

Commentary on the Gospels

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Print on Demand Edition (updated 2021)

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Introduction to the Gospels

If you understand that Jesus came to save us all from our sins, you have your foot in the door. Claim that truth and you should see Heaven after you die. Meanwhile, you will have gained precious little here in this life, and your ability to serve Him will suffer constant frustration and a crippling sense you are missing something. That's because you would indeed be missing a lot. You have to place saving the world from sin within the context of why that salvation came about.

The Fall took from us our pure and innocent spiritual perception, because in eating from the forbidden fruit, we turned away from God's provision for truth and sought to own and decide truth on our human terms. God did not leave us in that state of blindness, but left us a way to regain our fellowship with Him. We cannot see the Garden of Eden again upon this earth, but we can understand what God provided for our lives here and how we can use the time to gain preparation for what comes after this life.

God revealed Himself to humanity primarily in the medium of covenants. We are aware of two primary law covenants, Noah and Moses. While Noah applies to all humanity so long as the earth remains, Moses applied only to the Nation of Israel. Moses was a highly specialized subset of Noah, in part to provide a unique context for a much fuller and more detailed revelation. A critical element in the process of Moses receiving this covenant was time spent in the Presence of God on Mount Sinai. During those forty days the ancient oral lore was refined and edited as a prologue to the covenant provisions. This formed the foundation for a continuing record of revelation to follow.

Within that written record is revealed to us how Israel as a nation failed to uphold their end of the Covenant. Fundamental to their obligations was the mission to present themselves as a living revelation of their God to the rest of humanity. Obeying the provisions of the Law and reaping the blessings would demonstrate what was possible in this fallen realm. At the same time, fundamental to the cultural assumptions built into this revelation was the inherent understanding everything concrete was symbolic of something higher, something that could not be contained in words and actions. The Hebrew people were raised up as a nation with a mystical intellectual approach to things. When Israel lost sight of that higher truth for which all things were mere indicators, she lost sight of her mission.

The Messiah was promised long before His birth, as a means to clarify and fulfill that original national mission. He was to be the ultimate expression of God's revelation. To know Jesus is to know all any human could know about God, because He was God as man. That the leadership of His nation rejected Him as the ultimate revelation of God reflects just how far they had drifted from their original calling and the context God had created as the best setting for revelation. They had departed far from Moses, and were no longer capable of recognizing God Himself.

In reading the Four Gospels, we are granted a second-hand experience with this Son of God. Each writer can only tell us what he experienced of the message of the Messiah, and tell it in his own way. The Messiah Himself set the tone for reading Scripture by portraying a powerful sense of accountability to the Scriptures published up to the time of His ministry. That the first

congregations built from the New Covenant in His sacrifice placed certain written records of their own time with that collection of Hebrew Scriptures is an indicator what they regarded as equally obligatory upon us to observe and obey. That written record includes these four little books, composed or edited by people who were there during that time. They were themselves either first-hand observers or spoke to those who were. While we cannot avoid getting to know the writers in their writing, through them we experience Jesus with them. Not in the fullness of His entire ministry, but those things which the Holy Spirit of the Messiah wrote on their hearts as critical for us to know.

Our best hope for harvesting the full offering of these writers is an endeavor to see through their eyes, and the eyes of those who contributed to the narratives. Aside from Luke, there were Hebrew men declaring a Hebrew religion, and its fulfillment in the central figure in the revelation of God. They describe the work of a Hebrew man calling His people back to the more ancient Hebrew understanding of their own Hebrew Scriptures. He fought directly against the Westernized influences which held the leaders of His nation in darkness. Fundamental to His efforts was pointing out the ancient Hebrew approach to reality, which sees in the mundane human existence a collection of symbols pointing to something higher.

Jesus fulfilled in His Person the mission of the Hebrew nation to reveal God to all humanity. In Him, we have the authority to reclaim the heritage Israel threw away, so that we become the New Israel.

Matthew

By tradition, Matthew was a cousin of Jesus – their fathers were brothers. Also known by the name Levi, this fellow was employed in collecting King Herod's taxes. There is a lot of popular mythology about this profession. During this time, the Sanhedrin controlled direct tax collections in Judea, while Galilee was under a tax-farming system. Matthew collected taxes for the nominally Jewish King Herod in Jerusalem, but it meant handling money with pagan images and mixing socially with Gentiles, violating many of the legalistic traditions of common religious orthodoxy. Not quite the traitor, as those who collected taxes directly for Rome were commonly viewed, he was still a social outcast because the whole business was considered immoral. Even if Matthew were utterly scrupulous and fair, as John the Baptist had preached, Matthew was despised by Jewish society. Jesus included him partly for this very reason, showing His rejection of common misguided views on social morality.

An even better reason was Matthew's training and education. He would have been at the least literate in Greek, and likely Latin. He would be familiar with the various dialects of Syrian and Persian travelers. He was a superb record keeper, with a highly organized mind, using the common shorthand writing of those in his profession. He would have understood completely the nit-picking legalism of the Jewish government, and could easily keep track of Jesus' teachings as contrary to that legalism. Permitted no stake in the prevailing system of his day, Matthew's mind would have been quite receptive to his cousin's alternative approach to seeking God's favor. In the end, he was a very Hebraic writer, and his Gospel shows it. A primary focus of his writing was Jesus' declarations about His kingdom.

The primary target of this Gospel was Jewish Christians who needed to see that Jesus was most certainly a fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies, if not a fulfillment of the common political aspirations many Jews had for the promised Messiah. Matthew took pains to collect the teachings of his Lord into themes. Since he seems to have copied so much of Mark's Gospel, finding no fault with the narrative of events, we sense Matthew wrote his much longer version afterward; we date Mark around 50 AD. It seems painfully obvious Matthew thought in Hebrew, not merely the language but in the entire structure of thought itself. Hebrew was a supremely verbal language, and writing it down was a sort of translation in itself, never mind recording it in yet another language such as Greek. Apparently Matthew was quite up to the task.

Matthew 1

Mathew begins with a standard Jewish pedigree showing Jesus was of royal lineage. However, He gained that status via a loophole in the Law and custom of His day, because it is noted His earthly father was not His genetic father. Since Joseph publicly assumed responsibility for the child, there was no legal ground for questioning it, regardless of facts.

In passing, Matthew includes mention of women as significant to the pedigree. In a few cases, there was moral taint, in part to show the grace of God working through and against human failures. Matthew joined Jesus in rejecting the false Jewish notion that women didn't count.

However, Matthew stops short of offending his Jewish Christian audience, sticking with the point of the story: Jesus gained His pedigree by a means of a claim higher than mere DNA.

His conception was itself a miracle. Jewish social custom called for a betrothal for a man between 20 and 30, preferring the latter end of that range unless wealthy. The bride would be a teenager, not long after menarche. The period between betrothal and actual cohabitation was typically a year, based on the old custom of getting a wife, then building a room or two on the extended family home, if not a separate home, to house her. It would be hard to explain what took place unless we assume Joseph was somewhere in the middle class, at least. We know from elsewhere he was a builder, which meant primarily a stone-mason, but included carpentry. He was important enough to worry about his reputation, but genuinely pious enough not to be strict like a Pharisee.

On hearing discreetly his intended was pregnant, he planned to avoid an ugly public denunciation. Exposure would call for the girl's execution, for it was legally the same as adultery. It was a particular kindness to arrange a private dissolution of the marriage covenant. People might gossip, but would have no proof of shame. Quite likely, Mary's family would have sent her to live with a distant relative. Before he could act on this plan, Joseph was visited by an angel during a dream state at night. It was not simply a child of adultery, but the conception of God Almighty, Himself. This was a high privilege for any man to raise the son of a noble or king, but Joseph was called on to raise the Son of God. Most would then assume Joseph simply failed to wait for a proper and honorable consummation of the marriage. This would change the nature of the gossip to something far more benign, largely forgotten by the time the boy could walk. Joseph was told this son would become the awaited Messiah, using prophetic terms any pious Jew would understand.

However, Matthew raises one of the greatest expository difficulties for Western Christians. We know the context of Isaiah 7:13 he quotes regarding the virgin is specific to the time of King Ahaz, when Jerusalem was under threat from Israel and Syria. Those two countries to the north had formed an alliance against Assyria, and were going to force Judah to join it. The obvious meaning for Ahaz was to point out those two nations would soon be history. Starting from that moment, a young woman who was then a virgin could be married, conceive a child, and before he was old enough to understand good and evil, the Assyrians would come and destroy Samaria and Damascus. Second, we know Isaiah's son, Maher-shalal-hashbaz (Isaiah 8) pretty much fit that image, for that son was born of a young prophetess Isaiah had married at that time. Within three years of that birth, Samaria and Damascus had been destroyed.

In typical Hebrew mystical fashion, that historical event was foreshadowing something greater. It depicted a parallel of redemption on a much greater scale than the political situation of Judah around 700 BC. This time a virgin would conceive directly, and the result would be the Redeemer of the World, the very presence of God Himself. Telescoping a single prophecy from a lesser contemporary event into a much greater future event is normative in mystical Hebrew theology. This is not merely good allegory, as Western minds are expecting, but the more flexible Hebrew symbolism – the symbol of the virgin expands in the latter fulfillment. The former is an example of how God works, while the latter is the definitive culmination.

As soon as Joseph woke up, he carried out these instructions. We can envision a hastily arranged wedding feast, and the community's smug amusement. The point thus far is Jesus met several obvious tests of Messiahship.

Matthew 2

Matthew does not relate how Joseph and Mary came to be in the small town of Bethlehem, nor mentions Mary had been living in Nazareth when all this began. As is common with Hebrew writers, he simply assumes the common knowledge about Jesus' life and mentions things in passing, staying with the central thread of the narrative. He isn't telling an unknown story, but giving the importance of a story generally known to his audience.

The Magi were part of an ancient class of priestly nobility, going back well before the Medo-Persian Empire. However, we know Persia would have protected their craft in the spirit of Zoroastrianism, the official imperial religion. Darius united the Medes and Persians under the chief God, Ahura Mazda, of which a primary teaching was all other gods were his allies and friends. We see the Persian solicitude regarding the gods of subordinate nations as a natural result of this, calling on these nations to petition their gods on behalf of the emperor. Succeeding conquerors had valued the grand and ancient legacy of Magi scholarship of a wide variety of other religions, and there's no reason to suppose the Mesopotamian scholars of religion would have ever been harmed. They would surely have garnered a copy of the Old Testament books up through the writings of Daniel, who was a member of their class. They would surely have known of the Messiah, and perhaps some of the false Messianic Expectations which arose during the Judean Restoration Period.

Rome most certainly knew of the Messiah, particularly the parody popular with the corrupt Jewish religion of Jesus' day. The emphasis on a ruler in the mold of King David rising to drive out all Gentile conquerors, in light of Jewish racist contempt for foreigners, was exactly the sort of sensitive subject Roman bureaucrats would track. It was Rome who granted the Edomite Herod the Great a throne over Judea, and as an ostensible convert to Judaism, he too would know something about it, and was paranoid about threats to his reign. He was a perfect fit to stamp out messianic uprisings on behalf of Rome.

Indeed, a saying from Herod's time noted it was safer to be his hog than his son. Jews would not want to be anywhere near the slaughter of a pig, but Herod executed five of his sons, largely under suspicion they were considering usurping his throne. Such a petty and suspicious brute was a perfect choice in Roman eyes. During their ceremonious visit, he called the Magi for a secret conference to find out the date the Messiah's star had appeared, and slyly explained they should continue seeking Him, and report back so Herod could also worship Him. We can bet the Magi were not fooled by this.

The Magi entourage would have been substantial, doing well to reach Jerusalem within a few months of leaving their academy. Announcing the Messiah had already been born, Herod and his court were quite disturbed. As a man barely tolerated by the Judean priests and nobles, a legitimate heir of David was the last thing he needed. Being such a poor Jewish practitioner, he had to ask the scholars where it was prophesied the Messiah would be born. Bethlehem (AKA

Ephrathah) was not that large. While it was the home of David's family, the ancient king's move to Jerusalem as his new capital kept the old family town small and quiet.

Given the great Galilean showplace city of Sepphoris near Nazareth had been destroyed by Herod, in response to an uprising about the time Jesus was born, the tiny hilltop village of Nazareth just a few miles away would have experienced a decline in the building trades. Once the trip to Bethlehem was made, there was little reason to go back home. It would be a major mistake to assume Jesus' birth in the stable was because of poverty. The city was simply vastly overbooked at the time Mary came due, and they were lucky to find any shelter at any price. Once that crowd left, there were plenty of relatives in Bethlehem to get them established there. Joseph was plying his trade there as a builder and could easily afford some kind of home, which is where the Magi found them. Whatever heavenly sign they had taken as marking the birth of the Messiah met them on the way south from Jerusalem, and indicated to them which house held Him.

They could have brought some of the most amazing array of things, but chose three symbolic gifts. It is well known gold is presented to kings, both by right of taxation and tribute authority, but also as presents to gain a ruler's favor. It was the standard royal gift. Frankincense is the resin of rare desert plants. Mixed with other ingredients, it would have been burned as incense in worship of deities. The gummy liquid myrrh was used almost exclusively for burial, as if to say they knew He was born to die, but would also signal many deaths for His sake.

Thus, when the Magi slipped out the back door of Herod's jurisdiction, it took awhile for the report to reach him. Based on his known behavior, it's safe to say choosing all males up to age two was overkill, just to make sure. It's best to picture Jesus hardly a year old at the time. Given the population of Bethlehem as a small county seat, that would indicate maybe a dozen baby boys murdered, 30 at most. That Herod did such things so often helps to explain why the massacre never made the public records. Joseph had been warned during a dream the night the Magi left, and took it seriously enough to pack up and go before dawn that same day. With the recent gifts for their son, the couple could easily afford to set up shop in the large Jewish community anchored in Alexandria, Egypt. One could reasonably picture Joseph using his Jewish family connections and the Magi's gifts to start a business there, doing quite well until the angel called him back to Judea.

Matthew connects that calling to a quote from Hosea 11:1. By the way, the name "Hosea" is an alternate English spelling of Joshua, the Hebrew form of Jesus' name. Again, we see the Hebrew mystical telescoping of prophecy, by allowing the details to shift somewhat in meaning. The reference recalls the Lord's scolding Israel via Hosea's prophecy for spiritual adultery, referring to Israel as His son. Their very identity as a nation was rooted in the Exodus, called out of Egypt, where they weren't just led from Egypt, but miraculously delivered in ways which brought Pharaoh to his knees. With all this, they constantly strayed. Then they were given the whole land of Canaan with similar miracles, and still strayed. They utterly failed their purpose to be a nation of priests to bring the Lord's revelation to the world. When Jesus came out of Egypt, He fulfilled everything Israel failed, by becoming that faithful Light of Truth to the nations.

In noting that the massacre of Bethlehem's boys is connected to Jeremiah 31:15, we see a typically poetic Hebrew reference-in-depth. Rachel was the lovelier of two sisters married to Jacob, and his carnal favoritism was painfully obvious to all. As the whole family caravan was returning to Bethlehem whence Jacob had fled two decades before, Rachel came due, presumably in the vicinity of Ramah, a small village just a few miles north of Jerusalem, and a day's travel from Bethlehem. Her life had been quite sorrowful already, and she died in childbirth, naming the boy *Ben-oni* – "Son of My Sorrow" (which Jacob changed to *Ben-jamin* – "Son of My Right Hand;" Genesis 35:16-20). Thus, while it's uncertain, we could believe she was buried there in Ramah (Genesis 48:7).

It was thus in sight of her tomb much later when Babylon marshaled her Judean captives at Ramah, on the way north toward the crossing of the Euphrates. Jeremiah portrayed Rachel as weeping to see the captives taken away from the land, her own sons. We note Ramah was in the portion given to Benjamin, the son born there. On the northern boundary of that was Ephraim, one of the two sons born to Joseph, her other son. The latter son had already gone, taken by Assyria, and the younger was taken later by Babylon. Jacob passed through great sorrow when Joseph disappeared at his brothers' hands, and dreaded the loss of Benjamin when his sons returned to Egypt for more food during the famine (Genesis 43). So we see Rachel weeping the loss of her sons again, where Herod had them killed in the village to which she never quite arrived as her new home.

Of course, in Jeremiah's prophecy, Rachel is comforted by the promise the Exiles would return. While Jesus' time had not yet come when the infants were slaughtered in Bethlehem, His death would be even more senseless and brutal thirty years later. Yet, in His very death, all humanity finds comfort.

Herod himself died horribly, suffering a very painful and disgusting malady for quite some time, possibly related to kidney disease. Five days before he expired, he had his son Antipater executed. This latter had put himself in line for the throne by having his two elder brothers killed. Thus, Herod's kingdom was divided between three surviving sons. Archelaus was as nasty as his father, and had control of Judea and Samaria. So cruel was he that Caesar Augustus later deposed and banished him. Meanwhile, his brother Antipas was given Galilee and Perea. Antipas was no friend of his brother Archelaus, and generally wiser. Intent on building Tiberias and Julias into great cities, Antipas offered tax exemptions and other accommodations to persuade Jews to migrate from Judea proper and build up the economy.

There is no reason to suppose Joseph did not prosper those few years in Egypt. When the angel came to call him and his family back home, he was headed to Bethlehem. Having established himself there after Jesus' birth, it was natural he would resume his business there. Knowing Archelaus would have delighted in sending troops to murder Jesus, Joseph worried how he would obey God's command. Being warned away from Judea by the angel, Joseph took the logical course of returning to Nazareth, where this had all began. Sensible indeed for a man in the building trades, for Antipas was also rebuilding Sepphoris, the great city his father had destroyed, just a few miles from Nazareth. Joseph would have more business than he could handle alone, and may well have been in a position to work as a building contractor, employing many others to do the work with him. This was the setting into which Jesus grew to manhood.

Matthew again presents a quandary to Western readers in verse 23. Saying it was prophesied Jesus would “be called a Nazarene” is not a direct quote. Indeed, the name of the town Nazareth isn’t found anywhere in the Old Testament. Rather, this is a typical Hebraic play on words, something foreign to our Western sensibilities. We have this subconscious arrogance which rejects the idea that God could permit such liberties with the serious business of revelation. We so easily forget God created the Hebrew mystical literary sense of humor as the means to His revelation.

Matthew is taking advantage of the ambiguity of Greek words translated from Hebrew, and applying all the meanings to His Lord. In this case, there is the Hebrew word *netser*, for “branch” (Isaiah 11:1), a well established symbolic reference to the Messiah. However, there is also a play on the word from which Nazarite comes, the term for one who has taken a special vow of purity (Numbers 6). The root word for “Nazarite” is *naziyr*: “separate,” as in holy. It is taken from *nazar* – to hold (oneself) aloof, especially from sin. There is nothing indicating Jesus was under the Nazarite vow, for something like that was too important to ignore; it is conspicuous by its absence. We note John the Baptist, who gets far less play in the text, is described as a Nazarite (Luke 1:15), while Jesus was called a drunkard (Matthew 11:18-19). Thus, Jesus fulfills the Messianic prophecies in ways our Western minds don’t expect.

The adjective “Nazarene” in Greek is *Nazoraios*. It sounds almost exactly as the Hebrew term in Isaiah’s prophecy. Matthew is poking fun at the Pharisaical abuse of semantics by a pun: “Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be a *Netser ... aios*.”

Matthew 3

Matthew makes no mention that John and Jesus were cousins. Nothing is made of Jesus’ youth here, simply because little of significance to the central message took place. Rather, “in those days” when Jesus began to operate as Messiah, we first see His cousin. John’s message was repentance, for he was the prophesied forerunner, announcing the Kingdom of Heaven was right on top of them. Most listeners would have taken this for what it was: Messiah was about to manifest Himself. This was a very popular message, drawing large crowds to the rural settings where John preferred to preach. His choice of attire echoed that of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and had become a standard symbol of prophets preaching repentance (Zechariah 13:4). The description of his diet was a phrase commonly used to depict a complete reliance on whatever God provided, which in that region would have included a great deal of kosher insects. John exemplified symbolically the message he preached of turning back to simple and pure obedience to the Law and trust in Jehovah to provide, Israel’s one last chance to get it right.

The requirements of John’s teachings, however, were not so popular. Many seized by enthusiasm would have struggled to find ways to apply it, but very few really absorbed the message deeply. Repentance, turning from lack of concern to a state of high sensitivity to the Lord’s concerns, was depicted by John as the ancient practice of conquering monarchs sending advance parties to prepare the people for their new ruler. Even the roads themselves were prepared by widening narrow mountain passes, carving cuts through hilltops, filling in ravines, and smoothing the surface (Isaiah 40:3). John called everyone to prepare for their new King. Should there be resistance to His requirements, you can be sure He would not take it lightly.

This symbolized the call to conform one's life to a proper welcome for the Messiah. John advised the people to set their minds on righteousness now, so the transition will be less shocking, less destructive. True repentance requires wholly accepting the justice in the ultimate penalty for sin, and relying on God's mercy to withhold the wrath we deserve. The ritual of baptism symbolized this, and added to the image of newness, something fresh and exciting to the crowds.

For the peasants, there was little to hinder their repentance. They had long been told their poverty was a mark of God's disfavor, as wealth was the primary proof of His favor, according to the Pharisees. The wealthy frequently called the peasants "accursed," so it was nothing new to be told they were under judgment. For the socially prominent Pharisees and Sadducees, repentance was a far bigger issue. Convinced their wealth and power made them God's proctors for righteousness, they hardly felt sinful. Many sought merely to make sure John wasn't suggesting anything illegal or dangerous to their position. As some became enamored with the possibilities of political gain from getting involved, John rebuffed them. Their patronizing attitude was obvious to all. The Pharisees were empty legalists ("conservatives"); the Sadducees were Gnostic materialists, generally denying the spirit realm ("liberals"). The former had their tickets all punched, and this was another punch. The latter didn't believe any of it in the first place, but played along for the good of the rabble, as they saw it. Neither group by nature had any grasp of what John's message really meant. He called them children of snakes, a reference to Satan.

John asked them, "Who warned you to flee...?" The words mean specifically, "Who came to you privately and gave you a conscience?" It was a reference to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, whose divine presence had always brought a sense of sin (Isaiah 6). These big-shots had no conviction from Jehovah, for they had never faced Him. Their intentions were purely a public sham; they made no room for the workings of God's Spirit. Citing imagery from Jeremiah (46:22f) and Ezekiel (31:3ff), John warns them their time is gone; the woodman was measuring the stroke for his ax. Having Hebrew DNA would mean nothing, since God could make better men from rocks. Genuine repentance would bring massive changes in life, not merely in a few habits. John would not let them use him to advance their social standing. They would not be allowed to identify with him until they changed their identity, and showed true fruit of repentance.

John did not claim any vested authority. We so easily miss the profound symbol in Eastern societies of a person's footwear. To have charge of another's shoes and pedicure was the ultimate in degrading tasks, a mark of utter insignificance. The master calling for his shoes would not so much as acknowledge the presence of the shoe slave, only the shoes. John declared his place in the Messiah's Kingdom was even lower, a profound statement of humility to the Jewish audience, considering he was the one stirring up so much interest in this Messianic Kingdom. If his readily apparent holiness was insufficient to merit the Messiah's notice, what would it say of the fakes unworthy for ritual washing at his hands?

John's baptism was merely a water symbol, an inconvenience to those who did not come prepared to participate. The Messiah's baptism in fire would bring wholesale destruction of everything in a man's life, immersing the soul in the Holy Spirit of God, whom no human can see and live. His standard of separation between the righteous and the sinners would draw a

stark contrast. Those who failed would find themselves in a far worse situation than the garbage smoldering in the Gehenna Valley below Jerusalem, while the rest would see a Heaven no man can describe.

Jesus did nothing publicly to announce His ministry before this scene. John was sent as His forerunner, to carry the message of true repentance under the Covenant. The public ministry of Jesus was the doorway to the Kingdom of Heaven, and in many ways was the start of it. This meant a passing of the old Davidic Kingdom, and a passing of the Law of Moses. John served under this older covenant, but his service was to herald the New.

For Jesus to fulfill Israel's mission, to become Israel, required fulfilling every measure. Thus, to participate in John's baptism was a part of this. Not only did He lend credence to what John preached, but also that the Old Covenant was at an end. John was hardly a stranger to his cousin, Jesus, nor ignorant of the story of His birth and signs. He knew with some degree of conviction his cousin was the Messiah, though he obviously did not know everything connected with it.

Thus, assuming Jesus was indeed "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," John was looking to Him as the ultimate expression of God's message and will. John knew he was merely the herald, and clearly understood he deserved no place in Jesus' Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, when Jesus came to be baptized, John argued insistently and persistently against it. This was quite a scene. Finally, Jesus shut down the argument by noting He came to fulfill every jot and tittle of the Law of Moses so He could inaugurate better things.

The instant Jesus arose from beneath the surface of the water, the sky itself was changed. There are no words to describe the unfathomable yet noticeable shift in reality, but John felt the air change. This was no ripping of time and space, but an orderly opening in the wall of separation between fallen Creation and God's perfect Heaven. A visible manifestation of God's own Spirit appeared in this opening, and descended like a dove to rest on Jesus. With it came the authoritative announcement from Heaven's Throne itself that this was the very Son of God, someone in Whom the Father of all, Jehovah, had full confidence from the beginning.

Matthew 4

John at this point had fulfilled his central role in history. It's not a matter of no longer having anything to do, for there would always be in this world fallen people in need of the message of repentance and redemption in God's Son. John the Baptist would remain the conduit for those under Moses to come the Messiah. Rather, John's message was now fully formed, for its primary object was fully identified, and all his preaching now pointed to a clearly defined Person as Messiah, the Prince of Heaven. The claim had been declared, and John's life had reached its climax.

This claim by, and on behalf of, Jesus as the Messiah was not to go unchallenged. Just whose Messiah would He be? Several messiahs had already come, each with a different message, with differing and conflicting claims. So far, all had died, mostly ignominiously. Being the true Messiah, it was necessary to clarify at the least what He was not.

Led by the Spirit into the Judean Wilderness, the mountainous western rim of the Dead Sea, Jesus began a fast. It mirrored the time Moses spent on the Mountain of God receiving the Law. It must be noted here the mention of forty days and nights is a common Hebrew phrase rather like our saying "a month or so." It's not meant to be a precise count, because such was not considered important. What was important was that the length of time was sufficient to make a full and clean break with the past, to face every human self-doubt, to establish clarity of purpose and understanding, and more importantly to fulfill the purpose lost on the Nation of Israel. Following their meeting with God at Sinai, they failed consistently and utterly to embrace the purpose God had for them. Thus, because of their rejection of Moses' forty days with God, they faced forty years of wandering spiritually – also not to be taken with mathematical precision. Jesus, by contrast, did not wander, but was clearly led of the Spirit.

As this period of intense spiritual examination wound down, the final test must come. Would Jesus be the Messiah predicted in the Messianic Expectations common to the rabbinic traditions of His day? By no means. The Judaism of that day was bereft of spiritual depth, having become a shallow and narrow legalism, whose only concept of Heaven was material comfort. They had exchanged spiritual *shalom* for a poor shadow. They wanted gold instead of a legacy of revelation; they wanted a bulging dinner table rather than a fullness of the spirit; they wanted mere freedom from disease and pestilence, instead of God's divine power to resist every form of evil; they wanted political control and dominance to crush all others in the dirt, instead of reliance on God to grant power to fulfill His calling across all human political boundaries. While there must have been other temptations we could not name, these three primary issues are raised to indicate Jesus rejected the Talmudic brand of Judaism.

Perhaps it was the cool of the morning, as Jesus looked out upon the rocky waste, the perfect time to eat a breakfast of warm bread fresh from the oven. In that day and time the image of "bread" was not a long, squarish loaf as we think of it in the West, but a flat circular disk, rather like a pancake made with yeast. Many of the rocks lying on the surface of the desert looked precisely like that, even in color, sometimes. What it represented was far more. The Talmudic expectations of the Messiah called for Him to supply by miraculous power just this very thing; a particular legend called for the stones of the wilderness to be turned into bread, as a way of representing an unimaginable plenitude of food.

There's nothing sinful about food, and a good appetite was created by God as part of good physical health. Rather, there is sin in taking a shortcut to godlike power, and to win over the Judean masses with the one thing which most worried them, and many other people in the world: plentiful food. Give them bread, and they'll eat out of your hands. Do it by miracle, and all the more will they flock to serve you. Conquering at the head of such a massive army would be a breeze. But Jesus was not a mere food supplier, for though it is necessary for life, it is the Law of God feeding the soul which mattered most. Better one should starve until this life is extinguished than to betray His will.

Standing on the wall of the Temple Terrace in Jerusalem, there is one corner, the southeast, which jutted out into the Kidron Valley, forming a wall some seventy feet high (21 meters), we believe. Whether in the flesh or in the spirit hardly mattered; Satan took Jesus there to claim one of those promises, part of "every word which proceeds from the mouth of God" – the Messiah could not be harmed while engaged in the work of Jehovah (Psalm 91:11-12). Such a spectacular

act as jumping off the pinnacle and landing safely on the valley floor below would force the Jews to accept Him. Not just the rabble, but the savvy urbanites, as well. This miracle would forestall any question whether He was the Messiah, and there's some evidence this very act was a part of the legends. It's true the servant of Jehovah can expect everything to work out according to His calling, to overcome every threat that arises as a necessary element of such service. But this would be flinging a challenge in the face of God – "Bail me out or Your promise will fail." Jesus would not be that kind of Messiah, presenting spectacles simply to amaze. The miraculous power of God exists not merely to meet human need, nor to amaze, but to demonstrate spiritual principles and confirm His Word.

Neither do we need to know where this "exceedingly high mountain" stood, only that it was a place sufficient to display some extent of human habitation in the world. It represented the whole of humanity, under the various rulers and regimes appointed by God to fulfill the requirements of the Covenant of Noah (Genesis 9): Fallen man must live under social order, lest God weaken the natural order. At any rate, all of human government outside the Law of Moses was a matter of sinners keeping other sinners under control, never mind how imperfectly; that was God's command for fallen men. It was this fallen nature of government which gave birth to the constant threat of attacking and dominating Israel. In their failure to see it was their own sins which always brought outside conquests of Israel, the false Talmudic expectations of the Messiah demanded He once and for all end this threat. He must become a ruler of the entire world, and make the Gentile nations eternally subservient to Israel. Many extravagant promises of "ten Gentile slaves for every Jew" and other racist nonsense pervaded this idea. Rather than bring the light of God's revelation to all mankind, rabbis spoke dreamily of crushing all under their feet.

Jesus would not be that sort of Messiah, either. Rather, He would conquer the hearts of men, uniting them under His spiritual rule, a rule which ignored nation, race, government, and laws of men. It would be the true Kingdom of Heaven, not a mere "heavenly" kingdom. The laws and governing of fallen mankind in this world are of no concern to the servants of Heaven's King. Those matters are the Father's alone; His servants are devoted to His rule and reign, and leave such matters in His care.

That Jesus would have known the fullness of rabbinic teaching is hardly in doubt. With His auspicious birth and all the signs, it's hard to imagine His extended family would not do all they could to insure He had gotten a decent rabbinical education. There were numerous rabbinical academies and colleges throughout the world, wherever Jews lived. While some were more prestigious than others, just about all of them would have the same basic curriculum. It would have been loaded with Talmudic teachings, and it was clear Jesus from age 12 knew the heart of the matter already. Still, by the time He was around 30 years old, He would have studied the whole Old Testament rather intensively, along with the various lore making up the Talmud.

He would have understood well beforehand that the root nature of all fallen human desire could be narrowed down to three things: Lust of the Flesh, Lust of the Eyes and the Pride of Life. The first can be described as all the insistent human appetites having been perverted, providing an excuse for ignoring God's provision to meet them. The second notes there could never be enough new discovery and spectacle to sate the fallen human curiosity. The last

depicts mankind's natural dominance over all other living things, even over the very earth itself. It brings unspeakable pride, as if humanity could rule all by superior intellect, yet could not keep away death.

We see this understanding echoed in the Fall (Genesis 3:6) as the basis for tempting Eve, and declared later by the Apostle John (1 John 2:16). It was the same three elements of mortal nature tested in the Wilderness Temptation of Christ, the same three elements Talmudism had embraced by exchanging the abundant riches of the Spirit Realm for a poor shadow of worldly comfort. These temptations were the path Satan offered mankind to gain their loyalty, yet such was not sufficient to back his claim over fallen mankind. Jesus spoke with the authority of the Son, and remanded Satan to his rightful place under Him. Christ not only denied Satan's impudent claim, but would negate it in His choice to take the mystical path of Jehovah, through human death to eternal power.

Finally, we note here Satan's name in the text comes from the term, "to pierce through." What could be fatal in the rough hands of a mere soldier can also be healing in the hands of the skilled surgeon. To cut through something is to see what it's made of, to explore its substance. Satan pierces all of us, but by clinging to Christ, we force our Enemy – the Tempter, the Adversary, and the Deceiver – to do the work of God in clarifying our faith.

Let us remind ourselves here Matthew does not recount every detail of the Jesus' daily life. He relies on the knowledge his Jewish readers had of that story, instead focusing on how that story showed Jesus was the Messiah promised of old. Thus, we are not told of the first few days of ministry following the Temptation, nor how he became acquainted with several of His Disciples via their discipleship under John the Baptist. He only briefly mentions the arrest of John, leaving it to the reader to realize this made the political situation hot for everyone associated with him. Not only Jesus, but John's disciples probably went underground. Some of them returned quietly to their homes in Galilee.

Nor are we told of the incident at the synagogue in Nazareth. It was there they tried to push Jesus off a steep high bluff at the edge of town. This was His Father's signal to move to Capernaum, a much larger city, and not as politically dangerous as neither Jerusalem nor other cities in Judea. Recall Capernaum as a major hub of trade traffic, as well as a primary regional tax office. It was, therefore, a major hub of news which gave His message the widest distribution. This represents a permanent move for His base of operations.

Matthew indicates how this is a direct fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2. The context of Isaiah's prophecy notes the long, troubled history of this region. First, this region had been settled well before the central highlands of Canaan had seen any settlement. The sea was fresh-water, filled with edible fish ever in good supply, and a crossroads from ancient trade routes stretching back before recorded history. This was easily one of the nicest places to live in the whole land of Palestine.

It was also the center of some desperately wicked pagan religions. The economic power backing these religions made them equally repugnant and powerful as enemies when Israel began The Conquest. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphthali failed utterly to drive them out. Later, when a portion of Dan migrated to an area north of this district, their new City of Dan there became a center of paganizing influence among the tribes of Israel. When Jeroboam broke away with the

Ten Tribes to form a separate kingdom, it was no accident he chose Dan as the northern center of his alternate worship, dividing their religious loyalties to prevent his subjects dividing their political loyalty. This was the ultimate sin, using pagan idolatry as a political weapon, rather than trusting in Jehovah who had promised to make things work for Jeroboam.

Isaiah remarks on this deep spiritual darkness and how it resulted in their being the first part of the nation taken away captive by Assyria. Unlike the rest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the region around the sea did not long remain fallow. It was quickly repopulated by all manner of volunteers relocating within the Assyrian Empire. These also rekindled the gloom of pagan worship, but the Messiah would break the first light of the Kingdom of Heaven there as the new dawn of truth.

The message was the same as John's: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." However, Jesus was no mere herald, but held that Kingdom in His hand. In preparation for this Kingdom, He began to gather its first royal officers. We find Matthew mentions first Peter and Andrew. Peter is the elder of the Twelve, possibly older than Jesus. Peter and Andrew were business partners with Zebedee, whose two sons, James and John, are also called. We have already noted this latter pair was almost certainly first cousins of Jesus, and the other pair may also have been. At the very least, they were all fairly well known to each other already. Jesus calls them to join Him full-time, to become a part of His inner circle. Peter, James and John are later seen as the closest inner circle. Jesus remarks how they would leave behind the fishing business, and begin capturing the souls of men for the Kingdom.

This region was considered a part of the Jewish homeland in the Roman Empire, and the Tetrarch Antipas had succeeded in making it quite the bustling crossroads. That made it rather prominent in the whole of Syria, the name for the Roman imperial administrative division which included Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Idumea, Perea, Decapolis, and farther north. It was from this greater region in which the word of this healing prophet and rabbi drew crowds to His outdoor sessions.

For centuries, the Jews had blindly sought the mere shadow of God's grace and love. They were wrapped up in mere external "blessings" as the sole evidence of God's favor. They never understood that the presence or absence of mere human comfort was no reflection of deeper spiritual truths. It was not the need of healing that brought the miracles to these people, but the need of the Kingdom to establish the authority of the message of Jesus. There was no affliction God could not heal, no spiritual authority He could not humble, no suffering He could not end. Had the Jews been faithful, these things would have been granted to them under the promises of Moses. It would have been theirs to pass to the whole world, but they failed even for themselves. Thus, it belonged to Jesus to fulfill that mission.

Such a demonstration of Kingdom authority naturally drew immense traffic, but most of it was the poor, the ill, the disabled, the demonized, the lost and listless. These people had nothing but needs, each seemingly a bottomless pit of sorrow. The central message of the gospel was that such things were so easy to resolve because they weren't important in the Kingdom. The definition of "miracle" is an earthly demonstration of deep spiritual truth. Most of the rabble appears to have missed the greater truth, for they eventually desert Jesus. Their human needs symbolized their deep spiritual needs, so deep they were unable to find the light. The light

came, but they never saw it. Indeed, we might safely say the demonstration of power was more to teach His disciples than any other objective. These men would have begun their discipleship not asking questions, but by custom simply absorbing everything their Master said and did for a while in this noisy, carnival atmosphere.

Eventually, the rest of the Twelve and a sizable group of others gathered around Him. In their hearts and minds, they were fairly certain this was the promised Messiah. However, as with all Jews, their understanding of the matter was deeply corrupted by centuries of Talmudic teaching. Indeed, until the very day He died, Jesus continued to struggle against their density on this problem, and they continued to look for signs of the false Messianic Expectations. Matthew begins the next section of his Gospel recording the early teachings of Jesus. In this, Matthew shows how Jesus struggles mightily with the mountain of lies, showing the Kingdom of Heaven was of a nature far beyond their assumptions. The jarring conflict, though, made it stand out in their minds. Later, when the Holy Spirit descends, this is all awakened and clarified, and they are instantly transformed.

Matthew 5

The crowds had come from all over. For every one healed and sent away whole, it seemed three more arrived to replace him. Was this all the Master came to teach? Was He going to make of His disciples healers? No, there was more teaching than healing, though perhaps only His close followers knew that. A few in the crowd, indeed, wanted only the healing. Many realized the healings were but signs for something different, a teaching that had brought such power, a power not before seen in Israel. The scrolls held stories of miracles of old, but not on this scale.

More than a teaching of power, it was powerful teaching. Like no one before Him, this rabbi taught a stirring message. It was not simply one more rehashing of the Talmudic lessons, nor a dry recitation from the Books. No, this teaching beckoned to a place far beyond, a standard which, if obeyed, would require a miracle itself. For many, it was too much, and they went away confused. Plenty went away ridiculing. Still, just a few seemed to get it, seemed to hear in all of this something they needed more than mere healing of the body, but healing of the soul.

Most likely it was on Mount Tabor, more of a rocky, rounded high hill nearby where Jesus climbed up above the crowds for a time of teaching. Matthew uses this moment in the story to launch into an explanation of all the various teachings Jesus gave in those days. Finding a prominent spot, Jesus followed rabbinic custom and took a seat to teach. It was a subtle signal for quiet listening. In such a setting, the teaching session was primarily for His disciples. From the text, we know of only the first four of the Twelve, and they would have sat closest. The crowd would have already seen by their behavior these were His servants. By now, He would surely have drawn several others hoping for similar honor. Perhaps it was a pretty large group. Thus, it is likely some of the other eight were among the listeners. It was time to begin winnowing the group, to see who could weather the dramatic difference in style, and more so, the difference in content.

He preached about the Kingdom of Heaven that was right on top of them. What would it be like? It would be so easy to get lost in the details of His message. There really is a great deal of material, but we must first discern the theme. That is, what was the underlying concept Jesus

sought to declare? In this first collection of sayings, we are exposed to the shortcomings of typical rabbinic teaching. The constant refrain, “you have heard it said” refers to that. In this first few verses, Jesus starts by redefining what it means to be favored by God, to be blessed and happy in this life. As we’ve already established, the mainstream teaching of that day was to use relative wealth and comfort as the measure of God’s favor, and holiness as marked by adhering to the massive pile of Talmudic minutiae, something about which Pharisees and Scribes were quite pushy.

Jesus threw all that out. Not only did He ignore the rabbinical style of quoting revered experts, but seemed to poke fun at them. No doubt some felt this was tantamount to rejecting the Covenant itself, but clearly He did not. Had the leadership been obeying the actual Covenant of Moses, there would have been no need for such mass healing sessions. Indeed, all of this was reflected in obscure comments by some rabbis, but most in that day paid only lip-service to such things. Jesus seemed to offer a competing understanding of the Covenant and its requirements. It was not about rules, wealth and political power, but about the soul at rest in God, regardless of circumstances. God’s favor fell on those who were humble, mourned more at sin than at physical injury, knew who held the reins of life, cared more about true righteousness, showed mercy to others, were transparent in their motives, and preferred the *shalom* of the soul over that of the flesh. Most favored of all were those who faced contempt for these attitudes, for it put them in the company of the famous prophets of old. These would receive from God far more in spiritual blessings than any man could claim in earthly rewards.

Such persecution was unavoidable, because the truly righteous were radically different. They were driven from within. This was not about overturning the Law and Prophets, but of bringing them to life, fulfilling their message. Their message was precious, and any man who dared to raise anything above them – as most rabbis did with the Talmud, claiming it was more binding than Moses – would find no place in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Word would outlive every man. Those who lived by the Word did not simply observe the obvious requirements in conduct, but sought to live the higher meaning. Here Jesus clearly shows the Law was type and shadow, but He is the Light of Truth. One could obey the whole of Moses, yet fail God completely.

It was not enough to withhold your hand from murder; you must pull your heart from the pit of anger. The courts of earthly judgment were severe enough. Imagine the Court of Heaven, where God sees the hearts of men, and needs no prosecutor. You can’t stand before Him with unclean hands, but even worse is an unclean heart. Go first and live according to pure motives, or your ritual offerings will have no meaning.

Treating wives as little more than good cattle is an abomination to God. The Law of Moses was weak on men of weak character. However, the true standard of God was to hold your wife as His sacred gift. The only just reason for sending her away was adultery. God takes marriage seriously, and your marriage covenant was made before Him. It’s not just avoiding pagan wives, but avoiding trading them around like property. One man, one woman, for life.

Silly nit-picking over legal trifles will cost you more in the end. If it requires some sort of legally binding oath to get you to keep your promises, you don’t know God. God demands you simply say “yes” and “no” and mean it. If you spend your whole life just trying to get even with those

who attack you, you don't know God. It's better to absorb personal losses and attacks and trust Him for recompense. Don't cling to mere stuff! The greatest riches are His genuine approval. The greatest power over all your enemies is love regardless how they treat you. Return blessings for evil, so that evil does not own you. How can you hope to enter the Kingdom if you aren't any different from sinners?

Matthew 6

This teaching session was kicked off by Jesus turning upside down the typical rabbinical instruction of His day. In this chapter, the focus is on the nature of true spirituality. Jesus contrasts the kind of spirituality they were used to seeing every day against the genuine article.

He begins with what were commonly referred to as "acts of mercy," which today we typically call "acts of charity." We are aware of two different practices Jesus mocks in saying "sounding a trumpet in the streets." One is quite literal, when those with great wealth and power would summon the unfortunate to assemble for mass distribution of food, clothing and such. This is top-down charity, empowering the giver and weakening the recipients, versus the commanded habit of a community sharing freely.

The other form of trumpet sounding was peculiar to Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. Built into parts of the external wall were convenient drop boxes with heavy brass funnels protecting the depository. The large opening faced out on the wall, which narrowed and curved downward so thieves could not simply reach into the unattended box. Tossing a large handful of worthless coins would make quite a racket. The jaded residents of the city called this "sounding the horn." Such public notice was the full extent of blessing hypocrites received. True spirituality cared nothing for man's approval, but only for the Father's, Who saw all secret acts.

The Talmud prescribed rather extensive ritual prayers. Composed in rather flowery language, they lent themselves well to dramatic gestures preferred by hypocrites. Pharisees would typically ensure they found themselves in very public places during the hours of prayer, as if they somehow were accidentally caught by the timing. Had they made it a point to be in the Temple or any synagogue, it would have been more honorable. However, even there they mimicked the chanting of pagan idolaters. Prayer is hardly a matter of getting the attention of a busy or distracted god. Jehovah knew all things, so prayer was not for Him but for us.

Jesus proceeds to lay out a model prayer. While there is no harm in reciting this in worship, that misses the point. It is not a matter of precise holy wording, but grasping the character of this outline Jesus provides. I take the liberty here of paraphrasing it to help us understand that:

Our Father in Heaven, even Your Name is Holy. Extend Your Kingdom into our lives so we obey You as those in Heaven do. Provide us only what we need to serve You today. Teach us to forgive as You forgive. Help us follow You through trials such that we do not fall into the hands of Satan. We seek Your Kingdom's prosperity, by Your power, for Your glory.

Notice there is precious little here about worldly needs, except to ask for it in like measure to a Roman soldier's daily ration. The Roman ration was never enough to encourage a man deserting his commander, but enough to make it through that day. The whole passage aims at

binding us to God, seeking only for ourselves what it takes to bring Him glory and fulfill His purpose. Jesus goes on to make again the point about forgiveness. If you do not pass on the Lord's mercy and grace to others, it can do nothing for you. This is the character of prayer, of seeking to commune with God Almighty so that we are changed. More precisely, it's so that we are changed into a people whose whole focus is God's business, God's way.

Contrast this to the hypocrites who advertised their fasting by overdoing the sackcloth and ashes business. Such was originally designed to shock oneself into realizing the seriousness of some grave sin. Jesus describes those who obviously don't have a sense of sorrow over their sins, but a deep need for human pity and approval: "Oh, he is such a martyr!" While people notice, it never comes to God's attention. Fasting is a commitment of the heart, some internal concern which need not be a burden to those who don't know. God will know, and respond appropriately.

Jesus again hammers the Jewish elite for their worldliness by discounting the necessity of piling up material wealth. Such acquisitiveness leads merely to worry over how very much everyone else wants it, too. Hide it away too well and natural processes will render it useless. If, instead, you are focused on spiritual treasure, there is no way it can be lost. If your eyes are trained to see the world with price tags, the light of truth can never come in, and your soul will be darker than the pits of Hell. God will not share your loyalty with the god of material possessions.

The wealthy Jews often chided the peasants for not saving, blaming them for their own poverty. It was a hard-hearted meanness which characterized the comfortable class of Jews all over the known world. They seemed afflicted with an abject fear of losing what they were so sure was God's blessing. Perhaps it was that, but the only blessing they would ever know. Peace was denied them; they were held fast in the anxiety of a *shalom* which was measured merely in tangibles. A rote observance of Moses promised little else, if that much. Yet the whole of Moses and the rest of the Old Testament pointed to something much higher. It was a *shalom* of inner peace, a security of the spirit which trusted God to provide what was truly needed. Instead of presenting God with a list of requirements, the truly spiritual would request from God His requirements.

If one could not trust the God Who made him, and all things he could see, and many things he could not see, this world was a sad and dark place full of danger. Jesus noted far lesser creatures, whose lives appeared to have no significant purpose, seemed quite well taken care of by their Creator. How could anyone imagine the God who called them to service would do any less for them?

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 7

Most people completely mistake the point of this chapter. While we have loads of very fine spiritual guidance built on these words, most of it misses the more substantive train of thought in the larger context. We have noted already Jesus is working to distance Himself from the typical Talmudic rabbinical teachings of His day. He began this session showing how the Pharisees and Scribes (Mosaic lawyers) were promoting a man-made corruption of God's Word. They really had no idea what it was about. As a result, their brand of spirituality was a bad joke,

an obvious hypocrisy. In this chapter, Jesus points out the natural results of such a failed grasp on the Law of Moses: They didn't have a clue how God intended it be taught.

Jewish social and civic leaders of Jesus' day were infamous for harsh demands. Their way of correcting a sinner was with bitterness utterly foreign to God. Such an arrogant and hateful approach naturally provoked rebellion, even if those corrected dare not show it. The method destroyed the mission. Pharisees sharply picked over the slightest detail of their Talmudic laws – truly impossible to obey – and had completely buried the Law of God. It was like trying to remove a splinter from someone else while a wooden post was hanging out of your own flesh. You cannot judge if you have no discernment. Committing the teaching of God's Word to such fools was throwing Passover scraps to dogs (animals viewed by Hebrews of that day as we do jackals today), or tossing jewelry to filthy pigs. They had no idea what good it was.

Teaching the Word of God requires a gentle approach. People who aren't abused are more likely to listen, to be open to the truth. The Word of God is a love offering from above; it cannot be forced on anyone. We rightly condemn abusive parents, who drive away their hungry children with harsh treatment. The Laws of God are also not designed to harm and threaten, but to fill and nourish the hungry soul. The boundaries of the Law are marks of privilege, not deprivation. The Word of God itself demands you approach people the way you want to be approached. What sort of appeal would catch your attention?

Truth is hard enough without artificial burdens. It is like a narrow, steep path, passing through a small wicket. The whole world is full of those who take the easy way out. It requires no special talent to believe in yourself uncritically, without bothering to humbly examine your life against the Word. If you are not first drawn to it with a desire which drives you through all manner of personal sacrifice, you don't have it. If you don't have it, you can't pass it on. To compensate, the Pharisees and Scribes would spend hours each day creating detailed analyses of their predecessors' detailed analyses. It saved their dead consciences, believing they served a God they really didn't know.

Most prophets of that day were also in it for themselves. It was easy to put on a show, to act a part and draw a crowd. However, if watched over time, especially in private moments, one realized they were fake. It's like checking the fruit on a tree. God's Word is inherently nutritious to the soul. A real prophet lives a changed life first, then prophesies, as John the Baptist did. They welcome a probing eye into their private conduct. Fakes will hide, because their root nature remains that of a weed. Give them time; you'll know prophets by their fruits.

Jesus warned that even among those who followed Him, there would be fakes. They would appear to follow His teaching, would appear to do miracles, and carry His name and teaching everywhere. Do not rely on miracles, for they may come in spite of a man being fake. The way to know a man of God is his obedience to God.

Following Jesus means more than mimicking Him. A shallow performance, even with full sincerity, is still a mere performance. No, it requires hearing His teachings with the heart, letting them guide decisions. People who really get it will be building the Kingdom, and building their own lives at the same time. Life founded on true faith and conviction will withstand any storm. The wash of humanity rushing against it will not move it. People who miss it, who don't really get it, but try to fake it as a mere code of conduct, will have nothing. They'll build a life like a

house of mud bricks in the wadi. The first time things get tough, it'll be gone. Worse, they'll be left with a greater confusion and pain than before.

Matthew notes that, whether the people really understood or not, what everyone noticed was how Jesus was like no other rabbi. His teaching carried its own authority. There was no need to cite other authorities, no need to appeal to various experts. This was a teaching which carried power to change men's souls, even as it changed bodies in the crowded healing sessions. And it was the change of souls which truly turned things upside down.

Matthew 8

We are reminded again that Matthew groups teachings and events by themes. While generally following chronological order, the events in the next two chapters are unlikely to have occurred in quite this precise sequence. Matthew's perspective was to show to his Jewish readers how completely Jesus fulfills all the purposes of, and prophecies about, the Nation of Israel. At the same time, it was critical to show how doing these things made Jesus quite contrary to what the leaders of that nation expected, as they had bound themselves to a false reckoning of what Moses and the Prophets had written.

Promptly after the long teaching session on the mountain, Jesus was confronted by a leper. The worshipful approach was the leper's affirmation he believed Jesus was the Messiah, and his words indicated full faith in Jesus' power. The question was not whether He could, but whether He would. Jesus would and did. In the process, He shows His superiority to the Law of Moses, for He touched the leper. This would normally make Him ritually unclean, not to mention risking infection of Himself. Instead, it was Jesus' purity and health which was infectious. The caution about publicity was more for the sake of obeying the meaning of the Law regarding cleansing. Rather than go about bragging he was now clean, the man should first attend to the ritual of presenting himself before a priest. It would also guarantee the priests could not dispute Jesus' evidence.

Indeed, Jesus' authority was even better understood by Gentiles than by His own people. We note in passing Jesus need not have had this conversation directly with the centurion for this to be an accurate report. Rather, a conversation carried on by messenger was considered the same thing in ancient cultures. In this case, the Gentile centurion maintained a proper respect for Jewish sensitivities. Indeed, this man was quite wise and decent, referring to his servant as "my son." We can be sure such a man was highly regarded by his staff and troops. His true brilliance was in realizing, as a man under and over the authority of others, surely the Messiah would not lack for authority to have his command executed by all Creation from any distance. So it was. In marveling over this, Jesus bluntly prophesied that most Jews would find themselves outside the Kingdom they arrogantly considered their natural birthright, because it was about faith, not DNA. The image of reclining in the great dinner hall in the sky was a typical Jewish expression for better days when Messiah would come crush the Romans, and enslave all the Gentiles under Israel. Thus, Gentiles such as this centurion would take their place in the Kingdom, and most Jews would be less than slaves, but aliens.

Jesus was Lord over the Sabbath, too. Arriving at Peter's home in Capernaum, things were pretty much out of domestic order with the matron of the house sick. The large number of

guests invited with Jesus would have to fend for themselves, a deeply embarrassing prospect. Jesus paid no attention to social rules and promptly healed the woman. She immediately recovered and went about the business of the day. That it was clearly the Sabbath can be seen from the context, for the neighbors would not bring out their needy until sundown, when the Jews reckoned the Sabbath to be past – a “day” was evening then morning, so evening began the next day. Here Matthew points out directly that Jesus was fulfilling prophecy, specifically Isaiah 53:4, a Messianic prophecy.

At some point, Jesus decided to leave the crowds to their own devices and make a divine appointment elsewhere. He ordered His disciples to ready a boat for departure, but while waiting was approached by a couple of men seeking to be full-time disciples. One was, of all things, a Scribe – the term for a Jewish lawyer. Perhaps he was genuine in his own mind, but Jesus warned him to count the costs. In this case, it meant leaving behind all the creature comforts to which a Scribe might have grown accustomed. Another was hoping to finish up affairs at home. Under the Law, a man whose father died, or was approaching death, was exempt from all other civil and ritual requirements. Using a standard Hebrew figure of speech about spiritually dead people, Jesus pointed out the Kingdom of Heaven was yet a higher calling, taking precedence over the old ways, including earthly family concerns. Again, it was counting the costs, as Jesus was demonstrating by dropping everything, leaving behind an adoring crowd, at the whims of Kingdom service.

Stepping aboard the little boat, they pushed off. Typical of the Sea of Galilee at various times of the year, a violent storm struck without a hint of warning. Even experienced sailors would panic in such a situation, since it could easily mean death by drowning. Jesus was catching up on some lost sleep, apparently unconcerned. They knew He could save them, but were short on faith enough that they failed to trust His command to be out on sea in the first place. If He was sleeping, were they really in danger? Matthew seems to paint here a picture of Jesus exasperated by their panic, and stopping the storm more to end their whining than to end an actual threat. The disciples’ comments could easily be read as grateful crowing at what a powerful rabbi they followed.

Equally tiresome for us today is dealing with silly questions about where the boat touched ashore. Pedantic reading from a Western viewpoint yields an impossible situation, as there is no place that matches the names and the physical description. First, we don’t know of any place called Gergese. Comparing with the accounts in other Gospels, we get Gadara and Gerasa. These all appear to conflict, until we realize each Gospel writer addressed a different audience. Second, it’s just possible Matthew’s spelling is the result of minor textual corruption. Still, it hardly matters when we approach this from a proper Hebrew frame of mind, where the context explains everything.

The Decapolis was a region of Hellenist Syrians with other mixed ethnic groups who became dominant in the area sometime before 280 BC. Gadara was their chief city for that area near the southeastern shore of Galilee, some six miles inland. However, the city was on a high ridge, from which the Sea was quite visible. Much of this area would have been called by this chief city, and the inhabitants over quite some range could rightly be called “Gadarenes.” Since Gerasa was the capital of Decapolis at that time, all the residents could be also be called “Gerasenes,” just the same as most Samaritans didn’t live in the City of Samaria proper. It

happens a small village just beyond the farthest northern extent of Decapolis control along the shore is today called Kursi (or Kersi, Koursi, etc.). Greek rendering would almost certainly make that Gersa, Geresa, or something similar. Further, we note the herd of pigs was quite far off, just barely visible. People who have explored that area recently tell us one finds two or three places within walking distance of Kursi where a steep slope runs into or close to the water, and cliffs with caves are all over that area.

If we picture a massive herd of 2000 pigs stampeding, they could easily have run squealing the whole six miles from Gadara, if need be, in order to drown themselves. Chances are, they were just over the line from Decapolis in Jewish territory, near Kursi. This would make them Jewish-owned pigs raised for the Gadarene market. Even if the herders could prove in Jewish courts that Jesus was the primary cause of the herd's loss, it was illegal for them to raise pigs in the first place. At any rate, Jesus was not worried about pigs. Stampeding to their deaths insured the demons could do no further harm.

We note also Matthew says there were two men, but the other Gospels see one. Apparently one of them commanded a lot less attention. It hardly matters, because between the two of them, the Demon Legion was a serious problem. Indeed, the whole land at that time was spiritually wide open to dark forces, as the Jews had consistently disobeyed the Word. Those who embrace the Laws of God from a sincere heart will create boundaries demons cannot cross. When the leaders of Israel were sincere and faithful, their whole nation was protected from sickness and demons. The corruption of God's promises, twisted into mere worldly comforts, was a direct rejection of the calling to bring the light of spiritual truth to the world. Not only had the Jewish leadership denied that truth themselves, but tried to prevent others finding it. Their contempt and vile wishes for Gentiles resulted in the deep spiritual malaise hanging over the Promised Land. It was up to Jesus to clean up the mess, and set things right for these two men.

Thus, we draw a picture of Jesus establishing His authority.

Matthew 9

Every kingdom and empire had its enforcement. The Roman standard, symbolizing the authority of Rome, was carried at the head of every column of troops sent to assert that authority. Those troops had sworn allegiance, sometimes drafted at the point of a sword themselves, but it remained legally binding. The authority of the Kingdom of Heaven was not enforced by troops, but by faith. Faith replaces Mosaic Law, because it fulfills the Law of God. That the two – the national Law of Moses versus the spiritual Law of God – were not synonymous is what Matthew emphasized. All the more so, the corrupt Talmudic teachings were hardly consistent with Moses, much less true faith. Further, faith can only come from God as a gift of grace. In that sense, you cannot have faith; faith must have you. This new revelation of faith in the life and teaching of Jesus confirms the Law of Moses in one sense, but also fulfills and completes it, closing the book on its authority on earth. Jesus had already said the Law would remain in force until it was fulfilled, but He meant the Cross. In the meantime, exposing the purpose of the Law meant showing His authority over it, and that authority expressed itself in faith.

In the Judaism of that day, it was taught that all maladies were the result of sin. While that is true in the sense that the Fall brought disease and death, the Jews taught every particular health issue was a direct result of that person's sin (or the sins of their parents). Even today, we tend to feel guilt when gripped in the sorrows of suffering. Everyone so afflicted in that day easily concluded they had sinned somehow. Worse, many afflictions would disqualify one from coming into the Temple to confess and repent, as was also commonly taught. Thus, Jesus addressed that issue when accosted by some fellows carrying their lame friend on a pallet. First, He announces the man's sins are forgiven. This takes care of that concern. Before continuing, Jesus must address those whose teachings brought such condemnation and guilt on the man's soul.

We need not assume when Jesus knew the Scribes' minds on the issue that it was a miracle, since such false teaching had been around for some centuries. His own education surely included it. More importantly, He realized as soon as He mentioned sins forgiven, these lawyers would think He had blasphemed. This was a major crime under the Law of Moses, either by pulling God down to a human level, or elevating something human to divine status. These lawyers would be duty-bound to report this crime. Jesus warned them it would not be blasphemy if He actually did have the authority to forgive sins – that He was the Messiah. He asked them a question in logical terms they could understand: Which is easier to prove, that He could forgive sins or that He could heal the man? Any charlatan can say, "You are forgiven." If someone said, "Take up your bed and walk," we could clearly see and prove whether they had the authority to say it.

Turning to the man whose faith had now been restored, Jesus told him to rise and walk. The man did so, of course. In that context, it was legal proof under Jewish teaching. Jesus would not be able to heal a man still in His sins, so the healing proved the sins were forgiven. Thus, Jesus had authority to forgive sins. As a man of no great legal or political power and authority, nor wealth, Jesus showed all observers the power to forgive sins was something humans could exercise. The very idea brought the crowd to praise and wonder at God's unspeakable gift. At the same time, the Scribes were no doubt infuriated, not least because their power and authority over the people as their "God given right" was slipping away. The gift and power of faith made them insignificant, and even the legal recourse of accusations in a Mosaic Court was denied them, with hundreds or thousands of witnesses rejoicing around them.

This authority and power of Kingdom faith eclipsed the other side of the law, too, the civil law. Again, this account is not precisely chronological, as the other Gospels place events in a different sequence, while here it is by theme. Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, had no doubt already spent time with Jesus. Here was a rabbi truly possessed of a holy power, yet willing to associate with those despised by just about every upstanding Jew. Matthew worked in the toll station in Capernaum, where trade traffic on the main road south and north, or across Galilee by boat, must pass. This was somewhat less odious than collecting taxes from one's own people on behalf of pagan overlords, but it still meant far more close association with pagans than Jews would normally tolerate. Jesus spared nothing in pressing His claims under the Kingdom of Heaven to call Matthew away from this important task to a full-time discipleship.

Of all people, Matthew would be elated. Once a slandered as a sinner, now an intimate of the Messiah, this easily outshone any other social occasion celebrated among Jews. Matthew put on

a lavish celebration, and naturally invited His Master and fellow disciples, as well as all the friends he had. Those friends would surely be other tax-collectors, a tiny defensive minority within Jewish society. This group would include other people labeled “sinners” by the Pharisees and Scribes, people who found themselves at risk of being shunned, kicked out of synagogues, treated spitefully if they dared attend Temple celebrations, and so forth.

The Pharisees couldn’t bring themselves to step inside the household, but as we are told in other Gospels, called from the outer gate of the enclosed courtyard in front of every large home. They inquired how a rabbi of the Law could eat with those whose sins made them by definition “non-Jews,” in effect Gentiles. Jews were forbidden entering the homes of Gentiles, but Jesus reclined at their table. Jesus sent word back to the Pharisees at the gate: His commission was to heal broken spirits. Only those who knew they needed healing would submit to it. Those who felt themselves righteous could hardly repent and seek spiritual healing. It was a common Hebrew proverb. To drive it home, Jesus used a typical rabbinical phrase, telling the Pharisees to go back and study 1 Samuel 15:22: “And Samuel said, ‘Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice! To listen is better than the fat of rams!’”

There was another question: Why should the Lamb of God neglect the observance of ritual fasting? The Law of Moses called for one annual fast, but the Pharisees pressed the Talmudic tradition of fasting Mondays and Thursdays. This was probably on one of those two days. Addressing the bigger question of Mosaic Law, Jesus answered with a bit of humor, referring to this lavish occasion as a wedding feast. In a spiritual sense, it was, for this was Christ seeking His bride. For Jesus, His whole ministry was a spiritual wedding feast. It was as if to say this partying was fully appropriate, for it signaled a new beginning. As ancient Eastern royalty often did, the vestment of the royal heir took place at the prince’s wedding, marked by the symbolic rule of some small portion of the kingdom held up to that point by an appointed viceroy about to retire. In this case, the Law of Moses was being retired. The personal stamp of this Messiah Prince would replace the customs of the viceroy, Moses. Therefore, this celebration at Matthew’s home was the beginning of such changes, a new and invigorating rule marked by joy. This joy could not fit in the old forms of Mosaic rituals, which had reached retirement.

Jesus must have faced that fasting question all too often. We learn from the other Gospels Jesus heard this question at Matthew’s feast, but here it is recalled as a question from the disciples of John the Baptist. After having answered it yet again, Jesus is approached by Jairus, ruler of the local synagogue (as we learn from Mark and Luke). This man had faith to worship Jesus as the Messiah, and knew He could raise the dead.

On the way to his house, Jesus encountered a woman with long term menstrual hemorrhage. Her faith told her simply touching His outer garment, one of the tassels required by Moses on the hem, and not His person, would restore her health. She could not simply come up and talk to Him in public; her malady made her ceremonially unclean. Indeed, He was not just any man, but an important one, with crowds and big-shots in His company. It would be embarrassing to Him to even acknowledge her, much less touch her, so taking this unobtrusive route would have to do. Of course, it worked. Jesus turned to inform her, and to teach the crowd as well, that it was her faith which simultaneously cleansed and healed her, not the touch of His tassel. The

other Gospels record a much fuller story, but Matthew here is focused on the important theme of faith and its authority over every other fact of life.

The authority of faith brought joy where there was once deep sorrow. We find it strange those who mourn could suddenly laugh in derision, but Eastern cultures understand emotions could be conjured when needed. That is, they weren't falsely weeping over the loss of life; it was quite real. Further, this would have been quite a large crowd of mourners, given her father's importance as ruler of the synagogue. They wept because it was appropriate, as the sorrow over death was never far away. They brought genuine sorrow in sympathy to the family who had lost a child. That did not prevent them also deriding Jesus for saying something they thought was silly, even madcap. They felt the context called for it at that moment. That Jesus used the term "sleep" to enunciate a spiritual principle was quickly forgotten by His disciples, we learn later. In the Kingdom of Faith, even death is just a circumstance, a temporary condition. A simple touch from His hand, which would normally make Him ritually unclean, brought her back. Faith took priority over every other authority on earth, including death. Such power and authority simply cannot be hidden, for it reaches beyond the one place no man escapes – the grave.

As He made His way back home, two blind men approach, having been alerted by the incredible news of the girl's reanimation. They had faith enough to recognize He could be no other than the Messiah, the promised Son of David. They also had faith enough to realize they had no merit, but needed mercy. Choosing a private setting, Jesus allowed them to follow Him inside the house. He queried their faith, as much for their own benefit as anything else, then touched and healed them. Then He challenged their faith to obey, with a command to keep this miracle private. Jesus didn't need a faithless mob following Him around as they might a traveling showman. In this they failed, for the two men could not keep silent.

As those two left, they passed another group bringing in a man demonized and mute. Picture a man silenced by demons, with no means to cry out in torment. Instead, he was restricted to non-verbal communication. His mannerisms in this would have made it clear he was demonized. It was the faith of his friends which brought this man to Jesus, and their faith enabled his deliverance and speech. This was a final point by Matthew showing that faith had authority over the Kingdom of Darkness. That sort of authority was simply unheard of in the history of Israel. While Jesus did not address it at that time, Matthew shows that the Jewish leaders understand nothing, for they tell people Jesus' authority over demons could only come from the ruler of demons. They were right for the wrong reasons; Jesus was not using Satan's authority, but held an authority over Satan, too. They had long ago locked themselves out of understanding it was their sins which had unleashed the demons on their land. Under the power of Satan themselves, they insisted only Satan could order demons about with such ease. Their own rituals of deliverance were elaborate and expensive, and seldom seemed to do any good. This Jesus simply dismissed demons by an authority they never grasped, the authority of obedient faith as a gift from God.

Instead, mistaking their spiritual prison for a castle, and their chains as power and freedom, the teachers of Judaism had rejected the call of God to bring light and truth to the world. For them, the downtrodden were despicable, worthy of contempt, entirely to blame for their state. Matthew tells us how Jesus looked upon them as precious sheep. Without a shepherd to lead

them and protect them, they had been chased, mauled and nearly destroyed. Their spirit was gone, along with hope. In desperation, they clung to Jesus and His teaching as the one last grab at salvation. The Jewish leadership had made abstract ideas their treasure, where Jesus showed the ancient Hebrew concept of people as wealth. For Him, they were not the trash of Israel, but the valuable treasure to be salvaged from darkness and death. He taught His disciples to see them that way, as the long awaited harvest of souls. Pray the Father sends more faith laborers, for the crop is beyond measuring.

Matthew 10

A partial answer to the prayer for more spiritual harvest workers was to depute twelve of His followers to carry His message and work to their nation. Having demonstrated the authority of faith sufficiently, Jesus specifically empowered and authorized these men to carry that faith throughout Judea and Galilee. They were to avoid any cities controlled by Gentiles or Samaritans. This was not simply Jewish prejudice, but the proper order of Kingdom logic. We note that, since the Covenant of Moses applies only to that nation, in that land, until the revelation of Messiah, they were not to depart the land and the people. While it was certain they would as a nation reject that message, it must be offered to them first. Before their Covenant can be fulfilled, there must be this one last act of grace within that Covenant, so the chosen deputies were sent to them.

It would be easy to lose ourselves in discussing the identities of these Twelve Disciples. Suffice to note here they are mostly pairs from their families, and several are Jesus' cousins. We are told specifically the Sons of Zebedee are His cousins, as their mothers are sisters. By tradition Matthew's father (variously called Cleopas and Alphaeus) is a brother of Jesus' dad. That makes Matthew, James the Less and Lebbaeus Thaddaeus ("Judas the brother of James") all first cousins of Jesus. Some of the others may have been distant relatives, but the evidence is spotty. While there may have been numerous unknown factors involved, we can be certain the primary evidence of their fitness for this privilege is the manifest results seen later. We must note in passing, even Judas the Betrayer was given the powers the rest carried. At any rate, these were granted His authority, sent out in six pairs to the cities of the Jews in Palestine.

Recalling how Jesus at the end of chapter 9 sees the Jewish peasants as the lost sheep of Israel, Jesus sets conditions for this mission consistent with being still under the Law of Moses, fulfilling the substance of its demands. They are going to fellow Jews, who were bound by the Covenant to deal well with visiting preachers of the Word. These went specifically in the name of Jesus – in the vernacular of that place and time, they operated on His behalf, in His interests, doing His work as stewards of a high person. They were to carry out the same sort of activity we have been seeing in His early ministry in Galilee: healing, delivering from demons, and even raising the dead. The message was summarized in the same words: "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." They were to show the abundant blessings of this message by abundantly exercising His power.

