God's will to the people. However, Jesus' words are directly God's words. Moses created the infrastructure for the priests to make

sacrifices in the temple on behalf of the people. Jesus was the Sacrifice! At the same time, He was also a High Priest, through atonement for all people's sins.

Moses was faithful to God, but he was still a fallible man who sinned. Jesus' faithfulness, however, stood firmly to the bitter end, and through the greatest temptations of the devil himself, Jesus still remained standing and never, ever sinned. As Moses built a temple, Jesus also built a temple, one of flesh and blood, made up of humans. Moses' temple was holy, and so is the temple of Jesus, set apart for the Lord. Today we are still part of that temple, the church of Jesus. We are also holy because we are set apart for God, and we must strive to live that way.

God's Temple (the church) is very important, and we should not underestimate it. This is, of course, the place where we get rid of our sins. It is by no means the physical building, but the community of believers, and it is a halfway house of rest, peace and joy.

However, we should never lose sight of the fact that it is not about the temple (church), but that it is primarily about Jesus. As Moses was an instrument, and his temple was a tool to worship God, so is the church (you and me) only instruments that must bring all praise and thanks and worship to Jesus. He is the One on whom everything depends. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says Jesus in Revelation 22:13. He is the Beginning and the End. No one is bigger than He is!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I fall down in front of you this morning in worship, because to You alone be all the praise and honor and glory.

Unbelieving Believers

Hebrews 3: 7-19

As the Reverend climbs the pulpit, I feel it in my bones that a fire-and-brimstone sermon is on it's way this morning. And I'm not wrong either. This visiting preacher is very upset, and very soon I realise why. Some theologians in our country question the whole being of Jesus! There are even known theologians who claim that any kind of religion, whether Hindu or Muslim or Bhuddism, will bring you into heaven. In addition, a certain professor of theology and his cousins upsets the church with all sorts of blasphemous allegations, such as the fact that Jesus never rose from the dead or ascended to heaven, nor had a virginal birth.

The pastor shocked me with the report, that a certain pastor was part of a delegation that fetched the "spirits of the dead MK members," together with a group of Sangomas! Then you're colluding with devilish things! The sad part is that these theologians cannot even be thrown out. They

still stand on our pulpits and in the theological schools. They can't be fired because the law is on their side!

Certain pastors in South Africa's religion are said to be bound by New Age, and some theologians endorse the New Age principles! Shocking! These so-called Bible experts claim that 80% of things written in the New Testament are merely fiction, just stories! What kind of rubbish are they trying to make us believe!

Fortunately, this morning I can testify that there are thousands of ministers and theologians who are still firmly adhering to the pure Word of God and preaching from the pulpit every Sunday. For the past few years I have attended several church meetings where hundreds of pastors gathered, and the wonderful spirit of faith and hope that I have seen all along warms my heart. Pray for your pastor, that he will remain standing!

Hebrews 3:7-19 is a short sermon with Psalm 95: 7-11 as the basis. It deals with the Israelites who had been wandering in the

desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land. It certainly wasn't an easy forty years, but they, in a meraculous way, brought it upon themselves through their unbelief. Every day they had to see how God provided for them in their journey to the Promised Land. He gave them manna and quail to eat daily and gave them water to drink in a miraculous way. He guided and protected them in a divine way with the cloud and fire column, pointing them in the right direction from one dry sand dune to the next, through a desert that stretched out infinitely before them. The breathtaking wonder of God's care is totally incomprehensible, how He could provide more than three million people in all their needs. Yet they still could not believe that He could safely lead them into the promised land. They were stubborn, rebellious and provoked God! Not one of that generation of Jews saw the promised land except Joshua, the only believer. The others' bodies lie scattered across the desert.

The writer of this sermon now warns his readers that they should not fall into the

same kind of religion. The Israelites who, according to Exodus 33, worshipped God, soon fell into idolatry. Many of the theologians now making such shocking statements were once devoted believers. What happened? A Jehovah's Witness tells me she was a Sunday school teacher in the DR Church. What made her no longer recognize Jesus as God?

The Jews got to know God in a very special way, but they still turned their backs on Him. Their punishment was horrible. Someone who gets all the opportunities to really know God has a wonderful privilege. Theologians have opportunities that few people are privileged to have. Still, some are totally on the wrong track. You and I who regularly hear the Word of God are just as privileged. There are millions who don't have that opportunity. If you are seduced by false teachings or rebellion against the things taught in the Word of God, there is a terrible end awaiting you.

The infallible Word of God today pleads with

us: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not be stubborn, like your forefathers when they rebelled." Don't be tempted by the sweet talk of foolish preachers. Keep an eye on Jesus, the risen Lord, who truly ascended to heaven, and who rules over heaven and earth. Stick to your faith in Jesus, for He is truly God and Creator, so the holy Word of God teaches us. Believe with your whole heart that the Bible is not weakened "words of God" as some claim, but the true Word of God.

Prayer:

Oh Lord, I plead for mercy for the theologians who have rejected Your Word. Please rip them from the devil's claws! Please give them a new insight.

Desert Times

Hebrews 3:7-19

This morning we read the same Scripture reading that we discussed yesterday, and then look it from a different angle. How long did it take the Israelites to walk from Egypt to the Promised Land? Jerusalem is a mere three hundred plus kilometers from Egypt. A man can easily travel forty kilometers in a day. But say now, they only walked ten kilometers a day, then they could stand with their suitcases in front of Jerusalem's gates within a month. How long did it take them? A full forty years! Why?

The number forty is loaded with symbolism in the Bible. This is especially true of preparation. Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, where He was tempted by the devil. The apostles had to wait forty days and prepare themselves for Jesus' resurrection before they could tackle that huge task of making disciples of all nations. For them it was a desert time of uncertainty and anxiety about what the future would hold for them.

They were stripped of all their security that they had with Jesus over the past three years. They now had to learn to trust God alone.

Several times I have seen new young ministers, out of seminary, tackle their first congregations with fire and flame and tons of confidence, just to be brought to earth with a bang. What had to be a wonderful experience for them often turned into a nightmare desert. Sometimes they want to give up, even opt out of the ministry, because things are becoming just too much for them. The fact is that it is this tough school that they are going through, which makes them successful pastors. The conflict situations, fiercely critical and sometimes even obvious animosity from some of their own congregation members are the things that make them strong for their fruitful labour in God's vineyard.

Anyone who decides to be part of the Gospel team must also be prepared to go through a desert era, because it is the Lord's way of

preparing and strengthening you for your task. Desert times are very important. However, you need to know how to handle them, and what attitude you should reveal when you go through it.

Let's go and look at Israel's desert time. We must remember that Jacob and his sons lived in Egypt after Joseph had given them a place to stay. Jacob's sons were definitely not angels, so history teaches us. They did cruel things, even selling their own brother as a slave! During the years of bounteous living in Egypt, they probably neglected the little religion that Jacob had tried to teach them! Of this, very little was left for their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I wonder if they had ever known God by the time Moses had to lead them from the slavery in which they eventually fell. That is why Moses had to ask the Lord how he should explain to the people, which God actually sent him?

Against this background, the Lord takes them on a great detour through the wilderness,

and He teaches them who He really is. He cares for them in a wonderful way, and He teaches them His faithfulness and grace and how they should live. What do they do during this desert season? They reject Him time and again. Indeed, He brought them to the gates of the Promised Land, but they were not ready for it. What was supposed to have been a year or two to prepare them for this country, became forty years before they were finally ready.

How should you and I handle “desert” situations when confronted by them? I've been through some desert periods in my life, which I often have handled totally wrong. Most importantly, we need to realize that God is using it to prepare us. So don't fight it, as I've done many times. Accept it! But it is also important to consider it a very great privilege! Be sincerely thankful for it. The Lord only sends this kind of trial over the lives of people He wants to use. So be glad that the Lord deems you worthy to go through this “training”. Years ago, when I did my military service training, there was an efficiency test

done for guys who could become paratroopers. The training for this was pure hell, but each of us dreamed of being part of them.

Perhaps we as believers should also look forward to being trialed and tested like the paratroopers. But which makes you strong for service in the Kingdom of God. Be grateful and proud of the fact that the Lord regards you worthy for a desert time!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the desert times in my life. Please make me strong and ready for the task for which you are preparing me.

To Rest

Hebrews 4: 1-11

I am tired! I need rest urgently! Where I am sitting here writing, I have a dull headache and I would love to lie down for a while. But for poor me there is no rest because the work is piling up and waiting, and it must be done! Actually, I can now do with a holiday, but there is just too much work!

Railway staff were obliged to retire at 55 in the olden days. The years of sweating on the steam trains made a man physically exhausted by 55, and everyone was looking forward to that rest. But the men's rest was usually only short-lived, because within a few years of sitting idly they were sent to their grave at a fairly youthful age. Why? The sudden indulgence after a lifetime of hard labour made them waste away!

But what is the true meaning of the word "rest"? It is so easily misunderstood. For most of us it's relaxing and doing as little as possible. For others, resting means

something completely different, to stop doing what keeps you busy all day, and to do something totally different in it's place. So if you sit and work in front of the computer all day long, rest may mean to sweat it out in a gym or garden, or maybe just walking or jogging.

The best rest you can give me is to stay somewhere in the bush for a week or two, away from all the modern amenities. Pitching a tent and looking for wood in the veldt for the evening's braai, is not a hassle. And to walk for miles and fight my way open through impassable thorn bushes to look for some or other bird, pure fun. And then to collapse on my camp chair at the end of the day, utter bliss!

We read in Genesis 2:2 that God rested on the seventh day after He finished the creation. How did God rest? By maintaining Creation! God's rest was therefore not a mere rest doing nothing, but a rest doing something. Sunday is our weekly day of rest. How do you spend it? By sitting and doing

nothing? No, you go to church, participate actively in the worship service, give Sunday school, maybe do hospital visit. Or you could invite a lonely person for dinner or socialize with your family or friends. You can also spend time on Bible study or spiritual work for which you would not otherwise have time. In other words, it involves serving God and doing good to others.

There is, however, another kind of rest that is mentioned here, the eternal rest that awaits believers, or the rest with God in heaven. The question is whether every believer will taste that rest. According to Hebrews 4:1 it may not be a definite matter! You can forfeit your "passport"! Judas is a classic example. He knew Jesus intimately, but one day decided he didn't believe anymore. The consequences were tragic. In a previous meditation, we have seen preachers who have faithfully proclaimed the Word of God landing on the wrong track and now preaching blasphemy. Can they enter into God's eternal rest? The eternal rest is not automatically linked to Christianity. There

may be some left behind! There have been many debates on this question, and there is no consensus. If you ask me if I believe that a believer can forfeit his chance of everlasting life, then I have to say, I'm not sure, but I'm not going to risk taking chances!

What does it mean? Yes, of course it is only faith in Jesus that can save me. But it requires me to work at it, and to maintain and strengthen this faith. To think that an occasional Bible reading, praying, and occasionally going to church is enough, you are making a big mistake. It requires hard work to keep your faith strong and alive. At the same time, there is the matter of the God's law. No, I certainly do not gain salvation by keeping the law, because only Jesus' atonement gives salvation. But when I reject the law, I make a mockery of God's holiness. Of course, it is not that hard work in the Kingdom that gives you eternal rest, but if you do not, then you gradually slip further away from your faith, until you can eventually lose it altogether.

Yes, I know people who were once active believers and who have slipped away so that you do not even recognize them as believers any more. If you are one of them, I would like to ask you urgently today if your faith in Jesus is still standing firm. If so, for how long do you think you can still endure it before you reach your eternal destruction? Wake up! Do something about it before it may be too late forever!

