

Nights of Old

1. The night angels climbed a ladder

Imagine a lonely stretch of desert with bare wastes of sand and occasional tufts of grass. As the sun goes down, it sets on a weary traveller. If he's dragging his feet through tiredness, chances are he's also throwing the occasional glance over his shoulder - as if to see if anyone is following him. Why? Well, here's a man with sin on his conscience, for he's cheated his old father and defrauded his brother out of a blessing and now he's on the run. Sin always drives us out. It drove our first parents out of the Garden of Eden.

Jacob, the solitary traveller, stopped for the night, thinking he'd put enough distance between himself and home for one day. He found a stone to use as a pillow, and, lying down he sank into sleep. But as he slept ...

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying ... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel ... Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." (Genesis 28:12-22 NIV)

Was that the first recorded vow by any human in all history? Jacob says that if God would be with him and keep him safe and bring him back to his father's house in peace, then he'd honour the Lord as his God with any wealth entrusted to him.

How could Jacob ever forget the night he'd dreamed this dream: the night when God had made his presence known to him in this place? Jacob marked the place out by turning his stone pillow into a pillar. Surely he must have

intended to revisit this place where God had made his presence known to him in this special way by night.

Then he was off eastward again. Down in Mesopotamia, in the employ of his mother's brother, Jacob prospered, accumulating not only a family but numerous flocks and herds. He'd become rich and successful. He'd gained so much, but I wonder if he'd lost the vision of heavenly things?

Then, one day, in the midst of his prosperity God spoke to him in Mesopotamia and told him to go back to his own country, making a special point of reminding him that he was the God of Bethel, the place where he had set up his pillow for a pillar and vowed his vow (Genesis 31:13). Jacob then set out for his native land. On the homeward journey, he was once again overcome with fear - not so much the fear of what he was running away from this time – but even more afraid of what he was heading towards. After all, he'd heard that Esau, the brother he'd cheated, was coming to meet him with four hundred men! This homeward journey was to be another journey punctuated by a strange experience at night. For:

That night ... a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man ... The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God ... (Genesis 32:22-28 NIV)

Maybe this night-time adventure was intended to give Jacob food for thought - all through his life he seemed to have been struggling to get for himself the blessings which God had promised to give him anyway. It's also true for us that the blessings of the Christian life are found when we let go of our own efforts and lay hold on God alone. Maybe you're struggling with the issue of handing your life over to Christ? Perhaps you're wrestling with the demands of discipleship and the claims of Christ? Then God's word to you is just to yield to him – God made the point more forcibly with Jacob by crippling his natural strength and vigour. When Jacob got back to his own country, he was surely now a man who relied more on God and not his own strength in fighting for himself. He made his peace with Esau, his brother, and then turned to the south and settled down in a place called Shechem. But, we read that during all that time there were those in his household who must have been practising idolatry.

The years passed. If his conscience hurt him about the idols in his household, perhaps he excused himself by saying, "Times are different now". It'd been many years since the time God had appeared to Jacob at Bethel and since he'd made his vow. Then one day: *God said to Jacob, "Go up to Bethel and*

settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves ... Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." (Gen 35:1-3 NIV)

I wonder if Jacob had said to himself. "Bethel, that's where I dreamt about the angels! - that's where I experienced the presence of God! Bethel, that's where I made my vow!" It seems clear that Jacob knew he was now a long way from Bethel, not only in geographical location but also in spirit. His mind seems to have turned immediately to those shameful idols. How could he go to Bethel? He knew that idols and Bethel had nothing in common.

But this was God's gracious call to go back. We can only imagine Jacob's thoughts and recollections as his mind raced back through the years and he saw himself again as the lonely frightened youngster fleeing from the anger of his brother, Esau. Was it hard for him to find the place he'd marked out, where he'd dreamt that night long ago? There are some places you never forget.

So Jacob worshiped God at Bethel, and God appeared to him again. Did Jacob think to himself: 'I always intended to get back here. I don't know why it's taken me so long!'

Maybe it makes you think of some who've wandered away from close friendship with God, from some conviction or vision of heavenly things, perhaps even a vow or commitment they made with themselves and with God. Their spiritual interest has been submerged – perhaps by worldly pleasures – but it's still there below the surface of their life, like the fabled submerged city of Atlantis.

Did you know England has its very own Atlantis? It's a village called Mardale. Long ago it became submerged under the surface of Haweswater. The year 2003 was one of the driest years on record in the United Kingdom, during which the long-lost walls from the submerged village of Mardale reappeared and even began to dry off in the autumn sun. Some parts of the outskirts of the village poked above the waters of Haweswater reservoir for the first time since the drought year of 1995.

Our spiritual life with God can become like that – it can get submerged, covered with the temporary currents of this world. But deep down the interest is still there, and it shows itself now and again. For some people, spiritual interest is rekindled at a mother's deathbed, in some moment of awakening conscience, in the hour of distress or danger, or deliverance from illness or death.

It's easy to vow and promise to serve the Lord – but sadly just as easy to walk away from it. There are plenty of people today who would hardly be recognized as the same people their friends saw ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. The ladder and the angels have faded away from view.

The world will never tell you to go back, for the world's business is to keep you as far as possible from Bethel and to drown out any spiritual interest. No, if you're going to get back to God, God must first of all speak to you. But perhaps today he is. Perhaps through this booklet God's asking you to come back to himself, and to live up to your earlier commitments – to serve him once again at your highest level of commitment. Are you, like Jacob, willing to put away all that hinders, and get right back there?

2. The Night when death stalked the land

Some of the greatest events in the history of the Bible took place at night. In this chapter we'll look at one I'm calling the night when death stalked the land. It was a night that would open a new chapter in God's dealings with the world. Its setting is the ancient land of Egypt.

At the time in history when this story is set, terrible plagues have recently troubled the land of Egypt - hailstones have beaten down its harvests; frogs have come out from its waters into its houses; diseases have smitten its cattle and its inhabitants; blood has reddened its water supply; locusts have clouded out the sun; there has also been a thick darkness of a kind that could be felt.