This abundant message should, by rights, produce abundant support of its own. They were among their own nation, and should not need the baggage of foreign travel. This follows in the sandals of the Old Testament prophets who were sent to Judah and Israel. It signaled their

responsibility under the Covenant to hear the message, as demonstrated by providing the life support for the messengers. The men were to embrace every household as their own. If that household was unworthy, it was the Father's problem, Who would make it the people's problem. Indeed, filthy sinners such as Sodom and Gomorrah were in for lighter judgment than any part of Israel rejecting the message of Christ.

Some of this obviously represents long term instructions. They were not to be foolish, but harmless. Expect trouble in some places, as there had been for Jesus already, yet avoid making trouble in any other sense. No authority under Moses was equal to the One who fulfilled Moses, so they were not to fear synagogue councils. Nor need they prepare formal responses to accusations before such councils, but trust God to provide the response fitting the moment. His work will always bring His support. Even if this message rips apart blood kin and households, nothing was more important than getting the word before the people. Those who face worldly suffering for Jesus' sake will find death a mere circumstance. However, for so long as it is possible, flee unjust persecution and keep the mission going. Moving as fast as they could, the Twelve would hardly finish their canvassing before He arrived to follow up.

It was standard rabbinic practice that a disciple should mimic his teacher, though hardly to the ridiculous degree some famous rabbis had taken it. Jesus explained He meant that His disciples should expect the same harassment He had received, including accusations of working for Satan. Such lies would eventually be uncovered for what they were. Indeed, there was nothing of this ministry that was cultic and secretive. Their private discussions were not a matter of privileged insider status, but were preparing the ground for broadcasting to all. There was no need to keep secrets because God Almighty was watching over them as valuable servants. Those who lacked the confidence to be bold also lacked any standing before the Messiah, thus, before the Judge of all things.

The very substance of His claims as Messiah would split households, turning close family members against each other. The divide between those inside and those outside the Kingdom would not require keeping secrets, because the division would be a natural result of the truth. This earth would never see peace. Instead, it would be constantly stirred up in turmoil when confronted with the Kingdom's demands. Following Christ meant setting aside every earthly human concern, regardless the cost, in favor of spiritual peace.

Thus, in this preaching mission, those who received men teaching Christ would be receiving Christ Himself, which is the same as receiving Jehovah. It is not necessary everyone become a prophet, nor suddenly achieve righteousness. They can be offered the full reward of prophets and righteousness simply by embracing the message and mission of those who are righteous prophets. So it is with those who accept their message in the coming tour of Jewish cities. Should they so much as offer some small comfort to the needy because of what they understood from the message, they would have set their feet on the path of the Kingdom.

Matthew continues showing us how Jesus stood the Jewish society on its head. That's because they had drifted so very far from the truth of God. Without this one last chance offered to the people of Israel to finally understand what God had set before them in the Covenant of Moses, the Cross would mean nothing to them. At the same time, it is important to realize in a later commission to these Twelve, the situation is changed, and the needs of the mission would be

different. The procedural instructions were unique to this mission, but the underlying principles by which they faced persecution were eternal. The methods were not the mission. The mission was to bring clear and simple truth, obviously at variance with the established teachings, and to increase the number of disciples prepared to accept the calling to spread the Word.

Matthew 11

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, came preaching repentance under the Law of Moses. His message was harsh judgment, which he most certainly expected the Messiah to bring. He realized those of the Nation of Israel who were unrighteous would be treated at least as bad as Gentiles who rejected the Law. Because his was an accurate view of the Law, John had harsh words for the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who sought to use his popularity to enhance their positions. Matthew shows how Jesus points out the distinction between Jewish traditions and the Word of God.

After sending His Disciples on their mission, He left to participate on His own. Word of Jesus' miraculous signs came to John the Baptist, who was still in prison. The things John was hearing were not quite what he had told everyone to expect, with references to an ax laid at the root of the tree. It would seem John had not well remembered how the hand of wrath was the same hand which brought healing. Either way, his vision of what men should expect from the Messiah was apparently limited. Jesus answered John's query by quoting Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah, matched by what the disciples themselves could see in His miracles. Of course, He bore no grudge to his cousin for not understanding, but encouraged him to reconsider what the Messiah must be and do.

Turning back to the crowd He had been blessing, Jesus queried their understanding of John's place in revelation. Was John someone easily shaken by winds of fashion? Should he have identified with the Jewish leadership? No, he was the last great prophet of the Old Testament, predicted by Malachi, the last book there. John was indeed the herald of the Messiah. No one under the Law of Moses held a higher office before the Lord. Yet anyone entering the Kingdom of Heaven under the New Covenant would have better standing before God than John.

Matthew writes in Greek the words what Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the common language of Hebrew people in His day. We can't be sure what word He used in verse 12, but the English translation "violence" is surely a mistake. It carries connotations Jesus did not mean, for He was describing the transition between the Old and New Covenants, and how completely the Talmudic teachings were wrong. The Jewish traditions had sealed up all hope of redemption by asserting only those whom God made wealthy were in His favor, and only the wealthy Pharisees at that. When John made it clear that wealthy Pharisees were excluded, it became obvious their teaching was false. John said it was repentance, turning to Jehovah with a zeal for His Word. Thus, it was this exuberant zeal Jesus referred to, a zeal all the more evident in response to His teachings.

John's preaching laid the ground for a clear vision of purity and faith, a renewal of Elijah's ministry – whose manner of dress John copied. Jesus' preaching showed these things were themselves gifts of God. John raised a very high standard of supreme commitment and asceticism. Jesus showed no man could achieve it; it was a matter of grace. The Jewish leaders

were like petulant children, who could not lower themselves to embrace either John's or Jesus' message. They rejected John as demon-possessed, and Jesus as immoral. Jesus reminded everyone the truth of what He taught was seen in the fruit of His harvest: Those rejected by Jewish leadership were eagerly serving the Lord.

We have read how crowds followed Him all around Northern Galilee, and vast numbers were healed and delivered from demons. Yet these seldom included the comfortable classes, those who were heavily invested in the status quo. Aside from the rare person of importance, it was almost solely the poor and disenfranchised who turned to Jesus' teaching with that exuberant zeal. Everyone with a lesser response would be left empty. Thus, most of those living in the cities of Northern Galilee ended up worse off than pagan cities infamous for moral filth. Pride in their Jewish heritage would hardly open the gates of Heaven for them.

Jesus was seized by a moment of rejoicing in His Father's mysterious will. The paradox of God's wisdom was in choosing the outcasts, the poor benighted children who could never grow up to the Talmudic standard, as the Pharisees saw them. These truths were committed to the Son, because the Father alone understood what was going on. He alone really knew Jesus. How wonderful it was someone so insignificant in the Jewish world should be the Messiah. Jesus became ever more confident in declaring Himself the Son of God, the one true Voice of Heaven on earth.

His Voice spoke about how very accessible was the Lord. All those who had given up hope under man-made rules were extended an invitation to come and take up the yoke of holiness Jesus offered. This yoke was far easier than any previous teacher had shown, yet harder than anything the Pharisees could bear. The work of God was true rest, the *shalom* that Israel could never keep under the Law.

Matthew 12

The paradox of the Kingdom is that it must come by the power of grace and faith, not by any other means. Jesus makes the audacious claim of being the Messiah. While He offers sufficient proof by the prophecies, it's not about proofs which cannot be denied. He comes in gentleness, showing His power by what He does and by what He does not do, showing the godly results as His sole evidence.

As part of His claim, Jesus shows He is Lord of the Sabbath. The Pharisees had so thoroughly hedged about the Law of Moses that they had long since ceased to understand what it was all about. They were quick to push rules which benefited them personally, but used it to enslave every one else. On a particular Sabbath, Jesus and His disciples walked through a grain field. As was permitted under the Law, they were picking only so much as they might eat as they passed (Deuteronomy 23:25). This portion of Law pointed to the obligation of caring for others in their need. The Pharisees saw only the "work" being done on the Sabbath – by their wild imaginations, the disciples were harvesting, treading and winnowing.

Jesus reminded them how David set aside the strict requirements of the Temple ritual regarding Showbread, by taking as much as he and his men needed to escape Saul (1 Samuel 21:1-6). Moral requirements outweighed the ritual requirements. Further, in order to obey one ritual requirement, the priests disobeyed another. Priests would do their heaviest annual labor

observing special sacrificial requirements even if it fell on a Sabbath. The Temple was merely an earthly symbol of God's presence among men, but Jesus was Himself very truly God among men. Again Jesus bluntly reminded them of their abuse of the Law as a means to restrict others, refusing to act on the much higher requirements of the Law of God – to have mercy on others (Hosea 6:6). Jesus' lordship was above mere ritual.

On another Sabbath, in a synagogue, Jesus answered a rhetorical question with another regarding whether it was permitted under the Law to rescue an animal in distress. Of course, taking care of property became an excuse to side-step the strict requirements of the Law. How much more so can one not care about a fellow Israelite in distress? Again, the Jews considered it "work" to heal, even if Jesus did nothing more than command the man to stretch out his withered hand. When by faith the man strove to do what he clearly could not, he was healed. So deeply mistaken were the Pharisees that they took this as a crime. Who could not be disturbed by such misanthropy? Again, as long as bending the rules helped them retain power and wealth, they were fine with that. Using exceptions in the Law to actually do good things was forbidden.

It was not yet time to bring the conflict to a climax, so Jesus withdrew from those who were quite ready to arrest and try Him under the Talmud. How odd it should be they could so easily drop their fierce hatred against the Herodians – those who compromised with Roman occupation – in order to stop this one man's voice. The audacious claims of Jesus could not be refuted on any grounds except hatred. Yet Jesus was completely unwilling to force anyone over to His viewpoint. He presented His message gently, almost shyly in parables, warning people not to stir up a circus atmosphere. Matthew remarks how this fulfilled the prophecy that the Messiah would never use force, but would build a Kingdom on full respect for the human right to say "no" to God. No debates to force a change in the laws, no calling up an army to revolt, nor attacking the weak facade of Talmudic pretense, nor forcing anyone to decide one way or another. The truth itself was polarizing enough, and would bring its own victory, even to the point of winning the Gentiles to a trust in God more strongly than many generations of Jews who supposedly knew Him best.

When Jesus delivered a demonized man so that he saw and spoke, the Pharisees again alleged He did so by Satan's authority. This time He responded with a stern warning. The Pharisees trained people to cast out demons, as well. Jesus hinted their successes were fake, since it was the very perverted viewpoint of the Talmud which made that region of the world such easy pickings for demonic possession. But assuming they were attacking the Kingdom of Darkness, how could anyone suppose delivering a soul from demons would promote that kingdom? The very attempt at delivering is the standard of judgment; Jesus' effortless success was proof of greater authority, an authority above Satan's – it could only be God's authority. Jesus compared them to shepherds who served only to scatter the sheep He came to gather them into the Kingdom of God (Jeremiah 23:1-6).

Then Jesus pronounced one of the most disputed principles of the Kingdom of Heaven, warning that the one sin from which no man could be redeemed and forgiven was to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not bother to take offense when personally insulted, but this was not merely a slap at Him. It was a slap at God's holy Presence. Should any man be drawn so far into delusion that he can no longer tell the difference between a work of God and a

work of the Devil, there is no hope for him. It remains a simple matter of knowing the work of Lord by its fruit. Speaking evil of human redemption shows the Pharisees were committed to the path of destruction. Sooner or later, the truth of a man's character is known by his words when under stress.

The Pharisees' response was to demand a sign according the False Messianic Expectations, something in line with that mass of childish, arrogant and materialistic nonsense built up since the building of the Second Temple. Jesus pointedly refused, showing how the fruit of His ministry was more than sufficient to show He acted by God's authority. However, their sign would be taken from the singular best representation of Jewish arrogance: Jonah. This was the prophet who ran from a mission because he didn't want the Ninevites to repent and be forgiven. The Pharisees were the same sort, and this was not lost on them. Mere men did not thwart God's purpose. Just as Jonah was three days in a form of death, so would Jesus be in the grave. Meanwhile, the Ninevites repented and found redemption, shaming the Pharisees who rejected this One with a yet greater message of redemption. Even the pagan Queen of Sheba knew wisdom when she saw it, but the Jewish leaders called it evil.

Jesus and His cousin John had shaken and broken Satan's hold on Israel, driving out all manner of demonic activity. The House of Israel had been swept clean, as it were. But when the window of redemption was past, nothing would have changed. The demons would come back with a vengeance and things would only get worse. The Pharisees knew Jesus was blaming them for such hardness of hearts.

Yet, even Jesus' own family wondered if He had not lost His senses, and was taken by demons Himself. While they no doubt had heard Mary's recollections of the miracles of Jesus early life, it was hard for their fleshly minds to imagine the Messiah would act this way. They were just trying to be a good Jewish family, making sure Jesus didn't overwork Himself, didn't neglect His own needs over a bunch of strangers. Surely He would respect His own blood kin. Instead, He declared the only kinship which mattered was that of the Spirit. Human bonding meant nothing compared to the fellowship of the Kingdom of Heaven. The only father who really mattered was the Father in Heaven.

Matthew 13

No one can see God and live. Seeing His face removes you from this mortal existence. God cannot simply reveal Himself to the world as He is, for the world would cease to exist. That Day will come. Until then, His revelation comes in glimmers and glimpses, but never direct knowledge. Man's mind cannot encompass the ultimate reality. If we say the final revelation during this age is in the person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3), it remains for us to know the full context of His appearance on this earth. Even then, how does one know a person? While I may well describe to another certain observable traits of a person, it says more about me than it does about that other person. Then, when the other finally meets that person I describe, only a part of that person will be found in my comments. The real person will be somewhat more than human language can transmit. It works better if I am like the Person I seek to reveal, and let you get to know me.

So it is with the Father and His Kingdom. Jesus could describe something of the Father by describing His concerns in each situation, but the human mind in a fallen state can only absorb so much of that because the organizing principle resides above human intellect. It requires a mind opened to truth which cannot be uttered, by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Even then, the means of expressing the revelation of truth will fall short. All the more so today; our Western languages lend themselves to descriptions of external observable traits, but little of the moral substance of things. In Jesus' Hebrew culture and language, a part of the Ancient Near East, it was an old tradition to regard revelation as something which could be related only in parables. The telling of something very important was more about bringing that moment to life for you, not by describing externals, but by vivid sensations to make you feel you were there. The most important parts of the Old Testament are in parables or parabolic language, the language of personal experience.

In this chapter, Jesus draws a crowd as usual, while sitting on the shore near where He stayed (Peter's house) on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was time to teach, and what better way than to sit in the prow of a small boat just a few yards out, facing the crowd on the shore? This way, more of the crowd could hear Him, and see His dramatic gestures, as He communicated in the ways of prophets. The entire session was a series of parables. It was the Hebrew way, the way to reveal the most difficult and demanding truths of the Kingdom. The Parable of the Sower is really a parable about parables. The truth is offered freely, but not immediately usable – the experience must be savored and incorporated into one's life. Depending on the character of those hearing, the ultimate response varies. While Jesus was willing to explain the parable to His disciples, it was important they realize why parables were the proper means of Kingdom teaching. Those whose spirits were open to the Lord would eventually make sense of it. Those closed to Him would never get it, despite appearances to the contrary. Since Jesus could not winnow the crowds down to those whose hearts were open, it was necessary to teach in parables, allowing the crowds to winnow themselves.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, saying it described the Jewish society of that day. They had the truth, they could understand parables, but got stuck on the stories instead of the truth within. They suffered from the Hellenizing influence, which assumes a given symbol must mean precisely the same thing in every parable, which was contrary to the ancient Hebrew assumptions. Meanwhile, their senses worked, but their spirits were dead. That is, they had rejected the ultimate truth of spiritual wealth, power and security; they demanded the worldly kind, instead. Those who recognized in their hearts that Jesus was the Messiah were in a position to hear the truth. They needed a great deal more, so they could serve as He served. As soon as Jesus explained the parabolic language, they realized what He meant by the polarizing effect of truth. When God passes by, it cannot be a neutral event. You must either drop everything else to follow or you will burrow deeper into worldly concerns to hide from Him. In Jesus came this one last opportunity for Israel to decide once and for all time.

Indeed, the truth itself does all the work. In the Parable of the Tares, Jesus indicates that wherever the people of the Kingdom gather, there will always be fakes. It is not possible in this life to make a final distinction between those inside and those outside the Kingdom. Those of us serving the Kingdom here must resign ourselves to having at least one Judas here and there. The act of cleansing the Body here below would destroy some of those who belong, as well,

especially those still in transition. Thus, the Kingdom develops until the Final Day, when God alone will decide which is fruit or poisonous weeds.

In the next two parables, Jesus shows how the Kingdom grows. As a Mustard Seed, it begins with almost nothing, but spreads to cover the whole world. In that part of the world, mustard can indeed grow into small trees. As Yeast, the Kingdom changes the nature of all things it touches. The lesson of “give it time” is reinforced. God does not operate on our schedule, nor by our rules of management. Revealed truth requires we focus on the truth and transmitting it. There is no way to measure its effect on the spiritual level. If some join us right away, we wisely make room for them, knowing they may fall tomorrow, or some day take our place. Others will hang about, vaguely interested, but never quite sure. They may one day be the central figure of a great ministry, or disappear when it’s no longer entertaining. We cannot know for sure, and it’s not our concern, in the sense that we can’t do anything about it.

Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2, a psalm of Asaph. In that long psalm, Asaph warns the truth of God cannot be taught, only caught. God had made His truth a simple Law in the Covenant of Moses. He backed it up with numerous miracles, but they never got it. It was proof there was no way to make truth simple enough for everyone to handle. Truth only works when the very act of hearing it winnows out the closed hearts. When Jesus dismissed the crowd, the disciples asked for an explanation of the parables. Jesus explains because these men needed a head start on such teaching, some way to bring them back across the lost ground. The warning is clear to turn while the opportunity lasts. The next two parables are actually one, in which Jesus warns the Kingdom will cost you everything in this life. Whether you stumble across it as a treasure in a field, or you’ve been seeking it long and hard like a pearl merchant, it will consume your whole life or you won’t get it at all.

The last parable, the Dagnet, echoes that of the Tares. Doing the work of the Kingdom will draw every kind. Don’t even try to tailor your approach to one or another more desirable target groups. It doesn’t work that way. Human wisdom and efficiency is futile. You cast the Lord’s net and let Him worry about what it drags in, and take what comes. At the appropriate time, the Lord will separate between good and bad. It’s not possible to clear the sea of all the bad fish, so don’t waste any effort with that. When the Final Harvest of Souls comes, then all will be revealed. We must wait on Him to separate. We give ourselves to spreading the truth, not what it captures.

Of course the disciples got it. Then Jesus hit them with something unexpected. All this time He had been disputing with and condemning the Pharisees and Scribes. Yet, it’s not as if their education and training was the problem. It was their hearts. So if a Scribe were to have a Kingdom heart, his education would be a vast treasure of truth. He would be like a desert sheikh, who had in his treasury a host of amazing and wondrous ancient things he had gathered in his nomadic life, mixed in with the most recent technological achievements from far lands. The Scribes and rabbis were not human junk, unless their hearts made them junk, so cast the net of truth among them, too. Meanwhile, study the Word with their level of devotion, so as to have your own treasure to offer.

In stark contrast, Jesus’ experience in Nazareth was a net nearly empty. He went back for a visit with His immediate family, now at least a year after moving off to Capernaum. In the

synagogue He presented the treasures of the Word, but they were offended. How did this rather ordinary local fellow become such a famous man? Why all the fuss about great teachings and great miracles? They never saw any when He was growing up. For them, the treasures of God could not come clothed as ordinary men. With attitudes like that, it's no surprise He could do only a few miracles there. As a parting shot, Jesus quoted an old proverb about how prophets of old were never respected in their own household. It was a way of saying He left to do great works elsewhere because they rejected Him in the first place (Luke 4:16-30). He knew it would be so, but Jesus still gave them another chance.

The Kingdom does not discriminate in one sense: The message is offered to all. There is no basis for market research, no basis for excluding even those obviously not receiving the fullness of the truth. Ours is to press the truth to all, and to keep pressing it as long as they will listen. Let the recipients be self-selecting; truth will find its own path.

Matthew 14

Leaving Nazareth, Jesus returned to Capernaum. For quite some time, Herod Antipas had held John the Baptist in prison. This Herod was the son of Herod the Great by a Samaritan wife, thus making Antipas Gentile by birth. He inherited a portion of his father's domain: Galilee and Perea. Galilee was a large district spreading west from the Sea of Galilee to Phoenicia. Perea was the east bank of the Jordan starting about one-third of the way down from Galilee and stretching down to the mouth of the River Arnon where it emptied into the Dead Sea, some half-way down the eastern shore. There in the highlands of what had been ancient Moab, Herod the Great had built up the ancient fortress at Machaerus, and this was his son's primary residence. It was not far from where John the Baptist ministered on the Lower Jordan River, and was where John languished in prison.

This younger Herod made some pretense of conversion to Judaism, as his grandfather had done, to legitimize his claim to rule over the Jews in his domain. He had infuriated his subjects by putting aside his first wife, an Arab princess, and replacing her with Herodias. This woman was his niece, but also formerly married to his half-brother, from whom he wooed her. This was both incest and adultery, and it would be typical of John the Baptist to criticize this in his call for repentance. He was loath to execute John, both because his subjects would resent it, but also because he, too, was taken with John's charisma.

It was common among kings of the East to imitate ancient customs from legendary empires before them, and Herod Antipas was no different. In a pretense to high Persian culture, he made a vow to accept without reservation any petition offered him during the entertainment portion of his birthday celebration. The entertainment was his step-daughter, no doubt offering a seductive dance recital. This was probably well planned by her mother, Herodias, who clearly resented John's influence over her husband. At his offer of any gift, the girl demanded the head of John the Baptist. Herod was aghast, but was not man enough to rescind his offer, and ordered John executed right away. With the prize of his head delivered in a large serving dish, the girl's departure left him alone with his guilt.

Indicting him further, it could only be his dereliction of direct involvement in affairs in his domain that allowed him to believe this new miracle-working rabbi unknown to him was John

raised from the dead. The disciples of John had retrieved his body for proper burial, and then traveled north to Capernaum to inform his cousin, Jesus. Perhaps some came to join as disciples. While we can see the human wisdom of Jesus moving away from the public eye for awhile in case Herodias added Him to her list of targets, there were other reasons for taking a break. His disciples needed more time and teaching, while the disciples of John needed to mourn in proper company. Jesus needed to mourn the loss of His cousin and forerunner, but also needed time with His Father. We don't know where this wilderness place was, only that He and the group traveled by boat to get there.

Their departure was not as private as Jesus had wished. The Apostle John (John 6:1-4) tells us this event takes place in the run-up to the Passover. Given the ritual and social importance of this festival, many Jews would have begun winding down their daily work in preparation. Many more than usual would be free to pursue the entertainment of Jesus' teaching and miracles. All the more so as they approached a time of year many believed would see the Messiah announce Himself with miracles. They followed Him along the shore, and were on hand to welcome Him when the boat landed. As always, Jesus saw in this crowd the scattered sheep neglected by their shepherds. He began healing them.

As the day wore on toward evening, it occurred to His disciples that these people needed to seek food and shelter, and this was hardly the place, quite far from any village or town. Jesus suggested his men feed the multitude. The men stuttered they could only come up with food for one: five disks of pita bread and two small fish. Jesus directed the food be brought to Him and crowds to sit on the grassy slope. In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus recited a blessing on the God Who provided all things, then began breaking the bread and distributing the food via His disciples. Matthew notes some 5000 men and their families were fed.

Because it was such a common thing, it is not mentioned that each of the Disciples probably carried their own basket, sometimes shaped like a modern backpack. Jews felt compelled to avoid eating non-kosher food in Gentile areas. However, the baskets often contained other items, much as one today might carry in a day-pack. Thus, they would have had each of their baskets filled with leftovers from the miracle feeding, thoughtfully providing their food for the next day or so.

John's account tells us the crowd made ready to crown Jesus their king by force. Jesus ordered a hasty retreat for His disciples by boat, while He dissuaded the crowd and sent them away. He then climbed up onto a mountain alone. He was praying there all night, and toward morning a storm had blown down onto the sea. The disciples in the boat had made little progress against the wind, and Jesus went out walking on the raging waves. Already fearing for their safety, they panicked when they saw the figure striding on the sea swells. They had fallen back into superstition, fearing they were seeing a ghost come to welcome them into death. Jesus called to them to relax, for it was He.

There is no Old Testament tradition of having four watches in the night; Hebrews would have divided them into four-hour segments. More likely everyone had by this time already adapted to the Roman system of three-hour watches, and the fourth Roman watch would have been between 3 AM and 6 AM. Peter, impetuous as ever, in relief asked Jesus to command him out on the water. He had no faith to do this on his own, but was sure enough of Jesus to believe His

Master could make it happen. Jesus saw no reason to reject Peter's request. As Peter got close, he suddenly regained an awareness of the circumstances, and began to sink. Jesus grabbed him using His hands. He chose a more human method of rescue, since Peter was no longer operating by faith. They climbed aboard the boat and the storm ceased.

On the one hand, His disciples already believed Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Yet they struggled with what exactly this meant, still confused by a lifetime of false teachings. They had seen countless people healed, delivered, and now fed from almost nothing. Here He showed utter calm and power over the very elements of weather, something they knew God alone could manipulate. So their belief in Him rose to a new level, as they worshiped Him as God.

In a short time, with the storm gone, they arrived a few miles from home in the city of Gennesaret. This would be roughly four miles (6 km) farther west and a bit south from Capernaum, but still on the northwest shore of the sea. In a short time, word had spread of Jesus' presence, and crowds of sick people were brought into town. They begged Jesus for the privilege of merely touching the fringe on His outer cloak as He walked by, a blue fringe which distinguished rabbis. All who touched it were healed.

It is the nature of people lacking faith to fear, and even panic. We see it in Herod Antipas hearing about Jesus, in Herodias who tricked him into executing John the Baptist. The disciples panicked at the idea of feeding the multitude. They feared for their lives in the storm in spite of the knowledge Jesus had commanded they be there. They panicked at the sight of Him walking on the water, and Peter feared the storm again when he joined Jesus. We can guess they probably dreaded the lack of rest upon landing at Gennesaret and seeing the crowds gather. The contrast in each case is the total aplomb of Jesus. Matthew teaches us: Regardless how traumatic the situation may be, we will not find Our Lord anxiously wringing His hands. As Master of all creation, His peace is available to those who serve Him.

Matthew 15

Faith is a mystical, supernatural gift. It can be defined as a commitment to God's revelation, His provision for bringing that revelation to life in His people. It does not yield easily to examination from our Western perspective, and modern teaching often mistakes the manifestations of faith as the thing itself. This is hardly new, for Jesus faced it often in His ministry.

The Covenant of the Law was never intended to save souls, but to exemplify faith as manifested within the circumstances of the Nation of Israel as they prepared to conquer and occupy the land God had promised through Abraham. Reading between the lines of Moses' books, we see a call to the soul to embrace God, a call for faith which transcends the mere rote provisions of ritual observance (1 Samuel 15:22-23). However, it was obvious to anyone that most of Israel never got it. Thus, immediately after publishing the Covenant, Moses had to sit as judge over the endless disputes between Israelites. This wasn't judgment over honest confusion and a sincere desire to please God, but disputes in which each tried to get away with as much as they could. Very little of it required a word from God to zero in on the heart of the matter, and those few were recorded in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The rest was a matter of

keeping the peace according to the basic principles of Creation so the nation could survive as a means to revelation.

Of course, the wrangling did not end with Moses. It would be natural in the Semitic races to maintain an oral record of decisions based on the Law. Jewish tradition alleges a specific lineage of passing this oral body down through named individuals, including the likes of Joshua, Jeremiah, Ezra, Hillel, Gamaliel, and so forth until it was finally committed to writing after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. So in Jesus' day it was still mostly oral and it's obvious He had been exposed to some of this material. Perhaps a portion of it really was the genuine tradition of the ancients, but very little of it seems to actually derive from faith. Most of it reflects a very worldly viewpoint, though perhaps nonetheless wise at times. Worst of all, this tradition became captive to Hellenized rationalism, foreign to the Hebrew reasoning of Moses. In Jesus' day, this "tradition of the elders" had been elevated to reverence above the actual Law of Moses as written. They offered the specious claim that the Talmudic traditions were the Oral Law of Moses.

This was blasphemy, of course. When the Pharisees and Scribes raised the issue with Jesus regarding His disciples, that the men didn't observe the traditional ritual rinsing of hands before meals, it was no small thing in their eyes. So anxious were these men sent from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to compel obedience to this human tradition, they threatened transgressors with excommunication, giving them the status of heathens. Jesus responded in kind, showing how the same traditions were evil, a violation of faith and obedience to the plain meaning of the Law.

For example, the rabbis had developed a legal exception to the normal expectation adult children would provide support and comfort to their aging parents. It is impossible to emphasize enough how fundamental to all God's Laws was the requirement to share one's property with needy family members. For rabbis it was a simple matter of declaring their property dedicated to God, via the Temple, as a trust. That is, a man could live comfortably on his wealth during his lifetime, but upon death it all passed to the Temple. This became an excuse to withhold support from family members, so as to preserve the maximum value of the estate, never mind how the man might live extravagantly in the meantime. God would not accept on His altar the proceeds of crime, and this was criminal neglect. Jesus pointedly hammered His questioners as hypocrites, quoting from Isaiah about empty lip-service to the Law as a direct prophecy of the Pharisees and Scribes.

To punctuate His point, Jesus called the crowd to pay attention to an important lesson. He spoke in an epigram, a short pithy saying easy to remember. The point was that hands which had not been blessed by this man-made ritual did not so defile the food as to defile the spirit of a man when he stands before God. This infuriated the examiners from Jerusalem. Jesus used an obvious parable to answer: God did not sponsor pious extensions of the Law of Moses, especially Hellenized extensions, since that Law in itself was a poor shadow of God's true Law. Blind as the Pharisees were to God's revelation, their opinions didn't matter. Indeed, they did more harm than good to the nation. Yet, even this simple epigram, plain enough to anger the Pharisees, puzzled His disciples. Jesus clarified the matter by showing how evil was a matter of fallen human will – Hebrew tradition referred to the heart as the seat of the will. The Scribes

and Pharisees had it backwards, largely because of Talmudic teaching. God didn't care about dust on the hands, but judged filth in the heart.

However, it was wise to take a break and depart from the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin and take a vacation in the Roman district of Tyre and Sidon. While thus occupied, Jesus and His disciples were confronted by a Canaanite woman residing in that district whose daughter was demonized. Unlike the self-righteous Pharisees and Scribes, this woman was well aware of her dire need and to Whom she could go for salvation. At first Jesus gave her time to express her faith, no doubt as a means to teaching His disciples. When they complained of her noisome behavior, He turned and reminded her His mission at this point was to "the lost sheep of Israel," not the lost sheep of other nations. She responded by falling at His feet and blocking further travel. His answer was a gentle parable about tossing the children's food to puppies. Jews had long used the term "dog" to describe just about anyone from a nation they despised, particularly the Canaanites they were supposed to have slaughtered or driven out of the land under Joshua.

Rather than bridle at the implied insult, her faith absorbed the parable and turned it around: Children were messy eaters. Were there not a few crumbs on the floor? She understood the rejection Jesus faced from His own people. She didn't want what was theirs, only what they rejected. Here we see faith in action, for only by faith can parables be understood and applied. It was a lesson for the disciples. Jesus rejoiced at the courage her faith engendered, and granted her request. In another place, Jesus tells a parable of faithful persistence which sounds very much like this scene. She would not have dared carry things this far had she not been empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.

To press the teaching further, Jesus set up another test of faith. Finding a suitable place to hold another teaching and healing session, Jesus waited as the normal crowd gathered. They carried those in need of healing, and all were amazed at the problems Jesus could remedy. It was in part a response to their faith in bringing cases otherwise regarded as hopeless. Faith exercised cannot help but bring glory to our Lord.

However, they were in a remote place, and after three days of this it was time to consider other types of physical needs. Jesus explained the crowd needed food, because if He sent them away now, they would not be strong enough to make it home. A lot of good it does to heal people, then leave them to starve. He placed this quandary in their hands. Again they failed, for they were still looking at it from a worldly perspective, discussing food supply so far from farms or markets. Had they forgotten already, after the previous miraculous mass feeding? Jesus asked what they had on hand. What made a small snack for the group was enough, as before. Also as before, several thousand were fed, and there was enough left over to feed the disciples for a few days.

The highest law of the Kingdom of Heaven is faith. While Jesus and the Apostles taught it was best to obey the laws and customs when you could, by no means could they be equated with God's Law. As used by the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, the Talmudic teachings were blasphemy, imparting spiritual blindness. It raised human traditions above God's Word. Faith trumped that tradition. Further, even the Law of Moses was merely an example, for the Canaanite woman's faith trumped that, as well. It was the Old Testament which required Jesus

to restrict His earthly ministry to Israel, but which also permitted Him to respond to her faith. That faith trumped the very laws of nature, too. By faith were people healed of the most devastating conditions, and thousands were fed full from a snack. By faith in the hearts of people God shows He rises above human logic, and cannot be constrained by human understanding. Creation itself was fungible in the hands of God.

Matthew 16

By the very words in the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven,” it should be obvious it would be a kingdom not of this world. Yet the traditions of the Jewish leadership had completely discounted that element in the Covenant of the Law. Having totally missed the implications of Messianic prophecies, they were utterly certain all they needed to seek was paradise on earth. Every spiritual issue was twisted into a mere earthly concern. Had Satan himself removed the Romans, granted some wealth and a decent harvest or two, they would gladly have placed him on David’s throne. For this reason, the teachings of Jesus were incomprehensible to them.

Having heard of all these miracles, which to the national leaders in Jerusalem sounded very much like the false Messiah they expected, the Sanhedrin sent yet another delegation to Jesus. This time it included both Pharisees and Sadducees. The former we know to have arisen as a supposed revival of covenant faithfulness, but a concept long twisted by Hellenized materialist assumptions. True, it was a list of material comforts the Law of Moses seemed to promise, and little more, but its purpose was far above that. However, the Pharisees were the primary force behind promoting the corrupt Talmudic expansions of Mosaic Law. We saw in the previous chapter how these expansions served to break the Law itself.

The Sadducees were quite the opposite, thoroughly Hellenized in a different way. They embraced the spirit of the Law, but this became an excuse for cynicism. They used the abstract applications of Mosaic Law for a public show, but denied the afterlife to which the Pharisees at least paid lip service. We end up with Pharisees who were conservative, legalistic, materialistic Hellenists, and Sadducees who were liberal, immoral, materialistic Hellenists.

Together, these two dominant political parties were deeply concerned with mere political matters as if it were an issue of holiness. Jesus was upsetting their applecart. So they proposed a test to examine a sample miracle to see if He was just faking it, somehow practicing some sleight of hand or something. Jesus mocked their demand to see something from Heaven by talking about the signs in the heavens, using a parable regarding wisdom.

They might be children of the Law, but were not children of God. They knew all about the things of this world, but understood nothing of God’s character. The prophets had granted more than enough teaching and warnings, and Israel had resolutely turned away, like an adulterous wife. Having strayed so very far away from the Hebrew mystical understanding of God’s creation, they no longer had the bare ability to hear from God. To drive the point home, Jesus referred to the experience of Jonah. On the one hand, Jonah represents the ultimate indictment of Israel’s complete failure to take God’s revelation to the world. Instead, their smug racism condemned all mankind to Hell. Jesus compared Himself to Jonah in a different way, in that He would be presumed dead for three days, then rise to take the message to the world. Jesus was correcting the mistakes of Israel, as exemplified by Jonah’s attitude about his mission.

It would be a mistake to think the delegation weren't stung by the reminder of their racist hatred.

On this occasion crossing the Galilee, the disciples realized they forgot to pack food. While they were discussing this, Jesus tossed them a parabolic line about the leaven of the Sanhedrin. Jewish teaching had become utterly worthless in embracing materialism, turning away from the Spirit. The Disciples missed the cue, by taking the comment from a materialist viewpoint, precisely the problem He was indicating. Jesus berated them, reminding them of the abundance of food He had produced twice. Even if they starved for a few days, it would hardly hinder their mission. This was the whole point of His comment.

The encounter with the delegation from Jerusalem must have brought to the forefront of Jesus' mind His impending suffering and death. They had taken a journey some 20 miles north toward Caesarea Philippi. As usual, we aren't told the ostensible purpose, which hardly matters, but the spiritual events which do matter. It was not a question of the Disciples' knowledge, but their spiritual perception. First, we notice what the world thought of Jesus. The answers ranged all over the map of human thought. But what did the Disciples think? It was natural that Peter should answer first, for he was even now the acknowledged leader among the Twelve, being the eldest, not to mention brash. In his brashness, he was altogether correct this time: Jesus was the promised Messiah, and the unique Son of God. His Master replied the truth of this answer was neither a matter of mere humans, nor of human understanding. It was the truth of God Almighty. Peter was altogether certain of his answer, but it smacks of a child in school correctly quoting the textbook answer to a question he hardly understands. Time was so short, and there was so much they needed to grow to carry on this gospel ministry.

Still, Jesus is able to press the message with a sense of humor. Looking past the nit-picking debate over the meaning of the words in the Greek text of Matthew's Gospel, we see a Hebrew play on words which just barely comes across in English. Peter, the name Jesus gave His cousin, was both a joke and prophecy. If anyone was more likely to bluster and brag, then reverse himself repeatedly, it was Simon. Jesus called him "the rock." Later, it would be a fit name. Hebrew culture often presumed a man's name given at birth would predict his character, but a name given by one's lord upon vestment of an office was more a title, though often there might be a pun involved. In this setting, Jesus called attention to the joke, and then added the image of Peter as a stone having been chiseled from the foundation bedrock of this mighty confession of who Jesus was. With such a confession, Peter would be the first stone of a grand building (1 Peter 2:4-6), a massive congregation of souls committed to following Him.

The gates of a city were the not just a defense, but the place where the local wise men gathered to conduct the business of the city, especially in dispensing justice as a lower community courts system. The court system of Hades would not be able to stand in the face of God's truth as spoken by Peter. With such a declaration of faith, Peter – or anyone else – could execute the justice of God in this fallen world. With such an understanding, the congregation of Christ's followers would represent the King of Heaven in all the earth. Indeed, it would be for Peter to exercise the first use of Kingdom keys to open this same truth to those outside Israel living in Palestine. It was Peter who led the way in taking the message to the Diaspora at Pentecost, to Samaritans later (Acts 8:14-17) and finally to Gentiles (Acts 10). In Hebrew thinking, keys were

not about authority to control as a ruler, but more like a key manager giving access to the Ruler, rather like a welcoming home.

However, the time had not yet come to carry Peter's declaration into the world. That had to wait for the carrying out of God's sentence against all sin. Here it was Jesus began to introduce to His Disciples just what sort of Messiah He was. The Jewish leadership was the very heart of opposition on this earth. In the end, they would kill Jesus. Yet, this would hardly be the end of the matter, for He would rise again the third day. Having already taken the mantle of junior leader, Peter pulled Jesus aside and insisted He stop saying such things. Brash as ever, the text indicates Peter was quite sharp in his rebuke. Jesus responded by warning Peter such thoughts made him an adversary, too. Peter was still trapped in dreams of a political kingdom on this earth, not thinking spiritually.

Indeed, Jesus pointedly said following Him required nailing this life to a cross. The image was shocking. Learning to let go of this world, not just our goods and our position, but all our hopes and dreams for this life, would be the most agonizing experience any of them could imagine. Yet it was the only way. Clinging to this existence guaranteed the loss of it and the soul, too. The price of eternal salvation for the soul was abandonment of this life. When He comes back to end this age and take up the harvest of souls with His angels, those whose works reflect such truth would join Him in eternity, not some mere earthly kingdom.

Matthew records Jesus' last comment, which was surely something meant to lighten the mood of a dark discussion about His coming death and their future sufferings. Some of those standing with Him at that moment would see something of that eternal glory when the Kingdom was inaugurated on this earth. They would see Him in His glorified body, and would begin living in the temporal manifestation of His reign before they left this world. They would get a taste of eternity here on earth.

Matthew 17

The context keeps us on the retreat north from Galilee, up near Caesarea Philippi, roughly a week after Peter's dramatic declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. The apparent reason for the retreat was avoiding an untimely arrest by the Sanhedrin. Jesus must insure He dies as the Passover Lamb. This is not some cynical plot to appear falsely as the Messiah, but obedience to the Law and Prophets, the Word of His Father. Furthermore, it was necessary that His Disciples receive further training. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, all these experiences and teachings would be recalled with their proper meaning.

Having already vested Peter as the leader among the Disciples, Jesus adds the Sons of Zebedee to round out the leadership team. Their fitness for this became more apparent after the Day of Pentecost. Until that point, we see them jockeying for privilege as if they possessed very little understanding. However, it's safe to assume a certain level of kinship and fellowship which exceeded merely being cousins of Jesus. As a man, He very much needed their support for the coming trial, along with having someone trustworthy in charge during the early days of building His Kingdom. Their leadership training began with a demonstration of some things Jesus had been teaching all along.

While a lot of ink has been spilled over which mountain it was they climbed, it hardly matters. That's part of the lesson here. We can safely assume it was part of Mount Hermon or some other major rise which afforded Jesus and the trio some measure of privacy. They needed very much to realize this was not about politics and privilege, but about the ongoing work of revelation. Thus, in the middle of prayer over their task as leaders, they witnessed a transformation in their Master. He took on the form of His true identity. While much of the lore common to Hebrew teaching has been lost, we know at least when the divine comes into contact with the fallen Creation, there is a glow which is clearly unearthly. Significantly, two figures appear at His side: Moses and Elijah. While the latter had a mode of dress which made him distinctive (2 Kings 1:8), and copied by John the Baptist as the signal he was calling all men to repent (Matthew 3:4), we aren't told of a distinctive garb for Moses. More than likely, their exchange of greetings and conversation with Jesus was more than enough to establish who they were. While the symbolism is thick, most important were their endorsements of Jesus and His teaching, representing all the Law and the Prophets. Were there any doubts about Jesus correctly teaching what the Old Testament was all about, it was removed here. There were three ordinary witnesses to testify, sufficient in any Jewish court, that Jesus was God's clearest revelation. It didn't matter where they were; wherever Jesus was, all God's glory and truth was present.

This was no quick flash, no brief conversation. Peter recovered enough from his amazement to show he clearly had not grasped the meaning of it all. Still thinking along the lines of an earthly paradise ruled by Jesus, he suggested building on the mountain top a meeting place, with hopes of keeping Moses and Elijah around for awhile. Surely Peter had a thousand questions he would ask them to clarify matters in his own mind. Before Peter even finished proposing this, the presence of God Himself – described as both an enveloping cloudy presence, yet luminescent – overwhelmed them all. The voice from the cloud affirmed that Jesus was the Son of God, but pointedly told Peter and his two cousins there was no need to probe the matter with Moses and Elijah. All they needed to know came from the mouth of Jesus, because Jehovah was completely satisfied with their Master's work. The voice was enough to make them swoon, with the altogether normal response of any human to the presence of God Almighty: complete and utter fear, reverence and awe.

Jesus came over and touched them, a warm and friendly gesture. His words were, "Arise, fear not." Words not idly chosen, He pronounced them fit to stand before God, if they would take up the faith to do so. Upon looking around, they saw the dramatic scene was gone. While it burned in their minds, Jesus warned they were not to relate this experience until after His resurrection. This presented a problem for them. Was it not prophesied Elijah had to appear before the Messiah could begin to reign (Malachi 4:5-6)? Surely this required announcement! Jesus answered this was true, and had already happened, but Elijah's message was rejected, and he was treated very badly. They realized this prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist, who even dressed like Elijah. To the degree Israel would accept his message, all things were restored, but only a small righteous remnant did not bow the knee to a false understanding of God's Word (1 Kings 19:18). Yet from this tiny remnant of Israel, Jesus had promised to build His Kingdom, a spiritual kingdom. Everything had to be understood in the spiritual sense, from the otherworldly mind of the ancient faith.

As always, Jesus had been teaching crowds who needed healing, gathered in open areas outside the towns and cities. They descended from the mountaintop experience to find the usual crowd, but with an unusual problem. A young boy was demonized, as manifested by a condition literally translated as “moon-struck.” Whether it resembled modern epilepsy isn’t important. What mattered is the boy was seized suddenly by the demon at times, and too often the seizures found him falling into danger. The other nine disciples had been unable to cast the demon out. Just whose faith was the failure also didn’t matter. The whole Jewish nation had been so long and so far separated from Moses and the Prophets, they simply could not grasp the underlying message of Jesus, the message which empowered His miracles. Taking His divine authority, Jesus dismissed the demon. Notice, while Jesus had given His disciples authority over sickness and demons (Matthew 10:1), the authority remained His (Jude 1:9). The lack of persistence in using this delegated authority indicated a lack of faith.

When they later asked Jesus privately why they failed this time, His answer points to something we easily miss. The power of faith while in this world, and over things of this world, is by no means related to power as this world understands it. The weakness of the flesh is the problem, but paradoxically is the answer, too. To weaken the flesh spiritually is to empower the spirit over the flesh. Thus, it is hardly a matter of ritual self-abuse, but a holy disregard for things of lesser importance to engage spiritual powers in the spirit realm in a spiritual way. The phrase “prayer and fasting” was symbolic of self-mortification. We as humans are nothing, and thinking we are something is the fundamental failure. By implication, we see the disciples were not acting in faith, but in some way exhibited an element of self pride. That’s hardly surprising when, for the first time we know of, there was an element of segregation between the three and the nine.

The nine did not take it well. To the very last day of Jesus’ ministry on earth, they struggled with this human ambition to be seen as great in the eyes of others. By this time they should have passed the period of discipleship where they silently absorb the master’s teaching, and were now ready to begin acting on it. Had they actually absorbed His teaching, commanding the Mount of Transfiguration itself to jump into the sea would have been an elementary task for neophytes. As we saw in the previous lesson, the key to that power was to embrace death. Their spiritual understanding, and thus their commitment – another word for “faith” – to this life of the Spirit didn’t amount to the mustard seed Jesus mentioned once before (Matthew 13:31).

Eventually they all made their way back toward Capernaum. On the way, it surely crossed their minds they were once again coming within easy reach of the Sanhedrin. It was the right time to approach once again the matter of His impending suffering and death. Jesus’ point was to show this would be the path to His conquest, His ultimate victory. They didn’t see it. Instead, they grieved at their sense of loss. Things were just beginning to firm up, they must have thought. Now it would all come apart. They never quite grasped that actions of human government, even to the point of taking life, could hardly interrupt the God’s plans for His Kingdom.

Indeed, Jesus showed a simple principle in dealing with human government. It was well past the time of year for paying the Temple Tax (Exodus 30:11-16). Peter was confronted by the local committee for that tax, asking in essence why he and Jesus had not paid it. Was Jesus some kind of rebel against His nation? Peter didn’t think so, but hurried off to discuss it with Jesus. They didn’t have the money. Before Peter could ask, Jesus wanted to clarify the principles involved. It

was common knowledge tribute was collected by rulers from conquered nations, not their own people. The priests were exempt; even more so was the God whose Temple it was. As Son of God, He and His close Disciples were exempt by the nature of their duties. By extension, the entire Law of Moses and Prophets were subject to Jesus' interpretation. The Mount of Transfiguration made that all too obvious. Following Christ fulfilled the Law.

Yet, there was little to be gained by asserting that privilege at every turn. In the case of the Temple Tax, it was best to pay up. Since they were broke, Peter needed to return to his previous employment to pay, though not in the sense of fishing from a boat all night, or even in the surf. Rather, Peter was to throw in a single hook and take the first fish which he caught. Fishermen today know anything bright and shiny dropped in the water serves to lure some fish to bite. In the busy port of Capernaum, how many coins were accidentally lost in the sea? In this case, Peter would find in the mouth of this fish a coin of sufficient value to pay the tax for Jesus and Peter. Apparently the fish itself would be small enough he couldn't swallow it, so it was all a good Hebrew joke on Peter the fisherman. Meanwhile, Jesus and His friends stayed under the radar just a bit longer.

Matthew 18

We come to the final days in Galilee, before Jesus goes to offer Himself as a sacrifice on the Cross. Matthew describes one more essential lesson in pastoral leadership Jesus gave to His Disciples. As always, our familiarity with the lessons and parables in isolation from the context has served to destroy some of the meaning. While our understanding may not be entirely wrong, we are spiritually poorer for not having the richness of the context Jesus Himself gave for these lessons. Here, Jesus is responding to a persistent blindness in the Twelve to the fundamental nature of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Peter has hosted Jesus for at least a couple of years in Capernaum. As a courtesy to His host, Jesus helped pay the Temple Tax for both of them. We can assume the others had to pay their own way. Matthew should hardly have been troubled, but some of the others might not have it so easy. There had already arisen sensitivity over their relative status as leaders in Jesus' ministry, and He had already been teaching them it was near the time things should come to a head. Since they didn't know quite how to handle the idea that the crown lay through the Cross, we find them considering instead the details of how the Messianic Kingdom would play out, specifically regarding who among them was designated for which position in the Messianic Court. They were still suffering from worldly ambitions, envy, and confusion about Messianic expectations.

Children were given scant attention in the Ancient Near East, except within the privacy of the family. Even though highly valued and prized as a proof of God's favor, Hebrew parents did not cater to them the way we do in the West. While Hebrew tradition shared this with just about every other culture at that time, we note men didn't give children a lot of time until they were old enough to commence education and training, sometime around age nine. Indeed, we learn from the laws of the time that death from abuse of one younger than nine provoked no curiosity from officials, because their loss was simply a loss to the family. Only after their bar-Mitzvah ceremony, meaning literally "a son of the Law," did they have any status in the

community, and could ask questions in the synagogue, for example. We know from several Gospel passages that Jesus broke this mold. When the Disciples asked Him about their assignments, He called a nearby child, who was surely younger than nine. The boy took a place in the center of the group.

This rather unimportant figure became an object lesson. Jesus referred to a need to be changed, to experience a complete shift in understanding how the world works. Rather than the child needing to be trained to the ways of life, it is the world which needed the understanding of a child to enter life in the Kingdom. Once people are “converted” to become like children, they are fit for citizenship. This presented a bewildering paradox to the Twelve, who by now had begun to think of themselves as a class apart. Instead, it’s not their leadership they needed to work on, but their mere inclusion in the Kingdom. Children lack ambition, and are all too happy just to be included, to be taken seriously in any degree. They are quite indiscriminate in following the leadership of any adult who seems to care about them. Becoming childlike is the sort of thing which fits men for leadership in the Kingdom.

Once having adopted this childlike faith and trust, any leader in the Kingdom takes up the responsibility of welcoming other children. It is a solemn duty, and taking it lightly by casually misleading them is no joke. Typical adult pranks on children were an indicator of bad character. Taking advantage of their dependency by leading them astray for any reason is a sin so great, they deserve one of the most hideous forms of Eastern punishment known: tossed in the sea weighted down by a millstone large enough that it requires a donkey to push it. It’s bad enough the world is loaded with people who lead others astray; those who abuse spiritual seekers deserve the greater punishment from God. It would be worth any price to avoid seducing the vulnerable. It’s not hard to imagine Jesus draws a picture of the repulsive creatures who debauch children while pretending to love them. If you can’t keep your hands to yourself, or even your eyes, remove them. It’s better to live life with maimed flesh than to stand before God having seduced any spiritual child to sin.

Further, the dismissive attitude many leaders of that day showed to their subordinates was completely unacceptable in the Kingdom. We all stand before God as children before their Father; relative differences in roles are not really significant. Becoming impatient and dismissing someone who doesn’t rise to your personal demands is approaching blasphemy. You are not God, and God keeps the angelic representatives of His children close at hand. Jesus uses the image here of a tiny elite group within the court of an Eastern potentate. Most people with business at the court never actually see the ruler, but deal with his servants, taking their words as words of the lord himself. A choice few are permitted to actually see him face to face on a regular basis. In God’s courts, each soul is precious! A better translation of verse 12 has the shepherd leaving his flock in a safe place in the wilderness, while he goes off and seeks the one which got lost. It’s not a matter of the others having no value, but that all are invaluable individually. This is frankly a revolutionary concept in that context. While some shepherds would give names to their sheep, it was extremely rare he would do so for a large flock, yet Jehovah calls each of us by name.

Thus, when dealing with a straying brother, leaders must assume his soul is so precious they would be loath to let him go. Give him every chance to repent. By this time, rabbis had long realized Israel was under a foreign ruler in part because no one bothered to concern himself

with his neighbor's sins (Leviticus 19:17). This emphasizes the biblical communitarian instinct built into the Kingdom. Go to the brother privately, where it's most likely he'll climb down from presumptuous sin. If that fails, bring a few witnesses to establish whether he is indeed hardened in this sin (Deuteronomy 19:15). If all else fails, let the whole congregation know why they must ostracize this brother. The obvious assumption is the fault in view is dangerous to the community of faith, something which would cause a child to stumble. Such irresponsible behavior is symbolically associated with heathens (*goyyim* or Gentiles) and those Jews (publicans like Matthew had been) who served them.

Jesus then calls to their memory a standard rabbinical concept: legally binding and loosing. It was clearly understood by almost anyone who attended synagogue that the point was to teach the Law of Moses in the context of everyday life. As cultural and technological shifts came, it was necessary to understand how the agrarian orientation of the Law could be extrapolated to obey the intent. This was the original idea behind the Talmud before it was corrupted by Hellenist rational assumptions. Thus, preachers and teachers of the Law were to declare what was bound, forbidden by Law, and what was loosed, or acceptable. As leaders in the Kingdom, this responsibility was conferred on all the Disciples, and it was no small matter. However, it was not impossible to discern. While one might be mistaken in isolation, two hearts genuinely seeking God's face like children would surely come to a useful conclusion. The smallest possible congregation of faith would not lack for God's presence, and they would eventually know what was bound or loosed in His eyes.

This teaching brought to Peter's mind a question about forgiveness. While the Pharisees taught one only need forgive the same mistake three times, Peter knew that was wrong. Would a larger number do – seven? That was a good, sacred number. Jesus' answer showed Peter was missing the point. Echoing the number revealed in Daniel's prophecy (9:24ff) as the symbolic measure of God's patience with Israel's sin, Jesus indicated there was actually no limit. To emphasize the point, He offered the parable of Debt Forgiveness.

We've noted already many rulers of that time pretended to imitate the legendary luxury and manners of the Persian Empire. Jesus' calls up the image of such a potentate who is auditing his accounts, suggesting the domain was insolvent. The apparent cause was the impossibly flagrant embezzling of a satrap. When the man begged, his lord decided to treat it as a loan, but forgave it. This man promptly went out and seized one of his debtors, who owed a rather ordinary sum. Instead of passing on that magnanimity he had received, he impatiently remanded the servant to a debtor's slave farm. When word got back to the potentate, he ordered the forgiven debt reinstated, and treated the man according to his initial offense of embezzling.

We stand before God with a debt of sin. By no stretch of any imagination could we repay from our own resources. There is nothing we can do, and we most certainly deserve in this life the worst. Yet God chooses to forgive those who fully confess and humble themselves before Him. How can we do any less? The sins which concern us as leaders in the congregation are likely much smaller than our own sins before God. The consequences we mete out are equally small, because the issue is sin on a much lower level. However, the power to cause anguish to the soul of a child of God is huge. We rebuke a child of God for endangering other children of God. If our demands themselves constitute a corrupting influence on the faith of another, we are a threat to the Kingdom. Such indicates we have no place in that Kingdom. Being a leader in the

Kingdom requires we constantly remember our place as children, with a solemn task for leading the other children closer to Him.

Matthew 19

In the Kingdom of Heaven, treasure is defined quite differently than it is in the world. The wealth of the Kingdom was the growth of souls, both in number and in quality. Material goods were simply tools, and often completely unneeded in Kingdom business. Instead of real estate, Jehovah sought to expand the human territory in redemption from sin. Nothing mattered more than people.

As Jesus set His face toward His final destiny of winning the world by the price of His blood, He and His disciples traveled down the East Bank of Jordan to the district of Perea. Since Jews typically refused to tread upon Samaritan ground, travel between Galilee and Judea meant crossing the Jordan, which formed the eastern border of Samaria. The main routes then crossed back over into Judea at or near Jericho. Jesus and His Disciples remained in this area for some days.

As was customary for them over the past three years, He taught and healed in open areas. With the crowd were the ever-present agents of the Sanhedrin. They asked Him about divorce. Jesus was consistent on His teaching about divorce (ch. 5:31-32). The question was a matter of politics in Jesus' day. Would he favor the School of Hillel, dominated by the Sadducees who ruled the Sanhedrin, a rather liberal bunch? They were nonetheless the mainstream viewpoint, we are told. Or would he favor the Pharisees and the School of Shammai, which tended to be cranky and precise, with high conservative standards? The Sadducees saw Moses' word for "shameful" as practically anything that displeased a man. The Pharisees insisted on a more literal reading, a matter of genuine moral impurity.

Jesus answered neither, but recalled the original marriage in Eden. He explained the concept of one flesh, something neither school of thought had ever mentioned. Their question showed they misconstrued Moses' command as license (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), when in reality it was a radically new command for that day, and protected women from men's caprice. Again Jesus points out that the Law of Moses was a mere shadow of the much higher Law of Heaven. The sole legitimate cause of divorce is unfaithfulness. Once a woman has surrendered her body, and the man has taken it, the matter is settled in Heaven. If she presumes to offer it to another, she has defiled herself and he is permitted (not required) to divorce her. He may not punish her any other way. Any other complaint he may have about her is petty selfishness; real men know how to handle a woman. Further, once divorced, she is the same as a harlot, not a piece of property traded among men. We note he says this while standing a single days' walk from the palace of the man who had John the Baptist beheaded for pointing this out. The emphasis clearly weighs heavily upon the men, as the root cause of the whole issue is lust.

The Disciples suggest this puts men at a disadvantage, and it might be better to avoid marriage. Being but a few miles from the enclave of the Essenes, who taught this very thing, it's no surprise they mention it. Jesus actually agrees with rabbinical teaching on this point, and lays out the three cases where it's proper to avoid marriage. Matthew chose the Greek term for "eunuch," which included men who simply did not marry. Some were born without the

capacity for procreation; some were, indeed, literally made eunuchs by Oriental custom. Some simply had no room in their lives for a family, such as Jesus Himself, but these were rare. Only those divinely empowered specifically for the task should consider such an extreme measure. Jesus implies His followers would normally take up the burden of marrying and having a family as blessing from God, and would proceed in faith.

As proof of this, Jesus shows His utter delight in a group of toddlers and infants. He was putting His hands on their heads in a symbolic gesture of offering them to His Father. When the Twelve tried to shoo them all away, Jesus stopped them. He reminded them bluntly these were the symbols of innocence and receptiveness which characterize those acceptable in the Kingdom. Matthew places this so close to the discussion about divorce to remind us there are other parties in the matter, and Jesus was always concerned about powerless victims of suffering. If children are a good thing, so are the marriages which produced them and the homes where children properly belong – stable households which form the earthly anchors of the Kingdom.

Then came the dramatic comparison with the other sort of wealth. A young nobleman asked what he might do to obtain eternal life. So much of the exchange is lost if we ignore the subtle clues. He spoke deferentially to Jesus. Jesus responded that all goodness is defined by God, Whose ways had already been revealed. The man clearly worried he was missing something, bearing a sense of spiritual insecurity, but lacking spiritual insight. Jesus answered with a touch of sarcasm. We know from the other Gospels this man was president of his synagogue, by which we are to assume he was honorable in his conduct. Thus, Jesus rattled off the standard Ten Commandments, though summarizing in a manner common among rabbis. Naturally, the man assumed he has been obeying these all along, as best he understood it. Jesus then points out the flaw in his understanding. If he comes to Jesus for the ultimate answer, is he willing to follow Jesus fully to find it? He goes straight to the heart of the matter and asks if the man could renounce his material wealth in favor of eternal wealth.

The man departed with a broken heart. In his mind, the whole point of wealth was proof of God's favor. Throwing all that away was just beyond comprehension. Jesus turned and commented to the Twelve it was extremely hard for rich people to become like children and enter the Kingdom. He used an old Eastern expression, referring to the symbolic smallest passage known to mankind, the eye of a needle. It provided a metaphor of something extremely difficult. In the wall of Jerusalem was the Needle Gate. It was used mostly at night after the main gates were closed; this was a common security provision for many cities in the Ancient Near East. For a camel to pass through this gate was simply impossible. The man would have to leave all his stuff outside. This image provides the theological principle: Your entire human existence is subject to God's examination. A man of property must unburden himself of all things in this world to face that kind of sifting, so as to enter the Kingdom. It was thus not impossible for the wealthy to enter, but very demanding, and much more difficult than for the poor, who had nothing to lose.

Sadly, the Twelve were still operating under the same assumptions as the young nobleman regarding wealth as the manifestation of God's favor. This was why they were astonished, for if the rich weren't already bound for Heaven, who was? Jesus answered that it was not a matter of something men could see with their eyes or do with their hands, but a miracle of God's grace.

Peter noted they had passed through the “eye of the needle” in that sense, having abandoned their worldly possessions. Would they have entrance to the Kingdom? Jesus answered with soaring imagery of His divine throne, with them sitting as a committee of judges over their Nation. Obviously this was not meant literally, as they later understood. Rather, it was their choice to follow Him which provided the standard by which souls were measured for fitness as citizens in His Kingdom.

Jesus went on to show, as sacred as families and households were in this life, they were only as valuable as they served the Kingdom purpose. It was quite possible a good and proper family setting would hinder following the Messiah. It was possible a legacy of wealth and good reputation would hold you back. The camel must be fully stripped down. Everything must be surrendered to the inspection of God Almighty. Only what He gives back to us can be brought into the Kingdom service. Everything that matters will be supplied in abundance. Regardless how blessed a life may seem before entering the Kingdom, regardless what is lost in the process, everything inside the City of God is far more precious for having been renewed and redeemed by His grace. Indeed, man without grace cannot begin to comprehend what really matters. He typically puts first what God tosses aside. A man’s very understanding of what matters is subject to redemption, as well.

Matthew 20

Matthew refreshes the theme of the Kingdom standing things on their heads from a human point of view. Serving is greatness; doing it joyfully and without complaint is leadership. An ignoble death is victory. Humility and humiliation in this world is honor. The Kingdom Army is built of cripples. Again and again, Jesus points out to His Disciples how they must see through the eyes of God. They consistently fail to adapt. Matthew begins this chapter with Jesus explaining how the world cannot grasp the mind of God.

The Parable of the Vineyard Owner has suffered much from people reading into it things which simply aren’t there. The obvious meaning is drawn from the statement that appears before and after: “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” The central element of the image Jesus paints is the worldly image of fairness and justice in compensation, contrasted with the grace and generosity standards of God. Truth and justice are whatever God says they are at any given moment for the context. While it is obvious we should expect to some day understand something of the essence of that standard, we do so only by our ability to relate to Him. It demands a living connection that grows throughout human life, because we can never really arrive. Flesh cannot get there, and fleshly understanding cannot apprehend it. The Lord decides what each of us receives, and it is always in accordance with His promise. Those who understand find that faithfulness itself is its own reward. We should rather rejoice when someone barely slips under the wire of God’s grace and still finds redemption. Such is the way Our Lord sees it.

Finally, Jesus tosses in an epigram taken from Roman military enlistment practices. A newly appointed commander assembled a town or district. Because they were told beforehand, the people present the men most suitable for military service. Perhaps some testing takes place, but only a small portion is chosen as acceptable. Taking the whole male population willy-nilly

would pollute the army with useless men, possessing neither skill, nor physical ability, nor proper instinct, men more of a threat than an asset. Jehovah is altogether selective. By His own standards He decides who shall serve, and the rest go their own way. Jesus hints to Peter that the Nation of Israel would find precious few entering in, because they were unfit. Wealth and political power mean nothing, nor do claims of Abrahamic blood, as the Lord sees the heart of man. Peter's question in the last chapter about what they shall have for their sacrifice as the first to follow Christ is answered by a shift in focus to the Heavenly mind, the spiritual measure of things, and away from materialism. To read much more into this parable does violence to this teaching.

The narrative follows their steps toward the Herodian palace town of Old Jericho. It is clear the time has come to approach Jerusalem, as the Passover is near. At some point, Jesus draws them aside privately, away from the crowd following Him, and talks about His coming death. He adds a few more details, that He would be whipped, and die at the hands of Gentiles. From our comfortable place this side of rebirth, we marvel at how their minds keep rejecting the impact of what He says. His Kingdom at its fullest glory will be on the other side of the grave, because it will be eternal; it will not be anchored in this world, merely manifested here. It is obvious they continue thinking in terms of something concrete. The best they can figure is Jesus will reform the synagogue system of their land, and bring this new teaching into dominance, even if it means remaining under Roman political authority.

John and James resort to an old Hebrew custom. A female kinsman may ask a ruler for a wide range of favors, and he would be loath to resist. We saw it with David and Solomon. The latter instituted the custom of placing a smaller throne beside the king's for the Queen Mother. In this vein, Salome, sister of Jesus' mother, comes and asks that He offer her sons – His cousins – places of honor and importance such as is done in synagogues. She was a part of the larger entourage often following Jesus, but not mentioned much. Jesus makes it clear the request is out of bounds, because it's not His to grant. He warns again He faces unconscionable suffering (the symbols of the cup and baptism), but their minds simply cannot process it. He prophesies they will, indeed, participate in His suffering, whether they understand it or not, as James is the first martyr of the Church, and John suffers as an exile on Patmos when he is ancient. However, their request still makes no sense, for it assumes all the wrong notions about Kingdom service.

That the rest of the Disciples become angry at the politicking of James and John shows they, too, don't get it. Had they truly understood the Kingdom was altogether a spiritual matter, not of worldly honors, they would have been amused or simply sad, at most. Jesus puts it in perspective again. With men, greatness is power over each other; in the Kingdom, greatness is power over self. The power to set aside the flesh and all its pretense of importance, to sacrifice it willingly, is power in the Spirit. The Messiah did not come to rule over human institutions, but to offer His life willingly, the ultimate service.

The crowd now with Jesus was huge, intent on escorting Him into Jerusalem as their king. They rightly expected something really important was about to happen at this Passover Feast, though like the Twelve, that expected something was probably quite far from what actually transpired. Still, it all serves a purpose. The massive entourage had passed through the original Jericho where Herod had built himself a winter palace. A mile or two farther along the road up to Jerusalem was a much larger district of Jewish peasants, whose homes were built more recently

around the Roman winter quarters and attendant barracks, the official “Jericho” by Roman reckoning. Between these two, on a very busy route this time of year were two blind men, though the other Gospels only mention the more famous of the two, Bartimaeus. These two men realized Jesus was the cause of this latest surge of traffic, and called out to Him using the Messianic title, Son of David.

Jesus had warned people not to so address Him publicly. Further, these two men were hardly the recipients of honorable treatment. Anyone who begged for a living would be patronized at best, as someone who offered a chance to fulfill the Law of Moses regarding charitable giving. However, most beggars, even with working eyes, would stare into space while calling for donations, because it was proper etiquette not to gaze at anyone. In this way, donors could continue to ignore them even as they dropped a coin or two in whatever the beggar held out to catch them. To call out directly for attention was an unforgivable social breach. Even peasants, if productive, were a class above them. By calling out to Jesus, they were pushing too far. Yet they rejected social custom because the only real hope they had was not in the coin basket, but the healing of their eyes. By their persistence, they showed faith in Jesus’ power and authority, and it is to this faith He responded by stopping in front of them. His touch transformed them from beggars into followers, for of such was the Kingdom He planned to announce.

Matthew 21

Jesus built His case for claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God. He had no doubt such a claim would be rejected by the Jewish leaders. That in itself should have been an argument in His favor, but Jesus was not concerned with mere human perception. He proceeded on the basis of truth. He would do what the Word of God required to establish the testimony to His identity. That the Jewish leadership didn’t understand what the Scripture said about this could not be helped.

Having already accepted the public testimony of the two blind beggars in the previous chapter, we see Jesus going directly to His planned public announcement in Jerusalem. There is no need to see a miracle at every step of the way. The false piety of making miracles of mundane events is the same lie of Satan that makes of miracles nothing. The Gospel writers assumed the readers of their time would remember details not included in the narrative. Jesus had friends and supporters scattered throughout the area near Jerusalem. No doubt some were those He had healed, or relatives of the healed. It’s not hard to imagine a standing invitation from wealthier supporters to stay as guests in their home during the Passover Feast. Nor is it outrageous to suppose that another supporter had already agreed to provide the beast of burden for His use. Jesus had planned this festive entry into Jerusalem. Not in the cynical sense of forcing the hands of His opponents, but He did so in faithful obedience to the Word of God. Jesus declared Himself the Messiah according to what God had spoken through the prophets long before.

What so many seem to miss here is not how the Jewish leaders rejected their Messiah, but that God was pronouncing His final rejection of the Nation of Israel. Matthew quotes Zechariah 9:9 regarding the Messianic prophecy of entering the city through the gate every king had used in a symbolic parade, where the newly crowned king is conducted to His throne by the people. The ultimate King of Israel rode the most humble beast of burden possible. The same crowd that

had accompanied Him from Galilee, now swollen many times larger, obeyed ancient custom by throwing their cloaks and leafy branches on the path under His mount. The phrase including *hosanna* is intentionally ambiguous, saying both “God save the King” and “O King, save us.”

This huge crowd accompanying Jesus was composed of folks from the countryside. The people of the city were a wholly different bunch, and asked what in the world these bumpkins were yelling about. The multitudes identified Him as a prophet whose name was already well known, even in Jerusalem. The escorting crowd itself believed falsely that Jesus was about to establish an earthly, political domain, sitting on the traditional throne of David. When it later became clear this is not Jesus’ intent, they turned on Him. For now, though, it would be a heady atmosphere of hope and joy.

The Bazaars of the Sons of Annas were a monopoly service protected by the High Priest, Annas. Only the official Jewish shekel was permitted for payment of the Temple Tax because it lacked pagan imagery. Jews visiting from other lands had to pay an outrageous premium to exchange their coins imported from home. Further, a very corrupt practice was to reject any sacrificial animal brought in from outside the city as not meeting priestly standards laid down by Moses. It didn’t matter how perfect the animal was, it wasn’t going to pass. Instead, animals bought from the Bazaars were pre-approved, regardless how imperfect they might be. Naturally, they were always sold at outrageous premium prices. Worst of all, these Bazaars were packed into the Court of the Gentiles, the portion of the Temple complex reserved for those not allowed to proceed further inside. This activity prevented Gentiles getting close enough to observe any of the rituals. Symbolically, it meant they were unwelcome before the God of Israel, a smug racial hostility the Jewish leadership was known to express often. There are indications it was common for reformers to drive these Bazaars out from time to time. It was a symbolic act, and the question Jesus faced from the Temple authorities was a political issue – “Who gave you authority to do this?” – which implied they cynically wanted to know what He was “selling” as His particular reform.