Prayer:

Lord, please awake me from my rest - lead me to buy out the time and work in Your Kingdom.

Warthog in the Dark

Hebrews 4: 12-13

In a certain sense, animals are so disturbingly predictable. If you drive through the park, you will immediately know, without first looking, what the impala are doing. They graze, and during mating season the males roar like lions and fight from sunrise to sunset, and right through the night to sunrise again! Lions sleep. Well, so it seems, because all you see lions do is sleep. I think it's a myth that lions catch buck. Have you ever seen a lion catch a buck? It's mindblowing how the guys who make the nature movies get the lions so far as to hunt. My lions sleep! An osprey sits in a tree and looks important. Sometimes he goes flying high up in the air, but usually he just sits. Fishing? Never seen one fishing! Animals are so predictable!

And warthogs? They dig for roots or cut the short grass even shorter. And when they get a fright, they run, tails erect like little aerials. They also like to roll in the mud. Interesting

animals, because they have quite a large repertoire! Of course, at night you never see them, never, because then they crawl away in a hole. Warthogs are so predictable! Right?

One night we were sitting at our campfire in the woods. It's already pitch-dark, and the lions are chatting down by the Crocodile River. By the way, lions sometimes roar, so they don't sleep at all! Even the old hyaena is already busy singing his sad song to a mate who is looking for a piece of leftover meat somewhere. Everything is quiet here around the fire, too quiet!

Then suddenly there is a rustle. A twig breaking. My heart misses a beat or two, and Mosbolletjie grabs the flashlight. What could it be? Out of the dense forest, the ugliest face I've ever seen in my life peeks out, with two curved tusks and bloodshot eyes surrounded by dirty, rough wrinkles. He gives an unobtrusive snort and walks past to some maize kernels on the ground. A warthog! In the night? This pig certainly has a dark side

to him! They NEVER walk around at night! Duikers and genets yes, but warthogs? Definitely no!

The ugly warthog gives a vulgar snort, glancing at us arrogantly, and then begins munching the duiker's apple, open-mouthed. Then he discovers a heap of maize kernels which he licks from the ground. And when there seems to be nothing left, he sucks up some more kernels from the dust. I shudder! He takes a few steps in our direction and stares at us. Annoyed, I pick up a piece of wood and throw it at him. It's all but he pretends he didn't feel it. And then, as he came, he disappears into the night again.

And I wonder! You think you know someone, but you really don't know anything about him!

But wait a bit, don't look for the fault with others. Maybe I should start with myself first! Everyone thinks they know me, this friendly elder. But do they know who I am? Do they know the dark side of my life? Do they know that behind this friendly smile, sometimes there is a thundercloud inside me? One with

flashing lightning rays? No, of course they will never know, because I can hide it very well! Just I and I alone know about it! My secret is safe, very, very safe.

But was my secret ever locked away safely in my Fort Knox safe? The Hebrew writer warns: "The Word is sharper than a two-edged sword, and penetrates even to the separation of soul and spirit and into joints and marrow. It judges the intentions and thoughts of the heart. "Absolutely nothing is invisible to the Lord, but everything is visible to Him! And worst of all, we will have to give account.

We are only human, full of weaknesses. Temptations come across your path, and sometimes you fall head first into this temptation. Overpowered by sin, and even if you try to put up a pious face in front of people, there are still sins deep down inside that no one else knows about. The psychologists speak of the shadows of man. Freud calls it the ID, the THING, the beast, the night-warthog in us. Of course, we all

certainly want to be whole beings, redeeming the dark things in us that make us do things that are unacceptable.

Did I paint a terrible dark picture now? Indeed! But perhaps we need to do introspection from time to time and come back to reflection. But fortunately this is not where the Hebrew writer ends. This is the introduction to giving us the wonderful news of Jesus' intervention in the dark situation. But about this we report in the next issue. Don't miss it!

Prayer:

Lord, you alone know my heart - the dark things I carry with me. Thank you that I can bring this to you. Please forgive me, and cleanse me.

High Priest

Hebrews 4:14-5: 10

Yesterday we spoke about the dark side in my life, the ID, the "nightmare." Not one of us wants to be like that! I really want to wish that dark "ID" away! But how?

I can handle the problem in different ways. Firstly I might just deny having a problem! Of course, if I admit that I have a weakness, my "image" will be gone, so denial sounds like a very good option. However, I will never grow spiritually. But even worse is the fact that I do not lie only to myself and the people around me, but also to the Lord. Denial is therefore not an option at all.

Another alternative is to punish myself in some way. Yes, many people do it! In South America, people go so far as to scoff and even crucify themselves. I can actually punish myself much more easily than that by simply walking around with a guilty conscience! But all it gives me is a low self-esteem, and it also increases my stress

levels and my blood pressure.

Of course, I can also try to pay for the consequences of my shaky, dark life. In the old days, the High Priest did it on behalf of the people. He was, of course, also an ordinary person, and his job was to join God on your behalf. Being himself a man with his own weaknesses, he had sympathy with the people he had to intervene. He had to make sacrifices for people's sins, but also for his own sins. This system had many disadvantages, because human imperfection was painful as a painful thumb. Yes, even a high priest also has his shady side, those criminal sins of which only he (and God) knows. This was evident in the trial of Jesus, when the High Priest and other church leaders even brought false evidence to try to find Jesus guilty. There was absolutely no love lost here.

Now where does the answer lie? Is there any alternative that can work?

The only answer lies with Jesus! He made everything perfect. As High Priest, He was

personally appointed by the Father. No other high priest ever had the privilege of being ordained with a voice from heaven. However, this was not all, because, unlike earthly high priests like Caiaphas, He never had any sin. Was Jesus ever confronted with sin? Indeed! Shortly after His baptism He was in the desert to be prepared for His task. There the devil tried in all sorts of ways to seduce Him to sin. However, Jesus was still standing after the worst temptation and never sinned. Moreover, He can fully associate Himself with our problems, for He was truly human with all human problems, even temptations. So our sins today are handled by a sinless High Priest, the only sinless one, a high priest who truly has empathy with us ordinary people.

The priests in those days had to go to the Holy of Holies of the temple to intercede for the sins of the people, for that was where God was. Because Jesus Himself is God, He does not have to go into the Holy of Holies like other priests, for he has direct access to heaven. In fact, it was Jesus, the "Angel of God" who at that time met Moses in the Tent

of meeting when Moses had to intercede with the people of God.

Where the old order could only involve the Israelites, everyone today has access to Him. Jesus' Personal Command was that the Gospel should be spread to all nations.

Jesus was also not appointed from the temporary priesthood of Aaron, but the eternal ordinance of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20), a timeless divine order. We will never be able to understand the timelessness of it all. He was already before creation, and He is forever, how long it may be.

In the olden days people had to pay to be forgiven. However, Jesus came and paid the price fully with His sacrifice at Calvary. This means that you and I are now under an obligation to Jesus, to lead a life of gratitude. That doesn't mean we still have to pay, but only that I will give my best to Jesus out of my own free will, because I want to thank Him.

Let us today bring all our burdens and sins to Jesus, including those dark shadows that we never dare to tell anyone about. He will understand, and He is willing to forgive and forget it altogether.

Prayer:

Lord, You alone know my heart - the dark things I carry with me. Thank you that I may bring it to You. Please forgive me, and cleanse me.

Food Makes You Grow

Hebrews 5: 11-6: 3

Our grandchild is twelve years old, and of course the loveliest girl in the world! I watched with great interest as she developed over the past twelve years. That first time I saw little Zoë in the hospital, she was a helpless little thing that could barely open her eyes, her little grasshopper legs brought tears to my eyes! And the buttocks, smaller than chicken thighs! But then she started drinking! Liters and liters of milk, non stop! And just as you think she has had enough, she starts off again! Yelling blue murder if you do not have the next feed ready in time. Barely three months later, these same skinny legs resemble those of a ballet dancer. Like a sponge, she observes her environment and stores the information for future reference. Sounds fascinate her, and everything that moves. Such a pity that they cannot stay so small and cute forever!

Twelve years have passed, and the milk has made way for real, real food - meat and

vegetables and everything that is healthy. And I think: If Zoë had stayed so small, then there would have been a huge problem.

Years ago, there was a girl with me at school named Jenny who never grew physically. When we went to high school, she still looked like a four-year-old girl. She was beautiful, cute, and everyone wanted to pamper her, but she had a very big problem. Before she became mature, she died. Tragic!

If a baby does not grow, there are problems. If a believer does not grow spiritually, there are also problems. In spiritual life, there is no standstill, either you grow, or you fade away. It's like a top fit athlete: if he doesn't keep exercising, he loses his fitness and he fades away. Gradually, his condition is deteriorating. Exercise is not always fun, because it requires sacrifice and discipline.

The other issue that is being addressed is the baby's food: for the first few months he can only handle milk, and he does quite well! But then he starts with baby food, and gradually it is getting coarser and tougher,

until eventually he can chew a piece of tough biltong with ease. Many believers seldom progress beyond the Psalms and the Beatitudes, for they have never learned to read the more difficult parts of the Bible. Revelation is such a scary book that it is never opened. When reading the Bible, it is just to ease the conscience, and there is never a deep reflection on what God wants to say to you. A marriage enrichment course, you may be able to endure, but you avoid Bible School as far as possible because it is completely out of your league!

Where do I start? A good starting point is to read the Bible with a good commentary which gives a proper background and also explains difficult concepts. Something which also applies the scripture part to today's life. With such a commentary, the Bible begins to make sense to you. Join a good Bible school. There you get a foundation that makes Bible reading a new adventure for you. Most importantly, all this is done in prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, otherwise all these things mean nothing!

Solid spiritual food makes you grow spiritually. But now you have to be careful not only to grow in width and to become spiritually fat. Together with food comes exercise. That "fat" must be transformed into "muscles" so that you can become spiritually useful. Be prepared to also talk about the things you learn. Share it with others and discuss it. Not only do you enrich other people with your knowledge, but it also anchors your life. Something you just read, you forget quickly, but if you have discussed it with someone else, it is permanently stuck in your memory. A Bible study or cell group is invaluable, because here you can share what you have learned with others, but at the same time learn from them.

Furthermore, you have to experience the things you learn physically. For example, Philippians 4:4 says that you must be joyful in everything. A beautiful thought! However, if you deliberately live it out every day, it not only gives you a wonderful positive state of mind, but you have a positive impact on the people you come into contact with.

There are many ways to live the Word. Be creative, and listen to what God says to you. For example, send this devotional to as many people as possible. If you exercise your passion, it can be very rewarding. It doesn't have to be a punishment! Spiritual exercise can be a wonderful adventure - mine is exciting! I challenge you to start today!

Prayer:

Thank you for all the spiritual food you give me, Lord. Please help me to be spiritually active and live your Word practically every day.

The Abundant Bush

Hebrews 6: 4-12

As you may have noticed, I love the Lowveld. What is it about the lowveldt that enchants me? It certainly cannot be the climate, as it becomes intolerably hot, and if the sun finds you alone, it will kill you. Possibly the variety of animals? Maybe. But I rather think it is the tranquility and the vegetation, especially the trees that attract me. I can wander through the bush for hours and just enjoy the breathtaking variety of trees, shrubs, grasses, wild flowers. Look, I'm not claiming to be a tree or plant expert, but I certainly do enjoy them!