Why has all this happened? Pharaoh, the king of all Egypt, has been refusing to release his Israelite slaves. The God of the Israelites has been behind those plagues. Now, once again – but for the last time – Pharaoh's just broken his promise to let the Israelites go free. He's ordered Moses, the leader of the Israelite slaves to get out of his palace. But the same Moses now has an audience with someone infinitely greater than the Pharaoh of Egypt. The Bible next records the words of the Lord God to Moses:

Now the LORD said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely... "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt-- worse than there has ever been or ever will be again ... Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household.

The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs ...

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn-- both men and animals - and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt ...

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go ... as you have requested. (Exodus 11:1-12:31 NIV)

Just imagine an Israelite child that night in one of the homes in Egypt. He's asking his dad why the little lamb has got to be killed. "Because God has said so," his father replies. "But dad, it's not fair – it's so innocent! For the past four days I've enjoyed having it as a pet. Why can't we keep it?" "Because," his dad replies slowly, "if I don't sacrifice this lamb, you won't still be alive tomorrow morning."

Fourteen centuries later, when Jesus Christ was on earth, Jews were still commemorating this historic deliverance - as they'd done down through the centuries. God had asked them to remember that night in Egypt when he'd smitten the firstborn males of Egypt, but delivered his people wherever the blood was sprinkled on the door-frames. In God's timetable, arranged in advance, Jesus was set to die at the time of the annual Passover commemoration. That was no coincidence, of course. For Christ bore our sins upon the cross and died for us so that by his death we may live. Why did he, an innocent – a sinless – man have to die? The Bible tells us that if he'd not been sacrificed as the Lamb of God, we'd all face God's judgement upon us as sinners – sinners who deserve the fate described by the Bible as 'the second death' – which is to be removed from a sense of well-being, and from God, for ever and ever.

The meaning of the cross where Jesus died is at the heart of the Gospel, God's Good News for the world. John the Baptist said that Jesus Christ was *the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). Paul said that *Christ our Passover* is sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7), and Isaiah added that *he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and by His stripes we are healed* (Isaiah 53:5). There's power in this glorious Good News when a person realizes and confesses: 'Christ died for me, died as my substitute'. Paul said that it was this truth, that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3), that he delivered first of all whenever he preached. Yes, Christ did die for us.

During the last year of the American Civil War, a man paid a visit to the battlefield of Chickamauga, where, on September 19 and 20, in the year of 1863, the army under Rosecrans was almost destroyed and was driven back into Chattanooga by the Confederate army under General Bragg. The

battlefield was not then, as it is now, a beautiful place with stately monuments rising among the trees, but at the time when the man visited it, it still bore the scars of battle and was furrowed with recent graves. Over one of these new-made graves the visitor saw someone on his knees planting flowers. Walking over toward him he asked compassionately, "Is it a son who is buried there?" "No," the man answered. "An uncle, then, I suppose, or perhaps: a brother? Some relation at least?" "No," the man once again replied. The visitor then said, "May I ask, then, whose memory it is that you cherish and honour?" The man explained the reason he was there was to decorate that grave. He'd been drafted into the Confederate army. There seemed to be no substitute to take his place as the custom then allowed. But then just before he was to say good-bye to his wife and his family and report to the training camp, a young man came to see him and said, "You have a wife and a family depending upon you. When you are gone, you cannot support them, but I am unmarried and have no one depending upon me. Let me go in your place." The offer was accepted and the young man went off in his place to the training camp. At the battle of Chickamauga he was mortally wounded. The news of his death drifted back to the southern home of the man whose place he'd taken. As soon as he could save up enough money he travelled to Chickamauga and, after a search, had found the grave of his friend with its primitive marker. The visitor was touched by this story, and later when he passed the same grave again, he noticed this time that it was now well covered with flowers. He also noticed that on a rough board at the head of the grave were cut these four words: "He died for me."

Those same four words sound out all the power and the glory of the Christian faith - "He - that's Jesus - died for me."

It's said that the German artist, Sternberg, once met a little gypsy girl on the street, and being struck with her charm and beauty, he asked her to go with him to his studio so that he could paint her picture. As she was sitting for him, she noticed on the wall of the studio a portrait of Christ on the cross which Sternberg had only half-finished. The ignorant gypsy girl asked who it was. When she was told it was a painting of Jesus Christ on the cross, she said: "He must have been a very wicked man to have been nailed to a cross." The artist said: 'Oh no' - on the contrary Christ was the best man who ever lived and he died on the cross that others might live. "Did he die for you?" asked the simple and innocent child. That question touched the heart and the conscience of the artist who wasn't a Christian. "Did he die for you?" The question haunted him day and night, reminding him that Christ had died for him. Finally, he did come to accept the sacrifice of Christ on the cross had been for himself, and so he became a Christian.

So that's the question I want to leave with you: "Did he die for you?" - "Did Jesus die for you?"

Let's go back one last time in thought to that night when death stalked the land of Egypt: to that momentous night when we imagined an Israelite child asking his dad why the little lamb had got to be killed. "Because God has said so," his father had replied. Remember the protest? "But dad, it's not fair - the lamb's so innocent! For the past four days I've enjoyed having it as a pet. Why can't we keep it?" "Because," his dad had slowly replied, "if I don't sacrifice this lamb, you won't still be alive tomorrow morning."

Have you, by faith, taken your stand behind the protecting blood of Jesus Christ? – as Israelite children once took their stand behind blood-stained doors on that night long ago? Are you absolutely sure that God's judgement will not fall on you, but will pass over you too? Please don't head out carelessly into a lost eternity. Turn, and find shelter in the blood of Christ. He did die for you.

3. The night the dead preacher spoke again

The outcome of any battle is fully known with hindsight, of course. Hindsight allows us to see what ought to have been obvious before, but wasn't.