Jesus drove the scalpers out with a rough quotation of Isaiah 56:7, pointing out these Bazaars violated the clear command of Jehovah. The Nation of Israel was created in part to reveal God’s Word to the nations, to be a kingdom of priests to the world. They had utterly failed this, and Jesus presses that issue. Then, with the Court of Gentiles cleared of obstruction, He proceeds to use the Temple as it should have been all along, to heal anyone who approached with a need. Instead of using the Temple as the refuge of thieves, His words implying the priesthood was just that, He showed what the priests should have been doing instead of making fat profits. The blind and lame were forbidden to enter the Temple courts, so Jesus healed them and made them fit to go inside, to draw near to God. The symbolic contrast is easily lost on us today. The priests had done all they could to prevent men coming to God; Jesus did all He could to bring them nigh.

That His cheering section made Him out to be the Messiah was blasphemous to the Sanhedrin’s deaf ears. Noticing it was mostly young boys making the noise, Jesus quoted David’s Psalm 8:2. Since the leaders refuse to hear from God, it falls to the most insignificant to do the work of God, to speak His revelation. The symbol of the Fig Tree carries this further. These give fruit some ten months of the year, and should at least have offered something a bit green with the leafy foliage. Israel had failed to produce the fruit God had intended, barren of all but show.

Jesus cursed the tree, symbolic of the curse God had placed on Israel for their lack of spiritual fruit. In just forty years, the Nation of Israel would wither away, and cease to exist, just as the fig tree that had rejected God's purpose.

When the Disciples marveled at the tree, but missed the symbolism, Jesus noted miracles such as that were tied up in commitment to God's purpose. He cites a rabbinical image: a teacher particularly deft at reconciling difficulties and unraveling paradoxes was called "an uprooter of mountains." It didn't matter that the task seemed utterly hopeless; a devotion to obeying God would result in the authority to do anything necessary for the task. If Mount Zion stood in the way of the Kingdom, Mount Zion would be removed. So the Temple, at least, was removed a few decades later, symbolically removing the last earthly vestige of Jewish ritual, and replacing it with the spiritual Kingdom of Heaven.

The Jewish leaders insist on Jesus declaring His authority to clear the Bazaars from the Court of Gentiles, just in case He had some valid warrant unknown to them. He refused to answer until they dealt with the question of John the Baptist. Was his authority from God or from humans? The whole point was to get them to confess that their actions were more about politics than about truth. Refusing to answer was actually the answer. If they can't tell the difference between the works of God by His Word and the works of men in politics and hucksterism, they would hardly understand why Jesus did what He did. To press the point, Jesus gave them the parable of the Two Sons. The Jewish leaders were all show, but lacking any useful service to God. When John called for repentance, the Jewish leaders hardly noticed, aside from the political opportunity. Those the leaders had tagged as heathens, torn from the Nation, because they came to repentance, showed they were the true Children of God.

Without mercy, Jesus drives ahead with another parable of indictment. The Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Keepers recalls an ancient reference to the Nation of Israel as God's vineyard. Typically, renters would send to the landlord some contracted percentage of the wine they produced. These greedy fools insisted on keeping the entire season's produce for themselves. The Jewish leadership had always been guilty of consuming God's largesse on themselves, excluding the world with snorting contempt. That this depicted the Sanhedrin as inheriting Israel's past rejection of the prophets was not lost on them. Equating Himself with the landlord's son as the Son of God was also obvious. He backed them into a verbal corner, forcing them to pronounce their own doom. By rejecting the Messiah, they were bringing God's rejection upon their nation. When David wrote in Psalm 118:22-23 about the rejected stone, it was a note about Israel being rejected by all, but taken up by God as His own people. Jesus showed their place with God was in His hands. Given their complete failure to obey God's plan, it fell to Him to fulfill. Now, He was the Cornerstone of a New Israel.

Jesus makes His claim utterly clear: He was God's Son, the Messiah. He was the embodiment of God's will, the ultimate expression of Jehovah's revelation. They rejected His claim. Therefore, their place in God's divine administration was gone. The Kingdom of God was taken from them, and given to Jesus, who would build a new Kingdom. Anyone who encounters Him as Cornerstone would meet one of two fates. Some would be broken, reshaped and included in the building of the Kingdom. Others would refuse to be broken, refuse to repent of their sins, and so would be crushed into powder. They would become something so small and insignificant as to be carried away on the wind, dispersed and forgotten. This prophecy was fulfilled in full

measure in 70 AD, with the destruction of the Temple. The Nation of Israel as it had been up to that point no longer had any meaning, no part in God's plans.

Matthew 22

Jesus took His next parable from rabbinical sources, a story line He used more than once. The Parable of the Prince's Wedding recalls well-established ancient customs. Many kings would vest the heir to their throne on the prince's wedding day. It was the duty of every vassal to appear and swear an oath of fealty to the royal heir. Failure to do so was treasonous, deserving of death and worse. It implied the vassal had chosen to serve some other ruler. For such a grand occasion as this wedding, the king would spare no expense. He would calculate the length of time required for his messengers to arrive at the various vassals' locations, plus the time it would take each guest to make their way to the royal palace. Each messenger was sent with a sizeable honor guard, which would then escort the guest's entourage back to the palace. This marked the caravan as being on the king's business. Let no one seeing them pass doubt the importance of the persons or the mission! All Jesus' hearers would have recognized the imagery.

The response of the various nobles in the story would have horrified anyone listening. The second round of urgent messengers, it is implied, would have actually carried fresh samples of the food prepared. It is ready now; come immediately! The response was beyond scandalous. Sending an army to execute the scornful vassals and destroy their noble cities would have become a legend repeated far and wide for centuries to come. Lacking proper nobles to attend, the king called for any stranger to take their places, not just at the wedding feast, but also as his new vassals and lords. And since the king always provided festive wedding garments as gifts to his guests, there was no excuse for the one who failed to wear it. It would be an inexcusable breach of protocol, a grand insult. Such a one would be tossed into the dungeon.

Jesus makes the clear case He is the Prince Regent of Heaven. The Jewish leaders had refused to acknowledge Him, in spite of numerous heralds sent before to warn them. Like nobles who could no longer recognize their Lord's coat of arms, the Jews had as a nation rejected their Messiah. Their city, Jerusalem, was to be destroyed, and they would be killed. Others would take their place in God's Kingdom plan. Further, any who seek to enter later must accept the Lord's garment of holiness, something they did not yet possess. As they were, they would hardly be welcome in the Kingdom. Jesus makes this all so plain that ordinary bystanders would have understood it completely.

Now the different political groups in the Jewish leadership prepared to ensnare Jesus in something He said. From ancient times, the prophets had used parables presented as court cases for their target's judgment. It was designed to catch them in their own sins (2 Samuel 11-12). The structure of such exercises was designed to highlight moral culpability. Hellenized Jews of Jesus' day practiced a rather cheap form of such debate, based more on words and cold logic, lacking the moral depth of the Hebrew style. Unable to match Jesus on His own terms, they sought to catch Him on theirs.

For once, the Pharisees actually worked with their erstwhile enemies, the Herodians (Jewish partisans supporting Herod's dynasty; their Jewishness was in serious dispute). The point of

debate would force Jesus to choose either the Pharisaical position that it was a sin to pay taxes to a pagan usurper on behalf of evil Rome – giving God’s blessings to sinners – or to support the Herodian position of paying taxes which were pragmatically legal. Jesus bluntly calls them hypocrites for their fulsome speech and asks for the coin of the realm. The denarius was a Roman coin with images Jews considered idolatrous; the shekel was without such imagery. However, the tax was paid to Rome in denarii. Since the Pharisees consented to use Roman money, they had to recognize Rome could take it back at her whim. Whether a denarius or a shekel, mere material possessions hardly matter among the more important things to which we owe God.

The Sadducees fared no better. Materialist and secular to the core, they utterly missed the point of marriage laws. The stern command from Moses was a man must raise heirs on behalf of a deceased brother to prevent greed from displacing God’s provision. A man’s estate should support his widow, but given she was most likely from a different clan or tribe; she could not inherit her husband’s property, lest it pass illegally to another clan or tribe. Tribal boundaries were sacrosanct, and ultimately no clan or tribe could hold land inside another’s grant from God. Should the man simply take his brother’s estate for himself, it would be a sin. Thus, the Covenant required that, if necessary, he impregnate his brother’s widow to give a reasonable chance there would be sons with his brother’s name. The Sadducees’ story makes a mockery of the sharp divide between worldly material concerns, and spiritual moral concerns. We note in passing Jesus points out that angelic beings are without human sexuality. But the heart of the question was the Sadducees’ rejection of Scripture. If there is no afterlife, there is no God, so what’s the point of having priests such as the Sadducees?

The Pharisees took another turn, sending Scribes who would have a precisely memorized catalogue behind their question. Of the 600 or so specific laws noted in their Talmud, which would Jesus favor? They were ready with a hundred different ways to catch Him wrong no matter what He answered – or so they thought. Instead, Jesus based His answer on the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), which summarizes the First Table of the Decalogue regarding duties to Jehovah. He added a summary of the Second Table, which sums up the responsibility to fellow humans. They could hardly object to this, and it clearly implies they had all failed to observe it.

While the council of Pharisees yet stood nearby, Jesus offered His own question to show they would never be ready to face Him in debate. He notes the Messiah is called “Son of David,” yet David called the Coming One his Lord. How could a descendant be Lord over the quintessential King of Israel? He would be God in the flesh. Did His detractors have any further questions?

Matthew 23

During the Passover celebration, Jesus watched the Scribes and Pharisees zealously guard their false holiness, a mere collection of man-made ritual observances offering only a vague resemblance to the Law of Moses. The ancient symbolic rituals were far simpler than the Talmudic expansions heaped up by the rabbinical colleges corrupted by Persian and Greek influences. In a drive to produce a mountain of great works by their hands, they were filled

with pride. Their grand robes were filthy rags before Jehovah. Jesus offers His disciples a scathing critique of the empty suits that imagined they were the true keepers of Moses.

Standing in the vicinity of the Temple, Jesus addresses His disciples, clearly including the crowd of listeners in His audience. That it would have included Scribes and Pharisees we should take for granted. These two allied groups held civil authority presumably extracted from Mosaic Law. Jesus observed that His nation was legally obliged to obey their commands, but by no means should anyone assume they represented God. They delighted in making things difficult, but spared not the slightest effort to consider how things might be simplified. They were all about appearances. In observing some of the silliest customs of wearing little scrolls on their foreheads, they completely forgot to actually understand what God wanted. No one should imagine Jesus participated in such goofy displays. This is a rather blunt condemnation of the Hellenist tradition of taking Mosaic commands literally, as opposed to the Hebrew symbolism in the command (Exodus 13:16). Indeed, in their literalism they competed to extravagant measures.

The Pharisees and Scribes were specialists in appearances and worldly honors. They bickered over places of honor at feasts, and who ranked for which seat in the synagogues, and demanded various honorific titles meant to impress people, rather like the silly “Reverend Doctor So-n-so” of today. Seeking such distinctions among men showed the sinful heart of these men. There is only one title in the Kingdom: Lord. Don’t pursue the sort of ticket-punching which permitted men to be greeted officially as Professor, Doctor, or Dean (modern approximations of Rabbi, Master and Father). Greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is not in titles, but in humility and service. People who need ego stroking are the most useless before God.

Having explained the fundamental sinful nature of Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus proceeds to lay eight woes upon them. The first is easily their worst: They did everything they could to alienate all men from God’s revelation, standing as guards to block the way. Having never been inside the truth, they refused to let anyone else approach it.

In the second woe, Jesus makes a reference to Salome, the widow of High Priest Alexander Jannaeus; she ruled from 78-69 BC. Alexander had opposed the Pharisees bitterly, but they seduced his wife to their ways. They were so lacking in wisdom and restraint, the tension they created was a primary cause for Rome taking an interest in, and assuming control of Judea in 63 BC. Meanwhile, they were composing these eloquent three-hour prayers recited in public, begging God to set them free from the Roman domination they brought down on the city.

In a third woe, Jesus notes the Pharisees have a distinct preference for Gentile converts to Pharisiasm. The reason should be obvious, as those converted to a religion from the outside are the most zealous of all, embracing with a harsh fervor the most demanding silly observances. These were like a whip against the native Judeans who had grown up in the synagogues. Thus, these proselytes were more hellish and more completely removed from the faith of Abraham than before.

The fourth woe remarks upon the Pharisical legal tricks. In business dealings, an oath by the Temple was not binding. However, by nit picking and demanding an oath upon the gold of the Temple, the scribal lawyers considered that binding. This system of playing with words was

merely an opportunity to defraud outsiders. The mere presence of any such nonsense showed an evil intent, wholly lacking in the grace of God for Whom the Temple was presumably built.

Such a hair-splitting frame of mind was totally foreign to Jehovah. The fifth woe notes how the Pharisees would tithe on herbs one might grow in a window box, bringing to the Temple a mere pinch of dried herbs. Meanwhile, they didn't even know the God to whom they owed their very lives. These same men hardly comprehended the fundamental purpose of the Law of Moses. They might sift a barrel of flour to avoid the possibility of consuming the smallest non-kosher insect, but swallow in terms of gross sins of the heart the largest non-kosher animal in Palestine.

To drive the point home, Jesus uses a Hebrew parable in the sixth woe. Their pretense of external holiness was like polishing the faintest fingerprints from the outside of their dishes, but failing to wash the putrid food and drink remains on the inside. The idea of changing the heart of man never occurred to them.

Following every rainy season, tombs were whitewashed to prevent visitors to the area of Jerusalem accidentally defiling themselves by touching these structures. This meant the brilliant white coat was fresh during Passover. In the seventh woe, the Pharisees were like these glittering tombs, pretty on the outside, but utterly defiled inside.

Continuing on the subject of tombs, Jesus notes in His last woe that the tombs of prophets and important persons were rather substantial and ornate. By dressing up their tombs, the Pharisees celebrated the prophets' deaths, not their lives. In Hebrew tradition, a great pile of rocks is raised to mark the tomb of criminals, the larger piles indicating high crimes. Indeed, it is the Pharisees who are the criminals, for their actions showed they lied in their words.

Vipers were not hatched from eggs as most snakes, but were born alive, often by bursting through their mother's sides, killing her. This is the repugnant image of the Scribes and Pharisees, destroying the Nation in their venomous rush to death. Jesus prophesied He would send prophets, teachers and Scripture writers, and the Pharisees would be accountable for murdering them. The Lord would allow this to insure the full weight of rejecting the Messiah would fall upon them. It was the same hellish nature that bore responsibility for all the murders listed in Scripture. All this would be fulfilled and finished with those living at the time Jesus spoke.

Foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem 40 years hence, Jesus breaks into a beautiful lament over the city. In the shadow of His teaching alone would anyone find safety from the coming destruction. Indeed, in the next chapter, Jesus pointedly warns the Christians what to look for when it came time to flee Jerusalem. Those who followed His teaching would certainly have not been among the million or so Jews Titus slaughtered in AD 70. The final words of the warning here are conclusive. The Temple ("house") in which they placed so much confidence would be destroyed. It was never God's Temple, not while they profaned it with false religion. The public ministry of Christ was finished. Shortly He would die and then rise again. Only those who were His disciples would see His resurrected body. At the same time, He warns only those who follow Him would be walking in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 24

Of all the passages in Scripture, this chapter of Matthew has suffered the most abuse and misunderstanding. The greatest mistake is to forget Jesus is a Jewish rabbi teaching Jewish men a spiritual understanding of real world events. In the previous chapter, we saw Jesus ended by lamenting the coming destruction of Jerusalem. As a first-rate Hebrew writer, Matthew keeps the narrative in context, one principle of teaching leading to the next, all in context. This is no different. Jesus is warning His disciples about the coming destruction in AD 70, and how they should view it.

Naturally, the Twelve are still locked into those false Messianic Expectations. Foremost in their minds is noting the rising tension as a sure sign He is about to declare Himself Messiah and establish His reign over their world in some tangible way. They still don't see the Cross; they still don't see how the rejection of Christ by the Jewish leaders will bring destruction on the Holy City. Instead, they are wondering how He intends to make His throne there.

Jesus has fresh on His mind the sorrow of the City's destruction. Among His followers were residents of Jerusalem. As such, they were intimately aware of any new additions or modifications to the Temple edifice. These things they pointed out to Jesus, assuming He had not yet noticed. To these, along with the Twelve, He declared the very literal prophecy about Titus and his army ensuring no two stones of the Temple would remain vertically stacked.

They must have stared in stunned silence as Jesus walked away. How could the Temple of their God be destroyed? How could God want that? As they gathered later on the peak across the Kidron Valley, where the Temple and the City in all its glory was visible on the opposite ridge line just below eye level, His entourage came privately and asked for a fuller explanation of the prophetic words. They asked two questions, believing they were connected. So many Christians today make the same mistake, assuming what follows are far distant events from His time. That is, they assumed the Temple destruction, His rising in glory to declare the Kingdom, and the End of Times were all the same thing. However, they weren't sure how those things were connected, so they asked Him to explain.

Jesus takes pains to untangle what were actually three issues. He pointed out the destruction of the City was one event, and while tied to His proclaiming the Kingdom, that was not the same as the End of Times. First the Temple is brought down, meaning the final nail in the coffin of Mosaic Law and the earthly nation of Israel. However, His Kingdom was not a historical event *per se*, but a spiritual event, because it was a spiritual Kingdom. As for His return and the End of Times, that was another matter entirely.

Jesus begins by answering the question implied, but not asked: What suffering comes with serving this Kingdom of Heaven? This is addressed to avoid confusing that answer with answers for the other questions. He warns in verses 4-14 what events do *not* mark His Return: "See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass." Verse 7 is a known prophetic phrase (Haggai 2:22) reminding them not to be concerned with the rising or passing of any human government, nor any natural disasters. That's simply the background noise of fallen human existence: "All these things are merely the beginnings of sorrows." The next few verses (9-14) are just the typical reaction of the world to people possessed of a single-minded commitment to a Kingdom not of this world. The Final Day will come after the gospel has

reached the entire world; the words do not necessarily imply immediately following that accomplishment, nor is it precisely defined what that accomplishment means in concrete terms. It serves more to say, "All of that is a long way off. You need to be more concerned with your mission."

The specific prophecy of the Temple destruction we now know came true in AD 70. In this (15-22), Jesus warns them to flee the city when they see the Romans violating the Temple grounds, no longer honoring the prohibition they supported while ruling the Jews by keeping non-Jews out. Some of those living at the time would need to heed this advice, and leave town, or face being caught up in the slaughter. That it was indeed a major holocaust is not in dispute. Because Christians would certainly be still in the city, Jesus promised the Father would make it quick.

For the sake of long-term Christian teaching, Jesus warns His return will not be secret. Many evil and deranged folks would claim to be Him, but it won't be like that at all. It would be something so obvious, no human could miss it. When He Returns, there won't be any confusion whatsoever what is happening (23-28). Verse 29 is a standard prophetic statement, not to be taken literally. It refers to something so catastrophic there is no way to describe it. The whole world as we know it would be completely altered. The Second Coming would not be secret, but painfully obvious.

All of that was simply to answer the first question.

Thus, Jesus turns to the second question (30-31). He describes some unmistakable earmarks of His Return, something different from the previous discussion. Every eye will see Him and recognize Him as God, and angels will be visibly present. He cautions them to fix this in their minds (32-33), to make sure they can tell the real deal as surely as they can discern the change of the seasons. The Second Coming is a distinct event, with no warning whatsoever. All these other signs mean other things. Then returning to His discussion of the Temple Destruction, He warns they would live to see it (34), so heed the signs of this one event that is clearly forecast by signs. He reinforces that warning by mentioning His words are The Word (35).

However, the Second Coming will not have any warning signs (36). The Son Himself was not entrusted to know, so it's not possible for Him to tell. It compares to the Flood in that no one (except Noah) knew it was coming (37-39). It came suddenly. Using terms commonly understood to depict a sudden coming of judgment and wrath, Jesus describes a couple of scenes depicting victims snatched up by arresting soldiers (40-41). The ones taken are the guilty, and any other meaning was unknown to the Jews of that time. This will not be a convenient moment for anyone.

He launches finally into a call for faithfulness (42-51). The whole point of all this is that *there will be no signs*. You cannot possibly predict by any digging into the text and extracting details to establish a sequence. Get ready now, by obeying to the fullest extent. You can't know. You can't even guess. Don't try, because it's a waste of Kingdom resources.

Thus, Jesus answers the first question plainly, but warns them not to associate the second question with the same event. His mention of the Destruction of Jerusalem was quite consistent with His message of what really matters in the Kingdom: getting away from the ancient Covenant of Moses, getting away from the focus of One Place on earth (John 4:23). It would

never again matter, because that covenant was about to be ended, fulfilled, completed, with no unfinished business. Every day He had tried to help break the spell of false understanding of His Disciples, teaching them the Temple would soon be just a pile of rubble. The old ritual framework would be dead, and being a Jew would mean nothing. Only those who walked Christ's path would find God's favor.

Matthew 25

Jesus tried to show the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem, His ascent to His throne, and His Return to redeem the fallen world. For each of these, Jesus warned His disciples they must prepare. Preparing for His rule was a matter of spiritual understanding they would only gain when the Holy Spirit fell. It would require the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts to even understand the spiritual nature of His reign. For the destruction of Jerusalem, preparedness was a more practical matter of recognizing when Rome was ready to besiege the city. For His Return, the issue is quite different. Jesus offers three parables to explain how Kingdom service was the whole matter, for which no timeline was possible.

Jewish wedding traditions are rich and varied, but certain features are fairly well established for Jesus' day. For example, we understand the bridegroom would go to his bride's home, where the priest would engage them in various rituals. She would then leave her childhood home with him, and they would typically arrive at his home around sundown for a celebration with feasting, and distribution of gifts, which might last several days. This provides the background for a vivid parable using standard Hebrew symbols.

The focus of the narrative is the group of virgins who hope to be included in this celebration, symbolizing the people of Israel. It is their birthright to be included, but they have to meet certain requirements. The lamps represent the light of God's revelation, which Israel carried in the Law. Their fire was dying out, and the only fire that would continue burning in the New Covenant would be fired by the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the oil. Those who do not have Him will not be prepared to serve. Some Jews will never get this oil, but some will. No one can hitchhike on the spiritual rebirth of another. If the light of their testimony is the Law, they will miss the Messiah, and be excluded from Heaven. While the Lord delayed, giving them ample time, there was a certain and distinct endpoint to His patience. At some point no one could predict, the End will come, Messiah will Return to redeem all Creation, but also to judge all mankind.

Everyone living in Jesus' time could remember when one of Herod's sons had to appear before Caesar to fight a petition by opponents to his inheriting the throne his father bequeathed him. Should he be arrested, all his private property could be forfeited, so he wisely left some of his affairs in the hands of trusted servants. Known as a hard man, he hardly would have allowed them to merely preserve his assets in stasis, but expected the business to continue apace in his absence. In this parable, Jesus is the king going away to His Father's throne for a time. During His absence, He fully expects His servants to employ their gifts from Him to the maximum affect, so that His domain among the hearts of men will grow. While the word "talent" described a large quantity of money, we rightly use that word in English to describe any particular ability bestowed by God. All our abilities and talents are His, and He demands we

use them to increase His Kingdom, serving in ways that make His glory obvious to all. Of those to whom the Son offers much grace, they are expected to share that grace with equal generosity. Anyone who does not apply themselves with fervor is unfit for the Kingdom, destroying what little he has, and will not fare well when He Returns.

The Final Judgment of humanity is described as a shepherd liquidating his herd. Raising sheep in First Century Palestine followed ancient established practices, honed to perfection from centuries of experience. Given the very best breeds of sheep, in terms of what they produce, are also just about the stupidest animals known, a good shepherd kept goats in the herd to protect them. Sheep were deeply focused on just a few things: eating, drinking, and making more sheep. Predators could easily slip up and devour the sheep, because they often wouldn't notice. Goats would smell predators coming, and either fight or flee. Sheep were stupid enough to wander off a cliff, and would easily flee over one when frightened. Goats would pay attention and flee to safer ground. But goats were not sheep; they were fundamentally different and worth far less economically.

Jesus portrays Himself as the Master Shepherd. His sheep have a mission, and that mission is to feed on His Word, drink deeply of His Spirit, and bring to birth new souls for the Kingdom. They have His own nature in themselves, and will do by instinct His works, even if they don't quite understand it. The power of the Holy Spirit works to create a holy instinct, a tendency to serve Him in a hurting world by sharing His grace and redemption. In so doing, they tend to be pretty poor at running the world. The world is loaded with predators, those who would destroy the Kingdom by the works of Satan: deceiving, stealing, and killing. To prevent them being harmed, the Lord gives to those not His sheep the commission to create a civilized world, to restrain sin. Those who do this will not succeed if they have a sheep's nature, so the Lord appoints sinners to govern our world. By their nature, they are much harsher, and do not understand the peaceful, sacrificial nature of Christ. At the End of Time, they will not understand how they cannot be included in redemption.

In this parable, our Lord describes the nature of the Covenant of Noah. Social stability is the requirement given to sinful men in a sinful world. The work is messy and the results aren't pretty, but this is the plan of God to keep things under some semblance of order until the End comes. His people live among these civil rulers, and will tend to follow the laws of men. However, their true purpose and focus of attention is the Kingdom of Heaven, not any kingdoms of men. By their calling His people will not be very effective in such worldly concerns. The obvious warning here is that we who follow Christ cannot be goats. If we are to be any use at all to Him, our natures must make us unfit to govern the affairs of mankind. To seek such governing power violates our calling and His nature in us. It requires a nature that makes men unfit to stand before the Judgment Seat of God.

Thus, to be ready for the Lord's Return means to be actively serving His eternal purposes. We must be fired by the Holy Spirit to carry His light to the world, we must aggressively pursue His business using all our grace gifts, and we must not be distracted by the affairs of mere human kingdoms. Only those who embrace the fundamental change in their souls by the Holy Spirit will be ready. Those who seek other pursuits will stand before Him ashamed on that Last Day.

Matthew 26

During Passover season, the city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas were packed with travelers. It would be somewhat crowded no matter where a man might walk. The actual residents of the city viewed the outsiders with some small measure of contempt as country bumpkins, even as they relished the chance to milk them with higher than normal prices. In the middle of all this bustle, the Twelve are still trying to understand just what exactly their Master was about to do.

In the massive bookshelves of material written about these last couple of chapters in Matthew's Gospel, noting that so few scholars pay attention to the importance of this burning question says something instructive. We are inundated in extensive studies of the Passover Seder, and the richness of detail in many ways distracts from the more important story Matthew has to tell. The men who will be tasked to take this earth shattering message to the entire world still haven't a clue just what that message is. Jesus relies much on the Holy Spirit to keep track of all this in their hearts, so He can breathe life into it at some later date. For now, we have a dozen very confused men, grappling mightily with the fundamental nature of something still foreign to them, yet just in front of them.

They are still gathered on the crest of the Mount of Olives overlooking Zion. Having delivered an extended lesson to the disciples about the nature of His Kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem and His final return to earth in glory, Jesus catches them off-guard with something He has said repeatedly over the past year or so: He would be executed very soon. Specifically, He warns it would be only a couple of days away, on the Day of Passover itself. Since the Jews could not legally kill Him, they would have to bring Him before the Roman authorities, and this move would succeed, ending in His death at the hands of Roman soldiers in the gruesome practice of crucifixion. If anything served to point out that the fundamental nature of His Kingdom was spiritual, saying He would found it upon His death should have done it.

Even as He said this, folks elsewhere were planning it. The full body of the Sanhedrin were in session, including all the members who might normally be busy with their own families and guests. Having gathered at the palatial home of the High Priest, this was not a judicial gathering, but something less formal. Some time during this annual conference, they discussed the matter of Jesus of Nazareth. Because it was not a formal meeting, they could consider at length how to remove this particularly thorny prophet and rabbi, and not be bothered with the precise requirements of justice. Essentially they concluded they would have to trick Him in some way and arrest Him. Since He was so popular with the bumpkins crowded into the city during Passover, they would have to wait. However, the matter was decided – Jesus had to die soon.

We have a hard time identifying Simon the Leper. Taking into account the context of Matthew's narrative so far, we might safely guess Jesus healed him at some point. Were he still a leper, no Jew would enter the same house with him, most especially during Passover. Further, it appears this man was quite wealthy, and well known in the community. Perhaps in simple gratitude, he invited Jesus and the Twelve to a formal meal, since they were in town. We might expect the meal was conducted in typical Eastern fashion, where the guests lounged on large cushions around a low table, resting on their left sides, with their bodies at an angle to the table, feet

outward. Women would not normally be welcome, but one nevertheless came in and dumped a small flask of expensive perfumed oil on Jesus' head. She, too, wanted to express gratitude to Jesus, and was not worried in the least by social convention. Matthew does not identify the woman.

What mattered was what she did, and what it symbolized. Probably it was Judas who led the group in fussing about the apparent waste in this act. If she had simply donated the gift intact, it could be exchanged for something more useful to their ministry. Think of how many poor people could be helped by that money! Jesus shut them up. What she had done was quite according to Kingdom principles, which they still did not understand.

First, we note the obvious intent of the woman was deep devotion and a powerful desire to do something – anything – she could to honor such a beloved teacher. Further, it's implied she, at least, understood His warning He was about to be executed. Seizing the moment before it was too late, she offered the best she had. This contrasts with the petty posturing of the Twelve as they had their eyes on worldly fame and position. It requires a materialistic view of life to fuss over the price of something like this. The proper mystical view is that nothing is too good for the Messiah. Ancient nomadic Hebrews would have grasped it immediately, and so did the woman. Second, eradicating poverty is simply not possible in a fallen world. Talking about the abstract notion of "the poor" is an excuse to dehumanize them further. If you want to do something to lift the fallen, you have to do it one by one, individually. Redemption is personal. Meanwhile, is not the Christ someone who deserves a little attention, too? Jesus rightly prophesies that His servants in the future would mention this minor event. Sadly, the vast majority seem to have no idea why.

We are told elsewhere Judas embezzled as the treasurer of the group. We can surmise further he came alongside only because he was sure Jesus was the right ticket to political power and wealth. He was in it for himself. After being rebuked this way, it was surely more than petty greed that drove his next act. We would miss a great deal if we did not see his swelling worldly ambition, as well. The message of caring for the poor and taking no luxuries for the self would probably sell quite well to the average Jewish peasant, and could form a crucial plank in the reform platform Judas imagined Jesus held. But, Jesus had been warning that He would die soon, and perhaps it finally registered on Judas' mind with the anointing incident, or perhaps he simply realized this comment about the poor just went against the best part of a good political campaign. Either way, he switched parties. He became a mole for the Sanhedrin, and accepted an insulting and pitiful small sum for it: roughly the price of a slave one might win in a lawsuit when the slave was killed somehow.

By this time, many Jews would gather with friends and associates to celebrate the night before Passover, the evening of Preparation Day, with some portion of Seder rituals. This Preparation "Seder" with their Rabbi was perhaps the ultimate celebration experience of their ministry so far. Knowing this would be a unique and very special event, they had no doubt planned this far in advance. Most readers don't realize Jesus could have accepted any one of the many invitations He surely would have received from so many supporters. Jesus told them how to find the place He had chosen, and they went and made the necessary preparations. The meal took place at nightfall, as required in the Law (Exodus 12). During the meal, Jesus shocked them all with the rather calm declaration, obviously a prophetic statement: one of them would betray

Him. To say that it ruined the mood would be an understatement. With so many doubts already in their minds, each was quick to wonder if he were the man. While Jesus provided an answer we know was literally accurate, we know they would almost miss the point. To share a dish was to share about as much as any two men could share. With Jesus as their Master, it was a much more dramatic statement, for it implied the guilty one was also betraying God Almighty.

This betrayal was breaking a solemn covenant, sworn before the Lord, which made God a party of it. This was all prophesied long ago, but that did not excuse the guilty man. It would be the same as declaring God used the Babylonians to punish Israel, prophesied in advance, then turned and punished Babylon. They were dealt with severely in due time, and so it would be for the betrayer here. So drastic would be the consequences that the man would willingly take his own life. That's one of the implications of the Hebrew phrase, "It would have been better not to be born." Judas merely echoed the others in his question, but he, of course, knew his guilt. Jesus' idiomatic answer was a "Yes." Judas now knew that Jesus knew.

It is not necessary at this point to rehearse in detail the full Seder ritual. We note simply the importance of what Jesus made of two items. That piece of matzo represented among other things the promise of bread eaten in the Messiah's reign. Jesus associated that promise with the substance of His body, clearly saying, "This is Me; I am the Messiah." He showed that His body had to be broken, but it was also to be shared. His body can be associated with the full weight of His teaching, the full revelation of God Almighty, but also His manifestation in the congregation of His followers. The Cup of Blessing Jesus associated with the necessity of shedding blood to cleanse sin. He pointedly notes these two items would be the center of a new ritual and a new covenant, a covenant based on removing sin on a wholly different level. Further, He makes a cryptic remark about a spiritual new wine, using a term indicating the first juice running off pressed grapes. People often miss the symbolism of starting fresh with a whole new kind of Kingdom, a whole new kind of covenant, and a whole new kind of life.

They ended the meal and headed out across the Kidron Valley. Back out on the Mount of Olives, now in darkness, Jesus warns them the times themselves were rather dark. Before the light of day and before the light of understanding came to them, they would be under tremendous pressure. Indeed, as it was prophesied in Zechariah (13:7), the stress would be enough to scatter them in confusion. Then He promptly reminds them that His death is hardly the end of the matter. He would rise again and meet them in their old stomping grounds in Galilee. Peter, as usual, missed the point. Still campaigning as Jesus' second, he loudly promised to face things at Jesus' side. How heroic and heart-warming! Jesus warned him prophetically it was not possible. Indeed, Peter would instead lead the group in denying Jesus – three times before dawn. Peter argued, but then the rest chimed in with similar claims of bravery and commitment. How sad, they thought they were ready to face death with Him in a dashing display of heroism, but were not ready to face the spiritual Valley of Death.

The Valley of Death that night was on the lower hillside of the Mount of Olives, in the private garden called Gethsemane. The name means "oil press," quite appropriate since olive trees grew all over the mountain ridge named for them. They came here quite often. Most people would have used that quiet dark place for indulging in more fleshly pursuits, but Jesus came here for the last showdown *against* His flesh. He left the main group near the entrance to the garden, and took the same three who had seen His Transfiguration farther along. Paintings and

drawings of this moment are just guesswork, if not pure flights of fancy. It was probably much more mundane to anyone looking on, but false piety afflicts many who think it serves the Truth. The common posture for intense prayer was face down on the ground. Indeed, this was the slave's posture, knees on the earth, bent down between them with the forehead touching the ground. It is quite uncomfortable, and the ultimate sign of humility before some powerful authority. He had asked the trio to pray with Him together from nearby.

Jesus described Himself as feeling tortured. Apparently they were without comprehension on this. His flesh wanted no part of the sacrifice before Him. Still, He was master of Himself, and was willing to take this path if there was no other. He spoke with His Father in terms of a prisoner, sentenced to death by poison. Was there no one else to whom the cup could be passed, so He may be spared? We find His disciples sleeping when He goes back to check on them. Notice His remonstrance was more a matter of their spiritual safety, not some personal indignation. He could handle what was before Him, but they faced a trial beyond them. Twice He returned to find them overcome by the flesh. Had they any sense of what was ahead, they would have easily been awake and trembling. As always, the business of His impending death fell on their ears with no place in the mind to process the fact. On His third return, ensured He could embrace His Father's plans, He woke them to face what was coming for all of them. The betrayer was leading the soldiers to them.

Judas knew his former Master's habits. After the ritual meal, they would typically have come to the garden. Thus, arresting Jesus was simple. Judas was leading a crowd. The Temple Guard, armed with clubs, and Roman soldiers with swords. While the former did the dirty work, the latter by their presence showed it was lawful. There would have been any number of lesser officials of both the Sanhedrin and the Roman cohort, along with servants and perhaps not a few simple onlookers. The pre-arranged sign would be the typical Eastern greeting of respect. Not only was it dark, but also many might not have seen Jesus more than once or twice. Judas had no trouble picking Him out.

Impetuous Peter, good as his word, was ready for a fight, though Matthew does not point him out as the one. His "sword" would have been perhaps a large knife, just large enough to be classed by the Romans as a weapon, and thus, illegal. We have to wonder if he lacked skill in its use, for the wound he left was not fatal. Jesus stopped Him there, warning Peter the Kingdom was not served by mortal combat. Should God desire any violence, He uses angels. There was more than enough of them available to have battled the entire city. The need of the moment was to obey the Word, to fulfill the prophecies. Indeed, He mocked the heavy armament of the arresting party. They could have arrested Him at any time, and He would not have offered violence. Still, they did not know they were precisely acting as prophets had said they would.

At that point, the disciples were completely lost. Everything they had expected was wrong, and what happened was utterly beyond anything they understood. The world had turned upside down, so much so that they weren't even sure of God anymore. They fled the scene.

Near as we can tell, it would be a good hike to the palace of the High Priest. The position then held by Caiaphas offered a large home on the slope of a hill. The courtyard and entrance was naturally on the lower side. It was at this palatial home the entire Sanhedrin and court assistants had gathered. Peter managed to follow from a distance; who knows what was in his mind? He

came in the gate of the courtyard and sat near a fire for the servants who must stand in attendance in the open yard. Jesus would have been led up some steps. Most likely the assembly had gathered in a semi-open area just above the courtyard. Jesus would stand at the top of the steps near the entrance, facing the Sanhedrin. This was completely illegal by Moses and by tradition, since it happened at night.

Still, we cannot now know what other corruptions they felt they could get away with at that time. They did attempt to gain a legitimate accusation, but no two witnesses could be found with the same story. With one final attempt at two men suggesting something that added up to Jesus saying He could rebuild Herod's Temple in three days, perhaps after a plot to destroy it, Caiaphas arose to ask if Jesus had any reaction. That they could find a hint of broken law in a mystical statement about temples of flesh shows their desperation. Legally He was not required to answer invalid charges from a single witness. Finally, there was nothing left but to compel Him to answer a question He must, if honest, answer wrongly in their eyes.

Did He claim to be the Son of God? He did. The proof would be after His death, when they would see Him again as the Redeemer of God. They judged Him this night only by an accident of history; He would return to judge them as the Prosecutor of God Almighty. They didn't bother to demand proof of His claim; there could be none in their eyes. It's not as if they would know, in the first place. His claim was blasphemy on the face of it. Of course, for the High Priest to tear any of his garments on official duty was illegal, but he insisted on using the customary symbol of distress as the political leader of the nation, because all who heard a blasphemous speech were supposed to make a tear in their clothes and not repair it ever again. It served to stir the passion necessary to proceed, as they all agreed unanimously to His guilt and death sentence.

They treated Him with the ceremonial expressions of contempt by punching and slapping, and spitting on Him. At the same time, they mocked Him, demanding as prophet He name who was striking Him. From the courtyard below, and still in the Valley of Death, Peter saw all this. He was facing his own torment. Gone was the bravery and boasting, for he could not admit to being so much as acquainted with the Prisoner. Thrice, each time more vehemently, his tortured soul was torn by his fear and his lies. Upon the third time, cursing, he was greeted by the sound of a rooster crowing the coming sunrise. This triggered the memory of Jesus' warning that Peter would deny Him three times before dawn. While using the Romanesque term for that final watch before dawn – "cocks-crow" – it was all too literal, now. Peter, the man who perhaps struggled hardest with the otherworldly Hebrew mind of Christ, was finally hit with something his literalist mind could understand. It was all too much for him, and he left the courtyard in tears. His sorrows were just beginning.

Matthew 27

As noted previously, the false piety of those seeking to make of this portion of the narrative more than what it says have obscured the original intent of the author. Matthew continues to emphasize throughout his Gospel how completely the Jews failed to understand, how completely wrong they were about everything regarding Jesus. Further, Matthew takes pains to offer just the details necessary to show how Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies and ended the

Covenant of Moses with His sacrifice. Attempting to embellish Matthew's depiction with unnecessary drama and gore is the same lie as denying it all.

Having met and palavered throughout most of the night, the Sanhedrin took a short break. Then they reassembled at dawn, in some vague semblance of Mosaic justice by holding a second hearing. They decided their best choice for securing a Roman death penalty was to accuse Jesus of treason. There is every reason to believe the Sanhedrin had conferred with Pilate prior to bringing Jesus before him. This would have been consistent with the oft stated Imperial concern for keeping public order. Pilate normally resided on the coast at Caesarea, but often attended Jewish festivals in Jerusalem simply to ensure a quick authoritative response to disturbances. Hearing from the Sanhedrin that Jesus was another rebel, and prepared to accept their fallback plan of accusing Him of treason – plotting to re-establish the Davidic throne – Pilate was ready to go through the motions. It was convenient timing for everyone involved.

Matthew notes for us the end of Judas. The simplest explanation of his response is he realized Jesus was guilty of nothing, yet had been condemned to a horrible execution. It appears he met with some of the leadership on duty in the Temple. Complaining to the Sanhedrin that Jesus was innocent of any crime, it seemed Judas was trying to exonerate Jesus, making himself out to be a lying snitch. They were having none of it. Passing the offering box near the Temple entrance on his way out, Judas threw the coins on the ground near the box from which they ostensibly were taken. Oddly, the Sanhedrin were now pious about Judas' crime. Without admitting they had bribed for a man's death, they decided to use the money for a charitable gesture. They bought a field for burying non-Jews who died in the city.

There is a good bit of discussion why the text indicates the quote is from Jeremiah, when it is clearly from Zechariah. Matthew seldom mentions which prophet he is quoting, but in this case follows a rabbinical practice of referring to the Hebrew canonical collection of prophetic books by the name of the one which appears first in their order in some collections, in this case Jeremiah. The quotation refers to the complete failure of Jewish leadership to understand just what had passed them by, sarcastically calling the 30 coins a "princely sum" – the compensation required for a slave gored by some else's ox. Matthew points out that the Jewish leadership hardly bothered to investigate Jesus' claims. They stood Him before a judge who comprehended no better, but knew for certain that the Sanhedrin had lied to him about the case.

Sitting in the official judgment seat out in the open plaza before a crowd gathered to observe, Pilate heard the representatives of the Sanhedrin make their accusation. Jesus was permitted to defend Himself, and Pilate rather expected feverish denials from a desperate man. Instead, the accused stood silent, seeming rather unconcerned about the whole thing. Without describing the private audience Jesus had before Pilate away from the crowd, Matthew tells us Pilate realized he had been set up, so he decided to alter the custom of releasing a Hebrew prisoner at the Passover. He offered them the choice between Jesus of Nazareth, and a repulsive thug apparently also named Jesus, the son of Abbaiah (bar-Abbas). It didn't help that Pilate had been warned by his wife of a very strong omen about Jesus. His attempts to break his deal with the Sanhedrin were rejected. Though he could have easily set the troops on them and driven the mob out, Pilate was pressed between his pre-arranged deal and the very real threat of a riot. The crowd howled for crucifixion.

It was a common legal practice for prominent men under suspicion of murder to ceremonially wash their hands over the body of a victim. This was a very powerful claim of innocence – “my hands are clean of this man’s blood.” The mob, responding to the prompting of the planted provocateurs, ceremonially took full guilt for Jesus’ blood, willing to gamble on His guilt. What followed were standard elements of a crucifixion. The intended victim was beaten nearly to death by a professional lictor. The soldiers were conscripts from Syria. This meant they spoke a dialect similar to Jewish Aramaic, but the mutual contempt they bore for each other helped insure there would be no collusion. The chance for the Syrian troops to abuse a Jewish prisoner helped reinforce this. They mockingly dressed Him as a king, reflecting the official charge. The robe was part of the official governor’s wardrobe for ceremonial occasions with the troops. The “crown of thorns” was actually made from *acanthus*, a flowering green ornamental bush with prickly leaves. This was more at mocking the Western style crown of laurel stems. This was more a matter of humiliation and emotional distress than physical torture.

Victims of crucifixion were required to bear the crossbeam on which they died. This was more torture by way of exhaustion and humiliation, since they would be marched publicly to the place normally used for this, easily taking an hour or more. At some point, it became obvious Jesus could no longer carry the beam, and we are hardly surprised. The soldiers grabbed a fellow coming from the opposite direction down the road, Simon, known as a Diaspora Jew, who had once lived in a large Jewish community in modern day eastern Libya – Cyrene – a very important city on the Mediterranean coast.

The name Golgotha simply designates a grisly place of execution. Skulls littered the place because most victims of crucifixion were left until the birds ate their flesh, easily taking two or more days to die. Jesus rejected the standard offering of drugged wine. The typical division of loot by the guards fulfilled yet another prophecy. Guarding crucified bodies was not a choice duty, but the chance of some little plunder was a consolation. Matthew notes Pilate had the charge written mocking the Sanhedrin – this *is* the King of the Jews! Beside Him was a pair of robbers. Obviously, they had murdered too, since robbery alone was not a capital offense, only murder and treason.

Jesus was fully alert for the hours of mocking. All His grandiose sounding claims of spiritual authority and power were turned into ludicrous literalisms. No one is precisely certain of the details of crucifixion. What we know for sure is something in the positioning caused near asphyxiation while slumped down hanging by the arms. Victims could push upward on their nailed feet to breathe until their legs collapsed from exhaustion. This was something the Romans had adopted from the Persians and perfected. It’s not enough to simply die, but the victim had to be utterly miserable in every way possible.

Whatever the actual geophysical causes, the sky was darkened in a clear symbol of God’s own sadness, from noon to mid-afternoon. What is so easy to miss in recounting all the details is the far more important issue in Matthew’s mind: Jesus was paying the price for the sins of mankind, because He had no sin of His own. Three hours was long enough, apparently, because Jesus cried out in His native tongue a quote from Psalm 22. It was mistaken by Hellenistic Jews for another chance to mock Him. Perhaps to ensure they heard Him aright, they offered Him a drink of the low-grade vinegary wine issued to the Roman conscripts, soaked into a sponge so He could suck it out.

Rather than the miracles of Elijah, Jesus did something far greater. Showing absolute authority over all things, He dismissed His spirit from His human body. Matthew notes at that moment the veil in the Temple, passed only once each year on the Day of Atonement, was torn apart. Jesus now moved that solemn observance some six months to coincide with Passover by opening the way into the Holy of Holies for all. The proximate cause of the torn veil was an earthquake. This was the final closure of an earth-bound covenant of rituals, the final element of God's direct dealings with human governments. It was done. To celebrate this new beginning, Matthew notes, many of the bodies ejected from their graves by the earthquake – which could not be re-buried until after the holy days – were resuscitated after Jesus resurrected.

The hardened Roman officer in charge of the execution knew this for what it was, the death of someone divine. There were plenty of witnesses to the actual death, including some of the entourage which had followed Jesus down from Galilee. Two women were named Miriam; one from Magdala, often believed to be a former prostitute, but there's no biblical basis for that. Another was the mother of James the Less (and Matthew), married to Jesus' uncle. The third woman was Salome, a sister of Jesus' mother Miriam (who was also apparently there in other Gospels), and mother of James and John.

At some point, one of the Sanhedrin petitioned Pilate for the now dead body of Jesus. Matthew doesn't say much about the details, noting only Jesus was given a hurried but proper burial, wrapped in a linen strip up to the neck, held in place by a mixture of gum Arabic and burial spices. This fellow, Joseph from Arimathea (AKA Ramathaim), was wealthy enough to have his own tomb cut into the rock nearby, recently finished just in time to accept this body. To protect it from thieves, he covered the opening with a large stone, a common practice. The two Miriams Matthew mentioned earlier observed the location of the tomb.

During all those debates Matthew recorded between Jesus and the Pharisees, we had to wonder if they were being obtuse at times. Apparently, they understood the real meaning of one of Jesus' comments regarding His resurrection three days after His death. After discussing this with the chief priests of the Sanhedrin, a group of them came before Pilate again. Matthew slyly notes they did this on a Sabbath; whether it was a calendar Sabbath or simply a celebratory Sabbath we don't know, but a Sabbath by Law, nonetheless. After revealing their concerns, Pilate agreed it might be a problem if the disciples manage to steal the body of Jesus and claim He had risen. So, Pilate permitted them to seal and guard the grave under Roman authority.

How often do we read this passage in Matthew and make the same mistakes of the Pharisees? The traditions of their scholars had added a great pile of manure on top of God's Word, in some pitiful effort to protect Almighty God. They bore an intense focus on the mere appearance of things, never seeing beyond the flesh. For so long, the church has become entangled in magnifying Jesus' death experience as if it were unique in human history. It was not. To the world around Him, this was just another execution of troublemakers. Most of the actual events were rather mundane. What made it unique was the spiritual reality, as testified by the unusual response by Creation, and the ramifications for the end of Judaism. Those miracles were well below the threshold of logical proof. Without a spiritual understanding, this event was only somewhat noteworthy, and easily explained away. That is as it should be, for if the Holy Spirit does not make the message real, it's just a wild and improbable tale. The focus of this chapter is the spiritual reality; the events testify of that reality only if your spirit is alive in Christ.

Matthew 28

At times, Matthew's language is very precise, along with being rather graphic. In this final chapter of his Gospel, the scene offers a completely different feeling. An abrupt shift in mood from the trauma of the previous narrative justifies the chapter break.

We can almost hear the songbirds as the sky begins to lighten that Sunday morning. We are presented with the two Marys coming to check on the tomb where Jesus was laid. A tremor had struck, an aftershock from the earthquake which opened other tombs while Jesus was still on the Cross. They would have been concerned about making sure Jesus' body had not been exposed. There were other women present, but Matthew does not mention them.

As a dramatic device, he inserted something which had occurred some short time earlier, while it was still dark. An angel came down from Heaven and moved the stone completely away from the entrance of the tomb, something typically requiring at least a dozen men, and then sat down on it to wait for the women to arrive. It's as if he paid no attention at all to the soldiers guarding it. While maintaining a rather human aspect, the angel glowed with the power of the Spirit Realm. The soldiers nearly fainted for fear, knowing this was not someone they could have faced in battle. Nor are we told of Jesus' resurrection, but apparently the soldiers fled when there was nothing left to guard.

The women thus found only the angel near the tomb. He invited them to inspect the tomb, to see that Jesus was gone. Most emphatically the angel asserted Jesus had risen back to life, just as He had promised. They were instructed to take a message to the surviving eleven disciples. They were told to return to Galilee and meet where Jesus had told them they could find Him. In case anyone doubted, it was an angel of God who had spoken on this matter. The women were appropriately impressed, and wasted no time complying.

Somewhere between the tomb and Bethany, where they had all been staying during the Passover, perhaps in or near the Kidron Valley, these women encountered the risen Lord Himself. His greeting stands as an example for His followers, considering the circumstances at the inauguration of the Kingdom of the Spirit. It is variously translated, but we should prefer "Rejoice!" They mobbed Him, falling at His feet. It was an altogether appropriate response, given He was so very obviously the Son of God. He reminded them fear no longer had any place in the Kingdom business. He refers to the Eleven as "brethren," significant in releasing them from guilt over their previous fears. Reinforcing the message from the angel, He said He would be there in Galilee to meet them.

Meanwhile, across town the guards reported to the chief priests. This shows they had been detached from their normal duties and reported to the ranking Jewish officers. We note the priests grasped the story and did not argue with it. Rather, they make it a point to insure no one else hears it. They bribed the guards to tell a story soldiers would be loath to admit: the disciples managed to steal the body while they slept. This would make the disciples criminals and put the guards at risk for not remaining alert. Given that this warranted summary execution for the guards, the priests promised to offer political protection. They would convince Pilate it was necessary to go along with this tale and prevent them being disciplined by their commander. The guards accepted the bribe and the deal, and began telling the false story. Matthew tells us this remained the official report among Jews even as he was writing this.

While this lie was growing in Jerusalem, the disciples hastened back to Galilee. Gathering on the mountain where He had promised to meet them, they saw Him coming from a distance. Could it really be Him? Matthew does not report the pleasantries. He notes only that those present worshipped and others weren't too sure what they were seeing and hearing. The closing comment by Jesus is best read in light of all Matthew had written up to this point. Throughout His ministry, Jesus labored to show the Nation of Israel had long ago left the original intent and meaning of the Old Covenant. He had promised it was all coming to a close in His Person, as the final and ultimate revelation of God. The time of the Old Israel had passed, and God's direct dealings with mankind would now be on a spiritual plane only. Jesus had paid the price, and there was now no further ritual sacrifice required. Rising from the dead on His own initiative, He answered for all time every challenge to His right to speak for God.

Thus, all authority rested in Him, in both Heaven and earth, including all the former legal grounds for the existence of Israel as a nation on earth. Nothing else mattered; they need not consider the claims of any other office, above or below. Satisfy Christ, and all else is immaterial. As His duly appointed messengers, these eleven men were to disciple people from all nations, just as Jesus had disciplined them. National identity meant nothing, only Kingdom Citizenship. These new disciples from across the full scope of humanity were to be immersed wholly into the full identity of the triune Godhead. In so doing, They would teach them to obey everything Jesus had explained and exemplified. At no time would His servants ever again be without His divine presence. The Man now divine would be present in all their labors on His behalf. While they were yet to see precisely how that would be, it was a promise they could never forget.

Matthew leaves the story there. For him, the whole gospel hung on knowing who and what Jesus was, particularly in context of a contrary message from the Jewish leadership. These did not even know God anymore, so they were unable to recognize His Son, His teaching, His power, and His demands. They had died to the truth long before, and it waited until God's good pleasure to end their part in His plans. They never noticed what really happened, so foreign had they become to God. From then on, all mankind must approach God from the same place, doomed to Hell, and escaping only through His Son.

Mark

Growing up in Jerusalem, John Mark was just a teenager at the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. His mother Mary, apparently a widow, owned a significantly sized home in the city, and was a follower and supporter of Jesus. This was probably the home with the Upper Room. Given the importance of this visitor, and all the talk of death and such, we should hardly be surprised if the lad was the one who had slipped out of his room clothed only in his bedsheet, and who tailed the group to the Garden of Gethsemane and part way to the High Priest's palace before he was nearly arrested himself (Mark 14:51-52). We note Mark's Gospel is the only place that little story is recorded, and it really doesn't fit in the narrative very well, but would prove how Mark knew at least some of the gospel firsthand.

Because some of the Twelve were cousins of Jesus (see the introduction to Matthew), we should hardly be surprised at how many of the primary figures in Acts were related to each other.

Barnabas was instrumental in the early growth of the church, and helped bring Paul into acceptance after the latter's conversion. Barnabas was Mark's elder cousin and brought the young man along on Paul's first missionary journey. The boy bailed out on them at Perga in Pamphylia. For this reason, Paul balked at having him along on the second journey. Barnabas was more forgiving, and took Mark with him on a separate journey, while Paul took Silas.

Eventually Peter took to Mark as his own son, and they worked as a team. Mark showed his worth and was reconciled with Paul. It appears Mark had been working in the Roman churches for a while by the time Paul and Peter were executed. These churches didn't want their last living link to the Savior to die as others did without a written record of the gospel, so they prevailed upon Mark to write something. The account he wrote was probably first published around 67 or 68 AD. This would be after Peter's death, but prior the destruction of Jerusalem, a signal event he fails to mention. It was all the more important for him to write then while the risk to his safety was high during the persecution of Jews and Christians leading up to the march of Titus on Jerusalem.

Thus, at about the age of 50, Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome for the Christians there. This accounts for the brevity and tone of Mark's Gospel. While he wrote as an insider of the Hebrew society, intimately acquainted with details of the geography, he does not focus on the teachings of Jesus, because there was little to address a Gentile audience. Rather, he states with clarity and force what made Jesus unique in the world, and emphasizes the outline of Jesus' plan to train up and equip the Apostles for taking His message across the world. We see, then, the logic of Jesus' actions as the essence of Mark's message. Jesus was the faithful Servant of His Father, willing to sacrifice Himself for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mark 1

It is critical to realize Jesus was a fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Mark's Roman audience was familiar with Eastern Mystical religions and would recognize the importance of predictive prophecies. In this case, even the royal herald was prophesied. John the Baptist is described in terms anyone could see made him a man who had nothing to gain by selling snake oil. He was an ascetic, a man focused on principles, not on material gain. He was the messenger come to declare the approach of one far more important than him. His message was one of repentance, symbolized by ritual washing. Huge crowds went out to this man because his message found traction with the people. They came confessing their sins. He warned those who might be phony in their confession. Water wasn't much of a challenge, but passing through the cleansing fire of God's holiness would search the very hearts and souls of men; from Him nothing could be hidden.

To show His support for this message, Jesus traveled the long distance from Galilee to participate in the ritual washing of John. This was in obedience to His Father's command. Thus, upon coming up from the water, a powerful omen appeared: an opening between this world and the Spirit Realm permitting the Holy Spirit of God to appear, descending upon Jesus like a dove. The Voice of Heaven itself proclaimed Jesus His beloved Son. Further, the Voice proclaimed He was pleased with the obedient choice the Son made. Then the same Spirit commanded Jesus go out into the wilderness and fast, to pass one more test of His fitness. He

faced a hostile environment. Not only was the place forbidding, but so were the creatures haunting the place. Worst of all, He faced Satan, the enemy of God. After passing His temptations, Jesus was served by angels from God. Could anyone doubt the authority of this Jesus?

The imprisonment of John the Baptist hardly intimidated Jesus, but it wasn't time to fight that battle. Returning to Galilee, Jesus began preaching the same message as John, and more. He announced the time of the Kingdom had come, that a change was demanded of the world. Those who refused to turn and embrace this Kingdom would face the wrath of God.

The ancient heart of Galilean economics was the sea. It was a massive freshwater lake, drawing thousands yearly to the shore for recreation and for livelihood. As one might expect, the Lord found fishermen there. He chose His first disciples from those fishermen: Peter and Andrew, James and John, fraternal pairs. Upon His first calling to them, they left their worldly pursuits and followed Him. His challenge would be they could fish for souls of men. Whatever it might have cost the family business, this business of the Kingdom was far more important.

In His travels around Galilee, Jesus went into the synagogue at Capernaum. When He was invited to teach, He spoke in a manner to which the audience was wholly unaccustomed. Instead of quoting dozens of previous teachers, He spoke from His own authority. His native expertise in the material was all too obvious. The average Roman reader had seen enough Jewish rabbis to be familiar with how shocking this would be. To back up His claims to authority, Jesus faced down a challenge from someone there that was quite obviously demonized. Speaking through the man, the demon begged Jesus to leave. The demons were afraid, for they knew Him to be the Anointed One of God, with authority to destroy them. With but a word, Jesus dispatched the demon. This demonstration of authority in their sacred meeting place was beyond their experience, and their traditions offered no explanation. Thus, His fame spread quickly in that region.

Jesus' authority extended over all things on earth. When they stopped by Peter's home, the five men found Peter's mother-in-law ill. Upon hearing about it, Jesus went to her bed and healed her. So complete was her recovery that she immediately resumed her domestic duties. This power of Jesus was inexhaustible. As the Sabbath came to a close at sundown, people from the whole city brought their sick and demonized relatives to Jesus for healing. Because the demons were not fit to acknowledge Him, He ordered them silent.

An austere man, Jesus rose before dawn to commune with His Father in prayer. His four followers searched until they found Him out away from all human habitation. They asked if He would continue helping the people in Capernaum. But He had no plans to confine His ministry to such a small scale. Instead, He told them He had been out in prayer, preparing to take His message into all the cities and towns in Galilee. It was already time to be going. Thus, He preached in the synagogues of that whole region, demonstrating His authority, particularly by dispossessing demons.

Yet by no means was His authority a challenge to the established Covenant of Moses. His message and authority were clearly in line with that ancient Law. At one point, a leper knelt before Him. Rather than order the man to leave, as most Jews would, Jesus allowed the man to plead for healing. This man clearly knew the Lord's authority. Jesus exercised that authority

gladly on the man's behalf, and the leprosy disappeared. In obedience to Moses, Jesus instructed the man to obey the Law regarding cleansing from leprosy, and that he do so right away. For joy at his salvation, the man failed to obey, and broadcast his story to everyone. The resulting news of someone having power over even leprosy, in a message spread by a well-known former victim of that disease showing to everyone his obvious proof of healing, caused a commotion in the region. From then on, Jesus had to stay outside the towns and cities. So dense and large were the crowds coming to Him that there was no way to accommodate them without disrupting daily life and having people hurt in the rush of the mobs coming from all directions.

Mark 2

In the previous chapter Mark established the virtues of Jesus. He was strong yet kind, regal yet generous and patient, friendly but not foolish, really knew what He was talking about, yet showed Himself reasonable in all things. He was the model of manhood. This obviously put Him at odds with the corrupt mainstream officials of His day, the Pharisees.

Keeping in mind we are reading second hand the story told by Peter, we find ourselves back at Peter's home in Capernaum. That he and his family were engaged in a fishing partnership would naturally make Peter somewhat middle class. Thus, his home would include an inner courtyard with an outer wall or fence, accessed by a gate out on the street. After being home from their preaching tour a few days, word got out Jesus was back in town. The house was packed, as well as the courtyard, and the crowd spilled out into the street.

A group brought a paralyzed man. Most likely he was carried in a hammock like affair suspended by the four corners. These could hardly approach Jesus with their burden, so they climbed the outside stairs found on almost all houses in that part of the world. The roof would be flat with a parapet, a good place to catch the breeze and to place things for drying in the sun. The structure of the roofing varied, but most of them had clay or tiles laid over a framework woven in with long thin sticks and stiff grasses. It would be a simple matter to break away the covering, dismantle some of the lath, and drop this paralyzed fellow between the frame members. By the time this was done, everyone below would have become focused on the source of noise and the odd sight.

The first conflict with His opponents came in Jesus' response to the faith of the man and his friends. Jesus pronounced his sins forgiven. Most people in this world would tend to think such an affliction was related to some sin. This resolved that issue for the man, but immediately raised one for the Pharisees. If Jesus were just another man, this would be blasphemy. However, Jesus claimed to speak for God. He argued with their unvoiced thoughts. Anyone can say a man's sins are forgiven, and it proves nothing. But to prove Jesus had the full authority from God to forgive sins, He told the man to get up on his feet. The authority to forgive is demonstrated by the authority to heal; the man got up and walked out in view of all. Had the man not been able to respond thus, Jesus could fairly be viewed as a fake. The people watching were beside themselves with amazement.

On another of His walks by the sea, Jesus stopped at the toll booth and called out Levi (Matthew) to join the group and become a full-time disciple. The Roman audience would see this as vindicating government authority, since Jesus didn't see anything disqualifying in Levi's

occupation. This was quite the contrary to the Pharisees' view of things. Levi celebrated this new status in the Kingdom by hosting a feast. It's natural he would invite those in his social circle. As an outcast among Jews, that left only other outcasts from mainstream Jewish society. The Pharisees referred to a broad swath of folks as "sinners." How could a rabbi eat with such, since it was illegal by the Talmudic standards, the same as eating with Gentiles? Mark's Roman audience would chuckle at the arrogance so typical of Pharisees. Jesus replied He had come to call sinners to repentance. Since the Pharisees were self-righteous, they would not acknowledge any need of a Savior. The outcasts of Jewish society were eager to be saved and welcomed Jesus as a spiritual physician.

More than likely, this celebration fell on one of the fast days declared by the rabbinical teachings (Monday or Thursday). When the Pharisees commented how John's disciples joined in this observance, they wanted to know how Jesus did not. Jesus made out like the celebration was a wedding feast, which was exempt from the fasting rules. Further, it was a royal wedding feast, for Jesus was the heir of the Kingdom, a wholly new thing. The old ways of the Pharisees were about to pass away, and new ways were needed. This new Kingdom and teaching was not a patch to fix the old, but something altogether different. Nor could its joyful fullness of life fit in the old forms, but needed its own new forms.

At some point later, Jesus was strolling with His disciples through a field of ripe grain. It was perfectly lawful for them to graze as they passed, eating what they could without carrying any away. What the Pharisees regarded unlawful was considered "labor" – harvesting, threshing, etc. This was a petty, nit-picking expansion of Sabbath law. Jesus reminded them human need trumped ritual observances. David and his bodyguard were allowed to eat the ritual bread which had been set before the Lord. When the day was ended, the old bread was set aside for the priests only to eat. Yet David and his friends were allowed to take it. The priest of that day didn't suffer silly legalism, but knew full well there was a common-sense exemption. Thus, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that the Sabbath was a gift from God to mankind, to prevent the rich and powerful from abusing their servants and employees. Ordinary people got a break on the Sabbath; that was the purpose of the Law. Jesus then bluntly claimed He was Lord over such Law, that He had authority to declare the true meaning of things.

Thus, we see an image of Jesus as one who authoritatively corrects a very corrupt regime, one which arose to enslave men. This brought Him into open conflict with the legal authorities of His day. By no means did this conflict intimidate Him. He feared no man.

Mark 3

On another visit to the Capernaum Synagogue, the leaders had set a trap for Jesus. Having seen Him drive out a demon during a previous meeting, they wondered if He would also heal on the Sabbath. While dispatching a demon was hard to pin down as breaking the Sabbath observance, healing had been declared illegal long ago. They watched intently for a concrete reason to judge Him sinful by their standards.

Jesus had just declared Himself competent to judge what was appropriate for Sabbath observance. Here was a clear example of the conflict. Rabbinical teaching said refusing to use the power one had to protect the powerless made one a murderer. For Jesus to neglect using His

power to heal the man in need was tantamount to crippling the man. These synagogue leaders could no longer recognize their distance from God; their hearts were like stone. They adhered to a petty rule forbidding healing or medicine of any sort on the Sabbath unless the patient was near death. The obvious meanness in this idea was lost to them. Jesus was justly angry with them.

How odd it seems these had a short time before condemned Him for eating with “traitors” and were now conspiring with similar “traitors” – the Herodians were a political party which collaborated with Rome. Mark shows us these Pharisees were completely without principle in their drive to shut up Jesus and His message. As soon as they left the meeting house, they went to find their erstwhile enemies, to see if this Jesus was enough trouble to justify an alliance against Him.

Unlike the Jews who rejected Him, Jesus was sought eagerly by the thousands from all over the region, from the Dead Sea to Lebanon, from the southern wilderness to Damascus. The diseases and demons fled His touch, for which cause those afflicted pressed hard upon Him. Indeed, the text describes vividly people throwing themselves at Jesus there on the shore of Galilee. It was necessary to keep a small boat at hand to rescue Him if things got too rowdy.

We see that Jesus was above petty human politics. His Kingdom was of the Spirit; political parties and their agendas had no bearing on things. Thus, His choice of the Twelve ranges from all of life: fishermen and political hucksters, Roman collaborators and rebels against Rome, quiet men and tempestuous men – it mattered not that these were all least likely to be chosen by the Pharisees for much of anything. God saw their hearts and needed talents men would not recognize. Mark notes in passing the inner circle got nicknames, a rare event in Eastern religious practices to mark notable achievement. In this case, these were obvious jokes. To call Simon “the rock” was the height of sarcasm. The Sons of Zebedee – whose name meant a gift, rather like a dowry – became Sons of Tumult. These Twelve were the founding members of His divine royal court.

It seems neither Jesus’ enemies nor His friends understood Him. With all the constant hubbub and crowds, Jesus and His disciples hardly had time to grab a bite of food. His relatives came to take Him into custody, fearing He had gone mad. For their part, His enemies were sure He was demonized Himself. Indeed, demonized by the Chief of Demons, since He had so much authority over them. Did not the demons call out in recognition of His authority?

First, Jesus dealt with the more dangerous sin of the Pharisees. His point was they were so insensible, they couldn’t tell the difference between God and Satan. So determined they were to hang onto their prerogatives, they were willing to twist basic logic and violate theology. Jesus pointed this out: How reasonable was it to expect Satan to destroy his Kingdom of Darkness by rolling back his own conquests? Were they so utterly contemptuous of spirit beings they would think Satan a complete fool? Rabbis had long taught it was a sin to insult any angelic being, including Satan. Jesus was conducting a conquest and plunder of Satan’s realm, as a Lord suppressing a rebel. They never seemed to notice the great mass of good done to so very many souls, souls they often condemned as not worth any trouble. So deep was their error, it showed they were beyond redemption, for they had rejected the love and mercy of God for others.

His relatives simply figured all this attention had gone to His head. When people in the crowd passed the message to Him that His family was trying to reach Him, He took the moment to point out the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven as a spiritual family. Blood kin meant almost nothing by comparison. What mattered was commitment to truth, also called "faith." People determined to obey the Father had qualified themselves to be called and treated as His family.

It required no mystical understanding to realize the Kingdom of Heaven preached by Jesus was about good and right living. Jesus placed ultimate truth well within reach of the most common people. For this, He was rejected by the insiders, the elite rulers of His age. He eschewed tricks and twisted logic, seeking to bring light and redemption to those who most needed and wanted it. This laid a solid foundation for understanding more advanced concepts of the Kingdom.

Mark 4

While noting Jesus was a man of virtue by Roman standards, Mark cannot let us forget He was an Eastern man, a mystic. While mysteries were necessary, they were never meant to put truth out of reach. On the contrary, parables were designed to bring truth within reach of His followers. Even as far west as the Roman capital itself, residents were much more familiar with such diverse cultural variations as Eastern Mysticism than is typical in the West today. While Romans might debate whether there was much to gain from a deeper understanding of mystical insights, there was little debate that some things were beyond normal human logic. Mark hints to us sadly how the enemies of Jesus had over generations lost their way and lost their understanding of their own cultural truths. This loss was reflected in the lack of comprehension exhibited by His disciples, men who were raised under Pharisee cultural control.

The Parable of the Sower should have been relatively easy to guess, nonetheless. Perhaps they were simply trying too hard. When they asked Jesus about the parable in private later, Jesus enunciated the principle of spiritual discrimination. Truth clothed in parables served to separate between those led by the Spirit and those who rejected the Lord. That's how the Holy Spirit works: Where He is present, truth cannot be denied. Where He is absent, truth cannot be found. This was the foundation of the parable itself. In one sense, this was a parable about parables. Unlike the popular mystery religions of that day, there is no need to hide the truth from outsiders – they cannot grasp what is obvious to their faces.

Mark paraphrases Isaiah 6:9-10 to show this was a basic principle from long ago. Truth has always made its own path in the human heart. Those unworthy of truth cannot hear it. Jesus warns His disciples if they cannot embrace the spiritual view of life, they cannot hope to understand, much less teach, the Word of God. He explains the imagery to them. Then He adds a parable about the purpose of lighting a lamp. This is no insider mystery religion; this is about ultimate reality. Truth is not something hidden by intent. Just a little truth opens the door to far more. Just a little darkness takes you deeper into ignorance. As revelation is proclaimed and preached, those open to truth will naturally grow richer in it. Those closed to truth will lose what little they have.

