

Jesus

The King and His Kingdom

Dedication

To my wife Edie, the love of my life, my companion, friend, partner in ministry, mother of our five children, grandmother, and great grandmother.

We have labored, struggled, and learned life's lessons together. In the midst of struggle we have learned the great and wonderful truths of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Holy Spirit has been our primary teacher, and my wife has been the filter through which all truth is proven pure. Her love has sustained me through the years as we walked together through the valley of adversity, the classroom of instruction in the ways of the Lord. Though I am the author of this book it is the product of our lives and ministries together; we cannot be separated; we are one.

Acknowledgments

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I also want to thank the people the Lord sent my way needing the kind of ministry that allowed the development of the revelations and skills to apply them.

This book really belongs to the Lord; I am only a vessel through which it came. I have no right to claim ownership of the insights that have been so freely given to me. Freely I have received, so freely I give. I only reserve the right to monitor any commercial use of this work.

Preface

It is with humility that I commend this book to you. It is the result of a life long pursuit of the knowledge of the Lord. It is born out of suffering, the sort of which comes from toil and struggle.

I am the father of five children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, the husband of one wife, my adolescent sweetheart who became the mother of all five of my children. I entered the pastoral ministry at a young age and worked at the carpentry trade for a living. Later I ministered as a lay minister and at other times a lay worker in the church.

The call of God never left my life, but the cares of this life for a time overshadowed the call. There was a point at which I lost sight of the call for a time, but God sent a woman into my life that God used in a prophetic ministry. I was at a friend's home one evening visiting when our first introduction occurred. She had been a missionary to Mexico, but was in the states at that time. The evening we met soon became a prayer meeting. We all knelt in prayer for a while when all at once I was aware of her presence standing behind me in earnest prayer. She soon began to speak a message to me I will never forget; the Lord speaking through her began to tell me how displeased he was with my life. I considered myself a good Christian at that time, as good as any I knew at least, so the question was, "What did he mean?" As she continued, it became clear that the message was not a message of condemnation, but rather, invitation. The Lord showed the woman my frustrations and how I had sought in vain to solve the problems I faced, and that he planned to minister instruction to me. The Lord said that there was a void in me that was being protected and kept until now and that he was going to fill it.

The days, months and years that followed revealed that what was spoken to me was indeed the message of the Lord. From that day onward my life was different. The Lord had gotten my attention and began a process of unfolding the scriptures to me in many unique and inspiring ways. I have often marveled at the creative ways the great teacher, the Holy Spirit, has employed in the process of teaching what he wanted me to know.

The contents of this book are not my own; they are God given. Though other godly writers inspired some of the material, most of it came by the ministry of the Holy Spirit opening my understanding to one great truth after another. To God be the glory, great things he has done.

This book is written to those hungering to know the Lord and to those desiring to see him in the light of the scriptures.

This book is not a commentary though the format lends itself to a reference work. The intent is that it be read as one would read any other book, from start to finish, as it is a continuing revelation.

May the Lord Christ Jesus, make himself real to you and enrich your life as you read this book.

Pastor W. Richard (Dick) Patterson.

All scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

Part One

Laying the Foundation

Chapter One

Looking at the Problem

What is Man? To what depth have we fallen? Andrew Jukes in his book *Names of God* wrote, “What is it that we do not know, and which we are all slow to learn? Only two things: we do not know ourselves: we do not know God.”

In our pursuit of the knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven, we must come to understand that the kingdom is not at all like any kingdom of this world. To enter the kingdom of Heaven will certainly require some changes on our part, changes that will involve the ways we think, the attitudes of our hearts, and the affections, the dependencies and the motivations of our lives.

The Kingdom of Heaven is based on a concept which when understood will bring understanding of the great and mysterious ways of God.

It is not difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, yet there are many who will not enter. The way that leads to its gate is too narrow, and the gate is too small. We cannot pass through to that treasure beyond unless we fit through the door. What is required is so simple, yet it seems too much to ask. It all comes down to the heart; can we let go of those affections, and dependencies, and the need to possess or control that which is of this world?

We may not at once understand how created things might prevent our entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, but there is help if we can accept it.

Jesus gave us a very insightful teaching about two men who visited the temple one day. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector, an obvious sinner. The Pharisee, a very religious man, was also a sinner but didn't know it.

Jesus had a way of cutting through the religious facade and getting right to the heart of the matter. Ironically, the obvious sinner is seemingly closer to entry into the Kingdom of Heaven than the Pharisee.

The Pharisee is typical of a whole class of people who are religious, who think all is well, but lack something very important. Surprisingly, religious practice, forms of worship, membership in a religious denomination, Christian education, family tradition, and even a proclamation of God's existence are not the necessary ingredients of salvation. Had it been any of these, the Pharisee surely would have been justified. He was of the right religion, a practicing Jew, educated in his religion, and was a Pharisee. He was conscientious about his way of life; in fact, he was proud of his conduct in life! He was grateful he had received such a rich heritage.

Jesus, however, saw something that few men really see. He saw a wicked heart that had never changed. The desires to do evil were still there, though restrained. The outward expressions had been restrained by strict adherence to the law.

Some, upon reading this parable, will say that the sin of the Pharisee was self-righteousness, but that doesn't stand up to careful study.

This man had been taught that righteousness came by obedience to the law. Apparently this man had done it all. Here he stood in the presence of an all-knowing God with a conscience that did not condemn him. He was not ignorant about God. Jews knew all there was to know about him! He was ignorant about himself! He failed to see that restraining the outward expressions of sin does not alter the true problem. The problem is that the heart of man is desperately wicked.

The tax collector, through his lack of conscientious adherence to religious practice, cut through all the outward requirements of the Law and made his appeal to God's mercy.

Justification was granted to this man in sharp contrast to the Pharisee. Again, I call attention to the words of Andrew Jukes, "Two things we don't seem to know, that we are so slow to learn; first, we do not know ourselves, and second, we do not know God." Have we failed to comprehend that without the Spirit of Divine Life living inside of us, we are left with basic needs and problems that can never be solved or met? Do we know that apart from God we lack the Spirit of Divine Life, and that we can never be acceptable to God because it is not in us to meet his righteous requirements?

What answer do we find in God that the Pharisee missed? Wasn't it because the Pharisee didn't understand his need that he couldn't comprehend the significance of the words of Jeremiah the prophet when he prophesied concerning a new covenant that God would make with the house of Israel? He lacked the understanding of the new birth that was required to fulfill the promise that, "he (God) would put his laws into their minds and write them in their hearts?" (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

All who come to Jesus, as the tax collector came to God in the temple, laying all pretenses aside and confessing their deep need, will find grace to pardon, and power to cleanse their hearts and minds. We must come to Jesus, in whom the Apostle John declared was "life", and that "life" was the light of men. (John 1:4) Indeed, the life that was missing is what is so desperately needed, and its restoration to humanity is the hope we all need.

This is the Good News: that which was denied us as the result of the fall has been fully restored to us in Christ. Do we comprehend our need? Should we snatch this truth and run? Should we assume that knowing this has made it a reality in our lives? Truth is not always easily comprehended; and even when we think we see it, the application may evade us.

How deep is our need? There is a considerable difference between hearing a truth and experientially knowing its reality. When God is ready to reveal a truth to us, he must first set the stage.

Chapter Two

Man Has a Problem; God Has an Answer.

Gen. 22:1-13

Let's consider a very special man in God's plan, Abraham. Abraham would later be called a friend of God. Through him God would reveal some very important truths we all must know, and from him would come the Savior of the world.

God had a very special truth to reveal to humanity, and Abraham was the one chosen to reveal it. Thus, God instructed Abraham to take his son Isaac, whom he loved, to a certain worship place that he would show him. When they reached the place Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. It was his custom to do this as an act of worship.

Then he did a very unusual thing; he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood!

Next, he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, warning him not to kill his son. The fact that Abraham was willing to make this sacrifice was all that God required. Then Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Gen. 22:9-13)

Imagine! This man who, upon hearing the command of God to leave his country, his family and whatever benefits his life in Ur might offer to him: a man who had struck out in blind faith with only a promise that God would meet him, still needing a test to evaluate his commitment. Or was it a test?

What seems to be a "test" or "trial," that is, some occasion of suffering, is really, after all, God's means of bringing us to a greater revelation.

Job, another great man of scripture, was also called upon to endure a severe trial. This trial was not to see what was wrong with Job; God had already said he was perfect. Rather, it was to manifest what was right with Job. Job like so many of us did not really know the God he served, he had only heard of him with the hearing of the ear. God wanted Job to know him and the trial brought him into a more intimate relationship.

So Abraham was called to the mountain of the Lord, not because Abraham lacked in "commitment" or "faith," but rather that God might have the occasion to reveal to Abraham his need for a provision of a divinely supplied substitutionary sacrifice.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they became aware of their nakedness, and upon hearing God walking in the garden, fled to some trees to hide from the presence of God. This reaction to God was due to their newly awakened consciences. Their sense of shame caused them to sew inadequate aprons of fig leaves to hide themselves. Their sin made them fear God, so they fled to what seemed most likely to hide them; the foliage of the trees. (Trees represent hiding among strong things, something man has been doing ever since; education, occupations, talents,

wealth, influence, family, friends, clubs, or gangs.) The void of a lost relationship has driven man to seek to satisfy his deep need, filling his life with everything but what is needed. Sometimes he runs to substances to numb his senses (symbolized by fig leaves), and at other times hiding behind a facade of pride, self-sufficiency or reckless abandon and rebellion. Yet God in his great love had a plan whereby mankind could once more enter into a life-giving relationship with him.

What happened on the mountain, in region of Mariah, was that God was showing Abraham how he was going to meet his need. This is the same need that all men feel in the presence of God, as a result of sin.

When Abraham looked and saw a ram caught by its horns, it was God's answer to the need first experienced by Adam after he had sinned, and shared by all who have come after him. He fled to trees to hide from God, but trees could not hide him; they were inadequate to cover his sin. God in his love sent a ram to demonstrate once more, that God would provide his own lamb by sending his son to redeem mankind.

The place where Abraham built his altar is believed to be, either the location of the temple in Jerusalem, or quite possibly, the very spot where Jesus' cross stood.

Abraham and God became friends that day on a level few men have experienced. Imagine the pain that was in the heart of Abraham as he lifted the knife to slay the very son, whose existence was a miracle of major magnitude! What could be the reason? I am sure, what Abraham learned about substitutionary sacrifice that day could not have been learned in any other way.

The added bonus was that Abraham and God would always share the knowledge of what it means to place the son you love on the altar of sacrifice. God didn't require him to suffer the actual death of his son, God gave him a ram (Jesus) instead, but it was close enough. They now had something in common; Abraham felt the pain in his father heart. God would one day have to give his son (Jesus) for real, and on that day God would have a friend who would understand, Abraham.

Chapter Three

Four Candidates for King

1 Sam. 16:1-13

King Saul was Israel's first king. Previous to King Saul's reign as king, God had been considered Israel's king. Saul had been anointed by the prophet Samuel as Israel's first king upon the insistence of the people of the nation who wanted a king like other nations had, but later God rejected him due to his lack of obedience to God's instructions given through Samuel the prophet. Therefore God sent Samuel to Jesse's house to anoint a successor to the throne.

Before Saul had been anointed king, God had exercised his kingship by working through individuals, sometimes known as prophets and sometimes known as judges. These were individuals who were in a special position with God and had a measure of authority as his representatives. Samuel the prophet was the last of these special people.

Saul was a desirable candidate for king because he was physically a very tall man as compared to the other men of the nation. As king, he soon developed into a capable soldier and had good leadership qualities.

Saul was no doubt pleasing to the people, but not to God. He did what good kings do; he tried to please the people and God as well. Saul seemed to want the best of both worlds, but God will not allow that. Saul made a pretense of wanting to obey God; but when confronted with a choice of either pleasing God or pleasing the people, he chose the people. What was in his heart became manifest in his actions.

God had a plan that went beyond simply having a king who was "a good old boy." Had that not been the case, Saul would have been a good choice.

Saul was actually a pretty good king, as kings go. Yet, God was not pleased with him. It wasn't Saul's actions so much as his heart. Saul's attitude toward God was shallow; he only wanted to please him enough to get by. Saul did not want God angry with him, but he didn't really love God either.

God was looking for a very special kind of king to head a lineage of kings. It would be from this lineage that Christ would come. This was a very special prize, but Saul was not chosen to be this King. His compromising heart disqualified him. He came so close, but missed it so far.

Saul became, what is known as a "type," (that is something that symbolizes a theme or teaching in Biblical thought) of the flesh of man. No matter how good we try to be, we will always fall short of pleasing God when we try the fleshly way! The flesh (or the fallen natural nature of man) can never please God because it has been infected by sin. Only those who learn how to fall on the grace and mercy of God can please him.

Saul was still king, but his destiny was now determined. He had lost out. God was looking for another king.

Samuel was commissioned to anoint a king to receive the kingdom. He took a horn and filled it with oil, then went to find God's choice for king. Samuel was sent to Jesse's house.

The first king God had given Israel had been in response to the desire of man, but this new king would be in response to the desire of God.

As Samuel arrived at the house of Jesse, a problem soon became evident. Jesse had eight sons! Which one should he anoint?

The first son Samuel saw was Eliab (Eliab means almighty father) and he looked very much like a king. Samuel thought:

"Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord."

But the Lord spoke to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (I Samuel 16:6-7)

Next, Jesse called Abinadab (Abinadab means generosity), but God rejected him as well.

Then Jesse brought Shammah before Samuel (Shammah has two possible meanings, the most common was ruin, desolation, consternation, or waste. A more obscure meaning was wonderful thing probably the intended meaning in this context), but God also rejected him.

And so it went until seven sons passed before Samuel, each receiving the same rejection.

Samuel then turned to Jesse and asked if he had any other sons. Jesse replied,

"There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

"So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with fine appearance and handsome features." Then the Lord said, "Rise anoint him; he is the one." (I Sam. 16:11-12)

Now let's look at what we have here. We have eight possible candidates for king. All of them are of the same lineage. Any one of them could have been selected to carry the promise of the coming Christ.

There is, however, a special use of numbers here that is noteworthy.

First, I notice the number of sons. Jesse had eight. The number eight is used symbolically in the scriptures. It was on the eighth day of a male baby's life that circumcision was performed. The first day of a week was some times referred to as the eighth day of the week, when it followed a Sabbath week of purification ending on a Sabbath day. In that case, it symbolized a new beginning.

There were, no doubt, many families in the history of Israel who had eight boys. That fact in itself is not significant. It is only significant when it is connected to an important sequence in the Biblical story.

We also have another number in this story, the number four. The most common way the number four is used seems to be in connection with government or governments.

There are, however, instances in the scripture where the number four is used in a rather unique way. The book of Proverbs contains a good example. In chapter thirty the sayings of Agur are given. Beginning in verse fifteen and continuing through verse thirty, he gives groups

of things or ideas. He says, “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say enough.” In this passage there are several such groupings, and in each case “the three” are used to set the stage for the primary subject, the fourth.

This is what I see in this story of the anointing of David to be king.

Now let’s look again at what we have here. If the meaning of names can teach us anything, then we should take special note.

The first three sons are named and each was a candidate to become king.

The first son to pass before Samuel is Eliab. His name suggests a great quality for kingship; it means, “almighty father.” If his name suggests what qualities we might expect from him, then, this man would be a very strong candidate. Strength and wisdom, combined with the physical attraction mentioned, would make him a candidate of choice.

The second son to pass before Samuel was Abinadab. His name means generosity. His platform for election to be anointed King would be his “share the wealth program.” Such a candidate is always hard to beat since generosity is a very popular characteristic.

Surely one of those first two would be the one! But wait! Don’t count Shammah out! He’s the “Wow” guy! Mister Right. You know the type; he always says what everyone wants to hear. He knows how to dress, he’s good looking, and charm seems to drip from him like honey from an overfilled honeycomb. This guy has class.

Now, surely one of these would be God’s choice. But no, God did not choose these men, or any of the following four. Who then would be king? These men were all born with kingly qualities.

Poor Samuel; he must have begun to wonder if he was really hearing God by now. Did God send him? If so, was he hearing God right? Or, did God know what he was doing?

Finally Samuel spoke to Jesse and asked him if he had any more sons. “‘Yes, the youngest, but he is a shepherd boy.’ ‘Send for him, we will not sit down until he arrives’.” (1 Samuel 16:11) When David arrived, the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; he is the one.” (1 Sam. 16:12)

Once more we see our hearts laid bare. Once more we see the contrast between what we value and what God values. As we look at Eliab’s appeal we are reminded of what John said about the lust of the eye. Eliab looked so strong and handsome. We see Abinadab’s appeal to the lust of the flesh; how nice it would be to get something for nothing. And then there is Shammah appealing to the pride of life. These things, said John, are not of the Father, but of the world. (1 John 2:16)

But whose choice would David be? What appeal would he have? What kind of King would a shepherd boy make?

His appeal was not to man, but to God! He had a heart after God’s own heart! He loved God. He understood God. He often spoke for God; and when he sinned, he knew how to repent! It was David who said,

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and

blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
(Ps. 51:7-10)

This was the man God wanted to be king! From him, God would give a Son, a Son who would bring back to man the means of access to the Father, a Son in whom life would exist, and that “life” would be the light of the world.

What sort of king do we look for today? How do we see Jesus?

Do we see him as an Eliab, one who always has an answer to our problems; one to hold us when we hurt; and to protect us when we’re in danger?

Or do we see him as an Abinadab who can feed us when we’re hungry, clothe us and bless us?

Do we see Jesus as a Shammah, one who dazzles us with his glory?

I’m convinced that he does all those things, but that’s not the kind of king he is. Jesus is the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. This kingdom does not answer to the natural cry of man. This kingdom answers to the heart of God!

To enter it requires change. We cannot dictate its form or style. And yes, we can miss out on this kingdom. If our heart seeks an Eliab, Abinadab or a Shammah, we will never have Jesus as our King! Even though he is everything they represent, seeking him for those reasons will ultimately separate us from him! This kingdom requires a pure love of God as the motivating factor in our quest. We enter because we love the king, not because we love what he does!

Chapter Four

Parable of the Trees

Judges 9:8-15

A basic understanding of the principles of rule is very important to a proper understanding and appreciation of the Kingdom of Heaven. For this understanding we turn to a story about trees.

This little story sets forth the very essence of the underlying principles of both the kingdoms of men and the Kingdom of Heaven. The story in Judges 9:8-15 was told by a son of Gideon who was the rightful heir to the position of power in the nation of Israel after his father's death.

He had a brother who decided to seize power on his own and the result was a power struggle in midst of which this parable about trees was spoken.

He tells of four trees all approached by the trees of the forest requesting them to become king of the forest. Each of the first three, the olive, the vine, and the fig tree declined because they didn't feel that they possessed what would be required to be a king.

The fourth was the thornbush and its answer was different. He responded that if the trees were really serious about wanting him to be their king then they should come and put their trust in his shadow, otherwise fire would come out of the thornbush and devour the trees of the cedars of Lebanon.

The first three trees responded to the invitation to become a king in the manner in which we could expect them to respond, being sensible and good trees. To be a king one must be capable of governing.

All human governments operate on the understanding that human beings are basically rebels and must be controlled by a set of laws, and a means of enforcement of those laws.

If you are going to be successful, it is also helpful to have a charismatic personality.

A good king will appeal to the pride, greed or insecurity of the people. He will rule by popularity and power.

The three trees, the olive, the fig, and the vine in our story, knew it was not in them to rule by popularity or power. To do so would have required some very basic changes in their natures that would not be possible, so they acted in wisdom and declined to be king.

The thornbush was like the three trees that preceded him; in that, he did not wish to comply with the obvious need to change who he was and what he was like to become the kind of king that was obviously needed. He was different, however, in that he offered a different solution to the problem. In essence, what the thornbush said was, "All right, I'll be your king, but you trees will have to change. You will have to humble yourselves even lower than I and trust in me. Otherwise judgment will fall and consume you."

What a message is contained in this little parable! Imagine a kingdom based on the principle of loving submission! Imagine a kingdom where the burden of change is not on the king, but on those who are the subjects of the kingdom and who out of love for the king willing adopt change. Such a kingdom can result when the people understand the king is able and willing to provide all the answers, to all the needs, of all the people. But this is not the current case with the kingdoms of this world.

The question is, what possible answer can a thornbush provide? Can a thornbush inspire the sort of dedication that would cause others to lay down their lives for it? What kind of appeal would a thornbush have? Could this be our introduction to the nature of the “true” king who has the right to claim this kind of devotion from his subjects?

The prophet Isaiah had some words to say about the one who was to come;

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

Could it be that these words were written about the coming Christ? Is this the same Jesus set forth in the gospels? O Yes, I am sure it is!

However, the Jesus I have heard proclaimed of late seems to be a different Jesus from what the prophet set forth. The Jesus that is so popular today seems to answer to the cry of Israel to the prophet Samuel,

“Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all other nations have.” (I Samuel 8:5)

The Jesus I hear proclaimed seems to have all the answers for all the desires of mankind. It seems that all we have to do is believe, and health will spring forth, money will flow and happiness will be ours.

The apostle Paul seemed to have a different picture of Jesus in mind when he wrote with tear-filled eyes,

Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil. 3:18-21)

If the thornbush message has relevance to the Kingdom of Heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ as king, then it is clear that to become a part of his kingdom we ourselves will have to make the necessary changes that must be made.

Just how radical are these changes? Is it just a matter of adopting a new morality, or should I say, going back to the old one? “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” etc.? (Exodus 20:13-16) The apostle Paul seems to have a much more revolutionary thought in mind when he wrote the letter to the Galatians in which he said,

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 5:17)

Paul’s testimony does not sound like a simple quick fix in which we repeat a sinner’s prayer and shake a preacher’s hand, and then suddenly everything is all right. Paul, like Jesus, used strong words to describe what happens when man accepts faith, words such as; “I press on to take hold”, “I consider them loss”, (possessions or past accomplishments), and “I press toward the mark.” (See Phil. 3:7-14) Other words spoken either by Jesus, or Paul, or both, in various locations are; die, forsake, follow, obey, and believe in me. These are words that express more than a ritualistic, therapeutic, conscience salving experience. Salvation then transcends the idea that its attainment is simply getting rid of destructive habits or sins or being released from a conscience that is sick with guilt. Paul indicates that “The life I live in the body” is something totally different from what once was. (Gal. 2:20)

Is this radical change the main idea in the message of the thornbush? Can we say, “O, thornbush king, I do trust your shadow, I no longer live, but you live in me?” Should our life commitments be based on a similar trust?

Part Two

The Kingdom of Heaven

Introduced

Chapter Five

Jesus Son of David

Matt. 1:1-16

The New Testament begins, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1:1) I find it very enlightening that the author of the Gospel of Matthew began his gospel by associating the name of Jesus with both David and Abraham.

His gospel presents to us a marvelous picture of Jesus, the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew constantly draws the discerning reader to truth after truth about a kingdom that is not of this world. In this kingdom great ones are like little children. This kingdom lies at the end of a narrow road with a small gate. It is like a treasure hidden in a field or like a fine pearl of great value.

Matthew thus instructs us through the words of Jesus that though “life” is in this kingdom and it’s of very great value, it also may not be as easy to see as some might suppose. But to those who hunger for it, to those who seek it, to those who look for it, and to those who value it, it can be found; and though the cost of it is everything we have, it can be obtained.

To connect Jesus to David is to connect him to the qualities of kingship found in this shepherd king. Jesus was David’s Son, the promised heir to the throne as Isaiah prophesied,

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isa. 9:7)

He was indeed David’s Son, yet he was also Abraham’s Son. His lineage has greater significance in the spiritual lessons taught than in the legal rights implied. Many could have come claiming lineage rights to the throne of David, and all would have also been Abraham’s sons; but Jesus had even greater qualifications necessary to claim the throne of David. He was also tied to the spiritual hope of a Savior that came through Abraham.

It was to Abraham that God had revealed the substitutionary lamb, and it was Abraham who was asked to offer Isaac his son from whom Christ would come. (In Jewish thought, a father carried all his descendants in his body, and when a child was born, the child would then carry those who would come from him; each descending child would then also be his child.) Jesus was therefore the son of both of these men and because Isaac was offered to God, God was then also the Father of Jesus! Though the natural lineage was necessary to the claim of Jesus to be the Christ and the coming king, it was the higher role, the tie to the eternal plan of salvation that was the compelling qualification. Without this qualification, Jesus would have been a mere man, a great teacher, preacher and healer, but not the savior. The hope of the world hangs on the truth of the words of the angel, “they will call him Immanuel” - which means, “God with us.” (Matt. 1:23)

What a profound truth about God was revealed in the scene just described; Abraham gave Isaac to God, placing him on the altar as God had asked, and instead of losing a son he gained the right of the lineage of Christ! Whenever God asks us to give our treasure to him, he will return it blessed!

Some of you, dear readers, have lost loved ones prematurely, do not grieve as the world grieves, they will be returned to you, only in a blessed state, imperishable, and immortal, without defect or afflictions. God is just and the justifier of the righteous. You can trust safely in him who loves you with an everlasting love.

Chapter Six

The Virgin Birth

Matt. 1:17-25

The occasion of the birth of Jesus is filled with wonder and controversy. It is so hard for the mind of man to comprehend the miraculous. To believe in the virgin birth of Jesus is as difficult as to believe in a God who could create the universe. Our minds are so focused on the present world with its laws of physics that it is almost impossible to comprehend a kingdom where the laws of physics are completely different. Yet the Bible story is full of instances in which we encounter powers that are “other world” in nature. It is my understanding that there is a whole realm that exists which is governed by different laws than the laws that govern this world.

I heard this truth discussed in a movie published by Moody Bible Institute’s science department. The film participants discussed the resurrected body of Jesus with its capability to go through walls without opening the door. It didn’t seem absurd to them because they recognized that it is possible for such to take place if the laws of physics are altered. To demonstrate, they called attention to the fact that light can pass through some objects but not others. Glass, for example, will allow light to pass through, but wood will not; why? Both are solids, yet there is a difference in their molecular structure’s reaction to the energy of light.

To accept the Kingdom of Heaven as not being governed by the laws of physics that we are accustomed to is to open the door of understanding to what cannot be explained in our usual way.

The Bible speaks of angels who have the ability to appear and then leave without any obligation to the laws of physics that govern us. They cause things to happen that we cannot explain within the parameters of laws that restrict us. Events in the life of Jesus constantly went beyond the limits of our meager knowledge.

His life even began with happenings that demonstrate the truth of which I speak. It is my belief that it is entirely possible that another realm exists within the very space in which we live. There is so much we do not know. Even within the realms of laws that we know control us, we have found there is far more than was ever thought to be. True, we are able to perceive the existence of things around us by the means of our senses. We can see light. We can hear sounds. We can taste, smell and touch, and by these means we know. But what about what we cannot see, hear, taste, touch or smell? Do other things not exist because we cannot perceive their existence?

We all know that electricity exists; yet we cannot perceive it unless we experience the results of what we call electricity.

Between the frequencies we call light, and the frequencies we call sound there is a vast gap. Only in the last hundred years or so have we begun to understand certain phenomenon with the aid of technologies and instruments we have created.

Scientists are rushing madly in an effort to catch up with God! Yet, our ability to create is still limited to what already exists. Great discoveries are still only insights into what has already been created.

When man encounters something that suggests that there is more in existence than what he is able to comprehend, the idea seems beyond him and so his reaction is denial.

The story of Jesus is a story that challenges all our understanding of what actually exist. However, the mythical gap that exists between science and religion should be exposed as a lie of major proportions. I do not believe that there ever has been a miracle that is not founded upon very real laws. Instead, the problem, in my mind, is that science is too narrow in its concepts to understand that God can interact with this realm any time he so desires.

When we accept that this interaction can and does happen, we are then able to truly believe. When we read the story of the virgin birth, we are able to accept it, not merely as a matter of faith, but rather as a matter of fact! If there is any question as to the reliability of a story, we will then investigate the supportive evidence to see if it is valid. Thus it is no longer a question of whether or not miracles happen, but whether they did occur. And when one did occur, we understand that it was the result of a direct interplay between two realms, the present world and the Kingdom of Heaven.

The fact of the virgin birth of Jesus does not stand alone as the only miracle in the Biblical story. Our confidence in the reality of his divinity is based on the sum of all the evidence of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of this man who was God made flesh and sent to dwell for a while among us.

There is a place called heaven that is not made of the substances of this world, and yet it is a real place. Those who populate it are real as well; yet the substances of their bodies are different from ours. They once lived here; that is, the saints or people of God did. Some people imagine that heaven is far away, past the most distant star. I don't think so. I think it merely exists in a different realm. We may find that we occupy the same space, but we can't see into that realm with our eyes, except in visions.

When the day comes for each of us to make that journey to our eternal abode, we may find that it wasn't distance that was traveled, but rather that structural change and composition occurred.

The turmoil that Joseph experienced when learning of the impending birth of Jesus was very understandable, but one glimpse of the heavenly being changed all that. He then took Mary to be his wife and became the earthly father of Jesus in all legal senses.

Chapter Seven

Jesus a King?

Matt. 2:1-23

The life of Jesus was marked from the very beginning. He was not a welcome visitor to all the people of the earth!

There were wise men in the east that recognized that a very special birth had occurred and so set out to find this great king. When they arrived at Judea, they went to Herod the king of the region to find out where this young king was. They naturally assumed that Herod would know all about it. They probably thought he was a close relative of the king and that they would be welcomed to help celebrate this great occasion.

Though Herod, a foreigner, ruled over the Jewish people, he was sympathetic to their beliefs even though he was not a worshipper of the Lord God. When he heard that a king had been born, he became alarmed because he immediately recognized the threat to his throne. When Herod learned of the prophecies regarding a coming Christ, his understanding of the potential threat went even further. He evidently concealed his anxiety from the Magi, but turned to the chief priests and teachers of the law to learn what the scriptures taught about Christ's birth. They immediately knew where to look for him, quoting,

In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." (Matt. 2:5-6)

King Herod then sent the Magi to Bethlehem with instructions to return to him with the news of the whereabouts of the young king claiming he wanted to go and worship him as well. Kings are good at charades, and King Herod was no exception. The act he put on was a good one. And the Magi left confidently, again following the star that led them directly to the house where Jesus was.

Here they worshipped Jesus and presented him with kingly gifts.

During their stay, however, God warned them in a dream about King Herod's intentions, and thus they left by another way.

When Satan heard that the Christ had been born, he became enraged. There is a constant interplay between the forces of heaven and the forces of Satan. Satan knows that man is God's choicest creation. The love that God had for Adam was evident and Satan, out of hate for God, made it his business to try to interfere with that relationship. Man, being Adam's offspring, also greatly loved by God, became a target of Satan's hate. Satan knows the scriptures too; and when Jesus was born, he no doubt became aware that this meant trouble. Whether Satan was fully aware of God's plan of salvation or not, I do not know; but it is clear that he went to work immediately to stir up the heart of Herod in a murderous plot.

Satan uses people in his efforts against God; and God uses people in his work against Satan as well. We humans are caught in the middle in a great war going on between God and Satan. If

Satan could succeed in destroying our hope of salvation, it would be a great victory for his side. The reason victory is so important to Satan is that God loves us so much. Each soul Satan is able to steal from God is one more pain he can inflict on God.

There is not one soul that God does not want to save from eternal damnation, and Satan knows it. No one is so bad that God does not want him.

Satan tries every dirty trick in the book to keep man from God! He lies, deceives, bates, blinds, binds, and ensnares, anything it takes, to try to destroy our hope of salvation. Every soul he succeeds in destroying is a gloating victory for evil.

Some people think that Satan loves them and so is good to them for that reason! I am convinced that Satan blesses some people, if such a thing is possible. They think that Satan is better to them than God is! Like Herod, they have it pretty good and don't want to lose it. Satan has made God look like a Scrooge in

the minds of many people. The life that God sanctions seems boring to them, and therefore they wish to continue their lives of sin!

Speculation about Christ's birth in relation to eternal matters causes us to wonder at the conduct of people like Herod; how could he seek to destroy a baby who was to be the hope of all mankind? The obvious answer is that Herod, like so many people today, did not see the Lord God as having any relevance to his life. He most likely felt that since he was not a Jew, the promise didn't apply to him.

You have probably heard the same thing; it's not new. People say of our Christian beliefs, "It's okay for you, but I have my own beliefs." However, beliefs about God, salvation, heaven and hell are not Christian or Jewish matters; they are human race issues. There are no multiple choice questions about religion for which any answer is okay so long as the respondent is sincere in what he believes, an opinion popularly held today.

Herod yielded to the spirit that controlled his thinking and set out to destroy this young Jewish king. Though he recognized a supernatural origin to the prophetic messages, he did not discern that it was any different from the words of a psychic or a fortuneteller. He believed in the prophecy but felt that destroying Jesus would end the matter, the same sort of fallacy the Jewish leaders would buy into during the ministry of Jesus.

All the efforts of Herod and the fears of the priests could not change what God had willed. The life of Jesus could not be destroyed before its time was finished. The actions of man and Satan only served to demonstrate the folly of man in resisting God. We are, without question, outmatched. Only a fool defies the living God.

Chapter Eight

Restraint Versus Desire

Matt. 3:1-12

Onto the stage of Biblical unfolding came a man named John the Baptist who had the fire of a prophet and the boldness of a lion. He was the last of the great preachers of the law. His proclamation to Israel was not so much a message of foretelling, as it was forth telling. He came on a mission ordered by God and foretold by the prophets that preceded him. Many would call his preaching “negative” today because it was a denunciation of the conventional wisdom of his day. His preaching was fearless and probably loud. It was pointed and never diplomatic. He proclaimed the need to repent.

The law was given to man for a twofold purpose, to define sin and to show us our need of a savior. During the era of the law, man struggled with opposing forces within himself, the knowledge of God and his demands and a nature that wished to do otherwise. Man had a very uncomfortable existence wanting to sin, but afraid of the consequences of sinning.

The sinful nature of mankind needs to be held in check; this is the purpose of law. Without restraints, man is always living on the edge of disaster.

He has a drive to possess, but sin demands more than legitimate activity will provide; so he steals. He has a drive to control, so he seeks to dominate those who are not legitimately under his care. He has a reproductive drive that is easily seduced into actions outside the approved means of fulfillment. He has a hunger drive that draws him into desperate actions to control his food supply. He is a social creature with a nature that responds to pleasure; this leads to all sorts of excesses. He is also a creature with a drive to worship, and worship he will. He may worship God or his own self-will. He may even worship some stupid imitation; a creation of a god that best suits his fallen nature.

It was a loving God who saw the confusion in the mind of man and gave the law. The natural wisdom contained in the law was centuries ahead of the cultural and scientific development of man. When the Israelites obeyed the law of God, they were rewarded with the natural results of the life style they lived. Added to the natural benefits of obedient observance of the law was God’s blessing that was bestowed upon them.

Yet man failed to obey. Why? The answer is no secret. The fallen nature is too powerful for us. Restraint is only as good as the system that enforces it. There is no system of law that is ever going to endure without severe penalties for violations. When the will to enforce is broken down, moral decay will run unabated.

There is a universal law that states that everything that exists moves from order to chaos. It is only because of an outside intervention that chaos moves toward order! This is why the theory of evolution is so absurd. To think that life forms could move toward perfection without guidance and intervention flies in the face of all known facts. Natural selection of a species can account for some changes within the species, but it is only through intervention that real improvements can be made. We see this in the fruit we eat and the flowers we enjoy. Man, through direct

intervention, has been able to accomplish amazing results; but he has yet to create a new life form.

The nature of man left without guidance or enforcement of law will also soon be corrupt. Is there hope for man?

Yes, of course there is; John preached about it! What he preached about was obeying the law, yet it was only as good as revival could generate. Consider John's words;

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:11-12)

What law could not do, the blessed Holy Spirit would accomplish! Man was about to receive the greatest gift. God would soon restore what Satan had stolen. Something wonderful was about to happen to the very heart of man. Real change was about to take place. In the place of restraint that always fails, God was going to give us a baptism of fire.

Fire as a symbol is used in different ways, but here, I am convinced, it refers to purification of the heart of man. When the heart is cleansed of sinful desires and when the Holy Spirit comes to reside within the heart of man, something wonderful happens, desires are changed!

When we are possessed by the Holy Spirit's power, we have a new “want to” in our lives. Love for God and our fellow believers take the place of selfism. We find that obedience to God is the passion of our life. The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is characterized as a farmer who takes his pitchfork and separates the chaff from the wheat. Those works which are flesh are blown away, and those which are of the Spirit remains in our lives.

Truly chaos yields to order when the Holy Spirit comes to abide in our hearts. Thus the cycle is reversed. The natural direction of flow in the Spirit is from chaos to order. This is because there is an ever-present power of intervention within the life of the believer. When the cycle is not reversed, Holy Spirit power is lacking in that life.

Chapter Nine

About Baptism

Matt. 3:13-17

The time had come in the life of Jesus to step forward and take up his life's ministry so he went to the Jordan River where his cousin John was baptizing.

When Jesus met John the Baptist at the river Jordan and stepped forward for baptism, John, who had been forcefully preaching repentance, found himself suddenly conscious of his own need. He said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Did John remember some indiscretion from his youth that he knew Jesus knew about? Perhaps, but surely John had repented. After all wasn't baptism for repentance?

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (Matt. 3:14-15)

There is more to baptism than John apparently realized. It was taking on a deeper meaning and in the coming Church age, it would be continued, both as a witness to repentance and also an act of identification with Christ and his death, burial and resurrection.

Baptism is a symbolic act. In baptism we see three symbols either taught or alluded to.

Baptism symbolizes our identification with the death of Christ. As we go into the water in baptism, we are identified as entering into Christ appropriating the benefits of his death. Now we are identifying with his death. Thus, we consider his death to be our death in everything, all the power of the world, the flesh and the devil are broken! Sin has no more authority over us.

Baptism is symbolic, yet, unfortunately, not everyone who has been baptized has appropriated the death of Christ as his death. There can be no release from the power of sin until the death of Christ becomes an experience in our hearts!

As I look at the death of Christ, I see a second symbolism that seems to be as important as the first. When Jesus died he was buried. In baptism we not only take a person into the water, we submerge him into it. This second symbol we might view as the total severance or cessation of life as we have known it. Jesus' body lay lifeless in the tomb! He was dead to the world and stayed that way!

This symbol is seen in the story of Moses and the Israelites. After crossing the Red Sea they spent time in the wilderness where God dealt with them through a series of events that removed the love of Egypt from their hearts. Passing through the sea had been in itself a type of baptism. But passing through the sea had only delivered them from the outward threat of the armies of Pharaoh. It took the wilderness experience to get Egypt out of their hearts.

There are many Christians who have appropriated the death of Jesus as their deaths but who still carry a secret love of the world in their hearts. It isn't until the affections die that the process of death is complete.

Many people hinder the work of God in their lives because they do not want to let go of the world! For example, if God allows prosperity to come to a Christian before the love of the world is dead, he may only resuscitate the old nature with its carnal loves, covetousness and greed.

We also note that there are some people who want to be healed because they don't want to die to the world, either physically or spiritually. If we are dead to the world, we don't mind dying, even though we may have very good reasons to go on living. The apostle Paul commented on the subject, "I am torn between two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (Phil. 1:23)

The third symbolism I see is in the coming forth from the water. This part symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus. We can look at the Israelites and see this phase as well. God had covenanted with Moses that he would bring the Israelites out of Egypt and bring them into the land of promise. Between these two events he also covenanted to take them as his own and to be their God. (Ex. 6:6-8) In this covenant we see all three symbols clearly stated.

We also note that the children of Israel were delivered into the land of promise with the same sort of miracle that brought them out of Egypt! If the first experience was symbolized in baptism, then the last must have been a part of the same.

The point I wish to make is not to divide baptism as though it were three separate events, as it is not; it is one baptism. What it represents, however, may take a lifetime to fully experience.

If we view baptism in three parts we will see there is: 1. Separation from the world and the power of sin. 2. Separation from the psychological and spiritual ties to the world. 3. And finally, he will, by an action of the Spirit, deliver us into the realm of the Spirit.

In the second phase, God will strip us of affections for the things of the world. He will also deal with our dependencies upon the support systems of the world, such dependencies as upon, family, friends, jobs, talents, and intellects, which we have used to sustain us, and he will take us to be his very own and be our God.

He will also deal with the victim spirit that many have acquired as a result of the hurtful behaviors of others. A victim spirit is expressed in an inability to have faith in God because the person sees himself either as unworthy of divine intervention or finds it easier to succumb to a depressed state of living rather than to believe in God.

The Israelites had victim spirits when they were delivered from Egypt. This was expressed in the choices they made in the wilderness, choosing to murmur and complain rather than to believe God for answers to their problems.

The final phase is where we learn to live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and find that God is our all sufficiency, choosing to face our enemies and depend on divine intervention to deliver us from evil; this is the real Kingdom of Heaven! Here, we experience the reality of the new nature ruling within us. We now have the mind of Christ and we have the authority and the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in our lives.

Now let's look at the life of Jesus to see if we can find evidence of baptismal symbolism, first in figure and second in reality.

Before Jesus came to John to be baptized, he lived as all men do. He was born, grew up, was dependent upon his family, had friends, neighbors, brothers and sisters, and worked in a

carpenter shop. When Jesus came up out of the water of baptism, all of those things changed! It is said that he came forth in the power of the Spirit.

Was it real? Yes! However, before Jesus was ready to launch his ministry, he had to face Satan. Having once established his victory over the craving of the flesh, he was able to go forth proclaiming the message of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was just like the Israelites who, when delivered into the land of promise, had to face the enemy, but not by depending upon natural means.

From that point in his life Jesus lived as the appointed Son. Yet, these early events were just a figure of what was yet to come. Jesus would go to the cross; there he would, in fact, die to the world; he would be in the grave and really separated from all earthly ties. He was then raised from the dead!

In this we see baptism as a symbolic act, and that the reality is to be found in the placing of our faith in Christ. It is in our identification with his death and the resultant rising in newness of life. We then go forth in Christ, in the power of his Spirit, being obedient to the principles of his kingdom and sustained by every word that proceeds from his mouth, taking our place in his body, the church.

Chapter Ten

Temptation

Matt. 4:1-11

Satan really wanted to stop Jesus. He had tried to end Jesus' life through King Herod's madness when he was a baby, but God had warned Joseph of Herod's evil plot. Now after his baptism, Satan was trying to lead Jesus into the same trap into which he had led Eve.

After Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan River, he was led into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days. Afterward, Satan came to him to tempt him.

I find the sequence of temptation very interesting. Satan tried to get Jesus to use his supernatural power to satisfy his fleshly appetites because Jesus hadn't eaten for forty days. He said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." (Matt. 4:3) But Jesus resisted the temptation to use divine power for personal gratification. By doing so, he triumphed over the "lust of the flesh." (I John 2:16 KJV)

In the next temptation Jesus was taken to the highest point of the temple where Satan said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and they will, lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" (Matt. 4:6) What a spectacular sight that would have been! Imagine Jesus falling toward the ground, only to have angels suddenly appear and swoop him up. Once more Jesus resisted Satan's plot to get him to use his supernatural power to create a sensation! In resisting this temptation to look good in the eyes of man, he resisted "the lust of the eyes." (I John 2:16 KJV)

Finally Satan made his appeal to "the pride of life" (I John 2:16 KJV) by showing him the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "If you will bow down and worship me." (Matt. 4:9) Were the kingdoms of the world Satan's to give? What sort of kingdom did Satan show Jesus? To answer these questions, let's look at the book of Revelation.

In the book of Revelation we have two cities described that have particular significance, Babylon, and Jerusalem.

The scriptures use objects, names, events, and stories to teach. These cities are described in vivid language that helps us understand that they are spoken of more spiritually than naturally. Concerning Jerusalem the angel said to John,

"Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." (Rev. 21:9-10)

Whereas, there was a real city being described, it was the character of the occupants that was the intended object of discussion.

That Jesus is the bridegroom and Christians the bride, is a well-established biblical teaching. When describing people, we often speak of their occupations, gender, marital status, and nationalities. God also used such descriptions to teach us about spiritual matters. He gave us insights through describing the citizens of these two cities.

In the scriptures, after King David captured Jerusalem, it became the capital city of the kingdom of Israel. Since the people of Israel were God's chosen people through whom he chose to bring his word, their capital became symbolically God's city.

As we have already shown, Jesus was the rightful heir to the throne. Since the kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Heaven, and since this kingdom is within (Luke 17:20-21), then it follows that the occupants of the city are those who possess the kingdom in their hearts. If the kingdom is actually in our hearts, we will manifest the characteristics that the symbols and substances of that city teach.

The city of Babylon is also symbolic in the scriptures, although its historic importance had long since dissipated. In Revelation it is described as a woman called, "Mystery Babylon the great mother of prostitutes and the abominations of the earth." (Rev. 17:5)

In addition to the common meaning of the word adultery, it is used in the scripture to mean the worship of other gods. (Matt. 12:39, James 4:4)

It is my belief that Babylon is the evil counterpart of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem represents the capital city of God's kingdom, then, in the light of its prominent place in scripture, Babylon must represent the capital city of the realms of Satan.

Also, if the Kingdom of Heaven is within, it seems only reasonable to recognize that the real kingdom of Satan is also within.

Satan gained access to the nature of man through the fall. Jesus referred to those religious leaders who were of the apostasy of his day as being of their father the devil! (John 8:44) Therefore, to describe the city that is representative of the satanic kingdom is to describe the character and characteristics of the citizens of that kingdom.

First we read shocking statements about Babylon (Satan's Kingdom) being the home of demons and a haunt for every evil spirit and every unclean and detestable bird (vain imaginations and unclean thoughts), and shudder through further references to apostate religious practices. We find it easy to detach ourselves from those glaring evils and to give approval to the admonition to "come out of her, my people." (Rev. 18:4) It's also easy to understand how judgment could fall on such evil and vile systems and people as described. We can understand why those whose lives are sin-laden and vile should be visited with plagues, death, mourning, and famine. But wait, let's now look at the full spectrum of the description. The message hasn't ended yet. As we continue reading we feel more comfortable reading about her riches and luxuries that appeal to our need of comfort. We learn that the citizens of the city enjoy — cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet cloth, fancy and expensive wood, ivory, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, and carriages. In other words this list of items is what the natural nature of mankind seeks after and enjoys!

The list appeals to the lust of the eyes, the need to beautify the environment; the lust of the flesh, the love of good smells and tasty foods, and the pride of life, social expressions from the bodies and souls of men such as arts, dances, poetry, romance, and sports.

Such is the picture of the nature of fallen man. His nature doesn't seem to be all bad, but its interests and love are directed toward what is under the curse and condemnation of God. The influence of the satanic kingdom reaches into every facet of cultural and religious life. Jesus Christ came to show us how to live apart from this corruption. If we listen to his words and follow his example we will be able to live the sort of life symbolized by the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

God's kingdom has foundations made of enduring substances, twelve in all. It is solidly built and radiantly beautiful. It has gates of pearl and streets of gold. It has a river of the waters of life and trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. It is filled with the light that shines from the glorious Lamb of God. (Rev. 21:1; 22:6)

Each item mentioned is rich in meaning, but that I will leave for each individual to ponder personally.

As part of the world system with its ever-present influences, its call to pursue pleasure and its insatiable appetite for our money and service, we may wonder, "Is it possible to live in the world and not be a part of the world system?" The answer is yes, but if we look only at outward things, we will fail to see what must first be in the heart.

Many people have felt that they have found Babylon in the modern world. Each generation seems to produce its own candidate, this great church system, that powerful nation, or this city of commerce and influence; and I have to agree that they often match the description given of Babylon. In my view, however, Babylon is primarily spiritual and, therefore, in the hearts of men. Fallen man, given the ability to do so, will surround himself with whatever his heart desires. What he creates will fit the description of Babylon or that of Jerusalem. The choice will be his. The outward form and likeness will be a reflection of his heart's desire.

When Satan took Jesus to the high mountain to view the kingdoms of the world, he did not show the whole picture.

On a recent trip I was flying across the state of Arizona. It was nighttime when the pilot announced on the intercom that we should look out the windows; we we're flying over a spectacular looking city. It looked as if the ground were black velvet with golden lights all spaced symmetrically. Occasionally, there were also lights of white or red.

On another occasion while visiting San Francisco, we drove to a high hill overlooking the city. It was a clear day and the buildings of the city lay against a background of the bay with its bridges, boats, ships and islands — what a sight!

On still another occasion I traveled into Reno, Nevada. As I approached the city from the west, the city lay before me in the evening sunlight. Lights were coming on, a beautiful sight. I thought, "Lord, that's a beautiful sight." Then my thoughts went to what I knew to be true about the city, the disillusioned people who came there looking for pleasure, only to fall prey to a clever system designed to empty their pockets of whatever cash they might have. I thought of the people who suffered marital heartbreak, coming for quick ends to marriages wrecked by sin.