Our Search For Truth Mailing Centre operates from an address in Bolton, England. Hundreds of men from the town of Bolton became casualties of the Second Battle of Passchendaele during the First World War. Very few of them were professional soldiers. Mill workers and shop assistants, clerks and railwaymen, left the same streets where we in the Mailing Centre now live. They left them to go to fight for their country. All those years ago, few could have then imagined the horrors that awaited them in the blood-soaked morass of the Western Front. Many would never return. By early 1917, the Battalions of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment were ready, and on the morning of October 26, 1917, the two Bolton battalions were occupying front line trench positions in Belgium, ready to try to capture German positions that'd hardly moved for years. Nothing could have prepared them for the next few hours. Tired, wet, hungry and standing in a line of shell holes with mud like quicksand often up to their waists, they waited. When the whistles blew, they advanced slowly and steadily towards the German lines and the withering gunfire that came from them. As many drowned in the liquid mud as were killed outright by the gunfire. The battle was a complete failure, and by evening the remains of the Bolton battalions were withdrawn. Hundreds of Bolton men had trained bravely for three years for that day, and saw their lives and hopes shattered in only a few short minutes. Histories of the battle never mention this sacrifice - the blackest day in Bolton's history during the Great War. With hindsight, there could've been only one outcome to that pointless and costly battle.

It's the night before another battle that we turn to now - another battle that was also a foregone conclusion – declared to be such before it even began. Not hindsight, but God-given insight declared the result of this battle to be a foregone conclusion.

How the verdict came to be communicated was as the result of a man visiting a woman by night. The woman was a witch, and her visitor was none too ordinary a man either, as we'll see. Far off in the distant valley lay the camp of the enemy army of the Philistines. Here on this side of the mountain is a witch, a woman with a 'familiar spirit' who claims to have power over the unseen world. Suddenly, as we've said, there arrives at the entrance of her home - which likely was a cave - a man of great stature accompanied by two other men, all of them in complete disguise. The cautious witch reminds her visitors

of the royal commandment against the trade of the soothsayer and the death penalty upon those who invoke the dead. But the tall stranger guarantees her protection and safety. Then the woman asks, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" Her visitor, who is the disguised king of Israel, Saul, answers, "Bring up Samuel for me." The witch, we imagine, went through her ritual, and then to her amazement and terror Samuel really did appear. The woman then knew that her client was none other than King Saul himself. The king, who apparently at first either didn't see Samuel or at least didn't recognize him ... *said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming up out of the ground." "What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down.* (1 Samuel 28:13-14 NIV)

The last time Samuel and Saul had met hadn't been a happy occasion. It had been the time when Saul had disobeyed God by not completely destroying the army of the Amalekites. When confronted by Samuel at that time, *Saul [had] replied, "I have sinned. But please honour me ... So Samuel went back with Saul ... Then Samuel left for Ramah ... Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again.* (1 Samuel 15:30-35 NIV)

Saul had never again had another interview with Samuel while he was alive; now he was attempting to interview him after his death. Consulting mediums is something God has outlawed in the Bible. God has pronounced himself against it in the strongest possible terms. As a result Saul himself had banned the practice. But that seems to have driven the witches - quite literally - underground. Saul is now a desperate, doomed man, and deliberately does what he knows to be wrong. He'll stop at nothing, he feels he's nothing to lose since God has abandoned him.

To the prostrate king Samuel said sternly, *"Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" "I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what he predicted through me ... The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines."* (1 Samuel 28:15-19 NIV)

In the battle which was fought the next day on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, Israel really was defeated – as Samuel had said - and Saul's army fled. But Saul fought on with his old-time courage until he was seriously wounded by the Philistine archers. When his three sons had fallen dead at his side, then Saul, seeing that he had lost his kingdom and had lost his sons and had nothing further to live for, took a sword and fell on it.

There was never a night in all the Bible that more dramatically testifies to the influence of a good man than the night preceding that battle, the night Saul had requested an audience with Samuel. Saul hadn't asked for Moses, the great leader of the people; nor for Joshua, the famous captain of the host; nor for Gideon, who'd put the Midianites to flight. No, none of those great heroes of the past, but someone Saul had personally known and trusted, "Bring up Samuel for me!" The same Samuel who'd anointed him as king and wept over his failures. Yes, failures: for Saul's life illustrates the truth that great gifts can be wasted. How bright and promising was the morning of Saul's life, "the spring of the day" as the chronicler so beautifully puts it! Now he was bowing out in a dirty sunset.

When Samuel had departed from Saul all those years previously, the last terrible chapter of Saul's life had begun. There's possibly nothing quite like it, I think, in all human biography. Saul's like a man struggling in a vortex. He's like one of those heroes of Greek tragedy, battling with fate. He burns out like a volcano. What tragedy we find in Saul's jealousy, suspicion, insane anger, cruelty, murder, solitude, and remorse! Finally, consulting a witch and through her asking for the presence and counsel and prayers of one of the godliest men of the Bible. Such was the chaos of Saul's 'final chapter'. Time and time again Saul resisted and rejected not just Samuel but the Holy Spirit as he spoke to him through Samuel. When Saul called upon God in his distress God didn't answer him. Can we too get to a place from where God doesn't answer us? From more Bible evidence than Saul's life alone, we'd have to conclude that the answer to that is 'yes'. Saul made the mistake, foolish and pathetic though it was, of thinking that Samuel could help him when God would not help him. But the night the dead preacher spoke again, Saul knew his fate.

The Bible speaks of those who, *although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God ... Professing to be wise, they became fools, Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness ... God gave them up to vile passions ... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting* (v.21-28 NKJ)

I trust you are not in that category, and so I appeal to you by God's grace. Earlier we were thinking about battles that were foregone conclusions, let me mention yet another. The forces of evil on this planet will one day soon be headed up by the Antichrist who opposes all that God stands for. But when the showdown comes with Christ's return to this earth, the battle will be over as soon as it's begun. Paul says:

The secret power of lawlessness is already at work ... And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will ... destroy by the splendour of his coming. (2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 NIV)

Do you know whose side you're on? Believers on the Lord Jesus will be removed from the earth before that final battle even takes place. But, may I ask again? Are you on the Lord's side, through trusting in Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour? Remembering again those brave soldiers who trained for years for a battle that was over in minutes, let me say this: all life-long we have opportunity to prepare for the moment we meet the Lord, whether as our Saviour or Judge. We won't be kept in suspense then for the outcome. It won't take long. It, too, is a foregone conclusion:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:17-18 NIV)

4. The Night when the writing was on the wall

The Battle of the Nile was one of the most decisive naval battles ever to have been played out. In one night it altered the course of world history, denying Napoleon his Eastern Empire, and crippling him at sea.