I would like to invite you to take a walk with me through the pristine Lowveld. Let me introduce you to the prim and proper old aunt of the forest, Mrs Marula, always ready when the summer comes, to overload you with loads of fragrant fruit. Generous old aunt, she is. Next to her grows Buffalo Thorn. This beautiful evergreen lady has a dense, shiny, dark green foliage that always throws

shadows when the sun is burning down mercilessly. Her red fruit is food for a multitude of birds. The fruit that land on the ground can be used to brew a delicious tea. You just have to handle this little lady very carefully, because she has claws that scratch and will not release you once she grabs you. Next to miss Buffalo Thorn stands Red Bushwillow. He is definitely a man-tree, because he provides the most wonderful wood, the heaviest in the whole forest. A braai fire from his wood is good enough for a king.

Above these trees towers Mrs. Knob-thorn, a worthy old lady with a knotty, scabby trunk full of hiding places and holes where leguans, birds, the cutest little woodland dormice and bushbabies nest. She is actually the apartment complex of the forest. And in springtime she explodes into a mass of white flowers that make it seem like snow has suddenly hit the Lowveld. Tree Wistaria is a true gentleman, dressed in bunches of purple flowers. Sausage Tree is the clown of the forest, with giant sausages hanging from thin

stalks, and breathtaking crimson flowers. The stately Miss Leadwood stands maidenly and tall, her almost leafless head up in the clouds. A real old-fashioned spinster. And then there is Wild Mango, Mrs. Wild Plum and a clutter of shrubs. Raisin bush, Medlar, Donkey Berry and a variety of wildflowers. And everywhere, birds, bugs and other animals. The bush is truly Paradise!

But Adam and Eve's Paradise had it's snake, and so did the Lowveld: Aunt Sickle Bush with her horrible thorns! Her message is clear, when she shows her long, sharp nails: "Here you will not pass!" She grows in disturbed soil, where she takes over everything! Amongst the folds of her skirts, only Poison Apples and Khakie Bush grow! Where Aunt Sickle Bush has taken root, all the others are suppressed. She's a horror!

You and I are in a sense exactly like the Lowveld's forest! When you open your heart to Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes and plants fertile "trees" in the hardy soil of your life. The first thing to remember is that plants only

grow when there is food in the soil. In poor soil, your "trees" die. Your land needs to get spiritual food, as we have clearly seen in the previous passage. The more spiritual food you get, the more abundant and juicier the fruits are that your "trees" carry, are to the great blessing of all.

A second important lesson from the Lowveld is that different types of soil produce different kinds of plants. Driving through the north of the Kruger National Park, you will see stretches of Mopanies, where the elephants roam to their heart's content. On the banks of the river you will again find Wild figs, Jackal berries, Natal mahogany and reeds. So you and I are also different, and we carry different kinds of spiritual fruit.

The third lesson from the bush is that there is a very great danger threatening the disturbed land, where we allow the enemy, the devil, to destroy our fertile ground. That is where the Sickle Bush, Poison apples and Khaki bush take over in your life, and overtake all the other fruit. The Hebrew writer puts it harshly,

if he says that where a believer has "turned away, it is impossible to repent". He feels so serious about this matter, that he says that such a person actually crucifies Jesus again, and makes a mockery of Him in public! (Heb 6:6)

This morning's scripture reading pleads with you and me. When our spiritual life is losing its vigour and we no longer deliver the fruit we need, then red lights are flashing. Don't let the Sickle bushes take over your life because it can be fatal. You may even lose your salvation! Open up your heart to the Holy Spirit, and bring in spiritual food so that you can be fruitful and useful to the Kingdom of God.

Prayer: Lord, I don't want Sickle bushes in my life! Please feed me spiritually so I can bear fruit.

Is There Still Hope?

Hebrews 6:13-20

To scratch where it doesn't itch can be dangerous - so the first woman in the world (according to an ancient Greek legend) discovered. Her name was Pandora. According to this story, a box was given to her and, together with that, an order that she should not open it under any circumstances. Now I ask you with tears in my eyes, is it not the most unfair thing to do to any woman? Of course, as she was a woman, her curiosity got the better of her, and she simply couldn't help but look at what was in that mysterious box. And just there all the misery begins, because when she lifts the lid, all the most terrible things fly out: disasters, diseases, age, crime, hardship and all other miseries. She tried to prevent it, but it was to no avail! All that is bad is bubbling out of her box. Panic stricken, she finally slammed the lid down, just before the very last thing escaped. What was left in the box? HOPE! Without hope, mankind could never cope with the

mighty flood of evil that had escaped out of Pandora's box.

Indeed, it is just a story, a legend, but the fact is that without hope many people will never survive. A good example of this is the Nazi concentration camps, where people are kept like outcasts in the worst conditions. The well-known author, Victor Frankl, wrote in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, about his experiences in such a camp. He says the only people who survived there were those who still had hope. Hope literally kept them alive.

The Hebrew writer wants to give his readers hope. They experienced a lot of persecution, and the terrible living conditions they often had, made them desperate. Many people lost heart. Is there ever something left for them? Indeed! There is hope! God keeps His promises!

Abraham was an example of someone who lived with hope. If he died childless, it would mean the end of a lineage. A great disaster! However, God made Abraham a promise of a

myriad of descendants, and Abraham clung to that hope, even though it seemed impossible at times that God will be able to fulfill such a promise. By the time Abraham had already reached the Big Hundred, there was still no childrens' chatter in his tent. Abraham, however, still trusted in God, because God confirmed it with an oath. Abraham never lost his hope.

And then came the joyful day when little Isaac was born. Mom was old enough then to be a great-grandmother, and Abraham should have had plenty of great-grandchildren already. Just a few years later, however, he was given the shocking task of sacrificing Isaac. Did God break his promise? However, Abraham's hope was still based on God's promises, and He provided.

Today we also live in bitterly uncertain times. Oh yes, there are many people in our beautiful country who are stinking rich, and apparantly have no worries in the world. But millions of people live in the greatest uncertainty. What will tomorrow bring us? Will

my car be hijacked? Will I be robbed? Murderers, rapists and robbers hide around every corner. Will our country survive economically? Will all the corruption, state capture etc. not cause the total downfall of our country eventually? And what about global warming? We see how conditions worsen daily and how our beautiful earth is diminishing. The poles are already melting, and unprecedented droughts and floods plague the entire earth. We are destroying the world, and nobody seems to want to do anything about it. Is there still hope?

For anyone who does not share God's promises, there is no hope. If you do not have the Word of God as the basis for your life, the future looks bleak. But for me and you, for whom God gave faith, it is a very different picture. The Bible is full of wonderful promises we can keep. About these promises, the Hebrew writer writes: "There are these two things, then, that cannot change and about which God cannot lie. So we who have found safety with him are greatly encouraged to hold firmly to the hope

placed before us. We have this hope as an anchor for our lives.”

Yes, even if the worst happens, there is still hope. What may seem to us to be the end is only the beginning. Behind the "curtain" lies the beginning of an indescribable brand new life that we can only dream of. Revelation draws open the curtain, and it takes your breath away. Do you have hope? I sincerely hope so!

Prayer:

Lord, I cannot praise, thank and worship You enough for the wonderful anchor of hope that You have given me. Thank you for the glorious prospect of life hereafter for which we hope.

Melchizedek

Hebrews 7:1-28

Politics and Religion are two horses that definitely do not run side by side. When these two become mixed, there is great tension. Shortly before the 1994 election, our preacher introduced his sermon one morning by referring only to the political situation in the country. However, someone regarded it as politics, and stormed out of the church highly upset. If a preacher meddles with politics, his congregation soon shows him the door. You can't run these two things together.

There is a very good reason why politics and religion don't go together, politics is rarely played by Biblical rules. Now I don't only want to point finger at our own government, because this phenomenon is taking place around the world. In politics, this is only about self-interest. The politician, who does not fight his way up, gets nowhere, because it is only about the power of the individual. His party is only used in his own quest for power. It doesn't matter who suffers in the

process, as long as he can get to the top of the ladder. The politician who does not follow these principles is considered a weakling. Of course, apart from the individual efforts, there is also the great battle between parties, causing regular stone throwing.

What is Religion all about? First of all it's about God. He is of course the Alpha and Omega of Religion, and everything revolves around Him alone. There is only one law that applies here, the law of sacrificial love. In Religion there is no point in treading on someone's head to get somewhere, but selfless love for God and your fellow man is rather the norm. No wonder these two can't work together!

In the light of this, we read in Hebrews of the priestly king Melchizedek. In Genesis 14, the story pictures a war involving no less than nine kings. Abraham also lived in the war zone, but he was not interested in it at all. However, when his nephew Lot, who was living in Sodom at that time, was abducted, Abraham had to intervene and rescue Lot. At

night he attacked the ringleaders with his 300 slaves. Lot was rescued, together with a bunch of prisoners of war, including women and children. After this we read that the king of Salem, Melchizedek, brought food and wine to Abraham, and blessed him. Abraham gave a tenth of the loot to Melchizedek as a thanks offering. Melchizedek is described as priest of God Most High. His name is nowhere connected with the war. Furthermore, we know absolutely nothing about this remarkable king.

A moving piece of history! Suddenly there is a king who ruled according to God's interest. Absolutely unheard of! His name is remarkable. Melchizedek means "king of righteousness." But he was also king of Salem, which can be translated into "King of Peace". It is something every man strives for, justice and peace. And this we find in this priestly king, Melchizedek. He is seen as a shadow of Jesus, someone who would predict the true, eternal Priestly King, Jesus Christ. Was Salem perhaps the same place that later became Jerusalem? Jewish

tradition does believe so.

Politics has, over the centuries, run its own selfish path of power. However, justice and peace can only happen when Jesus Christ is the true king. In the church, therefore, there can be no question of the injustice and dissatisfaction you find in world politics. It is so sad that church politics is often accompanied by venom, injustice, dissatisfaction and even blundering and plotting. At many church council meetings, people attack each other with stones - stones of ugly, hard words that are meant to hurt. Jesus set the example, how to truly rule. The King of all times, was willing to serve rather than to give orders. He didn't sit down so others could wash His feet, but lowered himself to wash His disciples' dirty feet, certainly not a pleasant job! He did not sit in a palace and summon people to Him, but He personally went to the people on the street and in often barren places to proclaim the good news. No man was ever too lowly or sinful for Him, and He even treated the outcasts in society as kings.

To truly live out your Christianity means to follow Jesus' example. Indeed, you and I are God's children, prophets, priests, and kings. The question is, what do we do with these "titles" of us? do we use it selfishly like a politician, or do we use it as Jesus used it, to the glory of God and in the service of our fellow human beings?

Prayer:

Lord, I'm often guilty of selfishly seeking my own interest. Teach me to pursue Jesus' example.

Shadow Images

Hebrews 8:1-13

In my early days there were no such things as TV's and cell phones for entertainment. Our "wireless" worked from a car battery, and was only switched on for very special occasions, such as the news and "Die Du Plooy van Soetmelksvlei," because the battery soon became flat. What's more, the sound was horrible because it was short-wave, crackling, whistling and noisy. So in the evenings, we entertained ourselves by playing cards, making music and telling stories.

One of my great favourites was always making shadows. With a paraffin lamp or candle standing behind you as a light source, your hands make the most incredible figures on the wall. There were ostriches, snakes, horses and butterflies, dogs, cats, crocodiles and bulls. Just ordinary bulls, because those years there were no such things as Blue Bulls! I could entertain myself for hours with this fun game. Amazing what

wonderful images your hands can make! Sometimes it also happens that there is a moth or a praying mantis in front of the lamp, and then the most horrific images of giant dragons are projected against the wall.

The philosopher Plato, who lived about 400 years BC, told about people who were chained in a cave so they could just look in front of them. Behind them, a fire burned and all they could see in reality was the shadows that reflected on the wall. We are on earth like those cave dwellers. What happens in heaven we observe on earth as those shimmering shadow images.