What is seen of the kingdom of the world when viewed from a high mountain is a very deceptive picture. Satan knew that, but could Jesus be dazzled? Could Jesus be seduced by the apparent glory? The world was so available, so immediate; he could have it all! Why not go for what seemed to meet the needs of his present life? Was that bad?

Jesus had a choice to make. He was a king, not by the choice of man; he was God's choice. Satan recognized that reality; if he could appeal to Jesus' humanity, maybe he could cause him to forget what was only seen by faith. Perhaps he could convince him to claim what was clearly visible below!

How often such temptations are repeated in our lives! How often our "needs" take precedence over the pursuit of a kingdom that is not clearly seen. The idea that something exists beyond the limits of our known life span, or that kingdom that exists in a dimension of reality that is not seen by natural means, is of little interest to the person who is preoccupied with survival or pleasure. Many people are only occasionally interested in the Kingdom of Heaven. When people see the Kingdom of Heaven as an answer to what are the immediate needs of their lives, they will reach for it. But when they see that to have the kingdom of God means letting go of the kingdom of the world, many walk away.

Satan is always nearby when God is at work! He is always trying to distract us and steal our attention from the Kingdom of Heaven! Satan tries to deceive us into believing that he offers everything we need. He wants man to believe that everything happens here, now. If we insist on believing in eternal life, he tries to get us to believe in something else, such as reincarnation. If we insist on a supernatural realm he provides mystical experiences to imitate the supernatural manifestations of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus was not deceived, he said, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." (Matt. 4:10) There is the conclusive answer, worship and serve God, the only God!

Now we're ready to look at God's kingdom more closely. Let's move on to the revelation of the kingdom.

Chapter Eleven

What's in Your Heart?

Matt. 4:12-17

After being tempted, Jesus returned to his home. When he heard that John had been put in prison, he went to Galilee. The arrest of John the Baptist brought an abrupt end to his short but profound ministry. John the Baptist is a name that almost everyone with even minimal knowledge of Christianity knows. His ministry was an important ministry because he prepared the way for Jesus. John's ministry was a call to repentance; Jesus also came proclaiming the same message.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, which was located by the Sea of Galilee near Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfill what Isaiah the prophet had said;

Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Matt. 4:15-16)

During his ministry, Jesus gave attention to every word that had been spoken by any of the prophets. He identified himself with all that had gone before him. Even though society and religion had become worldly and contaminated, Jesus didn't ignore what God had established. Also, although Jesus was often very critical of those who were in leadership, and though he conducted his ministry outside the system, he did not fail to connect himself to that part which was truly of God. He was not an isolationist, his message, however, was repentance.

Repentance is without a doubt a prerequisite to seeing the Kingdom of Heaven. It requires a greater change of direction than turning over a new leaf or stopping a certain sin, though such changes are important too.

To illustrate the point, let's look at an incident in the lives of Abraham and Lot in Genesis, chapter thirteen. Abraham and Lot had left their homeland, Ur of the Chaldeans, and had traveled together for some time. Each had become wealthy. Their flocks had become large and it was now very difficult to find grasslands large enough for both families to live close together. They both realized the time had come to live separately; so Abraham told Lot to go in whatever direction he wished. This offer was an opportunity that Lot probably didn't understand was significant. (Gen. 13:1-18)

How often we are faced with such choices! We find ourselves in situations where the Holy Spirit challenges us with the question, "Which way do you want to go?" Or "Ask what you will." To be given such a choice tests our hearts. Have you ever stood on a mountain, as it were, with God at your side, looking at the world before you? Have you felt him challenging you to decide which way you want to go?

What is in our hearts at such a time will always determine the outcome. If I were to ask you today to choose anything, money being no object, what would your response be? Most of our

choices in life are conditioned choices. We, like Lot, look up and begin to see. What do we see? What we see is determined by what is in our hearts!

Again, what do you see, a trip to an exotic resort or maybe an adventure in some unexplored frontier? What do you want, a beautiful car, lots of nice clothes or perhaps you would like a house or a ranch, or a business, or-? Sometimes we feel really spiritual and only want to get by, pay our bills, and be left alone. No matter, it's a test! Our responses will ultimately reflect what is in our hearts.

Lot's gaze went toward Sodom. What he saw he desired. He thought he needed grass for his flocks; what he got was trouble! His concept of his need was exposed, his concept of God was seen, his faith was manifest and what had motivated his vision would ultimately be seen. Lot wanted grass—no big deal, so he carried his tent toward Sodom. Sodom was at the bottom of the world! It was by the Dead Sea that is the lowest place in the world, being 1293 feet below sea level!

In Biblical thought, up is toward God, and down is away from God. Heaven is up or away from the earth and hell is in the center or core of the earth.

When Abraham and Lot stood on the mountain together and looked out over the land, Lot looked in the direction of what his heart wanted. When the love of the world is in our hearts, we will always look earthward. Lot looked down until his eyes reached the lowest place possible. In Bible geography, the only place lower would be hell. Is it any wonder trouble met him there?

There are a few in this world who are a different sort; they're called the "elect." They are spiritually Abraham's seed.

It is said of Abraham that he looked for a city whose builder and maker was God! Two men stood side by side, Abraham and Lot; one's eye was drawn away by the hope that was in his heart until it left the earthly skyline and pierced the distant skies. There beyond all that is earthly, he saw a vision of a kingdom that is not of this world, whose substances are of heavenly materials, a city where contamination can never enter. (Heb. 11:10, Rev. 21:27)

Abraham told Lot to choose which way he wanted to go; this openhanded approach to what is of this world is characteristic of one who is a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. Citizens of the heavenly kingdom hold all that is earthly with a very light grip, always ready to release what is deemed to be theirs. They enjoy the world in which they live, even possess its wealth at times; but when duty calls or controversy comes their way, they release it without grudging, knowing theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Do you want to see this kingdom? Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Unless our hearts are changed from "Lot hearts" to "Abraham hearts" we will never see the Kingdom of Heaven

Chapter Twelve

He Did It All Wrong!

Matt. 4:18-25

Having relocated his place of residence to Galilee, Jesus began to form his kingdom. He began gathering the people who would carry his message. They would be key people in his kingdom, Peter, Andrew, James and John, all fishermen, (this meant common people, ordinary family men,) who were accustomed to hard work. These are good qualities, I'm sure. But was that any way to form a kingdom?

Wouldn't it have been better to interview some of the whiz kids in Jerusalem? Surely, Jesus should have known that what was needed was a "think tank," or "task force" to formulate a game plan for conquest. This group should have read like a roll call of the great families of Israel!

Jesus called twelve men in all to make up that special group. We might call them his cabinet. We would consider this selection process to be of utmost importance today.

The right men could open many doors. Right connections could insure a substantial financial flow. Good minds could form a powerful government. If Jesus had been looking for what mankind looks for he missed an opportunity to move quickly into success.

Did Jesus err here? Yes, we would have to conclude that Jesus didn't show very good judgment here, if he had been a king like other kingdoms have! But Jesus was not like other kings.

Jesus is the King of Kings! Jesus knew what he was doing. His kingdom is different from all other kingdoms.

This kingdom is not the result of organized efforts, think tanks, task forces, publicity stunts, gimmicks, or slogans. Its existence on earth is in spite of every imaginable difficulty! It has stood and grown against all odds. Judas' betrayal didn't stop it; Peter's denial didn't slow it; men have cursed it, fought it, misunderstood it, and ignored it; but it still exists today, just as strong and just and pure as ever, because it is not of this world. The Kingdom of Heaven is not an outward government; it is the kingdom of the heart, and its manifestation is in the realm of the Spirit!

Sometimes today, we look at the world of Christendom and we wonder; where is this glorious church without spot or wrinkle that we read about? Doesn't the church have many hypocrites in it? Yes, indeed, scandals, errors, quarrels, feuds of every kind have always plagued the outward church world and every difficulty you could ever imagine; yet in spite of all that, people are still turning to Jesus.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, "teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." (Matt. 4:23)

The power and appeal of this kingdom is not organizational, political or denominational. The power of this kingdom is spiritual.

Wherever people came in touch with Jesus, mighty changes took place. The Spirit's power worked, not to subdue them, but to change them!

And people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon—possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics and he healed them. (Matt. 4:24)

He is still doing the same kind of work today; in spite of all outward hypocrisy, Jesus hasn't changed. The Kingdom of Heaven is not what is seen outwardly. Anyone can claim anything, but the fact is seen in the fruit of a life.

Jesus is king over a very unique kingdom. This kingdom is a kingdom of very special people—people whose hearts are committed to the king—people whose lives are lived according to the principles of this kingdom. They, for the most part, aren't wealthy or influential; most are simple folk with pure hearts who are focused upon eternal matters.

The Spirit of God calls to all mankind, but few listen to his call. But to all who answer in faith believing, he grants the power to become children of God.

Part Three

The Precepts of the Kingdom

Chapter Thirteen

About Money

Matt. 5:1-3

The teachings of Jesus and how they relate to his kingdom will be examined in this section. We will be examining the truths as presented by the writer of the gospel of Matthew. It is my conviction that each of the four gospels presents a unique message and view of Christ. Since the gospel of Matthew is the gospel of the kingdom, we can expect to discover insights into the kingdom's laws and principles. In the previous chapters we have looked at introductory materials that have set the stage for the teachings and events that follow.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew, we see Jesus sitting with his disciples and beginning to teach them. What is presented in the next three chapters gives us an amazing portrait of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matt. 5:3) Unlike the gospel of Luke that simply says, "Blessed are the poor," (Luke 6:20) Matthew's gospel gives the more complete statement because in it he is writing about the king and his kingdom.

We note differences in the gospels in the ways the teachings are reported and the stories are told. Each writer is being moved by the Holy Spirit to tell his story in the manner best suited to the overall message.

Matthew selected the Sermon on the Mount where the Kingdom of Heaven is described with the principles of the kingdom in view. Luke on the other hand reported the sermon on the plain that fit the theme of his book. There are similarities in the sermons but differences as well. In the theme of the gospel of Luke, the poor are in focus as needing to be blessed, but in Matthew it is the poor in spirit that are in focus. Thus Matthew tells us "blessed are the poor in spirit" taking us to a much more profound depth of truth. "Blessed are the poor," limits the concept to the economic status of the hearer.

Some have interpreted "blessed are the poor in spirit" in this passage to mean humility as the intended meaning, however, though that is a valid spiritual teaching it seems too broad for the text.

The Greek word here is *ptochos* meaning poor, also used as beggarly, or one who crouches or cowers down, hides oneself for fear. Our interest here is on what is the intended meaning that suits the contextual setting.

Both uses of *ptochos*, beggarly or to be poor, is to be lacking in economic power. It would seem then that to say a person is poor in spirit is to say that such a person is also lacking in economic power, but by choice, and not by circumstances imposed upon him. To be poor is a condition that usually is thrust upon a person; whereas, to be poor in spirit (an attitudinal condition) is not. Perhaps, it follows that to be poor in spirit is to be unaffected by, or emptied of,

monetary considerations. The person who is poor in spirit then is a person who is able to maintain the same demeanor when in need as when in plenty.

It takes real faith to live as though you possess all things when you don't have food enough for your next meal. Equally, to be able to maintain full trust in God when there is an abundance of sustenance is not easy, since the tendency to be self-reliant is so dominant a force of our fallen natures.

We have an excellent example of a person who was truly poor in spirit in the widow who gave her mite (an almost worthless coin) at the temple. She was poor to the extreme, but gave what she had without consideration for her own welfare. It was her worship. Had she had the spirit of a beggar, she would have hoarded it as her last connection with life, but instead she was able to give because of her relationship of faith in God.

It is the nature of man to use whatever advantages he possesses, education, family heritage, social or political connections, talents, or even friendships to promote success in a career. To be poor in spirit is to cast off all such considerations and instead, seek the Lord and righteousness first with the promise that all things needed would then be added to us.

The Apostle Paul embraced this concept and testified that he didn't place any confidence in his past heritage or accomplishments but rather had counted them loss so that he might gain Christ. (See Phil. 3:1-10) Those individuals who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven must enter by faith. It is not for us to select a "path" or a "career" to follow in this world on our own, but rather we view our selection as "God willing" I will do this or that. We will see the result of our life then as the pursuit of God and his purposes rather than a career or endeavor.

When we have needs, we will apply faith in God asking him to answer, but we will not try to devise an answer and then seek God to bless "our plan". Such actions are totally inadequate and leave us in a condition of weak faith or no faith, since it is doomed to failure. We are not limited to our own thoughts any more than we are limited to our own power or resourcefulness to bring about answers to our prayers.

People who possess the Kingdom of Heaven are subjects of the King who do not live with the limitations of the world. Our king is omnipotent, that is, all powerful. (Phil. 3:20, Rev. 1:7-8, Matt. 28:18) He is omniscient, that is, he possesses all knowledge. (Heb. 4:12-13, 1 John 3:20, John 21:17) He is omnipresent, that is, everywhere present. (Jer. 23:24, Eph. 1:23, Matt. 18:20) We do not live with the limitations of the world. The Christian limitation is a self-imposed limitation that results from a lack of vision of God. It is God who is the doer in our lives. When we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven the responsibility for our care rests upon the Lord, just as earthly parents are responsible for their children!

What God does in our lives is the result of his love, wisdom, grace and mercy. God never looks upon our circumstances to evaluate what is possible for him to do. Since all things are possible with God. The question is what will love permit? What does the wisdom of God allow?

Real faith involves faith in all the attributes of God, the character of God, the love of God, and the plan of God. Faith not only accepts God, but also trusts in God so fully that it is willing to abandon all trust in self, human wisdom, world systems, or any other dependencies. With real faith we go boldly to the throne of grace and make our petitions known to him. He may direct us to seemingly natural means for answers, but even natural answers are supernatural when God has provided them! God is never limited to the natural means, however. Limiting an omnipotent God

to a natural answer comes very close to blasphemy! Jesus often rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith that showed they didn't trust in an unlimited God.

To limit God is to usurp authority over him, as much as to say, "God, I don't think you can do that!" Again, the question before us is not a question of whether or not God can, but rather what is his mind.

In an effort to know the will of God, some people search for single statements, promises or circumstances, in the word of God to attach their faith to, as though they explain God's total mind and will. The Bible is the revelation of God's mind, will, and purposes; no single portion can stand on its own. All scriptures are a part of a total revelation.

The Bible teaches us about God, ourselves, righteousness, sin, blessings, judgment, and above all, Jesus. Through the Bible's message we learn what God's view is and how it differs from ours.

It is universally given and not for private interpretation, in other words, it is not up to us to decide how it should be applied. The application of the living word is not by the decision or will of man but rather, by God's decision. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Phil. 2-13)

For those who do not really want God, but rather his benefits, it is much more convenient to claim a particular promise, rather than seek him and his mind.

Some may say, "But doesn't it work to claim a promise?" To this I reply, sometimes.

Many of us, due to a lack of understanding, experiment with God. We try this or that, sometimes acting, thinking or believing in agreement with the Spirit's desire, and achieving success. At other times we act on our own, not in agreement with the Spirit, and are disappointed. To act without being in tune with the mind of Christ or the Spirit's application, is to be left wide open to disappointment and confusion. Many have been deeply wounded because they did not follow the Spirit's leading. They have tried to apply a promise to a circumstance without the Spirit's direction. What folly! Listen to the words of Jesus:

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:15-17)

No man knows God, his mind, or will unless the Spirit reveals them!

To enter into the Kingdom of Heaven is to enter the Spirit's domain! Yes, to be poor in spirit is to possess the Kingdom of Heaven.

Those who are poor in spirit are no different in how they think, believe, or act when walking in abundance than when walking in want. They have the same peace, confidence and trust, because they are focused on God and his care; money is no object, therefore, it has no effect on them.

Kingdom people may be poor, but they are rich; they may be rich, but they are poor. No matter! They are blest because they belong to God!

Fourteen

Death to the Old Self

Matt. 5:4

Our natural minds are quick to make assumptions. As we look at the verse of scripture that says, “Blessed are those who mourn,” we assume that it is a casual reference to Jesus’ sensitivity toward a person suffering the loss of a loved one. But is that assumption compatible with the message of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Without a doubt, Jesus was and is, sensitive to every loss we experience, but the gospel of Matthew deals with the theme of the King and his Kingdom. While we associate mourning with the loss of a loved one through death, in the spiritual realm, spiritual death is of much greater significance than death in the natural realm.

The meaning of death in the scriptures is threefold; natural death that we all experience, spiritual death that happened at the fall, and death to the sin nature. Or we could say death to death that happens at the new birth! (Sin renders a person dead in a spiritual sense.) This latter death is the one with which we are concerned. (See Rom. 5:12-6:10) An illustration of this death is baptism. It is so important that the Lord commands us,

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt. 28:18-20)

To understand the significance of baptism and the practice of circumcising, which is also a religious rite, read what the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins. (Col. 2:11-13)

And to the Christians at Rome he wrote:

We died to sin: how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Rom. 6:2-7)

From these and other passages we see that the death to sin is the death of the fleshly sin nature. We are taught to render or consider this nature dead, in other words, to bury it with all its affections, ambitions, appetites, hopes and dreams. We may love the old self (maybe not all of

it), but some of it; but we can't die to only part of the flesh, and still enjoy the power of the resurrection of Christ. To die to part of the old nature and not the whole, would leave us cripples still alive to the flesh! I'm afraid many Christians try to live in the world and still act like a Christian. What a miserable way to live!

Let's obey the Lord and go the whole way and mourn because our old selves are dead if we were buried with Christ.

Now comes the comforting, "If anyone is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation: The old is gone, the new has come!" (II Cor. 5:17)

After we have gone through the initial experience of abandoning that that is dead, we are free to live again, however, this new life we live is the very expression of the life and character of Jesus.

Mourning has its place both in the natural and the spiritual, but happy is the person who, once having mourned the loss of that that was loved, is able to move on without bondage. Holding on to old fleshly loves in such a manner that we remain bound to them is not only unhealthy, but is also a form of idolatry!

There is comfort for those who mourn in the proper way; God's Spirit is available to wipe our tears away.

Many evils lurk in the shadows when people fail to accept what cannot be changed. If sins are committed that result in an unredeemable loss, the proper thing to do is to leave justice in the hands of God and receive his comfort for pain. Mourning is God given, a means of purging our souls of grief; but once having mourned, leave it as it has served its purpose.

Chapter Fifteen

Meekness

Matt. 5:5

In Matthew 5:5 Jesus takes us to a full realization of the characteristic of meekness. Because we are born with natures that are totally selfish, we have to learn consideration, fairness, sharing, and caring about others. Such traits don't always come easily because we want to possess what benefits us alone. We seek attention, possessions, or attainments to satisfy this selfism. However, the cravings and appetites of our self-natures are often tempered by our limitations.

Happy people in the natural world are people who have achieved a balance between what they wish to be, have, or control, and what they recognize as attainable. They are said to be at peace with themselves. That is fine until that balance is disturbed by some occurrence outside the realm of their control.

All natural people are subject to the ebbs and flows of the natural world. Even Christians, though changed, are for a time subject to these natural changes. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, we are told. The natural man can deal with these natural world changes or calamities with whatever resources and resourcefulness he possesses. If he does not believe that he possesses resources to deal with a situation, grave psychological problems may emerge.

Natural people seem vulnerable too two types of behaviors. On the one hand, we have a person who is domineering, aggressive, greedy, lustful, and full of pride and arrogance. On the other hand, we have a person who feels defeated, angry, frustrated, confused, sad, bitter, and jealous. The first person may resort to violence or aggressive behavior while the other may withdraw or even become suicidal.

Such should never be the plight of a Christian. As citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, natural wisdom or answers do not limit us, nor is our peace connected to what is present in this world. Peter spoke of this present world condition as being reserved for fire and judgment. He asks the question, "What kind of people ought you to be?" (II Peter 3:7-11)

Meekness, in short, is the ability to put ones trust in another. We are meek, indeed, when we set aside all self-sufficiency and depend upon the love, the power, and the wisdom of God. The highest achievement of human wisdom is to recognize the total inadequacy of our own wisdom and return with all our hearts to a God who is able to do exceedingly more than we can ask or comprehend. He gives us what we need through inheritance, not in wages.

Chapter Sixteen

Hungering and Thirsting

Matt 5:6

The Kingdom of Heaven is based on very special principles. We learned from the parable of the trees that in order for us to enter the kingdom of God, we must change. The trees had to put their trust in the shadow of the thorn bush, which necessitated some very large trees getting really low to get into the shade of the bush. They also had to get really close together and close to the bush itself! This kind of closeness would require a loving attitude of tolerance for one another.

How close can we be to one another without becoming irritated and mean spirited? Fellowship requires a great deal of agreement when put to the test! It is my belief that God wants desperately to have close fellowship with us; for this to happen, change is required.

When Jesus taught us that hungering and thirsting for righteousness would be rewarded, I am sure he had our changing in mind. When two people fellowship with each other, they must be in agreement or conflict will erupt. God is not the one who will change because he is already perfect in all his ways. (Ps. 18:30, Matt. 5:48) We must do the changing which means we must learn about God. We must come to understand his character and personality. Since the character of God is righteous and since he cannot fellowship with unrighteousness, we must learn what righteousness is.

The book of Hebrews says,

“You need milk, not solid food! Anyone, who lives on milk being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Emphasis mine, Heb. 5:13-14)

In these verses we see that righteousness is identified as being the meat or solid food of the word through which we are trained to distinguish between good and evil!

The writer of Hebrews lists a number of subjects that he calls elementary teachings. All of these subjects are important to know about, and as spiritual development comes into being and begins to manifest itself, we are encouraged to progress toward maturity.

From this perspective, the writer of Hebrews goes on to teach us about our high priest king. The teachings about righteousness are connected to the teachings about the character of God. God is shown to be a God who keeps his word. The book of Genesis tells the story of a king named Melchizedek who was a type of Jesus Christ. Reference is made to the fact that his name meant, “King of Righteousness” and that he was king of Salem, which made him the king of peace!

There is much more that can be said about this man and his role; but for the purpose of this writing, it is sufficient to point out that Jesus is the true King of Righteousness and King of Peace. Much more is said about the role of Jesus as priest and how he offered the acceptable

sacrifice of his own blood. He also made a new covenant that would affect all becoming one of his.

This covenant was not like the old covenant that required obedience to the law in order to receive the blessings it promised. This covenant was based on better promises because, instead of excluding us because we are sinful and unable to qualify for its benefits; it promises that God will be our God and that he will forgive our sins and remember them no more. He also promised to change our hearts and to write his laws upon our minds and in our hearts. In addition to all of this, he promised to reveal himself to all of us in such a way that no one would have to teach his neighbor about who the Lord is, for all would know him. (Hebrews 8:10)

After learning about righteousness, we are able to truly fellowship with God in the daily course of life. By learning about the true nature of God, we are equipped to please him in our conduct of life and thus maintain uninterrupted fellowship with him. This closeness is made possible when right conduct results in greater manifestations of the life of Christ in and through us. The more we learn about God, the richer our experience in him becomes! This experience is for that person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness

Chapter Seventeen

Merciful

Matt. 5:7

“Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13) “I desire mercy not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6) There is mercy for the merciful, justice for the just, and faithfulness for the faithful. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Matt. 7:2) The Kingdom of Heaven is built on such concepts as these.

God is a God of love. Love and mercy go hand in hand. How can any man expect to receive mercy if he does not show mercy? Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matt. 5:7)

Sometimes we struggle with such teachings. We can show mercy to those we love and to those we understand, but what about those sinners who do the unthinkable, whose sins are so gross that we can't even mention them in a book such as this? When should there be mercy and when should there be justice? Should justice ever be administered without mercy? God, being a totally righteous God, is our best example to follow. God comes to us with mercy in one hand and judgment in the other. There is a day for mercy and a day for judgment. First, God calls to the sinner in love and offers pardon; then, if that is rejected, judgment will follow.

When the Lord sent the Israelites into the land he had promised them, he told them not to intermarry with the people of the land. They were to break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire; because they were a people holy to the Lord their God. (See Deut. 7:1-6) Thus he instructed them concerning how they were to conduct themselves toward the people of the land. The people of the land had become so corrupt that mercy had now turned to judgment! The land had to be cleansed before the corruption contaminated the young people of Israel.

The natural flow of all things is from order to disorder. Life flows toward death and death toward decay. So it is with morality, each generation becomes more corrupt than the one that preceded it, unless of course, there is an outside intervention.

Repentance opens the door to deliverance and deliverance opens the door to restoration! People do not get better by themselves; God is the only source of real change. Evil can be restrained for a time and in a measure by law, but real change can only happen when the Spirit of life enters a person's heart upon receiving salvation.

The Israelites were confronted with the problem of a country polluted by sin. The inhabitants of the country had become so corrupt that God had to judge them. This, however, was not an instant judgment on God's part.

God had sent Abraham, a godly man, into this land living among them and demonstrating his faith. They also had known a man named Melchizedek who was the king of Salem, a priest of the Lord and a man to whom Abraham paid tithes! (Gen. 14:18-20) On another occasion, the Lord had visited Abraham in a dream and told him about things that would happen in the future. In

this dream he had revealed to Abraham that his descendants would be held in captivity for four hundred years and then be brought back to this land of promise.

The reason given for the four hundred year period was that the Amorites had not filled up the full measure of their sins. (Gen. 15:12-16) God is a just God who will not punish those who do not deserve punishment!

A God of mercy warns us of the treachery of sin. Once the door of evil is opened even a little bit, sin seems to enter like a flood. It takes radical measures to deal with sin. Those thinking they can toy with sin and not reap the results of their folly are very deceived indeed.

This same God who deals harshly with sin, also deals compassionately with the repentant sinner. Mercy triumphs over judgment when repentance is involved. Repentance is recognizing the extent of ones own sin and correctly responding to that reality by passing on the same mercy received. And should the occasion arise, mercy will be shown once again to the merciful!

Chapter Eighteen

Pure in Heart

Matt. 5:8

See God? That's right. That's what it says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matt. 5:8)

"God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) How can we see God who is spirit? "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14) One thing seems certain, seeing the Lord is not a natural phenomenon.

Those who go about trying to find God without first settling the one all-important issue will never find him. We must understand that there is only one way to the Father, and that "Way" is Jesus. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

What a happy note! There is a way to the Father! At onetime we were separated from his love by the guilt of our sin, but now his blood that was shed for our sins has brought us near. We who were full of sin, burdened down with all sorts of evil such as hate, self-will, selfishness, anger, lust, greed, murder and deceit have now been cleansed and pardoned. This pardon is because Jesus paid the penalty of our sins and gave us access to a new life found only in him. David wrote,

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean, wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. (Ps. 51:7-12)

Did the Lord grant the request of David? This Psalm was written after David had sinned with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan had confronted David with his sin. Certain judgments were pronounced on David that God did not remove. The sword never departed from his house and his own wives were openly humiliated; but God did say through Nathan, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die." (2 Sam. 12:13) It seems safe to conclude that God did hear David's prayer of repentance and granted a "yes" answer, but that did not mean that he would not suffer for his sin. Suffer he did, but the ultimate blessing was not taken away from him! He suffered in the present life, but eternal life was granted.

Purity of heart is not the natural state of man; since we were born in sin, our very nature is prone to sin. Purity of heart is the result of change that God alone can grant. It is an act of mercy! Jesus spoke of purity of heart after he spoke of our need to be merciful. Those who are merciful are demonstrating the same spirit to others that they wish to receive from God.

Once our hearts have been made pure, we are candidates to receive a revelation of God. The author of the book of Hebrews says, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14b) This teaching can be taken to only apply to the future we will enjoy in God's presence, or to

mean that here and now we can enjoy a revelation of God. I believe it applies to both future and present.

When the heart of man is darkened by sin he has difficulty seeing God in anything. The darker the heart of man becomes, the easier it is to conclude that there is no God. Evil denies God, but purity of heart is the result of the light of God through which we see our sins. It is because of that light that we cry out for cleansing, and it is that same light that grants us a clear view of God our Savior!

Yes, when our hearts are pure we can see the Lord in the pages of scripture, in the sunrise and sunset, and in the smile of a baby. In fact, we can see him in all of creation. When our hearts are pure, everything we see reminds us of some spiritual reality. We learn, we look, we ponder, and we understand. God is Spirit, yet we see him very clearly. He revealed himself in Jesus, and we see him now because the spirit reveals him in a thousand ways.

Nineteen

Blessed Peacemakers

Matt. 5:9

A peacemaker is a very special kind of person. He must be totally objective in every kind of situation. Anyone who is self-serving will not be able to make peace with any consistency. Also immaturity is a fatal characteristic where peacemaking is concerned.

James wrote on this subject,

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18)

Jesus said, “Peacemakers will be called the sons of God”. (Matt. 5:9) It’s an honor to be called a son of God, or a man of God! True men and women of God are people who, not only have faith in God but have also learned the true nature of righteousness. To be a peacemaker one must have a pure heart, that is to say, a heart that is free of any sort of preconceived judgments, prejudices, resentments, or other attitudes or emotions that hinder us from being truly objective.

Perhaps Jesus listed the last three beatitudes in the order he did because it is necessary to first be merciful and then pure in heart if we are to be a peacemaker.

I have noted that wherever the carnal nature of man is being manifest, it’s easy to be a war maker! Strife, dissension, irritability, and violence are the natural out flowing of self-centeredness. When those who are walking in the Spirit encounter conditions of strife, they try to bring peace by first giving soft answers to turn away wrath, and then by bringing truth to bear upon the situations to the best of their abilities. (Proverbs 15:1-2)

When strife is directed toward the Christian, his response will be transparent honesty so far as it is possible. It sometimes takes real courage to walk away from a situation that is intended to enflame our passions. But, “The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life.” (Proverbs 15:4)

Jesus Christ is called the Prince of Peace. (Is. 9:6) He came into this world to be a peacemaker. First, he came to make peace with God for us — “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” (Rom. 5:1) Then secondly, his will is that we live in peace with one another. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom. 12:18) And thirdly, by his sacrificial death and by his blood, he came to remove the wall of separation between Jews and all other nations. There is no place for racial prejudices within the body of Christ as we are all one in Christ. (Eph. 2:11-15)

To be a peacemaker is to be a real son or daughter of God!

Chapter Twenty

Persecution

Matt. 5:10-12

In giving us the teachings known as the beatitudes, Jesus was beginning to unfold the teachings and the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven. After giving us the preceding teachings, Jesus addressed the subject of persecution. In his preamble to this subject I sense a desire to communicate in very understandable words since he knew that there would be literally thousands, perhaps millions, of people who would draw encouragement from what he had to say.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom under siege, and thus those who embrace it will suffer persecution. Suffering persecution may, in fact, be evidence that one is, indeed, a part of the Kingdom of Heaven. To be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven is to have Jesus the king living in you. Satan hates Jesus; therefore Christians are his targets. Jesus warned us that people would be the means through which persecutions would occur, but that, suffering insults, accusations and alienation would lead to rewards in heaven. Jesus wanted everyone to know that it is worth it! Therefore rejoice and be glad!

The Lord Jesus Christ, king of the Kingdom of Heaven, is really concerned about our feelings on persecution. He went on to say that we are the salt of the earth and that he was concerned that we would lose qualities that make us what we are. It's really important that Christians understand what a privilege it is to suffer persecution because when we suffer for Christ joyfully, the world really sees Jesus in us.

Also when we suffer persecution, we are in some very wonderful company. Jesus pointed out that the prophets who went before us suffered. To those we can add, from our present perspective, the apostles, the early Church, and martyrs of all the ages.

Twenty-one

Salt — Light

Mark 5:13-16

Kingdom of Heaven people are very special. Jesus said we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, which makes us very important people. The people of the world do not always appreciate us as being important, but we are because we are to the world what salt and light are to us.

The natural condition in this fallen world is that everything tends to corrupt; it is only in the presence of life that this process is reversed. This fact is why we are so important. Jesus is the light of the world and John said that life was in him. Now that Jesus is in us, we are the light of the world, and we have life in us too. It is the life of Jesus that is in us, but the result of that life is that we are being renewed and changed into his image! Instead of being corrupted, we are being made holy like him!

Salt is a preservative, which explains why Christians are important to the world! Without Christian influence upon the world, there would be nothing to offset the influence of evil.

Even in the natural world, all energy flows from positive to negative. Wherever there is order, the movement is from order to disorder. It is only when an outside intelligence intervenes that order can be restored. Energy sources such as stars, planets, and suns, are yielding up their energy and little by little they are dissipating. When all the energy sources have yielded all their energy, and there is no longer any movement from positive to negative, all will be darkness!

Salt as a preservative slows the process of decay, a quality we possess as Christians. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us resists evil. Wherever we go, whether we are aware of it or not, there is an aura of light that emanates from us. The angels of the Lord are also present to protect us. It takes the presence of the Holy Spirit within us to make us an influence in the world that can be likened to salt or light.

Another possible meaning can be found in Old Testament scriptures. In Numbers we find these words, “It is an everlasting covenant of salt.” (Numbers 18:19) The implication of this expression implies an eternal quality. Covenants of salt were covenants that were eternal in nature. It is the eternal perspective held dear by the people of the kingdom that has a saving effect upon the world.

Christians are set apart from the world by this eternal perspective. Their knowledge of the hereafter is what gives them qualities of selflessness, love for the unlovely, and concern for the lost. The Christian understands that there is not only a justice executed in this life but one that is eternal. His presence in the world is a reminder that eternal judgment is coming. Even those who choose to disbelieve that there is a place called hell are disturbed, be it ever so slightly, by the fear of future retribution every time they see a genuine Christian.

On the other hand, those who understand that there is an eternal kingdom that is not of this world have a hope upon which to rest their faith. When everything in this present world seems to be falling apart, it is this knowledge that gives them the faith and courage to go on; during suffering and persecution, it is an inexhaustible source of strength.

Turning now to the subject of light, we remember that John the Baptist came as a witness to the light. He was not the light, but came to be a witness to the true light that gives light to every man. He also said that in Jesus was life and that the life was the light of the world! (John 1:3-9) Herein lies a wonderful truth. The life being spoken about is not the natural condition of biological life that all people have. Indeed, natural life would not be unusual; instead there was something in Jesus that caused John to say, "In him was life and that life was the light of men." (John 1:4)

We have to conclude from John's statement that in order for us to be lights to the world, we too must have life as Jesus did. We, however, cannot have that life unless it comes from an outside source because eternal life is not our natural possession.

Now with these thoughts in mind, first, that John the Baptist was not that light, but that Jesus was, and that John the Baptist did not possess light; Jesus did; we see that John the Baptist was not a part of the Kingdom of Heaven; he only bore witness to its coming. He belonged to the era of the Law.

It wasn't until after Jesus died and rose again that the Holy Spirit could be poured out upon the waiting believers. It was at this point that what Jesus had said about our being a light could become a reality. John's life ended before this point in time, so he could only witness about the light's coming. The life that can be possessed today is not our own, but rather the life of our Lord Jesus, given to us by the ever present Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Now going back, remember that what was lost to humanity because of the fall was spiritual life. From that time on, death reigned in the souls of all mankind. Now, for the first time since Adam was driven from the Garden of Eden, we see in the person of Jesus, a man who possessed this divine life.

We now come to the revelation, life is found in the people of the kingdom! How did it happen? What is its source? In II Cor. 3:6 we are told that the Spirit gives life. And, "So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being', the last Adam, a life-giving Spirit." (I Cor. 15:45) What a glorious mystery is revealed in these words; because of Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, all mankind have access to life! No man can enter the kingdom except through him; no man stays in the kingdom unless he abides in him and in the words he spoke. Herein lies the secret of real life, eternal life; we know him and he knows us!

To possess life is to be a light, a light that must never be hid; it is to be seen by men. Spiritual light, however, does strange things to fallen man; it reveals human corruption. People don't like that! It's embarrassing to have your sins revealed. In the darkness even bad can be passed off as good! Lies can be believed until truth is known.

To be a light is to be the source of a challenge. If you don't want to live a righteous life, stay out of the light! That's the reason Christians are persecuted! But don't let that stop you from letting your light shine. It's worth all the rejection, all the criticism and all the pain.

Twenty-two

The Gospel Focused

Matt. 5:17-20

Are you looking for ease for a hurting conscience? Those individuals who are looking for a righteous mask to hide behind, who really aren't looking for truth, should avoid the gospel of the kingdom at all cost!

Jesus taught that the law was still in force and that none of it would be voided until all had been fulfilled.

Some, who have taken the view that grace is given to us to simply to make it easy for us to go to heaven, may find this Gospel unsettling because the message of Jesus is not a message that let's us off the hook. Jesus taught accountability in terms that may seem rather harsh.

Some will argue that these commands applied to the time in which Jesus was speaking, which was still under law, and that now that we are under grace, they are no longer in effect. To rationalize so is to lose sight of the whole point of the message!

Jesus did not come to abolish the principles or the commands taught in the law, thus he said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:20) Had Jesus stopped with those words, we still might succumb to the temptation to declare a non-issue, but he didn't. In the teachings that follow it becomes evident that Jesus was not teaching law in a legal sense but rather introducing us to the concept of the power of a transformed spirit. Jesus was pointing us to a higher plain of living that is free of legalistic burdens and the burden of sin.

The Gospel message is a sweet message of hope, healing, and restoration. It's a message that calls us to a higher holiness than any that has been previously spoken about.

God made a marvelous provision for all humanity who will receive it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) This provision is more than a mere setting aside of guilt for the way we live. Getting rid of guilt is very important and without forgiveness of sin, we can never hope to see God; yet, that is not really what the Gospel message is about.

The Gospel message is about how God in his great love sent Jesus to be the sin sacrifice for the world, to pay the full penalty for our sins, so that we might receive access to his presence. If we merely accept forgiveness, but do not return to him, God's purpose is not met. We have thus fallen short of the mark since our need for forgiveness does not touch the real issue.

What happened in the fall was separation between God and his special creation, man. What Jesus did for us when he gave his life is a marvel that few have comprehended or appreciated; yet, the focus of our attention should not be on his substitutionary death, so much as on what glory that death opened to us!

We have fallen far from the mark of God's intention for us. True fellowship is only achieved when the spirits of people are in harmony. Strife between people results when they hold opposing views and each seek to influence the other person to change his opinion.

When man and God lost fellowship it was because man fell from agreement with God whose position is not negotiable. God's position is truth; all other opinions fall short. There is no error in God; all error is on our side. That is not an egotistical, prideful assumption on God's part; it is a simple fact!

Man's purpose is not to negotiate with God or to debate truth; it is to learn. We are not the teacher; we are the students. Returning to God involves coming into spiritual agreement with him. It necessitates more than philosophical changes or legal forgiveness, but of necessity involves spiritual transformation.

The message of the Gospel opens the possibility to us of living in fellowship and love with God. Yet, we cannot live in the Kingdom of Heaven without living in obedience to the commandments. That is not a legal matter; it is a spiritual reality. Fellowship is only fulfilled when we live in harmony with God.

The law reveals the nature of God and what sorts of behavior offend him. To live in fellowship with God requires that we do not offend him.

Living in the Kingdom of Heaven is to live in the Spirit; and when we are living in the Spirit, we are living in the Kingdom. Embracing the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law leads to a higher form of righteousness. The call of the Spirit is to come to God by embracing his righteous and holy nature, and expressing that nature in our daily lives.

Twenty-three

How Bad Is Murder?

Matt. 5:21-24

How bad is murder? I don't believe that there has ever been a culture that has condoned murder except as a part of heathen worship. (The present abortions excepted.) There have been headhunters, warring factions, and people who sacrificed their children to heathen gods, but killing members of one's own social order has always been regarded as wrong.

When Jesus spoke of murder as being deserving of judgment, there was no apparent argument. However, for Jesus to say that to be angry is just as bad may have seemed startling. Now come on, Jesus; everyone knows there's nothing wrong with being angry—but wait, let's hear him out—Jesus continued by saying, “Raca” is worse! Then he continued, “You fool” is still worse and the penalty for it is hellfire!

Now let's look a little closer to see what might be the real lesson here.

According to Vine's Expository Dictionary, the translated word in this passage, *orgizo*, means, to provoke or to arouse to anger, a state of being angry, having an angry attitude toward someone, not necessarily verbalized, a silent contempt. We all recognize the destructive nature of murder, but have we considered the destructive effect of silent contempt? Have you ever felt the pain of being shunned? We may feel really proud that we contain all our bad feelings, but Jesus says that in such instances we are still subject to judgment. Thus anger, like murder, is an act of violence against another person because it attacks their sense of well-being.

Raca is an Aramaic word of utter contempt, signifying emptiness, simply put, it means empty-headed. When a person would say “Raca,” they would be attacking the self-image of the person.

The word “fool” (*moros* according to Vine) means morally worthless. Raca scorns a man's mind, but “thou fool” scorns his heart and character.

The progression seems clear here. Murder is an attack meant to destroy the physical life of a man while anger attacks the mind. Even though anger is only an outward emotional display with the damage being mostly temporary, the effects can last a lifetime. Saying “Raca,” or its equivalent, is to indulge in a contempt that undermines the self-image of a person, thus attacking the soul; and “thou fool” is an attack upon man's spirit.

Man is created in the image of God and God loves his creation. The most important part of a man is the eternal part so Jesus assigns the greatest pronouncement of judgment upon the attacks on the spirit!

Now let's summarize. If we are murdered yet we are righteous, we go to be with the Lord. If we are hurt by anger, we can survive and overcome. If we lose the confidence to think, reason and act, we are in grave danger; but if we lose respect for ourselves, we become utterly corrupt! Thus the destruction of the spirit is an act that has eternal significance.

In Matthew 5:21-24 that we have just covered, we again see that the king of the Kingdom of Heaven is always concerned with that which is eternal. There is much to be learned from this passage. Our purpose is not to explore the depth of what Jesus is saying here. I am sure that anyone who understands what human beings do to each other could write a book on the same themes. However, these words were spoken with authority long before the science of psychology was developed!

Not only did Jesus understand the levels of psychological and spiritual suffering, but he also understood full well what the appropriate penalties would be. What man made kingdoms protect a people from such suffering? Even in modern America where we have learned much about psychological abuse, our laws are primarily concerned with the physical, not the psychological or spiritual.

Jesus, as king of the Kingdom of Heaven, is quite different from any king we have ever experienced! The laws he embraced are different; the principles he taught and lived by are different; the concerns that drove him were unselfish; and the power of his kingdom is beyond comprehension. This kingdom he presides over is eternal, yesterday, today, and forever.

We are learning that whereas this kingdom is eternal, yet its primary concerns and functions are in the souls and spirits of men. This kingdom has a profound effect upon the way we live our lives, once we have become a part of it. There is no greater joy available to man than to be a follower of this king, Jesus.

Twenty-four

Sin and Not Pay?

Matt. 5:25-26

Even though we who have found entry into God's kingdom are living in the realm of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, our expectancy of divine intervention should never excuse bad behavior. If we indulge in wrong conduct, we can expect punishment, as Jesus warned us.

Because of our modern theological mind-set, God's grace is often abused. We seem to think that we can sin today and repent tomorrow and that no consequence will follow; such is not the case.

Jesus taught if our conduct is bad don't expect divine intervention! When our hearts are right, our conduct will also be right which solves many of life's problems. Christians can, and should, expect divine intervention, but not as a crutch. What happens in the outer world is the result of what goes on in the hearts of men.

When we come repentantly to the Lord Jesus our Savior with sin-laden lives, we can expect to be received with compassion and love from him. Repentance brings restored fellowship, and restored fellowship brings divine intervention in many forms into our lives. We are grateful that, no matter how guilty we are or how vile our conduct has been, God's grace, once given, will acquit us of all sin! Our sinful records are gone forever.

There are some results of our actions, however, that no amount of grace can ever change. What has been done, has been done. History is history. Some things we do in this world affects us in ways that grace does not change. Jail may still await a condemned criminal, even though he has sought forgiveness of both God and man. A body, weakened by sinful living, may still be weak.

Jesus held out a hope to mankind that reaches beyond the parameters of this life. His righteousness brought fresh hope to our troubled world. Even for those of us who have difficulty living according to his precepts, there is hope.

The Kingdom of Heaven, though not a government of the earth, has citizens on the earth, who, through new birth, are naturalized citizens. Because they are naturalized citizens, their heritage is new natures that are compatible with the precepts of the kingdom. The kingdom's laws cannot be fully obeyed without a new birth experience.

As Jesus explained the fundamental precepts upon which this kingdom is based, it became evident that it has laws that grew out of the laws that preceded it, natural developments of a continuing revelation of truth. As a seed begins to grow and develop into a plant and later produce a flower, so God's revelation has been given to man in wonderful stages of development.

As Jesus unveiled his new kingdom, a transcendent righteousness emerged that the law could only foreshadow. For this righteousness to be manifest in the lives of the subjects of this

kingdom, a very basic change had to take place; man had to receive something from outside himself. That something came in the form of the promised Holy Spirit. The law that had preceded was weak, in that it could not provide an answer to man's deficiency that in turn, made it impossible for him to please God; this deficiency was the lack of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Twenty-five

Adultery

Matt.5: 27-32

Adultery, in its simple definition, has to do with marital unfaithfulness. This leads us to the subject of sexual lust.

Sex is a divine creation that guarantees the procreation of the species as it is expressed in marriage. Jesus taught that any digression from the authorized expression of sexual fulfillment is evil!

But isn't just looking upon a woman harmless? Not if lust is involved. Let me speak candidly on the subject of human sexual passions. It is necessary to stop adultery at its source before it can enter one's heart. The battleground is the mind, and the eye is the primary means through which lust enters, especially in men. If a man doesn't entertain himself by looking lustfully upon a woman or pornographic material, or by fantasies of his mind, he will certainly prevent this form of adultery. If men are subject to this form of lustful behavior, then the women who receive gratification from this lustful behavior are equally guilty of the sin of adultery.

Lust is a self-indulgent orientation that uses objects merely as a means to gratification. Lust slips easily into hate, violence, and many forms of deviancy. Its natural flow is away from purity and the authorized means of sexual gratification.

The tempter works overtime in his efforts to pervert humanity. His first attack is to interrupt the natural development of emotional responses and to divert them toward self-gratification. This attack begins very early in life, unless parents and society are alert to this reality. Children must be protected from premature exposure to sexual activities that are meant for marriage. If children are exposed to deviancy before they are morally developed, a normal sexual life is threatened.

The tempter offers every possible digression imaginable. Not only does he seduce with inappropriate sexual objects, but he also tries to involve other related sins, such as the use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

Sexual orientation is to some degree a learned behavior. Once a sexual response mechanism is developed and becomes established in a person; correction can be very difficult. Happy indeed are those individuals who are pure in heart, their sexual orientation having been developed around their love for their spouse.

After dealing with the subject of lust Jesus continues by dealing with the marriage itself. Marriage is a covenant agreement binding on both parties at the level of permanency. Trifling with this covenant is a very serious matter. Jesus said, "It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matt. 5:30b) Now that's serious!

You may say, but doesn't God forgive all sin? Of course he does, but forgiveness is not an automatic response. Forgiveness is an action of God based on acceptance of our repentance and faith. It may be very difficult to truly repent of a sin we have come to love. Purification of heart

becomes very difficult when sinful activity brings enjoyment and gratification. It is not God's power that is in question here; it is the will of man that may not be willing to surrender what it loves. When our hearts are willing to surrender to the spirit of repentance, cleansing and deliverance can follow. With God all things are possible.

Sin is the reason people get divorces. The sin may be in the life of one or both spouses, though the types of sin vary considerably from situation to situation; but the results are the same. An improvement of life may even be the motive, yet it often results in further sorrow. Reconciliation for a troubled marriage is, no doubt, God's best intention. As long as the parties remain single, reconciliation is possible. To marry someone who has been divorced closes that door of opportunity.

One of the primary reasons for divorce is adultery. Adultery is the act of taking from someone sexually what belongs to another; or giving to another what we have already given to our spouse. This is why adultery can be committed without the act of sexual relationship. Jesus pointed this out when he said, "Do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt. 5:27-28)

Lust and adultery have the potential of destroying one's very soul. Jesus said concerning the seriousness of it, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gauge it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matt. 5:29-30b) You may wonder if Jesus was serious about gauging an eye out, I suppose little would be accomplished that way, but it does candidly demonstrate how serious this matter is. Wouldn't it be easier to get rid of lustfully offensive material?

There is deliverance from sin for anyone who will earnestly and sincerely seek it. If you cannot gain victory alone then confess your sin to a brother, if you are a man, or a sister, if you are a woman, and let them pray with you earnestly. James admonished, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man (or woman) is powerful and effective." (James 5:16)

Twenty-six

Regarding Oaths

Matt.5: 33-37

As Jesus continued his teachings concerning the precepts of his kingdom, he turned to the subject of oaths. Our great teacher did not mince words. With the skill of a surgeon, he cut right to the heart of the matter. Why do men curse? Why do they brag? Why do they make bold statements about what they will or will not do? Is it not to impress each other? Why do they feel this need? The reasons may vary from person to person, but Jesus said, such actions are evil! Whether the reason is for show or because of a need that has not been met, they are wrong. Their need may be causing them to compensate by drawing attention to themselves! To focus on self is to fall back into the ways of the world; kingdom people focus on God!