Even before Napoleon's conquest of Egypt had begun, British intelligence had discovered his intentions and sent Admiral Nelson off to frustrate them. He joined battle with the French when he learned of their presence up the coast from Alexandria. The custom of the day discouraged naval battle at night, but that was only the first of the surprises Nelson had in store for the French. British ships edged between the shore and where the French fleet were moored. The French had believed they were safe from attack from that side, and had moved all their cannons to face the open sea. Within 20 minutes, the three leading French ships had been silenced. By 8 p.m. the first five ships had surrendered. At the height of the battle, some 2,000 guns roared. Nelson himself was struck by flying debris, and a flap of skin was torn from his head, falling over his one good eye. Temporarily blinded, he was led below under the impression he was dying. He nonetheless refused treatment ahead of his men, and insisted on waiting his turn.

Shortly before ten that night, an unprecedented event took place, one which Nelson insisted on being led up on deck to watch. Napoleon's flagship, The Orient, had been mercilessly attacked, and by 9 o'clock she was seen to be on fire. Poorly disciplined sailors had left buckets of tar and paint lying on deck, and these were now ablaze. Soon it was obvious that her vast stores of gunpowder would detonate. When The Orient did blow, the sound was heard 32 kilometres away, and the glow was seen in Alexandria. It was an explosion rarely seen in these days before weapons of mass destruction. For some twenty minutes, the stunned ships stopped fighting, horrified at the carnage that'd just taken place. The British sent a ship to rescue the French sailors, then fighting recommenced and continued till dawn. As a result of that sea-battle at night, the French were cut off in Egypt, unable to resupply themselves or to leave. Napoleon's dreams of conquering India were shattered. But it was not the first time that a battle and an empire were lost by night. With the help of the Bible, I want to take you back to the last hours of the once great Babylonian empire ...

Night is falling over the great capital of Babylon, with its buildings and towers and the Euphrates flowing through it. Here are the Hanging Gardens, built by Nebuchadnezzar for his bride, homesick on the flat Mesopotamian plains for

the mountains of her native land. This is not just any night, for on this night there's to be a great banquet for Belshazzar and a thousand of his lords and nobles, their ladies, and his wives and concubines. Imagine a banquet hall in keeping with the splendour of a world empire.

With the guests all seated, and the banquet underway, Belshazzar decides to startle his guests with an unheard-of performance:
he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way ... Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled." (Daniel 5:2-9 NIV)

What a grand defiance! What a royal joke, to drink to the health of the heathen gods - the gods of silver, gold, iron, brass, wood, and stone - with the vessels dedicated to the worship of the most high God! Where was the God of the Hebrews? He was nearer than anyone thought – as suddenly, over against the lamp stand, illuminated clearly by its light, the king saw to his horror the fingers of a man's hand writing on the wall. The king's face then drained of all colour and his knees began to knock.

Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin! Those were the words the fingers left behind on the wall, but no one could read them. The writing was there, plain upon the wall, but it was too much for the wisdom and superstition of Babylon. Then the queen remembered the old Hebrew statesman who had served under Nebuchadnezzar. The queen was not present at the banquet, for it was hardly a fit place for her. But when the news was brought to her of what'd happened, she came in and told the king about Daniel, who was able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. The king then gave an order that Daniel should be brought in, and soon an old man made his appearance. What a contrast between this Hebrew statesman and prophet and Belshazzar and his revellers! As Daniel stood there, I imagine his strong God-fearing countenance with its white locks surveying this spectacle of debauchery - and recent hilarity - but now frozen in terror and dismay!

Daniel was candid as he gave the interpretation of the writing on the wall:

"O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour ... But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory ... "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. "This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. This is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres [Parsin]: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." ... That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two. (Daniel 5:18-31 NIV)

Belshazzar is an example of a man who refused to be taught and would not be warned. In that brief and powerful sermon, Daniel reminded the king of the pride and blasphemy of his predecessor upon the throne, Nebuchadnezzar, and how God had dealt with it. Yet, unwarned by that, Belshazzar had gone one worse than Nebuchadnezzar and had exalted himself to a climax of infamy and blasphemy by drinking wine out of the cups from the Jerusalem Temple. Neither Belshazzar nor anyone else goes to his doom unwarned.

Belshazzar suddenly, on that night, saw a hand writing on the wall. It was writing his judgment and doom, the last chapter in his history. Nothing could now be changed, nothing altered. Weighed in the balance of his wives and concubines and the thousand revellers at his banquet that night, Belshazzar was not found wanting. His guests had surely been enjoying the grandeur and the debauchery of it all, for as Jesus said: people 'love the darkness'. But it's not the judgment and balance of this world that counts, but God's judgment and God's balance. Weighed in that balance, Belshazzar was found wanting.

What if the hand should now appear and write upon the wall of your room? How would it find you? Would it find you wanting or would it find you trusting? God weighs us in the balance. He's the Searcher of every thought, the Discerner of every secret, the Observer of every act. All of us, weighed in his balance, searched by his judgment, are most definitely found wanting. But God has provided for us a weight of righteousness that's not our own. The apostle Paul said that God, *ha[s] wiped out the handwriting of requirements (or 'writing of the debt') that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Colossians 2:14 NKJ)*

May I ask you, what's your response to that? Have you acknowledged, before a holy God, that as well as the writing on the cross that said; 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'; there was other handwriting too - seen only by the eye of faith? Do you believe that the extent to which you've offended God was written there - nailed to the cross of Jesus - and it's as though God looked upon the death of his Son there and then wrote 'Paid in Full' over the 'writing of the debt' - your debt. But have you turned to God yet - and trusted for forgiveness in his Son, Jesus Christ, the only Saviour? Again, may I ask you to think about this: When the hand begins to write, will it stop with that sentence, "You are weighed in the balances, and found wanting"? or will it add, "but found trusting in Christ"?