Yet another parable shows how the preacher need not understand at all how truth does its work. Just as a farmer sows and reaps with no idea how dry seeds come to life and grow into fruitful plants, so the servant of God cannot comprehend the nature of truth with his mind. He

knows only doing his work and seeing the results. Further, like a mustard seed, the smallest bit of truth can grow into a massive bush, even a tree, large enough for birds to perch in flocks. This is the way of the Kingdom, for it cannot be detached from the truth upon which it's built. It, too, grows from the most insignificant starts. Where it is started, it blossoms beyond all comprehension. No man can grasp just how, but can know for sure that such things happen without fail. Thus, Jesus established the pattern of His ministry. All the most important things were taught in parables. Then He would explain them to His disciples privately.

Yet, for all these efforts, it seemed His disciples were none the wiser. Indeed, they may well have been by human standards the worst choices for followers any leader ever gathered. For while Jesus was careful to ensure the principles of His truth and authority were clear to them, they never seemed to embrace it to the point they had His faith and trust in the Father. In one incident, as they crossed the Sea of Galilee, a sudden storm blew over them, as was typical of that body of water. It could go from gentle breezes to violent and deadly storm in just a short while. The disciples panicked and cried out in fear of this storm. It should have been a clue to them that Jesus was asleep, as if nothing significant was happening. But they woke Him, and He stilled the storm with a word or two, as if dealing with panicky children. They were stunned by this display of power.

We are left wondering in our minds why Jesus chose these men. Yet it was surely the same reason God had for choosing Israel. The prophets of the Old Testament made it clear Israel was chosen precisely because she was the worst choice of all nations on the earth. By choosing the most hard-headed bunch, God showed the greatness of His power and grace. In choosing what seems the slowest-witted of men from His nation, Jesus shows the greater power of truth to change the world. These men were wholly unfit then, and so are you and I today. All virtue comes from above, and if good and fine men enter the Kingdom, it proves nothing. If the most useless of all become pillars in the Kingdom, it is the clearest declaration possible of God's grace and mercy.

Mark 5

In the Roman world, those with authority knew they had it. While the world was full of people who admired and wanted power, it seemed few understood that those with true power and authority never surrendered to panic when things seemed to fail. The low-keyed self-assurance Jesus projected to the world around Him spoke volumes.

Even more, His sinless perfection thundered at demons. After Jesus stilled the storm, the disciples found themselves on the eastern shore of Galilee. Near as we can tell, the only place which best matches the description is a village today called Kursi, which would be right on the border between the Decapolis and the Tetrarchy of Philip just to the north. The area is quite hilly and rugged, with a steep slope dropping into the sea. In such a land, it would be common to find tombs, as there were many recesses and small caves. Here dwelt a demonized man, and under the influence of that demon, was compelled to worship Jesus.

While no one feels blessed at recognition by the piteous wailing of a scarred and naked tomb-dweller, it was the filthy spirit which was most unfit to call Him Lord. Nonetheless, it is quite obviously meaningful when the powers of Darkness fear Him. Those powers had impelled this

man to break all efforts to bind him, driving him into every imaginable means of self-abuse, and we can't imagine how the man himself would be able to avoid clinging to Jesus, even as the demons cried out in fear. Upon questioning, we find the demon was actually a legion of demons. It does no good to build a theology of demons on this short narrative, except to note the obvious authority of Jesus over them.

While Romans were no doubt aware of the Jewish attitude about swine, they provide an important element in the story. There were approximately 2000 of them. There were enough demons to drive the whole herd into the sea. While curious and envious of each other, pigs are hardly like lemmings or sheep. They are more intelligent than most animals domesticated by men, so knew the dangers of the sea. Yet every one of them perished under the influence of the demons driven out of the man.

We aren't told of their conversation, but the man obviously spent some time cleaning up, getting clothed, and being taught by Jesus. The swine herders had time to run into the nearest town, tell a bunch of people what they saw, and lead a large crowd of them back to the scene. After seeing the tomb dweller become a different man and asking a hundred questions, they finally decided whatever Jesus was doing was a threat to them. Keep in mind, if these are folks from Decapolis, they are pretty much Hellenized and superstitious, though aware of Jewish ways. If Jews from the northern side of the border, they would have stood to suffer much economic loss from Jesus demanding they reform their practices, such as no longer raising hogs for the Decapolis market. Whichever it was, the saved man was ready to get away from either mess. Still, with Jesus unwelcome there, the only witness to truth would have been this former tomb dweller. Indeed, what a testimony he had! We are told he was quite effective in his witness in that whole region.

Jesus' authority over Satan was complete. It extended also to authority over the works of the Devil's hands and the consequences, as well. Back on the west shore of Galilee – we cannot know the precise location – Jesus was met by a welcoming committee. One of the synagogue big shots came and fell at His feet, clearly and publicly recognizing His authority. The man, Jairus, had but one child, a 12-year-old daughter, on the verge of dying from a fever. Jesus willingly complied with the request to come heal the girl. Such hideous and heartless afflictions were a direct result of Satan's leading humanity farther into the Fall.

As we would expect, the crowd pressed in upon Him the whole way, people wanting to see Jesus, to speak with Him and touch Him. Many of these had been healed or knew someone else who had. Somewhere in this crowd, one particular touch out of thousands had far more meaning. A woman suffering from a hemorrhage was hoping to touch Him unnoticed. For twelve years she had suffered from vaginal bleeding. Just about every culture in the Mediterranean Basin would have marked her as loathsome for this. Given what we know of Jewish medicine at the time, no one is surprised it was only getting worse. She took a great risk because no other hope existed and reached in to touch just the hem of His outer garment.

She knew immediately she was healed. So did Jesus. Make no mistake: Jesus knew who it was. His question was to compel her into a faith building situation, and the crowd to gain some new insight regarding the Kingdom of Heaven. So, His question was for the sake of everyone else, especially His disciples. They thought it was silly to ask who had touched Him in that crowd,

when everyone was touching Him. He waited. She was healed, touched by God, set free from bondage. Regardless of the cost, she knew she must confess both her action – a serious breach of etiquette – and her healing. Blurting out the whole story at His feet, we can see the crowd wondering how she dared to hinder the Master in such a critical moment.

She was a nobody, a repulsive social outcast just a step above lepers, surely a sinner blamed for her own malady. Jesus was on the way to rescue the only child of a very important man. He ignored the tension and spoke to her faith. Her faith was the power to make a desperate choice, to perform such an insignificant act, and obtain what she sought. The faith of everyone else would grow by knowing this is how God operates.

Sadly, it seems this nobody had gained her healing at the cost of death for Jairus's daughter. Messengers came to announce it was too late; she had died. Again, Jesus spoke to their faith. The One who wore the crown of ultimate authority was hardly ready to mourn and would not allow anyone else to mourn. He commanded the crowd to stay with nine of His disciples, as they would probably protect the woman who had just been healed from the possible response of an angry mob. Besides, only a few would know what to make of what He was about to do next.

At the residence of Jairus, the official wake had begun. The whole place resounded with loud wailing and crying. Jesus rebuked them for the commotion, saying the girl was merely asleep. In later times, it became a teaching of Christians that those physically dead were merely "asleep." This is because the spirit of a person remained under God's control, and this girl's time was not gone. After ejecting the noisy crowd, Jesus led the trio of disciples with the parents into the girl's bed chamber. We can easily see Him in all earnestness and tenderness asserting His full authority over the situation. He called for the girl to arise.

They were stunned, shocked beyond words. Death had no power to deny Jesus. The ultimate consequence of sin on this earth was simply wiped away by the gentle words of this Man. The girl got up and walked around quite restlessly. Such an active child, after such a long time too sick to eat must have been famished. Jairus and his household needed to spend time enjoying their daughter's restoration, and Jesus told them to forget any social obligations they may have felt about giving Him proper credit and fame. Besides, there was no sense aggravating the conflict with the Pharisees already rising. The time for that was later. Apparently, they complied with His request, because we hear nothing else about this.

Here we see Mark has portrayed Jesus as holding the ultimate authority over the Spirit Realm. Oh, the things He could have gained from that! No, He was worthy of that authority, more noble than any nobleman. Instead, He patiently set about to show His world how they could claim a piece of that authority, by exercising faith and commitment to His teachings. Neither demons, nor the most repulsive disease, nor death itself, could resist His power. How He wielded it showed it fit Him well, always with the greatest wisdom. Jesus was truly Lord of all.

Mark 6

People hate change. Once we become comfortable with a situation, we are disturbed even when things are actually improved for us, unless it's a change that we brought on ourselves.

However, if the people facing forced changes happen to be politically powerful, their resistance

to change is often fatal for the changers. Jesus brought change, yet threatened no one in any way; He only threatened sin.

Mark gives us the feeling Jesus left this unnamed town where Jairus was a chief in the synagogue, heading directly to His childhood home of Nazareth. It's hard to imagine He would not be invited to teach in the synagogue there. This was not the Jesus they remembered. A fellow's hometown tends to celebrate if he goes out into the world and becomes significant. Having him come home with a load of fame can only cast them in a positive light. Yet this town did not celebrate their home-grown hero. Rather, they were offended because their hearts were hardened against the gospel message. Precious few people in Nazareth were moved in faith to seek His healing hands.

Since the Twelve were with Him, this experience was a good launching pad for the next phase of their training. Without any planning or collecting provisions, He sent them out in pairs on a preaching tour. The authority rejected at Nazareth was granted to them, and they were to rely on the famous Eastern hospitality. He was careful to admonish them that they dare not respond to rejection, except in the symbolic act recognized in most of that world in those days: They were to make it plain for such hard-hearted people that the very dust of their town's streets defiled the feet. It was an act of judgment which left the sentence in God's hands. Jesus also went on tour Himself, preaching in the cities of Galilee.

The message was to repent, for the Kingdom was at hand. Soon it would be too late, and the Lord would in some way visit the land. Those found in their sins would be rejected, judged and punished, indeed. This message could hardly avoid stirring a strong response one way or the other. News of this revival reached Galilee's king, Herod Antipas. His kingdom was two halves, Galilee and Perea, separated by the section of the northern Jordan Valley belonging to Decapolis. He was apparently at his palace-fortress in the far south of Perea, in the hills east of the northern Dead Sea. The news struck this Herod as a blow to his conscience. He was pretty sure this Miracle Man in Galilee was John the Baptist resurrected to haunt his kingdom.

Mark backtracks to the time not long before this preaching tour, when John the Baptist was executed for daring to preach that Herod Antipas had sinned in marrying his half-niece, essentially stealing her from his half-brother, Philip. While Antipas dared not harm John, his illicit wife, Herodias, wanted his head. She got it by catching Antipas entertaining guests. In a pretense of holding to fabled Persian opulence, Antipas had food, wine and dancing girls. These latter would normally be slaves, but Herodias seized the moment and sent her daughter to dance before the men. In keeping with his Eastern extravagance, he offered her anything she asked, up to half his kingdom. She checked with her mother, and Herodias sprang the trap. Forcing Antipas to fulfill her wish lest he lose face before his guests, John was beheaded right away, because his prison was on the palace grounds. With his remains taken away for burial, Antipas was sure John's disciples had managed to resurrect him. All of this was no surprise to a Roman audience, who were used to rulers putting on airs and being caught by their own pretenses. They would have immediately understood the superstition that someone returning from the dead would have incredible powers.

The Roman readers also would see immediately that Jesus could have destroyed Antipas, or any other political ruler, with great ease. To them, it was a glaring truth, for lack of political

ambition is conspicuous by its absence. All the more so with what follows: Given the attention they had garnered, Jesus wanted to let the agitation die down a bit and give His men a chance to rest. After gathering back in Capernaum, He had them take a small boat down the coast, most likely near the northeastern corner of the sea. Yet, as their boat was visible from the shore, the crowd simply followed their craft to its landing. Lesser men would be irritated, but Jesus saw only how these common Galilean people had been so abused spiritually, they were like sheep without a shepherd. As the Good Shepherd, it was impossible not to care for them, to instinctively want to pastor them.

So, He did, teaching them until it was late afternoon, so deeply was His care for them. His disciples suggested it was time to send the crowd away to find food. Most of them were poor, and buying food for so many of them would cost a fortune. They had just about enough time to walk back to a town before sunset, but Jesus had an important lesson in mind for His men. He told them they would feed this massive crowd. Then He said they should see what food was available from the crowd, and it wasn't much. Flat pita bread and smoked or dried small fish were a common meal around there, but this wasn't enough to make a snack for the disciples themselves, never mind the huge crowd. Still, Jesus had His disciples organize the crowd in groups ranging from fifty to a hundred, a common pattern for handling large assemblies in ancient Semitic cultures.

Then He began passing out the food, but somehow the food never ran out. Not only did they feed the massive crowd, but had enough left over for the Twelve to pack a day's ration each for tomorrow. For Mark's Roman audience, this was an obvious signal. Roman commanders would each day issue to their troops the food rations for the next day – giving them their “daily bread.” It was a strong link; for it was clear the commander looked after the welfare of the troops, but would not give them enough to desert their post easily in remote areas. They got just enough to keep serving another day. To the Roman mind, Jesus was acting with a commander's immense authority, but clearly seeing to the details of daily life maintenance. To God, such things mattered.

Again, Jesus had no intention of disturbing the political situation. Romans would be puzzled if a man seeking to change the world didn't take advantage of this moment. Here was a crowd of some 5000 men with their families, eager to follow this man wherever He went, and He had no problem feeding them, not to mention healing them and teaching them His ways. Here was a willing army to vanquish the local Roman garrisons, and just a victory or two would swell the army to become a genuine challenge to Roman authority. Instead, He sent His lieutenants away, and dismissed the crowd. His priority of meeting their very real needs was covered; they could walk home now in comfort. Meanwhile, He had an appointment with prayer. Whatever Jesus was, He never intended to challenge any legal authority. His powers were focused on a far different kind of kingdom.

To emphasize the otherworldly nature of this kingdom, Mark tells us of Jesus' actions after that time of prayer. Seeing from afar His disciples struggling to keep the boat upright in a storm, He walked out to them on the water. Such a man had no need for armies and navies and massive forts. When the superstitious disciples cried in fear that they were seeing a ghost about to welcome them to the realm of the dead, Jesus called out they should take courage, for it was not death, but life which drew near. Upon His entering their boat, the storm ceased. By now, they

should hardly have been surprised. Had these men seen and experienced all this power and still not grasped what it was all about? Indeed, for the miracle of the feeding was lost in having just another afternoon of work. They themselves were no doubt wondering just when their Messiah was going to organize His realm. They wondered because they did not understand the nature of His realm.

On the opposite upper shores of Galilee, the northwestern, was a relatively flat area called Gennesaret. The people here realized who was getting out of the little boat and rushed to bring out all their ailing and needy friends and family. A grapevine was set up to track His movements, and more diseased and demonized were brought to Him as a sort of odd welcoming committee everywhere He went. By faith, these people claimed His authority to heal by so much as touching the blue tassels hanging from the fringe of His outer garment. Romans had seen Jews before and would recognize this as part of the uniform typically worn by rabbis – a rather fine, lightweight robe, often white with pale blue stripes, and blue tassels.

It was a subtle reminder to Mark's readers that Jesus was first and foremost a teacher of righteousness. Had He intended any form of earthly rule, it would require He wear something else, something that would signal His political aspirations. Instead, He stuck with the image of a simple itinerant rabbi.

Mark 7

Jesus made it plain the Law of Moses was not about the provisions of ritual and conduct, but about what it symbolized: a higher reality. Jesus did not defy the Law but clarified its purpose.

Coming up to Galilee, a delegation of Pharisees and Scribes – essentially professors, bureaucrats and lawyers – arrived from Jerusalem to confront this rabbi who had gained so much attention. They wasted no time in noting Jesus had not taught His disciples to observe the traditions of the elders regarding ritual washing.

Mark goes to some lengths to explain that the Pharisee Party had developed a huge, long list of ritual cleansing provisions. Since no man could be certain he did not accidentally touch something which would defile him in the marketplace, it was mandatory to wash before eating. We believe this was using a small container to pour the water over the hands, such that the water flowed first over the fingertips, then down the fingers, across the hands, and off the wrists. They had similar rules about all sorts of daily household items. Mark also points out that this is a matter of human tradition, not the Law of Moses. We know these traditions today generally by the term "Talmud."

So, the basic accusation was that Jesus would pretend to be a rabbi without enforcing the Talmudic traditions. We can be sure the disciples were probably as sensible as anyone might be about sanitary measures. The complaint was they didn't wash with the proper ritual. The delegation accused the disciples of being defiled, unfit to serve a rabbi, and unfit to teach, preach, or heal, etc. Jesus answers by quoting Isaiah 29:13, where the Lord notes the Nation of Israel was all about hypocrisy; they put on a show to be seen as something they were not. Already in Isaiah's day, writing sometime before 700 BC, mere ritual observance was the sum total of the nation's religion. They were spiritually blinded, thinking the works of their hands

could accomplish the holiness of God. Now, these seven centuries later, things had only gotten worse. What began as an explanation of the Law became a displacement of the Law.

The hand washing ritual was not commanded by God, but the things He did command were nullified by these human traditions. Pharisees, in particular, were materialistic, and always looking for an edge to getting and keeping worldly goods. A tradition they taught allowed a man to decide he would place all his possessions in a trust for the Temple – *Corban*. While he lived, he could continue to use these things for his personal benefit. However, the trust would not allow him to provide for even his own parents should they have need, because the value of the estate must be protected, since it “belonged to God.” This was just an excuse to get a big public pat on the back while being stingy, because it was contrary to the clear command of God. Even pagans did better than that.

We can safely assume the delegation from Jerusalem heard what came next, at least second hand. Jesus called the multitude together and gave them a parable. What goes in is not sin; what comes out makes a man dirty. Later, as usual, the disciples missed the point. Jesus explained that ritual defilement had no effect on a man’s character. He might not be permitted to go into the Temple ritually defiled, but he was not excluded from God’s presence. If anything kept a man from God, it was a dirty character. The Pharisees as a group were about as evil as could be, with their greed, arrogance, racism, murderous hatred, lying, corruption, and everything else. They entered the Temple smugly, yet never met with God.

That His disciples did not grasp the parable was reason enough to withdraw for a time of private teaching. By leaving Jewish territory, Jesus removed Himself from public ministry. They had a place to stay, but efforts at privacy failed completely. Even Gentiles knew He was called to reach Israel, to bring them one last chance to seize their calling to take the revelation of God to all nations, to be a kingdom of priests. Still, in this foreign land, He faced someone pleading for a miracle. A local woman came repeatedly asking that her daughter be released from a demon. Using a gentler version of the epithet Jews typically used to describe Gentiles, Jesus said He could not take the blessings intended for God’s children and throw them out to the puppies. Folks from a Semitic background despised canines, and everyone else knew it. No Jew in his right mind would seek to tame dogs by feeding puppies; when grown just a few months they would feel welcome to prowl the house, and perhaps attack the children whose food they had eaten greedily. It was not right for Jesus to step outside the Covenant of Moses just yet, and the woman’s very act of requesting this would be regarded by the Jewish elite as defiling.

Seizing upon Jesus’ words, the woman made note she wasn’t asking much, not enough to deny any Jew something they really needed. Even good children, when very young, could hardly keep from dropping crumbs on the floor. By understatement, the woman made clear she knew Jesus was rejected by His own nation, so surely His power was great enough to leave a spiritual crumb or two? Her faith was painfully obvious, so committed she was to waiting on God. Dog she may be, but she would accept whatever the Lord offered. Her faith was the key, and Jesus said so. Remotely and without so much as a command, Jesus simply declared it to be, and the woman grasped it in that same faith. She found her daughter resting and recovering from the torment.

From there, Jesus gave Galilee wide berth, passing through Decapolis before approaching the sea again. The wording leaves us wondering the exact path, but it seems He consciously avoided entering Jewish jurisdiction. Nor do we have any idea how long it took, though it must have been at least a month for the entire vacation. There on the Decapolis shore of Galilee, someone led to Jesus a man who was deaf, and barely able to speak

What happened next is puzzling to many even today. Of the Gospels, Mark alone mentions this, and does so in this specific context of teaching about defilement. Jesus took the man aside privately. He poked his fingers into the man's ears, then spat on one finger, and touched the man's tongue with it. Merely touching the Gentile man made Jesus ritually unclean by Pharisaical standards. Spitting was a mark of contempt in just about every culture, but here seems to be related to the concept of driving evil or demons away. Jesus didn't spit in the man's face, but on His own hand. Compare this to the Pharisees fussing about ritual hand washing. What comes out from an evil heart is what defiles; what comes from a holy mouth cleanses. Most likely Mark notes Jesus makes a subtle joke of the sanctimonious nonsense of the Pharisees. A Roman audience would have chuckled over something so clever.

Jesus groaned, then called for the man's ears and mouth to be opened. The man was healed. Bringing him back to the crowd gathered there, Jesus ordered them to keep it quiet, again a pun – a deaf mute hearing and speaking would say enough. They were having none of it, but broadcast the miracle all over. This sort of miracle was simply unheard of in their land.

The Jewish leadership had completely forgotten why their nation existed in the first place. When Jesus came along teaching the heart of God, they didn't recognize it. They were too busy swatting at shadows of imaginary sins, enforcing human traditions in the name of a God they didn't know. When Jesus blessed people, gave them healing and deliverance, they fussed about water trickling over fingers.

Mark 8

Jesus the Messiah was a mystical spiritual King working to make His disciples understand, to shift the focus of their minds to the Realm of the Spirit.

We aren't told exactly where Jesus is teaching at the start of the chapter. The only thing we know for sure is that the location is far from any human settlement, and many in the crowd were quite far from home. Having stayed in this area for three days, it was clear the people had consumed whatever provisions they might have brought. Their apparent devotion to Jesus' teaching filled Him with compassion at their plight. He shared this with His disciples, testing their reaction. As before, they were at a loss to provide any answer. When asked, they produced seven of the flat disks of bread common in that time and place. They also had a few small fish, probably pickled or smoked.

Yet again, Jesus directed His disciples to organize the task of feeding, gave thanks and blessed God in plain view of all. Then He began handing out the bread and fish, breaking off chunks from a stack that never ran out. This time the word for "basket" indicates something quite large, and they filled seven of these with the left-over pieces. Four thousand had eaten. Once again, Jesus showed human limits meant nothing to Him, as whatever was needed simply appeared

for the sake of the Kingdom. Dismissing the crowd to their homes, Jesus directed His disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee.

Best we can tell, Dalmanutha is the name for the western-most shore area of the Sea of Galilee. While there, a group of Pharisees approached Jesus demanding a sign they would recognize. It was not enough that Jesus taught and healed, but they required something according to their own teachings, though we aren't told what it was. Most likely it would have been some spectacle, but this was unsuitable for a spiritual King. Miracles came neither on demand, nor in answer to mere human need, but always to meet the need of the Kingdom. Whatever they asked for made Jesus groan over their hardened hearts, and He rebuked them sharply, refusing their request. His choice of words showed He recognized the Pharisees as the primary influence on the Jewish people of that day.

In His disgust, He simply walked to the shore and got into the boat that brought Him there. The disciples steered a course to the opposite side of the sea, toward the area called Bethsaida. There is some dispute over the name, but it surely means something close to the mouth of the Upper Jordan River, where it emptied into Galilee. It was the original home of several disciples, and a place which seems to have rejected much of Jesus' message. As soon as they were under way, Jesus commented about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herodians.

Leaven was widely recognized as a symbol of ritual impurity. It made bread taste much better but was used to illustrate the idea of something which grew and insinuated itself into everything if you weren't careful. In the case of the Pharisees, it would be their rejection of the spiritual mysteries in favor of concrete and visible reality. For the Herodians, it was simply a case of pure greed. There was little difference between the two flavors, for both would destroy the soul by denying the Realm of the Spirit.

Sadly, the Twelve were afflicted by the tutelage of Pharisees and Herodians, for the men were pretty sure Jesus was fussing about their failure to pack provisions for the trip. It must have been quite annoying that His closest companions were still so deeply infected with the leaven of worldliness, but Jesus patiently explained by walking them through the two miracle feedings. Since when did mere food matter to Jesus?

Upon reaching their destination, a blind man was led to Jesus. Apparently, Jesus pulled the man out of town because this city didn't deserve to have miracles done in it. It seems the man was not born blind, but it was the result of something which came upon him later. Whatever the condition, it included the eyes weeping something which gummed the lids together. Using saliva, Jesus first removed this material and asked the man to describe what he could see. The man expressed being unable to distinguish humans and trees, except humans moved. Then Jesus touched his eyes to heal this problem. When the man realized he could see clearly, Jesus ordered him not to return to the city, but go to his home, which was obviously in another direction.

Then Jesus and His disciples also left the area, hiking north along the main road toward the far northern reaches of Philip's Tetrarchy, the city of Caesarea Philippi. It was time to nail some things down. In Dalmanutha, the Pharisees brought to the fore their teachings regarding what Messiah must do to proclaim Himself to the satisfaction of the Jewish political class. Such a Messiah would never come, for their teachings were mere human legends. Rather, Jesus began

addressing the real meaning of Messiah, the necessity of a spiritual focus, not of this world. He began by asking who other men thought He was. Did they agree with those assessments? No. Peter bluntly stated His rabbi was the Messiah. Since the rest of the world was so sure the Messiah must be something other than what Jesus had been so far, it was obvious they couldn't announce His title to them. They would misunderstand, and act rashly upon that false understanding.

Apparently, the disciples didn't understand either. As soon as He began expanding on the matter by describing in literal terms what would happen to Him soon, this same Peter rebuked Him for straying from the commonly held Messianic script. Jesus offered His own rebuke in return, for Peter clearly did not get it. Expecting the Messiah to establish a political rule was hardly what God had promised. Peter was still spouting legends of human imagination, not the spiritual concerns of Almighty God. If Peter meant to distinguish himself as leader of the Twelve, he had a long way to go.

To help clarify the matter, Jesus addressed the whole group, apparently more than just the Twelve. He began teaching the spiritual meaning of living. Clinging to this sorrowful existence was a fundamental error. This life was already forfeit, not worth much concern. Serving with Jesus meant choosing the Cross, the most gruesome torture and execution known in the Roman Empire. Eternal life after this life was more than worth the price of such an end. Why would Jesus cling to His human existence when the only throne that mattered lay beyond the grave? Eternity and clouds of angels was not some fairy tale. It was real, more real than this sorry life. Anyone not willing to carry their cross in the wake of Christ's death-march was not worthy to share the ultimate victory.

Mark 9

The Jewish elite regarded Hebrew mysticism as superstition, and themselves as a class apart. The peasantry, while having absorbed some of the implications of Hellenism, was still somewhat closer to the ancient Hebrew intellectual roots. Perhaps it might have helped the disciples if Jesus had taught a course on philosophy. But for Jesus the man, it was simply a matter of nudging them back in the right direction, unlike those born in the West who are even farther intellectually than they are geographically. For the disciples, the coming of spiritual birth would solve the basic issue, because they already had the raw materials inside their minds. It needed only filtering out the junk. The Jewish leaders were openly hostile to the truth; the minor conflicts Jesus suffered with the confused minds of His disciples foreshadowed a serious conflict with His nation's leaders.

Jesus bluntly announces that this Kingdom He has been preaching would appear during the lifetime of some of those standing with Him there in region of Caesarea Philippi. As far as we know, only Judas missed out, but the point was His preaching indicated an event which would manifest itself in real time and space very shortly. There would be real angels, and real heavenly glory seen with human eyes. While this declaration continues the teaching of the previous chapter, it also begins a series of lessons in just how thoroughly unprepared these men were to grasp what was coming. As soon as the words left Jesus' mouth and entered their ears,

the words took on a wholly different meaning and connotation. They persisted in assuming the nature of the Kingdom was merely a change in politics.

A foretaste of that spiritual Heavenly Kingdom was in store for at least the inner circle of the Twelve. After about a week in that area, Jesus led Peter, James and John up a rather high mountain, isolated away from other human company. There, Jesus took on the divine form that was His true nature, a nature manifested by glowing brightly in this dull and sin-darkened world. Two others appeared there, holding a discussion with Jesus in a like glorified form. From the context, the three disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah. Both of these other men left no grave on earth; Jesus would leave one empty. Moses had seen God, and conversed with Him often, and clearly supported as Lawgiver what Jesus had been teaching and doing. Elijah, as the most legendary prophet of miracles and pure character, knew all too well what Jesus faced in hearts closed to the truth. Their discussion centered on Jesus' impending suffering and death.

Did the three disciples pick up on this? Apparently not at that point, for instead they began babbling about setting up a temporary lodging for the divine trio so this could continue. Surely this must be part of the plan to take over the world! But no; God the Father showed His Presence in the form of a heavy cloud, as He had done since time began in this world. He pointedly identified Jesus as His very Son. His voice commanded the disciples pay attention to what Jesus said and rebuked them for running off at the mouth with their own desires and plans. With that, the scene faded back to its previous mundane, weather scarred mountain top.

Had it been real? On the hike back down from the peak, Jesus warned the three not to mention this episode until after He had risen from the dead. Ever missing the point, they tossed around what "rising from the dead" had to do with their work. Then, they seized upon the fact Elijah had been standing there and wondered if this was fulfillment of the Scribes' teaching from Malachi 4:5. Jesus confirmed that teaching as one of the few things the Scribes got right. Then He linked it to Isaiah's teaching that the Messiah must suffer and die. Why did they keep shutting out the part of God's Word they didn't want to deal with? At any rate, Elijah had come, and they treated him poorly, which was hardly new for anyone preaching truth. The disciples never seemed to grasp they were at that point in the same company as those who killed the prophets, because they refused to move beyond their childish dreams of political change.

The scene that welcomed their return was the usual crowd of peasants, with the remaining nine disciples and the others in Jesus' entourage in the middle. Sadly, they were having a loud argument with a detachment of those Scribes previously mentioned. Even in the far northern reaches of Jewish territory, these oppressive busybodies hounded Jesus. The crowd was stunned by this unexpected appearance of Jesus and mobbed Him enthusiastically. Upon reaching the center of activity, Jesus asked the Scribes what this was all about. Before they could answer, someone in the crowd told Jesus he had brought his demonized son for deliverance, but the disciples failed. A primary manifestation of the demon was keeping the boy from hearing or speaking properly.

Jesus was deeply torn by the meaning of this failure. Not just His disciples and their own lack of commitment to truth, but the whole nation had strayed from the truth for centuries. By embracing the delights of Hellenistic rationalism, and the human pride of assuming all things could be understood by the mind of man, the leadership of the Jews had corrupted the

unquestioning reverence and dependence on a mysterious God to solve problems they never could understand. This failure was the very cause of so many in Israel being demonized. Upon being led near Jesus, the demon convulsed the boy much like an epileptic seizure. Jesus asked how long the boy had been like this, and man described how since early childhood the demon had tried to kill the boy by causing seizures near fire and water. The man was desperate for his son's relief.

He requested Jesus to help if He could. Jesus seized upon those words. It was not a matter of what Jesus could do, but of what the man's faith would embrace. The man tearfully admitted he was crippled in that respect. Seeing how the scene was getting out of control, Jesus ordered the demon to depart, and not to return. The boy collapsed, seemingly dead. Jesus pulled the boy to his feet, and all was well.

When they returned to their lodging, the disciples asked Jesus why they could not dispatch the demon. Mark records a brief answer which most people today miss for much the same reason Jesus' disciples probably did. It's not the rigors of discipline, but the kind of commitment to truth which leads people to sacrifice themselves in death of self to overcome. The whole issue of shedding this world for Heaven was still a foreign concept to the Twelve, and its exclusion from the nation's teaching was what brought the demons among Jews in the first place. The stubborn insistence that all God's blessings were strictly material, and perhaps intellectual, had left the nation exposed to spiritual forces excluded from reckoning by such teaching. Thus, the only remedy was to recover the spiritual powers of God by death of the self.

As they journeyed back toward their home in Capernaum, Jesus returned to the teaching which dominated the trip out to Caesarea Philippi. The Messiah must suffer betrayal and execution. The third day following He would be raised. The whole image was so foreign to their worldly Jewish teaching that it passed over their heads. On the journey, they lapsed into an animated discussion amongst themselves. When they got home, Jesus asked them what it was about, but they were too embarrassed to admit they had been debating and bickering about their relative positions in the Messiah's royal court, which must be settled now because surely this Kingdom thing was, as they had been preaching, right on top of them. Jesus patiently showed how they had it all wrong: Greatness is marked by serving.

Theirs was a worldly perspective, and leading meant greatness, honor, and power. Jesus brought a little child into the group discussion, then hugged him close. Explaining the action, Jesus told them the nature of Kingdom service was to reach out to the least important, the most powerless. Building barriers to keep out the nobodies of the world, like the Jewish leadership, was a sin. If any of them failed to find the importance of loving the most unlovable in this world, they were unfit to serve in the Kingdom. Rejecting the lowly meant rejecting Jesus, for He chose to ignore the world's estimation of what made men important. And rejecting Jesus meant rejecting the Father who created all things. The only ones fit to lead in the Kingdom were the ones who led the way in the path of sacrifice.

The mention of "in My name" caught at something else in John's memory. He mentioned repeated run-ins with a fellow who insisted on casting out demons in Jesus' name, but didn't travel with them as a disciple under their leadership. Jesus explained that, like leadership, the Kingdom definition of following was different from theirs. Any man who manifested Jesus'

power in faith was hardly an enemy. Such a man was following Jesus' teaching, or no miracles could happen. He went on to warn them hindering someone else's faith simply because they didn't follow some artificial rules of membership was a grave sin, worthy of a horrifying execution.

Indeed, embracing death in this world in favor of life in the next was the one absolute requirement for the Kingdom. To drive the point home, Jesus used graphic images of self-maiming, should that prove to be the only way they could conquer sin in their lives. It was typical Hebrew hyperbole, but the principle was all too literal. Hell was not simply a scare tactic to keep children in line. The Valley of Hinnom, where trash and rot were abundant, and the fires were kept burning by adding rock sulfur, was a fit symbol for Hell. It was almost a song the way Jesus phrased it, with a refrain repeating the warning of Isaiah 66:24. Fire purified away sin, and if all you had was sin, you had a terrifying expectation of eternity. Whom the fire does not destroy will be utterly changed. Welcome the fire of God, for it will make you more like Him.

Salt was included in Temple sacrifices. It also preserved things which tended to rot. We know today it makes the food inhospitable to bacteria and putrefying agents. Salt in that land was mined from exposed rock faces and included a wide range of impurities we don't find in our stores these days. The salt itself could become corrupted, and would turn colors, losing its salty taste. It was then tossed out into the gutters like the worthless dirt it had become. What would happen if the preserving power of God was missing from society? It had nearly been lost by the time Jesus came along. As with all Hebrew symbols, the point was not to identify salt as an allegory for a particular thing, a single quality, but to understand how it works by its influence and effects. Truth preserves what matters. What does not preserve is hardly truth. A primary manifestation of truth is peace, peace which comes from dismissing the cares of human ambition and dreams. When people of God commune in self-sacrifice, debates are absent, because no one seeks his own, but seeks God.

Mark 10

The calm assurance displayed by Jesus regarding His fate was lost on His disciples. To the very end, they steadfastly confused His divine office with something dreamed up by nationalist zealots who never understood the very nature of their God.

Skipping over several months of ministry, Mark summarizes a period when Jesus left Capernaum on the north shore of Galilee, and traveled down to Judea, crossing the Jordan over into Perea, the domain of Herod Antipas. Mark's Roman audience would not likely have been aware of the dispute between two rabbinical schools regarding marriage. For them, it is enough to recognize the harassment of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus stood in the domain of the ruler who had executed John the Baptist over preaching on marriage. The topic would naturally arise as Jesus taught near the area where His cousin John had preached a few years before.

Asking if divorce was lawful implied the much larger question of whether it was right and just. First, Jesus dispatched the surface issue by asking His examiners to quote Moses on the matter. What many in that day realized was the significant improvement Moses offered to the condition of women in the Ancient Near East. The passage in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 actually demanded a

man present to the local courts a very serious charge short of adultery, not some frivolous distaste. Nor could he play her like a yo-yo. Women had been at a grave disadvantage until the Law of Moses. Still, Jesus showed how even that was not very strict. Jewish men tended to see the whole issue as trading cattle, an investment in breeding and service, with little or no commitment on their part.

Going back to the very first mention of marriage, Jesus quoted Genesis verbatim in declaring marriage was binding before God two lives into one. There was no proper reason for separation, unless the cause was sufficient to warrant execution – in every way a vow “until death part us.” This covenant was backed by God, a divine act for a divine purpose, not human convenience. Once two humans joined sexually, what was changed by that act could not be put back. Later, as the group convened in their lodgings there in Perea, the disciples asked for a fuller explanation. Jesus pointed out that divorce, if allowed, was no more than a separation from the only spouse you would ever have. If you can’t abide your marriage, you have lost your only chance. Marrying again was adultery so long as both spouses lived.

Jesus took family seriously, so naturally the product of such a union was important. People were bringing children with them to visit Jesus and the disciples. The Twelve were grumpy at what they saw was a waste of their Master’s time and energy. Jesus sharply rebuked them for trying to keep the little children away. He reminded them once again of the principle of childlike faith. If you do not come to the Kingdom with that absolute trust like a child, bearing no expectations and demanding no conditions, you do not enter. Jesus blessed the children with grand affection as if they were His own blood.

Mark doesn’t bother explaining the details of the young man’s background, he simply tells us a fellow knelt before Jesus on the road and asked how to find eternal life. Even the Roman readers would grasp how the man’s question was about finding that mystical spiritual enlightenment Jesus taught. The young man called Jesus “good.” In a subtle reference to His divinity, Jesus reminded the man only God could be called “good,” so he must recognize that Jesus spoke for God. From that ground, Jesus began with the obvious, summarizing the Ten Commandments. The man not only knew them but was certain he had obeyed from the moment he understood them. Yet it was obvious from his question this scrupulous observance did not bring him spiritual peace, did not quell his doubts about his standing before God Almighty.

That anyone should come to the place of conviction over sin has always been a miracle of grace. Where grace was working, so was love. This seeking heart was lovely to Jesus. He could only answer with absolute honesty. The one thing which would set the man free was to renounce his worldly attachments, sacrifice himself, and join Jesus in His impending execution. The truth of God crushes sin, and apparently the man was too wedded to his wealth to avoid being crushed with it. He could not divorce the false belief his prosperity and power were the primary evidence of God’s favor. How could he throw aside the only blessings he knew? He left deeply saddened because he could not make the leap into the Spirit Realm. His god was too much of this world.

As the young man walked away, Jesus noted how hard it was for those of means to embrace spiritual truth. Jews around the world had become infamous by this time for serving the god of worldly wealth. It was easy to see their words about their faith were just words. For them, the

one mark of God's favor was wealth, and anyone not wealthy was accursed. This is what the disciples had been taught. They were stunned with the idea that their future with the Messiah would not be filled with this world's treasures. In the Jewish mind, it was incomprehensible that anyone could enter the Kingdom if the wealthy were not favored by God.

Using a well-known image of unloading one's baggage to enter a security gate (today known as the Needle Gate) – "eye of the needle" – Jesus noted the necessity of leaving this world and its goods behind to enter eternity. A man, by his accomplishments in this world, could not change his eternal standing one bit. It would require a miracle of God. The price for embracing that miracle offering was to leave behind all that holds us here. The Messiah did not come to save political Israel, but to save souls of men.

Peter noted they had readily left behind their careers and homes to wander the land with Jesus. While many generously supported Jesus' ministry, there was no earthly assurance they would not find themselves sleeping in the open and waking to a breakfast of dust. Jesus responded this was a small price to pay for the riches of the Kingdom. Everything a man might value must be set aside for the calling of the Kingdom. In return, even in this world, he would receive back far more of the Spiritual Kingdom abundance. The spiritual family of grace would outnumber any clan, tribe, or nation. The real estate of the Kingdom was the whole earth. It was also persecution, because the world would reject that claim. But after it was all over, eternity stood at the end of the sorrow.

The nature of the Kingdom reversed everything. Fallen humanity had so perverted the true nature of things, everything that mattered here was trash in the Kingdom. Those who would lead in the Kingdom could be found among the lowest in this life.

Such talk was deeply disturbing to the disciples. As they approached what should have been their moment of triumph over evil in the world, their elevation to noble power and wealth, the dawning of a new age under King David reborn, they were confronted hourly by earth shattering concepts. Once again, Jesus talked of His death, in ever more explicit details. Not only would He not vanquish the corrupt Jewish leaders and the Romans, but the former would abuse Him and hand Him over to the latter. Again, He spoke of rising the third day.

Typically missing the point, brothers James and John privately asked if they could take the two highest offices in His Kingdom. Jesus warned it would be a high price to pay just being involved at any level. He used a common reference to group execution by poisoning, everyone in turn drinking from the same cup, sharing the same guilt before the law. And could they immerse themselves into this hard life of purity and sacrifice, of self-denial and asceticism, just to be on the team? They thought so, and Jesus promised they would pass through those things, dying literally and figuratively. But what they asked was hardly what they thought it was.

When word of this request got back to the other disciples, they acted like it was some dirty trick, because they weren't included in the negotiations. Jesus turned and warned them all. Rulers among Gentiles often regarded themselves as demigods. Were their expectations any less disgusting? In the Kingdom of God, serving is the measure of greatness. The most important thing is not sitting on thrones and making grand decisions, basking in the awe of others. The most important thing is how utterly one can set aside the self and serve others. Yes, even the

Messiah did not come to be great in this world, but to serve everyone else, and to die for their spiritual ransom.

The next anecdote proved it. In the First Century Christian community, a legendary name was Bartholomew (another spelling of Bartimaeus). When he first met Jesus, he was blind, a beggar sitting along side the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. He called out to Jesus using the royal Messianic title, Son of David. While the crowd tried to shush him, this giant of faith simply got louder. When Jesus called for the man to be brought to him, as if gamely playing at being royalty, the man tossed aside the only thing of consequence he had. In that part of the world, having a cloak was necessary for survival, and beggars kept this thing like a small tent over them while sitting and calling out for donations. Whipping this cloak off, the beggar ran to Jesus. Still playing at the kingly role, Jesus asked the man what his petition was. Bartholomew called Jesus "Great Master" and asked to receive his sight. Since he was already by faith spiritually enlightened, it was a small thing that he should be physically made to see. It was his faith that brought the healing.

Having clarity of vision and purpose, the man did what the rich young man could not: He followed Jesus. Nothing else in his life mattered. Obviously, Mark remembered him, as his is the only record to offer a name for the man. Because he shares a name with one of the Twelve, it is hard to sort out the stories from the First Century Church, but one of them died in India, and the other in Armenia. Both died carrying the gospel message as the greatest treasure on this earth. This was greatness as measured by the Kingdom.

Mark 11

It was an extraordinary climb hiking up from Jericho to the ridge line east of Jerusalem. It easily took the whole day, and the foot traffic at that season would have been pretty dense even without Jesus and His entourage. Near a high spot on that ridge nestled the village of Bethphage, which stood close to Bethany. Jesus pointed out the cluster of buildings, directing two of His disciples to fetch an onager colt. The only reasonable explanation is that this was prearranged, for Jesus had many supporters all over this area. It's not important at this point to name who it was, only that the story makes the most sense if we realize Jesus set out intentionally to fulfill prophecy.

Reminding ourselves that Mark writes for a mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation in Rome, it is important to realize the familiarity with a wider pagan background. The basic concept Jesus was teaching was a spiritual kingdom, not political at all. This was by now clearly established, even in Gentile minds unfamiliar with Jewish history. The symbol of setting aside something which has seen no other use for a religious ritual purpose was in those days fairly universal. Furthermore, it would not be lost on Mark's audience that Jesus chose an onager instead of a chariot with white horses. It reinforces the point Mark makes that Jesus had no political ambitions, but His mission was entirely spiritual in nature.

Thus, the people tending the colt were holding it for this very purpose. What the disciples said as they untied the colt was pretty much a password, a prearranged signal. Spreading cloaks for Him to sit on or ride over, as well as leafy branches, was always seen in ancient times as welcoming a new ruler. This context was undeniably the grand welcome of a spiritual king,

over a spiritual kingdom. Oddly, it would have been a large number of Jews there who would have missed the point, including Jesus' disciples. To the very last moment they were still expecting some miraculous overthrow of at least the Jewish leadership, if not the Roman imperial dominance, as well.

Perhaps it would be taken as a tour of inspection, for Jesus didn't say or do anything noteworthy once inside the Temple grounds. This was rather late in the day, and the Jewish leaders would not have had time to react to the news of His symbolic entrance and all the "Lord, save us!" – which was the literal meaning of *Hosanna*. Again, it would seem obvious the crowd was only superficially celebrating, because the majority completely missed the significance of this symbolic entrance. He didn't inspect the palaces and fortifications of the city, but only the Temple. His interests were clearly on spiritual matters, but the majority was still looking for a political Messiah.

A subtle clue comes in the episode of the fig tree. In this part of the world, fig trees bear fruit year-round, even without leaves. All the more so since this one probably grew down in the Kidron Valley where the water table would be higher than most other areas. The fruit would appear in cycles, and this being five days before Passover, the fruit would have been green at best. Still, it was a powerful symbol of the Jewish nation, covered with leaves, but bearing no fruit – a simulation of life, but actually useless. We see no unreasonable anger here, merely a symbolic denunciation of Judaism itself. While educated readers in Rome probably caught on, the disciples standing there did not. The Jewish people were all flash, but completely barren. Their time on earth as God's fig tree was ended.

Pagans had surely experienced, either directly or by observation, religious shrines where priestly hawkers charged a premium for pre-approved "worthy" offerings. When you brought your own from home, they never seemed to pass inspection. This sort of cynical corruption could be found all over the Roman Empire. For Jesus to drive out this corrupt market had an obvious significance to anyone outside Judaism. The Temple was meant as a place to meet God, not for people to be plundered by the Temple staff. The portion of Jesus' teaching Mark quotes makes this obvious. This would easily make Him popular with the country folk coming into Jerusalem, for they would be treated worse than the savvy locals in these Temple Bazaars. The officials didn't have enough manpower to take any action against Jesus for such a popular act.

In the minds of His disciples, things were shaping up for a fine showdown with the Jewish leadership. They followed Him with this sense of awe, wonder and expectation. How would He deliver the *coup de grace* to these corrupt fat-cats? On the way, they passed the same fig tree, and remarked it had withered and died. Whom their rabbi cursed was in deep trouble, so the priests had better watch their steps! As they stood facing the Temple Mount, Jesus was surely thinking about faith, that full commitment to His Father, and how lacking it was in His People. The irony must have made Him laugh even as it made Him sad. The disciples, as did most other Jews, saw the mere externals, missing the deeper spiritual meaning of things.

One day soon, the symbolism of the fig tree withering would become obvious to their new spiritual minds. For now, it was enough they would hear teaching which passed completely over their heads. The Holy Spirit would bring it all back in the proper light. The nation of Israel had remained unfruitful because they had been unfaithful. The Lord had come to visit, and they

weren't ready. Too late; they were accursed, about to wither and die. Their purpose on earth was ended. The Temple and all its trappings were about to fade into history, a dim memory of symbols badly abused by a people whose hearts were hardened against the truth. Pointing to the Temple Mount in front of them, Jesus said full commitment to Jehovah's revelation would easily displace not only the Jewish leadership, but could toss the whole Mount Zion in the sea. That would have been the Dead Sea, where Sodom and Gomorrah had been tossed for their sins – whose ruins were still visible in Jesus' day. Faith in the Lord of Heaven would empower removing sin all the way down to the foundations.

It was for this sort of miracle they were to pray, that the Lord should remove anything which stood in the way of His truth: Jewish leaders, Roman soldiers, the empty rituals and the whole racist nationalism of the Jewish rabbis. That includes impediments inside our souls, too. There was no room in the Kingdom of Heaven for grudges. Those who carried bitterness, such as the disciples surely felt for the Jewish and Roman powers, would not find a place in the Kingdom. Let the Father handle sin on the earth, just as He did with Sodom and Gomorrah. Come out of it because love and grace will not let you stay, but leave your anger behind with such a place.

The priests hardly carried such noble motives in their hearts. Seeing the raucous entry one day, the bazaar shut down the next, they were determined Jesus should declare Himself as the Messiah He obviously pretended to be. Just who did He think He was, shaking things up this way? It was not yet time to give them that lever, so He answered them with a question of His own. It was plain He implied the two questions had the same answer. Did they reject John's message? They surely had done so in their hearts, but would not do so publicly. For now, it was enough they knew Jesus tied His message to John's. Their own dishonesty and hypocrisy would frustrate them a little longer.

Mark 12

False expectations are surely among the greatest curses to afflict mankind. Mark draws a stark contrast for his readers between what was expected by the various parties opposed to Jesus versus what He actually taught and did as Messiah. In Jerusalem at that time, the status quo was the real god of the Jewish leaders.

In the previous chapter, we saw how the priests and nobles were questioning the authority of Jesus. Having tied Himself to the message of John the Baptist, He told a parable which clarified the sort of sin John was addressing. The Parable of the Wicked Vine Dressers was all too obvious to the Jewish leaders standing present. To them it was clear Jesus lambasted them for rejecting every messenger from God. Now the time had come for God to send His Son, who would be executed. The wrath of God would follow quickly against His murderers.

While it isn't clear they understood that Jesus referred to Himself as the Son, they did get the point Jesus was saying they had defied God. More than anything else, any public criticism of their rule, given to such a large crowd who so gratefully heard it, made them indignant. Not only had He verbally trapped them in their own cowardice before the mob, but He twisted the blade of embarrassment in their wounded pride. For all this, they still only half-understood, for they believed He intended to stir up a revolt against them.

While the crowd probably thought so, too – and surely the disciples did – Jesus plainly intended to let His Father take care of the problem. His revolt would be spiritual. Any conflict with current leadership in the performance of their duties would be entirely incidental to preaching a Kingdom of Heaven, not of earth. Rather, Jesus was pointing out that their place in God’s plans had come to an end. They had utterly failed the spiritual requirements, completely dismissing the otherworldly perspective inherent in ancient Hebrew culture and religion. Turning away from faith and embracing the ritual and symbol as the thing itself, they had made Judaism an empty cult practice. Again, Jesus pointed to a complete lack of spiritual fruit. Therefore, they would simply cease to matter.

Instead, the spiritual outlook and faith in God, as taught by the Son, was completely rejected, but would become the foundation of God’s new Kingdom. So, trying to draw Jesus into their debate about whether paying taxes to Rome was treason, as the Pharisees taught, was a waste of time. Nobody wanted to pay taxes, and surely Mark’s readers understood this much, if nothing else. Jesus pointed out that the common currency was just a tool. Produced by Rome, it belonged to Rome. Using it implied accepting the terms of such use. Things of this earth are simply the background against which the faith life is lived; taxes and politics were not important. What really mattered was whether God got His offerings in the currency which really mattered: souls committed to live His revelation.

The highly paganized Sadducees also tried to trip Him up with questions regarding marriage and Jewish laws of inheritance. Their entire assumption was eternity was just an extension of their current temporal existence. Jesus firmly rebuked that. Their highly Hellenized outlook was unable to grasp the ultimate reality: people in Heaven would not need to procreate, so spiritual beings were asexual. Angels were in their eternal form, and sex was no part of their existence. The needs answered by the typical family household structure did not exist in Eternity. Furthermore, all the saints of old were living and standing in the presence of God right at that moment, in an afterlife the Sadducees denied. God is a living God; to deny the afterlife was to deny God.

Apparently one of the lawyers standing there realized that, whatever else one might say of this troublemaker, He was very wise. Not simply sharp minded, He had a solid grasp on truth. So, for his own curiosity, he asked Jesus to declare the first commandment, the fundamental starting point of knowing God. Jesus answered with the *shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a ritual quote many Jewish men recited daily. Then Jesus adds a quote from Leviticus 19:18 about placing the needs of your fellow man on a par with your own. In these two commands, Jesus summarized the essence of what the Law of Moses was all about. What many miss is that Jesus indicates this is the essence of the higher Law of God itself. Everything else was just an expansion on these two concepts. Get those two right, and everything else takes care of itself. The lawyer agreed, and Jesus noted he was on the threshold of entering the Kingdom.

With that exchange, the Jewish leaders ran out of ammo for verbal sparring. Meanwhile, Jesus continued pointing the way to the otherworldly nature of truth, by pointing out the failures of the lawyers. He presented what would be a paradox to human logic, particularly as evinced by these lawyers, but completely acceptable to Hebrew mysticism. How could the Messiah to come be both Lord over David and his descendant, too? Ultimate truth can never be explained, it can

only be demonstrated. In the very act of doing so, one cannot avoid demonstrating how it defies mere intellectual grasp.

Not content with that, Jesus went on to show the moral bankruptcy of those who managed to memorize vast stores of intellectual content. They truly understand the nature of Moses' Law as law, but completely missed the point of it all, as demonstrated in the previous discussion. These men demanded respect as powerful figures, but merely used their position to hurt people for their own profit. They were phonies, knowing the Law but not the God who gave it.

In contrast to such greed, Jesus pointed out the Kingdom measure of wealth. While observing the Temple offering drop-box, Jesus and His disciples noted the showy gifts of the wealthy, contrasted by the pitiful offering of someone poor. While the wealthy were hardly sacrificing anything, this poor widow gave painfully, never mind how little it was in terms of cash value. She preferred to live in want because her faith declared a bit of human misery didn't matter. She had already given her whole self to God, something which the others would hardly consider.

The Jewish leadership had utterly failed the intent of the Law of Moses. They had led Israel down a dead-end path. Worse, they had fully denied the higher Law of God by denying there was anything beyond human grasp. It was a tiresome blasphemy to have told the world God Almighty was nothing more than a slot machine for worldly gain. They forfeited what little comfort the Law offered in this world, and locked everyone out of the embrace of faith which made this world's goods of little importance.

Mark 13

Mark continues to emphasize that Jesus was teaching His Kingdom would be spiritual in nature. Earthly Israel, the Temple, and the Covenant of Moses would all be put away. God's dealings with mankind would become entirely without reference to national, ethnic, tribal or cultural identity. Instead, this Kingdom will operate on a totally different plane, and it would certainly put them in conflict with those who continue to think earthly things matter.

As they were leaving the Temple complex, the disciples were remarking on the clever engineering of Herod the Great, which brought such massive stones into the city for the Temple renovation. Apparently, the huge blocks were first cut as cylinders, rolled into place, then chipped square. The Twelve were impressed by the size of the stones. Jesus remarked the whole thing would be dismantled down to the ground very soon. In the Kingdom to Come, the Temple would be merely a pile of rocks, and of no importance in God's revelation.

This must have shocked them, for they could not envision a Messianic future without the Temple. If that massive structure was not a part of their plans, what should they expect? As they crossed the Kidron Valley, and climbed up the slope on the far side, they must have discussed this some. Jesus brought them to a vantage point on the Mount of Olives where they could see the Temple backlit by the setting sun. The top four members of the disciples asked Jesus privately what He meant, and when they should expect to see such a catastrophe. Would that be the End of Time? What signs should they expect as this event approaches? Would such destruction be a part of their future, serving under Jesus? Was He going to miraculously dismantle the thing because Herod was involved in it? Maybe He would raise up a newer, better, purer Temple. Their question was based still on the assumptions of an earthly Davidic

Kingdom, an expectation that Jesus would throw down the corrupt leadership of the Jews, and take over running the Nation of Israel.

Jesus carefully picked apart this faulty vision. First, He outlined what was *not* part of His Kingdom signs. Deception was fundamental to the Enemy, so don't be suckers. Frauds would claim to be the Messiah. They would talk about wars, maybe stir up some conflicts, but this would have nothing to do with the Kingdom. They are simply typical of normal fallen human behavior. Earthly kingdoms come and go; don't worry about that because God is in control. The same goes for natural disasters. Worse things could happen. Don't try to read significance into them, because you are called to focus on higher things. You'll have all you can do to consider how you'll face persecution. Every arrest is just an opportunity to speak the gospel message to an audience you won't normally see. Look for ways to carry this message to the entire world.

You can't really prepare for such things mentally. Know the Truth in your spirits, and let God inform your mind what you should do. Rely on Him. Whatever you need to say to meet the spiritual needs of the hearers will be provided by the time you open your mouth. Don't rehearse pretty speeches and don't get wrapped up in legal minutiae. Indeed, when evil acts it ignores all law and custom, anyway. Family bonds will mean nothing. Indeed, don't be surprised if it seems the whole world is after your blood. Remain faithful in the face of death. Stay focused on Eternity.

However, the destruction of the Temple was not a threat to the Twelve directly. Mark appeals to his readers to understand: Daniel had two separate visions regarding desecration of the Temple. The first (Daniel 11:13) came in the time of the Seleucid rulers (168 BC), but the second (Daniel 12:11) was yet to come. In the second destruction, the Temple would be gone forever, when God's wrath against Israel for her sins would finally run its course, and the period of Eternal Jubilee would begin. However, just as the first desecration came with turmoil and tribulation, the second would be even worse. So, when that sign came around again, and someone desecrated the Temple built by Herod, it was time to leave Jerusalem, even Judea itself. In fact, it would be almost too late. He warned them not to get hung up on material possessions, because this would be the most horrific event in human history, from a believer's point of view, but The End. Everything before or after would pale by comparison. Yet, the Father would be merciful, if only for the sake of His chosen servants.

This destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem, and the end of the earthly Nation of Israel, was not the end of the world. It was only the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven. So, the idea that Christ had returned during such tribulation would be utterly false. Showing miracles, teaching huge crowds and drawing nice charts about how this just must be the End of Time all mean nothing. It could be pretty bad, but it was not the End.

No, the End of Time would be far more catastrophic. Not just the end of one city or nation, but the end of everything. The very heavens themselves will come apart, not to mention the earth. Indeed, the heavens will open, and the Son of God will return physically – not secretly, but painfully public will it be. He will dispatch His angels throughout the whole earth to gather His chosen servants to Him. They will become the only Kingdom on earth, and everyone else will be gone. He will rule directly in person. There's no reason to confuse the end of the Temple with the End of Time.

The context is still a discussion of the Temple destruction. Thus, Jesus recalls the fig tree in the Kidron Valley. It had foliage on it, so obviously summer was not far away. So, when crazy stuff starts happening and Rome starts sending more soldiers, it's a signal that it was time to leave the country. Indeed, those within the sound of Jesus' voice would be alive when it came. This was no joke. All the earth could come apart before Jesus' teachings and prophecies failed. Out of kindness, Jesus was helping them see the utter lack of importance of the earthly political situation. The current Jewish nation would pass into history as any other human political entity.

However, getting back to that End of Time, Jesus warned there would be no signs for that. No being but the Father alone knew the timing of that, and He wasn't telling anyone, not even Jesus. He warned them to fix in their minds and in their teaching: You cannot know. There would be no signs, no warnings. Jesus told a parable to illustrate the principle. He would be like a lord leaving His affairs to His servants while He went off to Heaven for a time. The interval was completely unknown, since the business on the other end of the journey was indeterminate. Every servant of Christ has a mission, and completion was not so important as faithfulness. The Kingdom principle was not completion of tasks as men understand such things, but a focus on faithfulness and love for God. The job would never be finished as such but would be stopped when God said.

Jesus' Return will be convenient for no man. It will serve the purpose of Almighty God. We must serve that purpose and focus on doing faithfully what we know best to do.

Mark 14

As the life of Jesus climaxes, we see the themes of spiritual blindness, treachery and injustice contrasted against a single example of someone with spiritual insight, and a sad bravery not of faith but of flesh. All this was set against Jesus' complete composure during the whole mess.

The initial plan of the conspiring Sanhedrin was to manufacture an excuse to arrest Jesus after the Passover. Without a strong accusation, or barring Jesus implicating Himself publicly, it would be very difficult to arrest Him at what should have been His greatest exposure, on the Temple grounds ruled by the Sanhedrin. They knew their case was weak, and it was important to wait for the holiday traffic to begin leaving the city. The jaded residents of Jerusalem were far less likely to react to something so purely political.

Meanwhile, mentioning figures surely known to his Roman readers, Mark tells of the one person – a woman – who understood what Jesus had said about His impending death. While dining in some supporter's home, this unnamed woman comes to Jesus with a delicate jar. It was long, tapered to a thin neck with a seal stronger than the material of the jar. It was meant to be an extravagance, because the only way to open it was to break it. Normally this meant snapping its thin neck. The entire contents were poured on Jesus' head, a very expensive perfume. The whole thing typically represented a year's wages for the average peasant. When His disciples complained of the waste, that it was better to have given that amount to the poor, Jesus shut them up by pointing out how she, at least, paid attention to His warnings about dying very soon. To the last moment, the Twelve never seemed to understand or believe this warning.

Mark seems to connect Jesus' rebuke with the timing of Judas deciding this game was over. Using the nickname which marked him as the complete political radical, a member of the assassins who chose Romans and their collaborators as targets, Mark tells us Judas went to the Sanhedrin to arrange a quiet and easy arrest of Jesus. If they would keep an arresting party on hand, he would come to them the first moment Jesus could be taken into custody without a crowd watching; this, in exchange for a mere pittance.

Mark then explains the origin of the Christian Communion celebration. It was based on Jewish Passover, of which most Romans had some vague ideas about sacrificial sheep. It was to be a private celebration of Jesus and His disciples. Obviously, Jesus had prearranged this, and told His men to look for, of all things, a *man* carrying a water jug, typically a task only for women. The pair found things as He told them and set about obtaining and cooking the meal. They gathered that evening, which most people knew the whole Near East regarded as the beginning of the next day. During this ritual celebration, Jesus identified two elements as marking a new covenant, symbolic of His life and teaching, and His coming sacrifice. It's unlikely anyone in Mark's audience would have missed Jesus associating His sacrifice with that of the Passover lambs. He told them bluntly that this was the last wine He would taste until the Kingdom was brought literally to the earth, meaning He was about to leave earth.

He had warned them earlier there was a traitor in their group, one of those who had been with Him from the start. It seemed impossible. Apparently, the immediacy of all this was lost on them. They sang a hymn and left. He warned them as they walked in the evening between houses of solemn celebration that the Scripture prophesied they would desert Him that very night. However, all would be well, and He would rise and wait for them in Galilee, where they had spent so much time together. They all insisted this was not so. Were they not about to take over the city and revive David's monarchy? Peter argued the more so, as he had prepared himself for duty as Jesus' bodyguard, carrying an illegal weapon. Jesus asserted Peter would disavow Him completely, three times, before dawn. Peter insisted he was ready to die with Jesus.

The cool night air and hike would have kept them awake. Once they settled into the warmer valley garden, with the heavy meal and wine settling in their stomachs, only some trauma could keep them awake at that hour. Apparently, Jesus was the only one aware of the awful doom approaching. He left the nine and took His closest trio with Him farther into the garden. His instructions were, as He was praying, they should be praying that they might rise to a more spiritual level, because human flesh was untrustworthy in the difficulty to come. Three times Jesus went off privately, falling face down on the ground, praying that He not have to be executed, yet willing to face it if there was no other way. Each time, He returned to find them sleeping. They just did not sense the spiritual turmoil but existed entirely in the flesh. All His teaching about His death as the Passover Lamb had passed over their heads. They didn't even have sense enough to be excited about what they thought was coming next: victory over the Jewish leadership.

Instead, Jesus announced His traitor had arrived. Keeping his bargain with the Sanhedrin, Judas led a large and heavily armed arrest party to Jesus. Greeting his rabbi in the typical expressive Eastern fashion, Judas identified Jesus in the darkness. As the mixed group of Temple Guards and Roman soldiers took Him into custody, Jesus loudly noted how silly it was they cowardly

arrested Him this way at night, when it would have been pretty easy to do so during His daily teaching sessions right in front of them on the Temple grounds. He never once threatened them, and the elderly priests could have taken Him themselves. Jesus knew it was to fulfill the Scriptures implicating His nation as deep in sin to the very end. The token resistance of Peter amounted to nothing, and the Twelve ran away.

Mark betrays his presence at the event by a brief mention of something about a young man following Jesus and His disciples that night. We envision a young fellow, possibly a member of the family which hosted their Passover celebration that night, who slipped out of the house behind them. Having heard some of the talk that night, it was obvious something exciting was ahead, and perhaps he could catch some of it. When the arrest party began marching Jesus back toward the city, this young man was following a little too closely, and was nearly taken himself by zealous members of the Sanhedrin's group. This young man escaped, as the Greeks say it, in his gymnasium suit – not necessarily nude, but embarrassingly close to it, at least.

Without bogging down in the details of the Jewish justice system, Mark makes it plain to anyone this whole thing was unjust from the start. The trial was at night to avoid public participation or observation, the Sanhedrin couldn't even *buy* consistent testimony against Jesus. The best they could do was some wild story about threatening to destroy the Temple building. In exasperation, the Chief Judge demanded the accused condemn Himself. Jesus willingly complied, frankly stating He was the Messiah. Further, He warned they would someday see Him in His full power judging *them*. This gave them at least a charge of blasphemy, for which their laws required a death penalty. Then the Jews themselves – since Romans weren't allowed inside the High Priest's courtyard – began abusing Him. Every detail was a complete failure of justice by any civilized standard.

Perhaps he hoped yet to redeem himself in some way, for Peter had followed somewhat behind all this, entering the High Priest's courtyard and hanging out with the milling crowd of guards and servants. Three different times he was identified as one of the Twelve, and each time Peter denied it. Nothing here should be taken as Peter using foul language, but as calling curses upon himself as an oath to back his denial. This was typical of Eastern men arguing with someone else. In the end, Peter was already standing in the ornate gateway, trying to avoid any further discussion of his identity, and was hit with it one last time. Obviously, this was fear rising in the place of dying bravado of the flesh. When Peter realized the rooster had crowed twice, and he had denied Jesus three times, both as he was warned, his living death was complete. Whatever Peter had been before, there was nothing left but tears. Recall: We have these details because Mark is recounting what Peter told him.

The Roman audience would have felt a mixture of contempt and pity for Peter. This was Jesus at His hour of greatest need, the last chance when even a futile gesture might be made. The Messianic dreams of kicking out the oppressive Jewish rulers, perhaps the Romans too, and reviving the purity and glory of ancient Israel, were all gone. Peter could not so much as acknowledge Jesus was His best friend, much less his Master. Nor could Peter witness to these servants what great things Jesus had done for him, nor all the mighty miracles he had seen, or done himself. Failure of the flesh could not have been more complete. The ultimate failure of virtue, justice and truth were still ahead.

Mark 15

Jesus predicted His death repeatedly, along with numerous details about who was plotting and how they would go about it. For Him, death was a station on the path to ultimate victory. Mark does not waste too much ink on details of Jesus' death. Rather, he recites the basic outline of events, perhaps to correct some silly legends, more than anything else. The focus of attention is showing by the sequence of events the narrative support for basic teachings the Roman Christians had received.

The second act of the Sanhedrin was to reconvene at dawn to reconfirm their sentence on Jesus. He was bound and turned over to Roman custody. While Pilate would not normally be in town, since his official residence was in Caesarea, it seemed during festivals trouble was most likely to happen in Jerusalem, as it had so often in the past. Mark sticks with the basic facts, showing Pilate asked Jesus if He claimed to be King of the Jews. Jesus' answer was idiomatic for "yes." While this was officially sufficient to find Jesus guilty of treason, it's obvious Pilate was certain Jesus was hardly a threat to Roman authority. As Mark had pointed out repeatedly, Jesus was too obviously a spiritual king, with no interest in human politics.

It became clear to everyone this was not going as planned, and the representatives of the Sanhedrin lined up to make radical accusations against Jesus. That Jesus calmly absorbed this without reaction rather surprised Pilate. This fellow had no fear for His life. Mark backtracks just a bit to note in this context that the Roman governor had a tradition during Passover of releasing a prisoner back to the Jews as a gesture of good will. Some of the folks in this crowd of spectators would have quickly called for the release of Jesus, but the Sanhedrin expected that. They had planted agents in the crowd to make it seem the multitude would prefer Barabbas. This latter was a notorious revolutionary, probably a likely hero to the multitude. Any hope of calling for Jesus' release died quickly.

Pilate had no legal grounds to charge Jesus, so took advantage of the moment, hoping the crowd might at least relent, since he had granted their wish to release Barabbas. Again, the Sanhedrin had come prepared, and immediately their agents began shouting raucously for Jesus to be crucified. It looked very much like a riot in the making, so Pilate resigned himself to executing this harmless rabbi. He had Jesus publicly flogged. Mark spares no relish for gruesome details, just mentions it in passing. His readers knew exactly what that meant and needed no elaboration: the victim tied to a post, hands above his head, the lictor facing him and wrapping the cat-o-nine-tails around the victim and yanking it back. Utterly messy and painful beyond words, the lictor was trained to discern and stop before the accused died.

It was probably another part of the ritual to allow the soldiers to afflict the condemned a little more. We know most Roman soldiers quartered in the city were Syrian conscripts, and there was mutual despise between them and the Jews. For a man who had just survived a vicious beating with a whip, the physical abuse wouldn't have mattered much, but it's hard to ignore the sorrow of the mocking. The prospect of execution would come somewhat as a relief, as He was led away. By now He was simply too weak to carry the crossbeam, and a man who happened to be the only one walking against the flow of traffic for this procession was ordered to carry the load. Mark names the man: Simon of Cyrene. The best explanation is that he was

known to the readers because at least one of his sons, Rufus, lived in Rome. Romans would also recognize the common practice of forcing someone to bear a burden “for the Empire.”

Mark translates the name of the place of execution, which had to be high ground near a well-traveled road. Such a spectacle was the Roman idea of deterrence. Jesus refused the drugged potion offered, a cruel joke which dulled the victim’s pain, but also prolonged the suffering. In a bare sketch, Mark notes Jesus was crucified, and the soldiers chosen for this extra duty were allowed to divide whatever property the condemned carried with them. Noting the execution began at 9 AM, Mark mentions the charge against Jesus, which amounted to treason. It is noteworthy for being so senseless. He also mentions the other two victims, which fulfills the prophecy that the Messiah would be counted as a common criminal. We note the tone of this narrative is simply describing the way human governments do things. The most significant event in human history, before and after, and it was just a routine matter hardly noted.