The Hebrew author applies Plato's way of thinking as he speaks of things in heaven. In verse 5 he speaks of an "image and silhouette of the heavenly sanctuary", which gives us a glimpse of how heaven is. There is, however, another shadow image he refers to, namely the things in the Old Testament that were shadows of what would come in the New Testament.

In the first six verses, Jesus is described as

the High Priest in excellence. A high priest on earth may have enjoyed much prestige, but he was merely a shadow, considering that the prestige Jesus enjoys is immensely greater. After all, Jesus rules from heaven with the Father. He has the highest authority ever. The Levite high priests were just standing in God's presence, their sacrifice was never completed. But Jesus is sitting now because He has completed his offering once and for all. The earthly high priests received sacrifices and gifts from the people that they had to sacrifice once a year on the Day of Atonement. This is just a shimmering shadow of the great sacrifice that Jesus would bring. The high priests' sacrifices were human sacrifices, and it was only a poor attempt to reconcile sin. Jesus' sacrifice was a divine sacrifice that could finally contrive sin. The earthly high priests received gifts from the people because they were Levites, and the law required them to take care of the Levites. However, Jesus was not a Levite, and therefore he could not qualify to receive gifts. He had to be the sacrifice himself.

God made a covenant with His people in the Old Testament. A covenant is an agreement or contract between two parties, and in this case God was the one Party and the people the other. He would be a God to them, but they also had to bring their side and serve Him. This covenant had a weak spot – man – because time and again the people were guilty of breach of contract. They could not fulfill their part of the contract.

Jesus came to act as a mediator between the two parties. God sets up a brand new Covenant, and Jesus represents the people of God, thus negotiating much better conditions to put man's case to God. Now it is no longer necessary for the overseers and intermediaries (priests and scribes) of the old covenant, for Jesus is already the intermediary by choice. Of class differences, there is no question, as everyone is equal before the Lord. It is now not only the Jews who have access to God, but all nations. However, much more is contained in this contract: God is merciful about people's iniquities. In Hebrews 8:12, God promises: "I

will be gracious to their iniquities and never remember their sins." Isn't that wonderful? That terrible sin that you committed years ago, and which haunts you like a horrible nightmare - God doesn't even think about it any more, because He has totally forgiven you that sin! It is erased in His book!

The condition? Jesus is our Advocate with God. The only condition is to accept Him as an Advocate. You can trust Him to handle your case successfully.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord Jesus, that today I can testify that You are my Mediator, and that You will deal with my case. Thank you for already accomplishing my full release from my punishment.

Worthless Rituals

Hebrews 9:1-14

It was 1967 in Durban North's Dutch Reformed Church. We're busy with a serious choir practice, because the church choir will soon be giving a big performance, and everything needs to be perfect. We sing our hearts out, and our brilliant choirmaster gets excited. "Go on!" He shouts as he disappears from the choir gallery. "Bases, more volume!" He shouts from somewhere below the gallery. We give all we've got, and in heaven the angels clap their hands. Our choirmaster is a perfectionist! "Nooow!" I hear him roar from somewhere, and I give my best. But then I gasp. It's sacrilege! How dare he! I stop singing. On the pulpit of all places he stands and directs. No one dares to climb up there in the most holy of places besides the minister! I am totally shocked.

Practising your religion is a very dangerous practice. For example, to regard a certain place as "holy", such as the pulpit intended for the exclusive use of a minister, or to

declare the church building sacred. I remember a time when there were so many instructions about exactly how to dress etc. As a church council we were obliged to wear black suits and white ties. The women had to wear hats and the men sat steaming in their suits and ties. And the poor pastor was punished even more harshly having to wear a robe over his suit! Every Sunday! There was a specific ritual of worship that no one dared to change. When the vestry doors opened, the congregation stood up like one man and sang: "Lord Jesus, we are all together." Remember? Then there were the form prayers that the pastor had to read word-for-word during Communion. Someone once called it a "hypocrisy, amen" ritual. There was an inflexibility in the form and course of the worship service, and in this, people felt safe, because this was how you worshiped God.

Of course, there must be order in religion, but if it becomes so rigid that it determines your religion, or that it includes certain people and excludes others, it becomes dangerous.

Then it is about religion and not about the Gospel message. If you want to convey the Gospel purely and effectively, the form of the religious practice must adapt to the message, and not the other way around. Shape religion gives you a false security. I myself felt safe in the church for years because I made the right sounds and followed the right prescription. Until I found out one day that I was actually lost, right in the church! I was shocked!

We often practice form religion today. To soothe the conscience, you read a Bible verse at bedtime, often without realising what you are reading. The Lord speaks to us through His Word, and to deal with it in that way is a slap in His face! If you do not have the time to really listen to Him, rather leave it completely! Other examples are how we pray and why we give thanksgiving. It is often just to lull the conscience or to show others that we are doing the right thing.

One of the greatest problems of the Old Testament temple service was the over-emphasis of the outward form of worship.

The Hebrew writer describes here how things went, and you realize that every ritual is fine-tuned. With great charm, he describes the furniture in the temple, the lampstand, the table, and the sacrificial bread. In front of the covenant tent, only priests were allowed, where they represented the people. They also had to go through certain cleansing rituals before they could enter there. Then there was the most sacred behind the veil, where only the high priest could enter, for there God dwells. There was the ark of the covenant and other sacred objects, and there the high priest offered a sacrifice every year.

However, Jesus Christ came to serve as High Priest in the perfect heavenly covenant tent. For Him it was only necessary to enter the sanctuary once to bring an offering. His sacrifice was not the blood of calves, goats and bulls, but His own precious blood which He poured upon us as an eternal atoning sacrifice, so that sacrifices would never be needed again.

Of course, all the rituals served a purpose,

pointing to the great sacrifice that Jesus would bring. Today, ritual is totally unnecessary, unless it has to convey a specific message. When a ritual is performed, you also need to be extremely careful that you have the right attitude. Communion is such a "ritual" that it can be easily abused or used out of superstition. You can so easily think your sins have been cleansed because you use Communion. This is an illusion! Only the atoning blood of Jesus can free you from sin. Communion is a memorial to remind us of it. Indeed, your life is radically transformed the day you taste Jesus' atonement, and with total new eyes, you look at the rituals.

Prayer:

Thank you for your great sacrifice, Lord. Let me never forget this for one moment.

The Testament

Hebrews 9: 15-22

Old Uncle Gerald never had any descendants. Yes, he was in love once and even engaged, and then she ditched him for his best friend a week before the wedding. It was traumatic, so Uncle Gerald never married. And eccentric! In addition, stinking rich and as old as the mountains. And then everyone just sat waiting for him to die, because his business interests amounted to millions. And who knows, maybe a man can inherit something if you're friendly with Uncle Gerald!

His will was safe with his lawyer, and no one could ever get to lay eyes on it. No matter how people tried, his lips stayed sealed. And no one dared ask Uncle Gerald, because everyone was scared of the old man, while he secretly laughed at the treasure hunters behind their backs. It amused him greatly, because he knew that only his death could put his will into effect, and there were some very big surprises waiting on those who

wished him dead!

The two important elements in a will are that someone will inherit something, but that the testator must also die before the will can take effect.

God has written a Will that promises a breathtaking legacy. John 3:16 tells, among other things, what this testament entails. The nominees in the will receive the most wonderful heritage yet: eternal life! They will not be lost, and they will be free eternal destruction. But does that mean that God is dead? Because a will only come into effect at a person's death? Indeed no! But Jesus did die on the cross, and on that basis this will will came into effect. However, what makes it different from all other wills is the fact that Jesus was resurrected physically from the dead, and actively assisted in the execution of the provisions of the Testament. So Jesus is not only the Testator, but also the Executor as well as the Guarantee for the execution of the Testament.

When Uncle Gerald eventually died, the

hopefuls sat like flies around the lawyer to hear who would inherit his fortune. The lawyer looked at the long faces over his reading glasses, then solemnly announced that only the faithful servants who had looked after Uncle Gerald so lovingly inherited something. Furthermore, everything else is bequeathed to the childrens' home. A few men still wanted to protest, but the will was final and unchangeable. What is written is written!

Jesus' testament is also absolutely immutable. What is written is written! Now there are also voices of protest, because it is not fair that only someone who believes in Jesus would be saved. Even from the church today, we hear very learned people who want Muslims, Hindus, Harikrishna and Bhudhists to have the same claim to eternal life. In practice, this would mean that the entire Bible would have to be rewritten! It's totally impossible! God wrote His Testament, and it is final! Someone who does not meet the requirements of the Will may not participate in the benefits of the Will.

But there is a twist, call it a loophole. In Uncle Gerald's will, everything was finally lost to the hopefull. In Jesus' Testament, it works a little differently because no one ever needs to be excluded. Unlike any other will, there is a provision made in this one, that any person who does not comply with the provisions, no matter what faith you adhere to, can still share in the immeasurably rich treasure of that will. Yes, even outspoken Satanists have been part of Jesus' Testament. The key word is: Believe in Jesus! That's all!

What does it mean to believe in Him? Is faith in His existence enough? No, even the devil believes that Jesus is a reality, and he is lost. Faith means placing your full, unconditional trust alone on Him, in other words, a living relationship with Jesus.

Does this mean that you can believe in Jesus and at the same time, for example, adhere to Bhuddism? No, definitely not. When you put your faith in Jesus, there is no place for any other god. Then it means you have to abandon all other idiologies. In Exodus 20,

God makes it very clear that you may worship Him alone, and no other gods. But there is only one way to reach God: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life," Jesus said in John. 14: 6. "No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Are You a Beneficiary in Jesus' Testament?

Prayer:

Lord, there is such a multitude of people who have not yet participated in Your Testament. I pray that anyone who reads this letter, and is still seeking, will accept Your Word.

Self-Chastisement

Hebrews 9:23-28

Every year at Easter they are there, the people of South America who so faithfully do penance for their sins. They walk through the streets with long, sad faces, singing while whipping themselves until the blood flows freely out of their raw wounds. A few men even go as far as crucifying themselves. Nails are wedged through their hands, and then they hang on a wooden cross to pay for their sins. Dreadful!

In Pamplona in Spain, a completely different kind of self-chastisement is done each year, when hordes of men are chased by a herd of angry bulls. Often we see the men throwing themselves down before the bulls so the animals can trample them. Some deliberately run into the sharp horns of the bulls. Self-chastising, possibly to prove their masculinity? Or maybe because they feel guilty and want to pay for their sins? Many people are horribly injured during this absurd ritual.

Of course, you will agree with me that such self- chastisement and penance are totally unnecessary. With this, the Hindus who pierce themselves with hooks and nails through their skin will never earn eternity, and the Christians who torture themselves so dramatically during Easter even less so!

However, there are many more subtle ways of self-chastening that occur daily in the lives of many believers. An example: Perhaps I did a serious sin years ago. However, I asked the Lord forgiveness about sin, but now I feel guilty about it, and I remind myself continuously. I am fed by guilt and I can't escape it. I repeatedly ask the Lord to forgive me for it. The question is, how many times should I beg for forgiveness for a sin I have done? If I keep asking forgiveness, then I really want to say to the Lord that His forgiveness is not sufficient! Couldn't His precious blood cleanse me completely? I think you will agree with me that Jesus' forgiveness is complete.

We have such a wonderful privilege to live in

a very special time, the end time. This, incidentally, is the period between Jesus' birth and His return. Typically, we often try to compensate for our own weaknesses, by sticking to the past so much that we cannot live for Jesus in the present. In this passage, the author asks us to accept Jesus' one-off sacrifice. It is absolutely sufficient to give you eternal life.