5. A Rescue by Night

One of the roughest sea crossings I've ever had was on a ferry sailing from England to the Isle of Man, which lies between England and Ireland. It's a journey I've made many times, and I know the Isle of Man quite well. So I was interested to hear of two fishermen who'd spent the night clinging to the hull of their upturned boat on one of the ferry routes close by the Isle of Man. In fact, the two men were seen by the crew of a passenger ferry 13 miles off the Isle of Man. After being spotted drifting in the Irish Sea, they were rescued by helicopter. It was an Irish Coastguard helicopter that was alerted and which winched the two men to safety before taking them to hospital in the island's capital. The ferry's captain, described the rescue as a miracle. "They were not exactly on our route ... but my second officer was very observant. He told me he had spotted something in the sea. When we came closer I could see it was an upturned boat." How thankful these two men must have been for such a sharp-eyed officer that night!

It's another dramatic rescue by night that I now want to draw to your attention. Darius, the mightiest man on earth can't sleep. Why? Because his conscience has been troubling him. It was what had happened during the day to a man called Daniel that now came back to trouble the king's conscience. We'll let the Bible book of Daniel the prophet give us all the background:

It [had] pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God." So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: "O King Darius, live for ever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered - in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." So King Darius put the decree in writing. Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed,

giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands - in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, "Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." (Daniel 6:15)

So that was how those jealous princes had made trouble for Daniel. They'd no doubts at all as to what he would do. Neither did Daniel have any doubt of course. At the usual hour he opened his window toward Jerusalem, toward the temple especially, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, just as he'd always done.

The wicked plotters were watching him and with great satisfaction they saw him make those prayers. But others were watching him also. God on His throne was taking notice of Daniel on his knees. When King Darius heard how he'd been trapped and how he'd have to honour his own decree by throwing Daniel into the lions' den – the Daniel, whom he honoured and respected and feared as a righteous man - he was sorry, and more than that, he was afraid. But trapped by his own decree, Darius ordered Daniel to be thrown into the den of lions.

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "O king, live for ever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him,

because he had trusted in his God ...Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: "May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures for ever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions." (Dan 6:16-27 NIV)

How powerful God's voice is even when it speaks through human conscience! To think that this King Darius, very likely the most powerful man in the world then, should be troubled in his mind about the fate of Daniel! In the whole of that vast empire, what was one individual? It was within his power to order the execution of one of his subjects in any part of the world, and perhaps he'd done that and then sat down to a comfortable banquet and passed the night in peaceful, untroubled sleep. But on this occasion there was no sleep and no rest and no peace in the heart of Darius. His conscience troubled him because he'd sentenced a righteous man to a cruel and shameful death. This must surely be one of the great triumphs of conscience – the great emperor, distraught and uneasy, standing there in the first grey light of the morning at the mouth of the den of lions. Could Daniel possibly have survived? Would his God have been equal to the task of saving him? That was the question he asked aloud when he came near the den. And to his immense joy and relief, he heard a voice answer from the other side. God had saved Daniel!

Although Darius the king had wanted to help Daniel right from the start, the obstacle, of course, had been the fact that Daniel had broken this contrived law - the law that he, the king, had foolishly signed. It was a capital offence to break the law. And in those days the death penalty meant being put into a den with lions. So this had been the king's dilemma. He'd very much wanted to save Daniel, but on the other hand, the law could not be overlooked. There was no way out of this dilemma. So Daniel had been sent to the lions' den where God rescued him.

That story of the king caught in that dilemma seems to me to be an illustration of something deeper. We've all broken God's law – his moral and righteous law imprinted in our nature. The voice of our conscience agrees with the Bible's verdict when it says, *all have sinned*. And further, *the wages of sin is death*, the Bible says. For God's own holiness, revealed in his law, demands that all wrongs must be punished. We don't hear much about punishment these days, but deep down we know it's right - if there's to be any real justice that is. And God the Judge of all the earth will do what's right. But at the same time he wants to save us. He hates sin, and yet loves the sinner. It's true that God is love and doesn't want anyone to be punished for ever. But in his holy love he can't overlook sin. So that's why Jesus came and died. In his death he

paid the wages of our sin. The death of Jesus on the cross was necessary to satisfy both God's desire to save us and to satisfy the law's requirements that stemmed from God's own holiness.

Now God reveals his love by offering salvation to anyone who will receive it. It can only be received by faith. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* This is God's solution to the problem of sin. He calls on us to be sorry for our sins, and turn from them and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

6. The Night the Jailhouse rocked

To the north rises a ridge of hills; to the south an immense barrier of the Macedonian mountains; and in between is a vast plain. And on that plain lies the city of Philippi. It's night, and if the city of Philippi lies sleeping; the same can't be said for the prisoners in its jail! For at least two of them are singing!

Men have sung songs in prison before, but they've been songs of obscenity. Here was a different kind of music. Two prisoners in the jailhouse, their feet in the stocks and their backs bleeding from the brutal scourging of the Roman magistrates, were singing praises to God.

Paul and Silas, the two prisoners, would know the songs of the Old Testament – the psalms. I wonder if they sang: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for You are with me." In any case, as Paul and Silas sang, all the prisoners would hear them singing – and probably responded at first with profanities and ridicule. But the missionaries kept on singing, and I wonder if the hearts of some of the hardened criminals grew soft.

But what had happened? Why were those missionaries in prison? Well, it all started when they'd been ...

going to the place of prayer [and were] ... met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul ... shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned round and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. When the owners of the slave girl realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the

prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. (Acts 16:16-27 NIV)

So suddenly at midnight there'd been a great earthquake which had shaken the very foundation of the prison, and freed every prisoner. The jailer, awakened out of his sleep and seeing that the prison doors were open, took it for granted that the prisoners had escaped and drew his sword, intending to kill himself. When prisoners escaped, Rome held the life of the jailer forfeit. This jailer preferred to fall on his own sword rather than wait for the vengeance of Rome. But Paul, seeing what he had in mind, *shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"* The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:28-31 NIV)

Saved from what? Not the earthquake, for it was over. The earth had become terra firma again. The terrible tremors of the earthquake were past. Neither was the jailer asking how he might be saved from the judgement of Rome, because he now knew the prisoners were still all there. None of them had escaped. No, it was some danger other than the earthquake or the judgment of Caesar that this jailer had in mind. His question had to do with the state of his soul. He was suddenly concerned about his relationship with God. In some way there'd been brought home to him that all was not right between him and God. He now knew he needed salvation – salvation from the judgement of God, not the judgement of Caesar. The earthquake might have shaken the physical building of the jailhouse, but its aftershock shook the jailor himself to the very core of his being. I guess it's possible he too might have heard some of the singing before he fell asleep, but at any rate he surely knew why these men – these missionaries - were in his prison. He realized these men had the answer to his desperate question: "what must I do to be saved?"