The idea of making vows had its place under law. People lived with “their life” as the central focus of their existence. Obedience to the law would result in divine blessings on their families, livestock, crops, servants and possessions, as well as health and happiness. They could go and come as “they” pleased, being so blessed. In this “earth oriented” way of life, making vows to God to attract attention was accepted but the reasons were selfish. (See Isaiah 58)

Our focus changes when we are born into the Kingdom of Heaven. No longer is it “My kingdom come,” but rather “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” (Matt. 6:10) No longer do we seek just our own good, but rather we seek the good of others. (See James 4:1-10, I Cor. 10:24, Gal. 6:9-10, Heb. 13:16) The old way was love self and respect the rights of others. The Kingdom of Heaven, however, is based on a new commandment, “Love one another.” (John 13:34)

When our hearts have been cleansed of selfish interests and focused on his interests; oaths, vows, faith promises and such like, are no longer of any real value.

When the Bible says,

Now listen you who say, “Tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

Kingdom people know who they are; they are citizens of the greatest kingdom that is in existence. God is their Father, and Jesus is their Lord and Savior. Being on a team like that is so great that we don’t have to try to impress anyone. The only one we need to worry about impressing is Jesus. We need only say “Yes” when we give an answer that calls for “Yes,” not a tirade of evil words. If it is “No” that we should say; then say “No”.

If someone wants a commitment from you concerning the future, say, “The Lord willing, I will or will not do it.”

There is great peace when we can acknowledge our dependency upon the Lord. When it is his will that motivates us, we are at liberty to forsake the concerns that torment the minds of the people of the world. The people who are of the world play many foolish games; they strut and show off, buy expensive things they don't need, and try to impress and intimidate one another. We don't need to participate in that scene; it's evil!

The Kingdom of Heaven is a Kingdom of people who are at peace with themselves and the world, and in love with the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

Twenty-seven

Give It All Up?

Matt. 5:38-6:4

As Jesus teaches, his enthusiasm for what he is saying builds! He does not spare a thing!

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you — “Wait a minute, Jesus; I’m not sure about all of this. Aren’t you getting a little too heavenly minded?”

Have you ever heard that? I have, many times. But don’t you see that, that is exactly what Jesus wants of us, that we become heavenly minded? Don’t you see that being earthly minded is our problem, not being heavenly minded: thus we want to be loved; we want our place; we want to be seen as people of value; we want to do well; and, we want to have our things. For this reason, the idea of eye for eye, tooth for tooth justice appeals to us.

Jesus continues without hesitation, “Do not resist an evil person.” If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And when he says that you should let someone sue you and take your tunic (or maybe your job, or your house, or your car), you feel put upon because your tunic is getting awfully close to your skin! Jesus has already said to take their blows! Now what does he expect? “Let him have your cloak as well.” Guess what, now your down to you’re loincloth! All that is left is what is absolutely necessary to maintain decency!

Is Jesus through? Not yet! “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles,” he continued. “This is too much,” you might say. Then you remember something that brings you hope; you remember he said, “if,” so you start to relax. The chances of forced travel happening seem rather remote. But don’t get too comfortable!

Jesus has something more to say; he only paused to catch a breath. “Give,” he continued, “to the one who asks you, and do not turn away the one who wants to borrow from you.” Maybe I ought to go repent! Want to join me? Maybe the Lord will forget the rest of what he has on his mind!

No chance! He’s still talking. Here we stand, beat up, half naked, exhausted, with nothing (we’ve given everything away); and Jesus is saying, “Have you heard that it was said.” Not those words again! Every time he says that you know you’re in trouble. “Love,” he continues, “your neighbor and hate your enemy.” All right, right on, I can buy that! “But,” he continues, “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” (Matt.5: 38-45) “Love my enemy? I can never do that,” you respond! “Not after what he’s done to me.” Can a man love his enemy? No, of course not; that is, unless he’s been born again!

Only after we have experienced the impartation of the Holy Spirit can we experience love rising from the inner man. It’s not natural to love your enemy; it takes the indwelling reality of a new nature. Concerning people who lack this new nature, Jesus said, “You are of your Father the Devil.” (John 8:44)

What a picture Jesus painted for us! Truly the Kingdom of Heaven was not designed for wimps! Those who are interested in worldly comforts may find this part of the Gospel a little unsettling. In our modern Christian community, we expect to be treated like some sort of royalty. The idea that we are kings and priests has somehow caused us to think that we should be pampered. Earthly kings, instead of our real king Jesus, become our role models! However, when we look at Jesus as a role model, we realize that there must be a total change of priorities. What Jesus described must become reality, not just empty words.

Jesus' words are painful to the fallen nature in us, but to the newborn spirit they are the words of life. We are now free to love our neighbors without fear of them taking advantage. The issue is settled. We can love the "difficult to love," and we can even love our enemies!

As is our Father, so is his Son. And as is the Son, so are we. If God is our Father, the evidence will appear in our lives. What is our Father like with reference to loving his enemies? Jesus left us no doubt, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matt.5: 45)

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (Tax collectors were known for their dishonesty and sin.) "And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect." (Matt. 5:46-48)

What a kingdom! It is quite unlike anything commonly seen on earth! It is rare indeed to see such manifestations in the lives of people, yet Jesus has made all things available to us. This kingdom is not to be found on a world map, but only in the hearts and lives of people who have been changed into the very image of its king, Jesus. The kingdom is not a religious organization; it's changed people who have humbly asked God to enter their hearts with his Holy Spirit. Such change is now possible because Jesus died in our place, thus satisfying the requirements of the law.

Reader, if you do not have the Holy Spirit within, won't you simply ask God to forgive all your sins? Won't you open your heart to Jesus and ask him to start living his life through you? Go ahead and tell him you love him! Tell him you're beginning to understand his love and that you want to be born into his kingdom of Love. Remember the promise of Jesus? "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." (Matt. 5:6)

Once we have taken Jesus into our hearts, change is evidenced. We even have a different attitude about our righteous acts, no longer doing them just to look good. We no longer give to be memorialized: we're not looking for credit! We give quietly, and even secretly if possible, knowing that our heavenly Father will do his own rewarding!

Once our hearts are right with God, we realize that it wasn't just a sin that needed repentance of, nor even a list of sins, but rather a total condition that existed because we lacked eternal life.

When you're a person without Christ, it's no great surprise when you sin because; it's natural to sin. So, just as a piece of rotten meat has an odor, so a sinner has sins. And just as you may slow the process of decay in a piece of meat by using some method of preservation, so you can slow the process of decadence in your life by observing certain rules or commands.

The Ten Commandments, with their accompanying laws and ordinances, while observed in society held in check the tendencies toward evil. The more a society moves away from these social and moral restraints, the greater becomes the stench of evil.

Because the fallen nature of man is a dead thing, the natural result is corruption. Therefore, restraints must be maintained; to allow a society to lose its moral convictions is to allow it to free-fall into an abyss of anarchy.

As an act of love, God gave Israel his laws, but they could not give people eternal life any more than a preservative can give life back to a piece of meat. The laws did not have life in themselves, but they testified that “the life is the blood.” (Duet. 12:23) The laws forbade the people to use the blood of the animals they ate, and instructed them to pour it out. Its only approved use was in sacrifices.

The word “flesh” in the Bible often refers to where the fallen nature dwells, and blood is said to be the life of the flesh. When blood was shed, the symbolism taught, the life of the flesh, now being gone, left no place for the evil nature to dwell. When Jesus took our place in sacrificial death, he shed his blood, an act of redemption, done in such a way that all people could plainly see what took place. The blood was shed literally and openly, yet its significance was spiritual.

The man Christ Jesus died a natural death, but what really took place was spiritual so that every man, woman and child’s flesh nature was dealt a deathblow. The blood of Jesus was shed; the life of the flesh was gone.

By faith in Jesus, we accept his death as our deaths and refuse to allow sin to have power over us again! We reject sin, the master of sin, Satan, and all his demonic helpers, along with all his lies and vain philosophies. By faith, we deem the old nature to be dead and live new lives as the result of the faith of the Son of God who gave himself for us. We no longer live under the domination of sin; we have new lives. The law is no longer needed, just as we do not feed preservatives to a living animal. We move away from a living death to the life received by faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said to believe on him, in doing so we forsake a separate existence, an existence of living and acting independently of God. We move into a relationship with Jesus, actually into him. His life, his death, and his resurrection are ours!

Now we can see what God had in mind when he sent Jesus into the world to do something for us that we could not do for ourselves.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:14-18)

Twenty-eight

Teach Us to Pray

Matt.6: 5-15

Once we have been brought back into relationship with our heavenly Father, we need to learn how to pray.

Even in our prayers we exhibit erroneous attitudes because of our separation from God. We have strange concepts about God because of our ignorance and our prayers likewise become strange and perverted.

The first point Jesus makes about prayer is that it is not for show, which does not mean that people should not pray in public. It does clearly mean, however, that people who are part of the Kingdom of Heaven do not go around trying to look religious by doing religious things. On the one hand, we are not to hide our Christianity (we are the light of the world); on the other hand, people who try to impress others with how “Holy” they are, are not the kind of witnesses Jesus wants us to be. I never criticize people who do unusual things in evangelistic causes, such as carry huge crosses or dress differently; but to make such displays the everyday style of life to impress, is not what Jesus wanted for his kingdom.

So, “when you pray,” Jesus said, “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matt. 6:6)

Next, Jesus draws our attention to the pagan idea that long prayers are necessary! However, because the object of pagan prayer is not “Our Father in heaven,” but rather some mythological creation such as the god within or the Christ consciousness, or some god represented by an image of some sort or other, prayer is fruitless.

Pagans believe prayer must tap into some power source, not understanding they are not of Almighty God; though all power, if it exists, originated with God. Prayer to any other gods will not be answered by the one true God, but by sources outside god’s direct control. I am convinced that demons exist and can do some seemingly powerful things, although their power is limited to what God has created. There are powers outside the physical realm that God has also created. These are sometimes used by Satan to deceive humans. They know, all too well, how to use this power, however, there are some things they can do and some they cannot do.

Some pagan prayer techniques include vain repetition or forms of concentration or reduce natural resistance to spirit powers so that psychic phenomenon can occur. In Hinduism, for example, a word or phrase that is believed to have power is repeated over and over again. Drugs are also used in this way.

In regards to Christian prayer we must walk a fine line of understanding. With God our Father, there is no need to repeat prayers over and over, yet our Lord did teach us to persevere in prayer since our earnest and fervent prayers avail much. On this vital subject, we must discern between the a person seeking an answer to prayer, that is, a person who is in agony of spirit

doing business with God, and the person who believes that God is impressed by how long or loud we pray, what scriptures we quote, and all such nonsense.

Jesus said,

“Do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matt. 6:8)

The concept of prayer here is the petitioning of God.

“This is how you should pray,” Jesus said, “Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.” (Matt. 6:9) Prayer should always be directed heavenward and should reflect the greatest possible respect and reverence for the person of God. Respect for God is reflected in respect for his name. The name in the scriptures translated “LORD” was from the Hebrew name of God, YHWH, commonly called the tetragrammaton. This name was unpronounceable and considered too holy to try to pronounce. Some added vowels to make it pronounceable, changing it to Jehovah or Yahweh; but the Jews simply avoided it as too holy to pronounce and substituted “LORD” in its place. Jesus encouraged this same sense of awe and respect, though he never addressed God in any other way than “Father.” We too, are instructed to address him with the respect his name implies.

Once we are a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, a very basic change takes place. The focus of our lives totally changes; our concerns are no longer selfish, nor are our prayers made for selfish reasons. “Your kingdom come, your will be done,” Jesus continued. What a change in attitude this is! Pagans use prayers to advance their causes, to obtain needed resources, or to get new creative ideas; their motives being to out do the competition. It helps to get “spirit” guidance, they believe. Christians also get “Spirit” guidance, but the Spirit is a different spirit than the one pagans encounter as their method of seeking is also different. The result is that the Christian Spirit brings eternal life.

A friend of mine was once a professional baseball player in the major leagues. He told me that the Christian athletes would sometimes say to each other, “P.F.M.,” which meant, “pray for me.” One day my friend went to bat against a Christian who was the pitcher, my friend called to him, “P.F.M.,” “Later,” was the reply.

God must smile sometimes as he hears us pray with intensity for a “hit” or some special favor that is clearly for the advancement of our own personal interests. I do not see such prayers as bad, so long as they don’t take on a more serious note. There are a host of trivial matters about which we Christians may say, “Lord help me” with shallow sincerity, but without the spirit of jest. Such requests are probably healthy as they reflect a relationship to God as Father. The overriding motive of our lives should always be “the heavenly vision” of which the Apostle Paul spoke.

Does God answer selfish prayers? I am sure that he does, but not in violation of his will.

In praying “your will be done,” we are expressing submission to the purposes of God. You may ask, “Isn’t it unbelief to say ‘your will be done’ when there is a verse of scripture that expresses God’s explicit will in a similar situation?” Of course not.

The Bible is the divinely inspired book that reveals many truths teaching us about God, what he is like and what his plans are, and about ourselves. There are many scriptures that reveal

God's will about specific situations and conditions. These are scriptures universally and constantly true because they spring from his very nature. God revealed his will, but in application other priorities often come into play. God has a will for the world, a will for the church, and a will for each individual. He also has established many laws that work universally.

In the natural world we see how these laws inter-relate. When two opposite laws come into conflict, the lesser law always yields to the stronger one. For example, when an object is thrown into the air, the law of thrust carries it upward until the law of gravity slows it. When the law of gravity has overcome the law of thrust, the object begins to fall back to the earth.

This same principle can be seen at work everywhere, in science, in health, in athletics, in psychology, and in Christianity.

The mark of a wise man is his desire to learn. Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." Vines expository dictionary explains the difference between two Greek words for wisdom. "While *sophia* is the insight into the true nature of things, *phronesis* means the ability to discern modes of action with a view to their results; while *sophia* is theoretical, *phronesis* is practical." Both these forms of wisdom are used in the scripture.

Colossians 2:2-3 says,

"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (*sophia* is the insight into the true nature of things) and knowledge."

Those who have the Spirit living within are always eager to know both what the written word reveals on a matter and what the Spirit directs. There may be specific scriptures that seem to apply to a situation of concern to us, but the Spirit may reveal that, whereas that is true, it doesn't apply at this time because it is in conflict with the Father's will for this specific occasion.

To say, "your will be done," is to express genuine humility (the recognition of a higher intelligence), the required attitude of heart for any person who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 11:28-30 says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

If the king of the kingdom is humble (expressed in submission to the will of his Father), then we who are his subjects must be very humble. To be humble is to acknowledge our true needs and deficiencies and to trust in one who can help us. All true treasures are found in Jesus.

Twenty-nine

We Need Bread

Matt. 6:11

“Give us today our daily bread.” Jesus continued to instruct us. I also recall his words, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matt. 5:6) And again, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35) Then again, “It is written: ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matt. 4:4) Still another quote is, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63)

What is it we hunger for, that which is temporal or that which is eternal? Jesus elaborated further on the subject: “Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matt 6:25-34) “Do not worry” Jesus instructed us, “Don’t you realize your value?” In daily life with God, all that is needed is to simply request what we need even if it is more for our own benefit than God’s! So when we say, “Give us this day our daily bread,” do we doubt his love? Do we doubt his ability?

The need for natural food dominates the mind of natural man, but hunger for spiritual food dominates the heart of the spiritual man. Jesus gave us this assurance, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matt. 6:33-34)

The need for natural food is a real need of course, but spiritual food is of greater importance. However, that is not to say that God is not sensitive to the needs we have in the natural world.

God likes to see the principle of giving established in our lives. When our hearts become more concerned with the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven than with our own needs, God looks after our natural needs. I have often expressed the thought this way, “If I will look after the Lord’s kingdom, he will look after mine!” I believe that and have seen him intervene in my life many times.

Never be afraid to ask for what is needed in your life, as God is interested in the smallest details. Sometimes when we get to thinking about the spiritual kingdom, we forget that it’s okay to have very human needs. People of the kingdom get hungry just like everyone else and need clothes to wear and cars to drive and all the other necessities of life.

The difference is that we keep in focus that which is eternal as our top priority and possess that which is temporal with very loose grips. When controversies arise in our lives, we let go of the temporal and reach for the one who is called Faithful because he is always there for us. When we cry — and we do, he is there to comfort us. His eye is ever upon us, and the smallest details do not escape his caring heart. Go ahead, ask him! Bread, the natural kind, is on his menu for you too!

Thirty

Forgive Too?

Matt. 6:12

Have you ever been in debt? Chances are you have. Have you ever been forgiven a debt? What a relief it is when, for some reason, you are forgiven the debt!

The kings of this world concern themselves primarily with power; and since money is essential to power, they are very concerned with money. In contrast, the Gospel of Matthew is about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is therefore fitting that Matthew would address the subject of money with the term “debts.” There is a parallel passage in Luke, in which he used the term “sin.” Money is so connected to evil that one could say sin or debt without the slightest dishonesty to the thought communicated. The use of “debt” in this prayer for forgiveness is, no doubt, intended to represent sin metaphorically.

Why do people go into debt? Isn't it because we desire more than what our daily provisions allow? We spend what we do not have because we covet what our heavenly Father has not provided for! The world system has made it so easy— “Just sign here, buy now, pay later;” only the most prudent avoid the snare. Blindly we follow the Pied Piper, ignoring the word of God that plainly says, “The borrower is servant to the lender.” (Proverbs 22:7)

Few among us have understood that, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” (I Tim. 6:6) Many have been deceived into believing that, Godliness is a means to financial gain. (See I Tim. 6:5) The apostle Paul wrote,

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and have pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.” (I Tim. 6:10-11)

If we are to enjoy the full measure of liberty in Christ, we must embrace a faith in God that enables us to live without wanting. When our hearts have ceased to trust in money, and our trust is truly in the provisions of our Heavenly Father, we find an ability to function in liberty few have experienced. We then come into agreement with what was written, “But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (I Tim. 6:8)

Forgiving others their debts is not so hard if one's own dependencies and affections are centered in the Kingdom of Heaven. Since the debt we owe God can only be forgiven as we forgive others, forgiveness is no longer an option. “Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.” (Matt. 6:12) This issue is so vital that Jesus returned to it immediately after completing the prayer saying, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matt. 6:14-15) Thus we see the strong connection between the words “debts” and “sins”. If we want mercy from the Lord, then we must show mercy.

Thirty-one

Fast in Secret?

Matt. 6:17-18

As we are confronted with vital issues of life, Jesus touches us more and more deeply. We must first let go of our aggressions, then our lusts, then our selfishness, then our insecurities, and then, of course, our greed. As we lay down our defensive attitudes and learn to give, love, pray and forgive, we may find ourselves wanting a little pity.

Surely we deserve a little credit for all we have suffered. If we were of the world, that credit would be all right, but not in God's kingdom! "When you fast," Jesus said, "do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full." (Matt. 6:16)

Do we fast for the benefit of men? Is it so we will look good to others? No, fasting is not to be done to impress one another; and true fasting, when done with right motives, will receive a just reward!

What we are talking about is the reality of letting go of that that pertains to the world. Worldly desires, feelings, and affections have no place in heaven; therefore, they must be abandoned. All earthly treasures will surely perish because this world is under a curse with everything in it destined for destruction.

Fasting is an exercise in self-control that attacks the demanding nature of our flesh. Denying our flesh food for a time, or any other controlling desire, tends to break down the cry of the flesh and that makes it easier to hear the voice of the Spirit.

Fasting is not even for the purpose of impressing God. It is for our benefit. When we fast we are getting rid of what hinders our relationship with God resulting in a richer prayer life, a more compassionate approach to those in need, and a greater freedom in ministries of the Holy Spirit.

What joy we begin to feel when we are genuinely free of the gravitational pull of our earthly natures, when our concerns are no longer, "How do I look?" or "How accepted am I?" or "Will I succeed?" or "How much money do I have?" or "Is my money secure?" When our minds and hearts have been cut free from all anxiety that stems from prideful greed and arrogance and we release our affections for success, power and acceptance, we begin to feel a sense of peace that we know will endure through any test. It is at this point that we are candidates to begin working, fasting and praying for the success of the Kingdom of Heaven, without regard to how our efforts will affect our own careers. The hypocrites of Jesus day were no different than hypocrites are today. When we fast to be acknowledged by man and not for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are being hypocritical.

As Satan gains more and more control over the economies, politics, education and religions of the world; it will become increasingly more difficult for Christians to function freely.

Those whose hearts, hopes and dreams are tied to this world will find increasing cause for frustration and disappointment. Those whose hearts are fixed on the eternal hope, those who are involved in the Kingdom of Heaven, whose treasures are eternal in nature, are immune to such anxiety and disappointment!

The Kingdom of Heaven is not a closely guarded secret; but because of the hardness of our human hearts, the ability to hear and receive it is greatly impaired. It is a message that God wants everyone to hear; unfortunately, not everyone can hear!

Many people are attracted to what appears to be the gospel of Jesus Christ, but, the true message of the gospel is a message very different from what is heard in the materialistically—minded Christian community. It is a message of hope; yet, what is heard may not even sound good to many people because it leads us away from those things that men seek.

Thirty-two

Treasures in Heaven

Matt 6:19-24

When you look at the world around you, what do you see? Do you see it by the light of the Kingdom of Heaven, or do you see it in the worldly way? When we consider that the light of the world is darkness, then it takes the light of the Holy Spirit shining within us to enable us to see as we ought to see. If our eyes are good eyes, and the light within is good light, then we will be able to choose the way of the Lord in every situation.

Jesus instructed in Matt. 6:19-24 that we should not lay up treasures in this world, that since everything in this world is subject to loss, and that any efforts here are going to lead to lose, we should then live in the light of the coming Kingdom of Heaven which is of great value.

Do we protest against a message that lays emphasis on the Kingdom of Heaven rather than on this world? Do we want our inheritance now, like the prodigal son who demanded his part of the inheritance prematurely? When we receive Jesus Christ, we become heirs of God and co-heirs with him if we meet the qualifications set forth in the scriptures. (See Romans 8:17) God has great plans for us that will take all eternity to fulfill. We have choices to make. What do we want? Do we want to pursue what is temporal or do we want what is eternal?

To choose what is eternal does not mean we only receive what God has for us in the future. Once we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, our eternal life begins. The remainder of this life on earth is phase one and very important because what we do here will be rewarded in heaven.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (II Cor. 5:10)

If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (I Cor. 3:12-15)

From these scriptures we see that, like it or not, we must all appear before the Lord to give accounts of what has been done in the body. There are many things that are done in the body that have little or no eternal weight to them, the everyday sorts of things that are necessary to our natural lives. They are not bad, just not of eternal value. Also, I suppose, everybody has a stack of hay, wood and straw that will be consumed in this fiery test, things done that we have spent a great deal of life's energy upon. We may have even thought that these things were important enough to stand the test, only to find that they weren't.

I have spent much of my life involved in the work of the Lord. As I look back, I wonder how much of what I have done will stand the test? I even wonder if anything I have done will stand the test!

It is my opinion that some people will go before the Lord to have their works examined and be amazed at how much of what they did in their lives stood the test! I am equally convinced that others have gone through their lives assuming that they were doing very well and piling up significant works, only to discover that very little will stand the test.

Motive seems to be the main ingredient in the formula for enduring substances. When we do our spiritual work in the name of the Lord, it has value. However, is simply saying to someone “I do this in the name of the Lord” enough? If that were the case then there are some individuals who would have some very corrupt actions rewarded. I think I can say with certainty that such testimony is not enough. If someone wished to act in my name, for example, I would insist that that person act in my character, doing what I authorized and in the manner I authorized. If they did not, I would declare the person a fraud. Does Jesus take a different view? I don’t think so.

If we are wise, we will take a good look at our lives to see if what we are doing is of eternal value. This does not mean that the “secular” parts of our lives are not of value. Sometimes, in my judgment, secular work can be done as an act of worship and obedience to God’s will and therefore be of great eternal value! This is why I believe some people are going to be very surprised to find great wealth in heaven after they have spent their lives performing very lowly tasks every day, but doing them unto the Lord! I do not think that a task must be “for the church” or some form of “ministry” to be rewarded. I think there has been a lot of work done “for the church” that will be nothing more than straw.

It is not always easy for us to know how God views us because we do not really know ourselves! I know that I do not always know my motives. As I sit writing this book, can I be sure why I do it? Do I hope someone will think it is good, or do I hope to be able to sell some books someday and make some money? Or is there a more noble purpose? Perhaps I do it because I learn so much, but does that make it a worthy endeavor? I know that as I write I am close to the Lord and am fed spiritually, but is that selfish? Is that worthy of reward?

I believe that most of the deeds that are truly worthy of reward, are those that we are hardly even aware of doing, but which come from pure hearts of love as gifts to others in need. Perhaps the deed is an encouraging word, a compliment when needed, or a helping hand, not for gratitude, but rather, just because it is the right thing to do.

I firmly expect that the most rewarded people in heaven will be those judged as “simple folk.” They aren’t the proud people or those with egos so big that they spend most of their lives either, feeding them or feeling hurt. They are the people who may not consider themselves very important, they may even be slaves to the kingdom of love, but Jesus says they are the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thirty-three

Do Not Worry

Matt. 6:25-34

Who can fathom the love of God? Why God loves us is a mystery that I do not understand. When I see the evil that manifests in the lives of many, I wonder that God has not destroyed this human race.

However, that God loves the human race is evidenced in the sending of his Son Jesus to die for us that we might receive pardon and the impartation of eternal life.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matt. 6:24-34)

The passage before us tells of the care and concern of our heavenly Father for us, not simply as a human race, but specifically as special people. We are instructed not to worry because our heavenly Father is caring for us. The Lord spoke of our value as dear children by contrasting our value to the birds of the air. Even the birds of the air have great value to God. His concern for them is evident in the way they are fed. Yet, Jesus reminds us that we are of more value than they, and how not even one of them falls to the ground without the notice of our Father; how much more does he care about us?

We are all children of Adam, God’s special creation. When God created Adam, he, in effect, created all of us. We were all in Adam; as his offspring, he contained a vast variety of hereditary possibilities. Adam was an amazing man and God loved him. If God had not loved him so, why would he have made a provision for his salvation?

Worry is a huge waste of energy, sapping, as it does, the very vitality of the human spirit. Moreover, worry never changes a thing; prayer, on the other hand, does change things. When we’ve been born again, we are a part of the great Kingdom of Heaven. Our very citizenship has been changed from earth to heaven! We are part of the Son of God and therefore his sons. The miracle that has happened to us is beyond our comprehension.

We only vaguely understand the value of a born again Christian. What happens to the human spirit when the divine Spirit enters is truly glorious. However, natural men are concerned with such things as what we will wear. This concern is not necessary because we have qualities that, when viewed in the heavenly perspective, transcend the limits of the natural man. To illustrate the point, Jesus talked about Solomon in all his glory.

Solomon was known for his great riches and wisdom. In contrast to Solomon's glory, we have the illustration of the lily that Jesus said has a greater glory than Solomon's! Man sees only outward appearances, but there is beauty that does not depend on ornaments of adornment. What the lily is, the lily is. The beauty of the lily is not offended if it is not appreciated! The lily does not need special attention to cause it to bloom. It will bloom no matter where it is planted, so long as it is not destroyed.

Solomon, on the other hand, had many servants to serve his need. His possessions were innumerable, and he arrayed himself in the finest clothes of his day. He had cattle, sheep, and every kind of exotic animal available. He had horses, chariots and an army to defend him. He was wise and powerful. Yet, in spite of all this wealth, Jesus said the lily is arrayed more gloriously!

Among the riffraff of the world are some very beautiful people. They go about their daily lives quietly, living lives of morality, responsibility, and faithfulness. They seldom get special recognition, nor do they want any; they are children of their heavenly Father. They possess a beauty that comes from within that is nourished by their relationship with God. Their beauty exists whether they are alone or in a crowd, whether among family or enemies, whether they are in need or in abundance; nothing ever changes them, they are God's people. The beauty of the lily is like that, it comes from within because it has the special gift of its creator!

The beauty God has given us is the beauty of a quiet spirit living under the provision, care, and watchful eye of the creator. The heritage of the born again believer is the care of a Father who watches intently, not judging, but rather, doting upon and protecting us.

So why worry? It is not necessary because those of "little" faith worry. Accept the words of Jesus and the care of your Father; let him do your worrying! Worry is not for us because we can't change a thing by doing so. Jesus gave us a remedy by saying,

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matt. 6:33-34)

Thirty-four

Judging

Matt. 7:1-5

As our eyes are opened in understanding, we see in contrasting light what has been and what ought to be; and a danger comes into view. I once heard it said that some people have just enough knowledge to be dangerous!

Some individuals are able, in life, to acquire respectable positions with only minimal training and experience. Actions motivated by a combination of a person's knowledge and attitude best suits his needs. Thus, if a person is immature, selfish, stubborn, proud, and lacks knowledge, chaos may result. Such a person may try to sit in judgment of others "flaws" which are totally irrelevant to a more experienced observer.

Jesus warned us about this matter of judging.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3)

While he did not forbid giving assistance to another, he did attack the hypocritical arrogance that often motivates such action.

We are not to be naive and gullible in our relationships with others, nor are we to have critical, judgmental attitudes, but we are to "watch out for false prophets coming in sheep's clothing while inwardly they are ferocious wolves." (Matt. 6:15)

The process of discerning is a form of judging. Yet often discerning and judging are confused as one and the same. In common usage we often use the words synonymously, perhaps a source of condemnation of very sincere and tender people.

The Greek word, "anakrino" means to examine, investigate, or question, and is translated "discerned" in 1 Corinthians 2:14. This meaning is not to be confused with what Jesus is talking about in Matt. 7:1-5 which is "krino," meaning to sit in judgment. It is therefore, appropriate to examine one another to determine whether or not we are truly who we claim to be.

It has been helpful to me to think of a discerning person as being like a medic who comes to the aid of the injured with a medical kit, ready to give assistance. Or, a discerning person is also like a watchman on the wall ready to warn of threats to the safety of those he is guarding.

Judges, on the other hand, are like crowds of people with rocks in their hands, ready to stone violators.

There is a place for judging, that is to say, determining what is right and what is wrong; but in the matter of getting even or expressing vengeance, we are to turn to the Lord. He is well able to do what is needed and often uses judicial systems to do so.

Before we hand out a judgment to someone who is an offended person, let's remember that mercy triumphs over judgment! James 2:13 says, "Because judgment without mercy will be

shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” Often when mercy, due to repentance, is granted to the offender, restoration follows! Let us also remember that to those who show mercy, mercy will be given! Jesus reminded us that, “in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Matt. 7:2) With this in mind, I am very careful to be merciful, lest I be denied the mercy I need.

Thirty-five

Pearls

Matt. 7:6

In the Kingdom of Heaven we discover many wonderful truths that enrich our lives so we are tempted to try to share all we have learned with as many people as possible. What is frustrating is, that what is a treasure to us is not always a treasure to others because, spiritual truths are only comprehended by spiritual individuals. Jesus said. "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs." (Matt. 7:6) Trying to share your treasure with an unbeliever is like looking at a family album with someone who has absolutely no interest in you or your family. Sharing your special love for the Lord with those who mock and berate can be a painful and disillusioning experience.

We have a message of truth to proclaim to the world that every person deserves to hear at least once. It's a message concerning man's lost condition and redemption for sins that have separated him from the loving God who alone can help, and save him.

Man must receive the gift of God before he can know about God and his kingdom. Spiritual knowledge falls on the deaf ears of those whose minds have not been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

There is some knowledge about God that all men can understand, but there are many truths that God must make real to us before we can fully appreciate their worth. We can know about God and even believe in God without having any understanding of how personally real he can be to us. We can believe in the love of God without ever knowing that wonderful knowledge that he loves us in a very personal and intimate way.

Jesus warned us to be careful of dogs and pigs. Now, I realize that in our western culture some may be very fond, of these animals so that they resent a negative reference to them. However, Jesus was not trying to denigrate them by using them in this symbolic way, but rather to demonstrate the character of people who have not been touched by the love of God. Pigs can be fine pets; I have raised some and was fond of them. But pigs are pigs! If you put a string of pearls around a pig's neck, you can be sure that at the first opportunity it will go straight for a mud puddle without the slightest regard for your treasure!

And so it may be with even your closest friends. If they have not received the wonderful experience of eternal life, they may become your worst enemies spiritually. How sad it is when old friendships become divided over something as precious as eternal life! What we have in Jesus is so valuable that it must be guarded with our very lives! Never, never, never give up your treasure! It's worth more than life itself!

Thirty-six

Ask

Matt. 7:7-12

With all the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount in our hearts we hear the Spirit's invitation, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matt. 7:7); what should we request?

If we have heard with our hearts and experienced change in our desires, we will now be asking for what will benefit us in the light of the Kingdom of Heaven. This assurance of answered prayer is not without qualification. God knows what we really need in our lives and assures us that what he gives benefits both our spiritual and physical being.

God is not sadistic turning us away when we come asking for help. If we human beings, though prone to evil, know how to make righteous decisions for our children, acting in their best interests, how much more is this true of our heavenly Father?

God never ignores us when we pray asking for something to sustain us; willingly he provides nourishing food and proper care to us. In fact, if the roles were reversed, God does for us what he would want us to do for him. Knowing all there is to know about us, and knowing every possible answer he could give; he gives the best gifts possible. Here is what Jesus said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13)

God knows that without help we will never make it into his kingdom! We need a power in our life that is not natural, though we live in a natural world. We are to live by the principles and in the power of the heavenly kingdom. Jesus gave a promise to us that our Father would give the good gifts we need. Jesus said, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised: but stay in the city (of Jerusalem) until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49) God's plan for his church includes giving the power of the Holy Spirit. Additional insight is given in Acts 1:4-9,

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

We are slow to learn important truth! Because we are worldly we have questions such as, “When will the tribulation occur?” “What about the millennium?” “Will Jesus rule an earthly kingdom?” And many more such questions about which the Bible is not silent.

But for us, what is it that is really important after all? As Jesus prepared to be taken into heaven, the minds of the disciples were still on earthly things. Jesus, however, knew what they really needed, thus the last words Jesus spoke were about receiving the Holy Spirit and why they needed this experience.

The message of this kingdom must be proclaimed. They had received much from Jesus, but they still needed more that would be given in a mighty outpouring on the day of the festival of Pentecost. Not only would they be affected by it, but the whole world would be as well. The Holy Spirit would release them to minister so that through their teachings change would come to those too whom they ministered.

Here is the record,

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

What happened in Jerusalem was not the whim of a cult group forming a new religion; it was God’s eternal plan being unfolded. This giving of the Spirit was God’s plan from the beginning and therefore not controlled by human desire; it was God’s desire!

Jesus’ death atoned for the sins of all mankind and now the message of salvation must be proclaimed to the entire world.

These events were pivotal points in the history of the world! Jesus really was who he said he was, and the men to whom Peter spoke, knew it was true. He had done his miracles in this nation and was crucified here in Jerusalem just days before. They knew his story. He had been placed in a tomb, a massive stone rolled over the entrance, and Roman guards placed the seal of Rome upon it. A guard was assigned to make sure no one would attempt to steal his body! And because he predicted he would rise again, every precaution was taken to make sure it wouldn’t be faked.

Peter stood to explain to the crowd what all that was happening meant. Peter proclaimed that: 1. Jesus was both Lord and Christ. 2. His death and resurrection were prophesied. 3. He was David’s prophesied heir to the throne. 4. This event was vitally connected to the work of redemption, and was also part of prophetic fulfillment. 5. That, they themselves could enter into this same experience they had just witnessed that had happened to these waiting disciples by repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus, and by receiving the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. 6. That this promised experience was not just for them that day, but also for all to receive from that day forward.

The author of the book of Hebrews picked up the theme concerning the significance of what was being spoken of on the day of Pentecost. He wrote a lengthy argument that Jesus was a priest, but outside and above the order of Aaron’s priesthood; and that only Jesus qualified to be a priest in this order that was based on the historical record of a man called Melchizedek.

The author shows that priests bear the responsibility of making atonement for the people; Jesus, like other priests also made atonement for sins. But, quite unlike those who had gone before him, Jesus made an all-sufficient sacrifice, which once offered would never be repeated. This sacrifice was not a substitutionary animal lacking redemptive power; it was the precious blood of Jesus who lived a perfect life.

As the high priest of the Melchizedek order of priesthood, Jesus became the mediator of a new covenant that is described as follows:

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds:

“Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. (Heb. 10:15-20)

Access to the Most Holy Place having now been made allows us to be partakers of the power of the New Covenant of which Jesus Christ is the mediator! The old covenant (the Law of Moses) had blessings or curses, whichever applied, because blessings were dependent upon the obedience of the people. (See Deut. 28) Disobedience and unfaithfulness to the Lord would bring curses upon them to be visited on their animals, servants, possessions and even their bodies.

The author of Hebrews demonstrates that as a result of the substitutionary death of Jesus, the old covenant is no longer in force and, therefore, has no power over us. Since the law pertained to the unregenerated life of a person, and since Jesus died in our place, the law lost its power over us. His resurrection body is beyond the reach of the law having died, the old nature is now dead, and by faith we enter into Christ becoming a part of his resurrection. Since the law pertains to those who live in the worldly way, this change of life flow results in a new authority over us.

The message of Jesus is that when we are “in Christ” we are dead to the world, the flesh, and the Devil. We hold all connections with this world loosely as though they are rather meaningless. We turn in our resignation, as it were, to worldly ways and sign up on the heavenly roster. We are now citizens of the heavenly kingdom!

Once the transition is complete, we come under the authority of our new king, Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant, by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith. It is the indwelling Spirit who produces remarkable changes in us. The promise of a changed mind and heart becomes a reality in our life as we lay down the old life and receive the new life! Satan has lost power over us.

For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (II Cor. 5:14-15)

Christ is the source of the righteousness of a believer who is no longer of the world, but rather, “in Christ.”

This having been accomplished makes us a “touch point” of the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, we become a point where the kingdom of God is seen in this world! Most of the Kingdom of Heaven is invisible to natural man except where God permits manifestations of his kingdom on earth in Christians, the primary visible part of the kingdom. It is important, therefore, that we are

separated from and standing in sharp contrast to the spirit of the world. The world system stands diametrically opposed to the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus rejected every part of it. We too must reject the spirit of the world in all its forms, styles, values and attitudes because it is a serious offense to God to love the world.

We have a heritage in Jesus that is beyond our comprehension, but what we get in this world is not the full inheritance. There is an inheritance laid up for us which we will receive in due time. Meanwhile, we are privileged to be a vessel in which God dwells! His mind is made known to us; his strength sustains us; his Spirit leads us, and he grants us access to the Most Holy Place! This is the place that no man can enter unless he is "in Christ".

Gaining Christ costs all one possesses, that is, everything that makes one proud. We surrender all dependency upon the natural support systems of the world, every unholy affection, lustful indulgence, consuming desire for worldly success or attainment, all love of money and what it buys, all love of acceptance and appreciation of man, and such like. It is a narrow road that leads to a small gate, which gives entrance to the great and vast eternal Kingdom of Heaven, the city of light and love!

Thirty-seven

The Little Gate

Matt. 7:13-14

Where is the entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven? Where are the flashing lights?

While pondering heaven's gate one day, I saw a picture in my mind of a busy highway with many travelers, each rushing to his destination. To the side and off a little distance was a great wall with a ravine between the highway and the wall. In my mind's eye I saw a little trail that left the highway, at a slight angle at first, and then led down and away on through the ravine to a gate in the wall that one might not even notice unless he were looking for it. As I looked at the trail I saw drops of blood on it, I knew they were from our Savior.

He came into this world and walked the way before us, not shrinking from the pain he was called to bear in our place. He blazed a trail for us through the valley of the shadow of death. He did not come to merely bear a cross in the figurative sense; he came to literally die on one! In doing so, he revealed the way for us so that we could follow him through this life on this narrow road.

That wall I saw, with the little gate, is the wall between the Kingdom of Heaven and us. The way into the kingdom is not marked so as to attract the attention of glamour seekers, nor are there signs advertising the great glory that is just beyond those forbidding walls.

The message that assures travelers that glory lies beyond those walls is left to certain travelers who have been instructed to tell others of its existence. There is a "way" into this Kingdom of God; the "way" is Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) And again, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." (John 10:9) He wants us to find the gate that leads to life and knock on it. When God answers, he wants us to ask him for his good gift, the gift of eternal life.

This Gift is available to all who are willing to leave the broad well-traveled highway and make their way through this forbidding valley of sorrows mixed with joy, and peace in the midst of pain. While traveling, we must have love for the one who has gone before us, no matter the cost or sacrifice. The Gift is worth the price! We also bear a message that not only is it better to go this way, but that the broad highway leads to destruction! At first this trail may not look very inviting, but the reward at the end is worth the travel.

Thirty-eight

Wolves, Thornbushes, and Bad Fruit

Matt. 7:15-23

Sheep and wolves, what a contrast! How could two animals so different ever be confused? Ah, change the outward appearance! Conform to tradition! Adapt to the approved religious culture!

We have become, to a large extent, a compliantly rebellious generation! I remember being told about a child who was being corrected and told to sit down. The child realized that compliance was necessary to appease the parent; so he sat down but remarked, "I am sitting but I am still standing on the inside!" That's being compliantly rebellious like wolves in sheep's clothing are also the compliant ones.

Jesus warned us about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but who inwardly are ferocious wolves. These prophets, Jesus taught us, are not always easily spotted because they would look very much like sheep. The outward appearance will likely be misleading.

If you haven't realized it yet, everyone is a wolf in the beginning, but some seize the opportunity to become sheep through the new birth! Matthew 7:15-23 doesn't teach this truth directly, it assumes we will know it. The focus of the story is the differences between sheep and wolves and how some will try to fake their Christianity.

There are some things about sheep and wolves that are distinctive, so actually they are not too difficult to tell apart even when they look alike. The real test is to look at the results of their lives. Here are some obvious clues.

Sheep and wolves eat different diets! Sheep, as Jesus refers to them, are people of the Kingdom of Heaven who hunger and thirst after righteousness. The wolves hunger for the sheep; they spend their time trying to impress others, gathering followings, dividing people, and undermining the bond of the shepherd (pastors) with the sheep (Christians).

Another difference between sheep and wolves is that sheep tend to be peaceful animals and have natures that respond to love. Wolves, on the other hand, are basically restless animals who stalk their prey. They try to separate the object of their hunt from the protection of the shepherd or the flock so that they can then devour them at will.

Jesus reveals that individuals finding in the gospel opportunities to gratify their desires through Christian identifications and powers will victimize people. They learn all the right things to say, they adopt all the right attitudes and get involved in all the right activities thus putting on the clothes of sheep. In outward appearances there is little difference between these individuals and a real sheep, but they can never learn to be sheep! They are still only wolves in sheep's clothing no matter how hard they try. How tragic it is to see such individuals waste their efforts.

Sheep are sheep because they are born sheep; if one has not been born again, he cannot be a sheep!

Jesus warned us not to be deceived. Good trees bear good fruit. Anyone can say, “Lord, Lord,” but the evidence of a relationship with the Lord is in doing his will. The implication of the Lord is that one cannot do the will of the Father without a relationship with Jesus. People can unfortunately, do miracles, cast out devils, and perform other manifestations of the Spirit’s power all in his name, and still not be sheep! Do not be deceived just because someone says, “Lord, Lord”; that does not make him a true born again believer!

I think it’s also interesting that Jesus used the illustration of a thorn bush. “Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?” He directs our attention to attitudes as other indicators. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus said. “for they will be called the sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9) Thorns are sharp and prickly as are people who have not been born again. This characteristic can be disguised for a time with outer garments of congeniality; but if you apply some pressure to these garments, the thorns will come through!

The fallen nature of man can be disguised, but it takes the indwelling Spirit of God to really change us. How tragic will be the words of Jesus on the Day of Judgment to those who have failed to meet the conditions for changed hearts. I can’t think of anything more dreadful than to hear the Lord say, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matt. 7:23)

Thirty-nine

Build It Where?

Matt. 7:24-27

The way of the Lord is the way of stability in a very unstable world. Adverse conditions in life will surely come, and some people, sadly, will find that they have built great empires upon very shaky foundations. As Jesus brought the Sermon on the Mount to a close, he drew attention to the importance of building on good foundations.

As we move through this life, it's good to know that all is not left to chance because there are so many things we cannot control. We may wonder if we can be in control of anything.

I remember a time in high school when I was asked to write about a poem that speaks about being the master of one's own fate. I recall that I reacted very negatively to this request and commented that Jesus was the master of my fate. I had strong convictions concerning God's role in my life. I felt strongly that trusting him was all that was necessary and that he would initiate my destiny. Although I still believe that as strongly as before, I now understand that more is required of me than I understood then. The result of my life is based on how well I understand the rules and how well I abide by them.

Jesus taught us that his teachings are the firm foundation upon which we should build, so careful study of the words and teachings of Jesus is the wise thing to do.

In his closing instructions, Jesus didn't say his teachings would keep the storms from coming, quite the opposite. He said, "The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house." (Matt. 7:25) In fact, the rains came upon both the ones who listened and obeyed his words and those who didn't; the difference was in the result. It rained just as hard on both and the floods were the same, but the ones who obeyed found that all was not lost. After the rains stopped and the waters went back down, their houses were still standing!

There is still more that can be said about this subject of strong foundations. Jesus spoke of how a wise man builds his house. The concern of the Lord was not so much what kind of house he builds, as it was where he builds it. Some wise men build plain little houses, and some wise men build great beautiful structures. Wisdom is not manifest in what sort of house one builds, but rather in building it on the rock of Jesus and his teachings. We are at liberty to build upon this foundation, but we should be very careful how we build. The Apostle Paul admonished us on this subject:

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he

has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:9-17)

From this passage we see that we are free to build with a variety of substances, all are materials that will produce buildings, but with different results. So it is with life; those who build with tested and proved quality materials will reap eternal values. What we say, what we do, and how we live in this world determines our lot for eternity. Wise men build on good foundations, and use the good and eternal materials of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Part Four

The Kingdom Seen In Practical Application

Forty

Leprosy, or I'm a Sinner.

Matt. 8:1-4

Having concluded the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began to introduce and demonstrate the healing power, authority, and sustaining power of the Kingdom of Heaven to his disciples.

The first miracle Jesus performed after the Sermon on the Mount was the healing of a leper. Leprosy is a disease that is chronic and mildly infectious and slowly progresses, destroying tissues and sensitivity.

In Bible days, a person with leprosy was said to be unclean. The stigma upon the person was probably as bad as the disease itself; it was a living death. It was also considered to be a disease of the flesh or fallen nature, a very instructive thought for Biblical students. If we understand the concept of sin and the resultant fallen nature and that nothing good dwells in our flesh, we probably would like to be freed from the power the flesh has over us.

The leper was caught in a real dilemma since he was as good as dead so far as society was concerned. The way out of the dilemma came to him in the person of Jesus Christ. He said to Jesus, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." (Matt. 8:2) Many people who want to be clean feel concern about God's willingness, but is it a valid concern? This man stood before Jesus as a representative of a very large number of people who are totally convinced of his ability to cleanse them. The question in their minds is not can he, but rather, will he? Jesus wasted no time in giving a response to the question once and for all. "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cured of his leprosy."

Today, we do not see the physical form of Jesus standing before us, but we do have his positive affirmation that he indeed wants us to be cleansed. But how?

If we suffer physical leprosy we can call upon the elders of the church to anoint us with oil in the name of the Lord that he may raise us up.

If it is from sin that we need cleansing, we are to call upon the name of the Lord. When sin has power over us, we are taught to identify ourselves with Christ's death so that the power of sin might be broken. (See Romans 6:5-14)

When we talk about our identification with Christ's death, obviously we are not talking about literally dying, but about the deep need we have to be changed. In the Christian vernacular, the word flesh has negative connotations meaning both the physical bodies we dwell in and, more importantly, our lower natures that have a propensity to sin. These bodies we live in have appetites for sinful indulgences that have, to some degree, been served in our lives. We have, indeed, been slaves to sin and stand in need of a Savior to cleanse and liberate us.

Sin often leaves deep wounds that may result in physical disorders and spiritual loss of hope, faith, or love. Sin may cost us the loss of health, finances, careers and friends. Sin breaking out

in our lives in some uncontrollable, life dominating compulsion surely robs us of stability and rational purpose. Examples are, compulsive lying, stealing, drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual deviancy, and gambling. Others find themselves slaves to hate, bitterness, unforgiveness, or a rage that will not go away. Eventually, the person so diseased will suffer losses that disfigure his life and mar all hope of a normal existence, just like a person with leprosy.

When we come to Jesus, what sort of help can we expect? The man with leprosy recognized that Jesus possessed the power to cleanse him. The immediate need was to stop the progress of the disease, a major miracle in many people's lives. Whether there will ever be restoration in all areas of life or not probably depends on the extent of damage the disease has inflicted upon us and those around us.

The result of sin in the nation of Israel during the era of the kings was a national catastrophe, their armies were defeated, their people carried captive to Babylon, and their beloved city Jerusalem destroyed.