In the Old Testament, it is described how the High Priest had to enter the Most Holy Place of the Temple every year on the Day of Atonement to bring sacrifices. A sacrificial animal was slaughtered and its blood served as a reconciliation of people's sins. For hundreds of years this was the case, exactly the same ritual every year.

Just think, if Jesus had to be crucified every year for our reconciliation for the past 2000 years, that would be an absurd thought! No, Jesus suffered and died only once, but also rose again from death. In this way, He has once and for all got rid of sin. The fact that people have to chastise themselves

repeatedly to fix their own bungling is over forever.

With the corrupt life we live, we are doomed to die once. This is the fate that hit all men! And then comes the judgment. No high priest can ever do enough for our reconciliation, even if he himself dies for us, because even he is corrupt and full of sin! Jesus, the sinless, however, was sacrificed only once, because He was perfect and could atone for all our sins. And now suddenly the judgment that would await us as believers after death is no longer there. In Hebrews 9:28, we read: **"In the same manner Christ also was offered in sacrifice once to take away the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are waiting for him."** Therefore, believers need not wait in fear and trembling for Jesus' return. He does not come to judge the believers but to carry them away in glory. However, for those who rejected Jesus' great sacrifice and gift of eternal life, it is a completely different matter. I'd rather not even think about their fate!

Romans 3:23 states: **"Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him."** Self-chastisement, in whatever form, is totally unnecessary, because Jesus' one-off sacrifice was enough. All He now asks of you is to believe in Him.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your Great Sacrifice. Please fill my life with gratitude!

Shadows on a Cave Wall

Hebrews 10: 1-18

In a line the group of tourists walks behind the guide in the cave. Stalagmites and stalactites appear in the most bizarre forms. Everything around us is a fairytale paradise. Then the guide stops and everyone bundles around him. The lights are switched off and suddenly it is frightening, pitch dark. He switched on a single light behind one of the formations: the shadow of a horrible dragon appeared against the opposite rock face. He switched off the light and another light took it's place. Now the shadow changes into a well-endowed Marilyn Monroe. The guide plays with the lights every time to form a totally different image of the same rock formation, followed by "Oeee's" and "Ahhh's" of a appreciative audience. After a fantasy flight of shadow silhouettes, the guide switches on the main lights again. I look at the stalagmite that was responsible for this wonderful show, but all I see is a formless, rough rock.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul also speaks of riddles and shadows, that we now see only a mysterious image in a dim mirror, but that we will see everything one day as it really is. Yes, we see many things today only as shadows, which are often far removed from reality. Wouldn't it be great if we could see everything for what it really was? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could suddenly clearly understand all the concerns and uncertainties? Wouldn't it be great to suddenly have clarity about the things our believers have been fighting for, for so many centuries? Oh, it's just a dream, but someday we'll know everything!

The law of Moses was one of those shadows, who originally had the very noble intention to point to Jesus and the great salvation that would come. Unfortunately, this law was hijacked by religious leaders who made the light so apparent that the once beautiful shadow turned into a drug image. A good example of this is what the Pharisees made of the law. The same law that had to serve as a guideline to serve God rightly and

love your fellow man, forged them into cruel chains that bind people and destroyed lives. Around the glorious, liberating Sabbath law, they instigated a multitude of laws to prevent someone from accidentally breaking the law, thereby violently restraining people. With that, the bright flame of faith was extinguished into a smoldering lamp!

Throughout the ages, sin has repeatedly tried to hijack the Gospel. Like the cruel crusades of the Middle Ages, where thousands of people were killed in the name of the Gospel. This is a blatant stain on the name of Christians! On the battlefield of church history there are numerous bodies littered, people who have often been killed completely innocently. And all this in the name of the Gospel. How terrible it is that something that was meant to save people, actually meant their downfall. Today, the tempers are still very high, precisely over the same subject. The gospel is at the center of a fierce battle within the church, where some scholars question the resurrection of Jesus, and everything that goes with it.

Everything is about sin. The Hebrew author in this pericope concludes his argument on sacrifices from the old dispensation and Jesus' sacrifice. It is not animal sacrifices, grain offerings, burnt offerings or sin offerings in which God is interested. We might add that today it is not the formal aspect of our baptism, communion, singing, worship or church ethos that pleases God. God is interested in obedience. In Hebrews 10:9, Jesus says that He came to do the will of God. This also implies that you and I must do the will of God in the light of Jesus. This is the "sacrifice" we must bring to Him. After all, believers are set apart for God by bringing the final sacrifice.

Old Testament sacrifices have been made over and over, and it never completely took away sins. If you and I have to repent daily for our sins so as to bring a modern sacrifice, it will still not be enough, because while we are still "sacrificing" we are again busy with the next sin. Jesus' single sacrifice swept away our sins once and for all.

So because we are now acquitted, we are no longer bound by legal rules. Does this mean we are totally lawless now? Certainly not! Instead of rigid rules that must be adhered to, the law now becomes a matter of the heart. Now it is no longer: "I must not kill", but "I love my neighbour".

Redemption also means that all the miserable things of my past have been completely forgotten, and that I start with a brand new, clean-cut page in my life. "I will never remember their sins and transgressions" (Heb. 10:17). What a wonderful thought. All the shadows of the past are gone!

Prayer: Lord, I cannot praise and thank You enough for the acquittal I have received so undeservedly!

To Be a Church

Hebrews 10:19-25

Clickety-clack disturbs the dead silence as she walks into the church. I stretch my neck to see who the culprit could be. She is wearing brand new high-heeled shoes that are clearly too big and a hat with plastic flowers. "Look in front of you!" Ma pumps me in the ribs. When she sits down, the pew creaks, and a few heads turn in her direction. Then silence, holy, tactile, uncomfortable silence. An old gentleman coughs, and the sound echoes through the church building.

At last, perfectly synchronized, exactly on the second 9 o'clock, the vestry doors open. The church bell rings twice, and the congregation stands up as one man as the elders and deacons enter stern-faced and take their stand in their reserved pews. "Lord Jesus, we are all gathered here in Your Name," everyone sings automatically when old aunt Anna Raubenheimer plays the organ with great zest. I marvel at all the elders and

deacons who are dressed exactly alike, black dress coats and white ties, just like a bunch of penguins!

Then follow the rituals of law and creed and rise and sit and rise and sit, and I never know when to keep my eyes closed and when to look. Sometimes I guess what the adults are doing, and then I do the same. I understand no head or tail of the sermon, because the pastor speaks in a dramatically raised voice, even when using understandable words. And when he says a word like "Mesophotaaaahmiah" he dramatises it so beautifully, it sounds so holy! The service is very long and the pew painfully hard and all the people so serious and unfriendly. I wish it was over!

Thank goodness, the old rigid ways are something of the past!

There has been a wonderful renewal in the church in recent years, and the stiff, unapproachable atmosphere has totally disappeared. It is almost symbolic of what happened in the very first church. The

ancient Jews worshipped only in the temple in Jerusalem. Only a few select people were allowed there. If you weren't a Jew then you certainly weren't welcome. Women and children had absolutely no status there, and they were not allowed into the temple either. They had to be content to progress to one of the outer courts.

Then the church of Christ was "born". Suddenly everyone has free access to the sanctuary, no matter who or what you are. And now you don't have to go to Jerusalem's temple anymore, but anywhere where people can get together is good enough, even under a tree.

The day when the veil in the temple was torn, the veil that devided God from the people was symbolically removed. Barely thirty years later, the entire temple was destroyed and levelled with the earth, never to be rebuilt.

The question is, what does church mean to us? First of all, the believers are the church, and not the grand building we like to call

church. Often people still try to sanctify that building, but the fact is that it is just a building. What is of the utmost importance is that the members of the congregation have to come together on a regular basis. "We should not stay away from the gathering of the congregation, as is customary," the Hebrew writer pleads. Many church members never ever come to a worship service. Were you part of the gathering of your congregation on Sunday?

Why is it so important to get involved in the regular congregation meetings? Why does the author ask members of the congregation to encourage each other to participate? Is it still relevant today in our modern society?

This is where your faith is strengthened in different ways. Baptism and Communion are tangible things that remind you of Jesus' salvation. During the proclamation of the Word you hear what God's will is for your life. Sometimes you need harsh words, at other times you find comfort and strength to face life again.

The gatherings also bring believers together to share their burdens with one another. By helping to bear one another's burdens, saying healing words, sharing one another's joy, drying tears, and taking hands, the Kingdom of God is built. Every congregation must be such a church where people can take hands, have compassion and share one another's suffering. The stiff atmosphere preceding the worship service of yesteryear made you think of a dead church where the church building is more important than people. Thank goodness for the opportunity created today for people to become involved, and to be such a truly living church.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you very much that I can be part of a congregation today that is alive and where people care for each other.

Once a Christian, Always a Christian?

Hebrews 10:26-31

There is a tense atmosphere in the camp of the freedom fighters. How did the government find out where they were hiding? Last night they were shot at, and had to flee for their lives. For hours already, the leaders are busy. However, things are slowly becoming clear. "Fernando!" The leader roars. Fernando shrinks. He jumps up and tries to run away because he knows he's guilty. But it's already too late. There has been something very suspicious about this man for a long time. Every so often he just disappeared. Now everyone knows: Fernando is a traitor! He is grabbed roughly. His anxious screams echoes when they kick and hit him. After all, he is responsible for the death of several of his companions during the previous night's skirmish! The firing-squad was waiting for him!

Terrible story! Horrible ending for a poor man! But this man knew exactly what he was doing when he betrayed his friends, his soulmates.

The ideology in which he believed, became worthless to him, and he threw it away to associate himself with the enemy.

In many cases it was a struggle for survival for the early church. Just look at how the Christians were uprooted by the cruel Nero. They had to make an underground existence to try and prevent someone from finding out that they were Christians. Secret signs, like the fish were used to recognize each other as fellow Christians. When someone from paganism comes to repentance, he is actually putting his own life at risk. Why did people face such dangers and oppression to accept the Christian faith? Oh, the benefits were of course infinite! Being a child of God means you are saved from the power of sin. It means eternal life and that you know Jesus. That means grace!

However, the day when a believer decides that he can no longer deal with this faith story, then it is a terrible decision to make. Suddenly he now becomes a danger to all the believers he has come to know, because

if he returns to paganism, the great enemy, then he has no choice but to prove his loyalty to them. Now he has become a traitor who can cause any believer's torture or death. It is against this background that we must read the passage in Hebrews 10. The congregation was dependent on each other for their survival, and any disloyalty was literally a matter of life and death. If we then read that disloyalty will be severely punished, then we must not be surprised, because disloyalty is a very serious matter.

But what does the author want to say to me and you today? He makes it very clear that a person who has deserted God will be severely punished by Him. "But it doesn't make sense!" You want to cry out, "God is gracious! Love! What happened to that?"

What does it mean to go astray? Sannie was a lost soul, trapped in the world's sins. One day she came to repentance powerfully. Her life is burning for Jesus, and she participates in all the church activities. One day she is disappointed when things don't happen the

way she wants them to. She is angry and remains away from church. Soon she came out less and less to the congregation, and eventually she fell into a life of sin again. If someone speaks to her about her faith, he is snubbed. Her confidence in Jesus is gone! She became a traitor who joined the enemy again. Impossible? No, definitely not! I've seen this happen many times.

What happens to such a person? I always thought that once you are a Christian, you will always be a Christian! So, what now? Be warned: you can lose your faith if you do not persevere. The Bible teaches us in very clear language that God is infinitely merciful and saves, but that the punishment for unbelief is terrible. "For sin pays its wage – death!" we read in Rom. 6:23. Matt. 25:41 describes the punishment as an eternal fire. "there he will cry and grind his teeth." Jesus says about hell in Matt. 25:30. This terrible judgment and punishment is not only for heathen and total unbelievers, but also for a believer who has drifted away from God, who has fallen into sin and has lost his faith and denied it. As it

happened to Judas Iscariot.