It's important to remember what Paul didn't say to this man. He didn't answer him, "Oh you'll be all right. You've had a nasty shock. You'll be OK, just compose yourself." Lots of people think that way today, even sincere churchgoers – something might ruffle them, but basically they think they'll be OK in the long-run - but this jailer knew he'd a soul and through the Holy Spirit there'd come to him the conviction that he was a sinner, and that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and so he needed a saviour.

Again, Paul didn't tell this jailer that he could save himself. He didn't say to him that night, "Stop any mistreating of your prisoners and let the dramatic events of this night teach you a lesson". No, neither is that the way of salvation - that's not the answer Paul gave to the Philippian jailer in his

midnight hour of need. He didn't tell him that he could save himself; but he told him the true and only way to be saved from the judgement which our flawed character and wrong-doing deserves. We're sinners by nature and practice and the only possible answer is: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Paul's answer is still the Bible's only answer. Let's try to see what it means. It seems there are different kinds or levels of faith. We might speak of faith in one another, or faith in the laws of the universe. Still higher is faith in God: that He exists, that He created the world, and that He upholds it and us by His power and providence. Alongside that might be faith in Christ, faith that is, to the extent, at least, that he once lived and died. But this is not saving faith. What the New Testament means, first of all, when it speaks of faith in Christ, is the total reliance of a soul upon Christ as our only hope of salvation. It's faith in what Christ did for you and me as sinners upon the cross - that by His death we're reconciled to God and have pardon and eternal life as a gift from God.

A young man went out as a missionary to the South Sea islands. John Paton brought to those islands the knowledge of Christ and the Christian way of life. When he was busy with the task of translating the Bible into their language, John Paton couldn't find the equivalent word in their language for the word "faith", and without that word the translation of the Bible would be very difficult to say the least. Day after day he listened to the speech of the islanders, hoping that he might hit upon some expression that would represent what the Bible means by faith. But months passed and the word had still escaped him until one day one of them came into his study and, throwing himself down upon a chair, said "It's good to lean my whole weight upon this chair!" The missionary was arrested by that expression, "to lean my whole weight upon." That was the word he'd been searching for! Saving faith in Christ is "leaning your whole weight upon him" for salvation.

When Paul then said to this Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved," he meant that the jailer was to put his trust fully – full-weight - upon Christ and him crucified. That's the only way of salvation.

I hope it's clear to us all that this is not what some have called 'easy-believism'. "Just believe in Jesus and everything will be all right." Paul shares the full message he preached elsewhere – which was '*repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*' (Acts 20:21). Why then was there no mention of repentance in his answer to the jailer? Simply because Paul could see that before him was a man who'd already been stopped in his tracks, shaken to his own foundations, and turned completely about in his thinking – which is what it means to repent! God's grace had already brought him to

repentance, had in fact brought him to an end of himself. At that stage what he needed to do was believe.

Repentance and faith is the way of salvation - one that humbles us and exalts God, for we're saved not through what we've done, but by what Christ did for us on the Cross. And it's to lead to a new lifestyle in whoever accepts it. This jailer was saved through his faith in Christ - and as soon as he became a believer, he showed his faith by his works, for in the same night he took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. Later, he responded to the biblical teaching of the apostle Paul and was baptized in water as a disciple of Christ. Have you declared your faith in that way too?

7. The Night of the Shipwreck

Whenever a train, car or aircraft gets wrecked it's always a terrifying experience. But I wonder if the most terrifying experience of all of those is a shipwreck, partly because of the prolonged strain under which shipwrecked people can suffer. The night-time story that features in today's message from the Bible is the record of a shipwreck, one of the greatest - perhaps the greatest report of a shipwreck ever written.

A shipwreck by day is bad enough, but a shipwreck by night must surely be worse. Even when the sea is fairly calm, there's something about a dark night on the ocean that fills many people with dread. But how terrible when there's a storm at night! It was midnight when a cry of alarm went up on the ship the apostle Paul was travelling on. A storm lasting for a single night is bad enough, but this was a storm that'd lasted for two whole weeks. It was now two weeks since the large grain ship Paul was on, tempted by the south winds, had set sail from the Harbour of Fair Havens, aiming to reach the port of Phoenix just a little further along the south shore of Crete. But she'd scarcely cleared the headlands when the wind shifted. A hurricane broke over the ship, and all they could do was to let her run before the wind. Day after day, night after night, with no light of the sun by day and no light of the stars by night, the ship plunged and wallowed in the great deep. Any who were huddled on deck, must've clung on in terror, drenched with the waves and cut with the winds - as the two hundred and seventy-six persons on board waited for what most of them must've thought was certain death.

At length, after two weeks of drifting before the wind in these raging seas, Luke says,

On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was one hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. (Acts 27:27-28 NIV)

Was it, I wonder, the ominous thunder of breakers against a rocky shore that first alerted them? Successive soundings let them know they were drifting rapidly onto a dangerous shore. Luke continues:

Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. (Acts 27:29 NIV)

The reason for dropping anchors from the stern seems obvious. They were close now to the shore, and if they'd anchored from the bow of the ship, it would have swung with the current and the wind and would've been that much nearer to the breakers. So, they anchored from the stern and "prayed for

daylight." Everything now depends upon those four anchors. If they drag, or if their cables snap, the ship will run onto the rocks. But the cables held; the anchors gripped the bottom and held the ship fast. All through the night those two hundred and seventy-six passengers waited and prayed for the dawn. What a night it must've been - the sky as black as ink, the great waves probably washing now and again over the ship as her stern, held by the four anchors, went under and her prow pointed toward the sky. But finally dawn came. Just in front of them they could see the cliffs with the sea pounding them. St. Paul's Bay, they call it now - among the smooth sandy beaches of Malta - and out on an island there's now a heroic statue of St. Paul.