Seventy years later, when they returned to their land, all that was left was a pile of rubble. They had repented so blessings could follow; but first they had to rebuild their land. God was there to help them and encourage them, but they had to apply themselves to the task; stay focused, and watch out for enemies who wanted to stop their work. Also they had to continue to deal with the temptations which could destroy what God had delivered them to do. They had to keep their hearts right before God.

When we come to Jesus in repentance, he cleanses our hearts, minds and emotions, and often heals our bodies. There are, however, some things that don't change because what has been done cannot be undone. Sins against God, those around us and us, are very serious. God forgives sin, if true repentance is in the sinner's heart; but the longer one waits to make his moves toward him, the greater the chance of irreversible damage. Many things can never be reversed; history is history, what has already happened, happened. However, from the rubble of misspent lives we are permitted to build, so once cleansed, let us be careful how we build!

To the leper Jesus said, "I am willing, be clean!" I am sure those are still his words today, since he never changes. When we come humbly, repentantly, really wanting his touch, he meets us, cleanses us, heals us and fills us with his Holy Spirit. Looking back, we may see nothing but devastation; but if we are born again, we can enter into Christ and his kingdom. What lies before us in this kingdom is everything we could ever want. Repentance and cleansing are necessary however, because no unclean thing will enter this kingdom!

Forty-one

Great Faith

Mat 8:5-13

Faith is the foundational concept of the Kingdom of Heaven. Without faith it is impossible to please God. The relationship of a believer to the Lord necessitates believing in what can't be seen with the natural eye of man. The life of the person of God and God, is a sort of marriage of the seen and the unseen.

A centurion came to Jesus concerning his servant who was lying at home suffering and paralyzed. Jesus offered to go heal the servant, to which offer the centurion replied,

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” (Matt. 8:8-10)

The Centurion's story presents a very important lesson, because we see the word faith connected to divine performance. Previous to this, in the Bible, faith was a word that had to do with relationships. It was used to mean, “keep the faith” or “to break faith”. In II Chron. 20:20, we are told to; “Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.” Jesus used the word “faith” in the same way in Matthew 6:30 where he reprimanded us for our little faith when we fail to trust in our relationship with God.

Faith is a conceptual word that indicates a state of mind and heart based on known facts or perceptions of its object. It grows as the perception or the reliability of the object increases. In human relationships faith in one another increases or decreases in direct relationship to performance. We learn to adjust our expectations to the personality and ability of the person in whom we are placing faith. If we don't want to be hurt, we will be realistic in our application of faith.

In spiritual matters as well, we are wise to want to know the object of our faith, God, so that faith in him will be a rewarding experience. The more accurate our perception of God, the more reliable will be the application of our faith. “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” (Rom 10:17) Thus we see that increase of faith comes from Christ and what we hear from him. It follows that accuracy in our perception of Jesus Christ will result in strength of faith, but inaccuracy will lead to presumptions and disappointments that weaken our faith. We may still believe in Jesus but lack confidence in knowing what we may or may not expect from him.

The Lord Jesus wants us to become strong in faith, but faith doesn't do anything in and of itself. God is the one who performs the miracles; we simply trust him. The size of our faith is not

what gets the job done; it is the size of our God that is important, because it is he who does the work. Faith is a condition of expectancy based on our confidence in God's willingness and ability to perform.

The centurion had some amazing concepts! First we note his humility. Here was a man who did not lack in his knowledge of his worth. He was a centurion and accustomed to power, yet he recognized that the natural power and authority he had did not make him worthy of Jesus. Perhaps it was because he was a Gentile that he felt that way but whatever the reason; it's what he did next that mattered.

The centurion must have been watching Jesus as he healed the sick and reached the conclusion that he was not doing the healing on his own! He seemed to see the link with a higher authority and that a spiritual kingdom was involved. It seemed to him that it was what Jesus said or did that brought about the result; therefore, he made his appeal based on that assumption. It was all very simple; no hand wringing, no heavy concentration, no scripture quoting, and no emotional hype. He simply said, "Just say the word and it will be done." It was, just that simple. Therefore, Jesus said, "go" and it was done! The servant got well!

How are the sick healed? Isn't it faith that heals? Faith is a vital part of the process because, in many cases Jesus pointed this out, yet, more is involved. We read in the gospel of Mark about a woman who was healed by just touching Jesus. "At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30) After a brief dialogue with the woman, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." (Mark 5:34) This is a very important passage because it clearly reveals two important parts of the divine healing process, faith and power. When the woman's faith and the Holy Spirit's power met in the person of Jesus Christ, the woman was healed!

It is important to point out that faith was not in and of itself what healed the woman. Jesus was the source of healing power. It was faith however, that motivated the woman to press through the crowd and reach for Jesus. Without faith she never would have received her healing because she would not have pressed through to him.

Herein is the lesson concerning faith and healing. Faith is the link between our need and God's supply. When we have a need and we have faith that God can meet our need, we are enabled by faith to reach for God's answer.

The centurion did just that, and was not disappointed. He understood authority, and that was all he needed to know. It substantiated his faith, and healing resulted.

Too many people have lacked understanding of the ways of God and have thus experienced disappointments in their quest for an answer from God. Sometimes it is because God has answered their request but they didn't see it as an answer. When we don't acknowledge God's answer, we are left with confusion and frustration. Many people have damaged faith because they haven't accepted God's answers since they didn't recognize God's answers coming as they did.

In the case of healing, if the answer came through medical intervention, some people don't believe that it was God that answered. I disagree. I believe that God expects us to do what we know to do as humans. Despite our best efforts, however, God is always needed because man still lacks complete knowledge. Man will never, not need God.

As for me, I pray and believe and seek for whatever answers the Lord provides. When I need fuel for my car I go buy it, but if I don't have the money or the station is closed, I pray and if the Lord causes my car to go beyond its normal limitations as he has done for me, I rejoice! I still go to the station and buy gas when I need it because, that sort of supply only lasts until I can buy gas.

Faith doesn't give us license to live recklessly, nor are we to act presumptuously. This is not a game; it is real life. God is not a gimmick or a toy; he is the creator of our very lives. When we act in love, respect and honor toward God, he loves to respond to us. He loves us and delights in enabling us to live happy and fulfilling lives.

Forty-two

Jesus the Healer

Matt 8:14-17

As Matthew continues telling us the story of Jesus, he relates the story of when Jesus went to Simon Peter's house where Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus touched her hand and healed her. In Mark's gospel we read of Jesus taking her hand and assisting her to her feet, and in Luke's gospel we read of him bending over her, rebuking the fever. Each of these writers gives us a view of Jesus in the act of healing. Each view is instructive, teaching us about the heart and soul of Jesus.

The writers of the gospels were not trying to write detailed histories of the life of Jesus but to communicate messages. They drew facts, stories and teachings from his life to set forth the message the Holy Spirit commissioned them to write. Matthew wrote about the king and his kingdom; Mark wrote about Jesus, the man upon whom the Spirit came to rest who was also a servant; Luke wrote about the Son of man who was also God; and John wrote about the Son of God who was the Word made flesh and dwelling among us and who was also a man. What each writer noticed and wrote was related to the view he was called to communicate.

Thus we have Matthew seeing him doing the unthinkable for a king; he reached out and touched the sick woman. Mark saw him doing what servants are known to do; he helped her up. And Luke took note of Jesus ministering by rebuking the fever. The facts were all, no doubt, correct, though each gospel reveals a different facet of the story.

Matthew 8:14-17 doesn't seem to focus on methods of healing so much as on how the king of the Kingdom of Heaven relates to people and their needs. Unlike earthly kings, Jesus put himself in direct touch with the needs of people; he was willing to soil his hands with direct involvement.

This king is a very personal king to all who enter into his realm. He is also a warrior king who does battle with the powers of darkness. Whenever Jesus came in contact with sickness, he healed it; and whenever he came in contact with demons he cast them out. Exorcisms are no big deal to Jesus; he is victorious over all the powers of darkness.

It was for us that Jesus came, to bring us more abundant life. Sickness and demon afflictions are the result of the fall of man, but Jesus came to restore us to our rightful places as citizens of God's kingdom. Satan was once our king, and under his rule we suffered the consequences of sinful living. He is a hard taskmaster, one we can well do without; Jesus, on the other hand, is the King of Love who came to rescue us from slavery to sin and Satan.

Friend, the Lord Jesus is not detached from your world because he knows your needs and wants to bring answers into your life! He is the same today as he ever was. To be free in your life you must be liberated from all demonic bondage; thus, it's necessary to relinquish all sinful ideas and attitudes.

It's not possible to be free from Satan's grip without first experiencing a change of mind about everything that belongs to Satan. We must hate everything about him and love everything that belongs to God. All that is of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, must be abandoned because; Satan is the god of this world! Satan abides in darkness; so if we live in the light, we will not be bound by Satan's powers.

There is liberty, life, health and happiness in serving Jesus!

While healing in the Bible was primarily for the purpose of demonstrating the validity of the ministry of Jesus and his role as the Savior of the world, we must not lose sight of the fact that it was individuals who received the benefit. While that was true of the big picture, there was also another purpose for healing. God was revealing his Father heart to humanity, thus we see him in roles of compassion, love, caring and healing. Whereas every believer will experience total and complete healing at the resurrection, we can experience the blessing of healing now as gifts of healing are given from God's heart of love for his people.

When healing ministers go about demonstrating the love and power of God, it is to individuals that the ministry flows. What joy there is in the heart of the person so blessed. It is a disservice, however, to imply that every person, in every circumstance can and should expect healing in the restorative sense. Nevertheless, everyone can and should expect the ministry of the Holy Spirit to work in the life of an afflicted person.

I have attended the passing of several people who I loved in the Lord. I have found a variety of purposes in the heart of God for these individuals. Some needed prayer for healing, yet the healing was only an easing of the pains of illness. I have ministered to others where the heart of God was to comfort the dying with words about what they could expect as they were leaving us and entering into heaven, a scary experience for some.

It is the unknown we fear, therefore' it is just as important for ministers to prepare people for a peaceful passing as it is to pray for healing for those whose time on earth has not yet been fulfilled.

In the big picture, healing is primarily for the purpose of validating the Gospel message, however; that does not mean that God does not heal individuals even when no validation is needed. It is the heart of compassion and love that is expressed in the healing of the members of the body of Christ. The very nature of God is health and that nature is best expressed in the health of his body the church.

Forty-three

Doing God's Will

Matt 8:18-23

So you want to follow Jesus. What a romantic idea! One day a teacher of the law came to Jesus and offered to follow him anywhere he went. It may have seemed like a romantic idea to follow a popular teacher around, but following Jesus was not a very comfortable thing to do! Jesus was not a fundraiser, and so following him was also not a profitable thing to do. Though he was the Son of God, King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, he apparently didn't even own a house in which to live, though some believe he had a home in Capernaum. No matter, his only involvement in the monetary system of the world was limited to what was necessary for survival.

How far we have drifted from the values held by our king! We get so involved in the enterprises of this life that we forget that following Jesus is a matter of first priority. Nothing should be allowed to interfere with the quest for his approval. Such concerns as what we will eat, or where we will sleep do not belong in the minds of God's people. Our Father in Heaven knows what our needs are and will supply according to what he deems appropriate.

Concern for what pertains to this life belongs to those who are still of this life. There are individuals who are, what Jesus saw as the living dead. To the man who wished to follow Jesus but who had a concern for what pertained to this life, Jesus counseled, "Let the dead bury their own dead."

Jesus was not trying to be hardhearted, but rather was expressing the contrast between what we deem important as unregenerate children of the world and as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. There is nothing wrong with owning property or being involved with what pertains to this life, so long as the relationship we have with the Kingdom of Heaven is not compromised. Whenever a choice must be made between doing what is expected of us with regards to this present life and what pertains to the eternal kingdom, the eternal kingdom must always dictate our choice.

Matthew kept driving the point home that Jesus was not like any other man; he lived, acted, and thought differently, and wasn't concerned about what concerned others. Jesus never spoke idle words, and he was only concerned about what concerned his Father. He always acted decisively, knowing exactly what he was doing. He was not here to do his own will, but rather the will of his Father in Heaven. He, like the centurion who came to him, was a man under another authority, and surrender to the will of his Father in Heaven was absolute. Jesus said,

"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these." (John 5:19-20)

The secret of the unerring success of Jesus is thus, not that he was God, which he was, but rather, he was in right relationship to his Father.

Could it be true that God is so vitally interrelated that, to function, each part must not ever act independently? Whether this is so or not, it is obvious the will of God is the will of the whole. He is one God, not three Gods. The Godhead, though three is still one. The three's dependency upon and love for each other, make them so interrelated that it is indisputably true that they are one.

When we recognize that truth and place ourselves in that same relationship by our willing submission, we make a grand discovery; Jesus answered,

“My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.” (John 7:16-18)

The priority has been set, and it is only by grace that this present life is tolerated at all! If we would follow Jesus, we must be willing to adopt a new value system or we will surely fail. Lest I make this sound too hard, I wish to point out that God is a God of love and able to take care of our every need.

Forty-four

Kingdom Authority

Matt. 8:23-27

One day Jesus got in a boat with his disciples and told them to cross the lake, but when they were in the middle of the lake a furious storm came up. Jesus was sleeping, so the disciples woke him because they were experienced sailors, they understood the danger. They had realistic fears and the waves were about to swamp the boat, but they had not yet comprehended the authority of Jesus. Their faith was weak because they did not understand the great power of the Kingdom of Heaven. The king is he of whom it is now said,

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:3)

And, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15-17)

These revelations about Jesus had not yet been fully comprehended by them. When Jesus got up and rebuked the storm and a great calm resulted, they were astonished! The truth was only beginning to dawn.

Imagine how they must have felt that day when all was going well and Jesus was taking a nap! Then suddenly a storm arose, the waves of the sea threatening to drown them all! Jesus was seemingly indifferent, sleeping and oblivious to the danger. How like us they were!

Are you in a storm of life? Does it seem that Jesus is unaware of your need? He is not. He is always just a prayer away!

The authority of Jesus is absolute, yet he allows people to choose to trust in him. Everything that exists was made by him and for him, yet not everyone is willing to trust him. Without him we would disintegrate, yet we argue with his wisdom. What arrogance to rebel against the one who holds the power of everything in his hand!

When the truth of the mighty power of the Kingdom of Heaven finally dawns on us, we begin to realize that all things are indeed possible. When we come to Jesus seeking intervention in our lives, we find him an ever-present friend to aid, heal, or counsel us. What he does for us depends somewhat on our faith and attitudes in approaching him, but mostly on what he sees is best for us.

As we begin to grow in the Lord, we experience change in how he relates to us. When we are baby Christians, we may think that salvation is wholly for our benefit. We may have the idea that the whole Kingdom of Heaven was established just for our personal convenience. However, when we begin to grow in the Lord, we reach a new realization; we discover that although Jesus loves us with a love so great that he died for us, he also loves every other human being with that same love. We then realize that we cannot stay in a self-serving mode of existence. Just as a

child must change from a selfish, self-centered, dependent infant to a responsible, selfless, loving, and giving adult, we must change from having selfish concerns to being vessels, through which he can live and work!

Accomplishment of the mission we have been called to requires growth in faith. In that boat in the midst of the storm, the disciples were given an opportunity to try their newfound faith. Jesus was with them, so even if they failed in the attempt, it was a good opportunity to learn.

In the Kingdom of Heaven there is mighty power available to be used in the life of every believer, but not for personal benefit, although we do benefit from it.

I once went to India. I needed a ticket so I went to a travel agent to get one. Amazingly, an airline agreed to pick me up in San Francisco and fly me all the way to Bombay. Now the question might be, did they do that just for my benefit, or did I benefit because they were scheduled to go to India and allowed me to also go?

The Kingdom of Heaven is somewhat like an airplane; it's going somewhere and if we want to go along, we must be willing to commit ourselves to its control and destination. It's for our benefit, but we benefit it as well. The key to successful kingdom living is finding out when and where the kingdom is going and being willing to submit and go too.

Now, what we discover about the kingdom is that, when we turn ourselves over to the will of our Father and put our trust in his Son, we become vital parts of his plan for earth. When we are willing to fit into his plan, without concern for our own benefit, we can flow in the authority and power of the kingdom.

When the disciples got in the boat with Jesus, it became a kingdom boat. The king was crossing the lake, so that's where the kingdom was going. A storm came up but no storm could stop it! In fact, the disciples would learn later that not even the gates of hell could prevail against it. Jesus was unconcerned about the storm because he understood the kingdom while the disciples were concerned about the storm because they understood the storm. What do we understand? Do we understand the kingdom or the storm?

When I went to San Francisco and boarded the giant jet, I confess that I didn't know very much about airplanes. I never met the pilot; in fact, I don't even remember seeing him. I didn't know how to start the engines or which way to fly; all I knew was that I had paid the fare and was told that the plane would take me to India. The airline clerk assigned me a seat, and I committed my life to the power and authority of the airline. Mighty engines lifted us into the air; the plane climbed, banked and pointed its nose toward our destination, everyone and everything was working toward a common goal. There were many occupants in the plane with varying purposes, but everyone on board had one thing in common: we were going toward India but not all would go that far.

The boat could not sink. Mark reports in his gospel that Jesus had said to go over to the other side. Limits thus, had been set on what the storm could do. The order had been given so Jesus was at peace; his will had been proclaimed so he went to sleep! The waves only seemed to enrich his slumber because the purposes of God must prevail. Were the waves friend or foe? What did it matter? The king had spoken and all heaven would obey.

When the disciples could stand it no longer, they woke Jesus. "Lord, save us!" they cried. Jesus looked the situation over and then rebuked them for their "little faith." Turning his attention to the storm, he rebuked it; suddenly there was a great calm!

Why didn't the disciples rebuke the waves? "Why should they?" you may say. What good would that have done? Certainly no good is the obvious answer. Storms don't listen to the voice of men, but Jesus was not just a man.

Do we have such power as children of the kingdom? Eph. 1: 18-23 says,

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

In this passage we see the exalted position of Jesus who has been placed at the Father's right hand and given incomparably great power. We see him as head over the church, that is his body and that has been exalted with everything under its feet! We too are in the picture; we, as parts of his body the Church, are seated with him in heavenly realms!

Does this mean that we have the power to go around commanding storms? Of course not! The reason the storm stopped was that it heard its master's voice.

Does that mean that storms don't stop for Christians?

No, storms do in fact stop for Christians whenever our Father wills it so. The power and authority of Christ does work on behalf of human needs but not at the discretion of human beings.

All power and authority are vested in Jesus who is the head of the church. As it is with the human body, so it is with the body of Christ; it is the head that controls the movements and gives the commands. When we are in Christ we become aware that we have a function as a part of the body; we are not the whole body, but we are a part of it. When we are at peace with this truth, we are content to be who we have been created to be and no longer strive to be something else!

We don't have to stop storms, heal sick people, or utter endless prophecies; those actions are up to our Father to decide. If storms need to be stopped or something else needs to be done, we do not act alone; the head Christ Jesus directs the body. The directive to act must come from him; if we possess the ministry or gift suited to the task, the Spirit quickens us to act on behalf of the entire body.

No one can truly act in Christ without acting as a part of the entire body since Christians are all a part of each other. Many, who have acted independently and therefore apart from the body, have lost sight of the kingdom and though they thought they were acting at our Lord's command, they were sowing discord and division in the body.

I am convinced that every conceivable miracle has happened in the life of the church and that every kind of authority has been exercised many, many times, yet only as God permits. Could the disciples have stopped the storm? I think so, since Jesus had already given the command to cross to the other side, I believe that if they had acted on his word and prayed, the storm would have stopped. Why else would Jesus have rebuked them for their little faith and great fear? Evidently, he wanted them to act with authority on the basis of his command.

Forty-five

Demon Possession

Matt. 8:28-34

After Jesus had quieted the storm, they reached the region of the Gadarenes and found two demon-possessed men. They, upon being confronted by Jesus, shouted, “What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” (Matt. 8:29) These men were so violent that no one could pass that way. The demons recognized Jesus and knew his authority so they begged to be allowed to go into a herd of pigs nearby, but when they did the pigs ran violently into the sea. This upset the owners of the pigs and they went into the town and reported what had happened. The people then plead with Jesus to leave them alone and leave the area; never mind that the men had been healed!

The fact that there are demons was accepted at the time of Christ. The Old Testament scriptures don't address possession as such, but they do talk about people being affected by demons on occasion. For example, an evil spirit was tormenting King Saul so David was called to come and play his harp for him so he could experience relief.

As a regular part of his ministry, the Lord practiced casting out or driving away demons.

When we consider the functions of the Kingdom of Heaven, we must take into account that there are both good and evil forces at work to affect the affairs of people.

In our story these men who met Jesus were possessed by evil spirits, their conditions being so severe that they were no longer living with their families. They were being tormented and had become a threat to those around them.

These days it has become common for people to claim temporary insanity after committing crimes that seem to be out of character with their normal life styles. Though we don't hear temporary insanity referred to in the legal system as demon possession, it certainly could be that demons are involved. In fact, I don't believe any crime is ever committed that doesn't involve the influence of demons for without that influence this would be a very peaceful and wonderful world in which to live!

Right from the very start of the Biblical story we are introduced to the reality that we are being affected by a satanic being. Some people see Satan as the sole tempter of mankind; others see a host of demons. Some people believe that only the most severe torment is caused by demons; others see demons in everything. Theologians are called upon to shed light on this subject; but there are so many different views, that we are left to our own judgments in the end.

Which view is right after all? Since the Bible doesn't give clear and forthright instructions on this subject, we are left to search and ponder. In Matthew 8:28-34 we see two men whose lives are a shambles because of demons. How did this happen to them? Were they born this way, or did they suddenly one day appear as raving maniacs?

The scriptures in teaching us about our fallen human natures refer to it as “flesh.” This nature is also sometimes referred to as the dark side of us. A potential or predisposition to evil is a human weakness, yet no one is without it. No matter how hard others or we try to control it, it is to no avail because sooner or later we sin in some way. We have recognized that fact and thus say, “no one is perfect.” However, those with the knowledge of the Lord will qualify it by saying “except one.”

We must also consider the scripture that states,

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph 6:12)

How much evil do we assign to the flesh and how much to demons? Is it valid for us to say “the devil made me do it,” or, correctly, is it fair to eliminate all supposed satanic influence from human conduct? It is my conclusion that, to varying degrees, both flesh and demons are involved in our bad behaviors.

Once we accept that there is such a thing as demon possession, or as some would state, “a condition of being demonized,” or “oppressed by a demon,” we then must ask how does one become so afflicted?

In Matthew’s story we are not given even a clue as to how the men became demonized. The important point of the story is not how, or why, or if they were “Christians” but that Jesus had both the power and the authority to bring deliverance to them. We cannot, however, help but wonder how they were demonized but we can only speculate since the scriptures do not tell us.

Some people are very adamant that Christians are immune to demonic problems. Is this a valid belief or is it wishful thinking?

I am convinced that it’s absolutely illegal in God’s kingdom for a Christian to be afflicted by a demon, nevertheless, that does not mean that he will never be challenged, seduced, or baited into committing sins that could bring him into slavery to demonic or satanic influences. I have prayed for too many Christian people who were victimized by evil spirits to doubt that they can be afflicted. Such afflictions occurred because Satan was able to take advantage of them because of their ignorance, neglect, or rebellion.

The men in our theme story very likely started out in life like any other Jewish babies. Without us trying to lay blame on their forefathers (the sins of the fathers are visited on the third and fourth generations), let’s assume that at least one of them only had the predisposition that came from the fall, a sin nature. Here we have a baby born in that community at that time, possibly one among many that began life being happy, healthy, and well protected.

However, many things happen to people along the road of life so we could create many fictitious episodes to illustrate what could have happened to the man to cause him to become so bad that he wound up demonized. We could also cite case history after case history to ask why more people who had bad things happen to them are not listed among the demon possessed. The answer is that bad things in and of themselves do not make men go mad.

I have learned that in most cases people play parts in their own bondage. A Christian lady I once knew had a vision of a man who was a Christian but who was bound by a demon. In the vision he stood with cords tying his hands behind his back. As she looked more closely at the

cords, she noted that they weren't tied in a knot but rather had one end crossed over the other strands to hold them firmly in place while the end of the cord was held in the hand of the bound man. He thus had control over his own bondage. It was ignorance that made it work! He had no need to be bound; all he had to do was open his hand and let the cords fall off.

Many of us have undergone very traumatic experiences in our lives and yet did not become demonized. There are, in my judgment, different levels of demonic affliction, ranging from very mild to very severe cases such as the sort experienced by the men in our story.

The issue of demon affliction is complex and therefore subject to many opinions. It is my belief that all negativity has a demonic dimension, if only an environmental one; that is to say, one whose power is exercised only through the power of suggestion. In such a case, the afflicted person is completely able to choose his own response. He can either accept it and act upon the suggestion, or reject it, and put an end to the matter.

There are some cases in which the only response to a negative influence is an action of the mind, a fantasy response. Such responses seem harmless, but Jesus warned us about them when he declared that sin proceeds from the heart. I once knew an elderly lady who was a little senile who would say, "What you eat is what you are." We laughed lightheartedly about her idea, but in regard to demonic influence, it isn't what you eat that you are, but rather, what you think.

When some person wrongs you, you have the option to respond in hate, bitterness or irritation, or to act in a "forgive and forget" mode, strengthening your love for the person. To reinforce our decisions to continue loving, we may remind ourselves that we too have failed all too often. Whatever the mental mechanism we employ, firmly closing the door to hate works to everyone's advantage. Those individuals who refuse to turn from their critical hatefulness on the thought level are being set up for real trouble. The battle between good and evil is, after all, won and lost in the mind!

It is the business of Satan to get us to accept evil by convincing us that it is the right thing to think or feel. How sad it is to see people eaten alive by bitterness or hate because something tragic has happened to them, such as the loss of a loved one.

There may be circumstances about a loss that make hate seem like the only honorable emotion to feel. Some people even point to their hate as proof of their love for the lost person and consider their misery their Medal of Honor. How foolish to lock ourselves up in prisons of hate, pride, envy, greed, lust, or covetousness!

Some will object to this line of thought, saying that it is wholly natural to experience negative feelings and that no "spiritual" spell is involved. "Nonsense!" they will retort. They will then talk of such things as chemical imbalances or chemically induced altered states. Are such states demonic? Of course not!

There are people who are clinically depressed for a variety of reasons. While they are not demonized, they are at great risk. When the body chemistry is out of whack, it is far more difficult to withstand the temptations of evil because the natural ability to cope is greatly reduced; yet coping is not beyond one's ability. Responses that resulted in past experiences will likely dictate our responses under pressure in future like circumstances. I, therefore, have difficulty accepting many of the temporary insanity defenses in our judicial system. If people practice righteousness, they are not likely to commit crimes while under duress. The problem for

many people is that, previous fantasies of the mind become real actions while they are in depressed states of mind!

Demon possession seems to be a progressive state for most people. The progression may include some bad teaching, some wrong values, some negative responses, some bad influences, and some bad experiences. Little by little the web is woven until the very life of the soul is snuffed out! In and through these various experiences yielding to the presence of demons can happen very subtly.

One may not think of their thoughts as being generated from a demonic influence, but does that mean it is not so? There are, in my judgment, many occasions when people are mildly affected by demons. Ignorance is what determines its effectiveness, and correction is all that is needed to deliver such an individual from the grasp of a demonic presence. Jesus said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32)

There are some exceptions to this progression, however. There are some people who retreat into a world of insanity because of a single horrific event that they just could not handle. The change was abrupt and the result devastating.

Was it something of this sort that happened to the men in Matthew, or was it a progression of events? We shall never know. The important thing was that when Jesus came, a new authority appeared on the scene; he had the power and the will to change what was wrong. He drove the demons out of the men and restored them (healed them) to their right minds. In the book of Mark, further light is shed on the same story, for Jesus did not stop with the miracle of deliverance and healing but went on to instruct the man to declare his healing and return to his home.

The power and authority of Jesus is still the same today; running from our problems never constitutes deliverance because real deliverance is established only when real life changes result. Jesus came to bring about real life deliverance in the lives of all who follow him; he alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

Forty-six

Forgiveness of Sins

Matt. 9:1-8

After Jesus delivered the demonic men in the region of the Gadarenes, he left in a boat and returned to his home. Soon a man was brought to him who was a paralytic. He told him his sins were forgiven and the elders looking on thought that this was blasphemy. Jesus responded to their thoughts by saying, “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?”

Humanly speaking, we would answer that it is easier to forgive sins because all too often we think in earth bound terms. Miraculous healing is beyond us. We may have experienced praying for someone and then healing happening, but we knew we didn’t do the healing because we cannot heal anyone or anything.

What Jesus was doing was granting divine intervention from outside the recipient.

Some people feel that by using psychological techniques they can initiate some form of healing. I too believe that the natural healing power within us can be enhanced or even released through positive thoughts and strong faith. However, that is not what we are talking about when we speak of Jesus’ healings. Natural healing comes from within us and most often happens whether we wish it or not. Our bodies are so constructed that when injured, healing begins to happen immediately. To understand what Jesus was doing, we need to separate the two kinds of healing. One is a natural world healing and the other a supernatural occurrence.

Forgiveness, unlike healing, is a very human experience that everyone has had. We recognize forgiving as being evidence of good mental health and are concerned when we see an individual fail to do so because we know that failure to forgive may possibly lead to psychological and even physical problems.

There is, however, another kind of forgiveness, forgiveness of sins that is a legal matter tried in the court of divine justice. To appreciate what is involved in forgiveness of sins, we need to have some knowledge of divine laws. For forgiveness to work it must be done according to law and granted by the judge. So what is the law and who is the judge?

The book of Hebrews sheds some light on the subject when the writer goes to great lengths to establish some understanding of the basic principles of the Jewish faith, and to tell what the role of Christ was in the picture.

It is very important to understand that Jesus did not claim to be an Aaronic priest; he was a priest, but of a different order, the order of Melchizedek.

It was also revealed that, as such, he was establishing a new covenant.

Two factors are clear about Christ: First he was able to make laws and promises outside the law of Moses because his mission as priest was of a higher order than Aaron’s was; and second he was God’s Son and therefore divine. It was to this “order” and “position” that he laid claim.

Under the Law of Moses, or the first covenant, remission of sins required a blood sacrifice. This requirement was not set aside in the new covenant; only the means was changed. In the place of a multitude of sacrifices that could never really atone for sins anyway, Christ provided an effectual sacrifice for sins, which, once made, never needed to be made again! Faith in Jesus Christ and what he came to do alone was required.

It was in the role of Savior that Jesus forgave sins. His life fulfilled and thus set aside the Law of Moses completely for all who would believe in him. He could thus grant forgiveness of sins.

To the Jewish leaders who did not understand these truths, they were blasphemy! I agree that had they not been really true, they would have been terribly blasphemous. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus becomes crucially important because without it we would not have an ounce of proof that he was anything more than an impostor and a trickster. The message of the gospels stands on the validity of the resurrection message. When Jesus came forth from the tomb, the message and the role of Jesus Christ in history was fully validated. He could say to the man in Matthew, "Your sins are forgiven" because he was his sin bearer. Because of the resurrection we can accept the gospels.

Actually, it was much more difficult to say to the man in Matthew, "Your sins are forgiven" than to say "Rise and walk!" Saying your sins were forgiven required a blood sacrifice, an effectual one. This was the hard part because the sacrifice had to be perfect, and who could provide that? The long and the short of it was that Jesus became both the offerer and the offering! He was the offerer in his role of priest in the order of Melchizedek and the offering in his role as the spotless Lamb of God. When he went to the cross he made atonement for our sins.

Because of his supreme sacrifice, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (John 3:38)

Sometimes we may wonder if Jesus really did do all that the Bible says he did? This honest question deserves an answer. People could not understand or accept what Jesus said, so he gave them something visible to empower their belief, the primary purpose of healings and miracles.

We, as humans with limited knowledge, need miracles to help us believe and to validate the message. Without miracles, we are left with only the words of the gospel writers on which to hang our faith. We thank God for still working miracles today! When we see or experience a miracle, we know for sure that the message is real. The real miracle is the compassion of God, reaching out to empower us to believe, so that we might have eternal life.

Forty-seven

Follow Me

Matt. 9:9-13

One day as Jesus was walking along, he came upon a tax collector, an occupation looked down upon by the general population. His name was Matthew Levi. Jesus summoned him to follow him.

He isn't called Levi here in this gospel, just Matthew, perhaps because this Gospel was written to appeal to the Jews. The name Levi, used by Mark and Luke, suggests that he might have been of the tribe of Levi, which means that he probably had a good education, a prerequisite for a tax collector. Yet, why would an educated Levite become a tax collector? His education and the reasons for his occupation are matters of speculation. He was a willing associate of sinners; this we know. Perhaps he had become disillusioned by hypocrisies he had witnessed in the religious world and felt that at least sinners weren't hypocrites. Whatever the truth might be, when Jesus came to him with the invitation to follow him, Matthew was ready.

As is the case with many early Church writings, there is some discussion as to who was, in fact, the author of the book of Matthew. Let's assume, for the sake of this writing, that Matthew was the author and that he had Jews in mind when he wrote this gospel. That would explain the use of the name Matthew since the Jewish name Levi would not be appropriate for a lowly tax collector. Matthew's being a sinner becomes part of the glory of the gospel since Jesus did not shy away from sinners. Matthew could have assumed his name upon his departure from good graces, if, in fact, he was a Levite who had fallen into temptation and forsaken a career as a priest. The use of the name Matthew in this gospel was to readily acknowledge that he was a sinner when Jesus, nevertheless, called him.

Not only did Jesus willingly associate with Matthew, but also went to his house to eat a meal with him and his sinner friends! This, as could be expected, drew criticism from the Pharisees. However, Jesus was never at a loss for words in any situation. When the Pharisees complained to Jesus' disciples about what was happening, Jesus responded,

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt. 9:12-13)

The message of redemption is the message of the Gospels. Kings cater to the rich and famous, avoiding the little people of the world except to use or abuse them; however, this king came to bring healing to all people no matter what the need might be. If men were caught in sins that made them outcasts of society, he reached out to them in compassion to heal them. Matthew was not encouraged to continue his life of sin, but rather, was asked to follow Jesus.

Jesus is still making that invitation today to all who will listen. We read.

"The Spirit and the Bride say, "come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." (Rev. 22:17)

Our compassionate Savior still is ready to touch any sin sick soul and bring forgiveness and healing. All that is needed is our cries for mercy coming from faith in him, and like the lepers, cripples, blind, lame, deaf and dumb, he heals us; he will heal you! Won't you invite him into your heart? Do it now! Prayer is just the uttering of words from your heart. You can do it if you want to be forgiven.

Jesus had a special message for the Pharisees, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt. 9:13)

This message of mercy was a message the Pharisees knew very little about since they were often harsh when they confronted open sin. With stones in hand, they would pass the sentence of death. Never did they consider their own guilt as was evidenced in the story of the woman taken in adultery. Jesus, on the other hand, taught us a better way, the way of healing and restoration. It is only to the unrepentant and rebellious that the door to the Kingdom of Heaven stands barred. Rejection of salvation is the only sin that closes the door of hope forever.

Forty-eight

Why Make Things Worse?

Matt. 9:14-17

Jesus had gone to Matthew's house to dine with him and his guests causing criticism from some of the Elders of the Jews. While there some of John the Baptist's disciples came and during the discussion at the table brought up the subject of fasting. The teachings of Jesus had created an ongoing struggle between legalism (the stressing of rules and regulations by religious leaders and institutions) and life-ism (the life giving teachings of Jesus that produce liberty). The teaching about the need for "life" is not an invention of the twentieth century. He came that we might have life and have it to the full. (See John 10:10)

The Pharisees, along with the Sadducees and Elders, represented the official religious community of Jesus' day. They were schooled in the proper decorum of their religion. Protection of their religious traditions was their reason for existence because of the heathen societies that surrounded them. They were thus very resistive to any change that might in any way contaminate their religious culture. For them protection of the culture was a greater mandate than any relationship with God. The idea that a person lacking spiritual life was therefore dead in trespasses and sin, was not even a consideration.

Christianity differs from all other religions of the world, in that followers must have a "born again" experience. This new birth causes them to grow and leave the cultural restraints of their former religions.

Placing this experience in the heart of a religious system dedicated to the preservation of an existing culture would be a tearing and destructive experience. Jesus likened it to putting new wine in old bottles.

Those old bottles were accustomed to such things as fasting, a very solemn activity which does not lend itself well to a spirit of rejoicing. Since rejoicing is associated with feasting, the rejoicing disciples had no need to fast, as the period of looking forward to the coming of the messiah was over. There was no need to pray that a messiah would come; Jesus was the Messiah. He said the time would come when they would fast, but not while he was with them.

We don't usually connect John the Baptist's disciples with the Elders and other religious leaders, but in this case they are all being addressed. These men too needed the ability to move on, they had embraced John, now they needed to take the next step and receive Jesus.

The old bottles of Judaism were stiff and filled with decay, so twisted that the day would come when they would be able to justify the murder of a righteous man! The concept that the end justified the means would be the driving force behind their actions.

Christianity provided new wineskins in the form of the new hearts of all receiving Jesus. Wherever the gospel has been preached, the hungering and thirsting have become the new wineskins to contain the message. However, those individuals who have been bound by "the love

of tradition”, have not proved to be very good wineskins because they tear or burst when their concepts of how it ought to be are disputed.

How sad it is to look into the history of the Church and see the monuments to the bursting skins and torn garments of religious forms and denominations. Often the church, like Judaism of Jesus’ day, has been more concerned with the preservation of doctrinal interpretations, and structures of organization, than with the celebration of Christ.

Jesus demonstrated that being in tune with the will and purposes of God are far more important than the preservation of a religious culture. When faced with the challenge of conformity or healing, he gave the stout command, “Take up your bed and walk!”

It’s time we did the same. If change needs to be made in our surroundings to allow for the presence of the Holy Spirit, let change be our battle cry! All change called for by the Holy Spirit will be “holy” change, having to do with worn out rituals and customs, not holy hearts on fire for God! Jesus came to set us free from whatever restrains us in our quest to please him.

When we are bound by the restraints of a worn out religious system, we want to fast and pray. Bondage brings those desires out in us; but when deliverance comes, so comes rejoicing. Fasting has no appeal to the heart of the rejoicing soul. May God set us all free from the inhibitions that deprive us of our joy in the Lord.

In this present time fasting has a different character than it did in Jesus’ day. For Christians, fasting today is not for the purpose of maintaining the status quo of a worn out religious order; it has a nobler purpose.

Fasting today among Christians is done to break down the resistance of the flesh to the mandates of the Holy Spirit. It resembles a feasting more than a fasting in the sense that all that can be set aside, is set aside, to give the Spirit greater opportunity to do his work in our lives. Before fasting we must wash our faces and put on our best exteriors to reflect that we are in no way deprived.

Once when Jesus was fasting, whether preplanned or not, he said, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about!” (John 4:32) Whether he was on an “official fast” at that time or whether he was simply teaching is not clear. Nonetheless, the incident illustrates the point very well. Fasting should be viewed as a privilege to those who fast and is a spiritually enriching experience, a cause for rejoicing.

Forty-nine

A King Like No Other!

Matt. 9:18-38

Jesus is a king unlike all others! He was a Man who could raise the dead, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and cast out demons!

In Matthew 9:18-38, we have the story of a ruler coming to Jesus whose daughter has just died and wanted Jesus to come and put his hand on her. He said that if he would she would live again! Then as Jesus was walking along the way, there was a woman with a bleeding problem who came and touched him and she was healed. After he raised the dead girl, he went outside and two blind men came to him desiring their eyesight. As they were going out a demon possessed man that couldn't talk was brought to Jesus.

What a picture of Jesus' power we see in these four examples! It was to this world Jesus came with a message of hope. Quite unlike the politicians who make great promises and are unable to fulfill them, Jesus was well able to meet any and all challenges of the world around him.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the very heart and nature of God manifest! God is about life, not death; about health, not sickness; and about being able to see clearly, not blindness. He is about our being free to be all we were meant to be. The Kingdom of Heaven is not about being bound and in torments, fearful and unable to communicate.

Jesus came to this world to be a great light so that we would not have to walk in darkness, afraid of what the future holds for us. There is no problem he cannot solve. He came as the authority of a great kingdom in which there is no death, no sickness or pain, no blindness or bondage of any kind, a place where people can communicate their deepest feelings without fear of being misunderstood.

This Kingdom is not of this world; it is the kingdom of the Lord Christ Jesus. In this kingdom there are no shortages of power or resources to accomplish our Father's will. If he calls, he empowers; and if he sends, he supplies all that is needed to accomplish his purposes. The harvest field is huge including all the nations of the world as well as all the groups within those nations. Sometimes they are clubs, gangs, or even churches. Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost; he cares about all people.

Because he cares, Jesus made a prayer request. He said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Imagine that! Jesus asked us to specifically pray that workers would be sent into the harvest field.

Often we think that he meant that he wants to send people into some foreign country. There is, of course, a need for workers to go to foreign countries, but there are also many groups a lot closer to us who need our attention. It is my belief that because what is needed are ready and willing hearts to hear the call of Jesus, some very fruitful fields are at our very doorsteps.

When we intercede for the lost and pray for the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers, some very important calls will be answered. Those summonsed into this harvest field may find themselves called to their very own work place; some will be called to family members. Jesus ministered to individuals, a ruler and his daughter, a woman, two blind men, a demon possessed man who couldn't talk, many other sick and needy people in the various places of ministry, and then, at last, to the crowds. If this progression indicates a priority, then it is that individuals rank high on the list!

It is my belief that Kingdom people are always looking for opportunities to minister and that no opportunity is too insignificant for their full attention. Yet, we are never to presume that ministry is going to happen just because we are willing. Jesus was in constant communion with his Father for direction and instruction, so his ministry was always fruitful. This is how the Kingdom of Heaven operates.

Fifty

Training School

Part One

Matt. 10:1-5

In chapter ten of Matthew we see Jesus shifting his attention to the future of his kingdom. If I had been the one to decide where chapter ten would start, I would have moved it back to verse thirty-five of chapter nine where we have the introduction to the theme. Jesus had been teaching, preaching and healing the diseased and the sick, because he was moved with compassion for the needs of humanity. “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” (Matt. 9:37-38)

He had gathered twelve men around him who were to become the twelve Apostles. (This list included Judas Iscariot in spite of the fact he would betray him, he was given every opportunity to fulfill his role in the kingdom of Christ.) He knew these men had to be trained and prepared for what would fall their lot as the leaders of the church; yet, it was the figure of a kingdom that was spoken of, not the church.

Jesus is the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you think we have difficulty understanding our relationship to Jesus due to the meanings we attach to words? When we think of his kingdom, we conjure up one picture; when we speak of the church we conjure up a completely different one. Interchanging these two terms behooves us to adjust our definitions of terms.

When we become Christians, do we join the church or the kingdom?

When we think of a church what image do we see? Do we think of a building with stained glass windows and a steeple? The picture may vary considerably, depending on our cultural or denominational backgrounds. If we are catholic or of one of the historic denominations, we may picture churches with stained glass windows, ornate architecture, robed choirs, and all the other trappings of religious cultures that have grown out of the history and the faith of generations of believers. If we think of a church founded in more recent times, we may think of completely different forms of worship in very different looking buildings.

Whatever we think about churches almost certainly includes their spiritual cultures with rules of conduct and forms of government. Some churches have well defined codes of conduct that all church members are expected to follow and strong systems of discipline to insure obedience. Other groups are less stringent and rely on the consciences and commitments of their members to maintain uniformity of conduct within the membership. Still other groups have no standards of conduct at all, with everyone doing what seems right in his own eyes.

When selecting a church, most people pick a church that either fits their family traditions or one that makes them feel most comfortable. It seems to be a common belief that the code of

conduct of a church is the invention of the church; therefore, if you enjoy a certain life style, find a church that fits you.

When we think of a kingdom, on the other hand, the implications are different. Governments seem to take on the character of the king! When we think of the Kingdom of Heaven, we do not consider choices since we understand that it is what the king wants that is of importance, rather than cultural conformity.

As we study the Bible, we find a variety of terms that describe the same thing, namely terms describing relationships with a holy and eternal God. The purpose of this diversity is to help us understand this relationship, even when history and culture have marred our concepts. We thus have the picture of a bride and groom relationship, a church, and a kingdom of heaven or a kingdom of God. By this diversity we are protected from the degeneration of our concepts about one or more of the figures used.

The Bible teaches its own message, and we need to understand that we cannot escape accountability by choosing a church that allows a sin that we like to commit. Our responsibility is to follow Jesus, to learn of him because we all will give account directly to him!

As Jesus began to form his kingdom it was also his church. Somewhere amid our traditional meanings of these two terms is the description of what Jesus was seeking to found. His kingdom and his church are founded on the precepts and authority of the heavenly realms.

Jesus selected men to lead his kingdom / his church, now he had to train them.

Fifty-one

Training School

Part Two

Matt. 10:5-42

Jesus gathered his selected men and assigned them some practical tasks that would enable them to understand how the principles and techniques of the kingdom work. He had been teaching them many principles, now it was time to apply the lessons.

The first thing he did was to give them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

Later, after his resurrection, he would instruct his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father, which he explained would be the baptism of the Holy Spirit to empower them for witnessing. The progression of assignments was thus similar to what Jesus was doing on this occasion.

Next, he gave them instructions about what they were to do; they were to go to Israel announcing, “the kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” (Matt. 10:7-8) They were not to take provisions for the journey; but were to accept whatever hospitality was extended. They were to be official delegates so failure to receive them would result in judgment.

This assignment was expanded to include the whole world and every people group in the world by the use of the term, “every creature”. For this assignment however, it was the house of Israel.

It’s an awesome thing to be a vessel through whom God works! When we speak God’s message, the people who listen are then accountable for what God has said through us. When we demonstrate God’s power, they can never again say they didn’t know it’s real. The work of the kingdom is very serious business.

Jesus warned his disciples about what they would be up against. It’s interesting that the disciples were given power to drive out demons, but were warned about men! He told them that they would be like lambs among wolves so it would take keen wisdom to stay out of trouble. He warned them that they would be arrested and flogged, that brothers would betray brothers, and that even a father would betray his own child! There was much that was upsetting about that message.

When the pure gospel message is heard a person must make a decision either accept it and apply it to his life or reject it and rebel against it. No one, having heard and understood, can remain neutral. There is something very upsetting about the gospel because it is about dying to the world. It teaches accountability and talks about the reality of the spiritual kingdom. Some people have it pretty good in this world so preaching a gospel that teaches the importance of the

eternal over what is here and now can be very threatening. The disciples had to be ready to face difficulty.

For them, there would be situations that would cause fear, even fear of death, and these had to be faced. It was this sort of fear that Jesus addressed when he warned them not to fear those who could destroy their bodies, but rather those who could destroy both souls and bodies in hell. If we must fear, it should be God we fear.

Jesus is the prince of peace, but the peace he brings is not like the world gives, it springs from our relationship with Jesus the Prince of Peace. When we possess the peace that comes from him we become peace personified, sort of peace icons. Nevertheless, conflict will follow us, for which we are not the source but the reason. Our lives become witnesses against the sins of those around us; the light that dwells in us exposes the darkness of others.

Willingness to die is part of the gospel message. First, we must die to the fleshly parts of our natures and then be willing to also literally die. If we are to truly have peace, we must resolve this mandate in our hearts, and be able to place our lives in his hands. When the performance of his will becomes more important than our comforts, we can begin to live in the kingdom.

It's easy for us to talk about being willing to die for Jesus; but when it comes to living for him, it is often a different matter. In Romans 8:36 we have a quote from Psalms 44:22, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Few of us have partaken of the love of God to the point that we can identify with those words. Yet Jesus clearly set forth the demand in his gospel,

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:37-39)

How few of us seem to be willing to personally identify with those words. We would much rather think of their meaning as being applicable to missionaries, Christians of other cultures, time, or nations because we don't want to give up our personal comforts.

There is a strange teaching going around today, the idea that Christians have a right to the wealth of the world, which has moved over Christianity like a dark cloud and has effectively darkened the souls of many people. Satan has been accused of robbing people of their finances; I don't deny that Satan works against us, but when did Jesus ever preach such a message? Did Jesus ever send anyone out to get wealth? Didn't he instruct his disciples,

"Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep." (Matt. 10:9-10)

I hear many excuses for ignoring this command of Jesus. Some people are expert in raising funds but do they sacrifice in their own giving?

I remember a friend, a new Christian, who started contributing to a famous evangelist. There was to be a special event at his headquarters so she decided to attend. She was anticipating the event because the letters she had received had sounded so personal; she thought she might at least get to shake his hand. When she got there, things were very different. The evangelist was dressed in very expensive clothes and was wearing a very expensive looking diamond ring. Such display was a bitter pill to swallow for a new Christian who had been giving sacrificially to this man. To add insult to injury, when she tried to have a word with him, she was treated very

rudely. This report is not intended to trash an otherwise good ministry, only to point out what I perceive to be a real problem.