If it is you who you are reading of here today, I can also give you good news today: there is still grace time! "You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow." says Isa. 1:18. God will still save and forgive. God's grace is a thousand times greater than His punishment. Even David and Paul, both murderers, were completely forgiven. Even if you have totally strayed and denied Jesus, He still stands there and pleads with you to come back and become God's child again. Don't you want to say to Him today "Yes"?

Prayer:

Lord, I can easily fall into sin and lose you. Please give me perseverance to stand firm and hold your hand tight.

Rejoice in your Hardship!

Hebrews 10:32-39

The persecution of the Church of Christ began in earnest shortly after Pentecost. The church was still in it's infancy, and already the authorities were beginning to make plans to get rid of it. Your first reaction is, "It's all the devil's work!" Perhaps, but it was all part of God's wonderful decision! He allowed it for a great and wonderful reason. First of all, these things have joined the congregation in Jerusalem into a close unity, because each of these people had one common enemy: the Jewish authorities. Later, we see much larger, spectacular effects.

What is the believers' reaction when the Jewish Council threatens them? Do they say it's not worth carrying on, and then everybody goes his own way? Do they sit down and shudder with fear, and moan, "What will become of us?" No, it actually brings them together to pray for the matter.

Read Acts 4 where Luke tells how this

persecution does not discourage the young believers, but rather encourages them to seek the help of God in prayer. But take note what they ask, not that God must destroy their enemies, but that God will give them boldness so that they can proclaim the Word. They also ask the Lord to make them instruments of emphasizing His omnipotence through "wonders and miracles." This means extraordinary deeds that believers perform to reflect God's great power, and the response of the people who see these things happen. These wonders and miracles for which they are praying have nothing to do with human power or ingenuity, but happens only in the Name of Jesus Christ, the One who can let us see and experience God's great power.

But it's not just "wonders and miracles" that have great power. We should never underestimate the tremendous power of prayer. Prayer changes things! Those first Christians experienced this very clearly, when the place where they were gathered was shaken by the mighty presence of God. The believers are filled with the Spirit of God.

It was also the sign for them that their prayer had been answered, and that they had received the necessary heavenly equipment to continue doing God's work.

Luke says that these people are not going to hide from Herod & Co. now, but that they will do exactly the opposite, to boldly proclaim the Word of God.

Emergencies teach you to pray. Unfortunately, we often pray for the wrong reasons and for the wrong things when the emergency presses. "Save me, Lord!" Is our first reaction when things go tough. "Use me, Lord!" is what our reaction should rather be!

Suffering often makes you think innovatively, and problems turn into challenges. We experience it so often that someone who loses his job is forced to think out of the box. He started his own small business, and soon it developed into a thriving business. A teacher constrained from Religious teaching sacrificed her recess time to share the gospel with children. It was not long before there was a crowd of children who had never had

exposure to the Gospel, who gathered around her, hungry for the Word. Dozens of Bibles were snapped up by these children, and so the Gospel not only reached the children, but also their households. Suppression of the Word here has precisely resulted in the Word being spread.

Yes, the persecution of Christians in Israel at the time caused them to flee into the wide world for their lives. The direct result was that the Gospel spread throughout the world, because they carried it as far as they went.

Suffering also has a different effect on a believer: it makes you sensitive to other people who are suffering. I myself have been through deep waters for the past few years and everything that could go wrong, went wrong. But the Lord picked us up spiritually to reach new heights. He also used me to give new hope to many people who were discouraged, because I was there myself. Despite all my problems, I am bubbling with joy today. You can also be.

Don't let suffering get you down. Habakkuk

rejoices: "Even though the fig trees have no fruit and no grapes grow on the vines, even though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no corn, even though the sheep all die and the cattle stalls are empty, I will still be joyful and glad, because the LORD God is my saviour." (Hab. 3:17-18) Let us, through our own suffering, make this the jubilee in our hearts, and make joy our life philosophy.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, that You have also deemed me worthy to experience hardship for You. Please give a rejoicing heart to everyone who reads this devotional and is suffering.

What Is Faith?

Hebrews 11:1-40

"To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see." (Heb. 11: 1) Have I ever seen God? No, definitely not! Nevertheless, I am convinced with all my heart of God's existence. Why? The Word says so, and therefore I accept it. Even more, the Holy Spirit convinces me! However, belief is not enough to have true faith. The other important aspect is trust. If I only believe that God exists, it means nothing, the devil also believes God exists! To trust in Him alone is true faith. In other words, there must be an intimate, personal relationship with Him.

In Hebrews 11 we read the stories of religious heroes that illustrate how faith works. It tells how they experience their faith and it's consequences in their lives. This positive and extremely encouraging reading will make you look at the characters again with new eyes. The author mentions a long list of names, but we're just going to talk

about a few, pillars from history that symbolize faith.

Abraham is widely regarded as the father of faith. He is also someone with whom you can even identify today. He was a prosperous man, someone who had almost everything in life. The one thing that was lacking was a offspring. Never he could he taste the joy of cheerful childhood in his home, and that was one of his great desires, that one day a son would be able to continue the family name. Abraham was a true believer who worshipped God. However, he did not only pray, he cast his full confidence in God and stood in a personal relationship with Him. Then God made a promise to Abraham. He would have countless offspring. This was, humanly speaking, an impossible promise, for as everyone knows Abraham was very old and Sarah was barren. But Abraham trusted God. Sometimes his faith wavered a little, like the time he wanted to take God's promise in his own hands and he and Sarah decided to use her maid to bear him a descendant. This, however, was not what

God had in mind for Abraham, and eventually ended in tragedy. But when Abraham was 100 years old and his barren wife Sara 90, the Lord made the absolutely impossible possible and gave them a baby.

Still, this is not the end of Abraham's faith testimony, and a few years later he is commanded to sacrifice that only son of his. So strong is Abraham's trust in God, that he prepares to execute the command without asking questions. If God can give him a child in such impossible circumstances, then God is able to resurrect that child after he has been sacrificed.

The examples of Abraham's type of faith throughout the history of the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament, are numerous. However, the question comes to us this morning, because history was recorded with a purpose, so that you and I can learn from it. How about our faith today?

For some, the truths recorded in the Scripture are simply too far-fetched. They can't accept it. Many of the amazing miracles

we read of are dismissed as stories. Even Jesus' virgin birth, resurrection, and ascension are regarded as fictitious by some. The Word of God is watered down to merely "words of God". With such reasoning, I think they might have totally lost their faith.

Faith is to fully trust in God. It also means that I fully trust that His Word is true. But what does this trust in God mean? That everything will go well with me? No, but it does mean that God will hold me, no matter what happens to me. Even torture, poverty, bankruptcy or even death cannot separate me from God's grace. We must remember that our life on earth is only temporary, and that the real life lies ahead of us beyond the gates of death.

Abraham trusted in God's promises, and God was faithful to make it true. God has also given me and you promises, not of wealth, prosperity, or a good life, but of an indescribable new life in eternity. Trust in God, for He keeps His promises. Never let go of his hand, because the alternative is

dreadful.

God's promises, however, do not only have eternal value: here and now He is at some time there to comfort and carry you, even through the most difficult times and the darkest night. But as with Abraham, faith also implies that certain conditions must be fulfilled on my part.

Prayer:

Lord, thank that I can know that your promises are true. Please give me an unwavering trust in you.

Life's Marathon

Hebrews 12:1-3

It is bitterly cold in Pietermaritzburg when the rooster crows, the famous rooster that causes so much consternation once a year. The shot is fired, and the masses come into motion. The forerunners are leading within minutes. The majority is still milling around before they can move, because the crowd of participants in the Comrades marathon is overwhelming. When the forerunners sail across the finishing line in Durban, the rearguard still struggles to get away from Pietermaritzburg.

What makes the Comrades such an interesting race is not the foremost athletes who sweat blood for the winning place, but the ordinary people running in the bundle, and especially the rearguard who are fanatically trying to get to the finishing line in time. Watching the people who are persevering in spite of the murderous hills, cramps, total fatigue and sore feet is sometimes heartbreaking. To see some

athletes stumble into the arena with their last bit of energy, just to see that the winning line is still simply too far away. And when two equally exhausted fellow athletes lift up a poor comrade who collapsed with the finishing line in sight, and despite their own problems still carrying him to the finishing line, you can't stop the tears!

The religious life is also a race, often a Comrades-type race. For some it is very important to cross the finishing line with distinction, for others only to complete the race. Some give up halfway, and never reach the finishing line. Just like the Comrades, the race is not easy. It requires hours and weeks and months of preparation to enter. A new Christian does not just immediately partake in everything in the congregation! He first starts by learning what faith is about. Serious questions relating to religion can only be tackled when you are strong enough in the faith to handle it. First you start with the small, easy races to strengthen yourself for the big one. When you start running in that marathon of life, realize that there are many

setbacks waiting for you. You must be prepared for them, but you must realize that it is all part of the race. What are the Comrades without the murderous mountains? Similarly, there are murderous mountains on your path of faith - they must be there!

So don't be discouraged if you have difficult times in your life. Illness, financial setbacks, persecution about your faith, people standing in your way and preventing you from doing things - these are just mountains on the path of your life. In that light they are no longer an unbearable obstacle, but a challenge that awaits you to be overcome.

Picture this: A young athlete at the Comrades runs off at the starting point. Inside his backpack there is a bottle of wine, a nice big bluebull steak, a braai, charcoal, roaster and a cast iron pot for the pap. And now to create a nice atmosphere when he has a picnic halfway, his guitar. Laughable? Indeed! He'll never finish that Comrades! In the marathon of life it is just as difficult to participate if you

run with a lot of baggage. "So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way," says the Hebrew writer, "and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly." The less sin you carry with you, the easier the race becomes! It's just logical!

He also says that we must run the race with perseverance. If, after a few kilometers, a man says to himself that it is far too difficult, he will soon fall out. I know believers who have fallen down in life! Don't let that happen to you. Hold on and persevere!

But on your own it is totally impossible: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end." the Hebrew writer emphasizes. This is of the utmost importance. Yes, this is our great comfort in this race: Jesus is there to assist us from the beginning to the end. When we stumble, He is there to prevent us from falling, and when the hills are simply too steep, He is there to take us by the hand and pull us up. As long as we never lose sight of him, we will successfully complete the race.

Do you remember the song? Turn you eyes
upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face.
And the things on earth will grow strangely
dim in the light of His Glory and Grace.

Prayer:

Thank you for letting me participate in the
Lord's race. I realize that I have many
weaknesses, and so I ask that you please
hold my hand tightly so that I can complete
the race successfully.

God Disciplines Those Whom He Loves

Hebrews 12:4-13

A cane can be a scary tool. Of course, the fear it imprints on one depends largely on the person's hand and the mood of that person. I remember the scatter-brained science teacher's cane. It was generously used when we were cunningly making iron sulphite stink bombs in his class while he was trying to demonstrate an experiment. I never bent before him, because I utterly enjoyed science, but he had his regular clients! Our history teacher, however beat me regularly, believe me! His cane was poisonous! But he simply couldn't manage to drill history into me. For our headmaster we all had a holy fear, because first you stood on the proverbial red carpet, and then we were preached to long and hard before your hiding, which wasn't so bad, but that sermon! Mr. Fred Geyser had a leather strap, but it was just an aversion, because he rarely used it. He formed us through standard five with

words, and we had the greatest respect for him.

And so I was reprimanded right through matric. Of course, Dad also made his contribution at home. With great love! I rarely received a beating from him, but I remember every painful one of them like it happened yesterday. And I deserved each one well!