The mockery never let up. It seems the people intentionally misunderstood Jesus’ teachings. The Sanhedrin celebrated with similar comments. Even the two robbers beside Him mocked Jesus. The moral darkness was matched by literal darkness. By noon, the sun was hidden completely from this scene. Another three hours, and we are told Jesus was utterly alone, for even His Father in Heaven turned away. In the context, we should realize this was the worst part of the whole thing for Jesus. With such severe dehydration, it was hard to be sure exactly what Jesus was saying in His native Aramaic, so someone offered Him a drink of the cheap wine provided Roman soldiers in their rations. This was what Jesus needed physically to enable what He had to do last. He cried out, but Mark doesn’t bother with words which didn’t mean anything to his Roman readers. Rather, he notes Jesus simply and forcefully breathed His last, and died. Much more important it was to reveal the Temple veil was torn open from above. The secretive inner sanctuary separating God from mankind was opened, and Judaism died, having no longer any purpose.

Oddly, it was a pagan Roman commander who realized dying this way had meaning. The officer recognized that the man in the middle was divine. How many times had he commanded a detachment to execute criminals in this manner? They lingered on for at least a day, and usually two. This fellow simply commanded his body to die after only six hours. No authority on earth could match that. Of course, members of Jesus’ entourage were there, mostly women. Mark names the ones known to his readers, noting there were several others. The men were in hiding.

The term “evening” should be read like our “late afternoon.” Mark notes it was approaching the day of preparation before the Sabbath that week. Jews could do nothing, even burying their dead, on the Sabbath. Joseph of Arimathea, described as one of the few members of the Sanhedrin who actually believed in God and His promises, mustered enough courage to come forth and bury Jesus. Mark describes how Pilate seemed surprised Jesus had succumbed so quickly. However, it is confirmed, so he signs a release, and the body is taken down from the cross. Mark notes the Jewish burial practice in passing, of wrapping the dead in long linen strips, rather like what portray for mummies in Egypt. The body was placed in an extravagantly expensive tomb, and sealed with a rolling stone. Mark mentions at least two of the women saw the location of this tomb.

We can't really say Mark treats Pilate with any sympathy, so much as he lays the blame squarely on the Jewish leaders. Pilate was simply an intelligent part of the impersonal Roman machinery, doing what government does best. Hardly an ogre, Pilate simply does his job. Squeezing from the crucifixion story every last juicy detail is foreign to the biblical point of view. After consistently pointing out Jesus was teaching a spiritual understanding, building a spiritual kingdom, and in every way emphasizing the spiritual nature of true faith in a spiritual God, it becomes a mockery that people would ever claim to seek splinters from a "sacred Cross," as if tangible objects could somehow have any inherent power. Jesus' own clothing was dismissed in a sentence, because the garment of true holiness was what mattered. At every point, He criticized the Jewish fascination with tangible objects of their false religion. The death of Our Savior was unjust, brutal and messy, but absolutely necessary. Like anything else, this life and this world, even death itself, is merely a tool used in service to the Kingdom.

Mark 16

Mark doesn't bother to offer extensive proofs of our Lord's resurrection. He explains simply how the news got back to the men Jesus chose as His closest disciples, and how everyone was so slow to believe. More so, they were slow to grasp something He had explained repeatedly.

The same three women mentioned before as viewing the execution and the burial are now on their way back to the tomb. They arise before dawn, bringing highly scented anointing oils to pour on Jesus' body. By the time they got there, the sun had just risen. They could see clearly. On the way they had been wondering how they would access the body, since the tomb had been sealed with a very large stone. Upon seeing the stone already gone, they stepped inside. Mark describes what they saw. Everyone knows this was an angel, but the Romans lacked the Jewish heritage of having dealt with angels so often.

The women were stunned. The angel announced Jesus had risen, and pointed out the linen casing in which Jesus' body had been wrapped, now empty and collapsed in upon itself. He commissions them to tell the other disciples, pointedly naming Peter. By ancient tradition, Peter's denial three times was sufficient to exclude him from any further service, but the Spirit Realm operates by God's Law. Even the soldiers who had crucified Jesus could be forgiven, so the senior man of the Twelve was still included, in spite of himself. The angel noted they would all meet Jesus again – alive – in Galilee, as He had promised. The women fled the tomb, as much out of sheer agitation as in obedience. They ran to the place where they had been staying, too dumbstruck to say anything to anyone.

At this point, Mark shifts to a different mode, offering a summary of the well-known narrative. His point is to show the process of how the disciples went from completely dejected and fearful, to the bold teachers of the gospel message. The first person to see His resurrected body was Mary Magdalene. It was she who brought word to the disciples. Being yet men without the Spirit, they didn't believe her. Two others reported that evening that they had seen Jesus as they were traveling away from Jerusalem. Eventually Jesus Himself came to His disciples during a meal. Among other things, He addressed the issue of their unbelief. Had He not told them repeatedly how this was all going to work out?

Then Jesus gave them the commission to carry on the ministry they had during His previous days on earth. Mark pointedly mentions this has changed to a message for the whole world, not just Jews. People who are changed by this message and immerse themselves in it will be saved. Mark records this in Greek, using the word equivalent to a sinking ship. The one who drowns will be saved, but the one who draws back is doomed.

Those who are saved will be marked by a spiritual power, a power which passes through every attempt to stop the message they carry. Demons will be driven out. Whatever is necessary to speak the message to every ear will be given them, including new tongues. Should they be bitten by poisonous serpents, they would be safe. Even drinking poison will not stop them. Instead, their miraculous health will be contagious, and others will be healed. These signs and wonders would be native to the Spiritual Kingdom, which carries a far higher authority than anything based on earth.

Finally, Jesus visibly rose into Heaven, the place where His Kingdom was based. There, He took His place at the Father's right hand. The symbol was not lost on anyone reading this. Jesus lives to execute the will of the Father, His Right-hand Man. Thus, these remaining eleven men went out, along with others, and began spreading the message of this Kingdom all over the world. When necessary for the purpose of the Kingdom and message, all manner of miracles took place.

Throughout his Gospel, Mark emphasizes Jesus was a worthy King. Indeed, more worthy than any ruler among humans, for His Kingdom was of the Spirit. All this world and its sorrows are just a circumstance, the background against which the authority and purpose of the Kingdom of Heaven demonstrates its power, its call, and its unique spiritual nature. Mark took pains to emphasize how very different this was from what everyone expected, most certainly the disciples. In the end, they finally got it. They finally understood the thing which held them, and their teaching was trustworthy, for they had been chosen by the King Himself.

Luke

This Gospel serves as Part I to the sequel we call Acts. Both are quite obviously written by the same hand. The author is well educated, has an analytical mind, and gives a great deal of emphasis to what can be known legitimately of the subject matter on a human level. However, the obvious intent is to justify believing in a higher plane. The writings are dedicated to some sponsor named Theophilus. There are two primary possibilities. First, the sponsor is an investigating magistrate trying to understand the defense claims in Paul's trial before Caesar. The second is a commission from a wealthy new believer who seeks to know more details of this whole story of Jesus and His Apostles, and the message they all taught. It's possible there may be something of both scenarios, as the writing could easily serve both purposes equally. Whoever wrote this Gospel obviously visited Palestine and spoke at length with eyewitnesses.

Luke does not name himself in his writings. We identify him based primarily on tradition, but historical and contextual evidence serves to dismiss most doubts. He appears in Acts about the same time he begins using personal pronouns in the narrative. A Gentile physician would have

the appropriate education, and the stories include far too many details of the human condition as a doctor might see it. He takes much from Mark's account, and would have been a close associate of his, since both were working with Paul. It also reflects an awareness of Matthew's Gospel. Perhaps Theophilus had read them both and wanted more. Because his purpose and outlook are different, Luke adds a great deal more material. All of this serves as a very high intellectual approach to understanding who Jesus was, and why He matters. It's hard to make sense of all this work unless we see Doctor Luke as the writer.

As a devoted attendant of Paul, we can easily find Luke spending several years in Palestine during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea, beginning around AD 58. The grim possibilities of that time would certainly help explain why Luke might begin his research, and then set about composing an account from it. It would be best to have a working document in hand should Paul, his primary source up to then, be executed soon. The book was quite obviously published before the destruction of Jerusalem, for that event is conspicuous by its absence.

Luke serves as the best path for Western minds to approach what is essentially an Eastern Mystical Semitic religion. He offers a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, appealing to the Western mind to look for something not obvious to the senses. This grasp explains how Luke was able to remain with Paul as the last of his long-time friends when the end came. It explains to the unknown Theophilus and other Western Christians the unique and absolute claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Luke killed a lot of silly speculation rampant with the rise of Gnosticism. We cannot help but expect many pious and exaggerated stories were floating about in Luke's time, as reflected by some spurious "Gospels" which appeared later. The story of Jesus was easy prey for those given to wild tales, and we struggle with that even today. Luke portrays Jesus as a real man, rather ordinary among His own people, but altogether extraordinary in what He taught. He wasn't some divine apparition simply holding human shape, but a regular Jewish man who happened to personally know the Creator of all things. He displayed this knowledge by His power over the created world. Yet His power was always tied strictly to the higher purpose, pointing to how it was available to anyone else in this world who was seized by a commitment to truth.

This truth often bore little resemblance to what all the great minds had struggled to formulate. Rather, it was a truth on a spiritual plane, incomprehensible in one sense, yet with obvious implications on this plane of our existence. Even while He was the very living God of Creation, Jesus Himself demonstrated the only significant difference between Him and any other man was this spiritual focus, not some inherent perfection which could be found in the flesh, a human ideal which all the Gentile intelligentsia sought to define. Pedestrian minds would define and expect divinity to manifest in but a few moments of Jesus' life and His death and resurrection. But the unique spiritual focus He taught and demonstrated in the routine of His daily life on earth made divinity available to anyone.

Luke 1

The first few verses provide the dedication of this Gospel to Theophilus, Luke's sponsor. He then launches directly into the story of John the Baptist as the forerunner to the Messiah. The

narrative seems to assume a rather limited knowledge of Israel and Judaism, along with some vague knowledge of Hebrew History. An educated reader can glean a great deal from the clues provided, and this Gospel clearly assumes such a reader. It also assumes a passing acquaintance with contemporary events from the viewpoint of a Roman official. Thus, the beginning is placed in the reign of Herod the Great.

There is a wealth of meaning here for someone more familiar with Jewish history and culture, but Luke wastes little time on such. Rather, he gives the pertinent facts to clarify just who Jesus is by telling about the birth and calling of His cousin, John. John's parents were of the priestly tribe, aged and childless, obviously an embarrassment. These were decent people, committed to living faithfully the best they knew of God's commands. The priestly service in Judaism was inherited, and by this time so many living priests could expect to serve as priest only rarely. In this case, during the course of service for his clan, this Zacharias drew the lot to offer incense in the Temple. This was a regular ritual with a large crowd in attendance in the Temple courtyard.

While inside the Temple, this man saw an angel. This was alarming to Zacharias. We get the feeling he expected this to signal something truly bad, perhaps a judgment from God. On the contrary, said the angel, this was a happy occasion. For Zacharias, it was to announce God was about to grant his request for a child. Better, it was to be a son, who must be named John. For Israel, whom Zacharias represented as priest in this ritual prayer by offering incense, this son was to be a catalyst for bringing repentance. Special ritual precautions were required for his upbringing, because from the very start this boy would be operating under the guidance of God's Spirit. Further, this son would be a fresh Elijah, the legendary prophet of old promised to return as herald of the Christ.

Zacharias would sound to Gentile ears like a typical contentious Jewish man. This all struck him as quite unlikely to be real, and even to this angel he dared ask for some further proof. The angel revealed his identity as God's chief herald. Since Zacharias would not readily hear the promise of God, he would not be allowed to speak for a time.

All of this was taking quite a bit more time than the usual offering of incense, and the crowd in attendance at the prayer service was getting worried. When Zacharias finally came out, he couldn't offer the usual benediction. He couldn't speak at all, but was clearly agitated and making lots of hand signs. Eventually it was clear the old priest had seen some vision inside the Temple. When his term of service was completed, the man headed home to the hilly region of Southern Judea. Apparently, he had faith enough in the message of this vision, because shortly after returning home, his wife became pregnant. She decided to keep it secret, savoring privately her maternal triumph, unlike the typical bragging Jewish woman. Time enough for others to find out when she could no longer hide it.

Six months later, this same angel showed up in another humble Jewish life. A good way to the north, in a tiny village called Nazareth, a young woman was waiting for her espoused husband to claim her as his bride. It was well known that Jewish custom provided a man would seal the deal for a wife well before he was in a position to live with her. She was legally bound in marriage to him and must remain chaste. Meanwhile, the typical delay was that the man went away to build a home for her and the future family. So, this Mary was biding her time in her

parent's home while waiting for her husband Joseph to proclaim a wedding feast in their new house.

It becomes critical here to note Scripture makes very little of Mary's virginity. The thrust of Isaiah's prophecy was more about the time it would take for a virgin to get married, bear a child, and wean it. Paul hardly says much about it, and the other Gospels give it far less space than Luke does. In this account, Luke emphasizes not Mary's estate, but the central involvement of the Holy Spirit. Frankly, nobody much is going to believe her claim, and it exposes her to public shame to accept this role.

Mary is hailed as the select woman of her nation for a special task. There is nothing here about Mary's greatness, but of the greatness of that task. Naturally, a young virgin who had not yet left her parents' home could hardly comprehend what she might do that would be so important to God. Gabriel tells her she's going to do the same thing just about every woman has done, having a child, but this one would be special. He would be named Jesus, be called "Son of God," and would take the legendary Throne of David permanently – indeed, forever. Even for a Gentile, this echoes of ancient legends and promised saviors common to many cultures. It was a common motif in various national legends.

Mary's only question was what she needed to do to get pregnant, since she could not legitimately bear anybody's child just yet. Gabriel's answer was not descriptive, but a reassurance God would handle the details. Luke's point here is simple: God did it, not man. Further, this was connected to other miraculous events. Mary's own cousin, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant with her first child, much to the joy and relief of all. God can do anything He wants, obviously. This was good enough for Mary, and she bowed herself readily to God's will.

People looking for things to paint "sacred" will find much here to satisfy their lusts. Meanwhile, they will completely miss the thrust of Luke's writing. God didn't suddenly decide He loved Nazareth more than His Temple in Jerusalem. Both were just places on the ground, and on maps drawn by men. The place didn't matter, and the people involved weren't somehow superior to others in that time and place. One priest out of thousands, chosen on the basis of God's purpose, was poorly qualified enough he had to be struck dumb for awhile because he argued with an angel, of all things. His very average-ness was critical to the story. The same goes for the young gal in Nazareth. Her primary virtue was willingness to suffer embarrassment for something she hardly understood, except as shadowy prophecies from centuries before. These were ordinary people pulled into the pivotal moment in God's plans. It was the presence and work of the Holy Spirit which made it all so extraordinary.

In Luke's writing, the presence of the Holy Spirit, typically referred to as "filling" the person, was always in preparation for declaring His Word. This portion of the narrative offers three such declarations. Again, we note Luke's subtle emphasis: The people are not themselves somehow inherently worthy of such expressions of faith, but are made usable by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Ordinary people do extraordinary things when God wants it.

When Mary heard from Gabriel her relative Elizabeth was pregnant, she prepared herself to visit. Luke notes merely the location is in the hilly area of southern Judea, one of the larger cities. Upon coming through the gate into the outer courtyard, Mary called out a joyful greeting.

The sound of her voice stirred the boy in Elizabeth's womb, who recognized his Master's presence in the womb of His mother. The experience pushed Elizabeth outside her fleshly self, as she erupted in a poetic expression typical of Hebrew culture.

She chanted quite loudly, so the entire household could hear. First, she rejoiced in the chosen role of her niece, Mary. Elizabeth knew by revelation that Mary was pregnant with the Messiah. Contrary to any embarrassment this would normally bring, it was cause for ecstatic celebration. Elizabeth notes immediately she is unworthy to be in such an august presence. She confirms her knowledge by describing how her own unborn son reacted in such an obvious way. She's left with nothing but to praise Mary for acting in faith and making herself available.

There is a lot of shared ground. Mary will face a lot of shame for being pregnant too soon, and Elizabeth had faced decades of shame for not ever getting pregnant. From the context of the passage, it appears she didn't tell anyone at all outside the household and waited for the birth announcement itself to let people know. All of this is contrary to typical Jewish behavior.

Mary responds with her own song of rejoicing. Luke does a fine job of translating something from a much older culture into the common language of the Roman Empire. Mary is quite happy to risk social embarrassment for the sake of God's plans. As with Elizabeth, she makes much of her unworthiness, something foundational to spiritual understanding. Instead of being shamed, she could expect people in the future to speak her name with reverence. Commenting on God's nature as all powerful, she draws a picture of a mighty king who welcomes the needy to His gates with provisions, but sends away the greedy. He turns the human establishments upside down, implying the world at large cannot comprehend His ways. Finally, He remembers His promise to Israel, made long ago to Abraham first.

Readers unfamiliar with the Old Testament, but with a decent education, would recognize this type of literary reference to some ancient and revered national founder. They would have read over such poetry several times, trying to absorb the imagery and mystical references.

Luke notes Mary stayed until shortly before Elizabeth was due to give birth. She returned to Nazareth just before beginning to show herself, ready to face the social pressures it would surely bring, even in her tiny village. Meanwhile, the birth of a baby to old Zacharias and Elizabeth was remarkable news in their area. The celebration signaled a sort of social restoration for Elizabeth, for she bore a son. The celebration climaxed on the eighth day, something educated Gentiles had already noticed among Jews scattered across the Roman Empire. It was noteworthy because so few cultures practiced circumcision, a ritual almost incomprehensible to Gentiles, aside from the term for it becoming the basis for Jewish arrogance at times. Given the law of primogeniture, no one is surprised when the relatives tried to name this son after his father. But Elizabeth insisted on a different name, a name not among those of anyone in the clan. In most cultures, that would signal something auspicious, for names were often viewed as destiny.

Poor Zacharias had been waiting all these months unable to speak. From the context, it appears he was deaf, as well, for they had to use hand signals to ask him what his son should be named. Taking the usual note tablet of that day – a thin wood plaque layered with wax, used for temporary writing – he wrote that the boy's name would be John. The crowd of relatives was quite surprised, for a stodgy old priest would be the last to break with Jewish tradition.

Obviously, this was not your ordinary circumcision rite. Indeed not, for immediately Zacharias regained his facility for communication and his first words were another bit of Hebrew poetry. The whole scene was just the sort of thing folks would talk about for days around the water wells in towns all over the region. It was obvious this was some omen, and the boy would be something completely out of the ordinary. Needless to say, the boy was under public scrutiny from day one, and everyone could see his life reflected the presence and power of God.

What Zacharias had to say that first day he could finally speak again was a prophecy about his son. He spoke of the promised redemption, of the fresh revelation of God's power working in the House of David. This promise of redemption went back to the first prophets. Typical of an educated priest, Zacharias spoke in terms of national redemption and vanquishing of enemies, and a renewal – perhaps completion – of His Covenant with Abraham. Pointedly referring to his son, John, Zacharias notes he would be the herald of the Messiah. His mission would manifest as a call to repentance, for God would hardly act to redeem the hardened sinners. He refers to the Messiah as “Dayspring” – a term for a mystical Dawn of a new age. This Messiah would teach accurately and clearly what God had meant to say all along.

For biblical scholars, this is the last of the Old Covenant prophecies. The terminology is full of the standard mystical symbols. While even Theophilus must have known many Jews took these things literally, Luke was about to explain how it was all purely spiritual. He notes John bore a singular spiritual inclination, an ability to think and operate on a spiritual level altogether uncommon even among adults, much less children. All this spiritual emphasis drove John into a solitary existence, often away from people in the open areas. Such was his typical haunt until the day he began his public ministry.

Luke 2

Few chapters in the Bible come with more baggage than Luke 2. Because of this, it is simply too easy to miss the consistent message of Luke regarding what matters most. The birth of Jesus was divine, as amply testified by the facts and events surrounding it. His birth fulfilled a divine purpose. The life of the boy after that divine birth was unusual, not by reason of His divinity, but by the operation and power of the Holy Spirit. His divinity removed the normal human impediments of walking in the Spirit, but did not otherwise characterize how He lived, until His death.

We come immediately to a historical note which has been the subject of much debate: The dates of Quirinius in the specific office of Governor of Syria don't match the details which otherwise place the birth of Jesus between 8 and 4 BC. The salient point is Quirinius served in that area for quite some time in several positions, and any of those positions could satisfy the Greek term translated “governing” to describe the service of this most notable of Roman officials who might be familiar to Theophilus. To imagine Luke might get mixed up on the details can only come from ignorance and unbelief.

Thus, Luke describes a census, which may not require paying a tax, but does require, in the case of Jews, returning to one's clan city. For Joseph, that would be Bethlehem, the home of David, since he was of royal lineage. Luke establishes the basic fact Jesus was a direct descendant of King David. The legalities required Joseph to bring Mary, who was not so far from delivering

their first child. The hassle involved being in Bethlehem during this bureaucratic imposition long enough for Mary to give birth.

The birth itself was pretty ordinary, although they were still in temporary quarters. In this case, the local rooming house was full, so they were sleeping in a stable. While Greek and Roman families typically left their infants naked much of the time, Near Eastern people tended to bundle their newborns in decorative wraps, after which Mary put Jesus in a feed trough.

Luke makes much of the incident involving shepherds. While many nations had a low opinion of this profession, it was widely noted the ancient King David was a shepherd before his coronation, and his Shepherd's Psalm was widely received as high literature. Thus, the symbolic importance of the shepherd figure would not be lost on Theophilus. God sent angels to notify those of David's trade to mark the birth of David's Heir. While shepherds would keep this tale fresh for generations to come, most people would ignore it as legend. In a blaze of glory, the angels announced the Jewish Messiah was born in Bethlehem, King David's ancestral home.

With such an auspicious announcement, they could not resist running cross-country to find this child, checking all the animal stalls in the town. Eventually they found the one newborn lying in a feeding trough and told of the unspeakably glorious announcement they had received. Then they made a racket all over town that night, and wherever they went the next few weeks, telling everyone that angels had announced the Messiah to them. With this, Luke points out how God frequently turns things upside down compared to human estimations. Instead of royal heralds in fine clothing, we have smelly shepherds announcing the birth of the Messiah.

If the shepherds were likely to remember such a thing for long, even more so would the mother of the boy in question. She already had been told by Gabriel and her aunt Elizabeth that her son was the Messiah. Such insignificant and mundane trappings surrounded the whole thing. Circumstances put the Messiah's birth in an animal stall, and heralded by shepherds, of all things. And as with every Jewish boy, He received the same ritual eighth-day circumcision and naming, as Jesus (Greek form of Joshua).

When a few other rituals were completed, they fulfilled the birth rituals by taking the boy to Jerusalem. There, in the Temple, they presented the minimum poor people's offering for first-born sons. While there, two more events marked this as a significant birth. First was the aged witness, Simeon. He had from God a promise he would see the Messiah born. The Holy Spirit led him to the Temple that day, pointing him to this very poor couple presenting their first-born son. His poetic recognition of the boy as the fulfillment of God's promise to bring His revelation to the whole world must have struck his parents as yet one more puzzle.

To top it off, Simeon warned Mary prophetically that Jesus was not what everyone thought the Messiah would be. He would turn things upside down, as God often did when He acted directly in the world. Moreover, Mary would experience tremendous sorrow, as the Messiah would be rejected, yet it would serve to expose the spiritual realities hidden in the hearts of countless people.

This was followed up by meeting an ancient woman, a Temple volunteer and prophetess. Anna had spent most of her life serving in the Temple, since becoming a widow at a young age. While

the couple were still mulling over Simeon's words, Anna began making a scene. She began celebrating in front of everyone this infant's destiny as Redeemer. She excitedly told everyone she knew she had seen the Messiah.

Who can say how all this affected His parents? Aside from these strange heralds, all pretty much nobodies among men, yet clearly a consistent witness of visions and miracles, things were fairly typical on the low end of the social scale. That is, Joseph and Mary eventually headed back to Nazareth, and the boy grew up like any other. The exception was a unique level of maturity which could only be explained by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The boy was altogether spiritually minded. During an annual festival visit to Jerusalem, He stayed behind in the Temple. This would be the year of His Bar Mitzvah, when Jewish boys were declared "Son of the Law." So seriously did Jesus take the responsibilities implied by this rite of passage, He engaged the ranking rabbis in Jerusalem in deep discussions. After three days and traipsing back to the City, Joseph and Mary finally found Him.

They rebuked Him for causing them grief, but it's obvious their rebuke would be blunted by a sense of pride. It's hard to imagine the rabbis would not have congratulated His parents for raising such a spiritually mature young man. Though He did go home and not cause them any further trouble, they were still puzzled by His attitude that they should have expected to find Him attending to "my Father's business" – pointedly not the sort of thing Joseph did. In a quick summary, Luke allows us to imagine for ourselves how Jesus became quite popular.

Given the detailed nature of Luke's account of miracles connected to Jesus' birth, we can justly say popular legendary miracles are conspicuous by their absence. Jesus understood His Father's purpose from the start, because He operated under full spiritual enlightenment. At all points, His claims can be questioned by human doubters. No one is backed into a corner, forced to believe. All the supporting facts are easily dismissed by any skeptic. But those who view these things by the same Spirit Who empowered the events would see clearly the mark of God's ways.

Luke 3

Luke offers a distinct signpost of the time frame. Not in the sense that we can pin it down to a single day of a certain year, but close enough for the reader to grasp the context. Thus, we currently believe Luke cites the year 28 or 29 AD. At that time, John the Baptist descended from his wilderness home to the Jordan River. Up and down both banks of this river, John preached a prophetic message from God urging repentance, and participation in the ritual cleansing in running water.

John's ministry was prophesied long before, and recorded in Isaiah as the herald of God's wrath – specifically, that God was coming in person to judge His people. Luke includes enough of the quote to point out the purpose was to ensure all the world, not just Jews, would see the redemption God had offered. In this preaching, John drew a lot of attention. We can't forget there was a powerful ferment of expectation in this time, something of which Roman officials would be keeping track. It's no surprise John drew large crowds.

When they came, John bluntly compared them to snakes, implying they were children of Satan. By the power of the Holy Spirit, John was able to get to the core of the issue: Having Abraham's

DNA did not confer any particular standing before God. Rather, it provided only a burden of responsibility to be humble and holy, since they knew more about God's revelation than Gentiles did. John echoed the image from prophets of old about bearing fruit for God. Like trees which were planted and tended, but produced nothing good, they were about to find themselves burning in Hell.

The same Holy Spirit who gave the message also made it take hold in the hearts of those hearing it. They asked for directions. Luke records specific commands, but it's obvious each represents something far larger. For the common people, the command to share clothing and food was to rekindle the community spirit, to regard the welfare of their fellow Jews as their own. For tax collectors, whom any Roman official knew were regarded by Jews as traitors, John didn't say resign. Rather, since tax collection was simply what governments did, John demanded they do so honestly. Instead of charging extra and pocketing it, they were to accept the generous portion offered by Roman law. For soldiers, it was that they should stop abusing their office. Being the only legally armed people around, they should not use their advantage to extort either directly by threat, or by false accusations – since Roman soldiers had a higher standing before the law than subjects. Accept the situation and be honest. Together, these samples of John's instructions show the same virtues lauded in every culture of the world.

This harsh-speaking man drew huge crowds, and many went under the water with him. With such charisma, could he be the Messiah? John pointedly said he was not. Indeed, while John preached an older righteousness of human change, he was but the herald of One far more demanding. John used rituals and prophecy from the Old Testament, calling the Jews back to the highest standards of their earthly existence. The Messiah, who was coming next, would not concern Himself with ordinary rituals and simple behavior improvement, but with the very souls of people. It was clearly symbolic language, but baptism by fire had long meant a harsh cleansing process, reaching deep into the core of a person's character and personality, a trial so severe many perished in the process. Jews took John to be a great Hebrew prophet, but he knew he was a mere Gentile slave beside the Messiah.

This coming Messiah would thoroughly test the spirits of men, to see if they were of any use to God. Like a man threshing and winnowing grain, the Messiah would discern the real nature, not just the external show a man might put on for human eyes. Those who failed would burn in Hell forever.

Inevitably, such an upright preacher as John would anger someone in power. So it was, Herod Antipas was already wary of John's influence and the attention paid the prophet. How short a step would it be to stirring up a revolt, when it was plain to all that Herod was totally un-Jewish in behavior? He was notorious for aping the ancient Persian emperors. When John directly criticized Herod for taking up with the wife of his brother, Philip – a violation of Jewish Law – Herod had him arrested. John was standing in Herod's jurisdiction.

However, before this happened, John had the chance to point out just whom he considered to be his Messiah. His cousin, Jesus, came to participate in the ritual washing, directly supporting John's message. As with most people coming up out of the water, Jesus prayed in normal Jewish fashion with His hands raised. In front of a huge crowd, the skies appeared to roll aside, and a Spirit appearing as a dove came down upon Him. In a typical Eastern paradox, this

one who came to immerse people's lives in fiery judgment of God, was marked by a Spirit of Peace, of gentle harmlessness. Further, an audible Voice from Heaven declared that Jesus was the Son of the Almighty, and quite satisfying to His Father. The phrase was a mark of approval, of more than fatherly pride, but a commission to carry on the business on His Father's behalf.

Luke thus makes an unshakable statement regarding the Holy Spirit, Whose presence and power had already been seen, Who was most obviously operating in this Jesus. Further, Luke offers a genealogy which reflects the Roman view of things. Best we can tell, this does not match neatly with Matthew's very Hebrew form of genealogy of direct lineal descent through the male line. Rather, Luke names what we take to be Mary's line of descent, since her husband Joseph was not a son of Heli. Rather, since women are not named in these things, Joseph and perhaps a couple other names in the list, were sons-in-law of their predecessors. Even if Joseph was not His real father, Jesus still came from the Royal House of David via His mother. More, His lineage could be traced to the first humans, since it is all mankind to whom He was sent.

With this, Luke sets out how Jesus entered His ministry very much as a man. While His birth was clearly divine, He chose to walk the human path, waiting on the anointing of the Holy Spirit, before beginning a work as a man of faith and Spirit. He made Himself utterly reliant on His Father, operating as any man of faith might do, should God choose to use him that way.

Luke 4

In his description of John's ministry, Luke points out that Jews as a nation are not walking where God intended. In the vestment of Jesus as His Father's emissary, we have prepared the ground for a ministry which reveals what the Jews are doing wrong, and what they could do better. Jesus is the ultimate reformer, but first Luke explains what sort of reformer.

Now filled with, and driven by, the Holy Spirit, Jesus goes out to the wilderness retreat His cousin John had just left. As a physician, Luke knew fasting would quickly put the stomach asleep until the body had cleansed itself, then hunger returns, typically a month later. Luke does not cite the trio of temptations in the same order as the other writers, but presents a logical order for his patron, Theophilus. Being hungry, Jesus was tempted to take the easy way out of things and make bread from stones, since the round flat stones looked very much like the disk-shaped bread common in those days. But Jesus was not going to let His personal needs and desires interfere with His ministry. He rebuffed Satan with a quote pointing out that food and similar basic human needs were not what made life worth living. If a man could not obtain his needs in the manner God provided, he was better off doing without. Jesus would not use His divinity for such mundane purposes, but set aside that divinity to live with all the risks of human life.

Nor would Jesus take any shortcuts by seizing political power. It hardly matters whether Satan could deliver on his offer. The point was Jesus had no need for such authority. His goals had little to do with the broader affairs of human existence and nations, but with bringing the revelation of God to the world, to put their focus on a higher Kingdom. Nor would he take advantage of human fascination with spectacle. God did not operate that way. Flinging a challenge in the Father's face, forcing Him to rescue His Son from a foolish act in order to leave people no room to doubt would insure the failure of Jesus' message. He was there to act as a

man of faith, a man of Spirit. If people were not drawn by the power of truth, they would never listen and be changed.

Jesus had no intention of trading on His divinity. Instead, He set it aside to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit. His whole interest was otherworldly, but with a very powerful impact on human conduct in this world. His agenda on earth flowed from the Kingdom priority of revealing the Father, primarily by acting as the Father intended men should act in every circumstance.

Skipping over a lot of detail, Luke relates the ministry of Jesus as it began in Galilee. Simply obeying the Spirit was all Jesus needed to become famous. He typically taught in the synagogues. When He returned to His boyhood home of Nazareth, He did as always, entering the local synagogue. Luke describes the ritual: standing to read from the sacred scrolls, then sitting down to teach. Jesus read the portion of Isaiah already known to be a Messianic prophecy (Isaiah 61:1-2). It is obviously an expansion on what John had proclaimed. Jesus began His message essentially proclaiming Himself the Messiah. His teaching was spellbinding, though Luke sees no need to recap the whole sermon. Rather, he notes the crowd then remembered this was just some fellow who grew up in their town.

Jesus sensed this and pointed out their change of attitude. How did this nobody become so famous? How about showing off some of the miracles they had heard about? Having already rejected that sort of spectacle mongering in the wilderness, Jesus pointed out how those listening were no better than previous generations, demanding things God would not do, and refusing to obey Him. The Jews would reject their Messiah. Because of this, His Messianic power would be exercised among the Gentiles. The hardness of their hearts is amply demonstrated by their attempt to lynch Jesus by tossing Him over a cliff. Luke does not say in what manner, only that Jesus walked through the mob and escaped.

In another synagogue back in Capernaum, it's a counterpoint when we see the demons have no trouble recognizing Jesus as Messiah. Exercising His spiritual authority, Jesus evicts a demon from a man. The same authority extended over sickness. Peter's mother-in-law is relieved of a fever which could surely have been fatal. These weren't flukes, for Jesus continued the same activity of healing and casting out demons late into the evening. Unlike Nazareth, Capernaum had no trouble embracing Him as the solution to all their problems. That next morning, He informed the crowd He had to carry that same message and authority all over the land.

Luke noted in passing Jesus didn't quote previous rabbis, showing off His great intellect by citing a memorized catalog of footnotes. Rather, He taught from His own authority. He needed no reference to earthly authority but spoke directly from the Spirit who gave the Word in the first place. He fulfilled the promises quoted in Isaiah directly, as a means to pointing out the spiritual truth behind the apparent reality.

Luke 5

Men had been fishing for centuries, long before Jesus came along. Indeed, fishing was old when Moses gave Israel the Law. As hinted earlier, that old Law was passing away, replaced by a new teaching. Not new in the sense of just begun, but a fresh look at the foundation of on which the old Law was built, a truth which had never changed. This fresh look was not just another new

and entertaining set of ideas, but something with power to change things. Jesus, having set aside His divinity during His ministry on earth, was not walking in His personal power, but the power of His teaching. It had power to change even ancient fishing.

What difference does it make when we fish with Jesus? We see Jesus had taken His ministry outside the synagogues, in part because the crowds were simply too large. On one particular day, He was near the shore of Genessaret, another name used by Rome for the Sea of Galilee. A perfect place for addressing a crowd so all could hear was to sit in the prow of a small fishing boat just back from the shore, while the audience sat facing Him on the sloping bank. The calm water would amplify His voice. When He finished His message, he told Peter to push out and cast a net. Anyone who knew fish knew they only came up near the surface at night, descending below the reach of nets during daylight. They had already spent the night in futility. Peter noted this, but decided, "Why not?" He humored his rabbi, perhaps to teach *Him* a lesson.

The first cast nearly tore the net with an abnormal high fish count. When the net was pulled in by two boats, it nearly sank both. Peter begged Jesus to depart because he knew sinful men in the presence of The Holy deserved to die. He was confessing his sins and sinfulness. Jesus told Him in essence that he was forgiven. Further, Peter was needed for a task of full-time soul fishing. Had they tried it on their own, nothing would happen, just as their past night's fishing was pointless. With Jesus, a single pass would harvest more than they could manage. They left behind this marvelous days' catch to follow the one whose authority even the fish in the sea obey.

Luke tells us Jesus met a leper who was in the later stages of the disease, already disfigured from its ravages. The leper should have stayed away, or at least warned Jesus to stay away. Instead, believing Jesus could change that problem, he came to Him. His only question was whether Jesus was inclined to grant him healing, not whether He could. Jesus healed him and instructed the man to recover his social standing by an offering in the Temple according to the Law and showing the priests. The priests needed to know, but so did the man's family and hometown. It was important not to make the claim without the accepted proof. We should hardly be surprised the man could not contain himself, but spread this most amazing tale of healing. In the end, Jesus was compelled to withdraw into the wilderness just so He could pray.

Jewish authorities came from all over to examine this famous healing rabbi, but they lacked the Holy Spirit and the truth. Jesus operated under the authority of His Father via the Holy Spirit, Who was personally present. Thus, the power to heal was there by default. The teaching session on that day was in a building, and a quartet of men brought their lame friend for healing. Luke describes a scene where the house was not Judean style, but more Roman, with tiles on the roof. Lacking room to bring the man in normally, they pulled up the roof tiles and found space to drop the man through the underlying frame. Under the authority of the Spirit, Jesus announces the man's sins are forgiven. This answered the question common in many societies, not just Jews, whether the man was lame because he had sinned. The Jewish authorities silently object, based on their own teaching.

Immediately Jesus answers their objections. He didn't bother to mention His divinity, because that was not pertinent. Rather, He answers by the logic of the inspectors themselves. Surely, any huckster could say someone's sins are forgiven, but there would be no proof. To back up His

claim of the authority to forgive sin, Jesus told the man to get up from his bed. Jesus teaches miracles are granted to support the divine message. The man's spiritual needs took precedence over his physical needs. The healing was proof those spiritual needs were met. Some day, that man would eventually grow old, perhaps become lame again, but his sins would remain forgiven, because there was faith to enter this new teaching and the new life it offered. The crowd confirmed this was not what they had been taught before.

Human methods were unlikely to have selected a trio of fishermen for assisting in this new ministry. Jewish leaders were known to despise the peasants of their own nation. Having already gathered Peter, James and John, Jesus needed more helpers. He made yet another choice too obviously contrary to the teaching of other rabbis – a tax collector. Even a Roman official knew a Jewish tax collector was an outcast from his nation. Just as these peasant fishermen left their jobs to fish for souls, Levi left his lucrative and powerful position to collect a fair tax of souls from the world. This new teaching of Jesus had power to redeem men considered permanently lost to Judaism.

Levi then proceeded to throw a feast to begin this new life. It compared favorably to a wedding feast, another way men started a new life. Luke wanted to share his joy with other outcasts, wanted them to meet Jesus, to know there was still some hope of coming before their God for cleansing from sin. When these Jewish inspectors complained Jesus ate with what they considered Gentiles, Jesus noted His teaching was not offered to anyone who had already accepted the old teachings. The Jewish leaders had their own false sense of righteousness and had no room for repentance. These sinners knew they needed to be saved, and Jesus was offering redemption to those without any other hope. He was the bridegroom celebrating His bride, the New and Ancient Kingdom of Heaven.

It would be silly to cut chunks of cloth from a new garment to patch an old one. The new spiritual life Jesus taught could not be seen as a patch over the old Jewish ways. It was its own thing, and was clearly meant to replace those old ways, a new garment of holiness to cover sin. The fresh new life of the Spirit could not fit in the old forms of Law. The old teaching had run out, served its purpose, and the skins were empty. Jesus' message was its own sweet vintage, and required unused skins, the skins of those who had never known the flavor of Jewish leaders. How does one get good, seasoned wine? It often took three years, and the old ways could not contain the pressures and bubbling life of the new. In due time, these lives would be remade to serve a mature wine of new life.

Luke 6

It was perfectly legal for anyone crossing a field or vineyard to pick as much as they can consume immediately. The idea is that the life and health of your neighbors is more important than the minuscule loss from a few grazers. The accusation of breaking the Law was actually false, but the Pharisees had abstracted and extended the principles logically and falsely, so they saw this as harvesting and winnowing, which were illegal on the Sabbath. Jesus points out that King David did not adhere so precisely to the Law, because he adhered to a higher covenant of faith. By that older covenant, David touched the Ark of Covenant like a priest, and much earlier had eaten Bread of Presence. David's sins were also well known. Yet for all this, he was man

after God's own heart – he loved and obeyed God directly, and the Law was merely a framework for that obedience. Any man who walked in such faith was master of the Law, including the Sabbath observance.

To further drive that point home, Jesus raised the issue on another Sabbath, while teaching in a synagogue. He was fully aware the lawyers and partisans were hoping to catch Him disobeying their silly rules. Calling for a man with a crippled arm to stand up front, Jesus asked the rhetorical question what the Sabbath was for – good or evil? It would be evil to neglect human need on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees had some rule about healing being labor and not lawful on the Sabbath. Technically, Jesus did nothing, but told the man to extend his hand. In so doing, he was healed – an obvious miracle which could only come from God. The partisans were incensed at Jesus' rejection of their rules. Nothing mattered to them but their carefully reasoned and locked down analysis of the letter of the Law. They had no inkling of the Spirit, and certainly no love for anyone but themselves.

Jesus prayed all night before taking the next big step: calling twelve of His disciples to become full time representatives of His ministry. Luke names them differently than the other Gospels, but it's not hard to figure out when a man might have a nickname, or a second name. Every one of them was unqualified to serve as a disciple of just about any mainstream rabbi. Jesus chose based on His Father's plans, and at the leading of the Holy Spirit, not with the usual paper chase of resumes and documented accomplishments.

Just about every teacher in history has had favorite themes and phrases, because they seem to work well in presenting the material. Luke offers a monologue which resembles the Sermon on the Mount, but the setting is different. While they were down on a meadow, Jesus was teaching from a seated position, as was customary. Many were healed, coming from places that required at least a day's walk, perhaps even waiting in the area overnight. At one point, he looked up at His attendants helping Him, and said some things directed specifically at them.

It is clear even to a casual reader Jesus is using the symbolic language of paradox. Abandon worldly possessions and gain the Kingdom of Heaven. Ignore fleshly appetites and be filled with truth. Weep over sins and know the joy of salvation. Accept the hatred of spiritless humans, for it puts you in the company of the great prophets of old. If you can't forsake worldly possessions, you'll never have anything better than worldly possessions. If you can't bear to fast, then you can't hear from God and fill your spirit. If you are enjoying this life too much, you'll have nothing when you stand before God. Pleasing fallen men puts you in the company of charlatans. Lost souls have no capacity for eternal truths.

The Lord's true servants are marked by love in the face of hatred, patience in the face of abuse, and a lack of concern for the loss of worldly goods. His people have no trouble giving things away, even under the pretense of loaning them out. Love does not wait for the scales of justice to balance, but aggressively pursues the unlovely with mercy and grace. Love looks for ways to share where it's not possible to repay. Kingdom people stand on a higher ground, a place where sorrows and pains cannot reach, a place where the Spirit rules. They have so much in their hearts, they can't bear to leave anything in their pockets when there is a need as-yet unmet. They treat earthly treasure as an impediment to freedom.

The Pharisees and lawyers were both spiritually dead and blind. They learned only from each other, never hearing from God, and never understanding anything God had revealed through Moses. Having embraced the mere words of Moses, they had rejected the God of Moses. Yet, they pretended to be experts at what God required of men. They were wild trees, producing useless or poisonous fruit. Only when your soul is rooted in the Holy Spirit can you produce spiritual fruit pleasing to God. The process these men upheld meant nothing if the whole result of their lives was meanness, hatred, and evil.

Even those who make a show of following Jesus accomplish nothing if their lives remain mired in sin. What you call yourself won't matter if you don't live up to it. That's like a man who builds his palace in the soft sand of the wadis – it's easy but comes apart the first time it rains. People who struggle with the sin in their lives are like those who climb up on the rock – it takes a lot longer and is much harder, but they won't change just because the weather does.

You can't call it Kingdom of Heaven if it's anchored in human lusts. It's known by what it does, how it affects people, not by lovely theories and logical consistency. Righteous standing before God was something the partisans and lawyers could not comprehend.

Luke 7

One of the first questions on a Roman mind in the first century would be, "Whose authority?" Luke offers four events to highlight the authority carried by Jesus. Instead of blunt claims, Jesus simply demonstrated His authority. Again, it is not a matter of His divinity, but the authority of faith over mere law.

In Capernaum was stationed a Roman centurion, rather like an army captain of today. In the New Testament, centurions are distinguished by their intelligence and understanding. This one is no exception. First, he cultivated a positive regard for the local Jews. In particular, he provided the means to build or renovate a synagogue in the city. If nothing else, this endeared him to the Jewish civic and religious leaders. We cannot say why he had not fully converted, but it was obvious from the context he had not accepted circumcision. Still, he had a good rapport with the synagogue leadership.

We would call him "a good man" today, and so would Romans, for he was even fond of some of his servants. One servant was about to die from some ailment. Hearing Jesus was a healing rabbi, this centurion asked the local Jewish leaders to see if Jesus could help him save his servant's life. The leaders made a strong case with Jesus, and He appeared willing to act. This was not a small thing, for it would mean ceremonially defiling Himself by entering a Gentile home. On this point, the centurion proved wise, for he sent a message which provided a most powerful lesson.

Not wishing to inconvenience this rabbi, the centurion indicated that he understood authority. His own was delegated from Rome and included a great deal of latitude. He didn't have to physically show up to exert his authority. If Jesus were a rabbi of truth from God, surely His authority was similar. It would be enough for Jesus to give the command from any distance, and healing would take place. Jesus noted no one in the Nation of Israel seemed to understand this. As expected, the messengers who came to Jesus returned to find the servant recovered.

As Jesus traveled the next day, His path brought Him toward the village of Nain. Most ancients would insist on burying their dead outside the city, and Jews were no exception. Jesus' path likely brought Him past the graves which have been found in modern times outside the site of ancient Nain. He encountered a funeral procession coming in the opposite direction. It was a young man, the last relative of a local widow. It seemed the whole town was in attendance, to commiserate with her on this tragedy, since widows without family to support them fared poorly in that time and place.

The procession would have typically included a large number of women wailing loudly with the mother. Jesus told them to hush for a moment, a demand that would have been regarded as quite rude. When they were quiet so that everyone could hear what He said, Jesus commanded the young man to arise. To everyone's stunned amazement, he did. The ultimate sad occasion became the ultimate celebration, with many exclamations about a mighty prophet. Few prophets of old demonstrated the power to raise the dead. This was clearly a visit from God, clearly an act upon His authority. News of this spread everywhere.

The news even went to John the Baptist. Luke doesn't mention at this point where John was at the time, in prison far south, halfway down the east shore of the Dead Sea at Fort Machaerus. However, Luke had covered that in chapter 3. Upon hearing this news from his disciples, John sent a message to his cousin, Jesus. When they found Him, John's disciples asked Jesus if He was, indeed, the Messiah. We can't see into the mind of John, but it's hard to imagine he's suffering major doubts. The nature of Jesus' answer – the demonstration of Messianic miracles promised by the prophet Isaiah – indicates John's need for confirmation that he did accomplish his mission before he faces death. It's no less faith than Jesus showed in the Garden of Gethsemane, where it was needful to make sure before taking that final, ultimate step. Upon the authority of Jesus' assurance, John would be ready for anything.

This interview prompted Jesus to address the authority of John the Baptist. Was he like a reed in the wind, easily swayed from his message? Was John after creature comforts? Surely not. He was a prophet, the real thing, a true messenger of God Almighty. More than that, he was the promised forerunner of the Messiah. No prophet of the Old Testament was greater; John was the pinnacle of the Covenant of Moses. Yet, in the Kingdom which would follow soon, everyone would find themselves in a position John would have envied. At this, a great crowd of former sinners and rejects from Jewish society rejoiced loudly. These who had answered John's call to repent stood a chance to enter the Kingdom for which John was the herald.

Naturally, the Pharisees and lawyers had rejected John's call to repentance, so sure they were of no need to repent. Jesus made the inevitable contrast between the penitent and the proud. The partisans and lawyers compared well to petulant children. They were implacable. If it wasn't their idea in the first place, it had to be wrong. On the one hand, John the Baptist came with the austerity of strict obedience to the Law of Moses, and the Jewish leaders called him a madman. Jesus came with the relaxed latitude built into Mosaic Law, reaching out to sinners, and the leaders called Him a hedonist. John emphasized the entrance into repentance, while Jesus emphasized the joy of living it. The truth was obvious by the results.

Jewish leaders had stood God's revelation on its head, totally confused about sin and repentance. For them, it was necessary to live in fear of crossing that invisible line, never mind

avoiding the obvious prohibitions of the Law. They made God a nearly implacable Judge. Luke showed this was a very low view of God by relating an incident where Jesus accepted an invitation from one of the Pharisees who opposed Him, by coming to the man's home for dinner. We deduce the motive was suspect, for Jesus notes the host, named Simon, had neglected the common courtesies of that day.

Nor do we know what sort of sinner was the woman who dared intrude on this formal occasion. There was scandal all around. We don't know if this was according to Jewish custom on cushions and a low table or Roman custom with couches and a raised table, but in either case Jesus' feet were exposed as He reclined with His head near the table. This woman came and wept, washing His feet with her hair and tears, then anointed them with obscenely expensive perfumed oil. The symbolic gesture was larger than life. By Law, Jews could not require Jewish slaves to wash feet, only pagan Gentile slaves. Jesus could have washed His own feet, but the host failed to offer even that option. This woman not only did this most degrading service, but obviously was worshipping Him.

Letting that open act of devotion pass, the host focused his thoughts on the woman's social status. Not just as a woman forbidden to speak in public to men not related, she was a notorious sinner, a reject who was past redemption in his eyes. In Simon's mind, a real prophet would know she was filth, and reject her touch. Jesus responded to the man's thoughts with a parable. When someone forgives debts, surely those with larger debts will love him more. Since this Pharisee host wallowed in smug self-righteousness, his sense of gratitude for God's grace would always be small. Why, he had *earned* God's approval! No surprise Simon expressed contempt for Jesus, under the polite veneer. This woman was fully aware she deserved death and Hell, and didn't need Simon to tell her. Thus, she more than made up for Simon's neglect by her extravagance.

This outward symbolic act demonstrated the depth of her repentance. No one would imagine she was faking it, unlike Simon. Her absolute and total embrace of Jesus' message actually was more demanding than the fussy details of Pharisical rules. She gave her whole self, and for this, Jesus told her she was forgiven of her sins. When the other Pharisees in attendance balked at that idea, Jesus went further, explaining that her faith was the key, the authority to access salvation. Her demonstration had served its purpose, and Jesus told her to go and claim the life of spiritual peace which would be denied the impenitent Pharisees.

Luke 8

Having established the authority of faith, Luke shows that while its effect is unlimited, its prevalence is not. There is a notable divide between those driven by faith and those who cling only to that which their human mind can conceive and perceive.

The Twelve have been selected, and now they must be trained. We saw in the previous chapter negative examples provided by the Pharisees and Scribes. Having established what His disciples shall not be like, Jesus begins teaching them how to be like Him. Thus, they depart on a preaching tour of Galilee, accompanied by some women in supporting roles. We sense here Luke got to know the three he named here who were delivered from demonic oppression. Of the three, Mary Magdalene figures large in the narrative, for her plight had been severe. No less

was the change Jesus made in her life. There is no evidence to support popular assertions she was a prostitute. Rather, she was a deeply troubled woman who was set free to walk in faith. So it was that she took her place in a rather large entourage for this trip.

We can be sure the Parable of Soils was used more than once as Jesus taught. Here it serves to introduce the spiritual principle of differences between people who were drawn to Jesus' ministry. Some just didn't get it. They were like the hard packed paths crossing the fields and meadows of Palestine. Some were too shallow to do anything with it. They were like the thin layer of soil overlaying bed rock – quickly warmed by the sun and sprouting early in the morning. Later in the day, the same warmth dehydrated that shallow soil. Some could not let go of this world, could not step into the spiritual realm, rather like being caught in the thorn bushes of that land. However, there would always be some who were completely taken by the message and changed by it.

While the obvious lesson of farming was in their grasp, the disciples didn't quite know what to make of the spiritual symbolism. Because of their unique position as future leaders of this spiritual revolution, they were allowed to ask for a fuller explanation of the mystical implications. The reason for parables was to differentiate the hearts of men. Those who embraced the message of Jesus would be changed by it, but the rest of the world would only be driven away. Truth has a polarizing effect, and truth can hardly be put in human language. Thus, it had to be caught, not taught. Jesus pointed out the different ways in which people responded to His teaching and that only those with a heart prepared by God can cling to the truth.

A critical element in this imagery is the long view, noting things must inevitably start small. The difference is not who embraces it and rejoices, but those who stay with it. Oil lamps put forth a very pitiful glow, so to make the most of that feeble light they were placed high on a stand. Any confinement of that light makes it disappear altogether. The teaching of Jesus was not some secret canon for insiders only, but must be offered to everyone. It's not possible to know at first whether a heart is ready for the gospel, so there should be no barriers erected to limit exposure of it. People would carry enough barriers in themselves already. Indeed, the truth by its own nature could not be hidden, anyway. More importantly it was for the disciples to make sure they understood it clearly so they could teach it clearly. The word "holy" meant separate; holiness meant nothing if the separation wasn't obvious in the long run.

This sort of holiness would be noticed first in family relations. We know Jesus' siblings did not believe in Him until after the Resurrection. Thus, their coming was likely an attempt to suggest He not embarrass the family by raving like a madman or starting a rebellion and getting Himself arrested. Jesus pointedly noted there was a higher priority than mere blood relations. A shared spiritual DNA took precedence. His natural family's concerns were their own problem.

Still, it was a good idea to take a break from the crowds. Jesus directed His disciples sail with Him to the eastern shore of Galilee, which was pretty deserted in those days. On the way, one of the notorious windstorms struck. Galilee was a deep bowl ringed mostly by hills and cliffs. As the heat of the day built up on the land around it, the expansion of warm air could create unpredictable bursts of wind across the cooler lake surface. These experienced fishermen found themselves severely threatened by such a windstorm. Jesus, with His supreme faith in His

mission given by the Father managed to sleep through it. The stark contrast in attitude was the point of this story. The storm hardly threatened the Man of Faith. When the disciples managed to awaken Jesus, He showed them why He was unconcerned by commanding the storm to cease. He wasn't teaching them to order weather to their liking, but to face it as something their Lord controlled. They still weren't getting it, as they remarked what sort of rabbi it was whom the weather obeyed.

Eventually they reached the shore near Kherasa. Again, we see the prevalence of demons, as they were confronted right away by a notorious naked tomb dweller. This man exhibited inhuman strength in breaking standard restraints, and had caused a lot of trouble in that region. Jesus had already commanded the demons to depart, but they were delaying in fear of their ultimate destiny. These had no doubt about the authority of Jesus, making much of His divinity. Since that was beside the point, He demanded they stick with the issue at hand. If the only fact of importance was Jesus' identity as Son of God, the lesson of His walking in faith would be hidden from the disciples. The demons took the opportunity to beg for some sort of reprieve, exchanging the poor man they held for a herd of pigs nearby. To Jesus this seemed sufficient improvement to permit the Legion their wish. The whole herd rushed down the steep slope into the sea and drowned.

The herders ran away and told the folks in Kherasa and the surrounding area what they had seen and heard. To them, this business of faith and deliverance was an economic disaster, never mind the life spared by it. While it was probably nice to see the wild man sane and safe, they would rather not have lost the income from the swine herd. They begged Jesus to leave. As He and the disciples began climbing back into the boat, the former tomb dweller naturally begged to join them. Clearly, he wasn't valued by his neighbors. Jesus pointed out that was all the more reason the man should stay and preach the truth. If anything would confront them more forcefully with the truth, it was the man who represented such a radically different point of view of what mattered to them.

The reception back in Capernaum was somewhat better. In the midst of the welcome, the ruler of the local synagogue, Jairus, approached with a long face. Partisans and lawyers notwithstanding, this man knew Jesus was his only hope – his only child, a twelve-year-old daughter, was dying. Obviously, Jairus felt this was an emergency. Jesus complied with the request and set off with him. However, He did not share Jairus's panic. On the way, a woman suffering a loathsome hemorrhage reached through the press of people to touch the tassel hanging off the back of Jesus' rabbinical cloak. She was healed. Jesus was aware and felt compelled to stop the procession and identify her. His question to the crowd about who had touched Him seemed silly, given the jostling crowd around Him.

He insisted this was something altogether intentional, and it resulted in a move of spiritual power. The woman was embarrassed; falling at His feet she explained her actions. Jesus pointed out that her faith was the difference. Everyone else in the crowd was just that: a bunch of people expecting a show. This woman's healing offered no entertainment, but was so very important in itself that Jesus felt compelled to praise her example. It mattered, and the crowd needed to know it.

What would Jairus have felt, seeing that this woman dared to interfere with his emergency like this? Too late, for as they stood there, he received word his daughter had died. Few can imagine what must have crossed his mind at that moment. Was his daughter no less important to God than that woman? Jesus remarked Jairus had nothing to fear from God. This business with his daughter was not over, yet. She would be well if he could see past his pain and believe.

At the house, the crowd of mourners had even less understanding. To them, death was the end. In the Kingdom of Heaven, death was a mere circumstance, subject to the authority of faith. For Jesus, death was no more significant than sleep. They mocked Him, so He ordered them out. Unbelievers did not deserve to see what followed. Taking with Him the inner circle of Peter, James and John, Jesus led Jairus and his wife into the girl's room. He took her hand and called her to rise. Her parents must have been stunned to see her do so. To help them adapt to the shift in their reality, Jesus told them to feed the girl, who would naturally be hungry after recovery from a long illness.

This was still the time of planting seed. For now, He told them, keep it quiet. Better it was those who embraced the teachings of Jesus that should have time to absorb what happened so they would see it through spiritual eyes. There would be time enough later for them to tell of this event when they did understand, so they would tell of it in a way to polarize between those who could not understand, and those whose hearts God had made ready for the truth.

Luke 9

Luke offers a more direct contrast between the ways of human power and the ways of Kingdom power exercised on this earth. Jesus spends a good deal of time teaching His disciples the difference. While they clearly remember the teaching, they don't understand it at this point. To awaken their sense of otherworldly power, Jesus commissions the Twelve to preach and do miracles. To emphasize the otherworldly nature of this work, He gave detailed instructions on planning and logistics – walk by faith, not by human logic. Take what comes as the provision of God.

Their tour in the name of Jesus only widened His fame. It came to the attention of Herod Antipas, who ruled over Galilee as tetrarch. He puzzled at what this might have to do with John the Baptist. Clearly, he saw all this from a very human viewpoint, and this business of miracles must be something which was bound to cause him trouble. To men, this sort of thing can only be aimed at politics. When seeking a retreat away from the crowds, Jesus and His disciples slipped over into the territory of Philip, Herod's brother. There, a huge crowd followed them, and it seemed a setting for announcing a new earthly kingdom, a revolt against current powers.

The crowd came out to the wilderness, heard preaching and was healed. When it became apparent there was no means to support such a crowd in that place, the Twelve mentioned the obvious solution of sending the crowd away. Jesus turned it upside down and said they should feed this massive horde. First, they were organized efficiently, showing a very wise application of human logic. Then, by some miracle, a snack became a full meal for this huge mass of people. Further, there was enough left over for Jesus and the Twelve to eat the next day. What more does an army need? With divine provision of food and power without weapons, was this not the moment? No. The crowd was dismissed.

What must this crowd have thought of all this? Jesus discussed it with the Twelve when they were alone again. They mentioned Herod's fears about John the Baptist raised from the dead, or some other prophet. This is the way human minds look at things, associating what they see with only what they understand. Did the disciples understand any better? Peter said He was the Messiah. True, but to announce that among the crowds would give the wrong impression. Sure enough, the Twelve themselves associated the wrong ideas with it. So, Jesus noted the truth about the Messiah: He came to die unjustly, and then to rise again. This world and its concerns, its measures of power, were utterly futile. Control the whole thing, but it won't do you any lasting good. Throwing it all aside and facing in faith the most awful suffering in this world for the sake of eternal things is the only way to go. Some of the Twelve would see that Eternal Kingdom before they died physically.

It was just about a week later that Jesus climbed up a mountain with his inner circle of Peter, James and John. It may have been approaching nightfall as the three were drowsy. Jesus took on a divine appearance. Standing near Him were the two greatest miracle workers of Israel's history: Moses who gave the Law, and Elijah who prophesied of it. Both of them were concerned with earthly fulfillments of God's earthly commands, but both Law and Prophets pointed to the spiritual teachings Jesus brought, and the spiritual kingdom Jesus would build. The glory of ancient Israel was gone, and it was time to look to for another realm beyond. But the three men didn't get it. Not just physically asleep, but spiritually asleep, they were hoping to prolong this experience. A cloud of Divine Presence came over them, and Jehovah Himself commanded the disciples should pay closer attention to what Jesus was saying, because that old order was gone. So, it was not yet time to say anything. Telling of Jesus' divinity would simply provoke the wrong response. It would not make sense that He was God's own Son until after His death and resurrection.

The next morning, they descended the mountain to find a confused crowd at the bottom. The first to greet them was a man with a heart-rending tale of woe regarding demons controlling his son. Why could the other disciples not dispatch this thing? Did they not have the authority already given? Clearly, they did not understand it yet. Their failure to grasp the spiritual nature of things prevented them using spiritual power to full effect. After driving the demon out, Jesus explained to His disciples just how little they understood. He had not come to reign over men, but over spirits. While He dispatched demons without effort, it had nothing to do with their visions of a world He ruled politically. Indeed, politics were about to take His human life, and it mattered, but was hardly anything to fear.

Still, they wrestled over their own petty politics, as if they hadn't heard Him. Presumptions about what office each of them would hold in this future Messianic Kingdom on earth must have been very frustrating to Jesus. So, He seated them in a circle and held a young child, the least important human in society in those days. However, in the Kingdom of Heaven, children were utterly important, if only because they knew how to trust. They knew nothing of greatness, only of love and acceptance. In the Kingdom, greatness was to love and accept others, and trust God. Still not getting it, John mentioned an incident where they restrained someone using Jesus' name who was not part of their entourage. This outsider was casting out demons. Jesus pointed out that He didn't much care about the way men decided who was on

what side. There would be enough opposition to them very soon, and anyone who didn't actually threaten them should be welcomed as a friend.

Indeed, the human opposition began immediately. Very soon Jesus would die and return to His Father. It required going to Jerusalem during the Passover. Educated Romans would be aware the Samaritans had rival religious claims and rival festivals in their capital city. Jesus sent messengers ahead to set up accommodations in one of the Samaritan cities, but was rejected because He was heading to Jerusalem. In other words, it was religious politics. James and John were ready to destroy these uppity Samaritans, who were no friends of the Jews. Indeed, during Elijah's day, the Jews living there experienced a little fire from Heaven and these people weren't even Jews. Jesus rebuked them for being no better than the Samaritans, because they were operating under a spirit foreign to the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus didn't come to settle old political and religious scores. His Kingdom was about saving souls, of keeping the focus on the Spirit Realm. Human opposition was taken for granted, and it really didn't matter much.

As the journey to Jerusalem continued, someone offered to join the crew. In the context, we can safely assume this man wanted a part in the action – the political action of challenging the established order. Jesus, recalling the city of Samaria which rejected Him, mentioned He had no place to even lay His head. That is, He didn't intend to conquer and occupy any palaces, and really didn't much concern Himself with creature comforts. His Kingdom was not of this world. When Jesus challenged another fellow to follow Him, the man balked. His immediate concern was settling his earthly obligations. The phrase "bury my father" was not meant literally but was a symbol for getting one's affairs in order and taking over as head of the household. Jesus replied those things belonged to a dead world, and if this fellow wanted any part of His Kingdom, he would have to set aside earthly concerns.

A third fellow offered a compromise, asking only to observe some basic social obligations. Again, Jesus pointed out that the Kingdom puts men into a totally different realm of operations. Not to encourage rudeness, this was simply to give priority to the call of God. Divine acts seldom reference human calendars and convenience. The time to turn, to repent and follow Jesus was now. It does not require settling fiscal or social affairs, and it won't lead to fame and fortune. All the things men do take on a different meaning in the Kingdom, and only by embracing that meaning could anyone hope to understand what mattered.

Luke 10

Jesus continued His journey, slow and purposeful, toward Jerusalem. While we saw in the last chapter several representative failures, we can be certain quite a few people did join Jesus' entourage. He planned a tour of some cities in Judea, much as He had done in Galilee with the Twelve.

This time, He selected from the new folks who joined His ministry, sending out seventy in teams of two. These would preach in various cities where He planned to make a stop later Himself. Judea was notably more difficult territory than Galilee for the message Jesus was bringing. There was a much higher likelihood of resistance from partisans and lawyers. Thus, He warned these preachers they were completely vulnerable to attacks, and this was by design. Going in pure faith, they were out to harvest, and to pray the Father raise up even more

workers from their audience. The walk of faith would take hold in the hearts of some who heard, and they would not be able to hold back.

So, what did this walk of faith look like? The focus of all activity was the message of the Kingdom. God would provide whatever was necessary. What was not provided was not needed. Learn to trust the Father for your everyday needs. Don't get wrapped up in your family ties or other social connections. This was not about investing time and effort in the affairs of this world, but the one above, the Kingdom of Heaven. Seek peace; offer peace. Don't make trouble where you aren't welcome, just move on. We aren't policemen. Results are not your concern, but your own obedience to the Father is.

There were plenty of towns back in Galilee that did not take Jesus seriously: Chorazin, Capernaum, and Bethsaida – all of which were close together. Jesus spent most of His time in that area at first, but apparently got rather poor results. On a human level, that was likely because He was there so much of the time; Capernaum was His home base. Yet a critical element in His teaching was not to rely on human ways and means of judging things. When the Final Judgment came, those cities would come in for special attention – negative attention – and fare worse than places notoriously vile and sinful.

The initial wave of seventy came back, rejoicing at the power they found over demons in Jesus' name. He remarked how the fall of Satan was quite sudden and noticeable. Indeed, all who served Satan among humans, referred to as serpents and scorpions, would be powerless before this faith. Still, this authority over demonic powers was not that important. It was merely a tool to gain a hearing. What mattered most was their recognition as citizens of Heaven.

Jesus found it altogether exciting to see the Father's plans coming together. The revelation of faith and Spirit to those who didn't matter much in this world was important. On a human level, no one could grasp what it meant to be Son of God. Only those whose spirits were awakened by the touch of God could recognize what Jesus taught, could make use of it, could understand and obey it. For Jesus, it was an unspeakable delight to be the primary means to opening this final chapter in God's dealings with mankind before the End. To the Twelve, Jesus noted this was the culmination of every prophecy of old, and even kings had desired to see this Kingdom come to earth in just this way, with people able to obey God from the heart.

Compare this with those who clung to the dead ways of the Law, who were convinced they obeyed God better than others. In a discussion with a lawyer, Jesus was offered a standard challenge of rabbinical orthodoxy. Jesus had no argument with Moses. The man quoted the standard sections of Moses (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), and it was actually a pretty good answer. Jesus said so. To justify pestering Jesus, the lawyer went a little further, asking Jesus to define the key term from this passage in Leviticus. Who is the "neighbor" we are to love as ourselves? Most readers would know Jews were clannish and would not feel any concern for those who weren't Jews.

For answer, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. This bears none of the marks of a parable, so we should take it as an actual case history Jesus lays before this lawyer. The main route from Jerusalem to Jericho crossed the Kidron Valley, up over the ridge of Mount Olives, then across some rough country, with no villages along the way once you left the high ridge, followed by a steep drop down into the Jordan Valley. It was the perfect place for bandits to

hide and do their work. Many priests and Levites lived in Jericho, and it was no surprise to them to pass a victim of such banditry. But they broke the law by letting fear of bandits prevent them stopping to give aid. The Samaritan, no friend of the Jews, took the risk of helping a stranger. It didn't matter what nation the victim was, the man took care of him. After rendering first aid, he took the unfortunate victim to an inn, where standard services included minor nursing care of injured people in those days. The Samaritan traveler paid about what he expected it would cost but allowed the innkeeper to hold him accountable for any extra costs which might arise.

Eternal life is not a game of having the right pedigree, which might be enhanced by adhering to rituals and customs. Jewish leaders were seldom nice people, having long ago built up a culture of looking out for self interests, and helping others only if there was some payoff involved. Only those inside the elite society received help, and everyone else was on their own, fit for exploitation when possible. The Samaritan was an enemy of the Nation of Israel, yet he walked as if he belonged to the Kingdom of Heaven. In the realm of eternal life, he was a leading citizen. He gained this status by obeying the intent of the Law of Moses and showing mercy. Was not mercy in the Law, along with all the other stuff Jewish leaders claimed to obey and enforce? Whether the Samaritans had the true Law was not the question – of course they didn't – but at least one of them managed to obey the Jewish version better than pillars of Jewish society whose duty it was to teach the Law. The sins of Israel were manifestly obvious in her leaders.

At some point in Jesus' tour of Judea, He stopped off at a friend's home. The hostess was named Martha. At a minimum, this meant she was putting up Jesus and the Twelve, so we can safely assume she was well off, and had a larger home. As the hostess, she felt obliged to make everything perfect, nothing less than the best for this important rabbi and His chosen disciples. But her spirit was all wrong. Her concerns were strictly human and material, as if all this fussing about really mattered. It did not. When Martha insisted Jesus not allow her younger sister Mary to sit in on teaching sessions, but to bear her part in the household chores, Jesus corrected the elder instead. In gentle tones of a friend, Jesus pointed out He had not made the demand for the services Martha felt necessary. Martha demanded them. Mary, on the other hand, was much more interested in the guest Himself, and what He had to say. This wasn't about entertaining mere men but being absorbed into eternity.

Luke 11

The power of God's revelation is the Holy Spirit. His divine Presence changes everything. The primary manifestation of His presence, the single path of fulfilling revelation, is a relentless and sacrificial love for others. To lack any compassion for the needs of a fellow human is more than adequate proof God's Spirit is not Lord in that soul. The focus of Jesus' daily life was the revelation of God in compassion.

To this end, Jesus spent a lot of time praying. He was the living model of a man reaching out to Heaven with both hands, pulling down the vast supply which He passed onto the lost world. This work required a constant, deep contact with Heaven. As men whose ostensible purpose in

training was to model themselves on their rabbi, the Twelve asked for teaching in prayer. Did not John, His cousin, give similar training to his disciples?

As all teachers throughout history, Jesus repeats some lessons because they didn't take the first time. Jesus offers here a renewed look at the Model Prayer, and it should surprise no one it comes out just a little different than the precise wording recorded elsewhere. The lesson here is not the words, and they were not meant for rote recital in any language. Rather, Jesus provides a pattern to breathe life into prayer, to make it a live audience with the King of Heaven. This outline echoes court protocol in the East. Recognize the Sovereign; presume to seek His interests. Declare utter dependence on Him and seek to spread abroad His fame by sharing His bounty. Ask Him to protect and support His own interests in your service. There was little here actually new in that day. However, it was a renewed emphasis on the otherworldly nature of such things.