When she returned with her story, I found his conduct indefensible. We often make excuses for such conduct, but why? Are such people really representing the Kingdom of Heaven? Is this a time to be putting on great shows, buying expensive goodies, or basking in obscene luxury, when our evangelistic task is still unfinished?

I realize that there have been people in Christian circles who have taken poverty to be some sort of badge of honor. To counter this kind of thinking, some have realized that God is not the God of poverty, but rather of plenty. I subscribe to this completely, seeing God as one who possesses all things, and therefore lack is inconceivable. However, it is the attitude of wanting the wealth of the world that must be dealt with in every person who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Our home is in heaven and our treasures should be there as well.

In a very practical sense, I am sure that if everyone who is a Christian quit his job, sold his possessions, made a large wooden cross, and started out walking from place to place, real problems would result very quickly. To counter that kind of thinking, the apostles wrote that men should be diligent in business and not eat if they don't work. These instructions were not intended to soften the teachings of Jesus, instead to put them in perspective. The obvious teaching is that we are to always keep our perspectives clear so that whatever our circumstances of life, our calls are to follow Jesus. It may not mean a change of job so much as a change of purpose.

Following Jesus requires very basic changes in the substructures of our lives. How we live after that will vary from person to person and minister to minister. It is my personal conviction that a minister should live within the approximate life style range of the people to whom he ministers. Exception to this occurs in missionary settings where the life styles of the people are physically or psychologically unhealthy for the ministers.

When Jesus sent his disciples out to learn how to function in the Kingdom of Heaven, he required them to be totally dependent upon the hospitality of the people to whom they ministered! They needed to have faith that they could depend on the Lord to provide for them through the hospitality of the people. When they needed something, someone would just happen to have it for their use! To those not familiar with the Kingdom of Heaven, such provision may seem like a coincidence. I have personally witnessed many such events to which I had the option of ascribing either coincidence or heavenly intervention; I chose the latter.

Finally Jesus assured his disciples that anyone who ministered to their needs would be rewarded. Rewards for the givers are important to any conscientious servant of the Lord who sees people give to others out of their poverty when their needs are even greater. The vast majority of ministers would rather give than to receive.

It is important to understand that there is one who sees the heart of the giver and will not let his sacrifice go unnoticed. Even a cup of cold water will not go without its reward!

Jesus said that in receiving them, they would be receiving him and also the Father who sent him. When a person is functioning as a true representative of the Kingdom of Heaven, those who hear his message are either blessed or cursed as a result of how they treat him! What an awesome responsibility is ours when we represent the Lord Jesus. How cautious we ought to be as his representatives lest we cause another to stumble!

Part Five

Lessons Along the Way

Fifty-two

John The Baptist

Matt. 11:1-19

Having completed the training discourse and having sent his disciples out, Jesus continued his ministry. One day as he was preaching, John the Baptist's disciples approached him. John was in prison because he had preached about Herod's adultery (Herod had married his brother Philip's wife). While preaching one day, John told him it wasn't lawful for him to have his brother's wife.

Human nature was evidently the same in Jesus day as it is now. As long as a minister preaches sermons that fit into the life style of the people who hear them, he is well received. If indeed, he feels he must preach against sin, he should do so in such a way that no one feels any obligation to change his ways. He should never preach as though he thought someone might be actually sinning. And if the person is sinning, he must make it seem all right to do so in his case because he is an exception. Just let a preacher really describe sin as wrong, and see what happens.

John did the unthinkable; not only did he preach about Herod's sin, he evidently named him publicly! Herod did the predictable; he arrested him. John had been so busy preaching that he had missed Jesus' sermon about being wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. His zeal to denounce sin led to a very tragic end to his life.

Was he wrong to be so bold? I don't think so, but we would do well to leave that debate to wiser men to decide.

Every generation seems to have at least one fellow who stands in our faces and tells us our sins stink and should be buried. They aren't very nice in how they go about it, so society tries to brush them off by using uncomplimentary labels to humiliate them. In doing so, they trash their reputations, so that no one take's them seriously. We may call them brash, crude, unkind and negative; or accuse them of being troublemakers and causes of division; and, in general, try to make them look bad for telling us about our sins. Woe to the man who dares to name names and expose them publicly.

John the Baptist was a preacher in a very special class whose members are seldom popular. They have to do their work outside the structure of religious society. They're considered a little weird because they don't flatter people by telling them how good they are. They can be negative sounding and seem insensitive to the feelings of others. They cut deeply with their words; but if they are genuinely a part of this group, what they proclaim is pure truth. What purpose do they serve? Wouldn't we be better off without such people? Ah, never! We do indeed need such people because they prepare the way of the Lord.

How can we repent if we don't understand our sins? Revelation of truth is the prerequisite of repentance. We are like goats that go butt, butt, butt! (A pun intended!) We're always trying to defend ourselves because it's really hard to repent.

Isn't it amazing how when we go to hear people like John, we don't really want to do anything about what they say, yet we seem to feel better having heard them? A sort of therapy, I suppose. But then why should we listen to them; aren't they men just like us? No one is perfect. We can always find an excuse for not listening, "He shouldn't name names!" or, "He lives too high, he's a nobody, look his clothes are cheap and he's not educated!" or, "He's too smooth, too professional". Jesus said to such as us, "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions." (Matt. 11:16-19) What childishness! We're so concerned about outward cultural conformity that we miss the message completely.

Jesus didn't come to create a culture but to lead us out of the bondage of this world. It's men like John who, with courage, speak the truth; yet the message he brought was only to prepare the way for Jesus. Having done that, his role on earth was completed; it was now time to appear before the Father.

Although the ministry of John the Baptist had been fulfilled and he was now in prison, he had legitimate questions in his mind about Jesus. Was he really the one for whom God had raised him up to prepare the way? Perhaps John too had been influenced by the popular views of what the Christ would be like when he came.

Prophetic interpretation is often misunderstood. What was prophesied can be fulfilled and yet not even recognized as being so. Such was the case with the coming of Jesus where what was happenings was so low key. His coming was only known about in a very small geographic area. The people whose lives were touched were few in number as compared with the total population of the earth. He seemed insignificant; yet, he was real, no doubt about that. John had questions; had he erred? For the answer he sent word to Jesus, as he needed reassurance. Perhaps he felt like a failure as he sat long hours in a prison cell. What a way for things to end!

Jesus sent word back to John, reassuring him that all was well. The proof he gave him was the record of the miracles. The miracles in themselves are not the message, but they are supportive evidence that the message is a correct one.

Having concluded talking to John's disciples, Jesus then gave a glowing summary of who John was in light of God's plan saying he was great, greater than any who had preceded him! It was Jesus' way of saying thank you.

Fifty-three

Pleasure Me Please!

Matt. 11:20-27

As Jesus continued to move about, along the way he denounced some of the cities in which he had been preaching. They had received his miracles but didn't want his message. They wanted the benefits of his power and authority, but they didn't want to enter his kingdom.

How like people today! We always accept blessings but don't want to be bothered with commitment! For many people, going to church is therapy. They like the music, and the sermons are nice, especially the motivational kind. They like preachers who can give us new ideas, inspire our faith, or give us shots of enthusiasm and send us home to more successful and prosperous futures. We muse, "If we could only harness this mighty power of the Spirit, surely all our problems would be solved, we would be able to live healthier, wealthier lives, and certainly we would be wiser!"

Jesus said that from the days of John the Baptist the kingdom had been forcefully advancing and that forceful men would lay hold of it! It takes real effort to break away from the conventional attitudes that grip our lives.

We are held in slavery to the world's system that uses economics that demand our every effort. So deep is our bondage to the world that we think the only hope of liberty is to make enough money to be free of its oppressive grip.

Added to this is our problem with greed. We may say that all we want is enough to get by, pay our bills, etc.; but that statement is only a cover to avoid the issue because we still want our pieces of the world's pie. To let go of earthly concerns and let God give us what is really needed in our lives seems too much for us.

Once, during a very difficult time in our lives, my wife and me received a prophecy from a friend, a promise that the Lord would deliver us from want. We readily accepted it because, our hearts longed to see prosperity; we were weary of our struggle with the system and longed for relief. We were encouraged and felt sure relief was about to come our way; but it didn't! I prayed and asked the Lord what he meant by this promise. He spoke words into my spirit that I reluctantly recognized as truth! "I deliver from want by delivering from wanting." I knew the Lord had spoken a death sentence to greed.

Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure." (Matt. 11:25-26)

Once we let go of our concerns for the many wants we have and start believing in God's provisions for our lives, peace enters. Our unbelief soon dissipates as we yield to the wisdom of God. We then discover a peace that the world can never give us, one that is dependent on the knowledge of the abiding love of God alone. When the peace we have comes from God, the world is powerless to take it from us! Our turmoil comes from worldly concerns. When we let go

of those concerns and die to the world, it has no more power over us! Pleasure seeking is lost in the pursuit of God, from whom we receive pleasures that last forever.

The people in the cities that Jesus visited failed to see the importance of his teachings. They wanted what would enhance their present lives, but demands for lives of holiness fell on deaf ears. Nevertheless, the message had been delivered and the people were now responsible for what they had seen and heard. They were now being warned that options no longer existed; it was repent or perish. However, since repentance was not forth coming, judgments did follow, although not right away, but they did come!

Sometimes because judgment is delayed, people think it is not coming, which is just not the case. It will come, suddenly and severely.

Fifty-four

Enter My Rest

Matt. 11:28-30

There is a condition of rest for the people of the Kingdom of Heaven; the book of Hebrews addresses the subject at length. However, the “rest” to which the author refers in the fourth chapter is not the rest of one day in seven. Those who observe the Sabbath do not really observe the rest spoken of in the scriptures. What God had in mind when he gave the Sabbath was not just a day in seven to rest the body, but rather, a day to foreshadow man’s entry into Christ.

The Sabbath was never really kept in the purest sense, only as a symbol due to the sin nature of the keepers. It was Jesus alone who was able to keep the Sabbath in the purest sense. In fact, he is the Sabbath personified! All that he did on earth was to please the Father. He, unlike all others, never sought his own pleasures or fulfillments.

As Jesus taught, he spoke words of comfort and peace to those who are weary from the pressure and turmoil that results from efforts to make our ways in this world. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

When God created the heavens and the earth, each day had an evening and a morning and each day began in the fading light of the one that preceded it. The first day began in the heart of God who had purposed to bring forth a creation and a creature, man. These creations, formless, empty and dark, began to be stirred by the hovering Spirit of God. What a picture of man, lost in his death, with darkness in his soul, and empty of divine purpose! Then God said, “Let there be light!” and Jesus was proclaimed to us! In us, the first work of the Spirit is to separate the light from the darkness.

The second work of the Spirit was to create “sky” or the heavens. The waters above were separated from the waters below, making a space into which God would place a future creative work. May I suggest that following the light of Jesus into our lives is an awareness of the existence of things we couldn’t previously even imagine? Into newly created spaces of awareness, God soon grants knowledge of the awesomely powerful Kingdom of Heaven.

On the third day God began to solidify things! Dry ground began to appear, vegetation sprang up and various kinds of seed bearing plants. Such is the point where we begin to experience the growth of new and exciting realizations, the results of the new life within. We soon see fruit beginning to appear in us; some love that wasn’t there before, some joy springing up over here, and some peace taking over there. We also discover that salvation is not all excitement, but substance; teachings taking root in us begin to bear a harvest.

The fourth work of the Spirit was the creation of bodies in the sky.

“Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night. They were to serve as signs to mark the seasons and days and years.” (Gen. 1:14)

There can be little doubt that these bodies symbolize the word of God that is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. Jesus was the word made flesh and the light of the world! We who have him residing in our hearts are also said to be the lights of the world because we proclaim the gospel.

On the fifth day living creatures filled the waters and the sky. This day made us aware that the Kingdom of Heaven has life abounding in it, cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures to do God's bidding. Seas are symbolic of the masses of humanity from which kingdoms arise. In fact, the Book of Revelations talks about beasts rising up out of the sea and it is believed by many that the sea represents the masses of humanity and the beasts are governments or kingdoms.

On the sixth day things began to solidify. Animals, reptiles, and insects were now visible on the earth. It was at this point that Adam was created and instructed to take dominion over the earth. All truth is parallel, it has been said, and it is not hard to see that the creation days were the format of God's plan. We see the likeness in our own experience and in the plan of the ages. If we take the view that the work of God in our lives is parallel to the creation days, then we can see that Adam's dominion was parallel to Christ's authority and dominion over all that the Spirit brings forth in us.

We can take the view that all the life forms that appear in the sky are symbolic of the thoughts and ideas that pass through our minds (the heavens), that animals that roam on the earth are symbolic of the enterprises that we involve ourselves with (our flesh or carnal natures), and that creatures of the sea are symbolic of affections of the heart that sometimes rise up to take dominion over us. (See Rev. 13:1-4) As a result of the fall of man, we also have wild driving impulses that must be subdued by Christ, who has come to rule and reign in us.

The sixth day was the day of the creation of Adam and the commissioning of authority. Everything came into its rightful order; all creatures became subject to him, and there was peace. Thus, each animal and bird has a diet of proper food or vegetation, with no creature preying upon another for existence.

God saw that "it was good" and rested, having accomplished his purpose. His rest day had no designated time reference! All other days had evenings and mornings, but this day had neither, as if it were an eternity that once entered into, all designations of time ceased!

The rest day is no longer just one day in seven to be observed week after week, but represents rather the condition of resting that results when Christ is truly enthroned in our hearts. Such resting is the natural result when the birds of the air, the creatures of the sea, and the beasts of the earth are all subject to him; great peace reigns in us when our diet is the bread of life. The lion and the lamb, which have conflicting natures, can lie down together and humans will no longer fear serpents or wasps. In other words, Christ has established his peace within us. The war between the flesh and the spirit is ended; the man on the white horse with the two edged sword has triumphed, and Armageddon has ended. All those mighty warriors who once warred and plundered our lives, who brought such stress and pain, now lie lifeless and God has called for the birds of the air to cleanse the earth of all remembrance of pain. The tears are wiped away from our eyes. (Truths alluded to in Rev. 19:11-21)

As we scan the scriptures from Genesis to Revelations, we see the symbolic parallel of God's dealings in our lives. The Bible tells its story that is both historic and prophetic; but within the narrative is a story that is also spiritual in nature. I am sure that in Revelations, as in other

Biblical books, there is a definite historic fulfillment of all the prophecies; yet I see a spiritual parallel there as well.

There is rest for the people of God who through faith receive the message of the cross and the mighty resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. We are thus exalted into the Kingdom of Heaven where there is love, joy and peace and genuine rest for our souls. When we stop doing our will and start doing God's, we find new liberty in our lives with forms and traditions having a new and deeper meaning. We can see what we never saw before, hear what we never heard before, be governed by a new law we never perceived before, and live by love and in rest.

Fifty-five

What Law?

Matt. 12:1-14

As Jesus and his disciples were passing through a field one day, his disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain to eat. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath!” (Matt. 12:2)

A major theological question had been raised. What about the law? Was the law meant to be an aid to man, a servant to help him, or was man made to keep the law? What is the nature of true holiness? Is it obedience to a moral code, or is the moral code the means by which we come to understand the nature of true holiness? What are we to do with one law when obedience to it interferes with another law?

Jesus stepped right into the middle of these questions to point to historical facts to prepare their minds for truth. Hadn't men of old acted on the principle of expediency and been found guiltless, even though they broke the law? What is the foundational truth upon which all morality stands? At what point do we close the law book and judge a matter on its own merit?

To answer these questions Jesus referred to the book of Hosea, chapter six.

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”
(Hosea 6: 6)

Jesus said, “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matt. 12:7-8)

How easy it is to lose sight of the real issues. In order to keep the spiritual message before us it is necessary to maintain institutions, cultures, and systems to educate each generation. Yet, in the process of maintaining these, we easily forget why they exist.

Israel had a religious system that, by virtue of its very nature, would one-day cease to exist. Its purpose was to teach hope of a coming salvation and its functions were symbols that would find their fulfillment in Christ. He would be the reality. The execution of their religious practice became so intent that they lost sight of why they did it. Their religious practice became the object; worship of God was no longer important. The condition of a person's heart was no longer important either, so long as obedience to the system was maintained

The passage in Hosea from which the quotation is taken is a portrait of the substitutionary suffering and death that Jesus experienced for us. It was Jesus who was torn; it is we who are healed. It was he who was injured; it is our wounds that are bound up. After two days he was revived, and on the third day we were restored! (See Hosea 6:1-6) It is the clear teaching of the New Testament that Jesus died in our place that we might have the righteousness of his life as our life. (Note that in the passage referred to, the use of the pronoun “us” is a supplied word, the opinion of the translators. In the books of prophecy, the prophecies concerning Jesus are now being read after the fact. It is thus legitimate to supply the correct name in retrospect.)

(For comparison this is the King James Version quote of Hosea 6:1-2)

“Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight. Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth.

After telling about what he came to do, he then spoke of Israel’s failure, and what the mistake was that led to judgment. They had failed to understand that God wanted mercy and not sacrifices, and acknowledgment not burnt offerings.

Even today, once an institution has been established, outward considerations begin to take the place of the original intention. For example, a church with its structure, creed, doctrine and style of worship were intended to meet a spiritual need. As time goes by, the need may not exist any longer, but the church has taken on other purposes and meanings. What was in the beginning a movement, now has become a monument! The need to maintain the church is more nostalgic than spiritual. We become tied to these monuments and occupied with their maintenance, forgetting their original divine purpose.

The religious practices of Israel had long ago fallen into this trap. The worshipers didn’t even remember the purposes of the practices. Observance of the Sabbath had become the focal point of their religion. When the real purpose for their religion was lost, another force took its place, money and power. Religious practice meant jobs because whether a service met a need or not was not as important as the maintenance of the institution itself.

When the real purpose of a function of their religion was either not known or had been set aside as being unimportant, a substitution was created to maintain control of the constituent’s lives.

Sabbath keeping had divine commands and examples to give it credibility. However, its purpose was easily forgotten in the forced ritual of its observance. They used this command as a means of control of the people as it involved their lives every week. It was effective because it was founded on God’s command, not theirs. Its authority over the people seemed justified, but was wrong! The religious institution zealously practiced a form of worship but Jesus exposed their hearts and brought them to the real issue.

The real issue was their relationship to God and the people they served. They weren’t supposed to be servants of the law; they were supposed to be servants of God. If they had understood this relationship, they would have understood the passage from Hosea, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” which would have tempered their interpretation of the law. Jesus showed that the intent of the law was more important than the fanatical and letter-perfect observance of it. He showed that the purpose of the law was to aid, not burden man.

Hot Issues?

Jesus had stirred a hot issue by putting his finger on their pet doctrine. If you want to find out where people place their values, challenge their favorite doctrines. Jesus was now touching them where it hurt; he was daring to challenge their teachings and their motives.

There are people today who teach that it’s not right to criticize ministers. They quote the scripture “Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.” (Ps. 105:15) This command sounds really straightforward, the perfect shield to hide behind, claim God’s anointing

and do as you please! If anyone says anything about your evil conduct, reprimand him for judging. If that were the intended meaning of the scripture, we are all in trouble because that's the kind of thinking that creates anarchy!

Was Jesus in violation of the scriptures when he challenged the authorities? Were they not God's anointed? Did they not sit in Moses seat? Let's look again at the quoted scripture, "Do not touch my anointed ones." What does it mean? It doesn't take too much intelligence to see that it is a warning against malicious attacks. If a person is truly acting upon divine commission and bears God's message, we are not permitted to treat the message lightly or reject it just because it's not what we want to hear. Once we have received God's message, we become accountable for it. If we are not sure it's God's message, we can seek further insight. In fact, Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for testing men who claimed to be apostles but were not. (Rev. 2:2) On the one hand, we are not permitted to treat people badly just because of something said with which we do not agree. If there is a disagreement, we should check into the matter until there is sufficient evidence to establish truth.

Jesus never attacked the authority of the Scribes, Pharisees or Sadducees, just their hypocritical teachings and conduct. He didn't call for a revolt, only repentance. When Jesus criticized the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and was attacked for it, his attackers placed themselves under the condemnation of the scriptures. He was clearly a prophet, and they were seeking to do him harm!

Recently a man wrote a book in which he openly and pointedly discussed a number of modern teachings. Because he quoted people, calling their names, many people began to cry "foul." People were offended and soundly denounced the man, however, those who used the scripture as their shield to accuse him of touching God's anointed, were themselves cut by the scriptures two edged sword. Was he wrong in what he did? Is it wrong to call a person to accountability? Some say he should have done this or that differently. Perhaps, the question still remains, why do we react? Are we afraid to be questioned? Did the public react because the issues raised were incorrect or to protect the reputation of a friend or perhaps an idol? Probably more evil was exposed by the book's existence than by its contents.

Jesus dared to let his disciples pick some grain and eat, and healed a man, all on the Sabbath day. Then he clearly demonstrated that his actions were legal which made some people look bad. If Jesus had been guilty of bad judgment would that have compared to the evil in their hearts? This incident climaxed in this way, "The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus." (Matt. 12:14) It's much easier to reject the prophet than to check his message for accuracy, and then repent.

Rejecting God's prophets does not release us from our responsibility to their message. Once we have heard truth, we are responsible for it. The messenger's brashness, rudeness, or foolishness does not release us from the responsibility to the truth because truth is truth, no matter how it is packaged.

Fifty-six

Plain Wrapper Religion

Matt. 12:13-23

Truth is truth, no matter how it is packaged. Those who hunger for truth are not offended by packaging. Jesus was truth personified, but many people are offended by his choice of wrappings. He came without the benefit of emotional hype. In fact, he played down too much advertising because sometimes too much hype can hinder God's work.

Man's work, plans and ways work best where enthusiasm runs highest, but God's work is not done on an emotional level. While emotions may motivate us they don't save us. The prophet Isaiah said concerning Jesus,

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.” (Matt. 12:18-21)

There was nothing of the world kingdom attitude in Jesus' ministry, no flash, no extravagant living, no politicizing, and no influence pedaling. “Here is my servant whom I have chosen.” Jesus was the personification of the heart of God, and God hates sin.

For many of us, it's hard to see that the need we feel to look good is really covetousness. There wasn't a trace of fleshly motivation in Jesus; he knew where he came from, where he was going, and how he was going to get there. He was committed to his mission to bring something beautiful to man. Debating issues, conducting demonstrations, or holding violent or even non-violent displays would not accomplish his work. God's kingdom is not social change or political power, nor do educational means or military actions obtain it. All such efforts are effective in influencing the kingdom of man, but not the Kingdom of Heaven. As followers of Jesus, our call is not to affect the world by its own means but by issues of the heart.

Jesus will lead justice to victory and, in fact, is doing so every day. For example, in Matthew the people brought a demon-possessed man, who was blind and mute, to Jesus. The man was a bruised reed (demonized) and a smoldering wick (impaired person). Such people are almost always the victims of sin, not their own sin, but rather the sin of the world. I have personally ministered to many bruised reeds, people who have been blinded by a cruel society and stripped of all their confidence in themselves. The torment of demon oppression has had such a debilitating effect upon them that they cannot speak of their pain, nor trust their own thoughts or emotions. There is only a dying hope in their hearts.

Satan is a cruel taskmaster whose assaults often begin even before we are born. Many children having been conceived during lustful affairs are not wanted and therefore, battle the spirit of rejection. This rejection having been transmitted to the children leaves them insecure and never quite able to receive love. The condition during which the conception takes place is

full of sensuality and selfishness, sins that in the hearts of the parents often lead to even worse sins.

The heart of a woman whose own life is being interrupted by an unwanted life wars between the natural instincts of motherhood and the sin that does not want the human life. Such wars, even if the child is not destroyed before birth, can damage it for life. Such children may become victims of lingering resentments, which find expression again and again as parents lash out in the frustration of having to share their lives. The child who feels this resentment may himself enter the battle, sin having found a home in his heart too.

Jesus entered the world scene to set captives free. If we can bring such people to Jesus, healing will result. I have seen these bruised reeds and smoldering wicks restored.

If this message somehow fits the scenario of your life and you need healing, call on Jesus; he is only a prayer away! Christian counselors and understanding ministers can be very helpful in the healing process so don't be afraid to ask for help.

Fifty-seven

What Shall We Do With Jesus?

Matt. 12:22-32

After Jesus finished healing a demon possessed man who was both blind and dumb, and the man could both see and hear, a predictable result followed; people began to recognize the reality of a very special person. "Could this be the Son of David?" they asked. To that question the Pharisees answer sprang from disbelieving hearts. "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons," they said. (Matt. 12:24) Sadly, they had more faith in Satan's power than they did in God's! Their perceived concept of God and their misunderstanding of his ways prevented them from seeing the obvious. In fact, they were in a worse state of need than the demon possessed man that came to Jesus.

Jesus had no problem healing the man who was physically blind, but healing a Pharisee of his spiritual blindness was beyond his authority. There is no greater tragedy than for a person to approach God with the sin of arrogance in his heart. If Satan can deceive us into believing a lie about ourselves before we begin our approach to God, chances are very good we will never find God at all. If Satan can first convince us that the most important things in life are fulfillment of inner desires and cravings of our flesh, then we are set up to be deceived.

These men had already read the scriptures and saw no need for a change of heart. Their concept of what was needed to meet their needs was adjustments in life. Conformity to the law would eliminate evil and social order was seen as the solution to humanity's needs. Dealing with the internal problems of sins of the heart did not fit into their socialistic agenda.

When men's hearts have been changed so that the driving forces of life are no longer worldly, laws lose their authority over us. When our hearts have their affections and purposes centered on heavenly matters, laws that pertain to the affections and needs of this world become obsolete.

If we could look inside ourselves at any point in life and accurately determine our heart's desires as compared to our concepts of a perfect God, we likely would find that the two match perfectly.

Truly it has been said that every way of a man is right in his own eyes. It follows that only when we truly have come to understand and desire the Kingdom of Heaven, that we are ready to receive its king.

It is said that the heart of man is desperately wicked; who can know it? Man possesses the ability to create his own concepts of righteousness and God; thus, he is a totally unreliable source. It is, therefore, necessary to be in touch with the Holy Spirit to understand what is really wrong and repent because; repentance is a prerequisite to entry into the kingdom.

The Pharisees were students of the Law of Moses and as such rightly understood that the law's authority lay in the realm of outward deeds. Thus, their concerns were only with what you

did or did not do, not with what you were feeling or thinking. The Kingdom of Heaven, to the contrary, rules in the heart where the kingdom of the world has no authority.

The authority of Jesus was seen to be a threat to their God's authority. They either did not, or could not, see that he was the real answer, an answer that would end the need for their occupation. They did not understand that he was not a different God, or a competitor to God, he was a manifestation of the very God they worshiped. Were they ready to decrease their power that he might increase his? Evidently they weren't, because, their solution was to condemn him.

He probably seemed irrelevant which today is still the judgment of a society that would rather be ruled by law than to embrace the answer God has offered. God's answer has been judged to cost too much and it does, unless of course, we're ready to give up our lust for what this world offers.

Real deliverance from the world's bondage requires changing our authority recognition base. Before we accept Jesus, circumstances dictate our actions. If hunger is the dominant need, it will control our lives. We go from satisfying one need to another, and what we do is determined by what we consider most pressing. If all needs seem to be met, we probably suffer from boredom.

When we meet Jesus our lives change as soon as we recognize his authority. We are no longer dominated by human needs because divine intervention comes into play. We are then freed from the fear of circumstances, even the fear of death. Our lives are ready for radical change.

Real life change comes through the power of the Holy Spirit, the instrument by which Jesus breaks the hold that demon spirits have upon people and by which all real changes are effected. Nothing happens in the Kingdom of Heaven that is not through an action of the Holy Spirit.

If we are to walk effectively in the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to understand that our role is to preach the word, correct, rebuke, and encourage. We are Christ's witnesses and work under his authority alone. Our spirit or power does not accomplish accomplishments that have eternal value. John 3:6 says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit." If we can realize the truth of this statement, we may understand why some people who claim Christianity don't show the Spirit of Christ. If our "conversion" is by man, rather than God, the result will only be psychological. No wonder Jesus warned us not to blaspheme the Holy Spirit! Everything depends on his work!

Fifty-eight

It's All So Simple!

Matt. 12:33-50

In the natural world of creation, things are kept simple. Every seed, fish, bird, and animal, bear offspring after their kind. When God gave instructions to Israel concerning their conduct regarding certain practices, they were told not to mix different varieties of grain when they sowed their fields. They were not to try to cross breed animals, or mix two kinds of thread in the same garment. These instructions sound strange. What possible purpose could they serve? I don't have a comprehensive answer, but it seems evident that God likes things to be what they are supposed to be. He doesn't like for men to dress like women (confusion the word says), neither should women try to look like men. A principle emerges; God teaches us spiritual truth through natural things.

Jesus was talking to the Pharisees in the passage before us because they had accused him in a few verses previous, of casting out spirits by the prince of demons, Beelzebub. They were outwardly religious but their hearts were evil. Had they been true men of God they would have recognized Jesus as also being of God.

Thus, Jesus taught that if a tree is good then make its fruit good! Jesus saw a disturbing condition, evil men parroting good. The Pharisees taught the holy law of God from evil motives! Jesus declared if the tree is evil then make its fruit bad. To do otherwise is to deceive innocent people. What confusion reigns when evil comes clothed in scripture! This is why cults often thrive, because their teachers use scriptures to teach what is really quite evil in nature.

Be careful about what is said because, every word will be called into judgment, even idle words.

Jesus was intent on teaching spiritual truth, but it is difficult to get through to us. Why? Is the truth so complex that our minds cannot comprehend it? Quite the contrary, it's all very simple, too simple; that's the problem.

If you're going to be a kingdom person, then be a kingdom person. Don't try to live as a citizen of this world, conforming to its rules, concerned with its concerns, and try to be a Kingdom of Heaven person too; this leads to confusion! Go the whole way with God; don't stop in the middle! Don't try to weave two threads together that don't belong!

The Pharisees, upon hearing these words, asked Jesus for a sign; he, recognizing their evil motive replied,

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” (Matt. 12:39)

Jesus knew these men were insincere. They did not want him, but what he could offer.

Why do we seek Jesus? Do we want to escape hell? Do we want to see miracles? Do we want some kind of help?

As a pastor, I have people come to me seeking help with tear-filled eyes because something is wrong in their lives. I minister to them tenderly and lovingly, but in some cases I wonder, why have they come? Do they want the God I serve, or do they want things to be fixed in their lives?

Jesus doesn't always require us to prove sincerity in order to receive help. For example, many insincere people benefited by the miracles of Jesus. When Jesus fed the thousands, he didn't tell his disciples to check their faith levels or ask for evidences of commitment; he just said to feed them. Even though God helps us, divine grace does not necessarily mean that he approves of our lives. The Pharisees had no reason to ask Jesus for a sign; he had been doing the miraculous right along.

However, their question gave Jesus an opportunity to point to the real issue, the sign of the cross. Healing is nice when you're sick, but bodies get old and die. After we have been with Jesus in Heaven for a while, I wonder how important life's problems will seem. Will we fret over the many insignificant events of this world, or, compared to eternity, will they seem far less important after all. What will be of importance then will not be what we possessed or what people thought of us, but rather whether or not our names are written in his Lamb's Book of Life.

As Jesus was concluding his teachings he warned them that judgment was coming. On the Day of Judgment, he told them, the Queen of the South would rise up against them because she recognized Solomon's greatness and now standing among them was one greater than Solomon and they failed to recognize him.

In final conclusion, Jesus returned to the subject that had begun the discussion, demon possession. He warned them that when a demon has been cast out it wanders in arid places seeking rest and not finding it, it returns to the house from which it came. He said this indicating that the nation of Israel would become even more demonized after their final rejection of Christ than he had found it. All the demons he had cast out apparently would return with even worse ones and their final end would be worse than if they had never heard.

In retrospect it is not hard to see the literal fulfillment of this prophetic word. The crucifixion of Jesus was the beginning of the end of the nation of Israel. In just seventy short years they would be reduced to a few thousand captives and refugees as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Having concluded his conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus was notified that his mother and brothers were outside wanting to see him. Once more the opportunity for important teaching presented itself to Jesus. He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who my brothers are?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.' For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Matt. 12:48-50)

In the kingdom it's not even important who our parents are because family relationships lose their meaning. The body of Christ is made up of all who are truly born again believers. The relationship we have to one another in the body of Christ is often closer than the relationship we have with our very own family members. Jesus was acknowledging this fact and honoring his followers on an equal or higher plain of honor than he was giving his own family, who themselves were struggling with their faith.

Fifty-nine

Plant Well, Harvest Big

Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Many people come to Jesus and ask his forgiveness of sins. They seek to be cleansed and set free from Satan's power over them. Having been cleansed and released from oppression, they settle back into a routine of life, thinking all will be well. As the course of life moves on, along come temptations and old struggles begin again, but this time it's worse than before. Something is desperately wrong. Jesus pointed out that cleansing is not enough; we are to be filled with the Spirit. (See Eph. 5:18, Rom. 8:1-11) Again, it's all so simple; just present an open heart to the Lord!

The same day after having had words with the Pharisees, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Soon so many people gathered he had to get into a boat to teach them. He then began to teach them in parables. He then spoke the parable of the sower and the seed telling them about how it is that seeds may fall into all sorts of ground. Some of the ground is well prepared while other ground may be rocky, and still other ground may have become paths and therefore packed down from travel. Still other ground will have so many weeds in it that when the seed sprouts the weeds will soon choke it.

If a farmer wants to plant a crop that will produce a good harvest, he gets out his plow and starts plowing his field. If he leaves weeds, the grain won't do well; if he leaves hard ground, it won't receive the seed. If he leaves rocks in the soil, the grain may grow fast for a while, but in the long run the soil won't produce a good crop. Well-prepared soil produces a good crop. So it is spiritually; if we prepare the soil of our hearts through repentance, the seed stands a good chance of producing a good crop.

To what do I liken repentance? Repentance includes getting after the weeds, digging out the rocks, and breaking up the soil that has been packed down by much traffic. What did Jesus say of Satan's role?

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.”
(Matt. 13:19)

In other words, a path is a busy place on which busy people carelessly disregard God's message. They don't understand or are too busy to care, so Satan snatches the seed away so that their lives remain barren.

The roles of teachers are seen here as well. Great evangelistic crusades reap thousands of converts, but if there are no teachers to bring understanding, the grain is soon consumed by the birds of the air. (Demon spirits spreading their lies.)

As it is with weeds in a field, the overpowering concerns of the world don't allow food-producing plants to do well. The concerns and unforsaken destructive habits of the world exist because we do not possess a comprehensive faith in God. Some people mistakenly think that the

way to deal with worldly concerns is with worldly answers. Such solutions are like fertilizing weeds! Instead our faith should always be in the wisdom, love and compassion of God, faith which says “Your will be done.” Such faith is not a “cop out” from unbelief, but rather trust in a God who really loves us and knows what is best for us.

After giving the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus continued with another parable that had the same theme.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.” (Matt. 13:24-26)

Jesus then told us plainly what seeds represent; we need not speculate.

“The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” (Matt. 13:22)

There can be no doubt as to the meaning of this passage. The gospel has gone forth in the world to call people into the Kingdom of Heaven, an entry that requires death to the world and all affections tying us to present life concerns. All lust and desire for things, entertainment, worldly excellence, and all human relationships must be subjected to the Lordship of Jesus. Then, and only then, can we be liberated from the power of this world and freed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Sixty

Hearing Hearts

Matt. 13:10-17

After Jesus completed the parable of the sower and the seed, his disciples came to him and asked him why he taught the people in parables. Jesus' answer to his disciples in Matt. 13:10-17 is somewhat difficult to grasp at first.

He replied,

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." (Matt. 13:11-15, Isaiah 6:9,10)

Why did he conceal his message by veiling it in obscure stories? His answer leads to somewhat deeper reflections.

There are at least two schools of thought on the subject. One explanation might be that, had he spoken more persuasively and used his supernatural power to open their understanding, the people never would have permitted him to be crucified. It was absolutely essential that Jesus die on the cross so atonement could be made for our sins. It is noteworthy that after the resurrection took place and the Holy Spirit poured forth on the day of Pentecost, these very people had an opportunity to hear the gospel first. Then the message preached by the apostles was clear, the Holy Spirit working with them to confirm the word with signs and wonders. Thus, the difficulty in hearing and receiving was only temporary.

The other observation is that these people did not wish to hear. "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes." (Matt. 13:15) In this verse Jesus indicates that at least part of the problem was self-inflicted since callousness of heart is the result of self-hardening. When people experience hard circumstances, disappointments, betrayals, and disillusionment, they easily seal themselves off from the natural tenderness of the heart. Humans tend to protect themselves from hurt.

The people were aware of the prophecies concerning the coming of Christ. However, Satan always likes to muddy the waters of expectation when God is about to do something extraordinary. He does so by sending false messengers with false predictions so that people get their hopes up only to be disappointed by the lack of fulfillment. After a few such responses, they tend to seal off and scarcely recognize truth when it presents itself!

A similar problem exists today with reference to the Second Coming of Jesus. A number of false alarms have been given about when he is coming. On certain dates some have even quit

their jobs, sold their possessions, and gone to some designated place to await his arrival, all in vain. Such predictions happen time and time again; man seems unable to resist the temptation to try to set a date concerning when he will come again.

As I write this very chapter, there is still another date setter at work, but he too will be wrong, however, predictions are not surprising, as we know that Jesus has promised to return. The sad thing is that Satan uses false predictions to excuse hardness of heart concerning his promise.

The people of Jesus' time were likely subjected to the same sort of scenario. Yet, despite their disappointments of the past, their false hopes and vain dreams, Jesus did come, just as the word said he would. It will happen again! However, Jesus said it would be at an hour when we think not. Why? Is it because we have all retreated to a safe place of skepticism?

Hardness of heart is a defense mechanism: it takes perseverance to continue to be alert to what God is really saying. I have at times in my life been the object of ridicule because I failed to get excited about some popular trend in the Christian community. Pop theologies come and go, but those who keep their eyes open for Jesus are safe.

Some come along with formulas and gimmicks to try to get people to believe in God, approaches that have a show of wisdom but lack Spirit inspired direction as evidenced by the disillusionment that follows. Those who wait patiently for Jesus' appearance are never disillusioned. They may become weary of the waiting and even wonder if the coming will ever happen; but when it does, they will be ready to receive what is truly of God!

The disciples of Jesus were ready to receive him, though not because they were so spiritual. They had been picked by the Lord and moved upon by the Holy Spirit. If there was anything to their credit in the process, it probably was that when confronted with clear evidence, they were ready to receive. (Judas excepted)

Can we continue to look for the appearing of the Lord in the face of all the false prophets who prey on the dreams of God's people? Yes we can! And we must! He comes to us in many ways, in a spirit of revival, with healing for our bodies; he comes to wake us up to the needs around us, or to call us to prayer. All such are special appearances of the Lord in our midst, but none can compare with the great climatic event when Jesus will appear in the clouds of heaven. As we saw him go, so he will return; this is the firm commitment of the angels who spoke to the apostles.

We have just past another date of speculation on the calendar, the year 2000. Books were written that speculated about many things and the hour of the return of Jesus. Those who were wise did not allow these predictions to do anything more than cause their hearts to wonder. They continued to listen, not to the voice of well-meaning men, but for the trumpet of God to sound and the voice of the angel to call to them. They still listen and when it happens they will know, and they will go.

Sixty-one

Look Out For Counterfeits!

Matt. 13:24-34

In the past while the church slept, false teachers arose and sowed seeds of worldly concerns, convincing many people that it's all right to seek success, money, possessions, and acclaim (so long as one pays his tithe). These ideas about worldly success and wealth are in direct contradiction to the teachings of the very Jesus whom these teachers claim as their Lord!

If these teachers have a Lord named Jesus, I am afraid he is not the same Jesus who is presented to us in the gospels; and, if he is the same Jesus, then they are in danger of the same judgment he pronounced on Korazin, Bethsaida, Tyre, Sidon and Capernaum. The people of those cities lined up for his miracles but rejected his message, the most important part!

Jesus didn't come to fashion us into more acceptable models for the eyes of the world to behold, but to save us from the world, removing the world from our hearts! Jesus said,

"I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (John. 17:14-17)

After Jesus answered the disciple's question about why he taught in Parables, he gave still more parables to the people.

He then gave them the parable of the sower who sowed good seed but soon an enemy came and sowed weeds in his field. The two began to grow up together that raised a question with the servants of the sower, what should be done about the weeds? Wait for the time of harvest and then gather the weeds and burn them in the fire, and the grain into barns.

What do we do about the condition in the church world? Wait. We wait until both the weeds and the grain are fully developed. At first, just as it is too confusing to tell, what is weed and what is grain, it's too confusing, to tell which preacher's message comes from the Holy Spirit at work within him and which reflects either the words of another or his own understanding.

Some people who are self-appointed and not Holy Spirit called are motivated by desires for acclaim, success, or money. If things of the world are in the minister's heart, his message will reflect that sooner or later as he gravitates toward his heart's desires. If greed motivates him, he will display a life style of ever increasing opulence that he supports by involving himself in various schemes and endeavors. May God help us to see these charlatans before they influence us! It's tragic when the church has the seed of a Babylonian spirit at work within it!

In the end these teachers will get their due judgment. May all that follow such individuals repent and flee from their influence, lest they too fall under judgment.

The work of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth is the propagation of the gospel. When this kingdom began on the day of Pentecost, just days after the resurrection of our Lord, the band of

believers seemed the smallest of all the people groups of the earth. However, the Holy Spirit imparted life, growth was rapid, almost explosive. In fact, three thousand were baptized the first day and, by the time Peter and John were thrown into jail believers had grown to number about five thousand. This growth was phenomenal, to say the least, considering that it was predominantly happening in Jerusalem, the center of power for the Jewish nation. Yet, in spite of all the excitement and rapid growth, the believers were still a very small group, as compared to the population of the earth.

Jesus also gave them a parable of a mustard seed. He told them that though the seed was the smallest of the seeds, it becomes the largest of the garden plants becoming a tree.

The kingdom of the Lord Jesus, though starting with a very meager following, was destined to become great, a force to be reckoned with. The symbol of the mustard seed is a very appropriate one, because even though it is the smallest of seeds, yet it can grow to a very large size. When used to demonstrate the growth of the Kingdom of Heaven in the beginning, it is most appropriate. However, it eventually weakens as a symbol, for the Kingdom of Heaven today is more like a mighty tree. Thus the Lord had to change his symbol in the parable from a garden plant to a tree of larger dimensions.

The Lord continued his parabolic teaching concerning the role of this kingdom on earth. “He told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.’” (Matt. 13:33) The kingdom has a destiny to fulfill on earth; to proclaim the gospel until its influence is felt everywhere, even the uttermost parts of the earth.

Sixty-two

Look Close Now!

Matt. 13:34-44

To what do we liken the Kingdom of Heaven?

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Matt. 13:44)

How can truth be so obvious, yet so hard to see? How can we read scripture after scripture and story after story, go through religious festivals, recite creeds, experience baptism, take communion, and teach others, and still not know what it is that God wants to do in us?

We have all, at one time or another seen cleverly constructed pictures that appear to be ordinary scenes, but which suddenly change to different pictures as one continues to look at them. I once saw such a picture of ordinary snow melting off the ground it covered. However, after development, the picture on the negative had an amazing likeness of Christ evident more on the negative than on the print. Our eyes have been trained to see things a certain way, so in order to see the face of Christ on the print, I had to see what I expected to be white as black. The reversal of what I normally would see deceived me. Once my eyes saw the picture, I could look at it again and again and always see the portrait! The picture hadn't changed, I had. The value of the picture had now changed as well because a once worthless picture of melting snow was now to its owner, a revelation of the countenance of Christ!

The value of the portrait depended on what it meant to each person who looked at it and what that person believed about it. Was it a picture of Jesus, or just some bearded man? Was the picture within the picture supernatural or just coincidental? Again we come back to the central issue, that, what is in our hearts determines what we see.

Even though, in these pages, you too have seen the Kingdom of Heaven, you still may not be ready to accept it! You may be thinking, “That’s interesting, but I don’t agree,” or, “I think I see it, but I’m not sure it works the way you say it does.” Or you may feel it’s not worth the cost involved. You may ask: “Isn’t God the God of both the living and the dead? Why then would he want me to die to the world?” “Shouldn’t I just claim salvation, go on living by the rules of the church, and leave dying to the last event?” “Couldn’t I then at that time emerge with Jesus in the power of his resurrection?”

What do you want? Do you want the kingdom of the world now and the Kingdom of Heaven later? What you value in your heart will determine your decision.

Kingdom truth is hidden in the field of the world, that is, in its history, its religions, its cultures, its politics, and man’s experiences. If we see the Kingdom of Heaven revealed and know that the means to receiving it is to deal with the world in our hearts, then we will seize that world (or field as is in the story Jesus told). Having once seized that field, we will acknowledge the existence of our pride, lust, envy, greed, and covetousness and in the acknowledgment we take ownership of it. Having thus established ownership, we will violate it and take only the

treasure from the field; then with joy, we will focus not upon the field from whence the treasure came, but upon the treasure itself.

Putting it another way, seizing the field is owning up to the reality that we are sinful fallen men who really love the world and all that it has to offer, both in the sense of the natural wonder of the physical creation, and the symbolic use of the term. Buying the field is the process of recognition of this truth, and taking the treasure from it is the recognition that the Kingdom of Heaven though coming from this world is not the world. It is the reality that the Kingdom of Heaven is made up of redeemed people of the earth and that the teachings and principles though taught in world like terms are really heavenly precepts. This is where the real value of the field lies. The world from which the treasure is taken is in the end as worthless as a wrapper used in the sales process to convey the product and present it to the consumer. How many times have we gone to the store and bought a box because we really wanted the content? After we have taken the content we usually dispose of the box, its purpose having been served.

In case you are confused about the story of the field, and still think that the pursuit of natural things is a part of God's plan, Jesus enlightens us. Imagine that the picture is now of a merchantman and that the treasure is a pearl. Once the man sees the pearl, greatly under priced and recognizes its value, he goes home and sells everything he has to buy it. Now there you have it, no room for doubt! This treasure will cost you everything. If you don't sell all, you don't get the prize. You must sacrifice all worldly concerns to enter the kingdom.

Go ahead; wiggle and squirm, rationalize, argue, or debate. It doesn't matter; the price is the same for everyone, "ALL." If the kingdom is worth it to you, you will do what is required, if not, you will pursue what is of greater value to you.

Sixty-three

About Hell

Matt. 13:47-53

Once more in Matthew 13:47-53, Jesus presents a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. This time the scene includes fishermen who let down their net to catch fish of all kinds. The fish are all brought to shore, but only the good ones are kept, while the rest are thrown away. But Jesus doesn't stop there because there is still a truth that must be proclaimed; the same truth he told them about at the end of the parable of the weeds in the field. What will become of the weeds and the bad fish?

The truth about Jesus, the king and his kingdom, is not an option; we are not given multiple-choice propositions. There are multiple propositions, but their sources are not the Lord Jesus Christ since there is only one truth about the Kingdom of Heaven and salvation. However, when our hearts are evil, we reject the message and become candidates to believe a lie, a very real danger. Jesus said,

“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 13:49-50)

People, who don't like the subject of Hell try to avoid, ignore, disbelieve, or disprove it; yet no effort will change the truth. Hell is not the invention of man, nor was it ever meant for man. We can get caught up in trying to determine if it is; a furnace with flames, a lake of burning sulfur? Yet, we cannot say we were not warned of its fiery nature, though some people think the language was just symbolic, and take comfort. What an effort in futility! Isn't it better to flee from the kind of life that would condemn a person to go there? No matter whether the interpretation is symbolic; the effect of hell will cause weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth!

Everywhere I look I see at work the principle of positives and negatives. Electricity works on this principle since energy is a positive and non-energy is a negative. The subject of positives and negatives is a very instructive one because there are valid lessons to be learned that are spiritually beneficial. However, it is equally true that a simplistic approach to the subject can result in erroneous conclusions.

To say that hell is a negative is too simplistic, yet hell is a negative in every sense of the word. Satan, too, is a negative; yet to threat him as nothing more than the absence of a positive is to over simplify. Satan is a negative, not because he is an abstract idea, but because he lacks something. Beings themselves are identified as being either positive or negative on the basis of what they have or do not have in them. In electricity we may have two wires that are made identically, but they are identified as positive or negative on the basis of which one carries the electrical charge.

John, in writing his gospel and also his letters, referred to what I call the “three big L’s”, love, light, and life, divine energies that come from God, but which convey potential misunderstanding of truth. Our concepts of these energies are of great importance.

Our thinking that all love is of God can lead to great problems and can confuse our discernment of what is good and what is evil. In general, we can conclude that all love is positive but that not all love is godly in application! All love that has origin in God is godly love; but since we are the vessels through which it flows, it can become tainted or even perverted by our sins or errors.