And then came my army days. Nine months of service was definitely not easy! As raw recruits, we are taught the basics of discipline in the hard way. If you make a mistake you have to run in the scorching sun to the furthest tree, and if you don't run fast enough, then you have to do it over. You don't ever make the same mistake twice! Later, when we were dealing with dangerous weapons, this discipline was already so drilled into us that you could handle the weapons safely. It certainly prevented many serious accidents.

What does discipline mean? It is a shaping process that is performed with love. A harsh killer is punished by the state with life

sentence. It's not discipline, because no discipline will get him on the right track! It is raw punishment! The purpose of discipline is to form the person physically and spiritually. A child who has learned an ugly habit is being reprimanded so that he can un-learn that habit. An athlete is constantly being disciplined by his coach: hours of sweat, torment and exhausting exercise in the gym and on the athletics track. An athlete without great ambition is practicing without much enthusiasm, but the one who has the ability and the desire to reach the highest sport is pushed to the limit.

Indeed, God does punish! His punishment for sin is hell, a horrible, frightening punishment. Jesus paid the full price for God's punishment by His sacrifice on the cross. So anyone who believes in Jesus is totally acquitted of God's punishment, but those who do not believe, who do not want to accept His gift of eternal life, must be content to endure God's punishment. So if you believe in Jesus, there is no such thing as punishment for you. But then God's discipline

comes into effect, not as punishment because you have sinned, but as an action of love to make you stronger in faith. Like an athlete, you are trained by your faith until you are unshakable. It is precisely those who have the greatest potential, who are reprimanded the most, because they can mean so much more to the Kingdom.

The Hebrew writer quotes from Proverbs 3: 11,12, saying that the day you experience God's chastisement, you should not be discouraged. Rather see it as God's great love for you, as He interferes with you only because you mean a lot to Him. Often sickness, pain or bankruptcy is needed to snatch a person out of a life of complacency, where God is no longer important to him, back to the things that really matter. Such things are usually very painful, but it forces you on your knees, back to God. Prosperity can be very dangerous, as it can make you so greedy and obsessive that you begin to forget about God. Often a financial disaster is the only thing that brings you back to God. When that happens, then you want to cry and

ask why God punishes you. Be sure taht it is not a punishment for sin you have done, it has long been forgiven and forgotten! It is God's love action to prevent you from losing your faith completely and entering eternal punishment. But it may also be that God wants to teach you to live in total dependence on Him.

So you are encouraged to walk the straight path, not to go astray from God's ways, and to keep your "limp hands and lame knees" strong, because if you stray it gets even worse! And be glad if you are being reprimanded, for it means that you are worthy of God! And the most wonderful of all: It means that God loves you!

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, that I am worthy to be reprimanded in Your eyes. Please give me gratitude and a happy heart when I suffer.

When God Speaks

Hebrews 12:14-29

Exodus 19 tells the story of a people who were in agony because they had a meeting with God. Moses led the "newborn" Jewish people to Mount Sinai. There he climbed the mountain alone and left the people below on God's command. God's command to him was that this mountain was holy in God's presence, and that no one but Moses could go up there, or even touch the foot of the mountain. The Lord was so serious about this, that anyone who violated it had to be killed immediately.

How scary! Maybe they were wondering what was so special about a mountain in the desert? It looked just like any other mountain! Moses gets a second command: the people had to wash themselves and put on clean clothes so they could symbolically stand chaste before God. What is waiting there for them? What Happens When You Meet Almighty God? In recent times they were prepared with God's presence in the cloud

and fire column as well as the staggering miracle at the Red Sea. But now they had to meet God face to face. And they were terribly scared because they had already experienced something of God's omnipotence!

At dawn, the Israelites are suddenly woken out of their sleep by the most terrible thunder, and a sharp, wailing sound like a trumpet that is getting louder and harder. When they storm out of their tents, they see that the mountain is covered by a cloud. Supernatural lightning flashes are everywhere. Frightened they see how smoke starts to bubble out everywhere from the mountain. The earth shakes, and it feels as if the end of the world has arrived. Meanwhile, that peculiar sound of the ram's horn is getting louder and louder. People tremble with fear. The next moment there was a blinding fire when God descended on the mountain. During this mighty spectacle of God's presence, He spoke to Moses, while the people were watching, shivering with fear. Even Moses, who met God many times, was frightened of

God.

Dare you and I appear today in our sinful condition before Almighty God and speak to Him? Thank goodness! Jesus came to change everything. Jesus enabled us to gain entry to the Almighty God, so that today we may stand in His presence without fear.

But the events at Sinai still have meaning for us. As the Israelites of ancient times had to purify themselves symbolically, so too does God want us to be cleansed and clean if we want a relationship with Him. "Strive for peace with all people as well as a holy life," is the pleading of the Hebrew writer. This request is a very big mouthful, because living in peace with my fellow-man involves a lot of things from my side. There cannot be true peace without love. To bring about peace demands from me very hard work, because it means that I have to hold myself deaf if someone says something bad to me, so that I don't get angry about it. I must answer an aggressive attack with love and tenderness. Of course, this also means that I will not say

anything that is harmful to anyone, because a sharp answer means that your intentions are not truly sincere. Making peace is definitely not for sissies!

Living holy is even more difficult! Holy means to be isolated for God, and to stay away from sin. Of course it is humanly impossible to do no sin, but your life must testify that you are trying.

For an individual it is a bitter struggle to fight alone against sin, and to try to preserve peace too. For that we need each other to talk and support each other, just like the Comrades athletes who carry each other over the finishing line. If someone stumbles, the other is there to help him. Within a congregation, space was created for people to support each other. Are you active in a congregation? If not, I plead with you this morning to join that support group where people care for each other because Jesus is in their hearts.

Indeed, we do not need to stand before God today in fear and trembling. Jesus is our

Mediator so that we can talk to God without fear. Yes, He is still the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, but Jesus became the Door to Him. Jesus did His part by giving everything to create that Communication channel. He even gave His own life and died a gruesome death on the cross for this! Will you and I not also do our part Him? Let's show with our lives that we really appreciate what He did for us.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for paving the way for me to speak to God today with confidence. Please help me to live a holy life.

Family

Hebrews 13:1-6

The saying goes that you can choose your friends, but you are saddled with your family! You can never get rid of them. The day you become a Christian believer, this proverb gets a twist, because suddenly all the other believers have become your family as well!

Yes, when the Nel family moved to sea, we also received unexpected family whom we never even knew about! But that's a very different story! One day a young couple came to us. "I am Oom Piet from Putsonderwater's cousin," the girl said, "Oom Piet said that you will not mind if we sleep over with you." What could one say? You can't turn the two away? And then they stayed with us for a whole week, and had a great holiday by the sea at our expense. Until today I do not know who they were!

Since then, many total strangers have entered the gates of the Nel family and found a place to sleep. One cannot refuse a group

of broke students who come to you asking for a place to sleep, even if it's just somewhere on the floor. And if, on top of that, they were getting a plate of hot food, perhaps the first in days, then their gratitude would not have any limits. Jim Reeves sang: "A stranger is just a friend you do not know." How right he was!

But hospitality has opened up a whole new meaning to me since a financial crisis hit us a few years ago. We also lost our house and had no money to rent another home. Two dear friends, Willem and Linda recognized our need. "You move in with us," we were heartily invited. Their granny flat was empty, and we could stay free of charge for as long as we needed. They never rented the flat out, but anyone in need would be housed there. However, this was much more than just a place to stay, because here we were bestowed with love and care during the year we stayed there.

The Hebrew writer names hospitality as one of the virtues of a believer. It has always been one of the characteristics of our older

generation. If you were stranded in the countryside, you were assured that the nearest farmer would give you a place to sleep and even provide a feast for you! Unfortunately, most of us are hiding behind high fences today, so that we exclude all strangers. No one outside our intimate circle of friends is trusted any more or invited into our homes. Even the pastor or elder is often viewed with distrust, and if they do come to visit, it is a formal affair, and you wish they should now go on their way so that you can continue with your life.

Our fellow believers are part of our spiritual family, that is relatives. No, but far-off cousins, but blood brothers and sisters. Seeing it in this light, there are some things that totally change our relationship with fellow believers. You react openly towards your brother or sister. They are not strangers. Similarly, you should react openly toward your brothers and sisters in Jesus. If your brother is in trouble, you will do anything to help him. Of course you will not leave him to his own folly! Even if he stumbled heavily

and collided with the law, you would still help him. After all, blood is thicker than water! Likewise, you will have empathy with a fellow believer who has landed in trouble. At the time this book was written, there were several believers in prison because of their beliefs. It is especially these people, who are also often tortured, that the author asks the readers not to forget.

Please remember, although we are children of God and our sins are forgiven, we are still just humans. No one can say that he goes through a single day without sinning in one way or another. Some believers are not as strong as others, and to stumble is merely human. So don't condemn a fellow believer if he has fallen. It can easily happen to you and me as well! Rather go to that person in love and help him again on his feet, without condemning, and lovingly, as you would with your own brother or sister. Tomorrow you may need exactly the same help from another believer, when you might stumble in a moment of weakness.

Jesus set us the example of how to go about with your fellow believers. He was never too tired to help someone in need. When the hungry crowd sat there on the shore of the lake, He gave them food. No one was ever beneath His dignity, not even the dissolute Samaritan woman. He made time to talk to her, not even thinking of his own reputation. He even had a feast with the hated tax collector and his horrible friends. Jesus truly cared! It should also be our pursuit.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me a true caring heart, and lots of practical love for my fellow believers.

Role Models

Hebrews 13:7-8

The four Gospels describe Jesus' life on earth, including the wonderful example He set for us. In all the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and others, we learn about the Christian life. They all give guidelines on how a believer should set up his life. But to me, one of the most striking aspects of the New Testament, are the interesting people you meet there, such as Paul, Peter, Timothy, Matthew, Philemon, John, Stephen, Lidia, Priscilla. What wonderful examples did these men and women not set for us! Yes, Paul wrote a lot, and his letters are extremely important to teach us what is right, but the example he set with his life is invaluable. The same goes for the others. The Hebrew writer would like to tell us that we must look at these people's lives and that we must strive to follow their examples.

For example, Paul was a hardened Pharisee, and this new “Christian sect” clashed with everything he had learned over the years.

And then he met Jesus on one of his cruel persecutions, on his way to Damascus, and he came vigorously to repentance. From then on, Paul cast all his forces into the battle to preach the gospel. Absolutely nothing dared to come in his way. For many years, he carried the Gospel to the heathen world, often under gruelling circumstances.

Opposition was a daily challenge to Paul, even from his own people, his fellow believers who were not satisfied with his methods. But the opposition he would get there in the unknown was unprecedented. It was especially the Jews who wanted to get rid of him at all cost. Many times he was chased from a city, thrown into jail, beaten and even stoned. At one such incident he was almost killed. But these things did not discourage Paul, but rather encouraged him to work even harder.

Despite all the hardships, Paul experienced life as a joyful song! When he and Silas, lay in the dark in the greatest pain from being whipped, did they feel sorry for themselves?

No, not Paul! They were lying down and singing, cheerful songs of praise to God. We never heard them blame God for what happened to them!

Later we see Paul in prison in Rome. He did not sit in despair, but grabbed the opportunity, and began writing letters to the many congregations he and his associates had established around the world. Never do we see a single complaint in these letters about his appalling circumstances, but joy that comes from this remarkable man. What a wonderful example for each of us to follow! How often do we not whine and complain about our circumstances. "May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again: rejoice!" Paul shouted as he sat in the most appalling circumstances. (Philippians 4:4)

Stephen is another wonderful example. As he was tortured and stoned by his own people, for the terrible "sin" of being a Christian, he prayed that the Lord should please forgive his murderers. How gripping! How forgiving

are you and I?