But back to the morning after - once again, we'll let Luke, the eyewitness, take up the dramatic story:

When daylight came, they did not recognise the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sand-bar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. (Acts 27:39-41 NIV)

All the prisoners then were turned loose and the order was given for everyone to throw himself into the sea. They reached the beach - one on a board, another clinging perhaps to a broken mast, another to a plank loosened from the deck, and some swimming. All of them, struggling up the beach out of the clutches of the angry sea. Ten, twenty, forty, fifty, seventy-five, one hundred, one hundred and fifty, two hundred, two hundred and fifty, two hundred and seventy-six! The whole ship's company escaped safely to the shore. For, as Luke records:

the centurion ... ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety. (Acts 27:43-44 NIV)

Perhaps in a way the story of that shipwreck by night can illustrate lessons for us as we navigate the sea of life. This ship on which Paul was travelling had already weathered one storm on its journey toward Rome. To escape from the fury of that storm, the ship had taken refuge at the Harbour of Fair Havens on the southern shore of the Island of Crete. A little further along on the island was a much larger place, Phoenix. The harbour there was more suitable - perhaps the town was bigger, and there were amusements for the soldiers and sailors. So when the storm had abated, when the northeast wind changed to the pleasant south wind, which blows so often in the Mediterranean, the centurion and the captain decided to sail for Phoenix. As Luke put it:

When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.

Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "north-easter", swept down from the island. (Acts 27:13-14 NIV)

They'd hardly cleared the headlands at Fair Havens when the storm broke upon them in all its fury. In the violent grip of the hurricane force 'north-easter' all they could do was throw the cargo overboard along with the ship's tackle, and let the hurricane drive the ship along. They were running before the storm. You might say they'd been tempted out of harbour by the gentle south wind. When that day at the Harbour of Fair Havens the south wind was gently filling the sail and the blue waters were rippling in the sunlight, nothing could've seemed further away than what happened almost straight afterwards - the rage of the hurricane, the ship strewn with wreckage, and the passengers, prisoners, and crew holding on for dear life. So we, too, in life, need to beware of the tempting 'south wind'. What I mean by that, in Bible language, is simply this: *"there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."* (Proverbs 14:12).

After those fourteen nights on the Adriatic Sea when the sailors on watch heard the surf pounding on the shoreline of Malta, they realized the ship was in grave danger. Immediately, after taking soundings, the captain ordered the sailors to let go four anchors from the stern of the vessel. The plight that the ship was now in, and the dreadful experience of the past two weeks, were due to the fact that up till then they'd disregarded all the warnings they'd received. They'd already passed through one severe storm before this storm broke over them and only with the greatest difficulty had been able to take refuge in the port of Fair Havens. That ought to have warned them that the season of year was no longer suitable for travelling by sea. In addition to that, just as they were proposing to set sail again, Paul had warned them that the voyage would be fraught with great danger. But the desire for greater comfort - with some pleasure thrown in perhaps - deceived them into disregarding the warnings, and they set sail on their disastrous voyage, which now was coming to an end on the rocks at Malta. God gives each of us plenty of warnings too: public warnings from God's Word; private warnings from friends who love and pray for us. There are the warnings that come from the experience of others who've made shipwreck on the sea of life. And there are warnings from our conscience when the still small voice of God tells us when we're drawing near to danger. We need to listen to those warnings.

But finally the sailors had taken the warning, and acted promptly when they heard the crash of the breakers against Malta's rocks. They let go four anchors out of the stern, and those anchors saved the life of everyone on board. Everything depended that night on those four anchors. The ship's tackle was gone, little else was left apart from its four anchors. For our voyage across life's treacherous sea, I believe God has given us four anchors: the witness of creation; the witness of conscience; the witness and voice of the

communication of God's Word, the Bible; and the witness of the life of Christ, and his death and resurrection. Remember them as four 'C's: Creation, Conscience, Communication and Christ – four anchors for our soul against the atheistic and godless currents of today.

The last lesson we could learn from this hurricane and shipwreck is the safety of all on board – for all of them had obeyed the word of the apostle Paul.

Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men [the sailors] stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." ... Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food-- you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." (Acts 27:31-36 NIV)

Not one of them was lost. The hurricane could smash and destroy their ship, but it couldn't hurt them because, through Paul, God'd promised that their lives would be spared. Life, too, has what we might call its storms: dangers, trials, sorrows; but those who put their trust in God, those who believe in Christ as their own personal Saviour will all arrive safely on the heavenly shore.

I suppose they called the roll that night after all the ship's company had gathered around the fire. Roman centurion?" "Present!" "Aristarchus, Christian from Caesarea?" "Present!"

"Master of the ship?" "Present!" "Luke, traveling physician?" "Present!"

"Paul, Hebrew prisoner on his way to Rome?" "Present!" Two hundred and seventy-six persons in total! All present, all safe at last on the shore. So when the storms of life are past and God's people arrive at length on the heavenly shore and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Captain of our Salvation calls the roll on heaven's shore – may I ask - will you be there?

8. A Night to end all night for ever!

In Bethlehem's homes mothers would've been settling their children down to sleep. In the courtyards of the inn the cattle too, I guess, would've been settling down to rest. In the fields the sheep would have been lying down while the shepherds were perhaps sitting around their fires. But in what was probably the stable of the inn a virgin mother has given birth and laid her child in a manger. The long journey of preparation for the arrival of the Saviour of the world ended on this one night.

For this great event, on this night of nights, had been long-promised. Straight after our first parents' disobedience, there was recorded the somewhat obscure, but certain, promise of a Deliverer – one who, it was said, as the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent; that latter being a reference to Satan. To Abraham the further promise was given that through his 'seed' all nations of the earth would be blessed. Then Moses tells the people that a greater law-giver than himself will appear in the future. Balaam, a prophet from outside Israel, declares, "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel." The psalmist sings of a great King whose name would endure forever, and who would have the heathen for his inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession. The prophets declare that someone's coming whose "name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." In addition to these general promises, there are specific ones too. The one who is to come will be of the tribe of Judah of the line of David, and Bethlehem will be his birthplace.