There is a specific focus on food as a symbol of spiritual provision, as the stuff of our service in revealing God to the world. A friend has come to us, weary and lost. He really needs help. What a delightful picture of evangelism! So, the host goes to the only person in town he knows can supply his need at this hour. If the bonds of friendship aren't enough, the sheer persistence will prod the other man to provide for his need. We cannot share the bread of life to others if Our Father does not provide it to us. Unlike a human friend, such asking places no strain on our relations with God, because there is no bad time to ask Him for the power to share His truth. Persistence is the key from our human perspective.

Persistence in love will drive us to ask again and again for ever greater measures of that divine food of revelation. More than just our King, God is our Father, who loves us easily better than any earthly father loves his children. Would you tolerate in your community an abusive prankster dad? God is the best dad in the universe. Pestering Him is what He hopes we'll do, because that means we will have taken upon ourselves His long-suffering nature.

In a very public deliverance, Jesus dispatched a demon which had bound a man in miserable silence. For some in the audience, their rejection of compassion demanded they justify their miserable spiritual silence by accusing Jesus of using Satan's authority to control Satan's demons. They demanded more signs from a heaven they would recognize, a heaven that didn't exist. It was silly on the face of it. Was not the deliverance from bondage enough proof? Utterly lacking in love and grace, they could not comprehend anything Jesus did, so He helped them understand.

Satan isn't stupid. He's not going to let anyone take his prisoners if he can help it. The only way anyone can raid his human treasury is if they use a power and authority Satan cannot resist. We either work for Hell, or we work for Heaven – there is no middle ground. If people do not pour out their lives in sacrificial effort to gather lost souls, they are actively oppressing them, pushing them more tightly in the grip of Satan. Let's suppose you could drive demons out by living according to the Pharisee's teaching. What would happen? The demon would take a vacation, and then bring back with more demon buddies, worse demons. Superficial changes are quite comfortable for Satan.

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus had little interest in public accolades. One from the audience referred to His mother as truly blessed to have such a son. Jesus turned that on its head. It did

His mother no good in the eyes of God to raise up a Son of God if she also didn't herself obey God's commands. Jesus didn't need to build Himself up; that was His Father's concern. Too many people in this world are seeking for themselves. They want to be entertained, and to gain affirmation from seeing their ideas confirmed by others. The leaders of the Jews were in it only for themselves, making self-important demands as if they kept the gates of Heaven. They were not even as close to God as the Ninevites to whom Jonah preached. They would never have recognized Solomon's wisdom, as a pagan queen did in his day, so they could hardly recognize the Messiah. Pagans throughout history had a far better response to God's revelation than His own nation.

Like Jonah, the leaders of Israel held God's revelation as their private treasure, and the rest of the world *should* go to Hell. They hid the light of God, and were so blinded they didn't see it, either. Their hearts were so corrupt, they were fully unable to recognize God's hand, and had turned His Word upside down, inside out – they had perverted it. God's truth changed people, made them different from the rest of the world. The Jewish leadership was distinguished only by taking pettiness and arrogance to new heights.

In yet another ambush, some Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal, in the company of other Pharisees and Scribes. The lamb in the den of wolves turned the tables. When His host made note Jesus didn't follow Pharisaic ritual cleansing before the meal, Jesus launched a stinging rebuke. Noting they were no different than richly decorated chamber pots, Jesus points out their whole religion is just such a fancy paint job which never penetrates to the soul. Did not God make mankind with an inner being? Did they really think God ignored what was in their hearts? God called people to share their inner selves first with those in need. Purity inside would show itself by genuine full sacrifice of the self. No, the Pharisees could smugly tithe the herbs growing in their window boxes but couldn't show a harvest of mercy. So self-absorbed they were, they had created extravagant rules to jockey for public recognition. Their titles meant nothing. They were dead while living, defiling everyone who came near, just like unmarked graves that pedestrians touch and run afoul of ritual purity on the way to the Temple.

One of the lawyers present felt insulted by the condemnation of the politicians with which he worked. Justly so, said Jesus, for lawyers were no better. Instead of making the Law simple and pleasant to obey, as David had rejoiced in some of his Psalms, they had made it a hateful burden. While the Pharisees were tombs, the Scribes were the builders of tombs. They were the legacy of those who killed the prophets. In Hebrew culture, the bigger the tomb, the greater the crime of the man buried there. So it was that the mass of convoluted legal precedent, utterly missing the purpose of God's revelation as a call to repent. It was simply a more ornate heap of stones to bury the truth. They were no better than those who eagerly slew every good man of God from Abel in Eden right up to Zechariah, the first and last unjust murders mentioned in the Old Testament. The lawyers knew all the words of the Law, but understood nothing of it. Their rejection of the spiritual meaning kept them out. As so-called guardians, they wouldn't let anyone else go near the Law to understand the God who gave it.

Naturally, these glimpses of truth from Jesus did neither the partisans nor their lawyers any good. It simply became their excuse to fight Jesus all the more fiercely.

Luke 12

We aren't told where, but the context suggests during some part of Jesus' Judean ministry tour, He was before a massive crowd. They were densely packed in their attempt to get closer to Jesus. At some point He turned to His disciples and began instructing them.

Jesus had already defined what He meant by the term translated into English as "hypocrisy." Rather than our modern meaning of "insincerity," it pointed out their shallowness, a hollow holiness which focused so completely on mere conduct they lacked the capacity to think in terms of what was in the human heart. The spiritual leaven of the Pharisees was just about the same thing leaven is in bread dough: air, bubbles, empty space. They were moral lightweights. There comes a time in each life when the core of a man's being would come to light. God is all about revelation and truth, and His Spirit will disclose the truth about everything, including what makes people tick.

For the Pharisees and scribes, this would be a horrifying prospect, for all their perfect behavior would count as nothing in God's eyes. Sure, they had clout in this world. They could arrange to have any of the disciples killed, but in the Kingdom, physical death is a mere circumstance. The Creator kept track of every living creature, kept a count of hairs on everyone's head. In other words, He knew precisely what was in the heart of every man, and it mattered to Him. Simply losing your life in this world was not a serious matter. After that, one stood before God, and His authority was much higher, able to send souls to Hell for eternity.

It was not a matter of cold and harsh accountability as the Pharisees taught. God does keep track of more details than any human can comprehend precisely because He cares. Don't be fooled by the apparent valuation used in this world because it most surely does not reflect God's viewpoint on things. This world is one big lie, and God has revealed to the truth in His Son.

Clinging to the teachings of Jesus was the path to acceptance in God's eyes. Jesus was the revelation of God in human form, and all who followed Jesus were a part of that. Jesus would claim them as a part of Himself before the Father. Those who rejected His message would find Him their chief accuser before the Throne of Heaven. It's one thing to talk bad about Jesus, but to insult God's Holy Spirit required such a depth of darkness that they cannot possibly repent. The Pharisees and scribes could hardly recognize the work of God when they saw it. So being accused by them in public was as much a mark of holiness as anything else. There was no need to plan a defense, because their authority was so limited. Whatever words were suitable for the Kingdom purpose would be revealed to them by the Holy Spirit at the time they were needed.

This talk of judgment and advocacy prompted someone in the crowd to make a smart-aleck request of Jesus. What would the Holy Spirit say in a court regarding inheritance? In Eastern lands, the first-born son got a double share of his father's estate, while any other brothers got one share. It would seem this fellow wanted it all equal for whatever reason. Jesus wondered out loud how He might get the political leaders of either Judea or Rome to go along with anything He had to say about such a thing.

Having just dismissed the importance of earthly life itself, no one should be surprised when Jesus used this exchange as the anchor for discussing material goods. The Tenth Commandment

rather bluntly condemned lusting after the worldly comforts God gave to someone else. If all you had in this life were such possessions, you had nothing. The Parable of the Bigger Barns points out the purpose of wealth. It's not about having comfort; it's about sharing. It's a tool for revealing God's ways. Empty the barns so God can refill them with fresh gifts. We can't take it with us into Heaven, so it's unworthy of any real concern. Does God not provide for all nature, itself a tool of His revelation? How much more will He provide for those who actively serve His revelation by choice, whatever is needed to empower that choice. Be quick to pass on this world's treasures and keep your eyes on the spiritual treasures of Heaven.

In Kingdom service, we can't afford to waste time and effort on material goods. We are stewards of the King. Our appointed duties are more than enough to keep us occupied until He comes. It's as if we are preparing this world for His return from the wedding ceremony at His bride's home. Only, when He comes, we household servants will be the guests of honor at the marriage feast. We can't imagine the joys of Heaven! Should we not then be willing to treat this life with some contempt, and throw it away, as it were, in anticipation? Extravagance with our lives and with this world's resources on God's behalf *is* good stewardship. Our time will come at the most inopportune moment.

Peter asked if this teaching was for the masses or for only His followers. Most people seem to miss Jesus telling Peter this was about Kingdom servants, not the world at large. Indeed, because the Twelve were chosen to be leaders of His followers, their duties were even more critical in waiting for their death. Jesus refers to servants who manage the household, supervising other servants. In the Kingdom, some are chosen to lead other believers. If they are faithful, their spiritual authority, and their joy, will grow. If they take unfair advantage of their position, they show that they are no better than the lost world around them. God will surely take into account what a man understands of his calling, and what His servants are capable of doing.

Those committed to the revelation of God's truth can't get enough of it. Their zeal cries out for sin to be judged even in their own lives. Whatever the cost in this world, nothing compares to the fire of God's Spirit! Jesus the man could hardly contain Himself in His drive to the Cross. It wasn't simply His own life, but the whole world as it was known then would end. The old order was passing away, and the new was anchored in Heaven. This world would be in chaos, and never understand what it was all about. Where once there was Judaism, a religion of the family, there would be broken households as God called individuals to join His spiritual family. The very fundamental element of human society, and all the stability it represents, would take a back seat to the primacy of the Kingdom of Heaven in men's lives.

Most Jews of Jesus' day had no clue. He turned to the crowd with a warning. When it came to weather, they could recognize the signs of what was approaching. Creation was fairly predictable in offering clues to such things. God also left plenty of clues in His Word about a coming Messiah, and the end of His dealings with Israel as a nation on earth. Still, the leaders were so absorbed in subtle details of external behavior that they never saw it coming. Most of them were pretty savvy about facing lawsuits, but were utterly unprepared for facing God's judgment. Jesus was about to haul the nation into Court by dying on the Cross. Rejecting Him would mean rejecting the one path to repentance. The massive debt of sin was more than any could repay, and the nation as a whole would not escape accountability.

Luke 13

That human death arises from sin is obvious to anyone acquainted with God's Word. The grand mistake of rabbinical teaching in Jesus' day was to make this rather like a direct exchange, something akin to the modern concept of karma. The world has never worked like that. Good people die horribly and young, while some of the vilest men lived comfortably to old age. Men have always preferred to think of holiness as a simple transaction of merit and demerit. Reducing God to a mere balance beam, with precisely calculated penalties for precisely defined errors and good deeds was the trademark of Pharisaical teaching. Indeed, God does have the hairs of our head numbered, but His plans for each of us individually remain a mystery to others. The Law of Moses was a matter of community, not individuals. Roman law recognized extenuating circumstances and Luke points out this is how God operates with those who truly know Him.

The Passover was quite near. Still fresh in their minds was a group of men from Galilee who managed to provoke Pilate, the Roman procurator. He had his troops slaughter the men in the middle of slaughtering their sacrificial animals in the Temple court. From the context, we glean the nature of the discussion was that these Galileans must have been really sinful men for God to allow such a thing to happen to them. Jesus refers to a common sneer by Jerusalem's elitist Jews against Galilean country boys as uncouth troublemakers. Were those slaughtered Galileans particularly worse than other Galileans? Jesus turns the joke on its head, and His Galilean disciples would have gotten a laugh out of it.

Jesus goes on to compare those "nasty Galileans" to some men of Jerusalem who were building an edifice near the Pool of Siloam. The building collapsed and killed eighteen. Was their bad fortune the result of sin, too? Regional differences between Jews were not the issue, but the whole nation was in sin.

The Parable of the Fruitless Fig Tree was an obvious slap at the Nation of Israel. For the past three years – Hebrew culture counted partial years – Jesus had been teaching and correcting the twisted idiocy Hellenistic logic had made of the Law of Moses. Nothing had changed. Because the leaders rejected Jesus' message, the nation remained unfruitful. God was ready to cut it down. This whole scene reflects advice actually given farmers in The Ancient Near East. If a tree is unproductive, approach it with a dramatic show of anger and an ax. Have someone stall for more time, pleading the tree's case. Then fertilize it and expect it to bear fruit next year. Jesus portrayed Himself as the advocate who intervened on the nation's behalf, but time was running out.

To highlight the Jewish leadership's obstinacy in twisting the Law, Luke shares the story of the Arthritic Demon. The woman attended synagogue some eighteen years in this horrible condition of locked joints, bent at the waist by demonic presence. What does that say of the spiritual truth of the leaders there? On Jesus' first and only visit, He calls the woman forward from the women's section of the synagogue and heals her. The leader of the synagogue stood to recite an old edict about healing on the Sabbath, because it was viewed as impermissible labor. His indirect reproof of Jesus got a direct response. Calling this revered elder a hypocrite – putting on a pious front – Jesus wondered how it was rabbis made exemptions for the Sabbath care of domestic animals, but God's own people must suffer until the next day.

The rabbis had no defense. They were exposed as self-centered and hateful. If anything was offensive to God, it was this. Jesus rubbed their noses in the embarrassment by citing a pair of parables He must have used often: The Mustard Tree and The Leaven. His Kingdom would grow from nothing to massive size in due time. Its nature would change everything it touched. In both cases it would do good things, providing nurture to the sparrows (whom God noticed) and making life richer. The rabbinical leaders of Israel could offer neither of those things with their empty, dead rational legalism.

The doom of Israel was all too near. As Jesus continued His preaching tour of Judea, someone asked if the Kingdom would be relatively inclusive or exclusive. Jesus answered that it was exclusive, calling the portal of His teaching a narrow gate. However, it was not for any man to know who was let in, only God. Unlike the all-hours partying popular in the West, Hebrew folks closed their doors and settled in at night. Anyone knocking had better be well known to the host, or risk being sent away. Jesus was keeping the door open for a time and calling His nation to enter. Once upon the Cross, the Nation was doomed. Those who made themselves intimate friends of God via His Son would escape. Those with a lesser acquaintance of God would be rejected. Having so horribly corrupted the teachings of the Old Testament, they could not possibly understand what God truly demanded. Without that inside line of communication, they would remain ignorant of the horror coming to them from Rome in 70 AD.

The Pharisees gave Jesus a warning, too. Whether the warning was genuine didn't matter, it was plain the Pharisees considered Jesus an enemy. They said Herod was seeking to arrest Him, and that He should flee his jurisdiction. His departure would save them a lot of heartache. Whether to Herod or the Pharisees, the answer was the same. Calling someone a fox meant they were a cowardly predator. The agenda of Jesus was set by the Father: a couple more days, and He would come to Jerusalem. The plans of men had no bearing on the matter. His ministry would reach full maturity on God's schedule.

Coming to Jerusalem was loaded with symbolism. Jesus lamented quite honestly how the nation, led from Jerusalem, had rejected His teaching. The consequence of that rejection was not a matter of mere personal disappointment but was the final step in a long line of rejecting God's message. God's very own people refused to obey Him. The tragedy of their impending doom was heart-rending. Destruction was certain, not just on the city, but the whole nation. Until they changed, there was no hope for them. Perhaps someday, there would be a Jerusalem that welcomed Him as the Living Word of God. That Jerusalem would last forever.

Luke 14

So many are the places where the Bible says God opposes the proud and befriends the humble, you would think it instinctive among those who claimed to teach His Word. Yet we find the Jewish leadership so childishly zealous for public approval, carrying a chip on their shoulders, that they become the personification of arrogance. The Pharisees and scribes had developed a complex system for delineating who had which rank in various social contexts. It is said they even competed in declaring false humility when faced with a ritual requiring formulaic self-denial. Genuine self-denial in faith was simply a foreign concept. Jesus confronts various manifestations of arrogance in this chapter.

In Jesus' day, Jews would typically go out on Friday and buy the finest food available for the Sabbath. It was common for synagogue leaders to prepare a large communal meal, especially for some of the many itinerant preachers and rabbis. It was ostensibly a time of close spiritual communion. Since the most ancient times, sharing food is a declaration of peace, and implies a covenant of mutual protection. In this case, the full hypocrisy of the Pharisees was at work, for Jesus had been invited to such a meal as an opportunity to observe Him closely and privately, seeking an excuse to publicly condemn Him.

One of the other guests suffered what today we would call edema – a very uncomfortable swelling, often in the lower limbs. Seeing the man in such misery, Jesus asked if there was any law against healing him on the Sabbath. The only objection they could possibly have is calling healing a form of labor which was not permitted on the Sabbath. Jesus had already pointed out the arrogance of forcing people to forsake an opportune healing for the sake of such silly interpretations. Nothing in Moses said it was wrong, and the implication of the Sabbath laws was to avoid doing things for your own profit, a sacrificial day to God. How could an act of faith, in producing the miracle of healing for a genuine human need, be against the Law? Could they sacrifice their arrogance for the need of a brother?

The men at the dinner had no answer, so Jesus healed the man. Jesus compared it to the lower case of pulling a child or even a valued domestic animal from a pit to save its life. He saved a portion of the man's life, a Covenant brother surely more important than thousands of herd animals. It takes a special arrogance to place a fellow human's life and health below your personal profit, when the Sabbath was all about sacrificing your personal profit.

Jesus pushed a little deeper. Noting their typical jockeying for honors in claiming various seats at the several tables one might find in the home of a wealthy Jew, He shows how completely out of step the whole thing was from the ways of God. Even a man of mere worldly wisdom would not pretend he was too good to sit with the nobodies, because the host would then feel compelled to publicly place the man in a more honorable seat. Arrogantly demanding a place among the guests of honor risked humiliation if they hadn't seen the guest list. It was a parable, of course, for how one dealt with God. If you deny yourself as having any importance among men, you find honor with God, who looks for a sacrifice of the heart.

One can be sacrificial in hosting meals, too. If your whole purpose is to exchange social honors, that's all the honor you'll have, since there is no sacrifice at all. Instead, host a lavish meal for those who cannot possibly repay you – the nobodies, the disabled and neglected in ancient societies. Eating with the poor is eating with God. If you aren't too good to be seen with them, you make a sacrifice only God can repay. Rest assured; He does repay. Jesus uses the standard formulaic phrase for finding oneself standing before God in the company of the righteous, His friends and allies.

Immediately, someone tries to ingratiate himself to Jesus with a pious recitation of the standard rabbinical blessing based on False Messianic Expectations. Jesus does not rebuke the man, nor reject this association of His teaching with what they all claimed to hope for, but refines that association. He tells a parable of God as a ruler, the ultimate Host who puts on the final wedding feast at the End of Time. As with all Eastern potentates, He sends out messengers as honor guards to escort His vassals to the celebration. The vassals bail out for the most frivolous

reasons, a scandalous insult to their ruler. A great man will not call off such a sacrificial offering but will find other guests. Since His chief allies and supporters will not come, He will find others to take their seats, and by implication, their positions of trust in the administration of the domain.

To those listening to this parable, it would have been obvious Jesus portrays Himself as the messenger of God, and the Jewish leaders as those who reject His invitation. Instead, those with whom they self-righteously refuse to associate will become the new councilors in God's Eternal Court of Heaven: the poor, the crippled and unproductive members of society, the Gentiles, and just about anybody who can be persuaded to accept the terms offered by God to enter the Eternal Covenant of Peace with Him. The Jews would lose their vaunted place, and would have to come begging, same as everyone else. Their arrogance made one unfit for the honor God had bestowed on His people. He would remove the Nation of Israel, and create a new, Spiritual Israel.

Luke connects this to other incidents where Jesus taught on the necessity of complete self-sacrifice. At one point, a huge crowd was following Him. He turns to discuss this symbolic act of following. Using an ancient Hebrew figure of speech, He refers to "hating" all the things we think we have in this world, including our very lives. Very pointedly, He mentions nailing it to the cross, a very nasty form of Roman execution. In their own Hebrew culture, attaching or impaling someone on a piece of wood was the ultimate humiliation, an utterly ignoble death.

To follow Jesus spiritually calls for volunteering to crucify everything you consider important in this world, in exchange for a place in the next world. It takes arrogance to start something for which you are unprepared to pay the full price. It takes godly humility to realize you are no better than anyone else and that you need to negotiate your way through life. In the end, those who do not surrender wholly to God cannot be at peace with Him, cannot claim any part in His Son.

Using an oft-repeated epigram, Jesus notes the salt in those days was not exactly pure, and quickly became useless when exposed to the elements, in some cases slightly toxic. When properly used, it preserved food and made it palatable. Simply sharing your salt with another was the same as sharing food. Degraded salt was worth less than dirt. Jesus warned that our presence in this world was either a savory taste on God's palate, or utterly objectionable. Only those who give themselves away completely, without reservation, to God's grace calling in faith could hope to be noticed by God as a friend and ally.

Luke 15

The difference between the worldly and materialist outlook versus that of the spiritual is a vast chasm. To those on the worldly side, there is no other side. There can be nothing beyond what they perceive by their various philosophical assumptions. Every bean counts because there is no hope beyond this life. For the spiritually minded, there is no hope in this life except escaping to the other side.

The Pharisees were bean counters. For them, life was wrapped up in the concrete reality of what can be observed and measured. So deeply corrupted they had become, they could not envision the spiritual realm. For them, heaven was just the sky, and paradise would be a conquering

Messiah, placing the Jews atop all humanity. All the Gentiles would become their slaves, and all worldly wealth and resources would be under their control. They were utterly certain this was their divine destiny. While they did speak of Heaven and angels, it never occurred to them such concepts were the center of their religion. It was as if they denied the very existence of the spiritual realm the Lord had told them to seek, and which He had told them they were called as a nation to reveal.

Since this world was all they understood, the Pharisees operated on a very human standard. Seeing nothing of the spiritual dynamics of things, the whole discussion of sin and righteousness was a list of concrete human behaviors. While they did pay lip service to forgiveness, it came at a high price of compensatory conduct demanded of those seeking to rehabilitate their standing. It's not as if they really condemned folks for being greedy – the Pharisees were probably even worse about material things – but gaining wealth contrary to their rules was a sin in their eyes. In today's world, they would be the ultimate prissy middle-class shrews, as phony as they come. Even their mystics were hidebound rule keepers. So it was, those they called "sinners" were doomed, condemned eternally, and unworthy of any help in repenting.

During His ministry tour in Judea, Jesus spent time in fellowship with those the Pharisees labeled as irredeemable reprobates: tax collectors, prostitutes, anyone who compromised with Roman or Greek customs and dress, etc. These people gladly heard the message of Jesus, for it offered a path back to God the Person, not some false idol such as the Pharisees had raised. They hungered for a God who, while condemning their sins, longed to see them return to Him.

The Pharisees made their typical complaints, attempting to scandalize Jesus. As always, Jesus explained the mystical truth in parables.

First, Jesus spoke of a caring shepherd, the image of Israel's kings. Any decent shepherd would keep a count of his flock. Should one go missing, he might expend no little effort to find it. All of them were precious. The ones that behaved well could be left for a time while he hunted the one which had strayed. Since it could hardly find its way back, and might not follow if left free to do so, he carried it. So it is with our God; He is not willing to just let anyone go, to consign them to death. Each life is precious to Him. And when once a sinner has turned and received the Spirit of grace, God Himself rejoices.

Second was the woman with a dowry. We can haggle over the meaning of the Greek word *drachma*, but Jesus was no doubt speaking in His native Aramaic tongue, so the value of the coin misses the point. Silver coins of some value would make a dowry for the average peasant lass getting married. This was her personal treasure, and losing a portion of it would be embarrassing, not to mention a financial loss. It was worth any effort to search carefully to find it. So it is with our Father, who considers all the world His inheritance, souls as His treasure. The Son is no different. Particularly among His own nation, no one was beyond redemption. Each person was a treasure, and their return was always an occasion for rejoicing.

The so-called Prodigal Son has become the quintessential parable of how God handles straying souls who repent. While the father could have denied the younger son's request, we see he granted it, even knowing how it would turn out. Auditing his entire estate, he gave this younger son one third the value of all property and allowed him to depart. While trying to talk

about how sinful living will destroy your life, that wasn't the point Jesus was making. Plenty of self-righteous Pharisees were quite wealthy, yet were spiritually dead. The elder son was a bean counter, and all he thought about was the unfairness of it all in strictly material terms. He hardly missed his brother because there was no place in his life for love, only stuff. Nor did he love his father, but felt he had a financial interest, grounds to condemn something he didn't understand.

For the elder son and for Pharisees, it was all about their own material comfort. They felt cheated by the idea they could keep the Law – or at least thought they did – and still had to repent the same as the rejects. Making this parable as a mere allegory based on the wayward son plays into the hands of modern Pharisees. Jesus strung them along with lavish detail of the sinner who left it all behind. The end of the story would have stunned them. This is about two sons dead in their sins, both in their own ways. Both are offered repentance, but only one receives it; only one will enter Heaven. The point of the parable was the crabby elder son who gave only the pretense of obedience and bore a heavy burden of self-righteousness, self-pity, and complete failure to understand.

For Luke's educated Roman reader, Theophilus, this points out the tragedy of the Jewish nation. They rejected the real Messiah because they were so sure they knew it was all about very fleshly comforts. Meanwhile, those who realized they had nothing to lose were those who entered the Kingdom of Heaven, far more and far above anything King David had achieved. What really mattered had nothing to do with what man could measure.

Luke 16

People of this world, whose whole existence is here below, have a very different perspective on things compared to those who walk in the Spirit. In the previous chapter, Jesus ends His parable by showing that the Jewish leaders were all about petty bean-counting. What can such people expect from their dealings in a world where everyone counts beans? Jesus tells the parable of the Unjust Steward to demonstrate.

In ancient times, wealthy men would appoint someone to manage the details of their household while they gave themselves to social and political pursuits. These hired managers would have something like a power of attorney, and their business decisions were binding on the owner. Since the owner had to present the manager to the court to vest him, it required a similar legal proceeding to divest him. It should surprise no one in a bean-counter world that some of these managers would be conniving scoundrels. When the owner suspected fraud, he required the manager to bring all his accounting materials for an audit. This often consisted largely of promissory notes from renters who farmed the owner's property. Each renter would write a promise in his own hand, which the manager would countersign, and it became a legally binding contract. If the terms of the contract changed, the manager would tell the renter to write up a new contract.

This story is typical of Pharisees, both as owners and managers, bean counters who focus on their own self interest. This particular scoundrel knew he had been caught mismanaging his master's assets. Having a bean counter's mindset, he made a deal with the renters to rewrite the contracts so they would offer him a kickback, probably in the form of skimming off a portion of

their reduced rent-in-kind. He would still be in business, but for himself. Because his master was also a bean counter, he noted with some grudging approval the rascal's shrewd dealings; it's how he might have done it himself in similar circumstances. Neither of these men was spiritually minded, so that's just the way things are in their world. The application of this parable is confusing only to those who still count beans by making a direct application of the words instead of seeing with a more subtle and mystical eye.

Jesus' audience would have had a good laugh at this story and so would the educated Gentile reader because it was so typical of the shrewd and self-centered Jewish elite. No, it's not nice, and not how the elite taught everyone else to act. The elite were not Sons of Light, but children of moral darkness. God gives us stewardship of His Creation fully expecting failures and isn't going to present bean-counting demands of us. We would be more careful than the shrewd manager in the story, but it is because we know instinctively the issue is our love for Him and for people, not their stuff nor our own stuff. God commends us because we know better than to count beans. When you get to Heaven, it is Sons of Light you will meet there, while the world's wealth will perish. Compare that to the shrewd manager, who might gain a reception in the homes of the renters, but they would watch him like a hawk, knowing what sort of man he was.

Faithfulness in the Kingdom is a matter of starting where you are. A spirit that can cheerfully serve faithfully in the small things will find trust for greater things. Faith and trust are more than a two-way street, but a living link to the Lord. He builds trust in us and for us, as we cooperate by holding tightly to that faith and trust. The bean counters can't be faithful even with beans, so what hope have they for eternal things? They worship Mammon, a word originally meaning "trusted things" – stuff in this world which bean counters treasure and trust. God seeks those who trust Him personally.

It was a common teaching among Pharisees that the true mark of God's favor was material wealth. Naturally, they scoffed at Jesus' teaching, rejecting His assertion they didn't serve the Lord. They had a long list of memorized speeches about how this was all according to the Law of Moses. The logic was impeccable, but morally empty. God knew their hearts, which is what really mattered to Him, a factor of humanity they casually ignored. They had their chance. From the day of Moses until John the Baptist came along, it was their opportunity to find the path to the truth, to absorb the higher meanings of the Law and see it pointing to the spiritual side of things. Not only did they miss it; they also got farther and farther away. Their time was past. Now the Son has come, and He is teaching the Way of the Kingdom of God. All the people they had rejected as unworthy were crowding around Jesus, trying to find out how to become a part of this spiritual Kingdom.

The failure of the Jewish leaders was not because of the Law failing. Indeed, they were zealous in nit-picking over punctuation and proper printing of the text of the Law. If anyone should understand the permanence of the Law, it was they. Yet by their relentless pursuit of creature comfort, they had twisted the Law. They treated their wives as mere breeding cattle. On the most frivolous excuse, they would divorce their wives, holding the women accountable on a level they would never apply to themselves. Moses had written that she must be found unfaithful for a divorce. No other provision was made. The Jewish leaders had built themselves a huge pile of exceptions. Jesus nailed it down: Serial monogamy was adultery.

Next, Jesus struck at the very root of Pharisaical falsehood. He told the story as if it were a very real historical case. The one man was fabulously wealthy. By Jewish standards, he was fabulously favored by God. Jesus names the poor man, Lazarus, who also suffered from a repulsive skin condition. In a world where dogs were not pets, but always dangerous and filthy, this man could not keep them from showing the only kindness he received – the nasty creatures licked his wounds clean. If there could possibly be any picture of a man cursed by God, in the Jews' world this was it. The image of luxury is a man so rich he used the flat disks of bread as napkins, wiping his hands on them and tossing them out. The servants would then feed these torn pieces of bread to beggars, like Lazarus, hanging around in the street outside the outer gate of the rich man's palatial home – how generous. The Pharisees would nod approvingly at the proper etiquette of those blessed of God.

So, what happened when they died? The accursed poor man, of all things, was escorted to Paradise! He was pictured as dining in luxury as a guest of Abraham, a guest of honor on his right hand, reclining at the table (the only way one could be "in the bosom" of another man in Hebrew society). Abraham was the symbol the Jews clung to: "We are children of Abraham." Worse, the man "favored by God" went to Hell. In his torment, he recognized from afar the nasty beggar he graciously tolerated hanging around his gate. Surely, he had earned some small mercy in exchange. The gulf between the spiritual and the worldly is wide in this world, but truly massive and fixed in Eternity. There would be no crossing over, because it was too late.

Well, perhaps Lazarus, blessed as he was, could be sent back to warn the rich man's brothers? No. Abraham noted the Law and Prophets were the starting point, and they had not yet honored that. Would not someone they despised coming back from the dead guarantee they could hear the warning? If they allowed material wealth to blind them to the conditions of their hearts, they had already rejected God's path for them. Their eternal destiny was already fixed before they died.

It would be hard for Jesus to offer a rebuke blunter than that. For all their shrewdness, the Jewish leaders were utter fools, condemned before God and on the way to Hell. We can be sure, just as with the rich man and his brothers, nothing could convince them. When Jesus raised the real Lazarus, a fairly wealthy man, the Jewish leaders simply planned how to kill him again. When Jesus Himself later rose from the dead, they bribed officials to say it was a lie. The truth of all these things was easily discernible when one embraced the Law, not as counting beans, but as the breath of eternity.

Luke 17

It is natural for children to want and need some sense of excitement, some frequent and varied stimulus. In normal human development, this becomes less important as we age toward adulthood. There comes a point when guidance is no longer necessary, and we can create our own sense of fun and adventure. We absorb experiences precisely so we may build from them internally. We carry the motivation and focus in our hearts in the form of commitment.

Faith grows in a similar fashion. It is first absorbed, and the fiery filling of God's Spirit burns the paths in our souls. After a time, we are obliged to recall on our own those moments and recreate the powerful obedience those high moments inspire.

A particularly difficult task in keeping to the path of faith as we grow is forgiving others. The Jewish leaders were particularly infamous for holding grudges. They would tolerate the same error only three times from any one person. After that, they taught, it was no longer necessary to forgive. Jesus warned His disciples to prepare their hearts for a very high tolerance of human frailty, both in others and in themselves. The real danger is creating situations that exploit human frailty for personal gain. Someone who took that route deserved a horrific death, such as being drowned tied to a heavy weight.

It is no sin to rebuke someone who wrongs you. What you aim for is repentance as a desire, not performance. When Jesus said “seven times” each day, it was not lost on His disciples, nor was it on Luke’s readers that this was more than anyone would likely need. They knew this was a heavy demand. For them to forgive the same error without limit would require a lot more faith, a much stronger commitment (and a holy cynicism to remain aloof from the damage).

Jesus replied to their request for more faith with the parable of the Mustard Seed. We know it was the smallest seed used for domestic agriculture, yet grew to quite a large bush, rather like a small tree. The point was to note that if you had any faith at all, there was no limit to what it could do, particularly in the heart. If a wee bit of faith could make a tree obey an outrageous command, could it not do wonders in making us obey God?

God’s demands are entirely just by definition. However so much He demands, it is only our duty. It is not possible to fulfill them, so we remain always in need of forgiveness ourselves. Since it is impossible to gain any merit on the spiritual level, patience with others should come naturally. Be thankful when the Father allows you the power to obey more fully. Living in gratitude is the life of the Kingdom.

Luke gives the idea a bit more flesh by recalling a moment when Jesus traveled along the border between Galilee and Samaria. At the entrance to one village, some lepers hailed Jesus from a distance. Lepers were required by custom and law to avoid healthy people, and to warn them away if they got too close. The only way to get Jesus’ attention was to call from a distance, crying for mercy. Because they had enough faith to go that far, Jesus simply told them to obey the Law by showing themselves to a priest who could declare them clean of the disease. They could then re-enter normal society. In faith, they obeyed. On the way, they realized they were cleansed, but only one felt seized by a duty to return thanks to Jesus. Significantly, it was the lone Samaritan in the group of ten who understood living gratefully. Jesus remarked the man was not only healed, but this life was made whole by such faith.

The idea that a Samaritan could be included in the Kingdom raised other questions. The Pharisees taught that the Messiah of necessity must come and declare Himself the new King of Israel and set about making the Jews rulers of the earth. Some Pharisees asked Jesus when He was going to get started. His answer turned their question on its head. The Kingdom was not something men could see with their eyes. It would not be political, it would not require a revolution against Rome, nor even against the current Jewish political leadership. It was already present. Wherever Jesus was and taught, there was the nascent Kingdom of God. The Pharisees would never see it, unless they repented. Jesus intentionally used an ambiguous phrase about the Kingdom within them. Not only was it already there, but it could only be present inside a person. This sort of mystical thinking the Pharisees had dismissed two centuries before.

While on the subject of eschatology, Jesus briefed His disciples to disabuse them of other false expectations. First, they should not expect to see the Son of Man return to earth visually as ruler of all Creation during their lifetime. Thus, they should never listen if someone says the Messiah has returned. When He comes back, it would be so obvious no one breathing could miss it. At a minimum, there was some unfinished business at hand for Jesus, and that would include something very different from the typical expectation of the Messiah: He must be utterly rejected by His own nation.

Naturally, this raises the expectation that God would punish those who rejected His Son. In the days of Noah, whose prophetic warnings were ignored, no one really expected any flood, but went about their daily lives until it was too late. Lot warned the Sodomites, too, but they came close to invading his house for daring to call their sin what it was. Instead, they partied into the night until destruction and death rained down from the sky. It wouldn't be any different for the Jewish nation on the day He finally revealed Himself as the Promised One. They'd reject Him. God's wrath would follow shortly thereafter.

When that rejection is finally too obvious to ignore, it will be time to leave Jerusalem. By the time Luke wrote this, many Christians had, indeed, left that city. However, the destruction had not yet fallen. Delaying like Lot's wife, caught by the storm of fire from the sky, would be foolish. She wanted too badly to keep her old life and could not let it die. So, she died instead. The timing would be neither logical nor convenient. It would be like the midnight arrest raid, or the early morning sweep when women grind corn, or soldiers riding up right in the heat of the day – the Lord's hand of punishment would come and take the nation away.

The Twelve wondered where this awful thing would happen. The epigram was all too obvious for them. The Jewish nation was a dead man walking. When it finally collapsed in the last spasms of death, the carrion eaters would not be far away. This was a veiled reference to keeping an eye out for the arrival of soldiers. Rome allowed her soldiers some latitude in plundering when destroying a city. When a mass of Roman soldiers began moving, it was time to get out of their way.

We know that in 68 AD, the tensions in Jerusalem became so high that a large portion of the Jewish leadership participated in a revolt. The next year, a large army from Rome fought several battles in Galilee. Some months later, Rome had crushed resistance and laid siege to Jerusalem. According to an early church scholar, at one point the siege was suspended rather briefly. The few remaining Christians in the city fled and were spared when Titus lead his troops back to flatten Jerusalem.

Luke 18

The Kingdom of God operates far differently from any other. Having its own spiritual logic, we can only understand it by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The parables of Jesus serve to break the mind free of mere human logic, to turn things on their heads, making room for the Spirit to point to another path, a higher standard of truth which cannot be taught, but only caught.

Having offered a dark vision of the final destruction of earthly Israel, Jesus pointed to the need to operate above normal human fears. Panic has no part in the Kingdom of God. Persistence in

the power of the Spirit in the face of all human opposition, both internal and external, is the key to Kingdom living. When we are pressed from all sides, including inside, with conflicting demands, how do we know what path to take? We know because the Spirit of God works mystically in us to make His will known. We do what we must, what is demanded by that flaming imperative of God's own character, not simply what makes sense to us.

Jesus illustrates conviction by the parable of the Unjust Judge. It was common in the Eastern world for widows to lose everything. If no male family member kept an eye on her affairs, she went unprotected from various schemes to lay claim to property that her husband left to her. All the more so under Roman law, for the magistrates tended to care only for profit, and who had standing to accuse them? Yet, a widow who understood conviction and persistence could eventually win legal protection from even such a magistrate. Granted, it could take some time. So, it is in our dealings with God. We cannot permit external circumstances and human wisdom to dictate our course of action. Even if that course is utterly futile in human terms, and we die in the process, what the Lord seeks among men is conviction. God speaks most loudly to us there. While He is, indeed, sovereign over all in this world, we cannot assume anything external to us indicates His will if it contradicts what His Spirit convicts us is right. God may well delay His response as men count such things, but there is always a good reason for His divine tolerance. What He wants from us is persistence in our convictions.

Men have too long presumed to know what God requires simply because they are smart enough to figure some things out on their own. Jesus tells about two men coming into the Temple to pray. The typical Pharisee knows he has obeyed the stipulations of the Law by observing the numerous interpretive rules of the Jewish traditions. This kind of man prays more to himself than to God. He stands in the center of the Temple to be seen of men, all but dethroning God in the process. The other man seeks no attention, but like the most insignificant slave in the king's court, slips in quietly and awaits his master's pleasure in the dark corner at the back. He is the first to confess his unworthiness, makes no presumption at all. He cries for mercy, because he knows he is unable to rise to justice. That is the sort of man who finds God's pardon, who finds the protection of the Judge of Heaven. All men are sinners before God, and He crushes the proud, but lifts up the humble.

This calls to mind an incident when Jesus was approached by a gaggle of women carrying their infants, seeking the blessing of a rabbi. For the average Jewish man, children were a nuisance. The disciples acted typically, seeking to protect their Master from this imposition. Jesus rebuked the men and received the children graciously. It was a lesson to the Twelve. As infants, they are utterly helpless. They absorb whatever comes to them, completely open to feeding and shaping by whoever rocks the cradle. Entering the Kingdom is starting over as a babe in a new life and nothing we bring with us matters.

This point is emphasized by how Jesus responds to the Rich Young Ruler. This fellow was under conviction. Having performed according to the most demanding standards of Judaism, he sensed something had escaped his attention. Jesus first wanted to make sure this fellow was not simply following protocol, but realized that true goodness can only come as a grant from God. Jesus asked the man to consider what he had been taught regarding outward holiness. Without referring to the more mystical elements of the Ten Commandments, He spoke of those addressing our dealings with other humans. The man was scrupulous in his ethics. Most

Pharisees were blameless by their own reckoning; having great wealth seemed sufficient proof of God's favor. Jesus struck at the heart of the man's problem: He trusted in his wealth, not in God.

Again, Jesus points out how the Jewish leaders had turned things upside down. They claimed God but clung to worldly possessions and position as their true god. If God was what mattered in this man's life, if the spiritual treasures of God were his concern, then surely, he could let go of the worldly wealth and power? He could not. He knew it was right but could not take that path. He would not let conviction rule his life. Jesus used a common phrase to describe the way trade goods were brought into Eastern cities – "eye of the needle." Traders would arrive with a caravan of heavily laden camels, either during the night or on a Sabbath. To enter the city for some urgent reason, they would have to leave their camels and stuff outside the Needle Gate, and only themselves come inside unarmed. The rich were loath to leave their possessions to enter the City of God. It might mean having to give up everything. The disciples, having absorbed the same heresy about wealth being the mark of God's favor, wondered at this: If the rich are not favored by God, who is?

The answer Jesus gave reminded them it had nothing to do with anything in this life. Wealth and power bore no relation to God's favor. Indeed, nothing any man can do earns God's favor. Everything that mattered could be done only by God's power. God alone, within Himself, was the deciding factor. Peter noted the Twelve had each left behind whatever mattered in his life and was with Him even then. Most of them didn't really have much property, but they did leave their families and homes for months at a time. Jesus promised that such devotion was what the Kingdom demanded, and that it brought its own rewards. The spiritual treasures of Heaven were theirs now, and all the more so in Eternity. Obedience was its own treasure.

But as-yet beyond their grasp was just how much more they would be leaving behind later, as the demands of conviction went beyond anything they had ever considered. They were on the last leg of their tour of Judea, the home stretch as the Passover approached. Jesus warned that when they arrived, He too, would pay the ultimate price for the Kingdom. It had already been prophesied for Him. His own nation would turn Him over to the Gentiles for horrific treatment: jeered, abused, and treated with utter contempt. He would be flogged and executed. It seemed all the worst that could happen to any man in this life, especially for a Jew, but it would not hold back the plan and purpose of God. On the third day, He would resurrect. The whole thing passed over the disciples' heads.

Meanwhile, there was one more symbol of conviction. For Luke's Roman audience, the name Jericho was applied to a rather new town built by Herod. Thus, Luke says they were approaching it, where the other Gospels describe Jesus leaving the more ancient site of Jericho some distance from the new. Between the old and new Jerichos sat a blind man on the side of the road. Hearing the large entourage with Jesus, he asked a passerby who it was so important to have such a crowd around Him. Hearing it was Jesus, quite famous by now for His healing miracles, the man tried to hail Him, using the royal address of the Messiah. Those at the front of the crowd tried to shush the man, but he began screaming louder. For him, that someone would care enough about Jesus to hush him meant Jesus was probably close enough to hear if he could make himself louder than the hubbub. No power on earth, no social convention, would stop this man from reaching out to God.

The man called for mercy, not justice. Jesus heard, stopped, and asked the man what mercy would mean for him. The blind man asked to see. Jesus granted it, noting that man's commitment was the key. That the man had a need was painfully obvious. The world was filled with needy people, but the need was not what made the difference in the Kingdom. The business of the Kingdom was faith, commitment, and conviction. Everything else was just small change, so making the blind to see was no big deal. Upon seeing again, the man joined the entourage. Had the crowd not been noisy enough before, it now became a chorus of praise for a merciful God.

Luke 19

Having seen the miracle of a blind man regaining his sight, the crowd chanted and sang praises to God. They brought this din through the newer Jericho. In the city that day was the district Chief Tax Collector, as Jericho was on a major trade route, and was a major city in that area. Herod the Great had built up a very fine winter playground for the rich and powerful in the balmy year-round climate of the Lower Jordan Valley. The main route was lined with large Sycamore trees, which would have grown larger and faster here than almost anywhere in Palestine.

This Chief Taxman was named Zaccheus. All tax collectors were rich, but the Chief was all the more so. Jewish peasants naturally hated any tax collector regardless for whom they were collecting taxes, but the Jewish leadership regarded them as complete apostates, Gentiles, sinners regardless of any other factor in their lives, because it was somehow religious treason to collect on behalf of Gentile rulers (and Herod only pretended to be a Jew). Such was the arrogance of the Pharisees, though, that they had one other motive for their hatred: Tax collectors were rich without jumping all the hoops Pharisees did. It was embarrassing for a Jew could be wealthy, indicating God's favor, when clearly, they could not be said to actually be in God's favor by Pharisaical reckoning. Zaccheus was the chief outcast in Jewish society, too.

He wanted to see this Jesus of whom he surely had heard much. However, the rabbi was obscured by the tightly packed entourage crowded around Him, and Zaccheus was rather short. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed up onto the low sprouting limbs for which Sycamores are known. What Zaccheus did not know was that Jesus also wanted to see him. The Lord stopped under the tree and called out to Zaccheus, informing him that he was to host the rabbi and His disciples for lunch that day. Zaccheus jumped down from the tree and leaped at the chance to be honored by a famous rabbi.

So great was the impact from the rabbi's teaching and demeanor that Zaccheus stood up and made a bold declaration before witnesses. Such a man would have amassed a great deal of wealth, not only taking his cut from the collections of his agents, but from smart investments he knew about from his taxing of businesses. The actual work of directing other tax collectors didn't demand much time, so he was a man of leisure, able to engage in all sorts of business opportunities. He swore he would first give half of his property to the poor.

Next, he would make the highest rate of restitution for fraud. Tax collection was the business of buying a concession from kings and other officials by paying them whatever they demanded, then receiving the power to regain that payment back, plus some interest, over a set period of

time by having sole authority to collect taxes in the government's name. It was rare when tax collectors didn't gouge, both by collecting more than actually authorized, and taxing things and people not exactly authorized. There would surely be an element of vengefulness against anyone who dared to indicate their contempt for "traitorous" tax collectors. However, the behavior Zaccheus addresses here is the power to confiscate property when that may not be entirely justified. Jewish law called for a 20% interest in fraud cases, but Zaccheus volunteered to consider it robbery, by offering to repay fourfold (Exodus 22:1).

All of this says that Zaccheus was no longer a rapacious little traitor to his nation. Instead, he was just a fellow with an unpopular job. More importantly, his allegiance was no longer the cash nexus between himself and some earthly ruler, but an allegiance of faith to a spiritual King. Jesus declared that salvation had descended from Heaven upon the man's household, because something lost to the spiritual household of Abraham had been reclaimed, much like a stray sheep. No one said anything about changing careers but changing his commitments. His secular work was immaterial.

Zaccheus was a member of the team. With such a wealthy backer, and symbolically taking a chunk out of the current political regime by stealing away the allegiance of a major official, Zaccheus, surely, they were about to wipe the slate clean and declare the Messianic reign in Jerusalem? There's no doubt the disciples were thinking that way, and no telling how many others. Jesus tried to put the brakes on that. He told a parable, taken from a well-known historical event.

Shortly after Jesus was born, Herod the Great died. He divided his large kingdom among his sons. To his son Herod Antipas, he left Galilee and Perea (east bank of the Jordan). There was a counterclaim filed with the imperial Roman Court by the brother of Antipas, Archelaus. This latter man had significant backing from some Jewish leaders. So, it was Antipas had to go off to Rome and defend his inheritance. It took quite some time, and he did succeed. Naturally, some of his enemies died when he returned.

Jesus draws upon this story, symbolizing the way things work in His Kingdom. Jesus was not going to proclaim some earthly Messianic kingdom right away. He had to go away to His Father. The Kingdom was not uncontested, and the Jews would certainly reject His rule. Thus, it would be a while before Jesus came on the clouds to redeem all Creation. While He was gone, there must be a winnowing process to see who would serve and who would not. Some would be more successful than others in building on Kingdom resources, but the only failures would be those who did nothing. The man who returned his *mina* (100 days' wages for a peasant laborer) intact thought he was faithful but missed the point entirely. In the Kingdom of the Spirit, it is not about having, but about using. Those who had the Spirit would end up with abundance from the normal activity of walking in conviction. Those who didn't have the Spirit had nothing that mattered.

Those who dared to actively oppose the Kingdom were doomed. Jesus ended the parable with a warning for the Jews who rejected Him, as they surely would, must suffer God's wrath. Just having to discuss this again would leave a sore spot on Jesus' heart as they approached the City.

It was easily an all day hike up from Jericho, climbing some 3000 feet (over 900m) in just the space of a few linear miles. Across a high and rolling tableland, the final climb up the Mount of

Olives saw Bethany perched on the eastern slope, and another tiny village higher up, just below the brow of the hill. There, Jesus had pre-arranged with some supporters to supply a donkey. These folks knew Jesus but didn't recognize the disciples on sight. Once they returned to the road, the crowd placed cloaks on the beast and on the path in front of Jesus as He rode to over the crest of the mountain.

It was a gesture recognized in many ancient Eastern cultures, placing your outer clothing to be trodden by your newly proclaimed ruler. The crowd accompanying Jesus had seen the miracles and welcomed the idea of this rabbi as Messiah. Jesus permitted this ritual, even while He knew they didn't understand the significance. It had all been prophesied, but they barely grasped the mere outward details. As they crested the peak, the crowd was shouting and singing Messianic psalms. Oh, how they longed for that sort of peace! The Pharisees were embarrassed, for this could not possibly be the Messiah; He didn't signify it properly by jumping through their hoops. Their rebuke was met by Jesus' warning that this fulfills the prophecies of God. If the crowd were silent, the stones themselves would burst out with the message – not that it would have helped the Pharisees any.

As the road winds down from the crest of the ridge, there's a place where it turns and opens to a broad view of Jerusalem from above. This brought tears to Jesus' eyes, for He knew the doom awaiting it, and why. Songs of peace had little meaning when the city was in constant warfare in the hearts and minds of the residents. The only peace that truly mattered, the peace which had some hope of calming the riot of human sin, was the spiritual peace of turning to God in faith. Few souls in Jerusalem knew anything about God's peace. They could not receive the Messiah because He was from the Spirit Realm. Death for Jesus would be victory everlasting. He embraced it. In rejecting Him, the Jews doomed the Nation of Israel. All too soon the city would be surrounded by siege mounds, then torn down level to the ground, neither stones nor citizens standing. God's own Son was coming in the gate today and would not be recognized. Such a city was dead already and didn't know it.

He knew it was futile, but He must fulfill the prophecies. Upon entering the Temple area, He saw the entrance plaza filled like a marketplace. Even as far as Rome, it was a notorious racket. Jews coming to Passover from around the world had to exchange their home currencies for the Temple shekel, before they even bought a sacrificial animal. If they waited until they reached the Bazaars of the Sons of Annas on the Temple grounds, they would be gouged on the exchange rate. Further, no animal offerings would make the trip in shape to be accepted, or so said the Sons of Annas and their associates in the priesthood. So, they had to buy an offering from the Sons of Annas, paying an awful premium for something that had already passed inspection. Worse than all this, the corrupt market clogged the Temple grounds. Jesus drove them all out with a whip. All the while, He charged them with making God's own house a home for thieves.

Had Jesus merely been harassing the Romans, His nation might have had more interest in His message. Instead, He spent a lot more energy pointing out the flaws of the Jewish leadership. They didn't need the kind of Messiah who promised to sweep them away. Most galling was how very popular this very idea made Him with the people. The Jewish rulers had respect, but love was something they never bothered to cultivate. They felt politically threatened but spoke in terms of His leading the people astray. And what would Rome do to those people if the

Jewish leaders who kept Rome at a distance, those savvy politicians who knew how to handle the pagan empire, were gone? But they couldn't touch Jesus. Every day the man gathered a crowd in the Temple grounds, tearing down the leadership's position. The peasants loved Him.

Luke 20

As the Jews living outside Jerusalem crowded the city in preparation for the Passover, the most common pastime was listening to various popular rabbis who gathered an audience, often in various parts of the Temple complex. Jesus was more popular than most simply because of the healing, but all the more so after His dramatic entrance into the city, and the cleansing of the Temple entrance.

In doing all this, Jesus presented a very potent threat to the established order among Jews. He flatly rejected all the oral traditions outside the Torah by which the Pharisees maintained their dominance. The Sadducees were stricter about adhering to Moses only, but in the process rejected the underlying spiritual reality. Neither was popular with the majority of Jews, who were merely peasants. The idea of a rabbi who challenged the political order within the nation was just too entertaining. With the claim He was the Messiah, it was irresistible. The crowds Jesus drew were impossible to ignore in the close quarters of Jerusalem.

It comes as no surprise the Chief Priests and other dignitaries attempted to get Him to say something that would discredit Himself. No doubt these word games had been used before with good effect. The first attempt Luke records during the days of preparation for Passover was to get Him to say something about authority. They made reference to the cleansing of the Temple foyer and the healings, among other things. On whose authority would He claim to do these things?

While it might appear Jesus was being coy about proclaiming Himself the Son of God, which could net Him a charge of blasphemy, it was more important that He point out the bigger picture. His authority was directly connected to that of John the Baptist, His cousin and Herald. Was John's ritual cleansing and call for repentance a fraud? Since many of the Pharisees had gone to participate (and John rebuked them for being phony about it), they could hardly repudiate him. Besides, they knew the crowd pressing about them viewed John favorably as a genuine prophet of God. For the Priests to say John was anything less would discredit them, not Jesus. To say John was from God meant they should have done more to meet his demands and would have been obliged to try preventing his execution.

The Priests waffled. This gave Jesus grounds to deny their demand. He then turned and told the crowds a parable about the leaders of their nation. The arrangement of tenant vineyard keepers was common enough. The owner would send an agent to collect some third of the harvest, which usually left more than enough for the tenants to make a good living. But few people who attended synagogue would have missed this reference to Isaiah's tale of the Vineyard of the Lord (Isaiah 5). In this case, the nation was the vineyard, but the keepers were folks like the Priests. There was no fruit for the Lord because all the strength of the people was consumed by the leaders; God got nothing. They came from a long line of those who rejected the prophets until long after they were safely dead. Jesus was saying these Priests were no better than those

who murdered the prophets. And if the Son should arise to proclaim Himself, surely the Priests would kill Him to make sure they kept their control of the nation.

What got the strongest reaction was the declaration that the Master of the Vineyard would turn the nation over to others – Gentiles. At this, the Priests objected loudly. The notion anyone but Jews could be God’s People was just too much for the racist leadership of the Jews. Yet, this is precisely what happened, as any reference to “God’s People” after Christ would mean those who follow Christ, regardless of their DNA or cultural background. The death of Christ was the door to the nations to enter the Kingdom.

The death of Christ was also the death of the Covenant of Moses. To the Priest’s vociferous response, Jesus asked the meaning of Psalm 118:22, where David prophesied that man would inevitably reject what God had prepared for His People as the foundation for His Kingdom. Anyone who stumbles over Him would be broken but could then be remade into stones of God. Those on whom the guilt of His rejection fell would be doomed. None of this was lost on the Priests. They would have killed Him there with their bare hands, but the crowd would have risen up against them. Having no power in themselves to harm Him, they decided to trap Him in ways that would mark Him as a rebel against Roman authority.

Surely a real Jew, even Jesus, would not support Roman power over His nation? He would, in the sense such power never mattered. It was mere earthly politics and had no bearing on the Kingdom. The Priests sent agents to approach Jesus as if they were fans with difficult questions. The first was a query about taxes to Rome. Under the Law of Moses, little was said about tribute to pagans, but Moses had warned it would happen if Israel disobeyed. However, under the Pharisees’ teaching, it was an abomination, a form of unfaithfulness and treason. Jesus ignored all that and pointed out the hypocrisy of the question. The most common coin in use at that time was the Roman silver denarius. It was about the price of one day’s labor from a peasant. The coin in question bore the image and Latin inscription about Caesar. That was specifically against Moses’ Law, yet the Jewish leaders carried them along with everyone else. Where the ruler’s coin was accepted was his realm.

More important was the underlying issue of material and worldly treasure versus the spiritual. The Jewish leaders seemed to have no grasp at all of spiritual and moral issues. They gave nothing of that part of themselves to their own God. Meanwhile, they fussed over a host of tangibles as if they really mattered. The authorities who made the coins can take them back when they like. God had an equal claim on the power of His revelation and His blessings and His nomination of His People. The Jews were denying God by denying His reign in their hearts, let alone their pockets.

Taxation was a Pharisee issue, but the Sadducees had their own ways. Using an old shop-worn tale of seven brothers in sequence attempting to raise up offspring to their eldest in order to obey Moses, they asked who her husband in the Resurrection would be – if there were such a thing. This story was used to ridicule the notion of an afterlife not mentioned in the Torah. How could these men obey the Law if there was a resurrection? Jesus pointed out that the Sadducees had no comprehension of Eternity. The afterlife was not more of the same that we have here, but something utterly different. Angels are eternal and sexless. In a spiritual realm, there was no need for procreation, so no need for marriage. Their question was silly.

To rub it in further, Jesus attacked the underlying assumption that there is nothing beyond this life. Using the same Hellenistic nit-picking which had corrupted the Jewish religion, Jesus pointed out that Moses, for whom the Sadducees considered themselves champions, had referred to his forefathers as living still. If those men were not in Heaven, He could not be the God of those men.

The Lawyers, who considered themselves non-partisan, had to admit Jesus was the sharpest debater they had ever heard. It was clearly futile to approach Jesus in public and hope to discredit Him that way. Meanwhile, Jesus continued poking holes in the Jewish leaders' teachings. Under the laws of all nations then, a man was always superior in authority to his sons and their descendants. If the Messiah, not yet born in the time of David, is a descendant of David, how could David himself call that descendant his Lord? This is more than merely an entertaining riddle. It points out the Messiah would come according to the Covenant of Moses, but would end that covenant by carrying a higher authority than the people and the covenant which gave them power. By that authority, He would abolish the old forms and institute a new Kingdom of a far higher order. The only solution to the riddle was to think spiritually, which few Jews even understood at that time.

But even the non-partisan Scribes could not claim God's blessing. Like the rest of the Jewish leaders, they lived for the trappings of honor and authority on this earth, yet clearly cared nothing for spiritual things. Oh, they knew the Law in all its stipulations and hidden meanings, but knew nothing about why there was a Law. Why did they command so much respect, when it was they, more than any other class, who would violate the spirit of the Law? Making long and flowery prayers in public, they would then proceed to foreclose on a technicality and confiscate a widow's property.

Jesus' reference to Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard was a dire warning. The Lord had promised to destroy that vineyard, to let it return to its natural state. The leaders would be killed. This prophecy came true, beginning shortly after Luke published this Gospel. It was a prolonged agony over a century, which ended with horrific loss of life on both sides. Rome decimated the Jewish leadership, and eventually forbid any Jew from coming within 10 miles of Jerusalem. The unrest in Palestine itself drove many Jews out to Jewish communities around the region. God's plan for Israel as an earthly entity was gone. The only Israel He recognized was that of Heaven.

Luke 21

While we note the basic message of Jesus offered here by Luke is mostly a summary of the Olivet Discourse, we must keep an eye on Luke's emphasis for his primary audience, Theophilus. The educated Roman reader needed to understand the very signal importance of the spiritual against the worldly. The scholars who divided Luke's Gospel into chapters were not fools. The tone for Jesus' message here is founded on the otherworldly mindset.

The disciples were still expecting Jesus to somehow remove the current leadership of the Jewish nation and inaugurate a revival of the purer Davidic Kingdom. To grab their attention and orient it on the Spirit Realm, Jesus pointed out that, among those bringing their offerings to the Temple, was a widow. The scandal of Jewish society in ancient times was the complete

disregard for widows. We left the previous lesson with Jesus criticizing the Scribes as they purchased widows' properties out from under them by paying off liens, sometimes filing bogus liens themselves. Most widows were destitute. In the offering line was one who dropped in the lowest acceptable amount, two *leptons*. The smallest coins known at that time, they added up to what we would consider about a quarter-hour's wage or less. She gave out of conviction all the acceptable offering she could scrape together. Of all the people dropping money in the box that day, she alone understood sacrificial giving, and a disregard of worldly value.

Those others who gave pocket change from their abundant resources helped to fund a lavish decoration to Herod's Temple, already quite extravagant in its time. The disciples were impressed, and perhaps a bit proud of what the nation could do for God's glory. Quite likely, in the backs of their minds, they were thinking how they would soon be in control of such a magnificent structure, just as soon as Jesus got the oppressive Jewish government out of the way. Jesus pointed out how utterly unimportant the Temple was in His Kingdom by telling how He knew the whole thing would be reduced to a field of rubble.

They obviously assumed such a thing would be the Second Coming, and the destruction of all things in favor of the New Heaven and New Earth. Jesus immediately addressed that question, and led them gently to the realization that He referred to something they would live to see, which would be far, far from the end of Time. Luke records their question as having two parts: (1) When will it happen, and (2) what should they look for as signs to indicate it was near? Jesus begins by establishing what is *not* a sign of the End. Should He come back during their lifetimes, it won't be necessary for anyone to tell them. They'll know. Nor is a bunch of chaos and strife signal the End, but is merely the standard human condition.

Indeed, nations and kingdoms go to war all the time. Periodically, there are natural calamities: earthquakes, famines and things commonly interpreted as signs in the heavens. Pay them no mind. You'll have a bigger issue on your hands when the authorities start arresting you for your faith in Christ. You can't predict that sort of thing easily and rehearsing your legal defense will only get in the way of what really matters. Human laws simply don't matter in the Kingdom. What matters is the ability to hear the Spirit of God speak, giving you the message that they need to hear. Give no thought to legal consequences but focus all your attention on the message of the gospel.

Don't be surprised when the closest human bonds fail. Don't be surprised when governments decree your execution. We should always expect people to be offended at the otherworldly focus of those who follow Jesus. Jesus uses a phrase which sounds in English like a promise that the disciples would not suffer physically, but He has just said they might die. Rather, the phrase means it's not as if God isn't watching, because He knows so intimately the details of your life; He keeps track of how many hairs are rooted in your scalp. Your scalp should be of far less concern to you than your soul. Seize your souls back from the worldly fears and commit yourself to a spiritual focus regardless of what happens to your flesh.

That's not the same as committing suicide. When the surviving disciples see the siege lines around Jerusalem, it's time to go. This particular city is not eternal. Its destruction is the signal to take that faith and message out into the wider world. When troops come marching into the area of Jerusalem, get away as quickly as possible. Nothing in this world is worth risking your

life if you can escape to keep your witness alive. God has appointed days of wrath on those who reject Him, including the leadership of the Jews. Times will be incredibly tough, and it will probably be hardest on pregnant women and new mothers. The invading troops will not be kind. Anyone who survives the siege will become slaves of Rome. The city was doomed; it would never return to Jewish control under the Law of Moses. The Gentiles would rightly own it until His Return.

Rightly did the disciples see such a disaster as a dark vision. However, the end of the Nation of Israel was not the end of the earth. That's a separate event. Indeed, the prophets had already spoken about it. The End would be the sort of thing which is more than just a slaughter of Jews or other nations. The End comes with war and destruction in the heavens, not just on the earth. It means all humanity will be in turmoil all at once, not just there in Jerusalem. That business of riding into the city on a donkey was merely symbolic. The End will see Jesus riding on the clouds, coming down to possess the whole earth. The end of Jerusalem and Israel is bad news, but the Return of Christ in power is good news.

The End of the World would be too obvious to miss. You won't need signs for that. However, the end of Jerusalem was very near to the disciples that day, and they needed to pay attention to the signs Jesus described – the siege by Roman troops. If they were smart enough to recognize that the fig tree was the first to bud in that land when spring was coming, surely they could figure out when to abandon the city once and for all. Most of them would live to see it. Jesus was dead serious about this. They were to quit worrying about the End Times and worry about carrying His Word until their lives ended by events beyond their control.

Jesus didn't tell them this to depress, but to impress. Folks who let worries of this life take over them are distracted. They spend a lot of time medicating their sorrow, or partying like there is no tomorrow. Let yourselves be eaten with worry over the end of the nation and you'll go down with it. There are already far too many humans who are so focused on this world and what they can know and do by their human capacities. They are completely wedded to this life. Jesus told His disciples to stay in the Spirit. They needed to spend time in praying, seeking to shed their worldly orientation and to adopt the Heavenly frame of reference in anticipation of Heaven adopting them. Only those who break from the cares of this world will stand before Jesus in the Day of Judgment.

To demonstrate what He meant, Jesus stayed focused on His message. For the next few days, He kept up a routine. At night, He and His disciples stayed somewhere on the Mount of Olives, probably at the invitation of some wealthy supporters. At dawn, they trooped down across the Kidron Valley into the Temple grounds. People would gather around Jesus and spend the day listening to His teaching. By this, He showed His willingness to face the Jewish leaders on their own turf, but He was not foolish enough to sleep inside the city where they could kidnap Him and call it an arrest for some imaginary crime. When the time came, arrest is how it would happen, but not until He finished His other work.

Luke 22

It seems necessary to remind ourselves once again that Luke tells his Gospel from the perspective of an educated Gentile. While there is an awareness of Jewish peculiarities, they are

not central to the narrative as they were in Matthew's Gospel. Thus, Luke outlines the final hours of Jesus' life minus a great deal of Jewish detail. One thing which stands clear, though, is that Luke makes obvious the place of earthly national Israel and the reign of Mosaic Law ends once and for all in Christ.

At this point, only one of the disciples understands there will be no revolt, neither by divine miracle nor by insurrection. The Olivet Discourse was the final clarification for him. Judas was never loyal to Jesus Himself, but to a partisan political philosophy which included removing Rome. At first, Jesus seemed the best hope for his nation's long-sought freedom from pagan domination, a liberty to once again serve God wholly and faithfully. There is no reason to doubt Judas' sincere hope on behalf of his nation. By the same token, he quite obviously saw his God through pretty much the same lens as that of the Pharisees, with the primary difference being his hope for a purity of implementation. He was an activist hoping to do that to which the Pharisees merely paid lip service.

It was the day prior to the actual Feast of Unleavened Bread when Judas chose the pragmatic path. If the Pharisees could not be removed, best come to terms with them by offering to bring Jesus into the custody of the national leadership. Jesus had been careful to avoid that until the time was right. As the Passover Lamb Himself, He must fulfill the Law while under the Law, which meant dying on that high and holy day marking the one even on which the identity of Israel was wholly dependent: The Exodus. A Roman could not fail to know about that event, at least as a national legend of the Jews. It remained the single mark of God's favor, of His carefully singling them out of all the nations of the world. While promised long before Moses, it was Moses who was chosen to implement the Covenant as God's agent. Having drained the whole core of spiritual value out of that covenant, it was already dead in the hands of Jewish leaders. They jumped at the chance to catch their number one problem in a quiet place, at night away from the crowds. Judas was faithful to his new commitment, at least.

We take a moment to clarify the timing of these events. Luke is careful to lay out chronological and historical details with an eye to those outside the Jewish frame of reference. Everyone knew Jews, along with many other Near Eastern nations, regarded the new day as beginning at sunset. Judas was the treasurer and would have been sent out beforehand to purchase food for a Passover Meal. During this trip, he could easily have stopped by the office of the Temple Guard and conferred with the captain on duty, who would certainly have summoned any available elders, priests, etc.

On the Day of Preparation, it was common enough to gather for a dinner which included some elements of the Seder. Since Passover was about households and family, these gatherings the night before would be social or professional associates. Jesus sent Peter and John to find the house whose host would have offered to provide a room and the facilities for preparing the food purchased by Judas. They would have typically begun about mid-afternoon.

Because this meal would have placed Jesus and the disciples inside the city walls, Jesus kept some of the arrangements secret from even His disciples. Peter and John had no idea where they were to make sure things were ready, so Jesus gave them a pre-arranged signal, something they would have noticed, since men seldom carried water. That task was always relegated to females. The house to which this unusual man carried this water jug was the place. After

speaking to the hosts of the home, they inspected the settings and began preparing the meal. As this echoes elements of the official Seder the next night, the hour of the meal would mean the group arrived at this house when the first three stars were visible in the darkening sky. How much of this Theophilus might have known, we cannot guess, but Luke seems to assume some familiarity.

At the meal, Jesus noted it was a passionate desire of His to celebrate this last Passover, as some referred to this special meal as part of the Passover, too. He was about to suffer, by which He meant all those awful things He had been describing to them over the past couple of years – arrested, flogged and nailed to a cross. It was the last time He would celebrate this festival, because it was about to reach fulfillment. It was one of those many symbols in the Law of Moses pointing to the higher spiritual realities. The Passover was not so much about the birth of an earthly Israel, but the birth of a Heavenly Kingdom with Jesus as the Lamb who would be sacrificed on the morrow. By saying He would not eat of it any more until it was fulfilled, Jesus pointed directly to the New Testament practice of communion. Thus, in the next few moments He redefined the meaning of certain elements of the Passover Meal to mean something new in the New Kingdom.

Luke passes quickly over much of the unique Jewish meaning of the symbolic meal to explain to Theophilus whence the practice of communion came. In the Preparation feast, they would eat the meal first and then walk through parts of the Seder. There was the common cup, to be shared among those present. It was the last wine Jesus would taste until the New Wine of the Kingdom. The unleavened bread of purity was His body, shortly to be given for His Kingdom of disciples. They were to celebrate in this fashion as a remembrance of His sacrifice. The final cup was the call to prepare for the future of God's promises. He made it a covenant of His blood, shed for the sins of the world. By these words, the Old Covenant was gone.

These symbols would take on shape and meaning for the disciples after Christ ascended and the Holy Spirit came. Until then, there were a few more items to which He must attend. First was His betrayal. It was prophesied, and the traitor was present at that table. How sad, for while Judas alone understood that Jesus had no intention of changing the political order, he understood nothing else. Judas didn't betray simply his Rabbi, but his God. Luke mentions that they discussed who the traitor could be since any arrest of Jesus would surely include them all.