Peter is also one of my great New Testament role models. A simple, rough fisherman who decided to follow Jesus. Here is an example of an ordinary person like you and I, someone who, like us, riddled by sin. Peter had great ideals, but often everything crumbled to ashes. He saw himself as the one who would follow and protect Jesus until the bitter end, but when the maid asked him if he knew Jesus, all his courage disappeared! Peter was the one who unequivocally declares that Jesus was the Son of God, but later when Jesus asked him if he loves him, Peter burst into tears - his love fell so short!

Still, we see the same scared, illiterate Peter later, testifying intently to the highly educated, intimidating Jewish council, and even engaging them in their own field, and telling them exactly how very wrong they were. Peter no longer relied on his own strength, but on the Holy Spirit. For example, if I were to rely on my own strength for one

moment to write this devotional, I would fail dismally! We must, like Peter, learn to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us in life and gain our strength from Him. Then we will never need to be afraid to preach the Gospel, even if we are "illiterate". Let us learn today from Jesus as well as the great men and women of the past, and apply the wonderful examples they set to our own lives.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for such wonderful examples that Paul, Peter, and everyone else have set for us. Please teach me to follow their example.

Holy Communion

Hebrews 13:9-16

Today's subject is simple, or so it seems. We all know the customs around the Lord's Supper, and their meaning. Well, that's what we think, but it's not as simple as it seems to be. Why do we celebrate Holy Communion as we do it today, and from where does this practice originate?

There is the well-known story of the little girl standing and watching her mother cook a chicken. "Mom, why does you break off the wings?" She wanted to know. "Because Grandma taught me so," the mother replied. When she asked Grandma, the answer came again that she had learned this from her mother. Eventually, the girl gets the opportunity to ask Great-Grandma why she had taught Grandma and Mommy so. "No, my child," comes the shaky old voice, "those years we were poor and my pot was too small, so I had to break off the wings to fit the chicken in!"

I have always assumed that the Lord's Supper is celebrated today because the earliest church has done so. I was wrong!

We know, of course, that the Lord's Supper originated night before Jesus' crucifixion, when He and His twelve disciples ate the Passover meal. Several years later, we derive from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that the believers regularly held a communal meal, where members of the congregation brought their food and wine to the worship service to enjoy it together, and so to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It was not just a symbolic meal with a few loaves of bread and a few drops of wine, but a proper meal.

More than a thousand years had elapsed before the use of the Holy Communion had been reviewed again. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic church had the mass where a form of Holy Communion was involved daily. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 statements of reform against the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, things began to change, but the Holy Communion remained much the

same. Zwingli, another great Reformer, proposed major changes a few years later, and ultimately it was Calvin who set out a proper outline of supper usage. According to him, it had to be celebrated every week, because Word proclamation must be accompanied by communion celebrations. For practical reasons, the weekly celebration became monthly and then quarterly. Furthermore, the whole character of Holy Communion also changed over the years. What was originally a festive meal gradually changed into one of grief and sadness.

Even in our own South African history, the practices around Holy Communion have changed dramatically over the past 100 years. In my grandfather's time at Machadodorp, a supper lasted for two weeks, where farmers came from far and wide and camped out on the town square. There were catechism classes, weddings, church services and Holy Communion celebrations. Even when I was still a child, Holy Communion was still a very big event, which lasted a whole weekend with

preparation, reflection and thanksgiving services. Today, it has completely watered down, and we (in my opinion) make too little of it. The wonderful symbolism of Communion often passes us by, because for many people it has only become a necessary ritual, a piece of tradition for a mere moment in a worship service.

How we should celebrate Holy Communion is unfortunately not explained to us anywhere in the Bible. The Hebrew writer, however, explains to us some very important things about the Lord's Supper: During this event, we symbolically eat the body and blood of Jesus. But it is a very exclusive event which he says should be celebrated "outside the camp" (v 13). The intention here is that the Holy Communion is meant for believers only, and that an unbeliever may not have any part in it. A third thought the writer leaves with us is that with the Lord's Supper we bring to God a sacrifice of praise through Jesus by confessing His Name. By participating in the Lord's Supper, therefore, the believer also tells the world that we believe in Jesus'

atoning sacrifice.

What do you and I do with this meal of remembrance? Is this still a special joy to us in honor of Him? Or is it just a piece of incomprehensible tradition? And then I want to talk especially to the preachers specially this morning: what do you do to make the Holy Communion a special experience for your congregation? Please do not let this just be a formality that needs to be completed. Please make a special effort to make it a wonderful encounter with Jesus for your congregation.

Prayer:

Lord, so often Holy Communion passes me by so quickly. Help me to experience it again as something very special.

Intercession for the Pastor

Hebrews 13: 17-19

Why should I pray for my pastor? He lives so close to the Lord! Does he really need it? "Continue to pray for us," the Hebrew writer pleads with his readers. We are dealing here with a pastor who has progressed to the highest sport of spiritual life - he even had the unprecedented privilege of being a writer of one of the Bible books, the world's best-seller of all time. The series of sermons that we have worked through so far are, according to some standards, absolutely brilliant today. As far as the author's spiritual life is concerned, we can presume from what we have read, that he lived very close to God. Just having the privilege of being part of the Holy Spirit's special team of Bible writers already confirms how intensely he knew the Lord. His life was also an example of someone who lived clean and tried to stay away from sin. We see it in Hebrews 13:18, confirming: "We are convinced that our conscience is clean, because we are trying to

do what is right in every way."

Does a person of this stature ever need our prayers? Indeed! First, the devil certainly does not like anyone to preach the Gospel successfully, it robs him of followers. Someone who is really serious about the Lord often experiences the devil's attacks very intensely in his life. Just look at how the devil attacked Jesus at a time when He was very vulnerable, after forty days in the desert. He tried to deceive Jesus by offering him power and honour and, of course, food when He was ravenous with hunger. Of course, we know that Jesus never succumbed. Someone who spread a booklet around a few years ago to warn people of the devil's "temptation" of the devil, told me how the devil attacked him in every field. Apparently, he does not like the fact that his activities are being exposed! I don't think anyone with frivolous talk about the devil has to worry about the devil launching an attack on him!

Therefor the first reason why every preacher of the Gospel needs intercession is because

they are so vulnerable to the devil's attacks. They are selected targets. Each of them needs God's special protection. Please pray regularly for your pastor and everyone in your congregation who is willing to preach the gospel. Please pray for me too.

There are also other reasons why they need intercession. Proclaiming the Gospel is an extremely responsible task. If the Word reaches someone in a distorted manner, it can cause huge damage. The Word must therefore be preached at all times. Proclaiming a false doctrine is so easy, and a pastor must be wary of speaking according to the Scriptures. But it must also be done in such a way that it will touch the listeners' hearts. A boring sermon causes your mind to wander, therefore a pastor must think extremely creatively and use every possible option to inspire his listeners or readers with his sermon. It takes hard work, and he often has to work from dark morning to midnight. He therefore needs a lot of intercession and, at the same time, a lot of encouragement to persevere to give his absolute best week

after week. He never dares to relax.

It is also so easy for such a person to become discouraged when he does not see results, or to succumb to all kinds of temptations. Pastors are often also under great pressure in the congregation, through difficult members who are not satisfied with anything. I often had to see how pastors bend over backwards to try to accommodate everyone. Their profession has one of the highest stress levels. They are constantly targeted by members for various reasons, often totally unnecessary or innocently. Also for that reason, he needs every believer's intercession desperately. But not only prayer, even constant inspiration and encouragement. When last did you encourage your pastor? When last did you say to him, "Hold on, hang in there! Everything is worth it. We are praying for you." Pick up the phone and tell him now!

Maybe we should even go a step further: visit the pastor. Who of us ever bothers to go and visit him, just to give him some courage?

Remember, he is just an ordinary person like you and me, and he often wrestles with questions just like us. Perhaps, with a deep longing, he is looking for someone to listen to him, to lend an ear regarding the things that concern him. Perhaps he needs someone to just tell him there are people out there who care about him and that he is in their thoughts, people who dedicate him and his ministry to the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord, I pray this morning for everyone who has the courage to preach the gospel. Please hold them in Your great grace.

Benediction

Hebrews 13:20-25

At the beginning of the Hebrew letter we looked at the need for renewal. We also saw how much pain renewal can cause you, and how you sigh despondantly when getting rid of old baggage. Just think of the sadness when you suddenly realize that something sentimental with which you have lived your whole life, suddenly has been gotten rid of, because there isn't more room for it any more. Yes, I also cried for a long time about worthless things that only gave me sentiment, things that only I would appreciate, and not benefit anyone else.

But at the same time, I also experienced the wonderful liberation with the weight off my shoulders. Gone, so you can never get hold of it again. Sometimes I feel a bit sad about that, but the sudden freedom is wonderful!

Yes, we look back to the past with great nostalgia, as the "Good Old Times," when everything was so much better and more

beautiful than today. But we easily forget about the bad memories of the past, but at the same time we become agitated by the bad and negative things we are subjected to today. However, if we are going to set up a list, we will soon find out that the present, even after all the renewals, is not so bad at all.

If I think back to my "nostalgic" young days, then I would like to relive the excitement of being young, the mountains we climbed, all the nice things we did together. But then I shudder when I think back to my spiritual life! A life in which I was involved in the church, but never really knew the Jesus of the church. Now I may no longer have the excitement of being young, but the excitement Jesus gives me is ten times greater than I could ever experience in my early youth.

In the past few years new values have come into my life, and I thoroughly enjoy it. After going through a huge financial crisis a few years ago, the Lord opened up new doors to

me that offered me many opportunities to share the Gospel with people. This is often not an easy task, but I get consolation from the blessings in Hebrews 13: 20-21.

The first thing I see is that God gives peace. He already gave me peace about what I had to leave behind. And now he gives me peace for new challenges that sometimes rest on my shoulders, challenges that are often too big for me.

The second wonderful thing I read here is that I am not alone in the task, because Jesus is there for me, right beside me. He LIVES! Not only was He brought back from death (v. 20), but He is also the great Shepherd of His flock. Who is the flock? You and I, the believers. I know that this Shepherd will lead me on the right path to where He knows the best pasture.

See, already this renewal in my life has made a tremendous shift in emphasis: From where I myself was “king,” often with tragic consequences, to one where I am led by the Shepherd, and where I am safe in His flock.

However, these blessings do not stop there: I also read that God gives me the necessary equipment for the task (v. 21). The Hebrew writer assures me that Jesus equips me with everything that is good so that I can do His will. Is it not wonderful! Yes, of course, I have a responsibility to myself to equip myself. I can't just sit back and say, "But God will equip me!" I have to look for his equipment and make it my own. But the fact is, I have the very best pastor you can get.

The question is, what does this equipment entail? Where does it eventually lead to? The answer is quite simple, that we can be acceptable to God at the end of the day. Not according to human standards, but according to God's standards. So I have to seize every opportunity where I can to grow spiritually, Bible school, cell groups, etc.

My prayer for you, at the end of the Hebrew letter, is also what the writer is praying for his readers, that you will equip yourself with the One who knows everything about equipment. That you will leave the past and will strive to

be made acceptable to God. Remember, it is not about ourselves, but about Him alone, for "To Him be the glory for ever and ever" (v. 21).

The author concludes with the most wonderful word of comfort of all time: "The grace of God will be with you all!" May you experience the grace of God in a very touching way today.

Prayer:

Lord, I pray this morning that Your wonderful grace and peace will rest on every one who reads this devotional.

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