Similarly, when we speak of life we may encounter different definitions. What we call life may be very different from what God calls life. Jesus said that we are to lay down our lives that we may find our life. It follows that, if we see all life as positive there is obviously a contradiction of terms. God talks about spiritual matters and we as humans have problems understanding.

Once we do have genuine spiritual understanding, however, we learn to recognize Satan, even when he comes clothed in light or love, or speaks to us of saving our lives. In spite of Satan’s efforts to deceive, God is still, without question, a positive and Satan a negative. I call God the “real God” and Satan the “Un-god.”

Some obvious, positives and negatives are heat and cold, light and darkness, life and death, and love and hate. Heaven and hell also have striking contrasts. All legitimate concepts of hell seem to agree that it is the direct opposite of heaven since heaven is portrayed as a place of peace and hell as a place of torment.

Heaven is portrayed as being filled with light while hell is a place of painful darkness. One can go on and on describing the differences, each equally terrifying. Jesus summarized the concept of hell when he said that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there.

In life we know and experience enough of heaven and hell to choose the good and shun the bad. Unfortunately, for some life is more hell than heaven while for others the opposite is true! Yet all of us experience enough of the bad we call “hell” to choose not to go there. If hell is worse than the worst of earth’s experiences, and heaven is better than the best, then only a fool would not do whatever it takes to be assured of a heavenly home! Earth is neither heaven nor hell; in fact, it is probably about half way between those two extremes.

Making the choice to turn to the good, to receive the light of truth, to accept the love of the Lord as he calls to us, is the only sensible and right thing to do. Won’t you receive him today?

Chapter Sixty-four

Christ My Heritage

Matt. 13:54-58

Having concluded the parables discourse, Jesus moved on and came to his hometown. He went to their synagogue and taught the word. The people were amazed at him and questioned, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him. (Matt. 13:54-57)

What is our perception of Christ? Inside the church there are almost as many varying views as there are outside. Who Jesus is, and what he is like to us depends on many factors; our thoughts and attitudes about him are gathered from various sources. Much of what we believe about Jesus results from influence. If we have been surrounded by people who have a deep love and faith in Jesus, who see him as God made flesh, and who know that they can trust him with their very lives, then we will likely have the same faith. Such was the case in my life.

I had the good fortune to have parents who knew the Lord as a very real and trusted friend. They always trusted him completely, sought his guidance and wisdom, and understood his ways. There was never a question about where they stood with him because they knew him. Whatever questions they had, were settled before I was born, and their example provided a firm foundation upon which to build my life. If they had imperfections they existed in their personalities, not in their faith.

This heritage left me with only one question. Would I also be able to embrace such a faith? Their faith worked for them, day in and day out, from the time I was born until the day we bid them each farewell at gravesides.

I saw them in times of happiness, sorrow, great joy, and disappointment. They had friends and were betrayed by friends. I saw them agonize over decisions and then follow the Spirit's leading in their lives. When they were sick, they prayed; sometimes they were healed but sometimes they weren't. They always rejoiced in the Lord; during want or blessing, joy or sorrows, their faith never changed.

When they buried my older sister at the age of nineteen, even though many people had prayed long and hard for her healing, their faith never changed; they still prayed for sick people, never questioning the wisdom of God. They bid her goodbye as they wept and then released her into the hands of God, trading their grief for hope of a promised reunion beyond. I saw their grief end but their joy in the Lord continued uninterrupted! Their faith had been built on the word, and it worked for them; it works for me.

How do we see Jesus? When Jesus went about preaching and teaching, people had varied opinions about him; he was the Christ, a teacher, a prophet, but in Nazareth he was Mary's son, brother of James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and some unnamed sisters. It was difficult for the people in his own hometown to get beyond their original perceptions of him.

Luckily my environment blessed me, but not all have had that opportunity.

The inconsistent lives and faith of others have influenced many people. They misunderstand Christ because they have only seen him through disappointed eyes misled by false teachers into a faltering faith. Perhaps they have been victimized by someone's zeal to be a great healer, prophet or blessing; someone who promised them great benefits if they would just follow his teaching, or contribute to his ministry. Wounded faith is hard to heal; but if we hunger for God, we can move past all obstacles.

How do we rebuild damaged faith? Some good advice exists in the Song of Solomon story about a young woman who was a vine dresser and a shepherdess. She was brought to the king's house because he had seen her one day and saw in her a special beauty. After arriving, she wanted to know more about him and his ways; she had some goats and wanted to know where he grazed his flocks.

The answer she received was good advice for those who really want to know more about how the Kingdom of Heaven works and about our king. She was told that the best way to get answers was to follow the sheep's tracks and graze her goats near the shepherd's tents. (Song of Songs 1:8)

If a person is hungry for God, if his heart yearns to know more about the kingdom, he should find a church where there are some healthy sheep (happy Christians) and stay close to the shepherd's tent (listen to the pastors). We cannot become a part of the Kingdom of Heaven by simply being around its citizens, but we can learn much that way.

Sixty-five

A Day in the Life of Jesus

Matt. 14:1-34

One day, in the life of Jesus, he received the news that John the Baptist had just been killed in a very grotesque way, being the object of hate.

John had accused King Herod and his wife Herodias of having an adulterous marriage. This angered Herodias and in the midst of a special state dinner Herodias' daughter pleased Herod and his guests by dancing before them. Herod being very pleased offered her a generous reward. As is often the case, sin wins out over reason. For her reward Herodias' daughter requested that the head of John the Baptist be given to her on a platter! The request was reluctantly granted and Herod ordered John the Baptist beheaded and his head delivered to her!

When Jesus heard about the death, he withdrew by boat to a solitary place. Sometimes we need to be alone; this was one of those times for Jesus. People, however, don't always understand that need, so when they heard where he went, they followed. When Jesus approached land, a large crowd was waiting for him!

If we had been the one followed, how would we have reacted? Most of us, I am afraid, would have been a little testy about that time and felt justified in being so. If we don't want to be bothered with someone else's needs, it's so easy to put them off. If Jesus were of the world, or like most of us, what he would have said, at least to his closest friends, would have been quite different from what he said and did there.

We are told that, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." (Matt. 14:14) His reaction was most remarkable when seen in the light of normal human emotion. He had just heard that his dear friend, the man who had been sent to announce his coming, had been killed. His first reaction was to get away from people for awhile, but that plan failed because the crowd was there waiting for him as he climbed out of the boat. Upon seeing the crowd, being the great king he was, he ministered to the people!

Amazing as this seems to us, the story is not over yet; in fact, it becomes even more remarkable as we proceed! Not only did Jesus not react negatively to the crowd, but after a long day of ministry, when he was expected to dismiss the crowd, he fed them instead!

Where did he get the strength to do all that? Anyone who is involved in ministry knows it is very draining, both physically and emotionally, to minister even a few hours. Yet Jesus endured the emotional trauma of the loss of John the Baptist, a long day of ministry and the feeding of the multitudes in a miraculous way. When God is our source of strength, we have much more to give than the natural source of energy can supply.

Having fed the people, Jesus then sent his disciples ahead of him by boat toward the next destination while he stayed behind to dismiss the crowd.

How unlike natural men Jesus was! Who ever heard of an evangelist sending his team home before the crowd has dispersed? What evangelist stays behind to small talk with the people after a grueling day of ministry?

After the people left, surely it was time for some rest; but no, Jesus headed for the hills to pray. What manner of man was he?

The further the story goes, the more incredible it becomes! The disciples obediently got into the boat and were sailing to the other side of the lake, but they weren't doing well because they had sailed into a head wind, and the waves were buffeting their boat.

Have you ever set out to obey the Lord, only to sail into a strong head wind? Have the waves of adversity beat upon the boat of your life until you thought all would surely be lost?

If the disciples were like people today, I'm sure they must have questioned what was going on because when the circumstances of our lives start going awry, we start questioning God's leading in our lives. "What are we doing?" we may ask. "Let's go back." we say.

Then there are those accusing voices that say, "You must have sin in your life!" "You didn't pray enough," or, "Maybe you confessed something wrong." What nonsense! How can we ever get a fresh vision of Jesus unless we face a storm? How can we grow in faith unless we see that Jesus reveals himself to us in storms?

Such revelations can be beyond our ideas of what salvation is about. Our reaction to storms is to deal with them as though they were intrusive fantasies there to torment us.

Aren't storms the work of the devil? No, of course not! Where would we be without them? Can there be the new growth of spring without the violent storms of winter? How we appreciate the water we draw from the wells supplied by the winter storms. When the day grows hot and the land grows dry, it is the water stored up from the winter storms that sustains us.

So it is in our spiritual life. In the heat of the dry seasons of life, it is the memories of the buffeting storms and what we learned from them that sustains us. It was in the midst of the storm that the disciples learned a valuable lesson about Jesus; he could walk in the midst of the storm on the raging water without sinking.

Jesus was not in a panic; there in the midst of the howling wind and dashing waves, he was unaffected by what was so devastating to them. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (Matt. 14:27) His courage was Kingdom of Heaven stuff!!!

Kingdom of the world people, whose view of God is limited to earthly tranquillity can't even begin to appreciate what these disciples learned in the storm. The disciples lost all concern about winds and waves because the sight of Jesus walking serenely, unaffected in the midst of the storm, totally captured their attention. What a man! What a king! What a kingdom! No wonder Jesus said, "The gates of hell will not overcome it." (Matt. 16:18)

Right there in the midst of all that turbulence, a new hope was born. Peter experienced a new grasp of truth and faith when he saw the kingdom in action; he wanted to be a part of it!

There were twelve men in the boat that night, all of them saw Jesus; but Peter was part of a special class of people who catch a lot of criticism because they're often outspoken, and sometimes impulsive. They're even an embarrassment at times to the more sedate members of a group; but because of their enthusiasm and emotion driven natures they're able to do things like

step out of a boat onto the water and walk! How far Peter walked before he noticed the wind and waves we can only speculate; Matthew says he walked to Jesus. Apparently, it was after he achieved his destination that he looked about and realized what he had done.

The crux in our faith walk often comes at a similar point. Many people seem to be able to step out and believe God when their emotions are running high; but what do they do when they face the reality of the storm?

Jesus conquered the storm; he walked all the way from shore after a long tiring day of ministry, a walk into the hills, and a time of prayer. In this story in Matthew we see him conquering grief, fatigue, sickness, and nature. He clearly demonstrated that when the Kingdom of Heaven is operating all things are possible.

After Jesus saved Peter they climbed triumphantly back into the boat, the winds died down, and every one of the disciples knew at that moment that Jesus was the Son of God. Can we say that the disciples learned more about who Jesus was from the storm episode than from all the other events that had preceded it? Wasn't it after Job had suffered that he could say, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes?" (Job 12:5-6)

Change is not easy.

Before we can know God, our own impotency must be exposed! As long as we are impressed by the powers we possess, we will never see God's power. It's when human strength has run out, human wisdom has failed, and all alternate sources of help have proved futile, that we are in the most opportune position to see God. It's on the darkest night that we can see the most distant stars!

If all is dark in your world, look for Jesus; he'll be standing nearby in the midst of the storm. He has overcome and stands there triumphantly. He invites you to do the same.

Hardened hearts make seeing spiritually difficult. Mark wrote that when Jesus had completed his notable miracle of feeding the five thousand, the disciples didn't understand because their hearts were hardened. Why do we experience so much difficulty in catching a glimpse of the heavenly kingdom? Is it not because we are still so earthy? No wonder Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing." (Matt. 11:12) The heart of man has been dark for a long time. Men whose hearts are filled with sin have built cultures: men whose eyes were blind to the truth have administrated religions.

Truly did Paul write,

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is not one who understands, no one seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless, there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. (Rom. 3:10-18)

Such is the condition of lost mankind. It's difficult for us to get into the Kingdom of Heaven because the gravitation of the earth pulls violently at the earth in our hearts. We only see and understand, that which surrounds us. What does it take to get us to look up? For some, it takes crushing blows of adversity and for others loving patient ministry.

The truth about the heavenly kingdom runs upstream against centuries of stubborn denial. Fallen humanity bent on mad rebellion, are determined to find their own way! The influence of all the selfism in the world has taken its toll.

Educators have secular points of view, taking into account only what they view as important to the social, cultural and political well being of society. We have been brainwashed into accepting only natural solutions to natural problems.

Educators do not understand that what they teach does not qualify as truth, because truth is personified in the Lord Jesus. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." (John 14:6)

Truth thus has boundaries; Jesus Christ is the truth and therefore, anything that is taught outside the parameters of that truth is a lie! What does that mean? It means simply that when math is taught it should be taught that the reason two plus two equals four is that Jesus created it so. It is written of Jesus,

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:16-17)

The reason anything exists at all is that God made it so and anything that is taught outside of that truth is a lie. That is why our secular education falls so short and is turning out students with no regard for God or the Bible; they have rejected the very essence of truth. Denial of the truth that God is indeed the one who holds all things together, that everything was created by him and for him, and that everything therefore is his to command, is the underlying lie that has poisoned a whole society!

Environment was different in the time of the disciples, but not human beings. Cultures, styles, and customs change, nations rise and fall, but the human heart still suffers. The more intense the earthly influence becomes the more difficult it is to break free. If the disciples had problems with their hard hearts, should we wonder that we have problems?

How do we deal with hardness of heart? If we are to experience change of heart, we must first recognize the causes and then see how change can be effected. We are looking at cultural pressures and how those pressures pull at us to live according to their dictates; but is hardness the result of cultural pressure alone?

Let's look to the scripture for help. The nation of Israel, which God had rescued from slavery in Egypt and placed in their land of promise, failed to follow the Lord with all their hearts. Their history was one filled with duplicity; they were afraid not to honor the Lord, but at the same time, served idols.

We cannot serve two masters because we have natures that must serve something or someone and even when we seek to master; we are mastered. The nation of Israel was only rarely mastered by their pure love for God; most of their history was a history of unfaithful love. When they did practice their religion, it was often for wrong reasons. They had spent seventy years in Babylon as judgment for their sins. Yet later, even in the midst of their sorrow, while they were faithfully practicing their religion, God said to the prophet Zechariah,

Ask all the people of the land and the priests, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and the seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when

you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?" —This is what the Lord Almighty says:

“Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.” But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry. “When I called, they did not listen; so when they called I would not listen,” says the Lord Almighty. (Zech. 7:5-13)

In this passage we see the causes of hardness of heart to be:

1. Wrong motives for religious practice,
2. Unwillingness to accept the Lord's instructions,
3. And willful rebellion.

Some people have hard hearts because they are victims of sin, others have hardened their own hearts so they can sin, and still others have hearts that God has hardened in judgment.

Whatever the cause, the cure is the same, repentance for all sins and self-seeking. (Rom. 2:4-8) To truly repent we must see the truth. What the disciples had failed to see in all the miracles, they finally saw in the storm. They finally saw what was real.

Substance seems real to us while spiritual matters seem vague. In the storm they saw spiritual matters as being the reality and substance was only a condition of this world. When we are changed, we come to realize that substance is the creation of Spirit!

Sixty-six

About Healing

Matt. 14:35-36

As Matthew concluded the events that surrounded the crossing of the lake, he spoke of Jesus ministering healing to the sick people of the region. The people believed that if they could just touch him they would be healed. Matthew told us, they begged Jesus to let the sick people touch him, and, surely enough all that touched him were healed!

Many hours of sermons and volumes of books have been written on the subjects of faith and healing. What I could add would probably not add significantly to what has already been said; suffice it to say — a healthy heart, mind, spirit and body are all a part of the destiny of believers. What we experience of these in this life probably depends on many factors. Healing is, without a doubt, part of salvation; but like salvation, healing will only be fully experienced as we progress with the Lord.

When we place our faith in Jesus as Savior, our eternal life begins — a beginning like the conception of natural life. What is, is not yet fully developed into what will be, and what will be is determined to a great degree by choices not our own.

In natural life, much is predetermined; we were not consulted, nor can we change birth dates, parents, nationalities, and other physical matters.

So it is in the spiritual life where will is the mind of God. It is not for us to control that mind, only receive, honor, and seek to understand it. To know God is to love him; to love him is to trust him; and, to trust him is to pray, “Your will be done.”

We may not all achieve complete healing, or total victory over all the enemies of our spiritual lives here; but if we have faith, life will be ours eternally. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid in full for all the transgressions of humankind; a sacrifice that is our full guarantee that we will inherit restored spirits, souls and bodies. What he purchased, though complete, is not at once fully manifest. When we receive salvation, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption so what we receive in this life is only a foretaste of what is yet to come.

Healing now, when received, is incomplete; we still live in dying bodies. Nevertheless, we receive manifestations of love, grace and mercy as God intervenes in our lives. In addition, after all is said and done, our promised inheritance still awaits us. The future holds more than any of us, no matter how much faith we have, will ever experience in this life. When Jesus bore the whip stripes for our healings, it was so that we will inherit incorruptible bodies, free of all sickness and disease eternally. Manifestations of healing now are samples of the reality to come.

There is a great spiritual kingdom in a dimension of spiritual reality not readily perceived by our natural perceptions. We tend to relate only to what can be proven to exist. This kingdom is extensive, elaborate and very real with laws of physics that are just as real as those laws affecting our present lives.

On occasion God permits glimpses of the spiritual kingdom through manifestations of the Spirit in our lives. I call these, “touch-points,” where the great Kingdom of Heaven touches the natural realm of the physical in manifestations that affect some area of our lives.

Just as we are aware of the existence of the supernatural Kingdom of Heaven, so we are also aware of the existence of an evil kingdom. Some people, unaware of this difference, have believed that all manifestations that are supernatural are of God; such is not the case.

God is the original source of all that exists, but the kingdom of evil is in rebellion against his will. The manifestations from those spirits in rebellion are evil, even when it is not immediately evident.

The most fundamental difference between the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven and those of the kingdom of evil is their submission to the will of God. Every person, angel or being of the heavenly kingdom, are intensely committed to the will of God. Every manifestation that arises from any other attitude is not from God. The evil of that error will be manifest in due time.

Love, though a good evidence, is not the conclusive evidence; it is obedience that stands alone as “the evidence”. Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.” (John 14:23)

Sixty-seven

Tradition, Obedience, Money

Matt. 15:1-6

Again Jesus encountered the Pharisees, this time on the issue of obedience. He was asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (Matt. 15:2)

Once more, Jesus was confronted with the issue of tradition versus true worshipful obedience to God. Jesus, I am sure, was not against traditions as a whole, knowing that we are creatures of habit. Habits are not bad if they serve good purposes; we need structures and formats in which to operate. Every culture probably has developed traditions that, at least in the beginning, served legitimate purposes.

The problem with religious tradition is that we tend to treat it as a sacred thing. Sometimes a religious tradition or point of doctrine is given a higher importance and meaning than the original divine intention becoming a tool in the hands of those who perpetuate it. Such was the case in the passage, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (Matt. 15:2)

The Pharisees were concerned with keeping their traditions and religion alive, intact, and in harmony because of political expediency. The leaders of Israel, the priests and elders, ruled the people through their religion — their system being financed by the tithes of devoted people. Any effort to upset the balance of this system was viewed as an act of treason.

Rome had wisely allowed these people a sort of self-rule through religious tolerance. The elders, therefore, had taken an attitude of, “Better get along with Rome than to be dead.” To avoid the possibility of their culture being romanized and also losing their national and spiritual cultural identity, the elders had invented a system of commands based on God’s law to keep the people involved with them and their history. This plan had a show of wisdom, but God did not approve because they had circumvented his plan; they themselves became the “gods” to be obeyed.

As Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he went right to the heart of the matter, money.

To possess money is to possess power because much of what we have and do is connected to it. Often, we give more attention to it than any thing else in our lives.

Money can purchase just about anything so from early childhood we are taught to respect, love, serve and covet it. How many parents have used money or objects it can buy to bribe their children into obedience?

We work long hours, expend great energy, obtain an education, and plan even risking our lives, to obtain a source of money. Once, having established a satisfactory source, we apply great diligence to increasing the flow of money from that source. All of this we do, not considering that we have slipped into idolatry and no longer serve the Lord with an undivided heart. “You

cannot serve both God and money.” (Matt. 6:24) It is so easy to slip into slavery to a wrong spirit, if we don’t understand what is right.

With money, a necessary medium of exchange in our complex society, we are able to purchase the necessities of life. Money should serve us; we should not serve it, yet we do. It becomes a hard taskmaster because it seems that we cannot live without it.

The more money we have, the more we seem to feel we need, its shadow of influence is cast over almost every area of our lives. We rent or purchased houses, food, cars, services, vacations, etc. Even when we go to church, the influence of money follows us! Nothing seems to compare to the power and authority of money in our lives, almost to the point that whoever controls our money, controls our lives.

Can we be free of its power? Paul warned Timothy, the young minister who sought his counsel,

If anyone teaches false doctrine and does not agree to the sound instruction of the Lord Jesus Christ and to Godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarreling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that Godliness is a means to financial gain.

But Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. (I Timothy 6:3-11)

When we finally learn that God is our source and let God be God, great peace results. Even though we will probably always use money (God uses it, too), what it means to us, what power it has over us, and what we do with it, are the issues.

The Pharisees, in trying to put Jesus on the spot about tradition, suddenly found themselves on the spot about God’s commandments being in conflict with the people’s ability to tithe. Jesus pointed out a teaching that put their commands and God’s commands in conflict. Jesus said to them,

“God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father or mother’ with it. (Matt. 15:4-6)

Isn’t it interesting how dogmatic we can become when money gets involved? What should a person do if his parents need help and there’s not enough money to both give to the church and take care of the family too? The response from the elders was to give to the church first and then, if possible, give to the parents. Parents could not have what had been committed to God. How did Jesus respond? He called the Pharisees hypocrites.

I wonder what Jesus would say about some of the modern techniques of fund-raising? Suffice it to say that giving to God first, at the expense of one's moral responsibilities, seems to have the appearance of wisdom. After all, doesn't the church always have a need for money? Besides, if God prospers people for giving, doesn't it follow that giving to God first automatically means that the giver will have enough money for his parents too?

Somehow Jesus saw through the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, that they were not motivated by the welfare of the people, but by concern for their own welfare. Isn't it interesting how motivated we become to raise offerings if we are in some way the beneficiaries? Perhaps we should examine the church budget to see how much is spent in serving the spiritual needs of the people and how much to satisfy the need for appearances.

The issue was what was in their hearts concerning money. When the need for money begins to dominate our lives, when our important decisions are made with money as the guiding influence, we have fallen from the faith!

Without a doubt, tithing is an important part of our life as a Christian. The question is, is it a duty or blessing. Are we Christians so we will tithe or do we tithe because we're Christians? For me, tithing is a part of my worship. I don't tithe to satisfy a law, but as an action of my faith. When I tithe as an act of faith and worship, I find that God also takes pleasure in meeting my needs of life. As I see God meeting a need of life, this inspires great thankfulness and increased worship. Thus tithing becomes a happy experience but if conflict of necessity arises, tithing never justifies neglect of our duty to those who depend upon us.

The question arises sooner or later, when do we pay tithe despite our pressing needs and when do we take care of the needs around us even at the expense of tithe? The answer seems to be closely akin to the question of keeping the Sabbath. Jesus asked the knit-picky Pharisees if their animal fell into a pit wouldn't they pull it out? There are times when the rules we live by must be suspended for a time due to some more pressing concern. This should never be viewed as an occasion of guilt. When the pressing circumstance is over, we then resume life as before.

The Pharisees themselves had fallen from true faith in God when their concern for money became more important than warranted by the original plan for the support of the priesthood.

In the beginning, the tithe had been used for the benefit of all when they were in the house of the Lord. In fact, the people were to bring their tithes to the Lord based on the increase of their goods annually. If they had lived too far away, they were permitted to sell the tithe, convert it to money, and then use the money to purchase cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, (a practice not continued in modern times), or anything they wished. After doing so, they could enjoy the feast of the Lord together, with no one left out. Having feasted together, they were then to lay up all the remaining goods and money of the tithe for the aliens (visitors), fatherless, widows, and Levites, whose only inheritance was this portion.

Because the religious system received support from tithes, enforcing the tithe rules became the obsession of those who received them.

When we deal with money or goods, strange things begin to happen. First we note that those who received the tithes and offerings tended to forget whose money it was, and why it was received. Because God had promised to grant continued blessings on their national economy as the result of faithful observance of tithing, some concluded that the reason to give was to gain personal blessings, as though giving is the magic formula for getting rich.

In Malachi 3:8-12, the purpose of the tithe is clearly stated, “that there may be food in my house.” God’s house, the institution that exists to fulfill the mission of the Lord, is to be maintained by this method. The same chapter says that the result will be Divine blessing upon that from which the tithe came. I do not wish to either take away from or add to the intended meaning of this passage. Actually, the same ideas about blessings are also stated in Deut. Ch. 28, but with an added emphasis, however; we also note that Deut. Ch. 28, ties these blessings to the whole law, while Malachi spotlights only the giving of tithes. Yet in Malachi, we also see God dealing with a number of violations of the covenant of the law, any one of which would bring down a curse upon their land. Only if we assume that the nation had listened to and obeyed all that had been said previously, can neglecting the tithe be the only cause of a curse.

Unfortunately, when we extract single verses from whole messages, we usually end in misconceptions. Though the spotlight falls on one special violation in this passage and though correction of this violation carries a promised blessing, do we really think we can violate all other matters of the law and yet be blessed for obedience to only one law? Blessings come from obedience to the entire law. If we are going to look to the law for blessing, then we must also obey the entire law.

Today, we are not under law, but under Grace. Does this fact exclude us from the blessings of the law? Yes, it does, as a matter of principle. To obey the law to gain blessings from it is to place us under its curse as discussed in many passages of the epistles. When Jesus uttered the words, “it is finished,” it was finished. What was finished? Everything the law dealt with was concluded because the purposes of the law had been served.

The purposes let me remind you, are four-fold:

1.To expose our need and to show us we were sold under sin’s power, hopeless victims of sin’s dominion;

2.To foreshadow and expound the coming answer to the problem;

3.To show us God’s love and desire to redeem us;

4.And to show the means by which the solution would come.

Especially in the prophets God shows the hope and the promise of a new day for man — a new covenant that shows the total answer,

1.A new mind-set,

2.A new heart condition,

3.A new relationship,

4.And a total release from guilt.

To new covenant Christians, the giving of tithes is not a matter of law. We are children of Abraham; and as Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, so Christians pay tithes to Jesus, our great high priest, giving to his work and ministries.

This new covenant God made with us, does not bring the blessings of the law, but blessings foreshadowed by the blessings of the law, the blessings of the inheritance of Christ. These blessings exist in us as hope and are experienced now as samples of the inheritance to be ours in full measure at the resurrection.

New Covenant Christians are in a relationship based on love; what happens to them is a matter of divine discretion based on the love and the wisdom of God. God views us as a loving

parent views his child and supplies his needs. Christians still pay tithe, but not out of fear but rather love. There are an abundant number of testimonies to the fact that financial blessings follow when people follow the teachings about tithing. Under grace, God is not obligated to give back to people who tithe any more than he is obligated to exercise a curse against them. God obviously does bless many people in a monetary way for tithing, but, in some cases, monetary blessing could have a negative effect thus God may use discretion in how he applies this principle.

We should all pay tithes out of our worship and love for the Lord. The love that God has for us when we help supply his house will result in blessings of all sorts.

Sixty-eight

If Not Law, What?

Matt. 15:7-11

If law is past, to what then, do we liken the present? To understand the present, we need to look at its foreshadowing.

One foreshadowing event with great significance was in the story of Noah. In Noah's time, the old order of things, which had become increasingly corrupt, was destroyed and a new order was brought into existence. The means God gave to convey man from the old order to the new was the ark. To escape from the old order's judgment and corruption, they had to go through the door provided and take up residency inside the ark. Now the ark was not to be their permanent home, but they would never again see their old home. To escape, they had to be willing to forsake all that was of the old order and commit their very lives to the ark. When they stepped out of that ark, after the judgment had passed, it would be to a new world. Life in the ark had its problems, but they were only temporary.

We are in such a transition today also. Historically, the old is standing under condemnation with the world and all that is in it reserved for judgment. An ark has been prepared to take us from where we were to where we will be. The door stands open, and the invitation is being given; let all who will escape the judgment enter. The ark is Jesus; if we will enter into him, we will be conveyed into his Kingdom.

In Philippians 3:1-14, the Apostle Paul takes up the theme of our present state. First, he warns against those who try to find righteousness through obedience to the law. He knew because if such efforts could have found righteousness, he would have found it. Paul counted everything he had ever accomplished by such efforts as a waste of time in achieving salvation and discarded them. To gain Christ, he wanted to identify with him by willingly sharing with his sufferings and becoming like him in his death; then he could attain the resurrection.

Paul clearly saw his earthly life as in transition, a progression of experiences, a time of learning, believing, enduring, sharing and growing. This world is a valley of decision, a place where we decide our destiny. Jesus is the only means of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. It is by faith we enter, are sustained and become what we will be. Faith is the condition of trust and Jesus the object; he alone can conduct us to the Father.

What exists now, then, is a condition of trust that brings us into a relationship with Jesus. Since his Spirit lives in us, we thus become a part of him and therefore a part of his body, the church. The life we have and the righteousness we possess, come from him. We press on in him in order that he might express himself in us, to the greatest possible measure. We want to win the prize, not through righteous deeds, but rather by death of self and faith in Jesus. If we are willing to count all things lost, and by faith reach for the prize, we can become partakers of Jesus now and in the future, partakers of the resurrection.

To be “in Jesus” is not only to be in a place of salvation and safety from judgment, but also, to be involved in his work. To be in Christ is to be a part of him, members of his body who receive care and nurturing from him that varies according to our suitability.

In the natural, body parts differ in appearance and function so that, taken separately, we would never guess them to belong to same body. Yet, when we see the entire body properly functioning, we understand the relationship between the eye, for example, and the big toe. The unity of the body, though the members are extremely diverse, is essential to the health and safety of the whole body. So it is in the Kingdom of Heaven with his body the church. Jesus is the head of the body, the king of the Kingdom of Heaven.

How Ought Men to be Ruled?

In a discussion of the body comparing it the church, the words of Jesus become very significant.

“These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by man.” (Matt. 15:8-9)

If our relationship to Christ and the other members of the kingdom (Church) is the sort of relationship that exists in a physical body (1 Cor. 12:12-27), it then becomes clear that our relationship with God must be more than lip service. We must be connected by the heart to all the members of this body while our instructions must come from the Head. Any other source of instruction will result in spastic movements. Lack of connection to the mind of Christ will leave the disconnected member of the body in a state of paralysis. A healthy body, capable of efficient bodily movements, has a well-developed relationship between all its members.

As members of the body of Christ, we need a healthy understanding of the relationships we have, both with Jesus and with each other. What good is the mouth without the hand that feeds it? What good is the mouth that speaks without the ear that hears?

Following this line of thought, we also need to give attention to the causes of disease in the body.

“Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean.’” (Matt. 15:10-11)

The natural body has an ability to cast off what is not good for it and an immune system to destroy what could destroy it. In the spiritual body, there is also a defense system against sin and doctrinal errors.

The Pharisee’s defense system was to control the people’s behavior. To counter that system, Jesus took the opportunity to expose their religious misconceptions about what is spiritually damaging. Dirt on the body does not contaminate the spirit, nor does what goes into the mouth. At this point, however, we need to clarify that Jesus was not sanctioning abuses of substances that damage the body or the mind. We are speaking spiritually here. Drinking alcohol, taking drugs, overeating, smoking, or any other practice harmful to man’s body does not in itself contaminate the spirit, but the reason people do these things is usually symptomatic of a spiritual problem.

Listed among fleshly sins to be abandoned by Christians is drunkenness. The cause of drunkenness is alcohol, but the usual cause of drinking, in our culture, is sin; thus, drinking is

symptomatic of sin in the heart in most cases. Drunkenness is always a symptom of lack of self-control; and self-control is a fruit of the spirit-filled life; thus the lack of self-control is evidence of the lack of the Spirit's power in one's life. The person who uses alcohol may do so for a variety of reasons, most of which are much better served by the infilling of the Holy Spirit. If it's comfort you need, he is the comforter, if it's stress relief you need, he is the source of real peace; if it's joy you need, the fruit of the spirit is joy. Those who run to the bottle are much wiser to run to Jesus where there is real help for the pains of life. "Do not get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit." (Eph. 5:18)

This same remedy applies to any cultural practices that lead to sin or destruction of life. It may seem like wisdom to protect Christians from everything that has the potential of damaging us, but to do so is to stifle the growth of the person. Jesus went to the heart of the matter: It's not what we take in that contaminates us, but what we do with it. Do we accept evil just because our environment presents temptation?

Evil temptations attract our fleshly natures, but cultural restraints aid us in dealing with them. Many temptations, however, are imposed upon us by cultural sources; we need to use wisdom in deciding to what we allow ourselves to be subjected. For example, it is unwise for a person who is an alcoholic to subject himself to an environment where alcohol is being consumed, or is available. Self-control is the ultimate strength that resists all temptation, but wisdom says that self-control is best expressed by removing oneself from the environment of temptation.

Thus, Christians even have instruction not to keep company with immoral people on a friendship level. Relationships with those who are not Christians should be casual, because it is a human tendency to take on the ways of those with whom we have extended contact.

The Pharisees wanted to control people by applying and enforcing rules because allowing individuals to grow in moral and spiritual strength left them feeling out of control. Exposure to sin may seem dangerous, but in the end, what is in the heart of each man will be manifest. Recognize sin and then pull it out, root and all; don't just trim it back!

Those who resist spiritual development should be treated as being blind. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matt. 15:14) Only blind men follow blind men! When our eyes are opened to truth, we forsake those who would lead us astray.

Sixty-nine

Religion of the Heart

Matt 15:12-20

Those Pharisees were always concerned with the outward appearances of everything! Ceremonial washings, Sabbath keeping, and tithing were all bones of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus was always right there, pointing to the need for real change of heart, patiently teaching the disciples that there are issues of concern that are more important than conformity to the social constraints of the religious culture the Pharisees so loved.

After explaining these things, Jesus addressed the issue,

“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man unclean; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’” (Matt. 15:19)

After studying Matthew some have concluded that Jesus advocated a permissive attitude toward certain practices of the flesh, which is far from the truth. The Jews of Jesus’ day were living under the law so they just followed instructions whether they understood the laws or not, nor did agreement matter. Obedience to the law was based on robotic like knowledge, application, and willingness.

At this time Jesus was introducing the concepts of the Kingdom of Heaven where actions go beyond mechanical obedience. When we are children; we obey because we must, but when we are mature; we obey because it’s the right thing to do. In order to develop morally, a person must leave the enforced restraints of his father’s house and learn to make right choices that spring from his heart. The Kingdom of Heaven exists in the heart and is based on the wisdom of the thornbush; those who become a part of it must enter it by choice.

The Pharisees were offended, probably because Jesus’ teachings were at cross-purposes with what they had been teaching. It’s hard to be shown one’s errors, but wise men seek repentance and accept change.

Seventy

Jesus Helps a Canaanite Woman

Matt. 15:21-28

It takes faith to become a part of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this Kingdom the mercies of our loving heavenly Father are available to needy humanity because God still loves this fallen race. It is his desire to reveal himself to us.

What stands between needy man and a loving God? Before we invite Jesus into our hearts, the barrier is sin, which is effectively dealt with when we become Christians by accepting Jesus as our Savior through his death on the cross he was the sin sacrifice of the world, removing the great barrier that prevents access to the kingdom.

The symbol of that barrier was a great curtain that hung in the temple between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place where God's presence dwelt. When Jesus died, that veil was torn from top to bottom, indicating that the way was now open into God's presence. There is much to say about this that we will discuss later, but for now, suffice it to say that the barrier had been removed.

There is, however, still another barrier that stands between man and God, not a barrier that God placed in our path, but one, rather, that Satan placed before us. This barrier is called unbelief and is the result of all the lies that we have come to believe. We have been subjected to an enormous volume of material that has entered our minds through education of all sorts. Most of this education eliminated all reference to a loving, intimately personal God, who intervenes in the affairs of mankind. It also eliminated God from all processes of logic and reasoning, the result being that in order for us to have an effective faith in God, we must travel against our programmed natural orientation.

The person possessing real faith is an astonishing phenomenon. Jesus met such a person when he went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. There he met a needy Canaanite woman who found a way to touch his heart. Faith is an abstract that seems to defy adequate definition because sometimes it has a substantive quality and at others a conceptual quality, but in every case it benefits us as recipients of God's love. It is a necessary means through which our needs reach to a God who can help us.

This Canaanite woman found it all very simple; Jesus could meet her need. She had concluded this to be beyond question because his willingness to use his power was evident everywhere he went. She needed contact with the source of power, Jesus. However, tradition, cultural attitudes, and religious beliefs stood as barriers to that contact because she was a Canaanite.

For us today, this ethnic restraint does not seem like a problem, but it was a big problem in Jesus' day because Canaanites were in Jewish minds, cursed people. The Israelites, upon entrance into Canaan, had been commissioned to destroy this race because of their idolatry. Having failed to accomplish this, some remained in the land, and were considered cursed people.

When this woman came to Jesus, she found herself face to face with the reality of the curse. Her need was great, however, so she chose the only route to success available to her; she humbled herself in the hope of mercy. She had no argument or action to offer and quoted no scripture; she simply put her trust in the shade of the thorn bush; which Jesus called great faith.

Isn't receiving such compassion the experience of most people who come to Jesus, even to this very day? It is when we realize the futility of trying to make a case before God for why he should act in our behalf, that we find ourselves humbly approaching the throne of mercy. Such was the case for this Canaanite woman. It didn't matter to her that Jesus had apparently thrown a racial slur at her; humility has no pride, so she was still ready to receive her miracle.

No wonder Jesus marveled at her! How many people would have left Jesus right there on the spot? Imagine being called a dog! Did Jesus mean to belittle her? I don't think so. That would have been out of character for him. I think he knew in advance that his remark would not be taken for anything more than a passing challenge to give the woman the opportunity to demonstrate her heart. She respected Jesus enough to reaffirm her request to him and demonstrate that she would not be turned aside by such obstacles. If he were going to deny her request, it would not be because of her pride! She believed he could meet her need; and, if it were only a crumb for a dog, she would take it.

However, it wasn't a crumb: instead she was commended for her great faith! Then Jesus gave her the proper recognition she deserved, "woman."

Jesus went back to the Sea of Galilee, where much of his ministry took place. There, once more, he demonstrated the love, compassion, and power of the Kingdom. The people gathered to him, and he healed the lame, blind, crippled, and dumb. The meeting went on for three days, after which Jesus once more miraculously fed four thousand men, plus women and children. The people were amazed and praised God.

Seventy-one

The Feeding of the Four Thousand

Matt. 15:29-39

The ministry of Jesus was a happy, thrilling and exciting experience for the people who witnessed the love and compassion of God being bestowed upon them. For three days the excitement held the crowd in rapturous glory as they witnessed the blind being given their sight, the lame being restored to health, and the ability to communicate being given to the mute. So captivating was the experience that no one seemed to want to leave the area. There are times when even the need for food must give way to more compelling interests; this was just such a time.

Jesus was mindful of their needs, however. It was time to dismiss the gathering and move on, but he did not want the people, who had had such a good time, to leave and become faint along the road. Perhaps some of the people had brought lunch with them and consumed it during this three days and nights meeting; but by this time the food had run out, and only a few had any left at all. They were able to scrounge seven loaves and a few small fish together, but what was that among so many? There were four thousand men plus women and children at this camp meeting under the sky!

I hope everyone understands that no-one went around counting people, the number was no doubt a rough guess, plus or minus a few. It's a common practice in some countries of the world to guess at crowd sizes, which Jesus allowed as well. There is little virtue in crowd sizes, but we all find it exciting to see a large crowd turn out for an event of importance. The importance of this unusual event was that, their religious worship was being received and rewarded by the granting of life changing miracles.

The miracles were apparently as exciting to the crowds in general as they were to the people who were being healed. I don't know if everyone who came there was healed. We assume that all those who came into the immediate ministry of Jesus were healed, but we don't know how many were in the periphery of the camp that may have gone home still sick. Neither do we know whether all the problems of those who Jesus healed, were healed. Perhaps a lame man came who could walk again, but who still had difficulty seeing the fine print on a page; was his eyesight healed as well? Obviously, we don't know. The important facts seemed to be that miracles were happening and that the focus of attention was on the miracles that were granted and not on those that weren't.

In every large healing meeting today there seems to always be those who leave, not having received healing. Many people wonder why all are not healed and even criticize the evangelist, and thus downgrade the event. How sad that we cannot rejoice with those who are so blessed without making those who are not feel guilty. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is grieved when we complain. Wouldn't it be much better to rejoice with those who are blessed and encourage those who weren't to take heart, knowing that we serve a God of compassion?

Whether all the people were healed during those days we do not know; but we do know that at the end of the time together with Jesus, they all had one last blessing. Jesus did something astonishing; he fed them all on someone's left over lunch! The miracle would stick in their minds and ours forever. No one worried or complained because the food had been in the hot sun so long or that the bread was at least three days old! And then there were those fish; probable the reason they were still there was that they didn't look like something you would rush home to eat. Never mind the small concerns. The real issue was that, even had it been edible and fresh, there weren't enough for so many.

Jesus, however, without any concern for any of those problems, took the loaves and gave thanks for them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples who, in turn, gave them to the multitudes of people! Everyone ate and was satisfied, and I'm sure after Jesus gave thanks for it and blessed it, it was completely edible! The great meeting came to a very happy and satisfying end. The people had seen the glory of God in action and it was good.

Seventy-two

Self-imposed Blindness

Matt. 16:1-4

Not everyone praised God as a result of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn't find acceptance all that simple. Jesus had dismissed the crowd and traveled by boat to the region of Magadan. Afterward the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test him desiring a special sign from heaven. These men were preoccupied with their duties and own sense of self-importance, apparently being more concerned with their own success than with what God was doing. Instead of enjoying the glory of the outpouring of God's love, they were caught up in trying to fit Jesus into their ideas of prophetic fulfillment.

Scholars find themselves in a very dangerous position when they approach prophecy because God is very careful about how he reveals his secrets. Humans, however, always want to find a way to capitalize on God; using understanding of the future as a means of positioning themselves for personal advantage since forecasters are very valuable people in business, politics and religion.

God has given us a great deal of prophecy to guide us, yet understanding that prophecy is not always easy. I am convinced that God wants everyone to come to him, that he yearns for men to make him their one and only God. I am also convinced that God could very easily overwhelm us with indisputable evidence, so that no one could possibly misunderstand his intentions; yet he uses restraint. Why does God restrain himself? Why doesn't he yield to the requests of those who ask for a miraculous sign?

Jesus perceived wicked hearts in the Pharisees and Sadducees; in fact, God is very aware of the condition of all human hearts. Just because we have religious bents in our natures does not mean that we are true worshippers. As long as there exists "a condition" in our hearts upon which our worship depends, we are not true worshippers. For example, some people proposition God. They may say in an hour of crisis, "Lord, save my daughter," or "Rescue me," or "Save me from this disaster, and I will serve you." I have seen people receive the help requested from the Lord, only to very soon forget him when the crisis was past.

If God produced overwhelming proofs of his existence and his plan, multitudes would, no doubt, embrace Christianity. However, history has shown that being convinced of a fact does not change a heart. Knowing God is real, believing in him, and knowing he is right do not equal heart worship because love is something we give as acts of our will. It may not seem so when we are infatuated; but when that enthusiasm dies down and real tests come, then whether we continue to love or not are acts of our will.

This truth is the same in human relationships as well as where God is concerned; if we love him more than life, our love will last. If God bores us now, we would not like him in eternity. If heaven were filled with discontents, then heaven wouldn't be heaven anymore. Thus, God has been very careful to present his truth in such a way that only those hungering and thirsting for true righteousness will be filled.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees came to Jesus asking for a sign. Yet, a sign had already been given, which, unfortunately, didn't answer the cry of their hearts, so they were not satisfied. The sign of Jonah was the sign of death. Jesus had been telling them that just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the huge fish, so he would spend time in the heart of the earth. This death he spoke of was the sacrifice of his life for the sins of the world. The message was clear, all the evidence having been supplied, yet they needed more. Why?

Jesus said they were wicked and adulterous, a heavy charge. Were they sleeping around? Were they clubbing people to death to take their money? Probably not. Adultery, in this context, clearly meant they were worshipping another God. Were they bowing to a graven image? God forbid! They were Pharisees and Sadducees, yet there was evidence that their hearts were not right. They simply worshipped a concept of God that was incorrect. A false concept is equal to an idol.

For this reason Jesus' message was repugnant to them, so they sought an excuse to reject him. It's still the same today where the popular message is, "come to Jesus for 'life'." Many turn aside when it is revealed that, to gain life eternal we must renounce affection for temporal life. To be able to see clearly, to understand the times, and to hear God's message, we must first understand the problem and then accept the solution. When we have observed the signs, we will likely understand the message more clearly.

The doctrines of the Pharisees and the Sadducees had a contaminating effect because they were not taught from hearts that yearned for the coming Savior nor could they recognize Jesus' identity. When people yearn for salvation, their hearts are opened to the cleansing power of God's Spirit. When we hunger to know God, we welcome the message that brings eternal life. Then we recognize Jesus as God our Savior, and no price is too great to pay.

Part Six

A Deeper Revelation

Seventy-three

Yeast Is Not Always Yeast

Matt. 16:5-12

Jesus and his disciples got into a boat and left for the other side of the lake. On the way Jesus told them to be on their guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples had forgotten to take bread for the journey, so they thought he was subtly getting on them about it, but Jesus was serious and not about bread. Jesus was leading his disciples into a relationship of faith in God, a difficult task.

How hard it is to have faith! Faith is usually based on some sort of evidence that we have come to accept as fact. Perhaps it's a supernatural experience we have observed, or one personally experienced, despite the fact that we didn't have faith ourselves. It remains that, true faith comes through the preaching of the word, thus Paul wrote,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14-17)

The disciples struggled with their faith despite all the miracles they had witnessed. It can't be said that they lacked basic faith, that is, the kind of faith that believes that there is a God or "the faith" referring to the body of truth we call Christian doctrine. What they struggled with, as most Christians do, was the kind of faith that says, "I know he will do it if I ask him!" It's the specific kind of faith that says, "God is with me; therefore, all things are possible." Because Jesus was the constant companion of the disciples, they had nothing to fear, ever; yet they still wondered what they could expect from him in certain situations?

The disciples were feeling guilty because, they had neglected to prepare for a journey that would take them away from available supplies. They probably were preparing themselves for a stern rebuke from the Lord. What would he say when he discovered that there wouldn't be a meal at lunchtime?

Jesus took this occasion to bring up a subject that he wished to discuss. Perhaps it was with a twinkle in his eye that he began to speak about yeast because what he said had nothing to do with bread. He was speaking to them about the teachings of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. However, guilty consciences do remarkable things, so just the mention of one of the basic ingredients of bread took their minds away from the subject of conversation. They didn't even hear what Jesus was really saying!

Their fears brought Jesus to another point of discussion. Faith does not require obedience or perfection in cases like this. Just because they forgot to bring bread did not mean God would say something like, "tough luck, guys; if you had planned ahead, you wouldn't be in this fix." That's

the way we humans react. We say, “You made your bed, now lie in it.” The disciples needed a rebuke, but they didn’t get what they expected.

Instead, Jesus rebuked them for their “little” faith. Based on the miracles they had seen, not once but twice, they should have just gone to Jesus, admitted their mistake, and asked him if he would kindly provide them with a meal. Would he have miraculously given them a meal? Perhaps, or possibly they would have suddenly found themselves at a dock near a fine restaurant. Still another possibility is that they would have all felt suddenly satisfied, as if they had just eaten a large meal. Their shame kept them from any such experiences, and their wrong theology also contributed to their failure to have faith.

The leaven (teachings) of the Sadducees and the Pharisees included the idea that God would not help them if they were stupid because blessings were dependent on obedience to the law. Therefore, it was easy to believe that if one suffered some kind of misfortune, it was because he was guilty of a transgression. However, Jesus was opening a new era of understanding about God that he is not some scrooge waiting to do us in just because we mess up. In fact, faith has nothing to do with worthiness. What comes to us through the faith channel is not based on our goodness, but rather on the goodness of God. The disciples’ attitude was equivalent to accusing God of being “little”! It was saying, in effect, that surely God could not love them enough to give them a meal if they were horsing around.

This was an important lesson to learn, that God’s love for them was not conditional, but simply to be received. Guilt is a robber that steals our confidence to go into the presence of God.

The priests of old, when making their sacrifices and performing their duties in the temple, were instructed to never do anything without blood, the reason being that they never were worthy of God’s love and fellowship. No matter how good or bad they were; they could only approach God on the basis of his redemptive work. God accepted them when the blood was presented in obedient faith. That was and is what redemption is all about.

Today, we don’t go to a temple with blood in a bowl, but we do appropriate the benefits of the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross when he shed his blood in our behalf. We do this as an act of our faith, identifying ourselves as the beneficiary of what he did in paying the sin penalty for us. We by faith receive forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, having a conscience cleansed from the guilt of sin; we now have fellowship - with God.