This created a dispute, but there were many such disputes among the Twelve. Luke also mentions their debate about which position each would hold in the coming royal court of their Messiah. Jesus turned this discussion on its head, pointing out the very idea was contrary to the way the Kingdom operated. Gentile rulers were referred to as serving the needs of the people, even as they might run roughshod over their subjects' lives. In the Kingdom, serving is greatness. He backed His assertion by pointing out how they all called Him Master, and waited on Him as personal servants, which was part of being any great teacher's disciples. Yet, His very existence among them was as a servant, preparing to suffer the ultimate indignity on their behalf. Because they had followed Him faithfully, even to the last moment, He would indeed grant them authority. But it would be a Kingdom of servants, and they would rule as chief servants with Him as the Lord Servant. Their service would make them fit to judge their own nation, but they would do so in the Spiritual Kingdom above.

The obvious head of the group, second to Jesus at this point, was Peter, as he was the eldest. Jesus addressed him as the leader, noting Satan had demanded – and received – permission to sift the whole group. It would be painful, earthshaking for them, but the chaff would be removed. Jesus had already prayed for Peter, receiving the promise that he would bring them all back into service by his example and leadership. Naturally, Peter affirmed his commitment to Jesus, expecting to share the fate of his Lord. That was not to be. Even after affirming that He expected Peter to keep the faith, He described how Peter would fail. Before dawn, Peter would thrice deny even knowing Him. Apparently, the Kingdom would turn a great many more things on their heads.

The old customs of the Jews regarding preachers and their care would come to an end. In the Kingdom, His servants could expect no help from the world. They did well by faith within the Covenant system, but that covenant would die shortly. Now they must make plans to support themselves. They would need the tools of the world to make their way in it. They would need to carry purses, supplies, and perhaps even prepare to defend themselves. This gave a hint of not being too worried about human laws, since such laws would hardly favor them. Ownership of weapons was illegal under Roman law. Carrying any knife bigger than a small kitchen peeler was viewed with suspicion. It was likely professional fishermen might get away with bending the rules, but two of them that night were carrying longer knives, technically illegal. This was almost surely the result of not just preparing the Passover Meal, but preparing for trouble. Jesus had seemed so cautious about things up until now.

Jesus noted the prophecies said He would be considered a crook. It was to signal how God's truth was offensive to the mass of humanity, even His own people. They had long since moved so far away, there was no path back in this world, but only in that above. In this case, Jesus was in the company of men who had long considered how they might go about overthrowing the current Jewish government, and perhaps the Roman government, too. While it would happen in a symbolic sense, such was not at all what they were thinking. It would have been most likely a humorous moment when Jesus notes two of them bear illegal weapons, saying what would be in modern parlance, "That'll do it."

Jesus could easily have fled. Judas left with little more than a good guess where he would find Jesus once he rendezvoused with the Temple Guard and Roman troops. Only if Jesus remained consistent with His habits would Judas avoid looking the fool. However, Jesus had faced everything up to now with equanimity. He refused to act from fear. On the other hand, knowing His trials and death were prophesied did not make it easy. He was still a man. They had gone to pray there at the foot of Mount Olivet quite often. If ever He needed that time with the Father, it was this very night. The arrest was at hand, and Jesus knew He had to surrender.

He led His remaining disciples across the Kidron Valley into the place they always went. To all appearances, it was a night like any other night so far. The disciples did not understand that this was the moment of crisis. Jesus warned them to pray they avoid too harsh a trial. Then He walked away some distance and prayed. Jesus needed very much to hear from His Father one more time the utter necessity of this awful path, this cup of bitter poison. The Father's response was not deliverance from the sorrowful task, but an angel to bring an extra measure of strength for the task. So great was the agony that sweat poured off Jesus, much as the blood would in just a few hours. This was His last night to pray in this place.

Luke shows the paradox of spiritual crisis being so unobtrusive in the material world. Everything was about to change irrevocably for all Creation, yet the only mark on earth was a damp spot on the ground and dim memories in sleepy minds. When the time had come, Jesus was ready. The battle was over, and all that was left was carrying out the formalities. The disciples missed the whole thing. Luke tells us that Jesus found them sleeping because they were too burdened. The heaviness of their eyelids was a symbol of heavy minds not yet set free by the Spirit to understand. They knew nothing except Jesus scolding them for what came naturally, saying something about an awful trial.

Every trial begins with an arrest. The ignorant dreams of the disciples about a kingdom on earth were about to be taken away, even as their Master was being taken away by a mixed mob of troops and officials. It was truly overkill to bring such a massive group, and Judas looked ridiculous with his effusive greeting of his former Rabbi. Jesus mocked the whole thing as unnecessary. So was the response of His disciples, for it was too late to fight. The battle had been utterly spiritual in nature and was over. If they fought now, all of them would be dead quickly, saving nothing, except the Jewish and Roman governments a lot of trouble. Jesus had to ensure He died for no earthly justification at all. Wounding a few hapless human pawns was pointless. Jesus demanded the disciples desist fighting and let it be.

Jesus healed the wounded man – such an awful threat He was! To the massive throng which came out to arrest Him, He ridiculed their show of force. What did they fear that they couldn't arrest Him in the His daily teaching sessions in the Temple, right there in their laps? Well, they would have their brief hour of power over Him. Again, the sense of paradox was excruciating. They felt so very threatened only because He needed no earthly power to destroy them. So, to feel safe, they had to side with Satan to keep what they were so sure God had given them. All the while, they had no idea what God had actually given. Not only had they missed entirely the vast spiritual riches, but they had also corrupted the word of Moses and lost the rich earthly blessings available through the Law. And because Jesus dared call attention to this, they wanted Him dead in the worst way.

Brave Peter, who swung the blade in Jesus' defense, had now passed the moment of his human bravery. Even as it faded away, he still had the courage to at least tail the arrest party from a distance. The most probable route was down the Kidron to the Hinnom Valley, then around below the old Pool of Siloam, and up the western side through the Tyropoeon Valley. The Residence of the High Priest was just off the street running up that shallow draw. The night was cool at that season, so while the officials and their prisoner met in the open portico at the entrance of the house, the staff clustered in the yard below around a fire. Peter was among them; someone recognized him, and then someone else. In the idle chatter, his Galilean accent gave him away. Each time, Peter denied with increasing vehemence knowing Jesus.

The moment had come for Peter, and the rooster crowed. A glance from Jesus, standing as the center of attention in the entryway above, was all it took to remind Peter what Jesus had warned. Peter wept bitterly and ran away. Here was yet another spiritual paradox. Among men, he was the worst, a traitor to his Master. On the spiritual level, it was simply a matter of stripping away the last shred of human dignity so he would be ready to know the depth of his need before the Lord. Until that moment, Peter was not yet ready to use.

Things got worse for Jesus, though. As they waited for the sun to rise, the soldiers holding Him beat and mocked Him. That the officials permitted this only served to indict them as criminals. At long last, daylight shone. Jesus was brought before the officially convened Sanhedrin. They asked Him whether He claimed to be the Messiah. Wrong question; they were not competent to judge the matter. If they were actually to entertain the question, He could prove He was the Messiah. However, they had no real interest in the matter, wishing only a pretext to turn Him over to Rome, since they could not lawfully order His execution. That would only serve His plans, since He was just a step or two from taking His throne in Heaven.

They seized upon this as the one thing they felt was within their purview. Did He claim to be the Son of God? His answer was an idiom, roughly equivalent to, "You wouldn't think to ask if you weren't already convinced in your hearts it was true." Because they were spiritually blind and hardened to conviction, it was like handing them the one thing they needed. In their minds, He had blasphemed in their presence. There was no further need for legal proceedings; He had confessed.

The vast gulf between the eyes of the flesh and the eyes of the Spirit could not be more obvious. In the former, what happened that night was probably routine in many ways. It would be forgotten. Indeed, many have denied the story ever since it took place. Sadly, many deny the spiritual power of the story by overly embellishing it with a very human grade of holiness. Luke left out so many details because what really mattered would be hard to explain in words. Only a spiritual mind could receive the unspeakable weight of that moment in the garden. For Jesus, the hardest part was already past. He was ready for what would follow.

Luke 23

An educated Roman would have observed a good more detail here than meets the eye of modern readers. At the same time, Luke does not linger long over this portion of the story. He dryly states the facts, unlike the pious exaggerations so popular today. As previously noted, the most important work in the Spirit was already done. Now the events played out as mere formalities.

The Sanhedrin wasted no time in bringing Jesus before the Roman Governor first thing that morning after His trial before them. Hardly a single leader of the Jewish nation was absent, so committed they were to gain a death sentence. Luke has taken pains to show that Jesus never challenged Roman authority directly as it was exercised at that time, even defending taxation. Nor did He suggest anything which would incite violence against the Jewish officials. While He did attack Talmudic teachings and proclamations, and undercut the leadership's claims to guardianship of Moses' Law, He would never suggest a violent uprising. Rather, He continually offered them a chance to get right. Clearly, they would rather be wrong, so long as it maintained the status quo.

Their charges were designed to warrant a Roman sentence, since Rome cared nothing about internal disputes among Jews. Given the well-known contempt the Jewish leaders had for Rome, this whole scene is rich with sarcasm. It's hard to translate Pilate's incredulous query in English: "You are King of the Jews?" In this context, Jesus' answer would approximate "no

contest," since His definition of kingship is hardly what is implied by the charge. It was painfully obvious that this whole thing was a bad joke, and Pilate attempted to dismiss the case.

It turned out Pilate had one good escape: The accused fell under another jurisdiction. Things had been quite tense between Herod's heirs and Rome's governors, but Pilate seized the excuse to pass this hot potato. The official palace for Herod Antipas was in Caesarea, and he often holed up in the Fortress Machaerus in Perea. Wearing the window dressing of Jewish observance in keeping with his father's conceit for maintaining legitimacy, Antipas was in his residence on the northwest side of town. Thus, it was a short march to his court. The opportunity thrilled him; he had never seen this colleague of John the Baptist. That Jesus had no fear of him and remained silent and serene might have been troubling to Antipas, but he turned the whole thing into a big joke. He mockingly had Jesus robed in a royal garment, and then allowed his bodyguards to rough Him up. While Antipas declined jurisdiction, he was flattered by this act of official recognition, and it soothed tensions with Pilate.

By now late in the morning, Jesus was back before Pilate. The Governor could not find legal grounds for execution, but perhaps a beating would teach the accused to behave better. That would not pacify the Jewish leaders. When Pilate proposed releasing Jesus for the customary seasonal good-will gesture, they demanded someone who really was dangerous, named Barabbas. Pilate tried again, but the leaders had primed the crowd for a riot if Jesus was not condemned. Pilate finally gave in, but his edict was framed in a way making it clear this was their demand, not the demand of Roman justice.

With all the abuse and lack of sleep, it's no surprise Jesus needed help parading through the city with the crossbeam. The unlucky fellow who happened to be coming into town on the main road by which the public procession was heading out was Simon of Cyrene. Luke alone mentions the entourage that had followed Jesus during His ministry. Their wailing drew a caution from Jesus. Having already faced His death the night before, He warned them that they should save their mourning for themselves. That was a reference to the coming destruction of Jerusalem that He had prophesied. He quotes a common parable of that day which meant they had not seen anything yet. This injustice afflicted upon Him was pretty minor compared to what was down the road a few decades.

Jesus thus paints His human sorrow as nothing extraordinary. It's difficult to imagine a more pointed contrast between the spiritual and worldly measures of things. On a human scale, this was just another typical act of government brutality, for both Rome and the Jews. What really mattered here was not what could be seen with human eyes, but with spiritual eyes. Jesus was guilty of no crimes, but certainly had stirred some resentment against the Jewish leaders. What really mattered was the eternal injustice – someone sinless had to die for all sins. If anyone should weep, it is we who are guilty of those sins, for we are the ones who demanded His death in that sense.

Standard military practice placed four soldiers with each condemned man. The soldiers were allowed to strip the victims of all property on their persons. Jesus' escorts used the typical means for dividing five items between four men. He was the center of attention. His lack of resistance, His pronouncement of forgiveness, and His whole calm demeanor stood in marked contrast to everything around Him. The Jewish leaders rubbed it in by sarcastic mocking, taken

up by the soldiers, as well. For Rome, a critical element in all this was making a very public example. Thus, crucifixion took place on the main highway coming into the city. A sign in Latin, along with the two most common languages used locally, indicated the crime which brought the sentence. One of the other victims could not resist a little mocking as he died. The other was not so hardened, and sought forgiveness and favor, because his soul was not deceived by the circumstances.

Jesus promised the penitent criminal he would see Paradise, a term commonly used to mean Heaven. Luke uses Roman notations for time, which begins counting the hours at sunrise. Thus, at high noon the sky went dark. This persisted until mid-afternoon. Luke mentions in passing that the Temple Veil was torn in two. Educated Romans might know this veil was too thick for humans to rip, so Luke's point is that this was one of many miraculous attestations. Further, anyone who read the Old Testament would know this was the final break in the power of the Law. God Himself opened His throne room to all, granting access to those who come through His Son, instead of through the Law.

The scene on the Cross was less glorious for awhile. In the midst of complete human failure, Jesus retained the authority to dismiss His human life. The attending centurion recognized authority when he saw it and knew whence it came. The mixed crowd of onlookers was apparently forced to agree with the officer's assessment, striking their upper chests as a symbol of sorrow for what they had seen as they walked away. Meanwhile, Jesus' entourage stood silent at a distance, staying much longer.

Typically, the Roman soldiers would remain in place until their victim was finally dead. They would take turns on the night watch, the point being to prevent any rescue. Hardy men might linger for days. One among the Jewish leaders there, a member of the Sanhedrin who had voted to spare Jesus, was Joseph of Arimathea. Luke tells us this man was one of those who had understood the prophecies rightly and had anticipated the real Kingdom of God. It took great political courage to seek to honor Jesus and His message in this atmosphere. Seeing Jesus was dead already, Joseph requested the body for burial. His request was granted. Joseph followed Eastern rituals typical as far away as Egypt, winding the body tightly in linen strips, normally held in place with heavily scented gum Arabic. He then placed the body in his own tomb, as yet unused. This paints the image of a wealthy man who could afford one of the few burial plots left in the city only because he paid the price to have it hand carved into a rock face. It was common for pious Jews to desire burial near the Temple. The space Joseph had reserved for himself he gave to His Lord.

This was the day before a Sabbath. The women from Jesus' entourage were keeping track of the whole process, but it seems they weren't directly involved in Joseph's efforts. They did happen to see the actual burial location and tomb layout. We can safely guess some of these women had access to property and wealth, because they went back and began preparing what would have been rather lavish burial perfumes. Naturally, they stayed mostly inside their houses during the Sabbath following.

Luke 24

The women waited until just before dawn Sunday morning to bring their funeral perfumes. Since they knew exactly where the tomb was, including precisely how the body was laid in it, there was no chance they were mistaken; that particular tomb was open again. Worse, the body was gone. They had no idea what was going on, nor what to do, nor how to find the new resting place. It was time to panic.

All the more so were they flustered by the appearance of two angels. To their eyes, it looked like very important men, but their garments projected light with a sparkle. The women rightly fell on their faces, since clothing that competed with the rising sun for brilliance could only mark the presence of powerful holy beings.

From the very first word, the whole post-Crucifixion message echoed with a note of reproof. Everyone had been exposed repeatedly to the teaching of Jesus' death and resurrection. That their minds dismissed it before the Cross is almost understandable, because their whole frame of reference excluded the proper understanding of the Scriptures. Their minds had been held in prison to a badly corrupted message. Jesus during His ministry had offered no excuse for the disciples not seeing this. Even less so now, since it had happened as He promised.

He had promised He would indeed die. He had also promised He would not stay dead but would resurrect. Further, He noted it would be the third day after His death. Sunday was that third day. If they expected to find Jesus, they needed to search among the living, for He was alive. The angels reminded them that they should have known all this, even quoting Jesus' very pointed words on the subject. Now it all made sense.

The women returned in a hurry to where everyone was staying. Lacking the divine reminder these women experienced, their audience was puzzled; they simply could not get their heads around this news. The women were insistent enough that Peter had to investigate. Luke offers more visual detail, indicating that Peter himself was the source of this part of the narrative. The mummy-wrapping case was still in the tomb, but there was no body inside it. Perhaps the gummed strips had caved in where the torso had been, as nothing supported them. The body had not been moved in the conventional sense, and Peter didn't know what to make of it.

The next part of the story must have come from Cleopas, who was involved. He and one other man were walking that afternoon from Jerusalem about a two-hour hike to Emmaus. It was late that same Sunday afternoon and the day's events and stories had confused just about everyone. On their walk, the two men discussed these things. The resurrected Jesus joined them on the way, but they didn't recognize Him, apparently because Jesus felt it was in their best interest. Playing ignorant, He asked them what the reason was for their intense and somber discussion.

They were utterly surprised He seemed unaware of the news which had stirred the entire city. They spoke of Jesus of Nazareth as a mighty prophet of God, His arrest and trial, and crucifixion. They had considered Jesus the one hope for their nation. Now these three days since His execution, they had heard some women had seen angels and His body disappeared from His grave.

Again, we have the same message of how they had all missed the point. Instead of recalling His previous words, He started from scratch, explaining how the Messiah had been promised from

the beginning of Creation. His death and resurrection were required to fulfill all the prophecies. For the whole two hours He laid out the clear thread of promise throughout the Scriptures.

It was not merely common courtesy that they invited this stranger to stay the night at their house, but they must have been moved and hungry for more of this teaching. Clearly this man was a rabbi, so they honored him, letting him play host at the meal. As soon as this stranger had offered the ritual blessing and thanks, broken the bread and passed it to them, their eyes were opened. It was Jesus Himself! Just as quickly as they recognized Him, He vanished into thin air. Tossing aside all caution, they ran out into the night, determined to report this to the disciples in Jerusalem.

Apparently, they weren't the only ones with a story of seeing Jesus. After these two related their experience, the whole place was tense. The transition from hoping for a renewed Davidic kingdom, to realizing that could not happen because their Master was executed, to the disappearance of the body and all these confused tales of seeing Jesus alive again – not everyone had fully experienced the dramatic shift required by this concept of a spiritual Kingdom of Heaven. More, this new concept was supposed to be the original, the message of the Law and Prophets, but twisted by generations of soulless scholarship in pursuit of man's wisdom.

In that moment, Jesus Himself materialized in the big middle of their debate. There are no words to express the sense of shock and confusion. He again reproved them for operating in the flesh. Inviting them to examine Him visually and with their hands, He first made it clear this was no apparition. To drive that lesson home, He ate some fish and honey, something ghosts can't do. Their minds were spinning.

Then He called for them to remember what He had told them before the Cross. His teaching had been a bizarre departure from three centuries of Hellenistic, materialistic nonsense. There was simply no place in their minds to hang the truth, no way to process such a radical reorientation. As they struggled to find a new mental footing, He explained again how this was the original, ancient understanding of the Law and Prophets. Instead of bits and pieces scattered over weeks and days, He laid out for them in a single lesson the more accurate understanding. Since the false Messianic hopes were dead and gone, there was at least now some room to absorb this new-yet-ancient teaching.

Wrapping up, He summarized how it was necessary He suffer and die, and then rise again on the third day. The ancient mission of Israel was now their mission. However, now it was no longer prophecy of a coming Messiah, but a revelation of the Messiah now present. Thus, all nations could be called to repentance, because sins could be forgiven without all the specialized rituals. Having seen it all for themselves, they would have a message which could not be shaken, so they were to preach to the whole world. The only unfinished business was the single unfulfilled promise of the Father, to bring upon them the power to carry out this message. Not by their own power, but they would do so by divine Presence in their individual lives, the same Spirit which had been in Jesus all this time. They were to wait in Jerusalem until that came about.

Luke skips over some two months of narrative. The next scene is that last day when Jesus would walk on the earth before The End. Luke sets the stage for the second part of his Gospel.

The disciples follow their risen Lord out of the city, to the Mount of Olives. Just over the peak, out of view of the Temple, Jesus stood before them near Bethany. Lifting His hands, He blessed them, and then levitated up into the clouds. Returning to the city, they obeyed instructions to wait in Jerusalem. The time was passed joyfully, worshipping daily in the Temple. It must have been completely puzzling to the Sanhedrin and Roman officials. There was no threat of rebellion, but the spirit of the group had never been livelier.

John

The Early Church scholars unanimously name Jesus' cousin, John son of Zebedee, as the author of this Gospel, probably published around 90 AD. It was surely composed in Greek by someone with a good schoolboy's grasp of grammar, but not born to the language. Yet this mind is very well read, educated in a different sense than is commonly assumed. This all makes good sense when we see it as John, the youngest of the Twelve, member of a prosperous Galilean fishing family that also owned a house in Jerusalem.

John and Jesus were related through their mothers, who were sisters. We find John more perceptive than the other disciples on the one level that mattered most: the spiritual. John's Gospel is loaded with comments on what Jesus was thinking at one time or another and he was clearly the closest friend to the Lord, the favorite. The narrative never mentions of the author by name but refers to the self-effacing "disciple whom Jesus loved."

That's because the point of this Gospel is to ensure everyone is forced to confront Jesus' claim to divinity. While there may be an attempt to answer Gnostic heresies, against which we know John struggled much in his ministry, that would be secondary. Rather, John fills in something missing from the other Gospels; they had been around for some time. Indeed, he assumes his readers have been exposed to the narrative outline of Jesus' life, and seeks to explain more thoroughly why He can be understood only if we assume He is God incarnate. At the same time, we must understand what sort of man that would be. The secondary objective is to compel the reader to an otherworldly viewpoint, to recognize that you cannot begin to understand anything Jesus taught without embracing the mystical viewpoint.

The narrative is thematic, with brief episodes pulled together out of chronological order to make the point. In a true biblical sense, we need not have a precise chronology of Jesus' life. Far more important it is that we understand just who He was and what He accomplished. John seems to thumb his nose at pedantic obsessions with mere events. It makes an odd combination to use such a basic level of Greek to explain something far above the most esoteric ruminations of high Greek philosophers. It makes no difference what you know, can do, or what power you have in this world; if you don't know Jesus, you are just a fool.

John is aware his primary audience would be a Greek-speaking world with little familiarity of Hebrew culture and history aside from Scripture itself. Yet John was intensely Hebraic in his worldview and sought to bring his readers the essential elements of that outlook. Many have said Paul was the ultimate bridge between a minor Jewish sect and a faith that conquered the world. Academically, Paul is head and shoulders above all others. Yet John was no less

intelligent, forming the other edge of the conquering sword of the Spirit. Outliving all the other disciples by some decades, John maintained the witness of the otherworldly focus. His was an intensely spiritual authority, a spiritual man in a very materialistic world. There are no parables, but much of Jesus' teaching about Himself. John thus manages to use the parabolic method of teaching by overloading the Greek language with an impossible task, making it obvious his readers must see beyond the words with eyes of the Spirit.

John 1

John opens his Gospel with a powerfully moving effort to explain the nature of Jesus in a Greek tongue ill-suited to the task. He takes advantage of established common figures of speech and loads them with new meanings. The result is an unconventional but fascinating work of art, rather like using subtle shades of clay to paint a monotone picture with high relief, or using thick gobs of paint for sculpture. If you cannot read it with spiritual insight, it may make some sort of sense, but you'll be forever lost in the wordy details and miss the whole point. Over-analyzing the simple but elegant Greek grammar serves little purpose.

John's first paragraph is both an honest statement plus gentle mocking of the high intellectual phrasing of great works of philosophy. He puts forth a fundamental principle of understanding – The Word – using a term typically referring to reason and study (logos). Yet this is no mere principle, but a Person. This Word is both beside God and is God at the same time. He was always there, was the Agent of Creation, and the very essence of Life. Further, He is the essence of what it means to be enlightened, because He is divine enlightenment personified. Nothing has the power to dim His light. In other words, we do not somehow reason our way to Him; He reveals Himself. To someone versed in the assumptions of Greek philosophy, this is preposterous, gobbledygook.

To place the Word in real time and space, John describes the other John, the Baptist, also a cousin of Jesus. His life had one purpose: to establish himself as a credible witness of the living Revelation. Unlike some Eastern religions, there was no claim this prophet was somehow merged mystically into the godhead, nor some incredibly wise man with special enlightenment like a Greek philosopher. He was simply a servant of the Light. Further, everyone in this world is in darkness, and the only light there may be in any human mind comes from this Revelation, the source of all intelligence.

He was a human life in this very world He created. Yet, all the world seemed unable to grasp who He was. Indeed, He came to His own special nation of people, and they rejected Him. At the same time, anyone who somehow comes to receive His revelation can join Him as family relations of God. These who receive Him can approach God as His own dear children, but only by coming through the Living Revelation of God and embracing His teaching. These become Children of God, not in the sense of blood kinship, and not based on some human decision, but by God's choice.

So, John asserts that this Divine Principle became a real human, walking around on the earth like other humans. Yet anyone with eyes to see could discern His glorious origin was God, because He was so completely full of grace and truth from birth. This is the paradox of God made human, and John the Baptist spoke of that paradox. He announced this Word was born

and called to minister later in time than John, but was his senior, not by right of birth, but by right of pre-existence. So mighty and obvious was His grace, His divine power and favor, that it just overwhelmed those who knew Him. Moses was certainly the one who brought the highest human knowledge of God via the Law, but the heart and spiritual knowledge of God came through this Revelation, Jesus Christ.

It is not possible for any human eyes to see God. What Moses taught was surely the clearest explanation of what God requires of men in their flesh. But that does not reveal God Himself. To really know God as a Person requires you know His only Son. He is now residing in God's very presence, yet what we know of Him is the fullest revelation of God.

The writer manages to discount both the meaningless mysticism of Eastern religions and the rational assumptions of Western philosophers. Both were quite popular in John's day. Instead, John insists that the real truth is altogether grounded in the reality of concrete events in history, yet rooted in the Heavens, completely out of reach of human reason. This sets the tone for the rest of this Gospel. John's message confronts a world which would exclude the claim of Christ by closing men's minds, chaining them to a fallen human logic that cannot grasp spiritual truth. Having outlined his message, John proceeds to explain the details.

Jews had spread across the Mediterranean Basin long before Jesus was born. Through them, the basic claims of the Old Testament were broadly familiar to the Gentiles in the Roman Empire. It should not surprise us to find the message of John the Baptist had already spread well ahead of the first Christian missions. Taking advantage of that familiarity, John puts the story in its proper context: John the Baptist was the Herald of Christ. What was this famous man's message about Christ?

Those who claimed expertise in the Law of Moses investigated John's ministry and message. A delegation of big shots from the Temple came to where John was preaching and asked him to explain. The Baptist refused to be pigeon-holed into their legal framework. John was not the Messiah, and claimed no other office defined by their system. At the same time, he claimed to fulfill the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, as the herald of the Messiah. Ancient Eastern heralds would warn of the approach of the ruling potentate, demanding the roads be improved, and folks along the path make ready to celebrate his visit appropriately. If they failed, whole cities could be executed. Since it was obvious John was not being literal, nor was Isaiah, the implication was clearly demanding readiness of another sort – personal repentance.

The leaders from the Temple were not impressed. They pressed John to explain his ministry, implying he might be doing something illegal. John reminded them that baptism was a mere ritual, folks getting wet. By itself, it meant nothing because it changed nothing. However, the point of this ritual was to raise awareness that the Messiah was alive already. Whatever office they might want to imply John claimed, the Messiah was far higher, for the Messiah was God's Son. John was not qualified to serve as a Gentile slave in His court. Naturally, John implies the delegation was no better than he, since they would hardly be able to recognize the Messiah if He stood right next to them. We are told this exchange took place far from Jerusalem, as if the city was unworthy of its Lord.

Instead, the Messiah appears where John is ministering. The next day, as Jesus was walking nearby, John performs his duty in publicly recognizing the Messiah as "the Lamb of God who

takes away the sin of the world!” Our writer makes a point of noting this was not about Jews alone, but the whole of humanity. The Baptist further clarifies by pointing out, while being older than Jesus, and having built a significant following already, this One would eclipse all of that because He was eternal. John had the normal human doubts about the Messiah’s identity before that moment but knew his work would draw Him out. It didn’t matter what John the Baptist knew in the flesh about his cousin, but what God revealed through the calling on John’s spirit.

When John repeated his declaration later, two of his own disciples left him to follow the One he called “Lamb of God.” The focus of the story shifts with them, for John clearly seemed to expect it. The men make it clear from the start that they want to follow Jesus, calling Him Rabbi. They also went and coaxed others to join them, referring to Him as the Anointed, promised of God. We learn one of them was Andrew, who fetched his brother, Simon. We are told where Simon got his nickname, Peter. Apparently, these men agreed to take up the job of hosting their new rabbi, and He prepared to go with them back home to Galilee. As He and His new entourage left, He picked up Philip, who brought along his friend, Nathanael.

This last fellow was under a fig tree when Philip fetched him. John doesn’t explain the significance, but it was common knowledge that a man could disappear completely in the shade of a weeping fig tree, since the foliage formed a thick curtain. Nathanael was dubious of any Messiah coming out of Nazareth, since the prophecies spoke of Bethlehem. Readers would have known Jesus had been born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth. Philip insisted such questions would be answered simply by meeting this One. Indeed, as he approached, Jesus noted Nathanael was a true Israelite, a man who had nothing to hide. This would have raised a chuckle in the audience, since Jews were typically clannish and secretive among Gentiles. Still, Nathanael realized this Jesus knew something of his character (others would say Nathanael was blunt to the point of rudeness). This convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah, indeed, for He knew the hearts of men He had never met.

Many assume wrongly that Jesus was saying Nathanael was too easily convinced. Rather, He was telling Nathanael to prepare an open heart to receive a great many more miracles, that his faith would find a very firm root in overwhelming evidence. While still addressing Nathanael, Jesus switched to the plural, noting that they would all see the angels themselves running errands for Him. This would be significant in the literal sense but meant far more. Jesus the man would be the very focus of God’s activity from here on out. Everything it meant from ancient times to seek God’s favor was about to change completely. This was the climax, the whole point of Israel’s existence. John the Baptist was His Herald, indeed, but only because Israel had failed at the task, and would not have recognized her Lord. That time had passed, and the entire world would be called on to see Him, and know He was the Son of God.

John 2

John is careful to select a small sample of Jesus’ miracles, and specifically calls them “signs” (*shmeia*) – not so much acts of wonder or mighty power, but pointers and indicators. This blends them in with other symbolic acts, pointing to a spiritual truth. It’s not so much a matter of what Jesus did but what it meant.

Nathanael, who had blurted out his low opinion of Nazareth, knew what he was talking about. He was from Cana, just a few miles from there. Nazareth seems to have been a mean and nasty little village from hints we gain in Scripture. Just a few days into His ministry, Jesus attended a wedding in Cana, to which He, His entourage, and His family had been invited. We can only guess what John's readers might know about Jewish weddings, but this was obviously a big affair in a little town. Most people would know a Jewish wedding feast lasted a week or so, hosted by the groom as a sort of housewarming for his new bride brought home for the first time. We get the picture this was a rather large house, with a lot of guests and much at stake socially, so that it all must come off well. It would not stretch the imagination to think Nathanael, the hometown boy, was closely involved in this social occasion.

This is also the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. As with any Jewish mother, ambitious for her first-born son, she brought to His attention a significant problem, and a chance to show what a bigshot He was. Embarrassingly, the wine had almost run out, and the feast was not quite over. Among Jews, the bride's parents were known to sue the groom's family if things didn't turn out well. Would Jesus bail out the groom? Surely He could get His wealthy supporters to cover this need and show Himself as social mover and shaker. The exchange clearly indicates Jesus did not do what His mother wished. First, He said something indicating her wishes did not match His Father's plans, using a form of address and responding in a way which drew distance between them. Playing political games and building influence was not the way; dying on the Cross was His hour.

Resigned to His attitude but persistent in her hopes, Mary advised the servants, pressing Him to do it His way. We get the picture Mary had some vested authority here in this social affair, and it almost seems Jesus is the guest of honor, because it falls to Him to do something. So, He slyly picks out the ceremonial water pots, part of the Jewish obsession about ritual cleanness, and tells the servants to refill them completely. These were always just inside the courtyard gates of a large home. After filling with water, they were to draw some out and present it to the master of ceremonies. This man tasted it and made a joke about saving the best for last, when it's usually down to vinegar grade stuff, since everybody was by then tipsy. In the end, nobody but the servants had any idea what happened, along with the disciples of Jesus. The Son of God was hardly going to do things man's way, and certainly had no interest in seeking fame and influence. He had another purpose in performing this sign.

The miraculous nature of the event reinforced the disciples' belief. John points out rather bluntly that Jesus did not do anything miraculous before this, shooting holes in spurious stories of Jesus performing signs as a child. His glory as God's Son was not previously manifested. They didn't linger at Cana, and Jesus instead established His base at Capernaum. No doubt this kept Mary from cooking up any more political opportunities for Jesus, because it was away from her social circle in the Nazareth area. Then John jumps from the start of Jesus' ministry to nearly the end of it, pulling in the story about cleansing the Temple to make an important point about Jesus' lack of interest in Jewish politics.

Indeed, running the priest's corrupt bazaar out of the Temple grounds was the last thing to endear Jesus to the Jewish leaders. He pointed out their greed bluntly, but also their casual dismissal of Gentiles, for whom that part of the Temple precincts had been designed. Instead of coming to find the One True God, non-Jews were confronted with a notorious racket. John notes

that he and his fellow disciples eventually figured out what this was about, regarding the prophecy that the Messiah would be zealous for the original purpose of the Temple. Of course, the leaders did pay some lip service to such piety, so they asked Him to show some miraculous sign to establish His legal right as a prophet to stir up trouble.

In answer to the leader's smart-aleck query, Jesus threw them a puzzle. He spoke of something obviously symbolic, connecting to Himself the purpose of the Temple as the place where men meet with God. Any decent rabbi would have recognized the symbolism, but these leaders of the nation were being obtuse. Jesus dared them to take His life, because He had the power to rise again on His own. Indeed, He prophesied they would do so, and on the third day He would live again. There's no reason we are forced to assume that they missed His point, though they did use it to mock Him later. They showed all too clearly the focus of their hearts and minds, perhaps pointedly rejecting His symbolic thrust. Professing to know nothing of this spiritual business of God in men, they noted the Temple building, which mattered so very much to them, was so hard won, and took longer to build than He had lived. Could the thing He might do in three days really replace their historic efforts? This Temple had been God's focal point of favor on Israel all this time and Jesus wanted to take that away?

Only later did the disciples figure out what Jesus had been saying. It moved them to a commitment not of this world. During that last Passover, Jesus performed many miracles and a great many people took their first steps of faith from seeing them. However, they didn't quite understand how God wanted His Son to operate. He avoided giving Himself to the momentum of the crowds. From the first of His ministry to the last, He knew better than to trust what man could accomplish. He was the Son of God and didn't need human methods. No one had to tell Him crowds were fickle and shallow, and that rulers were seldom the least bit interested in those they ruled. Jesus wanted no part of that, for He had come to give His life for the world.

John 3

The Apostle John is almost militant in his assertion that mysticism is the way to understand Ultimate Truth. Ancient Hebrew culture maintained a pervasive otherworldly awareness. By the time Jesus was born, this had been almost totally lost among Jewish rabbis. So deeply had their minds had become infected by Hellenistic rationalism that they never saw the spiritual element underlying the entire Old Testament. As John writes for an even more Hellenistic audience, he brings hard to bear upon their minds the testimony of just how utterly different the realm of the Spirit was from the world they thought they knew. He shows how this teaching arose directly from the mouth of Jesus, who struggled to address His own nation's need to recover that lost ground of understanding.

This message of embracing spiritual things could hardly be promoted by using worldly means. Jesus rejected the political methods of His own day, easily recognized even now. John relates how a very powerful politician comes to Jesus during the one time both were free of other concerns, so that a serious private discussion can take place. Nicodemus was a member of the Pharisee Party, having risen to the Sanhedrin. It was the Pharisee ideology that was particularly worldly and rational, utterly lacking in anything except a lip service to mystical truths. Yet, in the depth of this intellectual darkness, this man knew there could be only one explanation for

the signs Jesus performed in public: Jesus operated in the power of Jehovah. It was His teachings which Nicodemus had trouble reconciling with all he had learned of such things in his long life.

Jumping straight to the heart of the matter, Jesus challenged Nicodemus to consider things from a different set of assumptions. He said, in essence, no man can expect to understand God without a spiritual viewpoint. Nicodemus stumbles over the language, but that is precisely the point. Ultimate truth is beyond human language and can only be addressed in symbols. The chosen symbol here is a new birth, a birth of the Spirit within man. The flesh cannot achieve an understanding of spiritual things; only a spiritual nature can deal with such things. Jesus then uses the image of wind, a common symbol for the Spirit of God in Hebrew literature. Men of mere flesh do well to perceive merely the effects of spiritual power – such as signs and miracles – but have no idea of the source or purpose of them. Every person who has received this rebirth is likely to puzzle those who remain born merely of flesh.

Nicodemus had no basis for such an understanding. It was a mild rebuke Jesus offered one who shared the responsibility for the biblical education of the entire Nation of Israel. With his equivalent of a PhD, this man did not understand the most basic assumptions of the Scripture. Jesus knew them all too well but could never seem to get a fair hearing among the Jewish leaders because their minds were closed. It was no trouble addressing the earthly issues of the Law of Moses, but even that level of understanding was beyond the Jewish leadership. No surprise, then that they had no capacity for understanding the spiritual things to which that Law pointed. As the Son of God, Jesus truly understood heavenly things.

The whole purpose of having God's own Son come to earth was not to turn politics upside down and fulfill the worldly dreams of the Jewish leaders. Rather, He came to die. Surely Nicodemus understood the episode in the Exodus, where Moses raised up a bronze image of a serpent, not to be worshipped, but as a paradox: Do this crazy thing and God will save your life. The piece of bronze on a stick symbolized the thing killing them. God's Son came in the form of fallen flesh and would be fixed to a piece of wood. It would make no sense to fallen flesh, but it would redeem men from the poison of that fallen existence.

The problem was not a mere pile of acts to be judged, but a change of essential nature in people. The world already stood under God's wrath. It was this world that rejected Him and His spiritual message. Those who embraced Him as the very living revelation of God would be changed. People naturally prefer to avoid dealing with spiritual matters because of the mass of guilt, a sense of having done evil which is awakened by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The harsh light of His truth exposes the deadness of every fallen soul. It also washes clean those who come to Him, seeking the revelation of what God calls good.

At some early point in His ministry, Jesus and His disciples began teaching and baptizing in Judea. Not too far away, John was still conducting his ministry of baptism as a call to repentance. As expected, the Jewish leaders rejected any need for repentance, and got into a heated argument with the disciples of the Baptist. During this exchange, the politicians mentioned Jesus was also baptizing. These disciples came back to John and noted how the attention Jesus drew was eclipsing their work. This is a wholly normal concern where men are

convinced that, whom they follow and what they do in that following, truly matters to God. But it is a human reaction, not a spiritual one. John responded in a fully spiritual manner.

God was in charge of the whole thing in the first place. John's entire calling was to draw attention to Jesus, not to build his own following. He was merely the best man at a wedding, and the groom was Jesus. His task was to prepare the groom's home for the arrival of the wedding party, following the nuptials at the bride's former home. The best man also made sure that no one was allowed in who wasn't invited. When the groom finally shows up with his bride, it was the best man's job to recognize the master of the house. After that, the groom is ready to party as just another guest. John the Baptist was thrilled Jesus had come into His own.

The Baptist celebrated having seen the Messiah with his own eyes and hearing His teachings with his own ears. Of all the prophets under Moses, he was truly honored. The inheritance of God Almighty goes to only One Heir, and those who don't run to embrace Him as the living revelation of God will remain in God's wrath. The few who see the light will live eternally.

Thus, we see one of the greatest disasters of modern theology is to seize upon the words of Jesus, "you must be born again" as if it were a command. In so doing, men are hardly in a better state than Nicodemus, for both have become entangled in the words themselves. This is not a question of who or what you are; "born again" is about a changed understanding, more about the alternative meaning of those words: born from above. It's more than a changed state or status, but a symbolic description of a changed desire, a fundamental shift to an eternal viewpoint.

The human soul is born by default spiritually dead and requires the birth of a living spirit. The phrase has been stripped from the context and become little more than a rational decision, an event in time and space by which mere humans can measure things. This use of the phrase today makes it mean little more than Nicodemus' assumptions about being Jewish. The phrase was meant to point out an understanding that transcends the words which convey it. It's not a question of what you have. It's a matter of whether the Lord has you. Because of how the term is abused and framed in concrete logic, we can be sure many who claim rebirth are deceived.

John 4

God surely loves all the people in the world. A fundamental expectation He held for Israel was taking His revelation to the whole world. While there had been some efforts to make converts, the mistake had been in making them Jews instead of believers. The Law of Moses was a covenant with Israel, not all of mankind. Israel mistook Jehovah as their own national deity, a chauvinistic presumption of dominance instead of the loving fatherhood. They kept the world at arm's length unless they were willing to engage the political identity, the national aspirations. For Israel, it had all been reduced to politics. Contrast this with Jonah, who in the end, did not preach Judaism and the Covenant of Moses, but Jehovah as Creator and universal Lawgiver through Noah to Ninevah. So, it was that Jesus found room for bringing His message to the Samaritans.

John says simply that Jews refused to have anything to do with Samaritans, would not drink or eat with them. It was expected that his readers would be familiar with the history of the Restoration, how the Samaritans were rejected from membership in the nation. Their version of

religion was highly corrupted, coming from priests of the Northern Kingdom who had long rejected the Covenant. Samaritans adhered to a redacted copy of the Torah alone, honestly believing this was the religion of Jews (or should be). Instead of adopting the larger truth of the Old Testament, the Samaritans left angry over the rejection, which frankly was not entirely a matter of religion, but included nationalist arrogance.

Jesus rejected human politics and dealt with it as an obstacle to the truth. When things got too politically hot for Jesus in Judea early on, He retired to His own country, Galilee. It was under a different jurisdiction than Judea. Things were getting hot for Him in Judea and Perea both, so Jesus went straight north through Samaria. He and His disciples took a mid-day break in the saddle between Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, near the location of ancient Shechem. Jacob's Well was there, no doubt with shade trees nearby.

The well was typically for travelers, because Sychar had its own well. That a woman would come out of the village that far to get water there is not explained, but she came. Most travelers carried a leather bucket and line, but this was a very deep well – 85 feet (26m). She came prepared for that, and Jesus asked her for a drink. Not only was there an assumption of ethnic hostility, but Near Eastern men never spoke to women in public, unless they were family. She made note of this double impropriety, expressing a rather brassy and sarcastic manner. Jesus turned it into an opportunity to point out how little He cared for the strictures of human ways, because He was far more interested in high spiritual matters. Of course, the woman missed the point, but Jesus was willing to persist for the truth's sake, ignoring the little provocations that would inflame most Jewish men.

Jesus used a term that would be ambiguous in their common language: "living water." She took it as a spring of water, perhaps built into her house. Her words implied she was not allowed to access the public water in the village for some reason, so it's no surprise it took some work to get her mind off her self-pity. It's obvious in the context that she was an outcast among her own people. When Jesus advised her to bring her husband, it sounded almost like preparation for some sort of deal-making. Still working the self-pity, the woman said she had no husband. Jesus refused to play the game, and revealed that He knew the details of her life all too well. He pegged her for a woman hard to live with who drove men off. It was obvious to her now this was no ordinary man, but a prophet of God at the very least.

This shifted her attention. She wanted an answer to the question burning in the minds of many ordinary Samaritan believers. Pointing to Mount Gerizim, she noted they had counted that as their holiest place for a very long time, worshiping in the open without a building (their temple stood in ruins). The Jews insisted one could meet with God only in Jerusalem, inside the Temple grounds. At this point, Jesus makes a radical statement: Very soon such things would not matter at all. The revelation of God did, indeed, come through the Jewish nation, and the Samaritans were misguided about that. However, all of that hardly mattered. It was not about which nation was right about God, or which ground was His Holy Place. What mattered was whether your spirit was alive to commune with His Spirit. Location and identity were of little consequence in the Spirit Realm.

That was too much for her to absorb, so she pushed the issue off a bit by referring to the Messiah, expected by both religions, who would reveal once and for all who or what was right

before God. Jesus bluntly declared He was the Messiah, something He dared not do among Jews just yet. She had seen enough to believe His declaration, and excitedly ran off back into town to tell everyone. This was far, far bigger than her and her pitiful situation.

The disciples caught the tail end of this exchange but dared not bother their rabbi with the embarrassing question of why He spoke with, of all things, a Samaritan woman in a situation that called into question her morality. It was the paradox that this put her in the best place to gain a hearing for her declaration in the village. With her gone, they offered Jesus the lunch they had bought. He wasn't hungry in that sense, because He was savoring the spiritual victory feast. His disciples still wallowed in their fleshly discomfort with the situation, missing entirely the point of His words.

Jesus called attention to their lack of spiritual understanding. To them, it was all about the mechanics of life. This was the middle of winter, the rainy season when crops were still green, some months before harvest. Spiritual things knew no such seasons, for it was always time to harvest souls for the Kingdom. With the folks now pouring out of Sychar, most of them wearing an off-white which was the color of ripe grain, Jesus makes the obvious reference that they were ripe for the spiritual harvest. Further, just as every grain harvest was a community affair, and no one person could take credit for everything, so it was in the Kingdom of Heaven. The paradox is that we reach each person individually, but it's always a matter of sharing the joy, since God alone gets the credit.

So it was that Jesus taught the crowd there at the well, then at their invitation stayed two more days. It was worth putting aside the fleshly revulsion of dealing with Samaritans so the Kingdom of Heaven would prosper. And prosper it did, for a great many believed Jesus' message, and embraced Him as their own Messiah.

Jesus then headed on into Galilee. John notes Jesus had said it was very hard to prophesy among one's own people. The Samaritans in Sychar were moved by His teaching, but the Galileans focused too much on outward signs. Stopping off in Cana, where He had performed His first sign, news of Jesus' return to the area reached His new hometown of Capernaum. A nobleman there immediately set out on a mission to have Jesus heal his son, who was apparently dying. Was this another sign seeker, looking for a grand miracle?

Jesus tested the man, remarking that Galileans were more interested in visuals than the underlying truth of His message. The nobleman's answer was to note the urgency of his mission. All that mattered to him was the life of his son. Did he truly believe? Did he believe enough in Jesus to understand that His power was not tied to mere physical proximity, but global? Charlatans could fake it if they were on the scene. Jesus declared the boy healed and told the man to go home. The journey took him until the next day. So excited were his servants at the boy's recovery, they met the nobleman on the way. When he discovered the healing came at the very hour Jesus spoke the words, his faith blossomed into fullness.

John notes this was the second miracle Jesus did in Galilee. His first miracle was upon His arrival in Galilee after receiving the Baptist's witness. On His second trip into Judea, ostensibly for a festival, He had done many signs, and had taught and directed baptisms for a while. The Galileans who knew Him as the local boy expected that He would surely bring His miracle road show home. For them, truth was a matter as far away as it had been for the Samaritan woman.

However, the Galileans were more hardened to His teaching than the Samaritans of Sychar. Thus, John sets the stage for growing conflict between Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, and His own people. The nation rooted in God's revelation of Himself had wandered far away, abandoned those roots, and could no longer understand the truth.

John 5

Over the centuries, some parts of the City of Jerusalem had changed dramatically. Names commonly known in ancient times puzzle us today. Sometimes we catch a glimpse in the descriptions of those who saw it, or in the discoveries of archaeology. The northeastern corner of the city became the place where flocks of sheep were brought in during Jesus' time, inspected, and then processed for ritual slaughter in the Temple. Near there was a small pool. While the various spellings in many different Scripture texts is bewildering, a good guess is *Bethesda* means "House of Mercy."

There's also some debate about John's explanation of the place. It's hard to make sense of a random act of God's power via an angel stirring the water of the pool, in which only the first to jump in could get well. External sources and mosaics uncovered there point out people certainly believed it and acted accordingly. Plausible speculation suggests there was a random bubbling of hot mineral water coming up from the bottom, offering some relief to some kinds of malady, but the temperature would dissipate quickly. Jesus stopped by this place and spotted someone whose faith was alive, in spite of his apparent insurmountable weakness in the periodic competition to be first in the water after it stirred. His condition was so long standing that anyone who knew the man could testify that this was no made up story, and that's what matters.

God does not yield to human logic. There was nothing fair or just about the random healings of Bethesda. Nor was there any particular fairness in Jesus picking this man out of the crowd gathered there every year. Divine logic remains out of reach, but not for the Son who lives by it. After making sure the man was not using his malady as an excuse to avoid the normal human responsibilities, Jesus told the man to get up. The man obeyed in faith and was healed. He rolled up the mat he had been lying on and walked toward his house. Miracles operate in places of human need, but never simply to meet human need. Miracles come because God uses them to reveal Himself to men.

Jesus knew it was the Sabbath and knew the legalistic Jewish leaders would fuss at the man carrying his bed. While there was nothing in Moses to outlaw this specifically, the Jews had drifted far away from the reasoning of ancient Hebrews. Instead, they wrangled over words and meanings which invariably served to maintain their political power and keep the peasants in their place. The Sabbath Law was to prevent those in power from working the peasants to death, and to ensure no one had any excuse for not finding one day in seven to honor Him in worship. The Jews turned it upside down and used the Sabbath Law as an excuse to oppress. They harassed this fellow about carrying his bed home, hardly much of a physical burden, instead of rejoicing with him and giving God glory for the healing.

Apparently, the man was allowed to go on probation, if he revealed in due time who it was exercised authority over him to make him "sin." A short time later, we find the man in the

Temple, duly thanking God for the healing, and Jesus encounters him again. The man had not really sinned by the Law, and Jesus certainly exercised God's authority in such matters. His comment to the man in this context was probably almost humorous, advising him to be more careful to stay out of trouble. Any other interpretation would conflict with Jesus' own teaching, denying the common assumptions illness and disabilities were direct punishment for some sin. Thus, the man obeyed Jesus' advice by fulfilling his probation and telling the Jewish leaders who had healed him.

This gave the Jewish leaders a testimony that this Jesus wielded the authority of God over illness. There was, however, no room in their hearts for God's mercy on His own terms. They had God all figured out, down the last detail, and any information contrary to that was false, or at least beside the point. Their definition of "work" regarding the Sabbath Law would have caused this man to lose his property, and to miss his chance to meet with God in the Temple – he would have had to leave his bed, which would surely be stolen, or stay there with it. Jesus confronted the Jewish leadership on their petty and legalistic abuse of the Law. Did they not realize when God rested on the Sabbath, it was from His unique labor of Creation, so He could switch to the labor of dealing with what He had made? He still worked to keep His Creation together by His divine living will. Did they not know that God worked every moment since the Fall to call mankind back to Him? If the Father worked, what was wrong with His Son doing the same work of redemption?

So, there were two reasons they sought an excuse to have Jesus arrested and executed. First, He dared to question their supremacy in saying what the Law meant. Second, He dared to suggest He was divine. It was one thing for some hair-brained Gentile to say that, or crazy Jewish idiot, but this very popular rabbi said it, threatening to unravel everything they relied on in the world. Thus, Jesus set out to explain to them why they were wrong for rejecting His claim.

Jesus explains the proper way to see this question. His Father was the Lord of Creation. As the heir to that title, it was natural that He would operate with the same authority as the Father. They knew the Lord had returned life to dead bodies, and the Son would, too. Questions of life and death were in His hands, in pretty much the same way any king might name his son co-regent, supervising but not interfering, because the son was ready to rule. Failure to respect this Son's authority was failure to respect the Lord Himself.

That authority reached far beyond mere life and death. This Lord ruled over Eternity, and His subjects lived eternally. Embracing the teaching of the Son was to embrace the Father and His divine gift. Though all men are born spiritually dead, some would hear His message and come to spiritual life. The Son has the Father's authority to grant that eternal life, because He was the source of Life itself. And eventually this same Son would settle accounts with all mankind as the Father's proxy Judge. Jesus had that authority because He existed as an extension of the Father. Otherwise, He would be just another man.

Indeed, He made these claims not for Himself alone, but with plenty of external evidence that He could not have trumped up as some charlatan. First, there's the witness of the Father by His Holy Spirit. There was also the witness of John the Baptist. Jesus didn't need to be told He was the Son of God, but John's witness was for the nation's benefit. The Jewish leaders had no

trouble supporting John's ministry, at least superficially. Then there were all those signs Jesus performed, which could not be explained away.

Yet again, there was the testimony of the Law and Prophets, all of which pointed to Jesus. Since the Jewish leaders no longer understood those writings, and certainly did not understand the God who gave them, they were incapable of finding the truth in them. Despite spending years parsing the words, they never heard the voice of God. Instead, their spirits were dead, and they did not love God. It's funny how they honored all these men walking in the fame of their own cleverness but could never recognize God or His Son.

Though vested with His Father's authority to judge all truth and righteousness, there would be no need for Him to judge them. They kept pointing back to the Law of Moses, and by that Law they would stand accused. They never understood Moses, or they would have embraced Jesus as the Son.

John 6

John's readers were familiar with the Passover Feast that came in the spring. The barley harvest had begun, and hay mowing would start shortly because grazing grasses were at their tallest. By now those readers had tasted the Lord's Supper, and knew it was the Christian replacement of the Passover. Thus, John clearly links the Passover to the teaching here on Bread of Life. He contrasts it with the way the worldly mind operates regarding creature comforts. At the same time, he very sharply refines the concept of parabolic teaching as the essence of understanding the Kingdom.

The place is somewhere on the northeast shore of Galilee, which body of water was known by other names, as well. It was mid-March, and Jesus took a retreat with His disciples, sitting atop some small mountain or ridge. In the distance a large crowd approached. Jesus asked Philip where they could purchase enough bread to feed such a mob. The question had a spiritual meaning which Jesus would later explain. For now, the disciple choked on the literal meaning, because the cost of feeding that many was far more than was in their treasury. John notes that this was a test, since Jesus had already decided how He would handle it. Overhearing the discussion, Andrew jokingly remarked they had what amounted to a snack for one: some flat cakes of bread made from freshly harvested barley, and something pickled, probably rather like sardines. Barley was the bread of poverty, which made it even more humorous.

Jesus directed the disciples to seat the crowd in an orderly manner. Since the grass was tall and green, this wasn't too bad an idea. The context indicates it was rather like an impromptu theater, and Jesus took center stage. First, He made it a point to observe the ritual giving thanks and blessing the Lord's name. Then He passed out the snack, which simply did not run out. This continued until the entire crowd was satisfied. Typical of Jewish custom, those who served got to keep the remains, enough for each of them to have a day's rations for the morrow. By this time, the day was nearly gone, so that worked out nicely. Sufficient food for the body was not a concern for those who served God in His eternal affairs.

John said this was a giddy, thrill-seeking crowd they fed. These folks half-remembered a teaching about some great prophet who would come, and surmised Jesus was the man. They began making noises about crowning Him their new king, since He was obviously more fun

than the one they had already. Jesus cut them off and climbed back up the mountain. It was dark soon, and His disciples got in the boat to go home. A contrary high wind arose, making the task of rowing nearly impossible, not to mention the waves dangerously high. Jesus simply walked up to the boat over the water, calmed their fears and climbed over the side. The boat, still some ways from Capernaum, was suddenly there. These men who believed and weren't seeking signs and miracles lived the most astounding things the thrill seekers never saw.

The crowd had not gone far from the scene of the mass feeding. The next morning, they could see across the water only the disciples' boat at Capernaum. They knew Jesus had not gone aboard, but the darkness and storm surely prevented them seeing Jesus step out from the shore onto the surface of the waves. They were still ready to make Him king, but never found Him. They crowded as many of themselves as they could into some boats which had come over from Tiberias the day before, part of the folks chasing the traveling miracle rabbi. Upon landing at Capernaum, they were puzzled to find Jesus had already gotten home. Maybe He would tell of yet some new miracle.

Jesus had offered them the Bread of Life; they knew only of the barley bread to fill their bellies. The latter was merely a symbol of the former. He warned them to see through the physical to the spiritual, and to realize He was the Messiah as Prince of Heaven, not of any earthly domain. And just what did the Messiah wish them to do? What would eternal work look like? Jesus explained that it was all about trusting Him as the voice of God. In their minds, that was a tall order, requiring more than a single afternoon snack. How about something more substantial? Was not manna heavenly bread? Surely it was better than barley pita. Jesus responded that Moses was not the source of the manna in the Wilderness, and that manna was not eternal. Jesus was not claiming equality to Moses but stood on a higher plane. The heavenly bread is eternal.

Because of the ambiguities of the language, and their inability to perceive on a spiritual level, what they thought they heard was Jesus offering something more tasty than barley or manna, and that would be just dandy. Jesus knew that most of them weren't getting it, so He dropped a verbal bomb to polarize them – they would either receive the truth or be driven away. He claimed to be that Bread of Eternal Life, and those who embraced His teaching would never worry about food or drink ever again. They had seen, yet had not seen. It was the Father's way to bring spirits to life through the Son's teaching, and these would become inseparable from Jesus. Such a bond was not a matter of Jesus the man, but of the unseen power of the Father. The very presence of Jesus was by that unseen power seeking those marked for Heaven, for He came down from Heaven. Those who embraced Him by that divine power would die in the flesh but see the final resurrection of the Redeemed.

This was too much for the Jewish leaders in the crowd. While they understood intellectually that Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God, their dead spirits did not accept it. They knew this man was just one of the sons of some fellow whose family was well known, which just did not fit their concept of Son of God. This man was hardly a heavenly being. Jesus addressed them, warning them not to waste their breath analyzing the question. This was not something men understood enough to discuss, but could only be accepted by those touched by the Father. Those who were made over into eternal beings, with an eternal perspective, operated from an eternal logic. Knowing Jesus was the Son of God came only by the teaching of the Father's

Spirit, as prophesied in Isaiah 54:13. Those so touched would not be able to reject Jesus as His Son.

In the darkness of their pedantic minds, they could not hope to understand God's Word. People didn't go sit in some classroom to fulfill such prophecies. Only the Son truly understood the heart of the Father, and only those who embraced Jesus' teaching could grasp eternal things. So, Jesus reaffirmed that He was the Bread of Life, as a means to expressing the unspeakable truth. Those who ate manna, those who walked in Moses as the final expression of God's revelation, were all dead, and would stay that way. Jesus was a higher revelation, better than mere manna and Moses. Only in parabolic imagery could human minds hear the truth because that was how divine revelation worked. Jesus drove the point home by restating the teaching of the Bread of Life, and how it superseded Mosaic teaching, by mixing in terms repulsive to Jewish traditionalists. His body was the Bread of Life, and only by absorbing His sacrificial death to come would anyone have hope of seeing God in Eternity. This was the price of feeding Bread to the world that Philip had missed previously.

It was obvious to John's readers just how far the Jewish leaders were from any hope of enlightenment. They argued with Jesus over the terminology because they missed the point. So, Jesus became more explicit with His symbolic explanation. Only those who could absorb such an explanation would benefit from it. Ultimate truth is polarizing among humans, for it makes its own path. Awakenning a dead spirit into eternal life forever separated them from the spiritually dead. John notes that this last debate took place in a synagogue. The Jewish leaders didn't have to hunt Him down, nor slip into the outdoor crowds to hear His message. He brought it straight to them, offering them every chance to get it.

The huge entourage which had followed Jesus around up to this point choked on this teaching. Not so much the symbolism, but the claim of being the Son of God. For many, it was too much that Jesus would claim to have come down from Heaven. Would it make it any easier if they got to watch Him literally go back up to Heaven? The human intellect was completely out of its league; only by the mind of God implanted in the soul would people be equipped for eternal things. This teaching of the Bread of Life was a matter of eternal spirits, not of perishable human intellect. Some of them were unable to embrace it. Jesus, as the source of spiritual truth, knew who among the crowd of followers would embrace the truth and who would be driven to oppose Him when they could not embrace it. It was not in His control to decide, nor a matter of any other human decision, but something the Father reserved to Himself. God gave birth to living spirits in a few souls as gifts to His Son.

Many of the group left. Looking at the Twelve, Jesus asked if they were next to leave. Where would they go? Peter voiced it well for all of them: How could they depart? No one else had anything to offer on par with Jesus – eternal truth. Surely, He was the Messiah, Son of God. Jesus remarked that He had chosen well, even if one of them was a devil. John explained that this was a reference to Judas, who was chosen precisely because he would eventually betray Jesus.

John 7

Having in essence driven away the bulk of His entourage, those who could not gain a spiritual understanding, Jesus began to drive the wedge of confusion deeper. While He did offer explanations up to a certain point, He seemed unconcerned that most of His audience never got His message. Again, John shows that the ultimate truth of things cannot make sense to those spiritually dead.

Jesus entered a time in His ministry when it was necessary to reduce His exposure. For some months, He spent more time with the Twelve in private settings. He avoided Judea altogether because there was a warrant for His arrest there, which didn't apply in Galilee. In the run up to the Feast of Tabernacles – eight days celebrating the period of nomadic wandering when God toughened Israel before the Conquest – Jesus' younger brothers harassed Him about gaining publicity. They didn't understand because they didn't believe. Perhaps if He made a grand entrance at Tabernacles, He could win back His herd of followers. For them, it was a matter of worldly wisdom, assuming Jesus was engaging in politics.

His answer was somewhat cryptic to their ears. For Jesus, the moment of greatest publicity was the moment of death. It was not yet time for that, but they had no such mission. They could come and go as they pleased, as they were not wanted by the Sanhedrin. Since they were compliant with the world's ways, they were in no danger from the world. That same world hated Jesus because His message to the world was how deeply all men needed redemption from sin. This was part of what had put a price on His head, so He would perhaps show up later to avoid publicity. In those times, traveling to Jerusalem for the various feasts was unhurried, an opportunity to visit with friends and family, traveling all together. Were He to go up with His family, news would travel fast and He would surely be arrested and executed.

Some days later He did travel privately, meaning as an individual. The Jewish leaders had posted spies everywhere, believing He could not avoid showing up at such an important event. We must understand there are three main groups in the eyes of these leaders. They were themselves the blessed of Israel, those favored by God as evidenced by their power and wealth, plus their education. The Jerusalem residents were worldly wise, cynical and seldom regarded as nice people. The rest of the Nation were poor benighted fools, obliged to show up at the ritual celebrations and pay their taxes, but regarded by the urbanites as bumpkins, and by the leaders as accursed and ignorant. These leaders were engaged in some debate over whether Jesus was a good guy or a deceiver. But they were sure of one thing: The Jewish leaders were interrogating anyone they heard talking too loudly about Jesus.

At the midpoint of the feast, Jesus surprised everyone by taking up His usual teaching place on the Temple grounds. The first thing we notice is that the Jewish leaders are stunned by the content of His teaching, since they knew He had not attended any of the rabbinical colleges in Jerusalem, where He would have gotten a letter of graduation, and be listed among the registered rabbis. It was too obvious that He knew all about the standard rabbinical stuff, yet His teaching was not according to orthodox methods. Jesus explained it to them. It was not a matter of achieving anything as a man, but simply passing on the teaching of His Father. People committed in faith to serving God were equipped to recognize God's teaching and could tell Jesus wasn't just promoting Himself. Most rabbis sought to distinguish themselves by adding to

the body of rabbinical lore their own unique intelligence. The whole aim of every rabbi was jockeying for recognition and influence. Instead of petty self-seeking, Jesus was interested solely in promoting His Father's will.

The Jewish leaders made so very much of representing the Law of Moses, but hardly understood it, and so hardly obeyed it. They had issued a death warrant for Jesus, completely contrary to the Law. The visiting crowd was not aware of this death warrant, and said Jesus was crazy. However, He carried on His debate with the leaders. He recalled the last sign He performed in the city, healing the crippled man on the Sabbath, and having him carry away his bed. They were all worked up over what they perceived as a rabbi teaching the violation of the Sabbath Law. While circumcision had been around well before Moses, he commanded it be done on the eighth day of life, even if that day was the Sabbath. On this point, they should have realized their perspective on the Sabbath was all wrong. If an infant could receive the sign of the Covenant on the Sabbath, what was wrong with a man reaping the blessings of the Covenant on the Sabbath? Was not the Law all about bringing certain blessings to Israel? How could they look upon a divine gift as sin?

At this point, some of the city folk noticed Him. They knew all about the death warrant and were surprised the leaders were arguing with Him instead of dragging Him away. Had the leaders changed their minds about Him? The urbanites were pretty sure they had it worked out that the Messiah would be some Mystery Man, dropped out of Heaven, whereas this Jesus was known to have a pretty ordinary background. Jesus had a rather strong response to this. He yelled loud enough for everyone to hear. It didn't matter if they knew the history of His flesh. God Almighty was not constrained by their logical barriers, and it was quite obvious that they didn't know much about God. Jesus was His appointed Heir, so He alone understood Him.

This declaration goaded the Jewish leaders into action. However, they were restrained by God, who was not yet ready for His Son to die. Somehow the visiting crowd realized there was something at work keeping them from seizing Him. Some of them believed He was the Messiah simply because no one else could have such power. When talk like this came to the attention of the Pharisee Party, they alerted the Sanhedrin and arranged for Temple Guard to be dispatched. By His words alone, Jesus was able to stop them. He said it was not yet time for that, but soon enough He would be ready to go back to His Father.

Then He said something with a spiritual meaning that they could not grasp. In going to the Father, He would be eternal and eternally beyond their reach, outside their jurisdiction. He had no fear whatsoever, because they could not actually do anything His Father didn't authorize. What His Father allowed would certainly not harm His own Son. The Jewish leaders puzzled over this because they lacked any spiritual understanding, thinking only of questions regarding arrest jurisdiction. Meanwhile, they were still unable to arrest Him. So, at the end of the feast, which entailed rituals with water, Jesus called out where the worshippers in the Temple could hear Him. Those truly seeking refreshment from God could find it in following Jesus. Embracing Him as the Messiah, as witnessed by the Scriptures, they would become themselves sources of that spiritual refreshing.

John explained the meaning for his readers. Jesus was, of course, referring to the presence of the Holy Spirit inside human souls. However, that would be the Spirit of Christ Himself, who had

not yet finished His course on earth. Some of the folks in the crowd said the same things as those fed in the wilderness, that Jesus was surely the Prophet. Some even insisted He was the Messiah, but others insisted the Messiah was not supposed to come from Galilee. He would have to be born of David's royal household, assuming this meant literally born in Bethlehem. Jesus did not bother to clarify the matter that He actually had been born in Bethlehem and was considered of the royal household.

At any rate, those who wanted to arrest Him never could bring themselves to do it. When the Temple Guard returned, they had nothing to report. Queried why they didn't have Him in custody, all they could say was He spoke like no other man. The Pharisee partisans scolded them for being fooled like the crowds. They didn't see any of the Jewish leaders taking Him seriously, did they? Well, yes, there was one of them who rose to Jesus' defense. Nicodemus, who had interviewed Jesus privately, reminded these men that the Law of Moses did not permit a death warrant, but there had to be a fair trial first. The Pharisees snapped at him, implying there was no need for a fair hearing, since not a single prophet had ever come from Galilee. They were wrong of course, since Jonah was a Galilean, but it didn't matter. They suffered from the same harsh prejudices as possessed Jonah, willing to shake their fists in God's face in demanding to have things their way.

John 8

We can be sure Jesus had a faithful supporter living either in Bethphage or in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. When visiting Jerusalem, this was where Jesus stayed at night. The Feast of Tabernacles included one more ritual that evening; the day was treated as a high Sabbath. Jesus began the day early by teaching somewhere on the Temple grounds. The Jewish leaders were determined to at least discredit Jesus, if not find cause to have Him arrested. They interrupted His teaching session by dragging some woman before Him.

There was a pretense of honoring Jesus by asking His sage advice, in presenting a criminal case. The woman had been caught in the act of adultery, they all said, presenting the legally required witnesses to her crime. Would Jesus uphold the Law of Moses, and incite the crowd to break Roman law? Or would He rule for clemency, and justify the Sanhedrin's condemnation of Him? By squatting down to write in the dust which the wind had carried onto the stone floor of the Temple terrace, Jesus symbolized He did not recognize their authority to judge Him, nor the woman.

They persisted, and He tired of the game. The qualification for carrying out the sentence they sought was adherence to the Law of Moses, but it must be according to the mystical intellectual assumptions of Moses. Hellenized analysis of Moses was the same as defying Moses. The substance of the Covenant was to uphold the ancient, close familial tribal social structure – the Covenant community – maintaining social stability through a mystical approach to life. Adultery was punished as a threat to the community's *shalom*. They had not kept the Covenant, so there was no valid Covenant community, and they had no standing to use the provisions of the Law to rule. That God had allowed Rome to limit their authority should have screamed that in their ears, but they were deaf. God had taken the civil power from them, and it wasn't coming back. So, Jesus stated the standard in terms they could not mistake: If they stood before

God with a clear conscience, they would have the authority to execute the death penalty. People who clung to God's Laws in His way would have no such trouble with their consciences.

We can suppose the elders were wise enough to realize they had trapped themselves and left quickly. Since they had committed the woman to His custody, they left her standing with Jesus. After a time, the zeal of the younger members died out from lack of support by their elders, and they left, as well. The crowd must have watched with little comment as Jesus squatted on the floor, doodling in the dust. Eventually, He looked up. His question emphasized whether anyone felt pure enough to condemn her. She said there were none. Jesus, being the only one qualified to throw that first stone, chose instead to act with mercy. There was no community Covenant to enforce; there was no community threatened by her sin. Nothing minimized her sin, but the emphasis was on the sinfulness of all. He had no sentence to declare against her, only that she should turn away from her sins as an individual.

Sin was darkness. It was in the Court of Women where, during the feast several huge, multi-flame oil lamps were lit. Jesus pointed out the tall lamp stands, declaring He was the light of all nations, a theme connected with that celebration. His teaching would pull people out of sin's darkness into the light of truth, the light of God's justice.

Harping on something Jesus had said on a previous occasion, the Jewish leaders noted that He was presenting a witness unacceptable in any court, since He was testifying on His own behalf. There was no supporting witness. Jesus pointed out there was no other witness there on His part and no one capable of impeaching His witness. Since the case was above their jurisdiction, they certainly had no standing to accuse Him. They were operating from human logic, incapable of evaluating eternal matters. So, while they were quick to condemn anything that didn't suit them, Jesus was not in the business of judging anyone. Were He to take up any judgments, it would be eternally accurate, since it would merely reflect the justice of the One True Judge.

Two Judges from Heaven could easily overrule the entire Sanhedrin. That they could not perceive the Father's justice in the words and actions of Jesus was proof they didn't know His Father. By now, they surely knew that Jesus' father Joseph was dead, and had heard scurrilous claims that Jesus was illegitimate. With bitter humor they asked Him to produce His father. Jesus ignored their smirking and told them they were completely out of their league. What they knew about fleshly matters had no bearing on eternal things. It was here that John notes this conversation took place in the foyer of the Treasury, which had its entrance in the Court of Women. They knew all about gold, but nothing about the rich treasures of the Spirit.