Why didn't Christ come say a hundred years before or after the actual time at which he came? The answer is, the Bible says, that he came in *the fullness of the time* (Galatians .4:4) - when the time was ripe at the end of all the preparation for his coming. The Jewish law had proclaimed the oneness and the holiness of God. The tabernacle and the temple sacrifices had foreshadowed the great sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. Christ came to the Jew first, and the enlightened among them were expecting him and waiting for him – people like devout Simeon who had waited *for the consolation of Israel*. It was not by accident, then, that on this night of nights the Saviour was born in Bethlehem of Judea instead of at Athens or in Rome. There was a fullness of preparation, too, in the Gentile world. For the world had failed by its wisdom to come to know God. A dying, hopeless world was ready for the gospel of life, forgiveness, righteousness and hope. The conquests of Alexander the Great had given the world an almost universal tongue, ready for use by those who'd

soon proclaim the Good News of the Saviour. The conquests of Rome too had crushed the warring and independent nations of the world, and 'the pax Romana' (or Roman peace) held sway when Christ was born. Otherwise, humanly speaking, Christianity would have been strangled in its cradle. But under Roman law and government, and over the splendid Roman highways, the heralds of the Gospel went into the world with a common language to preach Christ. The time had come. God's hour had struck on that night of nights in Bethlehem.

What unfolds to us in that night is the most stupendous fact. Even the great mind of the apostle Paul when he thought about it exclaimed, *Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh* (1 Timothy 3:16) In the gospels accounts by Matthew and Luke we have the sublime story of how he came. God not only sent his only Son into the world, but he sent him in a way that forever touches our hearts.

'The most stupendous fact', we said, and let me say that Christianity depends upon its great facts. It can't be ethically and morally true and at the same time historically false. Without this record of Jesus' birth – without the Bible declaring that this was God in heaven sending his own Son into the world - Christ would be the supreme enigma of the ages. And we rejoice he came in the way that he did. The charm of the Christmas story lies in the way Christ came to earth: the star guiding the philosophers from the East; the wondering of the girl from Nazareth at what the angel had told her; the virgin mother arriving at Bethlehem where there was no room for them in the inn; the manger cradle; the lowing cattle; the echoing song of the angels; the bowing shepherds.

We're not left in any doubt as to the purpose of that wonderful birth on that night of nights in Bethlehem. The prophets had predicted he'd come as a Saviour. The angel of the Lord said to Joseph that the child to be born was to be named Jesus 'because he will save his people from their sins'. The angel told the shepherds that a Saviour was born to them. Later in his writing, the disciple John said that Jesus came to bring light and life into the world. The apostle Paul, also writing in the Bible, said that Jesus had come to save sinners, and Jesus himself, summed it all up by saying that he came to "seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The child that was born on this night of nights was born to die upon the cross for the salvation of all who come to fully trust in him. It was through his birth and death that he'd come to seek and to save that which was lost. Ever since that time, Jesus Christ has been seeking and finding the lost. Through the centuries with their dark, sad clouds of human anarchy and sin and war, shines the Everlasting Light with still invincible hope. The coming of Christ was all about bringing peace between God and man, the peace of forgiveness - not political peace. But if all of us were to receive that peace, we'd have peace between the nations too.

Mentioning the connection between Christ's coming and peace on earth, reminds me that recently a book of memories has been published to document a strange, but apparently true, happening amid all the carnage of the fighting of the Great War. In the first months of World War I, while the mud was still new to the troops in the trenches, and the killing also was still novel to them, Christmas approached.

Some of the soldiers on both sides crossed no-man's-land and met to exchange gifts, sing carols, play games of soccer, and socialize. This so-called Christmas truce lasted in some sectors for several days or even a couple of weeks. It was declared by the soldiers over the Christmas Holiday in 1914. Officers repeatedly (as reported in the recent book *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*), but unsuccessfully attempted to suppress this friendly behaviour amid the frozen mud. They feared the men wouldn't be able to go back to the business of killing each other after such fraternization. A bone-chilling concept indeed when you think about it.

The mud of Flanders had covered the German grey and the British khaki alike and given everyone a common uniform. The soldiers who yesterday were seeking to kill one another now put out their hands towards each other and passed the morning and the afternoon of Christmas Day in brotherly friendship, with songs, and the exchanging of gifts.

Through that brief period prior to Christmas in 1914, on the battlefields of Flanders, when German and British soldiers spontaneously agreed to declare a truce and suspend fighting, we glimpse how much more horrendous the war must have been for them after they'd clasped hands and focused on their common humanity.

But as the light of Christmas Day faded, and the men in grey and the men in khaki went back to their dismal trenches and took up their instruments of death once more. I wonder, will our thoughts about the Saviour, Christ the Lord, leave us just as quickly? Will we go straight back to our old ways of behaving? Or will the Saviour born on that night of all nights make a real, an eternal difference to us? – a lasting difference that'll more and more be seen in us by others.

With that challenging thought for all of us, we come to an end of what we've called 'Nights of Old', and in which we've looked together at many important nights in the Bible. Some, we've seen, were nights of destiny as when world empires changed hands overnight; others were nights of individual heroic faith, involving the likes of Daniel. We've concluded with the high point of our series: the greatest night of all – the night when the Saviour came to earth, and was cradled in Bethlehem's manger. But I want to leave you with this

amazing thought. He was born at night, that we might experience no more night! At the very end of the Bible, we're given a glimpse of what it'll be like for believers in the world to come. One of the many striking features in the description we find there is this:

There will be no more night. (Rev 22:5 NIV)

Please, don't refuse the invitation of Bethlehem's Saviour, for, if you do, you will go out into eternal night. You may remember that it's written of Judas, the betrayer, that *he went out ... and it was night* (John 13:30). Instead, I ask you to follow the Everlasting Light, born that night two thousand years ago, so that for us it'll be a case of 'no more night' for ever and ever.