Seventy four

The Foundation Stone

Matt. 16:13-20

The disciples of Jesus had received the revelation of his identity; in Matthew 14 we are told the story about how they had seen him in the storm, walking on the water. Their hardened hearts had been softened and opened to the light of truth. Now here in chapter 16 while still in the boat the discussion continues. The disciples were ready to answer a very vital question.

Jesus asked, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then he got to the issue by saying, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven.” (Matt. 16:13-17)

Knowledge of Christ’ identity is so fundamental to the Christian faith that any effort to take from it must be regarded as the most serious heresy. Peter’s recognition was so vital that Jesus said,

“You are Peter (petros, meaning stone) and on this rock (Petra, meaning rock) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:18-19)

The meaning of this passage is quite clear, though some have misunderstood it: Peter stated a fundamental truth that is the foundation stone of all Christian confession. To the English speaking reader the truth is not visible; therefore it would go unnoticed if it were not for those who study language. Jesus referred to Simon as being a “stone,” (Peter) but then said that upon this “rock,” he would build his church. Some interpreters are divided in opinion concerning, the rock of which Jesus spoke. It is clear that Peter was not the rock, but maybe a stone in Jesus’ plan. Was his confession the rock? Peter didn’t seem to be confused about the meaning at all. Here is what he had to say later,

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in scripture it says: “See I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious Cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Now to you who believe, this Stone is precious. (I Peter 2:4-7)

There are many passages of scripture in which plays on words illustrate truths. To Peter, it was all very simple; Jesus himself was the great Cornerstone of the Church, and everyone who came to him were stones. Peter laid no claim to special acclaim for himself, but rather included everyone who trusts in Jesus as stones in a spiritual house, the temple of God.

With Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus would build his church. Peter was important, his role vital, because his proclamation launched the church. It was also his proclamation on the day of Pentecost that caused three thousand people to put their faith in Jesus. They listened to Peter, but believed on the Lord Christ Jesus. They accepted his message but were baptized into Jesus because he is the head of the Church. He is the Rock, the Chief Cornerstone of the Church, and confession of who he is, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," is the rock upon which our faith is built.

Jesus was very confident about Peter's proclamation, a revelation that would survive every onslaught that could be thrown against it. Many efforts have been made to discredit Jesus, with some saying he was just a teacher, a prophet, still others simply a son of God; but Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" And Jesus said, "I will build my church."

To this, he added, "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven," which seems to imply power of entry to it. Thus, to those who believe this revelation from the Father, comes authority to enter this kingdom. I can tell you about Jesus, I can give you all the evidences, but the saving knowledge must come from our Heavenly Father. Jesus told Peter plainly that man did not reveal this truth; therefore, authority to enter the gate is connected to the revelation of Jesus by the Father.

If the symbol of keys indicates the right of entry, it follows that without the keys of the kingdom, entry is denied to those who refuse the revelation of who Jesus is. In giving Peter the keys of the kingdom and connecting it to binding and loosing, Jesus was likely indicating the power of the proclamation, Jesus the Christ the Son of the living God, upon those who receive the message. On the day of Pentecost, Peter gave the first evangelistic sermon of the church, thus using the keys (the message of salvation) of the kingdom to grant entry to those who received the revelation. Those who rejected the message were thus bound over to judgment.

Peter would not be the only one in the kingdom to exercise this power, but rather, everyone who proclaims the truth about Jesus is using these very same keys!

Seventy-five

No Pain, No Gain

Matt. 16:21-28

Now, just in case Peter or we might have misunderstood and yielded to the temptation to put Peter on a pedestal let's note what followed. There is still another part of the revelation concerning Jesus' identity that we understand only after we understand the first part. However, understanding the first part does not necessarily mean we are ready for the second part! Peter accepted the truth about Jesus being the Christ, the Son of the living God, but he was not at all ready to accept the atoning work Christ had to do. When Jesus began explaining how he must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, be killed, and on the third day be raised to life,

“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, ‘Never, Lord!’ he said ‘This shall never happen to you!’

Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’” (Matt. 16:22-23)

After having heard glowing words about the keys of the Kingdom, and the authority to bind or loose, Peter now receives another part of the revelation. When you are acting as men act, thinking like men think, and saying words meant to benefit natural man, your behavior is not from God, but from Satan. God's message is not for the purpose of improving one's life on earth but to prepare us for entry into an eternal kingdom that is now within, but will also be manifest outwardly at his coming.

Jesus left no doubt as to our instructions. He continued,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matt. 16:24- 27)

Just as it was necessary for Jesus to go to the cross to become the sin sacrifice for the world, so we must identify ourselves with that sacrifice by taking on the same spirit. The figure of speech about our taking up our crosses became a reality for Jesus. When Jesus spoke of laying down his life for his friends, he meant it literally. As a general rule, we are not called upon to lay down our lives in the literal sense of the word, but rather, to live for others instead of ourselves. However, the purpose to which we are called is not simply laying down our lives for others, it is laying down our lives to follow Jesus. In fact, Jesus did not speak of this sacrifice as an option or ideal, but as a mandatory and fundamental part of salvation! To fail to follow him is to risk loss of all, because; Jesus said, that if a man wants to save his life, he must lose it!

Do we understand the importance of repentance? Many seem to grasp at salvation, make a pretense of repentance, and do lip service to it; but do they ever really repent? Though Jesus doesn't use the words “repentance,” or “salvation” in Matthew 16:21-28, the concepts are

inferred. Repentance is described in real life-altering terms: “come after me,” indicate a decisive direction; “deny himself,” indicates a change of attitude; “take up his cross,” indicates acceptance of resultant pain; and “follow me,” indicates continual attention to where Jesus is going. The result of such actions is the ultimate saving of one’s eternal life. The concept of laying down the present life in order that we might gain eternal life is not a popular concept of the church, nor did some zealous evangelist introduce it. The concept is in the words of Jesus who lived them to the full measure.

Some of us have the attitude that we have done God a great favor by accepting Christ. Our actions and lifestyles seem to say to Jesus, “Okay, now here’s the program, Lord; if you follow me and do everything I ask, I’ll run your kingdom, and build a great church for you.” We would never say those words, but some seem to feel that it is their responsibility to do just that. We try to develop our talents, and search for new ideas, but do we really seek to discover what Jesus wants? To follow someone takes attention on our part; is our attention truly upon the Lord? Is it his favor we seek? Do we seek his mind and his will in every matter?

Following the Lord may result in suffering as the cross suggests, so if we suffer, it should be because we have walked in obedience. In fact, the pains great Christians have suffered all through history have been the natural result of obedience. However, some suffer, not for their obedience, but rather, for disobedience.

It is not to our credit to suffer while being disciplined. We are to suffer discipline joyfully because we know we need it, and it shows us God loves us; but the suffering that is called “fellowship with Christ’s suffering” is the suffering that results from obedience to the commission to proclaim his message. Fortunately, our suffering will be gloriously repaid.

Whatever we do in the spirit of the cross will not go unrewarded! When Jesus returns in his Father’s glory, he will reward each person according to what he has done.

Meanwhile, we have a job to do because the Kingdom of Heaven, while future in outward governmental manifestation, is present now in the hearts of all who receive Jesus and make him king. Jesus came in bodily human form, but he is coming now to each of us as a personally real Savior. Eventually he will come bodily again in power and great glory, to complete the restoration mission on earth. Our present task, having ourselves entered into Jesus (the Kingdom of Heaven) by making him our king, is to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom (salvation) to the whole world!

Truly, the disciples did live to see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom and we see him coming today, taking up authority in the hearts of all who put their trust in him and acknowledging his authority over them.

Seventy-six

The Transfiguration

Matt. 17:1-13

When we begin to walk with God we soon discover that there are some very exciting experiences to be enjoyed. Jesus had just talked about what he must accomplish at Jerusalem, how he would be handed over to the elders, have to stand trial, and be condemned by an apostate religious system. Literally, they were going to put their God on trial, and condemn him, because he didn't perform according to their expectations. In the eyes of the elders, Jesus was not a good candidate for king. They wanted worldly dazzle.

Let me suggest a possible scenario. Let's say Jesus had gone to Jerusalem after he was baptized and instead of turning water into wine, he turned a pot full of gravel into gold nuggets, then handed them over to the priests; after which, he began to organize a kingdom from the doctors of the law and promised great positions of power to the leaders. What do you think? Would they have rejected him? Wouldn't it have been just as easy to create gold from gravel as wine from water? Wouldn't it be just as easy to smite the Roman army with blindness as to heal a man born blind? God was not interested in changing the outward world in which men lived. Jesus came to change hearts. He didn't fit into the wisdom of man, nor did he wish to; he came for a different purpose, the redemption of man.

After talking about that purpose, he now took his disciples up a high mountain beyond the realm of natural man, where only the eyes of those ordained to see, could see. Here, Jesus allowed a glimpse of real glory that natural men do not desire to see. Most people would rather see a golden city than a glowing Savior, however, the golden city is reserved for those who seek the glowing Savior.

When the disciples saw Jesus standing transfigured before them, they were awestruck. For a brief time, Jesus let the glory of his real personage shine through the veil of his human body and it was awesome!

Added to this was an equally startling appearance of Moses and Elijah, completely disorienting the disciples. First, Jesus started glowing, then Moses and Elijah appear, next a bright cloud envelopes them and the voice of the Father is heard, saying,

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” (Matt. 17:5)

Upon hearing this, they fell face down on the ground terrified. But Jesus came to them and touched them and told them not to fear. “Get up,” Jesus said, and they went back down the mountain.

This was an experience to be remembered, the significance of which they would ponder. They had seen Moses and Elijah! No wonder Jesus said not to talk about this until after the resurrection. Who would have believed it?

This event raised another question, what about Elijah? The teachers of the law taught that he must come before Christ. Jesus answered, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Seventy-seven

Why not Cast Out the demon?

Matt. 17:14-21

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John arrived at the foot of the mountain, they found a crowd gathered around a boy who had epilepsy. The disciples were attempting to cast a demon spirit out of the boy, but were without success. Jesus instructed them to bring the boy to him, and after scolding them for their lack of belief; he cast the demon out of the boy.

The disciples asked a very practical question, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

“Because you have so little faith,” Jesus replied. (Matt. 17:19-20) Does that answer seem too simple? Is it really the truth? My own experience confirms that it is.

Demon spirits can’t stand against the power of the Holy Spirit. Whenever I have experienced a problem in casting out a demon spirit, the problem has been a conceptual one. Faith, a conceptual term, is the catalyst to a miracle!

Demon spirits use deception as their best defense. If a demon can cast a doubt over either the demonized person or the person casting out the demon, that he really exists, he can very likely successfully resist being driven out. Also, if the demon can create an illusion of strength, he can create self-doubts in the person doing the praying.

Faith is a conceptual term, a noun that refers to a body of truth or a belief in that body of truth. When we understand God, when we know what his word teaches, when we know what our proper roles are, after all questions have been firmly addressed, and after our own relationships with the Lord have been firmly established, we are strong in faith.

However, the dynamic of faith can be undermined when Satan creates a sense of self-doubt. When people come up against a strong demonic presence the demon spirit attempts to cast darts of self-doubt at those opposing it. If they are not properly armed with the knowledge of salvation and active faith in God and power exercised through the Kingdom of Heaven, the fiery darts hurled by the demon will likely wound them, and the effort will fail. Faith that recognizes the authority of the king will be able to effectively use the sword of the Spirit (the scriptures) with the mighty power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and drive out the enemy from the demon controlled person.

The demon spirit can be equally effective in resisting being cast out through his ability to hide. If we can be convinced that he either doesn’t exist, or that he has left, when he really has only gone into temporary remission, he may then be allowed to stay. If a person is not convinced that demons exist and that they often exert a profound influence upon human behavior and health, he will never be able to cast them out.

Faith is a conceptual term; the power you command in the Kingdom of Heaven is dependent upon your concept of authority, your submission to authority, and your dependence upon a power outside yourself, the mighty power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit. All things being in order, the Christian walking in communion with the Holy Spirit, standing in a state of readiness to react, is a threat to the realms of darkness and the control Satan exerts over human life. When we discover the roles we play and the power of God’s Spirit within, we will be able to take courage and be vessels through which God works.

What is it that prevents us from operating effectively in the power of the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it not the perversity of our fallen natures that wars against the mind and will of our Heavenly Father? Jesus said, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? Bring the boy here to me." (Matt. 17:7) Truly is the word fulfilled, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17) When Jesus spoke, faith responded in everyone's hearts, yet honesty to the text demands that we recognize that Jesus expected his disciples to also be able to cast out this demon.

When asked about the disciple's failure, Jesus replied,

"Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matt. 17:20)

Here, once more, we learn that faith, combined with God's power, makes mountains move. When Jesus referred to faith as a mustard seed, it seems he was saying, "It's not the size of your faith; it's the size of your God that counts!" When we speak by the authorization of the Holy Spirit with full confidence in God's power, mountains move!

There is another thought about a mustard seed that I think is note worthy. Any seed large or small contains within itself all the genetic information necessary to reproduce the original plant and bring new life to harvest! It's not the size of the seed that matters; it's the information in the seed. When we liken our faith to a seed, what counts is the information that our faith contains. If we see our God as able and willing to meet our every need, we are then able to believe for what is needed.

Deep-rooted uncertainty and questionings about God's ability or willingness will prevent faith from operating. It stands as an enemy in our hearts that prevents us from believing in God effectively.

Some Biblical manuscripts add to the text, "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (v. 21) If we can successfully deal with the resistance of the flesh, to the operation of the Holy Spirit, we will see God work on a supernatural level. There is nothing so effective in dealing with fleshly resistance to the Holy Spirit as prayer and fasting because the person who would know God must commune with God.

Seventy-eight

The Cross

Matt. 17:22-23

Once more, Matthew, in reporting the life and words of Jesus, returns to the message about his coming death, and in doing so connects teachings about faith, authority, and power to the message that Jesus had to die. Was that connection purely coincidental? Or, was it because these teachings are in reality, very connected? The message about the Kingdom of Heaven is, in reality, a message about the “cross” which, as used in Christian terminology, usually refers to the entire redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

When we use the term “cross” as “our cross,” we reveal our recognition of his death on the cross as being for us, and our identification with the spirit of the cross in our daily lives. When I speak of the “spirit of the cross,” I speak of the attitudes of Jesus essential to his obedience to the will of his Father in going to the cross to die.

To properly understand the cross, we must first realize that Jesus did not die as the victim of a murder plot. He knew he would die if he went to Jerusalem; he went by choice, because it was necessary for him to die, so that we might be saved.

It was love that made him go there to die for us. In spite of the fact that the ugly scene was one of betrayal, false accusations, hateful mockery, abusive behavior, physical torture, exhausting interrogation, and unreasonable displays of hate, anger and cruelty it was his choice. Such vile abuse was perpetrated by demonically enflamed emotion. Jesus became the focus of all the hate, frustration and anger that filled the regions of the damned. He could have easily avoided this humiliation, but his death on the cross was absolutely essential to the redemption of mankind. It was his obedience to his Father, then, that was the first spirit of the cross as was expressed in his words in the garden, where he prayed, “not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt. 26:39)

The second spirit of the cross was expressed when Jesus, hanging on the cross in triumph over every human emotion, said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) He had every justification to be angry. Was it really necessary for them to be so hateful? Was it necessary for them to be so abusive? Didn’t they crucify criminals, guilty of heinous crimes, without such displays of vengeance? Why were they so cruel to Jesus? What had he done? How unfair it all was! Jesus had every reason to hate these abusers, but instead, he conquered hate, anger, resentment, bitterness, and unforgiveness. He uttered in triumph, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) What a Savior! What a King!

His forgiveness was a true gift of love, teaching us how to forgive as God forgives. There is no true forgiveness unless that forgiveness is a gift of love!

When we come to Jesus, we come with all our burdens of sin and with no justification for our actions. Any efforts to defend ourselves are only further evidence of the depths to which we have fallen. When we really see our need, we know there is no defense because what is needed is mercy.

God has one consequence for sin, death; and it doesn't matter whether that sin is big or little, white or black, or even gray.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

Whereas, everyone stands guilty before God with one penalty for all, there is also one remedy for all. Nevertheless, by God's law, we all stand guilty.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. (Romans 3:21-25)

Now, that's love! God, who graciously exposed our needs in such a way as to remove all doubt, also provided a remedy within reach of everyone. Faith in his blood erases all record of sin, the means by which we receive the fabulous gift of eternal life. He gave to us a gift of righteousness not based on the goodness of our lives, but rather on the goodness of the life of the One who fulfilled all righteousness for us! Having died in our place, we have forgiveness of sins. Because he rose again, we have received his life! Because he lives now, he makes intercession for us.

The message of the death and resurrection is a vital one because the future of all humanity is connected to it. If we are to be partakers of the glory, we must understand the cross because believing in its redemption is the means of forgiveness of sins. It is our identification with his death that is the means of our deliverance. It isn't until we see ourselves dying with him as he hung on the cross, having submitted to the will of the Father, forgiving everyone and everything that hurts us, whether deserved or not, that we find deliverance from the powers that control us. It's when we see ourselves dead to loyalties, affections, dependencies, covetousness, selfishness, lusts, and fears, that we become candidates for the resurrection power and glory of the Lord!

When Jesus related to the disciples that he would be betrayed into the hands of men who would kill him, they must not have even heard what else he said. He said, “and on the third day he would be raised to life.” (Matt. 17:23) Because their hearts were not in tune to the message, they missed the point! Death is important for redemption and deliverance, but without resurrection, what good is it? If all we do is die, what joy exists? It isn't until we realize the power of his resurrection that we can expect good to come of our lives in Christ. The disciples were filled with grief because they understood the death but not the resurrection. If they had understood and believed the message of the resurrection, they could have endured the shame of the cross with hope!

The agony of death becomes less difficult when we can anticipate a resurrection. Without the knowledge of the resurrection, Christians lead drab, dull and morbid lives. However, it is when

we understand that the door into the joy of the Lord is the door of death to the selfism of the world that we enter joyfully, that we might be partakers of what lies beyond!

Seventy-nine

Pay Taxes?

Matt. 17:24-27

When Jesus and the disciples arrived at Capernaum, a tax collector came to Peter and asked him if Jesus paid his taxes. Peter replied that he did then went and spoke to Jesus about it. Jesus pointed out that children of the king don't pay taxes, but so they wouldn't be offended he sent Peter to go catch a fish and he would find a coin in its mouth. He was to take it and pay both his tax and Peter's.

Since the tax collectors had arrived on the scene Jesus faced the very practical problem, what do we do about the demands of natural life on earth? Those who die for Christ die to this world, so then, what do we do about our lives here? How should we live? Leave it to the tax man to bring us back to the reality that, though we have been born again, and are now citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, those around us still expect us to be on time to work, work diligently in business, be prompt in the payment of our debts, and be conscientious in the duties of life.

Does death to the world make us any less citizens of the world? There is a spiritual death and there is a physical death. The world system exercises control over us through its politics, through what we deem necessary for our natural lives and through the satisfactions from what we crave or desire. Laying down our lives spiritually cancels that power over us; nevertheless, life goes on, and we still must live it, but how?

It's not a pleasant experience to have to come down off the mountain of transfiguration where you have been reveling in the glory of the eternal kingdom, where you have seen Jesus glowing in his divinity, only to face the tax collector, or your sick baby, or your hungry family, or your unreasonable in-laws!

Maybe you have just had a marvelous time of prayer and the services at church have been especially inspiring, only to have to go to work and face a "turkey of a boss," who does not at all understand that far-away look in your eye; all he wants is your faithful attention to your duties. How degrading to be a son of God, with all the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in you, and then to have to submit yourself to some ungodly employer, or to have to deal with unreasonable, self-centered, demanding people, just to get along in this world.

Is it right? Should it be so? If we have truly died to the world, it won't matter! We may suffer now, but those who mistreat us will have to face judgment. If mistreatment occurs because we are negligent or unfaithful to duty, the offenders will be guiltless; but if we do what is right and still others wrong us, judgment will come. Vengeance belongs to the Lord.

Our potential, our relationship to God, and our destiny all take the form of a promise with nothing changed yet. When people abuse us no lightning strikes them dead, the earth doesn't open to swallow them, nor do disasters repay them for their misdeeds. Yet the day of retribution will come. God allows people to go on expressing what is in their hearts. If it is righteousness, it

will be richly rewarded; if it is evil, it will be severely judged. The day will come when it will be fully known what it means to be a son of God.

In the meantime, the taxman still must be paid and the rent or mortgage payments come due. Fortunately, we have a destiny that is yet to come, a blessed hope for the hereafter.

Eighty

Innocence

Matt. 8:1-4

Once we are children of God, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, how should we conduct ourselves? What should be our attitudes? Should we stand tall, proudly proclaiming our royal statuses? Should we seek to gain recognition among our brothers, so that we might gain positions of power in the kingdom?

One day the disciples put the question to Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

Jesus then called a little child and had him stand among the disciples. And he said,

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matt. 18:1-3)

The Kingdom of Heaven surely is different! Who can enter it? Do we understand yet what is required? Was Jesus overemphasizing the point? Weren't the disciples already destined to greatness? Hadn't they been called to be his apostles? Yes, of course they had, but foreknowledge, predestiny, or special callings do not exempt anyone from being responsible for his own actions. Someone said, “I believe in predestination; therefore, I will do whatever I want to do. It won't matter because whatever will be, will be.” How true that is! That kind of attitude only ensures that the heart's secrets and sins will be plainly seen!

Only when we come to Jesus on his terms can we enter his kingdom. Even after all that the disciples had experienced, learned, and confessed, they still were not in the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, I know you may be saying, “Come on, you don't really mean that!” Well, look at it. Didn't they reveal that fact by their own words? “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” What does greatness mean to a child? The disciples' self-interests were evident; they wanted a position for their sacrifices. They indeed wanted Jesus to be King of Israel; but underlying all their lofty motives, were desires for their own glory.

Since Adam and Eve, fallen mankind has suffered a deep sense of loss, on the one hand, we are arrogant and on the other, extremely insecure. We were created as sons of God. God stamped his image upon us, making us visible representations of himself. We were not made totally like God, but very much like him. Some obvious differences between God and man include those between created beings and creator. We are physical bodies; God is Spirit. We are dependent creatures; (we have no spirit of life in ourselves, life had to be imparted by our parents and sustained by continued nurturing) God is self-sustaining. In general, we have time and space limits set upon us as well as limited powers of thought, reason, and choice.

God has a plan where-by man can develop into some semblance of God-likeness, but with a very controlled environment to allow this development. God had to give humanity enough power and liberty to allow growth, while still maintaining control.

When humanity became an errant creation, much was lost of man's original position, power and glory. There is a sense of destiny in the depths of man's nature that causes him to be restless

and dissatisfied with himself and his world; yet, we have a sense of worth that stands in contradiction to what obviously exists.

Why were the disciples not in the Kingdom of Heaven yet, and why was their wanting to know about who would be the greatest, evidence that they had not entered? To understand this question, we must understand the problem. When Adam stood in Eden, made in the image of God, he was innocent. The tempter sought an opportunity to pervert that innocence by persuading Eve to see herself as inferior to her destiny, a fantasy notion. God only wanted Adam and Eve to be what he created them to be and nothing more; that was their destiny.

Dissatisfaction with that destiny led to the fall. That dissatisfaction with innocence lies at the core of human pride, arrogance, rebellion, self-will and self-centeredness. Concern with our self-worth, status, possessions, or greatness is an expression of self-centeredness.

On the other hand innocence is unaware of vainglory and joyfully accepts what is provided.

Satan knew that Eve would want to disobey God's expressed will only if she became dissatisfied with that will, because dissatisfaction results in questioning.

Children are the symbol of innocence and entry into the Kingdom of Heaven demands a return to it. A return to innocence is a return to quietness of spirit. To return to innocence is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Well did Isaiah speak,

"In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." (Isaiah 30:15)

Jesus knew full well what it takes for man to return to fellowship with the Father, a joyful acceptance of his provision. Because dissatisfaction is so deeply ingrained in us, repentance must also go deep. It is the spirit of the tempter that sows dissatisfaction in our hearts.

When I was in India, I saw people living in poverty conditions, but some were happy and some were not. The happy people, it seemed to me, were the innocent people. Those people who had never seen a different culture, who had never been told about what might result if this or that were different, seemed very happy.

With dissatisfaction comes unrest; unrest is the necessary ingredient of change. Thus, progress rides on the wings of restlessness, but does it carry us heavenward? Doesn't this same restlessness carry us farther from him who is our life? Why does man resist returning to the Lord? Is it because seeking our own glory seems more logical? Restlessness serves a good end only in the logic of the serpent. Satisfaction is happiness; dissatisfaction drives, enslaves, and destroys us.

Those who love Jesus love simplicity and innocence. Can we regain that lost innocence? Yes, of course we can by accepting God on his terms. What must we do? Cease to resist God's way and forsake all selfism.

To natural man, Jesus is a thornbush; his teachings are like a thorn in the flesh. Trusting in him is like trusting in the shadow of the thornbush that provides little comfort to the flesh! However, having his wisdom sets us free of the torments and cravings of our flesh and troubled minds.

For many people, trusting in Jesus is like putting trust in a shadow, so vague, so intangible. A thornbush shadow may be intangible, but fire from the thornbush is not.

Eighty-one

The Ultimate Enemy of Innocence

Matt. 18:5-7

Continuing his discourse, Jesus spoke of how individuals who wrong little ones would be held accountable and regarding those who cause others to sin, it would be better for them if a mill stone would be hung around their necks and be cast into the sea.

The world system is an enemy of the simplicity children represents, making it difficult to live in the Spirit because people of this world system live by different value codes. The spiritual will be wronged but judgment will come to those who wrong them.

There is no doubt that Satan will gain full control over the world system. His rule and authority is even now expressed both outwardly through governments, false religions, and atheistic philosophies, and inwardly through our fleshly appetites, affections and drives.

The mode of operations and the strategies for world takeover by the Anti-Christ are outlined in Daniel 11:28-45. Satan is the spirit of the Anti-Christ who works outwardly through governments that allow his control. The armed forces are one means he employs to try to gain absolute control. In verses 28 and 29, we see a government being used by Satan to attempt a military action. Syria to the north and Egypt to the south, with Israel in the middle though historically presented, this passage predicts the end time spiritual drama. It seems probable that these nations will also be involved in the final fulfillment of this passage.

Let's look at the scenario. The northern kingdom attempts a military action, but western ships in the Mediterranean change his mind. Does that sound familiar? Now as a result of spiritual insights, we understand that the real war is not a war of nations, but rather, a war between God and Satan for control of human lives, with nations, governments and people used as instruments. We see this war specifically shown in Revelations through language that ties the symbolic spiritual directly to the outward physical.

Now the real concern is not so much the takeover of governments, as the takeover of people. The real power that stands in the way of a satanic takeover is the power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of humans. I see in Daniel 11:28-45, first an attempt to use military means to achieve control with the balance of power preventing that from happening, and then attention being given to neutralizing the influence of the people of the holy covenant.

However, if we have a Jewish mind-set, we could miss the point because at the time Daniel was written, reference to the holy covenant was a reference to the Law of Moses and the people who held to it. Something has changed since then; Daniel's passage is about the end time with a new covenant in place. In the intervening years Jesus came, died for the sins of the world, and became the mediator of the new covenant. Some people prefer to see only an outward struggle referred to in Daniel, involving Israel, the temple, and sacrifices at that temple. Maybe so, but I think I see more; the real target of Satan's plan is the power of the new covenant. If he is to ever gain control of humanity, he must neutralize the effectiveness of that covenant, for it is much more dangerous to the satanic dream than the old covenant.

The old covenant was easily manipulated and perverted by Satan because man has a nature that is easily perverted. The blessings of the law were dependent upon obedience. Equally, disobedience resulted in curses that would be visited upon them. When the people obeyed God, he would bless their lives with health, increase of goods and victory over their enemies; when they disobeyed, they were visited with curses upon their bodies and their possessions. When blessed by God, increase resulted but increase led to selfism that led to idolatry and many other forbidden sins. Thus, blessings were removed and curses forthcoming. Even the religious institution was vulnerable to Satan's perverting influence, as he used it to satisfy selfish ends.

The new covenant is different because it is based on a sacrifice that removed sin once and for all. It has a priesthood that is incorruptible, and it has better promises. The new covenant blessings are the result of faith in the sacrifice Jesus made in shedding his blood, the acknowledgment of his authority over us, and obedience to the Holy Spirit as he administers the mind of Christ and knowledge of his word to us. The blessing is visited upon our minds, giving us the mind of Christ and upon our hearts, by changing our desires and drawing us into a relationship with God. Our sins are disposed of, never to be remembered again, which is dangerous to the satanic kingdom. When the blessing was visited on outward things, it was easily perverted; but blessings visited upon the hearts and the minds are not easily perverted, nor are the people of this covenant controllable through conventional means.

Satan must devise a strategy to neutralize God's power if he is to be successful in his desire to control humanity. In Daniel, having recognized the futility of military effort with a show of force from the west, the king of the north turned his attention to desecrating the temple.

Without a doubt, there will be some historic event that will reenact this desecration in a literal way, but I have also observed this strategy at work spiritually.

In new covenant terms and thought, the temple is no longer a building in Jerusalem. The people of the new covenant are now individually temples as explained in I Cor. 3:16, 6:19 and collectively as explained in II Cor. 6:16, Eph. 2:20-22, and I Peter 2:5.

As there is a spiritual temple, there is also a spiritual battle fought with armaments. The armor of the Christian is described in Eph. 6:10-20.

Satan, too, has an army and weaponry. In the same passage of Ephesians 6, we are warned about the devil's schemes and flaming arrows, all obviously meant to be taken symbolically. When the prophet said that the king of the north (Satan) would turn his armed forces against the temple fortress, the wording fits new covenant thought better than old covenant thought because the literal temple was never thought of as a fortress, while the new covenant temple has instructions to put on the full armor of God.

Satan has long sought to desecrate God's temple. For example, one of his primary objectives is achieved through sexual immorality that was used by God in scripture as an outward symbol of a spiritual condition. When a spiritual condition exists, its outward expression will manifest sooner or later. Sexual immorality is the result of embracing of a principle or attitude other than the principle of holiness toward God. When Satan is able to seduce a Christian into a self-centered mind-set, he sets him up for a fall, and what logically follows is the discontinuance of the daily sacrifice, part of the scenario described in Daniel. The apostle Paul expressed this sacrifice by saying, "I die daily." The daily sacrifice was symbolized by the death of an animal

looking forward to the salvation brought to us by the death of Jesus. The daily sacrifice for a Christian is thus identification with Jesus that is lost in an attitude of self-preservation.

Next, Satan sets up the abomination that causes desolation. The abomination that causes desolation is a subject of interest to most people who are interested in prophecy. There are several Biblical references to the subject, and there have been some possible fulfillments. Yet, there are also speculations as to what exactly constitutes a fulfillment. Since my purpose is not to describe the natural worlds, outward fulfillment, but rather to present a spiritual lesson, we need to ask the question, “What, in the spirit, would be an abomination which causes desolation?”

Antiochus Epiphanes, a king of the north, was one person in history who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem with a heathen sacrifice; Jesus, however, predicted the reenactment of this desecration in Matt. 24:15, so we determine that more was intended. What Antiochus did, was, noteworthy and likely stands as a commentary on the intended meaning. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian, Antiochus went into the temple, built a heathen altar on God’s altar, and sacrificed a pig on it. Now, especially to a Jew, a pig is the ultimate abomination, but why?

In the Law of Moses, God gave instructions concerning clean and unclean animals. A clean animal had to have a split hoof and chew the cud. The split hoof was, no doubt, symbolic of the two-part “walk” (walk is a New Testament reference to the daily life experiences of a Christian). In application it’s the knowledge of the Word of God and the wisdom and power to apply it, which in proper balance, are qualifications for a right relationship with God. Chewing the cud occurs after an animal gathers its food and then goes to a quiet place to lie down and chew it, actions symbolic of thankfulness and contemplation. When we receive our spiritual food with thanksgiving and contemplation of God and his goodness toward us, we please God.

Now, let’s look at the pig that does have split hooves. However, the individuals that the pig symbolizes, though they have knowledge of God and his word, and even the wisdom and power to apply it, are unclean in the eyes of the Lord because they do not lead lives of thankful contemplation. The pig has split hooves but doesn’t chew his cud. It manifests also the spirit of self-interest.

I remember once when I was a boy, my father bought a baby pig to raise that we brought home and put in a nice pen. We fixed some food and put it in its trough, but the pig wouldn’t eat. Dad thought about this and decided that there was one sure way to get this fellow to eat; he bought another pig. When we let the second pig loose in the pen, the two couldn’t get to the trough fast enough! Such actions are certainly instructive enough, but still another point is that pigs enjoy filth. Need I say more?

Should we offer such on God’s altar? What sort of sacrifice should we offer to God daily?

Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. (Romans 12:1-3)

What is Satan’s objective? His heart is set against the Covenant (Dan. 11:28) because the New Covenant returns to humanity what he stole.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time”, declares the Lord. “I will put my laws in their minds (changed mind-set—the mind of Christ) and write them on their hearts.” (New attitudes and affections.) “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (The relationship of Adam and God restored.) “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest.” (The presence of the Holy Spirit within gives this knowledge.) “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”. (Heb. 8:10-12 comments in brackets are mine.)

Satan hates this covenant because it gives to man what he lost, relationship with God and its benefits. Had Satan understood the fundamental truths about God and his creation’s need to remain in harmonious relationship, he probably would not have rebelled.

All created beings are dependent upon God, much like a baby in the mother’s womb is dependent on the mother. As long as the umbilical cord is connected, the baby can live by the life of the mother; however, when the cord is cut the baby is on his own.

Unlike the baby/mother relationship, we cannot live without God; if the cord gets cut, we die. Satan wants to cut the cord. He did so in the Garden of Eden, but God brought us back through the cross (the new covenant work). Now, Satan wants to keep us from that covenant; or, if we have partaken of it, he wants to convince us to forsake it.

If Satan is to be successful in his dream, he must neutralize the church because the church’s message of identification with the cross produces the new covenant blessing. If Satan can get the church away from the new covenant and away from daily identification with the message of the cross, he will be able to desecrate our temple with sexual immorality, spiritual idolatry, or a host of abominations the result of which is desolation.

Eighty-two

If It Offends You, Cut It Off!!

Matt. 18:8-10

If we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must return to innocence, even if we have to be violent toward our flesh. Jesus said,

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matt. 18:8-9)

Those are strong words, but sometimes it takes strong words to communicate serious matters to our dull minds and hard hearts. The thought of cutting off parts of our physical bodies to prevent sinning is too radical for most of us to take seriously because our minds have never really accepted the reality of hell. What stronger words could Jesus use? The truth about God is important. Salvation is not just something that we can take or leave as we wish, with everything remaining okay regardless of our choices.

Heaven and Hell are real places; no matter how we feel, we cannot change realities by wishing them away. We can construct our arguments, and debate the issues; but when we close our eyes in death, it will be made manifest to us that what was said was true. We will know that it wasn't some sadistic madman, trying to frighten everyone, that proclaimed the teachings about hell; they were proclaimed by Jesus, the man of love, who subjected himself to death on the cross because of them. Jesus believed in the spiritual kingdom, not only in the present, but also in the future. He warned us about our conduct and attitudes, and stressed our responsibility regarding them.

Since Jesus knew the horrors of hell, it is not surprising that he put more emphasis on saving one stray lamb than on protecting a whole flock. He placed great value on the "little ones," their protection being our responsibility.

There are many spiritual dangers to young ones in our society because we live in dangerous times. Our young people are being subjected to all sorts of erroneous thoughts and teachings because Satan has been hard at work capturing the minds of leaders, both in our government and the educational system of our nation. What we once took for granted concerning the general environment our children live and study in, can no longer be deemed safe!

The threats to their safety may vary according to the environmental conditions, but some threats exist everywhere. Many children become the targets of sexual predators that have no heart for the moral development of children. The damage that such predators can do to young, tender, innocent children in just a few minutes may last a lifetime!

Added to the damage done through seductions or violent attacks, is the damage done to the consciences of those who are being taught that there are no absolutes, that morality is a matter of

choice, and that nothing is evil unless we make it so by our own thinking. Concerning this, Jesus said,

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! (Matt. 18:6)

Hell will be the final abode for all such evildoers, and justice will be done. The only hope for those who have committed such sins is to totally repent and fall upon the mercy and grace of God.

Eighty-three

Cleansing in the Church

Matt. 18:12-20

There is much to be learned about the Kingdom of Heaven and the King who reigns over it. Now that we can see how different its principles are, now that we have been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit, and are motivated to change our allegiance to those principles, we are confronted with the responsibility to affect others. What is our responsibility to an errant world? What is our responsibility to a brother who sins?

First, we need to remember that God loves every person who has ever begun a walk with him; so when one of his little ones begins to wander away, the heart of the Father goes with them. Jesus told the story of a lost sheep and how much the shepherd cared about that one lost sheep. It was of greater importance to the shepherd to find the one lost one than to be with the ninety-nine that remained in his care.

When a person falls into sin he cares about that person and wants his people to care as well. There is a tendency in Christendom to give up on people who fall into sin. Others, being afraid to offend them, hesitate to confront them about the sin in their lives.

Do we ignore sin, hoping it will go away? There are repeated Biblical warnings about sin and its effects upon our lives, our relationships with God, and our relationships with each other. Sin is like a life-threatening disease that we must deal with. If not confronted and eradicated, it will spread and increase. Jesus taught confrontation. Sometimes, in our grace-oriented frames of mind, we treat sin very lightly. We seem to feel that all that is needed is for a person to say, "I'm sorry," to make the sin disappear. Those who are caught in sin especially want to use this remedy.

To be sure, I am a total believer in the need to forgive. However, forgiveness without correction is like fertilizing weeds. Unless the sinner turns from his wicked ways and seeks the cleansing power of the Word of God and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, which are effective because of the blood of Jesus, he will simply become bolder to sin again.

Sometimes, however, we do need to be easy on the sinning brother or sister; sensitivity and wisdom are needed. Fortunately, when we come together to deal with a sin problem, Jesus promised to also be present and he taught forgiveness. Forgiveness should be the underlying attitude in these confrontations with the offending person never having to struggle for it. However, though forgiveness should be automatic it does not cancel the need for correction, deliverance, healing or restoration.

Under the law, when Israel dealt with sin in the symbolisms of their worship, they took two goats for sin offerings; one was offered on the altar, according to the procedure for sin offerings, while the other was called a "scapegoat." The scapegoat was presented before the Lord with the sins of the people confessed over it and hands laid on it, after which it was taken out into the desert, away from all population, and released. This symbolism teaches that Jesus' sacrificial

death removed the guilt of sin, but we must also remove the sin from the midst of the congregation. If the offending person will not agree to change, he should be cast out of the fellowship. Ridding the offending person of sin is, of course, top priority, but if that does not happen, we must cast person and all out of our fellowship.

The forgiveness of a repentant sinner is mandatory; we are not left to decide whether or not to forgive, and failure to do so is a heinous crime. Every one of us has been in a position of needing forgiveness, and failure to forgive puts us right back in that same position. That is not what any of us wants. It is much better to forgive than to suffer condemnation on the Day of Judgment!

Eighty-four

Love, Mercy, Forgiveness

Matt. 18:21-35

The Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom in which love is the law of the land! There is mercy for those who need mercy. A kingdom, where people aren't critical of one another! Instead, they are patient, kind, long-suffering, tenderhearted, and easily approached about anything. When there is a problem, they solve it. If there is a difference of opinion about anything, they share their insights with one another, listen attentively to each other to try to understand each point-of-view and, after all input has been examined, render a judgment based upon wisdom. All are then content with the result, knowing it to be the best possible solution at that time. If sacrifices need to be made to facilitate a solution, all are willing and eager to contribute what they can. If effort is needed, all put themselves to the task until the needed result is achieved.

Does this sound too good to be true? It's not. It's the normal experience of the people of the Kingdom of Heaven! After all, peace, love, joy, and happiness are the heritage of the saints. Why shouldn't we live this way? What is worthy of preventing it, pride, greed, selfishness or laziness? None of these belong in the Kingdom of Heaven nor are they parts of the life of the person who has deemed the old nature dead and who is hidden away with Christ in God. Why, then, should we who have been cleansed return to the sin for which we sought to be forgiven?

In Matthew 18:21-35 Jesus gives us a parable about a rich man who has a servant that owes him a lot of money. He wants the man to pay up but the man is unable to pay. The rich man then threatens to sell the man and his family and all that he has to repay the debt. The man pleads for mercy, and then the rich man takes pity on him and forgives the entire debt owed! Afterward, the servant goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him money and starts choking him and when the man pleads with him to be patient, he has him cast into jail until he can pay all that was owed. Hearing about this, the rich man calls the servant back in and has him thrown into jail. Jesus then says that unless we also forgive, our Father in heaven will likewise deal with us.

This scenario happens in many people's lives, especially among families. Many marriages are torn apart because individuals do not apply the spirit of mercy to one another. We are like the servant who was forgiven that great debt and then turned to his peer and demanded that he pay the debt he owed him. How tragic that we cannot give gifts of love to one another! How tragic that we cannot give without fear that someone will take advantage of us, or belittle us for being so nice, as though nice were some kind of disease!

Entry into the kingdom results in great change, so some things have to be left behind. From now on, we will have new hearts about everything. What we do, we will do as unto the Lord. If people don't appreciate what we do, we will do it anyway, so long as it's the right thing. Our joy will be found in serving the Lord, with the love of the saints being an added blessing.

What a privilege to be granted access to such wonder! How can we not, in turn, show to others what we have so graciously received?

However, if we persist in ignoring the law of the kingdom, which is love, we can expect to enter into judgment for our actions. That is what happens to those who do to others the same as that for which they sought forgiveness. God will not tolerate bad attitudes in his house; if we want to live with him, we must be willing to change.

Eighty-five

Live It at Home

Matt. 19:1-15

There is no relationship in which the principle of forgiveness applies more than in marriage. After Jesus had completed a rather lengthy teaching on forgiveness, he turned his attention to this relationship. How does forgiveness apply in it?

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3) Jesus was asked. This question is still one of the hot issues every society must address: “What do we do about relationships gone sour?”; “Am I married to the right person?”; “What if I don’t love my spouse anymore?”; “We don’t get along well”; or “What if our careers take us different directions?”

Jesus didn’t answer the Pharisee’s question; he went right back to basics. First, Jesus pointed out that the reason for marriage is sex. There are people who recoil from this reality but the reason remains, God made us sexual beings; therefore marriage exists.

Secondly, Jesus pointed out the results of sexual conduct: we become one with the other person.

This is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of the biblical concept of marriage, or to argue its validity or relevance in modern society. Suffice it to say that, after several years of the sexual revolution, even a casual look at the condition of our society should end all arguments. What Jesus taught might seem like idealism to our do-it-yourself social reformers; but now, with the harvest of broken hearts, broken lives, and diseased bodies, wisdom cries for a swift and sure return to the simplicity of the Biblical approach to human sexuality.

What Jesus said, in effect, was that (putting moral concerns aside) there are very practical reasons for marrying and staying married. The practical reasons for marriage are a safe, honorable, and satisfying means of sexual fulfillment; the reason for staying married is the resultant union. Nothing binds people together in quite the same way as sexual intimacy. When children result from the union, it takes on eternal dimensions that neither divorce nor the death of the child can cancel because, once a living soul comes into existence, it never ceases to be. No wonder God hates divorce!

When we see the harvest of hurt and pain that results from the world’s “sex for pleasure” philosophy and the broken lives, shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams, is there any real argument for continuing with this course of behavior? Nevertheless, the decision about whether we continue down this slippery slope of moral experimentation may not be ours to make because the presence of the sexually transmitted diseases including Aids has likely signaled the beginning of the end of sexual promiscuity as an acceptable lifestyle.

To the question, “Did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.” (Matt. 19:7-8) Divorce is the result of sin; if sin does not exist in a person’s heart,

there is no need for divorce. There is no difficulty that cannot be solved in an atmosphere of love.

Love is a conceptual word that has taken on very bizarre meanings in our society. It is not an emotion, though it often involves emotion. Those who really know the meaning of true love know that the good feelings called love are all too rarely felt in the real world.

Parents fall head over heels in love with that new little life that their union has brought forth, but the thrills they feel when looking into that innocent face too often turn to testing frustration. The rewards of love are great, but no meaningful relationship endures without pain. (Not the pain of violence in the home, of course!) The pains that life brings to a married couple, drives the tent stakes deep. Those who have stood by their commitments through painful storms, find their lives standing on firm foundations.

Love without pain is impossible to find. Should we abandon a relationship because there is pain? Jesus said, with regard to marriage, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." Why so? Aren't there legitimate exceptions? The point here seems to be an issue of integrity. Marriage is a covenant bonding; the breaking up of the marriage is the breaking of a vow. Adultery is giving to another what is not yours to give because marriage partners are responsible for the proper sexual, emotional and ego-centered fulfillments of their partners. Not accepting responsibility in any of those areas leaves the partners vulnerable to temptation. Vulnerability does not constitute reason or excuse for misconduct, but I am convinced that many people who have appeared victims in marriage were themselves the victimizers.

Many people have, for example, fulfilled all the outward requirements of a marriage, faithfulness to duty, personal hygiene, and sexual availability, but have totally neglected the ego-centered needs. They have left their spouses feeling unaffirmed as a person of value. People left without this affirmation may eventually develop moral, spiritual or psychological problems.

It is my opinion, as a Pastor/Counselor, that most serious problems have very small roots in the beginning. If our hearts weren't so hard, we would never withhold any form of affirmation needed; we would love, enjoy, support, and touch and touch until our hearts become one. Why is there divorce except for marital unfaithfulness? Is it not because our hearts are hard? Yes, divorces happen and I am convinced that they will go on happening as long as there is selfishness in our hearts; but what a price we pay for our folly!

The disciples then asked Jesus if people should get married in the first place if their marriages lack the potential for happiness. Jesus responded that if a man is a eunuch (castrated), born without sexual desires, or has the ability to put his sexual desires on hold because of his spiritual strength, then it's all right to remain single. Otherwise, the implication is that marriage is best.

As is so often the case, the real victims of social changes are the children. Jesus didn't overlook anyone; from the least to the greatest, all are included as objects of compassion. When people brought little children to Jesus so that he would put his hands on them and bless them, the disciples objected. But Jesus said,

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matt. 19:14).

Eighty-six

The Rich Young Ruler

Matt. 19:16-30

The Kingdom of Heaven includes the young, the old, the rich and the poor who are gathered from every nation and tribe, a multitude that no man can number. However, some people will not be there.

One person who will be absent at the great gathering was a man, who Matthew tells us, was young and rich and who Luke tells us, was a ruler. It may be that, in the eyes of the world, there is great advantage in being young, rich and famous and a person of power and influence. In the Kingdom of Heaven, however, things change radically. What is of great value in the world system; may be a great hindrance to entry into the heavenly kingdom.

Why is money so important to us? Why did the rich man's face drop when Jesus told him to sell all he had? He was a good man and, no doubt, very sincere. Didn't Jesus know how much good Peter could do if he had a man like that backing him? What a lousy organizer, promoter and fund-raiser Jesus was! Here, bowing on his knees, was the answer to all their money problems. What did Jesus do? He said to him,

“Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matt. 19:21)

In this story, Jesus brings us to an interesting observation. The first question the young man asked Jesus was about what good thing he could do to get eternal life. To this Jesus replied,

“Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

“Which ones?” the young man inquired. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matt. 19:17-21)

Now this was a probing teaching! The first concept put to the test was that of what constitutes good. This young man was good according to what he had been taught about proper behavior and his being faithful to these teachings. However, he obviously felt that there was something more for him than he had yet experienced; he sensed in his spirit that something was lacking in his life. If this need were to be met, Jesus would have to take him into a whole new arena of understanding.

Obedience to the law produces great blessing.

All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed,

and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. (Deut. 28:2-7)

And so, on and on, in like words, the blessings for obedience go.

All of these blessings had, no doubt, been visited upon the young rich ruler, yet something was lacking. He had come in contact with another dimension of spiritual reality. He wasn't looking for blessing; he was looking for life, a Kingdom of Heaven blessing and a real problem to obtain.

How was Jesus going to overcome that difficulty? The young man was, in a sense, a victim of his own goodness that had indeed brought blessing. His religion had done what it should do and had resulted in the promised prosperity, but now that prosperity stood as a gigantic barrier to his spiritual progress.

This scenario is repeated everywhere the gospel is taught. We begin by coming to God because we have needs. We then learn about the ways of the Lord and walk in obedience to his teachings. The results are that God begins to smile upon us and good things start happening. We clean up our acts and look better. The unclean spirits leave us, the darkness in our eyes leaves, and our brains are not clouded, either spiritually or chemically. We behave better, are more conscientious, and have improved health. We become interested in improving our environment, so we work harder; and because we're now more valuable, our salaries increase and we get better jobs. Advancements come, but deep inside, something is terribly wrong—the blessings have turned on us and now have become our curse! We come to Jesus for help. What does he say? Get your priorities straight? Give me a love gift? Put your money to work? No, no, no, none of those carnal-preacher answers! How good we have become at explaining away the power of the gospel! Jesus says, "Sell them! Sell all those blessings."