Jesus reminded them that He belonged to a higher jurisdiction. While He would die sinless and return to Heaven, they would die still clinging to their sins, and never see Heaven. By now they are only a little closer to the truth, for they wondered if He planned to commit suicide. It showed the spiritual poverty of their minds. He bluntly told them He was from Heaven, but they belonged wholly to his world. They would leave everything they had in this world when they died, standing before God naked and condemned. Those who were truly favored by God would have embraced Jesus' teaching, for He was "I AM."

The leaders played dumb, prodding Him to say more precisely what He meant. Jesus had not changed His teaching from the start of His ministry. It was the same thing God had been saying all along since the dawn of creation. The only problem was their discernment. Were they ready

to listen, He would have filled their hearts with the clarity they lacked, correcting all their misapprehensions, because it all came from the Source. The one defining moment would be on the Cross, when the truth of the matter would burn undeniably in their souls. They would realize Jesus had simply obeyed His Father in all things, always under His watchful eye.

Something in His speaking began to sway some of these Jewish leaders. It was compelling. Jesus raised a challenge to their human pride. He described how those who committed themselves to His teaching would be His followers, finding a fresh liberty in His truth. They huffed about being children of Abraham, legitimate heirs to the Land and the Promise. How could He speak of them as slaves, in need of manumission? They made the mistake of thinking bloodline was the whole issue, but Jesus was referring to eternal things. If a man obeys sin, that is his master. Slaves are property of the household, but the heir *is* the household. They could be bought out of their slavery to sin and made part of an eternal household where there would be no slaves.

Being a blood descendant of Abraham does not make one an heir to Abraham's spiritual blessings. His true legacy was faith, not property. If all they had was lineal physical inheritance, then they had nothing. From an empty heart of nothing, they issued a death warrant for Jesus. They could do that because His teaching never found root in their souls. His teaching was learned from His Heavenly Father, and their actions were learned from their father. They insisted again that their teaching was what they had inherited from Abraham. Jesus noted that they were hardly acting in the faith of Abraham. The death warrant still stood on a man who spoke the truth from God; Abraham would never have issued a death warrant. They would have to claim some other father.

This was a bit much for them, since it was like saying they were children of Ishmael, who did not inherit any part of Abraham's promises. They insisted they were the true sons of God. Again, there was that dig about Jesus and His questionable birth. Jesus said it didn't matter how He got His fleshly body – He came directly from God. Their complete lack of God's mercy and love shows they had no real claim on Him. They lacked spiritual ears, so spiritual talk was unintelligible to them. Their conduct and demands were too obviously that of Satan. The nature of Satan is murderous hatred, an aversion to truth, and their behavior was closer to that than to Abraham or God. They had no moral standing to accuse Jesus of sin, because they wallowed in their own sin. If they were people of God, they would embrace Jesus' words.

They denounced Jesus as a Samaritan, someone unfit to speak of God. Further, He must be possessed of a demon. Jesus responded that demons would not feel comfortable where God is glorified. Since they were slandering Jesus, they were also slandering God. Maybe the demons would have been more comfortable in them. It was not as if their bitter accusations hurt Jesus' feelings, since He sought only to please His Father. That being the case, anyone who embraced Jesus' teaching would avoid death, and live eternally. As always, the leaders failed to grasp the spiritual meaning, and reminded Him that Abraham died, the prophets died, and Jesus was also just a man, so how could He keep anyone from avoiding that fate? What sort of arrogance was this?

If Jesus were simply making wild boasts, they should have ignored Him long ago. Obviously, His claims pulled at their souls, so they were forced to deal with Him. That pulling came from

God Almighty, the same God they claimed as their own. Obviously, they didn't know anything about this God. Yet, if Jesus denied God in the way they did, He would be the same kind of liars they were. So let them hear the Word of God: Their father Abraham looked forward to the promise of Jesus coming. When the time in Heaven came for the day that Jesus was to be born, Abraham rejoiced. The leaders wondered how a man younger than all of them could claim to have seen Abraham's face, since none of them had lived that long. Their confusion showed that they had absorbed the Aristotelian unitary universe, in essence denying a separate Spirit Realm. Instead of thinking how Abraham was still living in Heaven, they were considering how long Jesus had been on earth. Jesus reminded them one more time that He was "I AM."

This time, they finally caught on to what it meant – He was the Son of God. They began reaching for stones, to do for Him what they would have done to the adulteress. But it was not yet His time, so He simply disappeared from their sight, and walked out of the Temple grounds. In the process, He walked right through the crowd of Jewish leaders who had gathered around Him. It was a symbol of their spiritual blindness.

John 9

A popular debate among rabbis of Jesus' day was whether an unborn soul could transgress the Law of Moses. The question arose over a false assumption, rather pagan in nature, which held that human disabilities resulted directly from some unconscious or unconfessed sin. Jesus noted that it was not a matter of fault, but of mercy. That is, it's a wonder we all don't roast in Hell. God grants us an opportunity to see His mercy, each in varying ways. This man would find mercy in being made to see, but the path of grace included him showing that grace to others. The work of God is to show His glory.

Jesus, by His very presence in the world, brought God's glory to life as never before, glory as the Father wanted it. In passing, Jesus warns His disciples a time will come when He won't be in the world. He would die and be in the grave. The bright splash of divine glory would be snuffed out. It would be a time of darkness in that sense, and there were things which needed to be finished before that day. One of those things was yet another chance for the Jewish leaders to see the failure of their logical structure, for such logic could not account for much of anything that mattered.

Most beggars would be near the Temple, so we aren't surprised Jesus came past this man. Making a disgusting little paste of spittle and dirt, Jesus put it on the man's eyes. Then He told the man to find his way to a pool at the lower end of Hezekiah's Tunnel. It was located some distance from the Temple, down at the end of the Zion ridge line just before it dropped into the Hinnom Valley. There he was to rinse off the paste. Jesus could have done it any other way He liked, but this man had a mission to bring God's glory to life. Upon completing the instructions, the man climbed the slope up from the pool able to see for the first time in his life. It's hard to imagine the wonder and excitement as he made his way back toward the Temple; it's hard to imagine how long it might take for the sheer wonder of vision for the first time in his life to wear off, if ever.

Everyone who knew the man was stunned. There is no record of any previous miracles where one *born* blind was healed. It was prophesied, but with the double meaning of opening spiritual

eyes, as well. Some just found it too hard to swallow. The man knew the name of Jesus, but had not seen Him yet, and Jesus had probably moved aside so events could take their course. It was a divine plot to hit the Sanhedrin from a direction they could not defend. The man told the story, and his friends and relatives knew it was important to inform the Pharisees, teachers of the Law.

By the twisted reasoning of the Hellenized Pharisees, making clay on the Sabbath, even so tiny an amount and from such humble sources, was a gross violation. Healing was also considered work, illegal on the Sabbath. Jesus told the man to walk more than a Sabbath journey. So deeply concerned by the threat to their systematic structure of law, this required some drastic action, though the meeting seemed rather informal. Completely ignoring this all-too-obvious sign from God, they insisted Jesus must have sinned. The formerly blind man was not too impressed by their reasoning. The Jewish leaders conducted an extensive investigation, even to the point of calling the man's parents to make sure this man had been born blind. Of course, these people had been forewarned that anyone saying anything good about Jesus would face legal sanction from the Sanhedrin. Just saying He was the Messiah could get folks kicked out of their synagogue, which included the necessity of the whole community ostracizing them like Gentiles.

As the debate wore on with the majority clearly locked into a closed mindset on this question, there came a point where the man showed impatience. Jesus could not possibly be doing God's work, but the leaders couldn't justify saying it was the Devil's. The man pointed out that it had to be one or the other according to their own teaching and giving sight to a man born blind was clearly not the work of evil. The only answer the leaders had was arrogance and a personal attack on the man. I'm sure at that point, the man considered ostracism from that bunch a small loss. The system itself was illegitimate.

The man's first Kingdom mission was completed. Jesus went to meet Him, disobeying the inherent order to ostracize the man. Surely the man would have recognized the voice of the One who healed him, at the minimum a prophet of God. When asked about embracing the Messiah, the man asked Jesus to point Him out, because surely, He would know. Jesus said the man now saw the Messiah, the one speaking to him. Without hesitation, the man proclaimed Jesus his Messiah.

Jesus remarked loud enough for those around Him to hear how this whole episode symbolized His purpose on earth. Using standard Hebraic figures of speech, He told how He came to bring justice. It was only just that those who saw spiritually could also see physically, while those who had working eyes and dead spirits should be shown as blind. The Pharisees hovering nearby retorted sarcastically, wondering if Jesus thought they were blind, meaning ignorant. Jesus replied: If they were simply ignorant, they would not be blamed for making trouble for this man. Instead, they insisted they were the ones who truly understood what God required; they were "the light of the world." By claiming that, they took upon themselves the burden of responsibility for all the failures of the Nation of Israel to fulfill their mission from God.

John 10

The tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders escalated. John continues drawing out the drama as the setting for explaining more clearly the doctrine of a spiritual Kingdom of Heaven. In this chapter, the emphasis is on the parabolic image of shepherd and sheep.

We should not make the mistake of assigning to the images a static representation, as in an allegory. The logic of parables includes a measured fuzziness, of fluid meaning drawn upon the context. The man born blind was rejected by the Sanhedrin, as was the sign Jesus performed in giving him sight. Their rejection was the result of a hide-bound logical framework, a perversion of the Law of Moses via Hellenistic rationalism. They had rejected the fluid symbolic logic of Hebrew culture in which the Law of Moses was cast. It was inevitable that their rationalist approach would entirely miss the point of God's Word. The cognitive dissonance was almost comical, because their own rules of logic betrayed them.

Jesus depicts the Law as a safe enclosure for the sheep of God's pasture. Its purpose was to bless the nation with stability until the time was ripe for the Messiah – the true Shepherd – to come. The gateway was the true passage through prophecy, the self-revelation of God from ancient times. Jesus came according to the prophecies, fulfilling all things by God's own power. The path of Hellenistic logic was like climbing the wall, the path offered by Satan as a diversion to give him access to the sheep. The Jews had failed miserably in their calling to remain faithful to the provisions of the Law. They could not even understand those provisions, for they were no longer Hebrew in heart and mind. When Jesus arrives according to the Word of God, the gate is open to Him.

Within the Nation of Israel were those who were true sheep of God. Sheep followed only their own shepherd's voice, always accurately recognizing him. When Jesus came, bringing the Word and power of God's self-revelation, God's sheep recognized Him as the Messiah. The man healed of blindness rejected the judgment of the Sanhedrin because they were not operating according to the Law of Moses, much less the higher Law of God. These brandished a caricature of the Law as a weapon against the sheep, and it's no surprise people did not love the Jewish leaders. Their voices of Hellenism were foreign, not according to the Word. As so many today do not understand, so we are not surprised when John tells us the Jewish leaders didn't grasp the parable.

Jesus then shifts the parable just a bit, saying He had become the door of the sheepfold. The only way to gain leadership of the hearts of true believers was to embrace Jesus as Messiah. For quite some time, the Jewish leaders were not seeking the welfare of the nation, nor of any part of mankind, save only themselves. They had twisted the Law for the purpose of rape and pillage. But for all they took, they never held the hearts and minds of the true believers. Jesus became the door by His commitment to the sheep. Instead of taking from them, He came to give in abundance the blessings of God which the Jewish leaders could not get their hands on, spiritual things which secular men cannot perceive.

Again, Jesus contrasts Himself with the Jewish leaders. He was the Good Shepherd, not just willing, but expecting to die for the sheep. The Jewish leaders were just hirelings, mercenaries without a fighting spirit. They sheered the sheep but fled at the first sign of trouble. In difficult times, they had abandoned their duty to the flock. Otherwise, there would not be so many in

need of healing and deliverance. The blessings of the Law included protection from disease and demons, but it was obvious the Jewish leaders had failed to build up that protection.

Coming according to the Word, Jesus recognized those who could receive the truth. These, like the man healed of blindness, were quick to embrace their Messiah. He not only fulfilled all the requirements of the Law and brought the just blessings promised by Moses, but raised them up to the Spirit life. This was the way of the Kingdom, the way of God. Jesus knew His Father's character intimately, and His own actions reflected that character. Knowing it and walking accordingly were inseparable. Thus, Jesus was preparing to die for them. Further, His death would bring other sheep into this mystical sheepfold of God, from among the Gentiles. The distinction between Jew and Gentile would disappear, for all are one in the Kingdom of the New Covenant.

This was the plan, the good pleasure of the Father. By this power, the Son was able to give His life, knowing beforehand that He could raise Himself from the dead. As the source of life, death was merely a circumstance to Him. This teaching caused a vigorous debate among His listeners.

A couple of months later, in the dead of winter came the Feast of Dedication. It commemorated the victory of the Maccabean Revolt, regaining control over the Temple in about 164 BC. As Jesus strolled under the long Portico of Solomon, the Jewish leaders accosted Him. They demanded He state clearly whether He was the Messiah. Jesus answered the issue was not a lack of clarity on His part, but of refusal on their part to believe. The only witness they needed was His miraculous signs.

Again, Jesus rehashed the teaching of spiritual sheep. When the Living Truth comes, those whom God has chosen will always respond appropriately. His accusers were not spiritual sheep, so it wouldn't matter what Jesus said or did. They were not going to recognize it. Jesus went on to explain that spiritual sheep were granted to Him as a gift from His Father, so there was no power or authority on earth capable of keeping them from responding, no power capable of alienating them from Jesus. Their citizenship in the Kingdom was eternal, as was the spiritual Kingdom itself. Just to satisfy their demand, Jesus added that He and the Father were One.

In the twisted minds of the Jewish leaders, this demanded Jesus be executed, so they began gathering stones suitable for the task. Jesus asked for which miracle He was to be executed. The works could only come from God, so they witnessed to His assertion. They rejected the evidence, since the assertion was not acceptable under any evidence except that which they had drawn up some time before. Several figures since the Restoration were considered possible Messiahs, but always for political accomplishments. This included the Maccabean brothers, whose military feats were celebrated during the current feast. But a man who simply healed every known ailment could not be Messiah if He didn't fulfill the political ambitions of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus reminded them in Psalm 82:6 the term *elohim* ("gods") was applied to judges in Israel by God Himself. They would be hard put to prosecute over mere words, for in that passage David wrote that those who served God were His children. Claiming to be the Son of God was viable for anyone in the nation, except for those present, for they judged falsely, as David had accused in that Psalm. The only legitimate grounds for judging such a claim would be the backing of

God in miraculous signs. This only infuriated the Jewish leaders further, but Jesus slipped their grasp again.

For a time, Jesus reduced His exposure to them by staying in a town on the east bank of the Lower Jordan River, where He first received the endorsement of John the Baptist. This was in Perea, out of the Sanhedrin's immediate jurisdiction. While there, Jesus performed His usual healing signs, and many were moved to believe. In their minds, John the Baptist had done no miracles, yet prophesied accurately of Jesus and His ministry. John was a true prophet without miracles; how much more so this One with miracles of whom John accurately prophesied! Unlike the Jewish leaders, these people believed. Thus, the Good Shepherd came and gathered His sheep under His care, and brought them to rich pasturage, to a spiritual life not otherwise available.

John 11

The compassion of the Kingdom is often incomprehensible. We saw a man born blind just so Jesus could make him see. Why would God put him through that? Now we have another man who will suffer death for the sake of Jesus' glory. If we view this from a human angle, it would be easy to accuse God of playing games with us, treating us as mere tokens in some incomprehensible capricious entertainment. If we see it spiritually, we learn that our flesh means little. Death itself is but a circumstance in the Kingdom.

As far as we know, Jesus was still in Bethany beyond Jordan. While there, He received a message from the other Bethany, some 20 miles (32km) away and a very long climb up to the Mount of Olives. The message informed Him that his dear friend, Lazarus, was deathly ill. John mentions who this man is, because none of the other Gospels do. Jesus responded to the message by announcing that it would not be fatal, but for the purpose of glorifying the office of Messiah. Then John notes He stayed two more days. In the minds of His disciples, it was probably a good idea to stay away from the jurisdiction of the Jewish leaders.

So, when Jesus mentioned it was time to cross the Jordan back into Judea, the disciples questioned the wisdom of it. Had He not just missed being stoned? Jesus replied with a parable. It was not yet His hour to die, so the plans of the Sanhedrin didn't matter much. He was in the world as Light of the World, and it would be dark soon enough when He died. They should avoid stumbling around in their fleshly minds and take advantage of Jesus' teaching regarding such things. Otherwise, they might not be ready when it was their turn to become His light shining again.

As Light of the World, it was time to go and wake Lazarus, whom Jesus referred to as sleeping. The disciples took this literally, knowing that a man who was sick was probably on the mend if he was able to sleep. So, Jesus bluntly tells them what He meant: Lazarus was dead. Had Jesus been there, He would not have been able to allow Lazarus to die. No one died in the presence of Jesus, for He was also the Source of Life. It was important that Lazarus walk through physical death so they could experience yet one more faith building sign from God. So, they were off to visit Lazarus in his grave. Thinking Jesus meant to go and die, Thomas demonstrated uncommon resolve, encouraging the others to face death like men. We would be wrong to doubt that he really meant it.

It's quite likely Lazarus was already dead when Jesus got the message. There were some silly superstitions about dead people and ghosts, so holding off a few days would ensure everyone knew that Lazarus was good and dead. So, they arrived, just a couple miles short of Jerusalem. It was close enough that many of the Jewish leaders turned out for the funeral. We can safely assume Lazarus was a big shot, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin himself.

Martha got word of Jesus' approach and went out to meet Him. The conversation showed that she believed Jesus was the Messiah but was not fully aware of all that meant. She said something which must have been traded between the two sisters frequently: Had He been there sooner, Lazarus would have lived. That's true enough. She was not sure what God might do but was certain God would do whatever Jesus asked. Jesus responded with the assurance that Lazarus would rise. She took it as a reminder death was not eternal. It sounded like a noble thought to Martha, but small consolation at the moment. Jesus restated the underlying truth about life and death. He was resurrection and life personified. Dying was never the end for those who embraced Him as Lord. She believed it, since He was the Messiah and God's Son.

With that, she sought to invite her sister Mary to join this private conference with Jesus. However, the Jewish mourners felt socially obliged to follow the two sisters to the tomb, or so they thought. Instead, she went out to meet Jesus, still standing where He met Martha on the road outside town. Mary was far more expressive, but repeated the same wistful comment: if only He had been there. Ranged behind her were the Jewish leaders who had come to grieve with the family.

We can't know precisely what crossed Jesus' mind at that moment. The word translated "groaned" normally signals a sense of deep distress and anger. At the least, we know this tableau represented all that was wrong in the world. Death was not the Creator's plan; it was a grave affront to all the joy that life was meant to bring. Here stood these men who participated in maintaining a system which aggravated all things, holding back the truth of God's light and life.

Jesus asked the two women to escort Him to the grave. He continued in that moment of sorrow, weeping visibly. The Jewish leaders took that as a sign of deep love for Lazarus. For them, it was the first they saw or heard of Jesus weeping, and they never understood Him in the first place. They also speculated about whether Jesus could have prevented this death. Upon seeing the tomb, Jesus again groaned deep inside. He ordered the stone covering the door removed. Martha reminded Jesus that the man had been dead four days, and it would not be pleasant. Jesus reminded her she was about to see something no one expected. So, the tomb was uncovered.

Jesus prayed aloud. It was not necessary for the sake of prayer, but for the sake of those standing by listening. Then He bellowed for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Try to imagine a man hobbling out all wrapped like a mummy. Jesus ordered that he should be released from the wrappings. Here was as much proof as any man could have ever demanded. Indeed, several of the Jewish leaders there were convinced, and embraced Jesus as the Messiah, if only secretly.

However, the rest went and reported to the Pharisees. They called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. The striking thing is that they still rejected Jesus' claims. They absolutely had to stop Him, because if things continued as they were, it would be the end for them. They were thinking that

this Jesus would be proclaimed the Messiah, and the Romans would take that as a revolt. Rome would then tear down their Temple and remove their special status. Worst of all, these men would lose their coveted positions and wealth. There was a time the leadership of Israel knew God could prevent such losses if they were faithful, but that was long past.

The High Priest, Caiaphas, silenced them. He decreed that Jesus must die for the sake of the nation. John notes this was an unintended prophecy, since God could use any vessel, regardless how corrupt personally. However, it was not only for the sake of the Jewish people, but for all the world that Jesus would die. They redoubled their efforts to kill Jesus. It would seem all other Sanhedrin business was suspended while this task remained. Jesus then slipped back out of sight, hiding in a small town which has not yet been identified in modern times. However, during the next Passover season, as the celebrants clogged the roads into Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders debated whether Jesus would show Himself. There had been a very public announcement of an arrest warrant.

John 12

Tying up loose ends can be the worst part of any task. For Jesus, it was the final denouement. For John, it sets the stage for making sense of everything that follows.

Less than a week to Passover, Jesus attended a grand feast hosted by Lazarus, whom Jesus had resuscitated. This was the typical Middle Eastern formal meal, where men gathered at the table of honor, reclining on large cushions with their left side down. With Jesus at the head as the VIP, Lazarus would place himself at the foot. Since all the men had their feet extended away from the table at an angle, it was easy for Mary to anoint those of Jesus. The expensive perfumed ointment was nard, a rare spice from the Himalayas, with a scent described as earthy and musty, related to ginseng.

Mary was hardly practical, but surely spiritual. This was pure worship, as well as embodiment of His teaching regarding His mission. She recognized His glory and knew where His glory would be seen – in death. So, it made Judas's complaint appear the more petty than mere self-interest. Not simply a political activist, Judas acted as any politician, lining his pockets while others suffer, neither realizing nor caring that he would be the key to Jesus death and glory. In passing, Jesus explains poverty is politically exploited in part because it can never be resolved on this earth. He pointedly notes that He is also not willing to suffer Judas's political exploitation, either.

It was common during formal dinners among notables to allow the public to stand in the shadows of the dining hall and watch. Many of those who came gawked at the man raised from the dead, and the One who raised Him. Against this background, John notes that the Sanhedrin plotted to murder Lazarus because of the political implications of having him wander around alive, a testimony to Jesus' power and their impotence. This same crowd of people led others in worshipping Jesus as He entered Jerusalem the next day.

The mob engaged in a processional, Psalm 118, which praises God for delivering His Nation. John notes that this scene, with Jesus astride a young onager, fulfills Zechariah 9:9, how God's victory would be the end of human conflict and He would rule the world in peace. It was not by some thundering victory in battle or in political theatrics, but walking humbly in the truth. Little

of this registered on the disciples' minds until after the Resurrection. What was obvious to everyone, though, was the manifested power of God to bring a man back from the grave, and Jesus carried that power in His person. He needed no weapons or political speeches. The partisan Pharisees were framed as the enemies of God, disarmed by this harmless fellow who could so easily destroy all they worked to gain. But that work was not a work of faith and trust in God.

The Pharisees noted that Jesus drew the whole world, and even Gentiles wanted to see Him. There was a class of Gentiles called "God fearing" – they didn't accept full conversion to Judaism with circumcision but did embrace the beliefs. They would attend Jewish celebrations, participating from the Court of Gentiles in the Temple. They approached Philip and Andrew, the disciples with Greek names. Their request implied a wish for an audience with Jesus, not merely to catch a physical glimpse of Him.

These Greeks had an underlying need for redemption, and Jesus was the fulfillment of what drew them to Judaism in the first place. Jesus declared that His hour had come, the moment when His glory would be most obvious. Using a parable of wheat cultivation, Jesus points out how fruit in the Kingdom is not possible without death. Clinging to life in this world was eternal death. Surrendering this life to God assured that death was just the beginning. As Jesus walked straight to the Cross, so we must join Him to follow Him into Eternity. No, it would not be pleasant, but death was the very purpose of Jesus' life. However, that path was open to all mankind.

Jesus called on His Father to glorify His own Name. The Father answered in an audible form. As He had in the past, He would again in the Cross. For any lesser being, this would be unspeakable arrogance. Yet, for all Creation, nothing serves our interest better than God gaining glory. So it was that Jesus had no need for this audible answer, but it was for those standing there. Jesus wanted to make clear once and for all just what it meant for God to judge sin. Satan ruled the world by an awful choice back in Eden, a choice we were powerless to take back. That rule was about to be broken, in that the lien against our souls was broken. Those who cling to this world would share Satan's fate. Thus was the sin of all mankind judged. From that point forward, the dividing line would be how men responded to the claims of Jesus Christ.

Using a phrase Jews recognized as execution, Jesus said this was how the world would be offered the chance at redemption. Not just any execution, but a deeply humiliating one, obliging all to remember His name as an epithet. Was not the Messiah supposed to be eternal? Surely Jesus was speaking of some other poor soul! No, Jesus had explained it too many times. He warned those listening to walk in the light of His teaching, to memorize, if they could, all He had said, because all too soon the hour of death would come. For a short time, they would be deprived of the light of His presence, and it would be a very trying time. After that, they must be prepared to act very quickly on what they already knew. Time was short, and they needed very much to review all He had taught already. He then left them to act on His words and disappeared.

If men could come to that truth by mere logic and intelligence, no one in Judea could have rejected the claims of Jesus to be the Messiah. All those signs, any one of them, were sufficient proof for His teaching. John declares the truth of the matter, which itself is incomprehensible.

Without attempting to justify it, or make it rational, John points out how this lack of belief in so many hearts fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. The prophet had warned that God's truth, embodied in the Messiah, would not make sense to anyone in the flesh. The ruler of all Creation would come to earth ignobly, live what seemed a pointless life, and die horribly. The ultimate truth of things would make no sense at all to mere men. They would be spiritually blinded. Once truth is revealed, they would be driven away from it. Those to whom God chose to reveal Himself fully would see Him as only He could be seen, by a spirit newly born from the dead. John notes Isaiah had a very clear vision of the Messiah.

All was not lost, though, for even among the Jewish leaders were those whose spirits came to life and received the truth. Yet, they could not fully come to act on that truth. All they had gained as the upper crust of society was still too valuable to them. Many did come clean after the Resurrection, but their duplicity prior to that provoked Jesus to proclaim very publicly what it took to be His disciple.

He refreshed His claim to be the incarnation of God's revelation. Embracing His message was to embrace God's truth. Jesus had no need for arguing with His critics. His immediate task was redemption, not debate and judgment. Rather, the teaching itself would be their judge. While that might not fully manifest until Time had ended, it was all the more sure for God's patience in waiting that long. The teachings of Jesus were directly from the Father. Not merely words spoken, but life lived. This is what would divide humanity between Redeemed and Damned. The Word of Truth carves its own path into the human soul. Those with living spirits would embrace it, could not avoid it. Those who rejected it were already dead.

John 13

John tells us the Last Supper took place on Preparation Day, because Jesus died on Passover as the Lamb of God. During that day, the lambs were offered in the Temple, slaughtered, and eaten that night as the Passover Feast. Also, the meal narrated here was eaten reclining, not appropriate to the official Seder. That was eaten as if prepared to leave in haste, as they had from Egypt. We know that Jesus incorporated elements of the Seder in this special Preparation Day meal, something common in that day. Some might even refer to the meal as a Seder. People could celebrate on Preparation Eve something like the Seder with a social group, or a professional group so as to celebrate Passover the next day with their families, as required by the Law.

This is the background when John frames the meal according to the symbolic importance. The Hour had come, and Jesus was ready. This one final peaceful moment with the disciples would impart the one most important teaching of all. The Law of the Kingdom is divine sacrificial love. No words can transmit mind to mind what that meant. Only the heart can understand. Thus, as a parable indicating the truth, it needed a symbolic act to portray this teaching. The disciples were not fully spiritually aware yet, but they would remember this night, and would grasp the full meaning of this parabolic act later.

Nothing we would have expected happened. Jesus knew it as His last night on earth in human form. There was no sorrow, no call for pity. He calmly faced His fate, even knowing one of the Twelve was to have a direct hand in the matter. All the details were established in Heaven, and

the matters were simply playing out. Jesus knew it, but the disciples could not have understood any of it. At most, they were probably aware something important was about to happen during the Passover celebration, but all their assumptions about political action were far, far off course.

The meal itself was ended, and it was time for the ceremonial elements of the evening. They had been granted full privacy for this event, so there was no Gentile slave to wash their feet. It would be illegal to have a Jewish servant do this, and usually people simply offered guests the means to wash their own feet. In that day and time, walking in the streets where most people dumped their household garbage and chamber pots, where any animals were likely to have relieved themselves, the streets were disgusting. Feet got nasty in Jerusalem at the best of times. Whether they had already individually washed their own feet already wasn't the point.

The Master Himself stripped down to slave garb in utter humiliation and performed the service. Recall that this meal was arranged around the table in Eastern fashion, reclining on cushions with the participants' feet extended out from the table. The act of washing feet was rather a simple operation. Peter was already somewhat the acknowledged leader of the Twelve. At this point, he was probably just a little full of himself, thinking about how he would be Jesus' lieutenant. Still, he could not permit his Lord to wash his feet. In worldly terms, he was quite right. But this was a spiritual act, and Jesus warned him his position in the group was at risk. We know the words carried much more meaning – if Jesus did not cleanse a soul by His loving sacrifice, that soul was not in the Kingdom. Peter understood just enough of this to realize that, if this was about cleansing from sin, he needed a lot of it. No, Jesus explained it was not a matter of regeneration, but of making His followers aware that their walk in this world would ever stain them with sin. Still, it was never enough to lose their eternal place in God's family. These men were saved and needed only to have the stain of worldly splatters washed from their minds.

Of course, for Judas there was no hope. He was not regenerate, but there was nothing to gain from tormenting him in front of the others. When the symbolism was complete, Jesus got dressed again and regained His cushion at the table. He wanted to clarify the one most important item for them. Who was the greatest there that night? Jesus was more than just their rabbi; He was their Messiah, Son of God. They acknowledged that. This was not some new ritual instituted for future observance, but an object lesson: *Serving is greatness*. It implied dying is life. The Kingdom of Heaven turned worldly things upside down because sin turned righteousness upside down. The God of Heaven was serving their needs at an awful price, which is part of what made Him God.

He knew one of them would betray Him. Yet He was fully willing to wash that man's feet, too. The business of the Kingdom is manifesting the glory of God by sacrificial love, even knowing some would reject it, including those who are our closest friends and family, those whom we accord high privileges. We love those least deserving, and Jesus quotes Psalm 41:9 to highlight that. However, telling them this in advance would simply add to their conviction who Jesus was. He would send them out with His sacrificial love, and those who embraced their love would be embracing God's love.

But none of this could prevent the human heart break of knowing such a close companion could be so taken with evil. Only Judas knew what He was talking about, and Jesus didn't wish to make this a confrontation. So, Judas kept his secret well because his victim helped. That's the way God does things. Peter just had to know, so he signaled John from across the table. It was John who was lying on the cushion in front of Jesus. In this context, John simply refers to himself as the one whom Jesus regarded with extra affection, as the seating arrangement indicated. He could simply lean back, so his head touched Jesus' chest, and whisper the question: Who was the traitor? Jesus made a point to answer, not by naming Judas, but by indicating how John should learn to treat his enemies in the future. Having already eaten the main meal, they were going to walk through some of the Seder symbols, and Jesus would give a symbolic gesture of honor to one of them. He would dip the first piece of matzo in the bitter sauce and give this to the traitor as a token of honor.

Once this was done, it was time for Judas to move. Notice how business in the Kingdom happens not by scheduled hours, nor exactly as a matter of sequence, but of spiritual moment. If the arrest were to come at the right moment and some final words be shared with the rest, it was time now for Judas to leave. Jesus simply said so and told Judas to hurry. The others had no clue what it was about.

Now He could continue this final hour of teaching with the remaining disciples. They were on the threshold of God's great glory coming to earth. Perhaps what they thought that meant was they were about to take whatever action Jesus had been planning as the Messiah to claim His role at the head of Israel. This was true enough, but not in the sense they were thinking. Instead, Jesus referred to the Cross. They weren't going to follow Him there just yet; He had to establish the route. Meanwhile, it was to be the symbol of the Law of the Kingdom: sacrificial love. Their service in this Kingdom was all about love, the sort of love Jesus displayed and would display more completely than any could comprehend. They were to love as Jesus loved, from the Cross, as the mark of the Kingdom citizenship.

In Peter's mind, these words indicated that Jesus was heading out of the city, perhaps out of the country, alone. Jesus could not answer the question as it was asked but had warned them already He was going to die. They surely had heard this phrase before, but still could not wrap their minds around it. Such a thing just did not accord with what they thought they knew about the Messiah. Catching just the edge of it, Peter insisted that he was a good soldier, ready to die for his Lord. He surely believed that, though anyone who knew him might suspect Peter would change his mind somewhere short of actually dying. Jesus was more pointed than that. Did Peter really believe he was ready for that? Jesus knew Peter was not ready; no one was ready for this. Indeed, Peter would bail at the last moment, a moment that would come during the dawn watch. More, he would deny Jesus three times before dawn that very night.

These men had come so very far in the few years they had known and followed Jesus. A part of them had begun to understand at least the part about turning back to what the Law had meant originally, honestly keeping God's commands. They suspected this all pointed to something more important, but that was beyond their intellectual grasp. So, they focused on the part about reforming religious practice and the obvious connection it had with the way their nation lived. Without the Holy Spirit, it was not possible to fully grasp what was about to descend upon

them, the darkest darkness they would ever know. Jesus, their leader in this reform movement from God, was about to die in a way which would break anyone's heart, if they had one.

John 14

Turning from His crushing warning to Peter about denying Him three times before dawn, Jesus addresses him with the whole group. In the Jewish world, the heart was the seat of the will, of commitment and loyalty. Thus, He counseled them to remain faithful in the course to which they were already committed – “Don't let your faith waver.” As surely as they would never turn against their God, they should simply trust in Jesus to make it all work out. They were all members of God's royal household. It was for Jesus to go and register them there, marking out their individual offices and accommodations which He promised would be lavish. His departure was to make sure this happened, and then He would return to escort them there. Their places were secure; God's favor upon them was not fickle. Surely, they understood what it took to claim that privilege.

Take a moment to notice John's witness here. Had Jesus bluntly said to them as He did later to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world,” it would not have changed the outcome of this conversation. It's not as if they suffered from the limitations of a Western mind, but it was also a mind not entirely Hebrew. Jesus does not speak of some discrete historical event to fulfill the Messianic promise. He refers to a change in spiritual dynamics. His “going” – death – would usher in a whole new regime, a spiritual existence which pays little heed to concrete reality. He promises that they already belong, but it waits a sequence of events here inside the realm of Time for them to become aware of this spiritual shift to Eternity. They needed to experience the manifestation of those eternal truths in this realm. While still walking on this earth, they would occupy Kingdom offices in Eternity. They would hold title to high privileges, which would easily manifest in this world, but was fully realized only once they leave this world. Jesus promises that they would surely leave on the same path He took.

It was Thomas who spoke what was obvious from their point of view. They still didn't quite grasp “where” He was going as a spiritual symbol. If they had understood, they would not have had to ask the way. Jesus' answer was, again, parabolic. He was going back to the Father, and the only way they could ever get there was by Him. The path was to embrace Jesus and follow His teachings. To embrace Jesus, to commit to following Him, was to know and follow the Father. As much as any man can grasp intelligently about the Father, it was only possible by knowing Jesus. The whole focus of our human experience here is to focus on the path, not the incomprehensible destination.

There was something Philip thought he could grasp. Moses saw God, in a rather literal sense, on Mount Sinai. If Jesus could make that happen for them, surely they would need nothing else. They could walk in Moses' power. It was common for people to swear that they would not have been as unfaithful as the generation that wandered in the wilderness, if they had only seen what that generation had seen. It was not true, because seeing is not believing. All the proof in the world could not make one a servant of God. Had they spent all this time with Jesus and not understood that? The answer Jesus gave simply reasserted that the only thing they really needed to see was with spiritual eyes. The fullness of what a man needs to know about God is

available in the life and teaching of Jesus. What they knew and understood about Jesus was all they could know of the Father on this plane. The signs and miracles would help to clarify things, but it was proof only a newborn spirit could grasp.

Jesus had set aside His divine privileges to walk with them under Moses. Those signs and wonders were well within the grasp of any man who served God the way Jesus did. Indeed, these men would go on to do an even greater number of signs. The release of such power required that Jesus to go to the Father, having won a new Covenant in His blood. Thus, He could stand personally in the presence of the Father, at His Right Hand – the position of Executive Officer comes closest in our times. Jesus would ensure that the Father’s authority was placed upon everyone who embraced Him, embraced His teaching and mission. Anything at all needed for the mission would be granted, including mighty signs and wonders.

Jesus continues speaking in terms of the Kingdom and Divine Court in Heaven. To love one’s Lord was to desire whatever the Lord’s whims demanded. It was the picture of the most loyal servant standing ready to run and commit any act commanded. With this commitment in His hands, Jesus could go to the Father and call for the release of the Holy Spirit in a way not previously experienced on earth. He would come to make an eternal residence inside their persons, uniting with them in their souls, raising their dead spirits to life. From that time forward, God would deal directly only with those who had been so changed. The rest of the world would not be able to receive Him, because they would lack the faculty. Their spirits would still be dead. The disciples, however, would recognize this spirit easily, because it would be the Spirit of Jesus Himself, who would ensure that their Father never forgot them.

As adopted children of this Heavenly King, they would serve as members of the Divine Household. Such insiders always had a means of identifying each other that outsiders would miss. By the Presence of the Holy Spirit, they would have the Presence of Jesus, living above this world, even while residing in it through their bodies. They would then be able to discern the oneness with the Father. Their full faith and commitment to the business of the Kingdom, the mission of bringing God glory, would be proof of their filial piety. The ability to love and care about God’s Kingdom affairs was what it meant to know Jesus, to know the Father.

The other Judas (Jude) was puzzled by the idea of separation between what they would see compared to the rest of the world. What was the point of them seeing He was Messiah, if the rest of world didn’t know it? Wasn’t this all about bringing to Israel all the long-awaited promises of world dominion in holiness? His dominion was not on the level of human political power. Only those capable of loving Jesus, and desiring what Jesus desired, would be able to obey Him in the first place. It was necessary for the Person of God to live inside them. The rest of the world could not love Him that way, so would not make a home for Him inside. But what the rest of the world could understand about Jesus and the Father would be gained through those who did know Jesus. He would be manifested to the world through those who loved Him.

The problem was definition of terms. Jesus was gently calling them to a mystical, otherworldly mindset that was part of their cultural history, but one which the Hellenized leaders had long tried to bury. The very act of confusing them would compel them to remember. Jesus knew it was all puzzling, and above their level of understanding at that point. When He was gone, and

returned in the form of the Holy Spirit, they would have a new life inside them. That Life would do the heavy lifting in their spirits. He would feed back to their minds what they needed to know, bringing to life all these teachings that would, until then, sleep in their hearts. Jesus was leaving them with the promised shalom of Heaven. Not the mere earthly security, prosperity and health, but that of the Spirit. They saw how Jesus faced things without getting all tied up in knots, so they could expect to have the same serenity.

Thus, when He speaks of going away, and coming back in another form, it should be cause for rejoicing. For men committed to serving Him as their Lord and King, what makes Him happy should make them giddy. Of course, it was a little difficult for them to grasp just yet, so perhaps it would be a few days before they celebrated. He firmly promised that it would all make sense soon enough. For now, the time for talking was nearly past. Jesus refers to Satan as the de facto ruler of the world, coming to kill Him. Since the Devil's authority was limited to this world, there wasn't much he could do to genuinely harm Jesus, nor them.

Still, it had to come, because the whole world deserved one chance to see what divine love means. Loving the Father means making the ultimate sacrifice, as any good royal Son would do for His Father. Welcome to the New Kingdom of Heaven.

John 15

In vivid imagery, Isaiah had warned that Israel failed in her calling (Isaiah 5) to provide the fruit God had sought. If the symbol of fruit was simply more members of the kingdom, that requirement was satisfied when Israel's population increased. However, the image is that of bringing forth God's glory, of revealing Him more fully. In this Israel failed utterly. Jesus came to fulfill this purpose. Therefore, He was the True Vine, sent to bring about the true revelation of God. He would be the True Israel, and everyone who became a part of His new nation of hearts would be a part of that True Israel.

The Father is keeping an eye on things. Every member of the Kingdom of Heaven is an extension of Jesus, a branch on the Vine. If we cannot bear fruit – if we cannot manifest His glory – He will remove us from this life. Those of us who do bear this fruit of revelation can expect to suffer some losses. In viticulture, it is normal to clip off the excessive growth of fruitful branches, so that more nutrients are put into heavier fruit. It's not about us, but the fruit. Trimming and pruning is also called "cleansing". A great deal of this had already taken place in the disciples' lives.

During most of the year, a pruned branch abides in the vine, as the vine grows longer and stronger. During fruit season, those branches suddenly grow out and sprout fruit. Jesus warns about staying attached to the purpose of God's glory. He repeats the warning about there being no life for us if He is not living in us. However, by continuing to seek His glory, we are in a position to ask for more fruit. Only a fool sees here a blank check for their own desires. The context is clearly lifting up the name of Jesus; the fruit is His glory.

We can't imagine a Heavenly Father who did not love His only Son. In the same way does Jesus love those called to follow Him. His glory and fruit are for us to manifest that same kind of sacrificial love. Obedience is sacrifice, dying to self, and living to the divine purpose. Love is hard to imagine without the benefit of joy. The two are inseparable, so joy is also His fruit.

Indeed, all His commands could be summed up in that sacrificial love and joy. It marks us as members of His divine family. He reminds them it was not a matter of earning their place, but He chose them as the branches for the fruit of His glorious joy in love. That sort of fruit is the basis for what we know to ask, to be more like Jesus.

Our love for one another, that sacrificial love that glorifies God, will surely put us at odds with the world, the system that rules the lives of men on this earth. It's not as if all humanity hated Jesus; many would have made Him an earthly king. Rather, it's clear that He is pointing to the system which rules over men with anything but love. If we obey Jesus, we must reject that system of human rule, and it will hate us. We cannot presume to be any more at peace with such a world than was Jesus, our Master. If we embrace Him, cling to Him and His ways of sacrificial love, we will not fear such a system. It will persecute us, but it cannot change us. For all its pretense, no human government can ever understand God. In particular, the Jewish government of His day, even after hearing all His corrections of their false understanding of God's Word, refused to embrace any part of the truth. To hate Jesus is to hate the Father who sent Him. This simply fulfills that Word which they could not understand. They would kill Him for the very act of setting the record straight.

Jesus knew His death would be a frightening prospect for these men who followed Him. It was necessary to release the Holy Spirit, since that would be His own Spirit. As long as He had His earthly body, the Spirit was confined to Him alone. Coming down from Heaven without such a body would make Him available to His New Body, His followers. Naturally, His Spirit will simply call up His teaching, and produce in His followers His divine character afresh. These men had been with Jesus long enough to absorb more than they knew. They would produce the fruit of witness, of bringing His truth and glory to the world.

John 16

As they walked through the city toward the Kidron Valley, Jesus continued with the last few items in their teaching. They were already in some sorrow and confusion, and they felt the tension of the moment without quite being sure what it was all about. It doesn't help that Jesus has been using His typical parabolic speech. In this chapter, John relates how Jesus came as close to literalism as He could.

The Helper – the Holy Spirit – would change everything. Jesus had been explaining to them about the upcoming sorrows and tribulations connected with His death. The point in telling them was to ensure they weren't caught totally off guard when it came. Surely, they would be disowned by the Jewish leaders, even threatened with death. The leadership was so certain that such was God's will because they never knew God.

During the previous months of ministry, so long as it was not His hour to die, He was able to prevent the Jewish leaders from doing more than causing a scene. It wasn't necessary to warn the disciples, but now His time had come, and they were going to face it all. Surely their faces fell as He spoke these words, and they were no longer asking where He was going. Their sorrow was misguided. It was not just good, but utterly necessary for Him to die, and then return to Heaven. He reminds them again He cannot send His Spirit so long as it remains in His earthly body. He had to shed that body to release His Spirit.

Once the Spirit came, everything would change. Not just their little corner of the world, but the whole universe would be changed. However, that change would be rooted in the Spirit Realm, hardly perceptible to those in the flesh. Jesus describes three ways His Spirit would work. First, He would convict the world of sin. It would matter not a whit what a man believed, thought or did; if he didn't embrace Jesus as the Messiah, everything he did was sin. Second, He would convict the world of righteousness, redefining it as the sacrifice on the Cross. The foot of the Cross was the only righteous ground. All things would be measured by that standard, and nothing less could be called "righteousness." Third, the world would be judged because it remained under the rule of Satan, refusing to repent. Everything Satan tried to gain would evaporate, because it would be so vividly exposed; nothing could again deceive men who served God.

There were plenty of things Jesus might have added, but the men were simply not in any shape to hear them. When the Spirit came, that would also change. They would be able to hear from God for themselves, able to discern with God's discernment. He would be the voice of God inside them. The Spirit would bring about all the power and enlightenment they needed to glorify Jesus. There would be no barrier at all between them and God Almighty on His throne in Heaven. That's what the Holy Spirit does.

It sounded to the disciples as if Jesus were talking in parables again when He spoke of "a little while." They were debating amongst themselves when Jesus broke in with an explanation. At first, there would be sorrow very soon, while the Jewish leaders would be celebrating and congratulating themselves. Yet again a short time later, all that would be reversed. As with a woman giving birth, it's not pleasant during the process, but what a wonder it was afterward! They would be feeling pretty much the same as that. Once that new life was born in them, they would no longer need to ask for explanations. Indeed, it would require only that they turn to the Father inside themselves and understanding would be supplied. This was a new turn of affairs, for they had not previously been able to call on the Lord as associates of His Son. Notice that this business of asking comes in the context of seeking to understand how to live this new life, not for a bunch of stuff.

In due time all this parabolic language would become clear as glass, because communication from Jesus would be via the Spirit directly into their hearts. They would address the Father directly as His children of grace, not relying on a physical Jesus to play priest for them. By their embrace of the truth that Jesus was the Son of God, they gained the Father's acceptance as His children. Since He came down from Heaven and from the Father, it should be obvious why He needed to return thence.

Now it all made sense to them – or so they thought. Jesus knew they still weren't there yet, because the Holy Spirit was not in them yet. Indeed, in just a few hours they would all run away in fear, hiding where they could. They would leave Him to stand alone in the coming trials. Yet, He was never really alone. His Father never left Him. He was telling them directly and bluntly, because in due time they would understand by experiencing it for themselves. His real Presence would become a part of their very souls, and they would be lost in His serenity, His spiritual peace. The world would remain difficult, become even more difficult. However, He had broken the power of human fears and human governments over them. He would

become their true Lord and King; they would serve Him directly. His approval would be all that mattered.

John 17

As near as we can tell, the Upper Room was near the Eastern Wall of Jerusalem. The path out of the city toward the Garden of Gethsemane would almost certainly take them past the Temple Plaza, probably on the northern side. It's easy to see how Jesus would have seized the moment for this high priestly prayer.

It is hardly necessary now, nor would be then, for Jesus to address His Father aloud. Rather, this prayer was the one last act of instruction before the Cross. The soliloquy serves as a grand summary of all that John had explained leading up to this moment. To human ears this is almost repetitious. It seems the same words and phrases appear as in the previous chapters. Given this is largely for the sake of His disciples, at a time when they were still trapped somewhat by the limits of their human minds, it's not hard to understand why this was so important.

As always, the words themselves can be misleading. There is a certain ambiguity or fuzziness of terms, given no human language can fully convey spiritual truth. Jesus refers to both the Cross and His Ascension as His glory. Thus, this nebulous "hour" has come when Jesus knows the long and painful experience will culminate in suffering no man could describe. This was His glory, in one sense. Bearing all this, making no sense at all on a human level, was precisely the one thing that would make the Father's glory most apparent in purchasing our redemption from sin's grip. The paradox is that Jesus stands now just *outside* the Temple grounds, yet holding all God's authority over all Creation, particularly over all human authority. In the sense that Jesus could not turn back from this path, so the work had been done. Very near was the moment Jesus would forever nail His memory on the conscience of all humanity, and through that senseless suffering and death, set before the world the glorious grace of God.

In many smaller ways, He had already set that grace before the men who were near Him at that moment. Jesus makes much of how they came to be selected – they were gifts from the Father to the Son. They had embraced the truth He taught, knowing that it came down from the Father. They hardly comprehended at that moment all that it would require of them, but there remains a timeless quality to eternal things. They already had the truth, and it would not be long held back by any force on earth. Their human limits would soon be overcome. Once the work of the Cross had set them free, they would grasp the fullness of their oneness with the Father and the Son, through the Spirit. The only man lost from the group was the one lost from the beginning.

Jesus returns to the theme of joy equals love equals sacrifice equals the coming of the Holy Spirit. As soon as these men began to embrace spiritual things, they faced the hatred and rejection of their government, and the rejection of some parts of their own minds. Their hearts and spirits had begun the journey into Eternity. While leaving this world physically as well would be all joy for them, such was not the point of this whole exercise of discipleship. Rather, Jesus prayed that they would remain out of Satan's reach. No matter what evil came upon them physically, their spirits and minds would be safe. They would leave it all soon enough. Until then, they needed increasing purity. Not some external standard of purity, this was a call for

purity of commitment and loyalty to their Heavenly King. It would require restoring the supremacy of their hearts over their minds.

By this loyalty they would reach many others. Jesus prayed for those who would come to Him through their lives. Oneness in the Spirit included filling up the measure of those the Father would grant to His Son. When their time on earth is completed, Jesus reminds the Father that He looked forward to having them come to be with Him in Heaven. Nothing would more fully reward their faithfulness than to see the unspeakable heavenly glory of Christ in Eternity. Here at this awful moment, anticipating the suffering of the hours to come, Jesus was never more conscious of whence He came. We can't imagine the frustration Jesus felt as a man in seeing so clearly the truth that His nation rejected.

Having done all any man could do to declare this truth to the Jewish leaders, He knew that declaration would continue to live a life of its own through these men. They would not carry it on alone but would find that Jesus had never really left them, only His bodily manifestation. Soon, they would be the new bodily manifestation of Christ, living that divine love only the Father could grant.

John 18

John often skips over details in the other Gospels and adds his own. His choices may surprise us until we remember that otherworldly emphasis. Readers who have not yet developed this spiritual viewpoint would make far too much of the human experience of Jesus, with a tendency to make Him too much a human hero in His trials. John reasserts by his choice of material that Jesus was all about the Spirit Realm.

So it was that John tells us briefly where Jesus and the disciples were when the arrest took place. Judas led a very large party of Temple officials, Temple guards, and Roman cohort troops. John skips over Jesus' prayer alone in the Garden as adequately covered elsewhere. However, John reminds us of Jesus' divinity and absolute authority in all these things. First, Jesus had access to His Father's viewpoint in Heaven above, so no secret was hidden from Him. Second, He made one last expression of His divine authority to the men who rejected that authority. He demanded that they explain whom they sought. When they named Jesus of Nazareth, He answered as God: "I AM!" At this, they were forced to back off a respectful distance and prostrate themselves before the Almighty. Miracle or not, it was the same divine command of respect that kept the same folks from arresting or stoning Him until His hour had come. His hour came when He said so, not before.

Then Jesus asked again whom they sought, to nail down the legal principle that His disciples were not to be arrested. This fulfills His promise to keep them safe for the sake of future witness. Even Peter's blatant seditious act was ignored, but perhaps only because he chose to assault someone unarmed. While his willingness to fight probably arose from his own fear, Jesus was right to contradict Peter's promise to defend his Master – it was half-hearted at best. John identifies the unfortunate man for us. Jesus rebuked Peter for missing the whole point. Jesus was now ready to face the task His Father had appointed.

He went along voluntarily, and John makes the point that their first stop was the home of Annas, the former High Priest whom Rome deposed in 15 AD. John makes the connection for

us between Annas and the current High Priest, Caiaphas, who had accidentally prophesied the sacrifice of Jesus. So, this was not an official hearing, nor legal in any sense. However, Annas still bore tremendous influence, and was determined to have his part in this matter.

John notes that Peter followed him into Annas' courtyard. Legally, Peter could be classed a wanted man for his assault, never mind that Malchus was healed on the spot. Nothing had turned out as Peter expected, so he was totally out of his element, and fearful of real-world consequences. The first query he faced expected a negative answer. Peter joined the very men who had witnessed his crime in order to warm himself on the cold night.

Under the Covenant, a man who was High Priest kept that title until he died. We should not let this confuse us as we follow the narrative here, still in the home of Annas. It seems obvious Annas was seeking some evidence that he could present to the Sanhedrin, in keeping with their firm plans to have Jesus executed. Perhaps this Jesus would confess His plans to usurp legitimate authority, even lead an armed coup. Did He have such secret plans? Jesus insisted everything about Him was in the open, and there had been no secret teachings or instructions. A Temple guardsman there felt this answer was insufficiently obsequious and struck Jesus. Jesus noted that there was no legal ground for that, and the guard had nothing to say, nor did Annas. With that, Jesus was marched off to see Caiaphas.

John takes a moment to tell us how Peter fell deeper into the grip of his own human fears. Those nearby began to recognize him standing there by the fire. One asked a bit assertively. The second had a much better grounds for accusing Peter, being related to Malchus. Upon his denial, Jesus' prophecy was literally fulfilled. The warning that Jesus gave Him used Roman jargon about the various watches into which the soldiers divided their nighttime guard posts. Rooster Crowing was the term for the third watch, just before dawn, but Peter's memory was jarred by a literal rooster crowing. John tells us enough to reinforce his thesis of Jesus' divinity.

Skipping over the Sanhedrin Court, John tells us briefly of how Jesus was turned over to Roman custody. He also reminds us that this took place on the day of the Passover Feast, by noting that the Jews could not enter the Roman governor's residence that day, since he was Gentile. Pilate humored them, meeting the delegation outside in the street. The Jewish leaders had no case under Roman law, so Pilate told them to use their own Law. They informed him it was a capital case. Jews would have stoned Jesus, but He had prophesied that His execution would be Roman. There is solid evidence that this proceeding had been pre-arranged between Pilate and the Jewish authorities, but not so neatly tied up as the Jews had thought. Pilate decided to carry out a Roman investigation of charges of treason.

Did Jesus claim to be King of the Jews? Jesus knew Pilate had been manipulated, deceived by the Jewish leaders, and asked if Pilate really cared one way or another. Pilate denied any interest in Jewish politics. Why had Jesus' own government turned Him over the Rome? What had He done to stir them up? Pilate's commission from Rome required him to at least find out what was afoot. Jesus answered honestly, and in terms Pilate would surely grasp: Jesus was King in a spiritual sense, but was no threat to anyone's political authority. Well, could Pilate still hang things on this king business? Yes, strictly speaking, Jesus was born a king, but it was about ultimate truth, the sort of truth which needed no swords to advance His reign.

At this, Pilate realized this was none of Rome's concern. It wasn't even philosophically interesting to him personally. He announced to the Jewish leaders waiting in the street that there was nothing he could do legally. John doesn't spare much for the details, but notes that Pilate attempted to turn the tables on the Jewish leaders by appealing to the crowd about having this popular rabbi released in the customary gesture of good will in honor of Passover. Having already been primed by agitators, the crowd ended up calling for a real criminal, a very dangerous man named Bar-abbas.

Thus, John keeps before his reader's mind that this is all a scripted drama, and the only one truly free to choose was Jesus. Everyone else simply played their assigned roles, mostly as unwitting servants of God Almighty.

John 19

John demonstrates what matters by his sparse descriptions. Yes, we know that this trial before Pilate transpired on what is now called the Day of Preparation for Passover, which by Jewish reckoning began the night before, when Jesus and His disciples had their private Last Supper. The course of the day following is the time for preparing for the Passover meal itself, which takes place after sundown that evening. On the day Jesus died, the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Temple; He was the True Passover Lamb of God, the last sacrifice under the Law of Moses.

Having released Bar-abbas to the crowd, Pilate had Jesus scourged. While the Roman version is quite brutal, and the process grants the soldiers too much time to mock the victim, Pilate was hoping that this screaming mob of bloodthirsty Jewish leaders would be satisfied. Jesus was apparently not quite beaten to the edge of death, because He was still conscious enough to stand during the soldiers' abuse and mockery afterward. Pilate went back out into the street where the Jewish leaders were waiting, and we could suppose they and the crowd of onlookers heard the beating. Then Jesus is paraded before them in the fancy robe, crown of thorny green vines, and bleeding profusely from dozens of wounds.

Normally such a sight would end the matter, but Pilate underestimated the bitter hatred at work here. Make no mistake: Satan lived in the hearts of those men of Judah, for they had embraced his ways, having long before rejected their God for some caricature found in massive precise nit-picking over the words of the Law. It is the same overly precise picking at insignificant details that colors far too much of Western church theology and religion. It was this frame of mind which demanded that Jesus be executed without mercy. Pilate refused to be involved. Here, finally, the Jewish leaders revealed the core issue of their complaint: Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God.

Pilate then realized just how crazy this whole thing was, because what little he knew of the Judaism surely made this the ultimate sin, yet this claim was so typical of rulers historically. Jesus was hauled back inside where Pilate sat in his official seat of ceremonial authority. His question appears aimed more at getting Jesus to say something about this claim of divinity. Did Jesus claim to be from Heaven? Any answer He gave would not help Pilate personally, nor would it help him in this dilemma. Pilate warns Jesus that this silence could be fatal. Jesus responded by noting He was indeed from Heaven, for it was divine authority that mattered

here, not Roman. Pilate was being manipulated as a mere tool, but the blood guilt was actually on the hands of the Jewish authorities. Pilate struggled to avoid even this lesser degree of guilt, but to no avail. The Jewish leaders threatened to appeal to Caesar with a complaint that Pilate was derelict in his duty.

Pilate accepted his fate, as it were. Following official protocol, he pronounced sentence on Jesus for treason. To make sure they knew it was entirely their own decision, Pilate asked the crowd one last time. They had already been primed. It went so far that the Chief Priests committed what was normally considered blasphemy, by invoking Caesar as their legitimate ruler. Jesus was turned over to the crucifixion detail composed of Roman troops. John notes in passing that this was midday, using what for his audience would be standard Roman notation. We realize John skipped over a great deal of detail covered by the other Gospels, since it took half the day for Jesus to be finally led away to execution.

With few details John makes a point of discussing the charge publicly posted above Jesus' head. Pilate was in no mood to cooperate further in this travesty. Perhaps he's skewering the Jewish leaders by asserting that Jesus really should be King of the Jews, or perhaps he was simply being sarcastic. John sees the hand of God in this, as well as the prophetic fulfillment of how Jesus' clothing was disposed among the soldiers. Then John notes how Jesus appointed him to take up the care of His mother. Finally, he describes how Jesus actually died, fully in control. Jesus cried out in thirst, and a soldier gave Him a sip of the cheap wine Rome issued as military rations. He needed one last drink to wet His vocal cords so as to carry out the final act, by crying out in full voice for the whole world to hear: *It is finished!* Jesus did not last as long as most crucifixion victims, but all we need to know is that it was enough to pay for our sins.

Jesus gave up His Spirit and was truly dead. John makes it a point to describe enough detail to prove this. In particular, he offers his solemn testimony about the separation of blood and other body fluids, something seen only in truly dead bodies. Again, this fulfilled prophecy. The end of the matter was rather quiet and hurried. Two upstanding members of society, apparently members of the Sanhedrin, Joseph and Nicodemus, took care of the body with an eye to keeping the Law. Just a few hours remained before the Passover began at nightfall. The two men between them managed to properly wrap the body in linen winding strips dressed with a large amount of spiced gum Arabic, all according to their custom. One of them owned a tomb very nearby and they just barely made the time limit. John notes in passing that this tomb was a standard offering to God, something new, as yet unused for any other purpose.

Aside from making the obvious point that Jesus really was dead, John seeks to show his readers what really mattered. No man ever died as Jesus died, because no other man was the Son of God. Jesus remained the Master of all things even as He died. The one man involved with any real earthly authority recognized this, a pagan Gentile. Yet, the very People of God refused to recognize it, because they didn't know their own God. The day Jesus died was their last chance to make amends, and they spitefully rejected that chance. Their day ended, and they were not to be spared – passed over – any longer.

John 20

Jesus was dead and buried. As men and women not yet having the Holy Spirit to clarify things for them, His followers had up to the last moment believed Jesus was about to do something miraculous to change the political order of their day and revive the ancient meaning and observance of the Law of Moses. If they understood anything at all, it was how Jesus had set about correcting the meaning of the Law. The Jewish leaders had corrupted it horribly, and Jesus taught the true meaning. Surely this truth had to be brought into force! Then Jesus was arrested, tortured, and died.

In their minds, there was nothing keeping them from being arrested next. It was not simply an observance of the Sabbath laws, but a very real fear that this was not over which kept them cautious about showing themselves in public. Now in the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread, they weren't supposed to leave Jerusalem yet. Only now was it nibbling at the edge of their consciousness to wonder what they would do with their little fellowship. Their actions arise in this context.

It was before dawn that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb; John does not mention the other women, but their presence is assumed. However, this Mary is the central figure in what John has to show us. It was just light enough for her to realize the large stone covering the door was completely drawn away from the entrance of the tomb, not even close enough to be of any use as a door. As Jesus' body had been the only thing inside, she assumed it had been moved. She ran back to where Peter and John had gone to hide and told them the body was moved. On the one hand, Joseph of Arimathea may have simply moved the body, which had been placed in his tomb for the sake of convenience. More sinister possibilities surely ran through their minds, though.

Given the amount of time they all seemed to spend there, we can safely assume they had been hiding somewhere in the northeastern suburb of Jerusalem, typically called Bethesda. They had seen the hasty burial, and then went to the nearest safe place. That would put them just a short distance from where most new tombs of that era were built. Thus, they arrived just as the sun rose high enough for them to see clearly. The combined Gospel narratives make no sense if John wasn't considerably younger and somewhat smaller than Peter, arriving first at the tomb. It was cut into the rock below the level of the entrance, so John stooped down to see inside. Tombs in those days would have a single resting place with the feet facing out near the door. From his angle, John saw the collapsed casing of winding strips sealed by gum Arabic. Peter caught up and blundered on inside. He could see that the head covering was folded neatly, and had an even better look at the collapsed casing, no body inside.

For John, it was proof enough that there was nothing natural about this. Peter was less sure. In all of His teaching, Jesus had not yet explained how the Old Testament had prophesied of His resurrection. Rather, He had simply stated the fact, and it had just as simply gone over their heads. Whatever they may have been thinking, the men went to their quarters, instead of back to their hiding place. Mary Magdalene eventually got back to the tomb. She didn't go inside but stood outside weeping at her sense of loss. So deep was her sorrow that she did not recognize the two fellows sitting inside the tomb as angels. When they asked the cause of her distress, she told them. Another figure came up behind her, and she assumed he was the caretaker. A

Hebrew woman seldom made eye contact with a man unknown or unrelated to her, so she was still looking down. He asked the same question and she requested to know if he had moved the body, not wishing to impose on the wealthy Joseph any further.

It took Jesus calling her name, in a way she must have heard a hundred times, before she realized it was Him. She cried out a respectful title, rather like the English “My Lord” and hugged Him. Jesus was not worried about the physical contact but was using humor. He called for her to calm down, since He wasn’t gone yet, implying He would be around for some time yet. However, it wouldn’t be forever, so she needed to get cracking. She had an important mission – to go and make sure the other disciples knew that He was just about to ascend to Heaven. She carried out that mission immediately.

That evening, they all gathered secretly in the Upper Room to discuss this business of Jesus being alive again. Jesus Himself showed up without bothering to use the doors, which were locked. Most Jews believed in ghosts, and would surely think they were seeing one now, and it would not be good news. But Jesus told them to remain calm, proving beyond all doubt just who He was by the wounds they had all seen made. So, this is the miracle by which He would assert His authority over the Jewish leaders! Perhaps, but He had something else on His mind. He asked them to forget about all that and focus on a new mission. They were to go out and touch their world the same way He had. Then, He did something symbolic, by exhaling hard on them. It recalled the creative act of God first breathing life into Adam, but this was a New Creation, and a New Law.

Previously, forgiveness was a matter of Law. Now it was a matter of Spirit. The power of the Spirit about to descend upon them would give birth to a whole new order of things, symbolized by their new authority to decide by the Spirit whom to forgive. Yes, these men would lead a New Kingdom *on* earth, but not *of* the earth. It would be according to the new Law of the Spirit.

Thomas missed that meeting. When he heard the report of the others, he showed his character. He was objective, not driven by emotion, but driven without limit. He was not a man easily swayed by wild stories, but had come to believe in Jesus because he had been there and seen it himself. He was ready to die with Jesus, probably the only one of the Twelve actually capable of backing up that claim. Since they had all gone into hiding, who were they to convince him? So, at the next meeting after the Feast was over, he came to put the matter to rest. Same conditions, with the doors locked, and Jesus appeared as before. He invited Thomas to check for himself, to settle his doubts by whatever means necessary. Thomas was not a hard-head, but immediately confessed his renewed willingness to die, as it were. Jesus told Thomas in a round about way that it was time to stop dealing in hard evidence and human logic. If Thomas was to spread the gospel, how could he ask others to believe something on terms he would not have accepted himself?

With that, John points out the reason for this Gospel. People who need evidence will never get enough. Still, John presents enough evidence to probably win a court case. And if that weren’t enough, he could tell much more, but it wouldn’t help. Instead, John selected a narrow range of incidents to emphasize the point: Jesus is the Son of God. His message and power were from Heaven. John wasn’t trying to prove all this was true, but why it was important. This business of New Life in the Kingdom was not a matter of the mind, but of the Spirit and spirits. It was

the higher, ultimate reality to which all things God had done in the past was pointing. Reason and proof won't get you there, won't pave the road, won't even point the way. Only the impossible power which brought Jesus back to life can do it, because it's that kind of Life into which we are all drawn.

John 21

Seven of the disciples were idly waiting the promised meeting with Jesus, probably sitting in Peter's home in Capernaum. For lack of anything better to occupy their time, Peter returns to the one thing he knows best – fishing. Some of the others we know were fishermen, and the rest had probably worked at it some. They were seasoned professionals, working all night as all fishermen did in those days. Applying all their best skills, they caught nothing. When Jesus greets them from the nearest shore that morning; perhaps they mistook Him for an aggressive fish buyer. No, maybe this was a friendly surf fisherman, telling them where the fish were, advising them to drop their net over the right side of the boat. It wasn't simply catching fish there that mattered, but a sudden clear memory of catching more fish than was possible under ordinary circumstances.

The same thing happened some three years ago when Jesus first called them. They almost tore their nets that morning. The other three Gospels together tell how they had been following Jesus for a few weeks after that first meeting down in Judea, hanging around John the Baptist. Back up in Galilee, they were cleaning up after a night of fruitless fishing. Jesus had sat in the bow of one boat, asking that they push out a bit. He taught for awhile, then had the boys run a single drag of the net. They argued, but did so, and the nets were overloaded in just minutes. Peter knew then that Jesus was holy, because he was struck by the sense of his own impurity. That's typical when people first awaken spiritually, after which a clear sense of unworthiness persists. The world of the Spirit is the Land of Everlasting Repentance. They had hauled the catch in, began counting it, and started repairing their nets. It was then that Jesus called them to fish for souls of men.

John reminds us of that story, and by now we should understand the symbolism. All the human skill and experience in the world means nothing in the Kingdom if you aren't following Jesus. Obey divine guidance and you can't fail. They were still being called to fish for men's souls, not labor for food. So, John recognized this latter scene as a replay of that other day three years ago, but it was still Peter who fully committed himself to that knowledge. The rest of the men rowed in the smaller boat. Fishing always required two boats; one large vessel to hold the nets and fish, the other small one to stretch the net out, then dragging it back around, encircling the fish. The net was too heavy to haul into the larger boat, so they struggled to tow it close to shore where it could be dragged up on the beach by hand. Jesus had breakfast already cooking and wanted them to bring up some more fish. Peter showed his physical size and strength, and this time the net didn't tear, so they wouldn't be distracted by the mending task. A generous catch promised what lay ahead for spiritual fishermen.

Matthew described the Great Commission in words, but John shows it in symbols, and offers us this unique account of Peter's rehabilitation. Peter had denied Jesus three times and was again wrestling with his wounded conscience. All those years of bluster, never carrying through; how

could Jesus still use him to fish for souls? Three times Jesus asked Peter about his loyalty, and each time Jesus directed him to proceed with the task of shepherding souls. They were even now, no?

But there was more to it than this, for John indicates in his schoolboy Greek that there was a difference in the quality of love discussed here using two different words translated into English as the single “love.” Jesus asked Peter if his love was sufficient to sacrifice for Him. Peter’s answer was an honest estimation, and he limited the quality of his love to friendship. No more boasting. On the third round, Jesus changed his question, dropping down to Peter’s level. Could he love well enough to be friends? Peter understood the reduction, and it shamed him. But he stayed honest and affirmed he could be Jesus’ friend. Jesus said that was good enough for now. All too soon, when Peter was older, he would be led away to sacrifice for Jesus. Peter began as a big talking, big planning, wavering and unstable man, entirely too worried what other people thought without knowing himself well at all. Not anymore; Peter knew himself. That other man was dead, replaced by someone who was worthy of trust in Christ’s eyes, worthy to be called a stone – Peter.

Peter understood correctly that this was meant to vest him with leadership of the remaining disciples. But Peter knew John was much closer to Jesus. He asked what John’s place and John’s end was. Jesus replied that Peter didn’t need to concern himself with that, because John’s mission was different. Peter would be executed, but John’s end was God’s concern. What if Jesus wanted John to live until His Return? By the time John published this Gospel, he was the only one of the Twelve still living, and by a wide margin at that. There were silly rumors arising from that conversation long ago with Peter, that John would indeed live until the Return. It would have created a lot of hysteria, as John was obviously not going to live forever, and could probably die any day.

It was at that point John reveals he was the “disciple whom Jesus loved” – His best friend on a human level. He walked and talked with Jesus and saw it all. He quite obviously knew Jesus personally better than anyone else. Stack up all the facts of Jesus’ words and actions, and you could not record them all. John wrote what mattered most for those under his leadership at the close his life. His Gospel was aimed at portraying Jesus to a church far removed from the events portrayed, both in time, place and culture. Understanding John’s Gospel requires moving from the worldly rationalist viewpoint to the spiritual, even mystical frame of reference; from the human rational to the heavenly symbolic logic; from the precise literal narrative to the parabolic. There was no other way to grasp the Kingdom of Heaven.