Blessings are not where it's at! Give to the poor. One fellow, in trying to justify his worldly possessions, said it wasn't necessary to give everything away, that Jesus just said, "Sell everything and give to the poor." He explained that Jesus just meant that the rich young man had property that would hinder him from following Jesus. I think that explanation was very clever! Isn't it amazing what genius we possess! With people like that around, will anyone be saved?

Jesus' message is so obvious that only a wicked heart can miss the point, blessings become curses the moment we begin to love them! "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." (1 John 2:15-16)

What an incredible problem! How do we deal with it? The first part of the solution was to show the young man that it took more than a good record to establish goodness. In fact, true goodness is not even achievable by fallen man. This man was only good enough to receive what we call blessings that did not, however, validate him as good. In reality they became the verification that evil was in his heart.

The problem was not a lack of morality on the young man's part. He was sexually moral, had obtained his goods justly, had executed authority honorably, respected his elders, and was

generous. How do I know all this? By the commandments cited, he was not chargeable on the basis of the law. The commands required not only honesty, but also generosity. To say, as I have heard, that this man lacked generosity, is to speak from ignorance of the law that was big on generosity.

The offense then was not obedience to the law; in the first place, no one is perfect in the eyes of the law. One can only be perfect when he has received that perfection as a gift. There is One who is perfect, only One. Our perfection is the result of our identification with him. If we will be perfect, we must count all other things as loss. Goodness gets blessings, but it's worthless! It isn't until we recognize our folly and dispose of the whole philosophy of obedience for blessings, that we can enter into the true riches that are found only in Christ.

If I err not, Jesus was trying to get across to the disciples that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven you must realize the total inferiority of the world's system. The young man had indeed gained the world, but he was in danger of losing his soul! The old system is very appealing to the flesh; but to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must abandon it. This man could not do it; his blessings had cursed his heart because he had come to love his possessions. Present world blessings meant more to him than riches in glory; he went away sad.

The apostle Paul also confronted the reality of disposing of worldly things. He, too, was an ultimate achiever, but his attitude was different. Here is his testimony.

If anyone else thinks he has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:4-14)

Notice that the apostle's confidence came from the gift of righteousness to be found in Christ. To obtain this gift, he counted all his religious heritage and efforts as worthless garbage. He made no effort to salvage any part of them; he didn't even try to use it as a bargaining chip. He forsook them, abandoned them and didn't even try to get God to give him credit for some great sacrifice he had made. This gift of righteousness is not given because we are special, though in the eyes of the world, some are special; however, being worldly special means absolutely nothing to God! Emptiness is needed if he is to fill us.

The rich young man loved what he had already obtained. What's wrong with being wealthy? What's wrong with being good? What's wrong with keeping that with which God has blessed us? My heart trembles at the implication of the truth taught here; once more we stand naked before the One who sees all, our hearts laid bare. When we are blessed the most, we stand in the greatest danger. When we think we are rich, we are poor, wretched and blind. It's our love for

the blessings that has cursed our hearts. God hates the fact that we like to wear these blessings as verification of our worthiness.

How hard it is for God to bless us, because to bless us is to seal our doom. Our hearts are evil as long as we love what is of this world. When God blesses us, we should grasp that blessing, hold it before us, and say to it, "Blessing, I take authority over you: You will not be my God; you will not receive my love; I will not trust in you; you will have no power over me."

Maybe you think that's radical, but is it? Didn't Israel, as a nation, displease the Lord by taking the blessings bestowed upon them and creating idols with them? Don't we do the same today by using testimonies of blessings, healings, or miracles as validation of our "ministries"? Do we not strut our stuff to gain images of strength or greatness? What super ministry is there that would survive financially without showing evidence as verification of worth? Why do ministries want more and more of your finances? Is it because they think that money is blessing?

What is blessing anyway? Blessing is a condition that exists in God's presence where the nature of God is manifest. It occurs when God smiles approvingly at you, not because you are perfect on the merit of your actions, but because you have placed your total faith in Jesus as your redeemer. It is your faith in the blood he shed that results in his favor.

What we call blessings are merely the results of blessings, and that is what makes them dangerous; we tend to covet the things we call blessings. Is that what Jesus taught us to do? Is that what motivated the apostles and early Christians? Did they apply their faith in God to get financial gain? Isn't this misdirection of spiritual energy what the apostle Paul warned Timothy about in I Timothy 6:5? "...and constant friction between men of corrupt mind who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain."

I wonder what our modern pied pipers that are leading this generation to believe that blessings are to be grasped and possessed are going to say to Jesus who said, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." Possessions may be the result of blessing, but how tragic when we mistake them for the blessing itself and therefore something to be grasped.

Possessions are neither blessings nor evidence of blessings since one can be greatly blessed and yet have no possessions at all. Let me illustrate, let's say a person is called by God to dedicate his life to the Lord's work. He forsakes all to follow the Lord. The ministry takes him to a remote region of the world, and there he serves faithfully in the service of the Lord, pouring out his life as a sweet offering unto him. Can we say this person is not blessed because money or possessions aren't given to him? What if he returns home without family or friends to greet him, penniless and broken in health? Does this mean he is not blessed? If there is no promise that reaches beyond the horizon of this life, then such a person is a fool indeed. However, if this person sells all, gives to the poor, follows the Lord, and gains the prize that Paul said he pressed on to obtain to become a part of the resurrection, and finds that he forsook what is temporary, corrupting, decaying and fading away, to become co-inheritor of all things eternal, incorruptible and enduring then this man is blessed indeed.

Is such a person better off than a person who is not called to a remote region of the world, but who stays at home, has a family, makes friends, and gains great wealth? Actually, there is little difference, unless the person who receives manifestations of God's love in outward blessings becomes corrupt in spirit, misplaces his love, and misses the prize. It is neither, going nor

staying, acquiring wealth or experiencing poverty that counts; it's obedience to Jesus that comes from a pure heart of love!

The disciples wanted to know about themselves because they had forsaken all to follow the Lord. Would that fact bring any spiritual consideration? Yes, of course, but all that are in Christ inherit with Christ. Though each person will gain what his pure service of love to Christ deserves, yet all are co-inheritors with him!

Eighty-seven

How Much Do We Get Paid?

Matt. 20:1-16

In Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus tells a story that boggles the minds of the transactionists. (A transactionist is one who believes that in order to get something, you must pay “the price,” and that you are paid according to your work.) Now, in the kingdoms of the world, reward is largely based on effort. However, exceptions occur where there are evil doings, favoritism, payoffs, or deceptions. For one to achieve or gain advantage in the world, he must pay his dues, getting an education, working up the ranks, or taking risks in investments or endeavors.

The story before us is about a man who has a vineyard and it’s harvest time. He needs to get the crop in so he hires men to do the work. As the day progresses, he needs additional help so he hires more men at different times as the day progresses.

In this story everything was going along really well until the paymaster started handing out the pay. The workers had all apparently been hard at work, probably telling stories and in general having a nice time. When new workers started showing up in the field, as the day wore on, they probably welcomed them, because the task was great. It was, no doubt, an encouragement to those who were growing weary, to see fresh workmen show up.

What joy filled everyone’s heart at the end of the day when the paymaster showed up with a bag full of money to pay wages. Then things started changing. When the fellows who were hired last were called, they were each paid a denarius; in fact, everyone received a denarius. This didn’t set well! Tempers began to flare; this just was not fair! Their transactional theology had been offended!

What is the meaning of this story? In this world, we have people who labor long and hard for the Lord. They pray and intercede, fighting through Satan’s opposition to gain great victories; revivals break out with many people being saved. There is great rejoicing, yet at the end, when the rewards are passed out, everyone gets the same blessing! Is that fair? Well—do you care? If a denarius is what is needed to meet your need, should you get more? Why? Isn’t the concept of transactionism a kingdom of the world view? How many religious institutions are guilty of pampering one worker above another because one is more charismatic or in a position of greater responsibility? Is this right? Yes, if we think like the world thinks.

If Jesus suddenly appeared today in the Christian community, took charge of the finances of the church, and applied the rule of supply according to the need and service out of love, I wonder how many ministries would survive. I have a feeling that there would be a stack of resignations on Jesus’ desk. How many senior pastors would remain in churches if the assistant pastors’ salaries were more because they have larger families and need bigger houses, extra cars, and money to take care of the children?

Isn’t it our evil hearts that wants to feel pampered because “we have paid our dues,” or “we’re important because...?” Jesus touched our nerves; and if that doesn’t hurt, it’s because we

didn't understand. Can we let go of our affection for the system that has been so compatible with our evil hearts? Can we learn to rejoice in the prosperity and exaltation of another? Is it not the evil that lurks in our hearts that resents another's benefiting from what we have labored to gather? Do we yet love the adulation of people? If we labor so that another benefits and gets credit for our labor, do we rejoice that our suffering is healing him? Have we yet learned the meaning of love?

I am convinced that God is an extravagant God. Not only did he create abundance in quantity, but also in diversity. He is not cheap; he spares nothing to achieve his desired purposes. He is not short on resources; if there is an insufficient quantity of anything, he can easily make more; yet, he does not want us to covet, hoard or waste. Greed, covetousness, the love of the world, and the need to possess are all parts of the fallen nature.

Some people justify their greed by pointing to the promise Jesus made that "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." (Matt. 19:29)

Does this mean that we're supposed to wind up as great landowners because we follow Jesus? If we attach that meaning to the words of Jesus, then we have two problems: First, that has not been the history of the church: And second, increased ownership can't apply to families. If Jesus had in mind the promise of increased ownership of families, we would have an unanswerable question: How can you get increase of mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers? Granted, you can have increase of houses, lands and children, but is that the intended meaning?

It's all a matter of what is in your heart. It's a good thing Jesus didn't include wives in the list, or some lustful people would use his words to justify their perverse sexual desires!

Don't we know that all things are ours? Ownership of property is a fine thing if it serves a useful purpose, but ownership is also enslaving because we must also accept responsibility for maintaining that property.

Somehow I don't think heaven has property markers, title companies, real estate sales firms, or insurance companies. This business about what is mine and what is yours belongs to the kingdom of the world only. All concerns over space, possessions, acclaim, credit, and proper remuneration are of this world. While we live here we do have such concerns, but they should not be concerns of the heart. When our hearts have been cleansed, our affections are on things above. What peace there is when our view of the world is that it is temporary. What we do, we do as a means to an end. What we possess, is only important if it serves a righteous end.

Eighty-eight

Who Will Be the Greatest?

Matt. 20:17-28

The day of crucifixion was drawing near as Jesus and the disciples traveled toward Jerusalem. The truth about Jesus' coming death was beginning to dawn upon the disciples' minds; but though he was now speaking openly to them about what was about to happen to him, the magnitude was hard for them to assimilate. The truth was beginning to find lodging in their hearts, but the roots had not yet gone very deep. Thus, Jesus had to face still another appeal to his natural nature, a dragging of natural world concepts into the spiritual kingdom.

One day a loving mother, Mrs. Zebedee, approached him. Every mother wants the best for her children, so I speculate that Mrs. Zebedee came to where Jesus and her two sons, James and John, were, to see how things were going for them. I am sure that there had been many family discussions about "this Jesus," who had captured the imaginations of their two sons convincing them to follow Him. I am also sure that many wonderful stories had been told in the evening hours or while the family worked with the nets. But there was also one very troubling concern, what would happen in the future? Where was this "teacher" leading these young men? If this mother was like most mothers, I am sure she had been asking Mr. Zebedee all kinds of questions that he could not answer. She wanted some answers, so there was only one thing to do; she had to go find the sons and find out what was going on.

Mrs. Zebedee probably asked very probing questions: "What's the teacher saying about his future plans?" "What's his vision?" "Does he have a plan for evangelism?" "Is he making any headway with the leaders at Jerusalem?" "How many Pharisees has he won over?"

The answers were no doubt, very unsettling. When the sons had tried talking to him about it a few days before, Jesus had given them a teaching about how they should be like little children; so how could they approach the subject again? At that time he had promised each of the disciples a throne to sit on and a tribe of Israel to judge, but Mrs. Zebedee wanted more. She did what we could probably expect any mother to do; she took her sons and went to Jesus. Kneeling before him, she asked, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your Kingdom." (Matt. 20:21) Now we're getting somewhere. Hadn't he said, "Ask and it will be given to you."? (Matt. 7:7) With promises like that, how could he say no?

Surely he knew he was bound by his words! Hadn't he surrendered his sovereignty to his words? Some people think so, but does that make it so? Jesus had already said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4)

It's not legal or proper to take scriptures out of the context of the entire Word of God because all scripture meaning is amplified by all other scripture. It was Satan who quoted scriptures like the one that inspired this response from Jesus in his attempt to seduce him into the improper use of the Word of God.

Was Mrs. Zebedee wrong when she asked Jesus if her sons could sit with him on his throne? I don't think so. I am sure that it's okay to ask anything, but the answers are dependent upon the will of our Father in Heaven.

Jesus' answer began with a question, "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

Contrary to what some people seem to think, God is still God! The Bible has not become God nor can we use it to control him. Neither can we command God, as some suppose. "This is what the Lord says—the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?" (Isaiah 45:11) (A misunderstood quotation because of the wording and punctuation of the KJV) It is not for the creation to try to control the Creator.

Now, I am sure that Mrs. Zebedee was innocent enough and that there is no evidence of any power play beyond the simple human sentiment involved, but the story does serve to show that the Father reserves the right to control man's destiny. No amount of scriptural coercion will change the matter; it is not negotiable. What the Father wills is final, yet there are lessons to be learned.

Eighty-nine

Jezebel Who?

Rev. 2:18-21, 24-27

In the previous chapter I wrote about Mrs. Zebedee and her desire to see her sons get positions of prominence in the Lord's kingdom. The subject is so probing that I can't restrain from writing more. Jesus had more to say, but he said it through John and addressed it to the church of Thyatira.

In Revelations 2:18-21,24-27, the promise of shared authority is tied to overcoming. The primary concern of the passage is a woman named Jezebel who claimed to be a prophetess. In the Old Testament Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, King of Israel, and a very wicked queen especially noted for her idolatry. The reason for concern about this new Jezebel was that her teachings affected innocent people, leading them astray. Who was this woman? Was there really a person in Thyatira of that name? Likely, there was a local church at Thyatira and a woman there who called herself a prophetess. She may have been named Jezebel, but the name was probably used more descriptively than literally. This whole passage seems to have a prophetic overtone beyond the localized application.

Many Bible interpreters see in these letters to the seven churches, symbolism for the seven ages of the church. In this view, Thyatira would be applicable to the age of Papal apostasy. If this were the case, the woman Jezebel would be representative of the infiltration of the spirit of religious adultery and false religion into the church. The teachings that would result would lead people into sexual immorality and spiritual permissiveness.

The spirit of false religion is any spirit that draws the focus of the believer's faith off Jesus as the Christ. Many forms of idolatry centralize the attention of the devotee upon his self-life and very commonly results in sexual immorality. Often, in false religions or infiltrated religions, sexual immorality is either openly allowed or easily excused.

Many Protestant faiths that have cried out against the teachings of the Catholic Church because it brought about the great apostasy, have themselves been guilty of similar abuses. For example, they have looked at the practice of selling indulgences and pronounced it evil (I agree), but have themselves made grace so easy, that one can commit any sin and still feel that grace will cover it. Perhaps the time has come for us to stop looking for someone at whom to point our fingers and start looking into our own hearts to see if we ourselves are guilty. It's much easier to point to a church in John's day, or an age long removed from us, as the guilty parties than to see the same spirit still alive and well, working in our own churches or Christian communities.

Jesus tied the promise of shared authority to the ability to resist and stay free of Satan's seduction. It seems that his power and deceptions are so strong, that the Lord did not wish to add any additional concerns for us. What is implied is that keeping free of his influence will require all our attention. If we succeed, we will have qualified ourselves for special positions of power in God's kingdom, during the era when he will rule with iron-fisted authority. The strength of

character required to deal with the Jezebel spirit will be useful when fire starts coming from the thornbush to consume the proud and control the rebellious for the thousand-year reign of Christ.

What sort of spirit is this Jezebel spirit? There are three clues given: her name, sexual immorality and the eating of food offered to idols.

First, let's consider the name Jezebel.

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa, king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians; and began to serve Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. (I Kings 16:29-33)

In this passage we have the depressing record of a man who greatly angered the Lord, but why? What did he do? If we think in terms of human rights crimes that kings often commit, he was not guilty of much. Ahab's crimes, it seems, were crimes against God, more than crimes against man. What he did caused a lot of trouble for everyone, but the trouble was not his oppression of the people as much as it was God's judgment. Ahab had the idea, apparently, that what he did religiously was his business; but God proved that wrong. Not only did Ahab affect everyone outwardly through God's judgment, but also inwardly, through the effect of idolatry upon them and their future history.

Now, what Ahab did when he married Jezebel was to bring idolatry into Israel on a scale and in a capacity like never before. Ahab had not only married a heathen wife, but had converted to her religion! He built her god a temple, an altar, and gave her power to oppress those who disagreed with her. In fact, her power became, in practice, even greater than the king's power because he was so influenced by her that he did her bidding. The idolatry that resulted from bringing Jezebel into Israel brought about a confrontation with Elijah the prophet, and a severe famine resulted. Ahab, instead of looking at his sin and seeing that he was being judged for it, blamed the famine on Elijah!

There is an attitude about sin that as long as we keep it to ourselves, what we do is our business. People today talk about victimless sin. The idea that sin is a private matter seems right at first, but many people are beginning to see that sin is everyone's business. Indeed, today, we are seeing the fruits of our folly as society grapples with the staggering problems that have resulted from drugs, promiscuity and divorce.

Similarly a lot of people in Israel probably thought it harmless for Ahab to worship at the temple of Baal. After all, what harm could an image do? Wasn't it just a piece of pottery, or a piece of carved wood or stone? What connection could there be between private sins and famines? Does the fact that there is no direct scientific link between a sin and an effect; mean there is none?

Ahab and Jezebel brought in a seemingly harmless form of religion; it seemed all right to have an object to worship. After all, who's to say that one religion is better than another? Don't they all serve the same God but with different names? Isn't there something good in all of them? Isn't it very narrow to believe that the Bible way is the only way?

Jezebel and her religion were a law unto themselves; she ruled by her strange teachings with all Israel suffering the judgment.

When Jesus referred to Jezebel in Revelations, a woman who called herself a prophetess, was he not talking about a spirit which takes the liberty to teach occult practices, and, in this case, in the name of Jesus? Just because a person says he or she is a prophet or a prophetess, does it make it so? Can we benefit from the insights learned from the occult about how to operate in spiritual dimensions?

The Christian community today has been greatly influenced by the teachings and practices of people who have taught occult concepts with Christian labels. The result is that, fundamental biblical teachings have taken on a demonic overtone, which is responsible for many excesses and broken lives. It is very exciting to some to see seemingly supernatural results from practices that seem very logically right, especially when the results are desirable. There are, without a doubt, many people who speak as prophets or prophetesses, whose words are mere concoctions of their own minds, or worse still, the words of demons.

I have observed many people who, in their zeal for power, attention, or greatness, have lived their lives thinking they had some great divine destinies, the result of some other person's misguided effort to be the Lord's spokesperson. Still others, as a result of great desire, have been deceived by spiritual experiences that mistakenly led them to believe they were very special people in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Are such experiences of the Lord? Usually not. I have been amazed at the number of such people who end up in sexual misconduct. Now that fact in itself proves nothing, because many people are guilty of sexual misconduct. However, when such misconduct is the result of spiritual experiences that produced the attitudes of being special, chosen, or greatly loved, the observation seems to be significant.

143

The woman Jesus spoke of at Thyatira led his servants into sexual immorality. The Jezebel of the Old Testament also practiced an immoral religion, and manipulated Ahab by creating illusions of personal grandeur.

You too may wonder about such people? Whenever I see people who seem to be affected by a sense of destiny I wonder what motivates them? Are they really Christians? I answer with a question: Was Peter a true follower of Jesus when he was rebuked for speaking Satan's words?

The words of Isaiah seem appropriate here,

All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—a people who continually provoke me to my face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat; who say, “Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!” (Isaiah 65:2-5)

How can people pursue their own imaginations as though they are God's revelation; offer sacrifices in gardens instead of at the temple; burn incense on altars of brick instead of uncut stone as they were instructed; sit among the graves keeping secret vigil to communicate with the dead, a forbidden practice; eat the flesh of pigs and broth of other unclean meat (representing the fallen flesh nature), also forbidden, and thus provoke the Lord? You can, if you think it's okay

too. You can live your life either worshipping God in the manner God has set forth as approved, or you can defy that revelation by acting or worshipping in a manner of your own design.

The people in this passage seemed to feel they were very holy people. However, what we think is not nearly as important as what God thinks. What they were doing was very wrong, but they evidently thought that what they believed was more reliable than divine revelation.

Perhaps these people in Isaiah's day reasoned that a lot had changed since Moses met God on the mountain. They possibly thought their ancestors were quite primitive, uneducated people. Times had changed; their lifestyle and education was very different. Their knowledge of the world and the cultures of other nations qualified them to make better choices. They were intellectually advanced enough to pick and choose what they would accept. They could have even thought that it was a sign of maturity to be willing to accept other nation's views of God.

Is it too narrow to accept the possibility of an absolute revelation of God? Is it a sign of arrogance to be sure about something that has substantial historic evidence? The revelation of the God of Israel and what he expected from his people had much more substance than the mere teachings of Moses. What Moses taught was divinely given and validated by history. If Moses acted out of an illusionary notion of personal worth, all that history could teach about him would be to affirm his folly.

I do not wish to sound like I doubt that God speaks to people today because, indeed I do! I do not, however, believe that it is wise to accept everything spoken in the name Lord, as being of the Lord. What Moses spoke did not come from a subjective experience, the result of his desire to speak; he was chosen by God, his life was ordered by divine destiny, and when God spoke it was because God wanted to speak to him.

I believe that God desires to speak to people today and people want to hear from God. It would be extremely naive not to recognize, however, that a great deal of discretion is needed to evaluate all spiritual experiences. Do they concur with both the spirit of divine revelation and the letter of divine revelation?

God is the same yesterday, today and forever; he does not switch from one spirit to another.

Getting a good solid view of ourselves will help us avoid many pitfalls in our spiritual experience, avoiding satanic deceptions, which are designed to make us feel that we are either worthless, or so special we warrant special treatment.

I have observed that when people draw close to the Lord, they often feel very loved. They seem to feel that they are so special that no one has ever been so loved. It is indeed very true because the love God has for us is always personal, unique and very special. God has never, ever loved anyone the way he loves you! You need to know that, but that love does not get you indulgences! It is God's love that sets boundaries.

Ninety

Food Offered to Idols; Is That Significant?

Isaiah 65:2-5

I have already spoken sufficiently about sexual misconduct, so I wish to comment instead about eating food that was offered to idols a practice that was very symbolic and suggestive of spiritual truth. Going into an idol temple and eating food offered to the idol may seem irrelevant to people who aren't given to idol worship, either personally or culturally; but if we see eating food offered to an idol as suggestive of agreement with evil spirits, then it takes on spiritual significance.

We may do very well in a lot of areas of life, loving the Lord, demonstrating unwavering loyalty to him and serving faithfully and selflessly in his work, and yet harbor attitudes that have the character of demons. Such attitudes as bitterness, envy, jealousy, unforgiveness, resentment, and vengeance, are manifestations of evil. To entertain, meditate, or ponder such evil is like eating the food of idolatry!

The people spoken of in Isaiah sixty-five were engaged in radically heathenish practices. Eating the flesh of pigs and making a broth of unclean animals was a severe transgression of the law, and acts of contempt for the laws that regulated their lives.

When people become discontented with the ways of the Lord as restricting their lives too much, dominating too much of their time, money and privacy, not allowing enough self-expression, they find it easy to start drifting away from the Lord.

Sometimes people become bored in their spiritual lives, the "blessed hope" seeming too irrelevant to their daily lives. Living their lives with a "heavenly vision," when there is a world to be gained, seems counter productive to the progress of society. So when the laws of righteousness forbid actions that could result in worldly success, the temptation is to abandon those laws. The problem is not a new one, nor is it a problem that only existed in Isaiah's day. While expressions of rebellion against God may differ today, the heart condition that produced them is the same.

I recently heard of an evangelist who reportedly stated that the word of God contains two different kinds of messages; one restrictive, negative, and full of suffering and judgment, the other is full of prosperity, blessing, joy and happiness. He was reported to have said that we could choose which message to follow! It is my judgment that such thinking leads to the abandoning of a heart felt yearning to know the mind of God and to discover his true nature.

Romans chapter one, gives us a vivid picture of the decline and fall of man from the place of fellowship with God. Verse sixteen contains a bold statement about the true nature of the gospel message while verse eighteen shows that any effort to suppress the truth results from godless wickedness. This effort is without excuse, the apostle states, because the message is so plain. Then he sites the true cause of the problem:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:21-22)

Herein lay the reasons for man's descent into gross evil. It begins with his thinking about God. Any conceptual digression from the Biblical revelation of him will lead to a fall. When we fail to embrace the God that the total scripture reveals, to honor and love him with all our hearts, souls and minds, we are open to any sort of deception that suits our heart's desires.

The next step down is unthankfulness. When we can no longer appreciate all of God's dealings, avoiding passages about discipline and only talk of blessings, rejecting the clear teachings about judgment because they violate our concepts of a God of love, we will consequently be unthankful for adversity. To fail to be thankful for adversity is to reject the process of correction that produces the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

The next step of decline occurs when man sees God as being like himself or himself as being like God. To say that man is the exact image of God is to reduce God to being like mortal man. This was one of the apparent mistakes of Job, who seemed to think that God was like himself. Man does indeed bear likeness to God being created in his likeness, but God was not patterned after man! The difference is as great as that of the toy car that bears the likeness to the real car, but the real car is not patterned after the toy.

The result of these errors in judgment is a descent into an abyss of evil almost to horrible to describe. To see a vivid picture of this abyss, all one has to do is go to the parts of our cities where sin is practiced openly. As a nation we have made the descent into evil, the result being broken lives.

In the world of the church many are just starting down the trail. Satan has seduced them into mindsets of discontent with the argument of separation from the world, death to self, and the need to persevere in a hostile world. They are convinced that they can ignore important passages of scripture and twist others to suit their ideas of what the gospel should say. Still others, arrogantly, would add so called new revelations that contradict the Biblical revelation to the teachings of the church. The new revelations seem good at first, with large crowds gathering with great enthusiasm, but the end will be as always. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12)

Ninety-one

We Need Our Sight

Matt. 20:29-34

As we noted in the passage of scripture written to Thyatira, (Rev. 2:18-29) there were three areas of concern that Jesus expressed: tolerance of Jezebel's behavior, sexual misconduct and eating food offered to idols. He pointed out that overcoming these offensive spirits would be a prerequisite to being assigned the responsibilities of authority.

If one is to rule with Christ, it is necessary that his heart is deeply in love with Christ and that pleasing him with complete loyalty is his only concern. He must also not take liberties with spiritual laws and principles. A person who allows sexual liberties will also likely use power or prestige for personal benefit. Such violations, if not overcome, are cause for disqualification for future responsibility.

There is no doubt that Jesus taught the existence of an eternal heavenly kingdom and that those who qualify will serve in that kingdom. It is a desirable reward to be deemed worthy by the Lord Jesus to participate. In fact, there is no higher reward than to be found worthy by our king. Can we drink of the cup from which Jesus drank? If we are to share with him in his glory, we must also share with him in the results of living a life of loyalty to his name and his will.

This worthiness of which I speak is not worthiness earned by works or some great deed; neither is it the gift of righteousness received at salvation. Instead, it is the result of devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is keeping of oneself from the distractions of the world, lovingly serving the Lord Jesus by serving one another, and evangelizing the world.

The biblical passages I have cited, and others like them, if we understand them, can give us important guidance, enabling us to avoid the pitfalls of behavior or attitudes that can disqualify us for the prize. I am convinced that there are great benefits awaiting those who are found to be "in Christ," who have put their full trust in him and have given themselves to the service of his will. If we are to qualify for the prize, we must avail ourselves of all opportunities to purify our attitudes, strengthen our faith, and purge our spirits of all unholy affections; we need to have our eyes wide open.

After Matthew discussed kingdom authority, he reported that two blind men came to Jesus. They were typical of all humans before meeting Jesus. They were blind! What they did, I believe, is what we all must do; cry for mercy. Seeing the Kingdom of Heaven clearly requires an opening of our understanding, a divine act of mercy. Jesus asked these men, "What do you want me to do for you?" 'Lord,' they answered, 'we want our sight.' Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him." (Matt. 20:32-34)

Part Seven

The End Draws Near

Ninety-two

Here Comes Your King!

Matt. 21:1-17

As we near the end of the life and ministry of Jesus on earth, his picture as a very unique king comes into even sharper focus. Matthew takes us to the final days of the life of Jesus; the long awaited hour having arrived. Jesus now is presenting himself to the nation as their king. As they approached the city of Jerusalem, he began to make arrangements for the grand entry the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah had foretold:

Say to the Daughter of Zion, “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Matt. 21:5, taken from Zech. 9:9)

Now is that any way for a king to enter the capital city if he is serious about becoming king? Where’s the pizzazz? How about some trumpeters? Where are the prancing horses? Where are the military marching units?

This king is not like other kings; he is the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. His kingdom is not one of glitter and glamour, of celebrities, dignitaries, power brokers or influence peddlers. This is a kingdom of love, compassion and mutual recognition, where the weakest members are the most important members. It is a kingdom where the sick and wounded are cared for, loved, and healed. This is a kingdom where the poor are given an inheritance and the weak discover strength. The king of this kingdom is Jesus! He came riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey!

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

There are no barriers around Jesus to prevent access to him. He does not dress in a manner that intimidates the poor. There is no show of strength to make the weak fear him. We see no austerity to make the timid recoil in his presence. When Jesus presented himself as king, he came as friend, brother, savior, healer and restorer.

There are places for displays of power, authority and austerity and these will be in evidence when Jesus comes back to judge the world. To those who refuse the rider on the donkey, he will come as the rider on the white horse, with power and great authority, with a sharp sword and an iron scepter. But this time it was different,

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. (John 1:10-13)

Matthew tells us that a very large enthusiastic crowd gathered around Jesus, cutting branches from trees, laying them on the road and shouting,

“‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Hosanna in the highest!’ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’” (Matt. 21:9-11)

The silence must have been almost deafening as the question was asked, “Who is this?” “Jesus?” “Who is he?” How this answer must have disappointed those who were looking for the promised Messiah. A king from Nazareth? Jesus fit the words of the prophets, but not the concepts of man. Nazareth was not a very respected village and certainly not where you would look for a king!

How frustrating to see Jesus in action! Just when it looks as if something good is about to happen, he says something or does something that gets everyone upset! Didn’t he know anything about psychology?

When Jesus entered the city, he headed straight for the temple and when he got there, he acted as if he owned the place.

Well didn’t he? Wasn’t this his Father’s house? Wasn’t it built for him? Didn’t people come there to worship him? He is God, after all, and Jesus is God’s one and only Son!

When Jesus came to his Father’s house, he got upset because he found that things were not at all what they should have been. All that was there should have had something to do with the reasons people came there, prayer and worship. He found merchants selling their wares and moneychangers exchanging foreign currency. The merchants for the most part were serving a good purpose but for corrupt reasons, profiteering from the hearts of loving worshippers! Those who labored in the temple were allowed to eat from the gifts and sacrifices of the people and selling animals for sacrifices may have been a legitimate service, but what was going on had turned into big business. Even if it was needed, it was inappropriate here. This was God’s house, a place meant for prayer.

Jesus expressed his displeasure by upsetting their tables and benches and clearing the merchandise from the temple area. Then he began to teach them, saying, “It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers.’”

“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.” (Matt. 21:13-14) What a scene! Jesus standing in his temple with all profiteering ended, the mess cleaned up, children shouting, “hosanna to the Son of David,” eyes being opened, and the lame walking. What a day at the temple! Jesus was in his house, doing what he had come to do!

Not everyone was having a good time, however. By this time the chief priests had heard what was going on and, as might be expected, were indignant — “hot”, to be frank. What in the world did he think he was doing? Who did he think he was? Weren’t they in charge here? To these men, the words of the children sounded like blasphemy. There was no acceptance of Jesus in their hearts! They hated the attention he was getting and were angry.

The stage was being set! Jesus would be crucified in a few days, but not yet because more was to be accomplished. Jesus withdrew to Bethany to spend the night.

Ninety-three

A Tree Without Fruit

Matt. 21:18-22

As Jesus was returning to Jerusalem from Bethany where he had spent the night, he came upon a fig tree. After inspecting it he found leaves but no fruit. He then spoke to the tree telling it that it would never bear fruit again. It immediately withered.

What power the Kingdom of Heaven has over created things! There are, no doubt, questions to be asked about the fig tree. Why was there no fruit? Was it out of season? Was Jesus justified in looking for fruit?

Some believe that since the tree had all the outward appearances of a fruited tree that fruit should have been there. Others see the tree as symbolic of Judaism, with its elaborate show of religious ceremonies but lacking righteous fruit.

However, whatever truths we see, there was one obvious lesson; Jesus was talking directly to the disciples about the power that was now available to them as they move in faith and prayer. Jesus replied,

I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. (Matt. 21:21-22)

No biblical passage can be removed from the whole context of scripture; no scripture can stand-alone. The disciples were being brought to the full knowledge of the dynamics of the kingdom. When hearts are pure, motives are correct, and we are flowing with the will of God, all things are possible.

Those whose hearts are full of self-will, self-ambition, or carnal desire for power, snatch at a passages like this one from Matthew, trying to prove that God will work on their terms. The only concern in the minds of such people is that of faith. Jesus had already spent nearly three and a half years teaching the disciples all the qualifiers to power and authority in the Kingdom of Heaven. What they needed now was reinforcing evidence to strengthen their confidence and faith.

They were about to be subjected to the worst possible trial imaginable, Jesus submitting himself to the hands of wicked men. If they had just remembered the fig tree, they would have known that he willed his own suffering and death. Dark times were just ahead, but strength could have been drawn from the knowledge that if Jesus had said the word, the hand lifted against him would have withered.

Nothing is ever out of control in the Kingdom of Heaven; there are limits set on everything. Wicked men are permitted to build towers, but not to heaven. Satan may make war, even in heaven, but he will receive his judgment at the appointed time!

Yes, all things are possible to those who believe, but not even Jesus used that power except by the will of God. The use of power and the exercise of authority must be in harmony with and in the context of the will of God. Those who enter into the kingdom must be in subjection to its king who doesn't allow us to be independent.

The advance of divine purposes must not be allowed to suffer because of lack of faith! What should be done, can be done. There is ample power and more for every Spirit ordained endeavor. No amount of money is beyond God's ability to supply; no evil plot can prosper to the destruction of God's plan. Yes, tests will come and wars will be launched, even against the church, but the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

Ninety-four

By What Authority?

Matt. 21:23-27

When they got to Jerusalem again the next day, Jesus went right back to the temple and taught the people. It wasn't long until the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" (Matt. 21:23)

Until we see the Kingdom of Heaven through spiritual revelation, until we come to the point where we hunger to really know, we will not ever see the true kingdom because it takes a pure heart to see God! The author of Hebrews wrote,

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy, without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (Heb. 12:14-15)

Sin blinds our spiritual eyes. There are, I am sure, sins with varying degrees of significance in our lives. Sin is sin, and all sin separates from God; yet, humanly speaking, sins vary in the impact upon our souls, our bodies and our spiritual natures.

There are what we call sins of the flesh; these are outward sins which affect this present life, our relationships, and, in general, our physical, mental and social peace. These are manifest as "sexual immorality, impurity (of the heart), debauchery (totally depraved conduct especially seductive conduct), idolatry (misplaced affections or worship) and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, orgies and the like." (Gal. 5:19-21)

Then, there are sins of the heart. These are sins that have to do with our affections; what we place our hearts upon. The sins of pride, self-centeredness, covetousness and greed, all are sins of the heart. Jesus said it this way, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matt. 15:19)

Again, spiritually there is no difference between one sin and another sin because all sin must be dealt with, but humanly speaking, there is a difference.

I am convinced that there are many people who go along in life sinning. They don't know the Lord; in fact, spiritually they are very naive. These people do many things that are violations of the Biblical code of conduct; they don't intend it as a sin against the Lord because they don't know the Lord. They, like the chief priests, have never understood by what authority Jesus speaks. To expect a sinner not to sin is an exercise in futility.

It isn't until we come into contact with the revelation power of the Holy Spirit and our eyes are opened that sin begins to take on serious significance. What was being done outwardly, perhaps habitually, now begins to involve the heart. Our spiritual natures have been awakened by the knowledge of God, and sin takes death (as a spiritual condition) to a deeper depth.

We must now begin to decide an important issue, who is in charge here? There may be varying degrees of submission to Divine authority; but if we are living our lives in a general sense of acceptance; progress and growth will result. It is when we see Divine authority and sin in direct opposition to each other, that we must decide who will be our master? Will we go on in sin or surrender our hearts to Jesus for cleansing? It is when we reject his voice that sin begins to penetrate to deeper depths. The second depth then, is when those who know the truth reject it.

Then there is a deeper depth still; it is when spiritual wickedness occupies high places. Now, we're talking serious violation! At this depth those who know the truth reject it and then prevent others who would believe from entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This prevention occurs in many ways, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly. Whether just an attitude never expressed outwardly, or a blatant violation, it is wickedness. The gate of hell stands open to receive

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such evildoers. Often the perpetrator knew the Lord at one time, but, because his heart loved the world, money or some lustful pleasure, he, upon some excuse (hypocrites, gossips, greedy preachers or the like), rebelled against the Lord and leads others into hell!

The crowd began to gather that day, "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. People have gathered under that same banner ever since that day, large crowds of many varied backgrounds, some religious and some pagans. They all have one thing in common; they do not accept the authority of Jesus.

In our day, the crowd is getting larger. The political climate of America, for example, has drifted from acceptance of Divine authority, to recognition of only our own laws. Once there was a public consciousness of Divine authority standing above our laws determining the application and interpretation of our laws. This is no longer true. For the most part, we stand in a crowd that is saying to Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Some people seem to be a part of this crowd but are not; others don't appear to be a part of this crowd but are. Jesus addressed this truth in a parable.

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not go.

Which of the two did what the father wanted? (Matt. 21:28-31)

There is a struggle within every person over this issue of authority. For some it is obvious and outward while others struggle inwardly. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are constantly having to decide who is in charge.

In this parable, Jesus points out a simple truth; what constitutes real obedience to God is not always what appears at first. In the parable the son, who said no at first but went, was the obedient one.

To put it another way, its not how many runners begin a race but the order and manner of the finish that counts.

There are people who ought to be entering into the Kingdom of Heaven, but who do not. Others, who we might think should never be allowed in, are entering. Jesus said to the chief priests and elders, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you." (Matt. 21:31)

Evil Confronted
Matt. 21:28-46

Now Jesus was getting down to the real business at hand. Evils seem to come in layers, some evil being surface and incidental and some contemplated and deliberate. Again, Jesus uses a parable to speak his message and turned to a familiar theme. This time the setting was a well-equipped vineyard to which the landowner had done everything to make it workable and profitable; then he had leased it out to tenants.

It's at this point that the incredible began to happen. When the landowner sent a servant to check on the vineyard and to collect the rent, the farmers beat him up refusing to pay. The next servant they killed, and the last they stoned. The situation was very serious. What would the landowner do? He couldn't just ignore the problem, so he sent more servants, this time in groups. The farmers did the same things to them; so the landowner reasoned, "maybe if I send my son, he can straighten this out; surely they will respect him."

However, when evil gets into the inner man and his heart becomes corrupt, he can do the unthinkable. Again, a corrupt heart is a heart that loves its sin. When men love their sins, they will do anything to continue them. If they love them enough, they will kill for them.

The men in the story recognized the son as the heir and killed him, thinking this would end the matter, they thought the vineyard would then be theirs. Jesus then asked the chief priests, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'" (Matt. 21:40-41) This reply became their judgment! Jesus continued,

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Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?"

Therefore I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. (Matt. 21:42-43)

Having said these words, he concluded by making this statement, "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on who it falls will be crushed." (Matt. 21:44)

Once more Jesus brings us back to harsh reality. If we are to enter into his kingdom, some things will have to change. It is not a minor adjustment of which he speaks but major change. He refers to a breaking experience, but who can endure it?

That did it! The chief priests could no longer avoid the issue; Jesus was speaking of them. They had proclaimed their own judgment and now the truth was becoming too obvious. They wanted to arrest Jesus!

What a truth! If you don't wish to face your sin, get rid of the preacher! Find someone to blame so you won't look so guilty. We have many devices we use to avoid what must be if we are too ever be truly healed. The idea of falling on the rock and allowing ourselves to be broken seems far too dangerous to us.

When ministering to people who have deep emotional, psychological, or spiritual problems, I find that full disclosure of all that has happened to that person is essential to healing. Now,

obviously, not every event of life is important to our deliverance from sin or torment, but if there is a sin or a pain too awful for words, that's the one that must be confessed! It's not those events we find easy to disclose that usually are hurting us.

With reference to the levels of sin (sins of the flesh, sins of the heart and spiritual wickedness), no sin is unimportant; but some sins get a much greater hold upon us than others. The level of pleasure we receive has a direct bearing on whether a sin is a casual surface sin (a sin of the flesh) or a sin of the heart (a sin of the affections). Whether or not we are willing to give up sin determines whether that sin is simply a sin we love and enjoy or a sin of idolatry. When we are once challenged by the Holy Spirit to forsake a sin, to continue in that sin is to refuse him who speaks from heaven—a very serious violation!

If we commit sins with the idea that no one will know, or “God will forgive me,” we just may find that release from the guilt or power of that sin may require confession. However, we all seem to want to avoid owning up to our faults because one of the sins of the flesh is wanting to look good.

Jesus was not doing what an aspiring young politician should have been doing; he was not making those who held the power to make or break him look good! He was not playing by the rules of the game. Jesus had become a threat to the well being of the chief priests and elders of the people, so they sought to arrest Him.

Ninety-six

Is This Anyway to Treat a King?

Matt. 22:1-14

Jesus continued teaching, giving parables and insight into a variety of subjects. He taught that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He then sent out his servants to call the guests who should have come, these would have been his family and close friends, the inner circle of his life; but the response was cold and indifferent.

So the king tried again; this time they ignored the servants and went about their life's activities, as much as to say, “This is more important to us,” their attitude might have been understandable if this had not been an important event, but a king was throwing this party! If it wasn't important to them, they should have realized that it was important to the king.

This was the second notice, but their resistance was increasing! Some of them were so irritated by this apparent inconvenience that they killed the servants!

The king was enraged and why not? Such contempt for his wishes was inexcusable. So he called his army and instructed them to destroy those wicked people and burn their city.

Then he called his servants and sent them out to call everyone whom they could find, good or bad. He came in to look the guests over and saw there in the midst of the guests a man who was not dressed for the occasion. Once more the anger of the king was stirred, and in language filled with implications of eternal

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damnation, judgment was pronounced on the man. “Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 22:13)

What we learn from this parable is very plain: the wishes of a king should always be our first consideration. That is true in the natural as in the spiritual. Treating the Lord as if his wishes don't count for much is to show contempt for God.

I think most of us ought to feel very ashamed in the presence of the Lord. Think about it: If we come to church late, displaying a nonchalant attitude, being disrespectful of the house of the Lord, are we not showing contempt for God? If our conduct before God would not be good enough for the kings of the earth, perhaps we ought to consider, is it then good enough for God?

The Pharisees already were aware of what Jesus was teaching in his parables. They knew full well that he claimed to be the Son, and that the father in the story was God! That meant they were the guests being invited to the dinner and their hearts were being manifest. The desires of their hearts to get rid of Jesus were being exposed further and therefore, the heat was being turned up for the soon coming crucifixion.

Ninety-seven
Hard Questions
Matt. 22:15-46

The hour of crucifixion was growing near so Jesus was turning up the heat, as it were, confronting and being confronted. There were three major schools of thought that were influential among the Israeli people at the time of Christ. Proponents of these schools were enemies, of sorts; but as the hour of crucifixion grew near, so did their efforts to trap Jesus draw them together. What strange bedfellows were Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees, all enemies of each other; but in this chapter they were working together to trap Jesus by his words.

So it was that they came, each with his primary doctrinal concern. First the Pharisees brought the Herodians who advocated Roman rule and were often spies for Herod, as might be expected they thought they could catch him on the issue of tithing versus taxes.

What Jesus taught on the subject was that God deserves what is his and the government deserves what is theirs. The Apostles also taught non-confrontation with the powers of government as an official religious position, so long as the government does not impose restrictions on matters of religious concern. In such cases, loyalty to the Lord takes precedents over what the government says or does.

After the Herodians came the Sadducees with a seemingly friendly question, perhaps even a sincere one, so Jesus answered them in the spirit of — “since you asked.” The question had to do with the resurrection in which they didn't even believe, a not too subtle tip-off to the fact that they were up to something. Their story about a woman who lost her husband and then married another man was probably one of their arguments for not believing in the resurrection. They likely reasoned that if there were to be a resurrection, many problems would result. In the resurrection there would be a poor woman with seven men each claiming that she was his wife!

For Jesus, an answer was no problem! He replied,

“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matt. 22:29-33)

There is nothing like the truth spoken in clarity to repudiate error. Whenever there is a dispute, is it not because there is insufficient truth being brought to bear upon the point in question? The wrestlings within courts of law have to do with one side trying to withhold the truth while the other tries to bring a clear rendering of truth. If there were no dispute over the true facts, there would be no trial. When Jesus spoke, disputes were put to rest, both because he possessed a clear understanding of the facts and because he spoke from the perspective of authority.

With the Herodians and Sadducees thus subdued for the time, Jesus was now faced with the Pharisees, men who were so convinced that he had a flaw in his teaching, that they had to continue their line

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of questions, even though each had been answered with indisputable accuracy. They were not trying to get answers to hard questions; they were trying to discredit Jesus before the people by making him look like a fool. Emboldened by their arrogance and pride in their great learning, they continued: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:36-40)

Once more Jesus had turned the tables on them, because he had such an absolute command of the scriptures, catching him in some error was an exercise in futility. But he had a question for them: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”

“The son of David,” they replied. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.” “If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”

“No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.” (Matt. 22:42-46)

This scripture opened the door to full understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ, and they knew it! They were caught in the web of their own making; but did it change anything? Repentance can only occur when the heart of man is ready to receive truth as a result of hunger for righteousness. When we come to the end of ourselves and are ready for Jesus to enter in saving grace, we can be saved.

Ninety-eight

Hypocrites Will Not Enter!

Matt. 23:1-39

Jesus did not allow the opposition to slow his ministry to the people, nor did he skirt the issues to please the religious leaders. On he went preaching instead of politicking. Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. (Matt. 23:1-3)

The ones of whom he spoke loved to look religious and to be called by high-sounding titles, but the truth was that they did not want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, nor did they want others to do so! They wanted people to be religious, but only so that they could have them under their influence. Religion seeks loyalty to itself; Jesus sought loyalty to the Father.

How corrupting it is when religion becomes the object of worship!

You say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath." You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? (Matt. 23:16-17)

Isn't it typical that when our hearts are in this world, our concerns are for what is valued in this world? These men were concerned for those parts of religious practice that affected their power, influence or wealth.

Religion worries about outward appearances, correct dress, correct speech, and other such externalities that appeal to the pride of life. "You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." (Matt 23:27)

If they had any question about the threat of Jesus to their religious position, they had none now. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt. 23:33) Then after further charges that must have infuriated those leaders, Jesus ended his remarks by saying,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (Matt. 23:37-39)

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Having concluded this searing attack on fallen religion, and those who propagate it, Jesus left the temple. That was his final visit. As he left the temple he paused to predict its destruction.

That temple and its significance would be destroyed, along with all the externalities and circumventing policies of a fallen religion. Jesus was the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world. A new day was about to dawn, Jesus would be the mediator of the New Covenant.

Ninety-nine

When Will the End Come?

Matt. 24:1-14

As the disciples were leaving the city of Jerusalem, darkness began to settle, not the darkness of the setting sun, but rather a darkness of the souls of mankind. When the heart of man comes into harmony with satanic purposes, unspeakable evil soon results. Satan was no doubt very busy stirring the fires of fear, hate and resentment that were already burning in the hearts of the chief priests and elders of the people.

The last days of Jesus' life provided opportunity for him to discourse on a variety of subjects. As the disciples were leaving the temple area with him, they called his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" Jesus asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matt. 24:2)

This was an incomprehensible prophecy of destruction. Yet, just a few short years later in the year of AD 70, the army of Rome came to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and the city with great devastation. What the Jews suffered during that siege at the hands of their own countrymen and the Roman army makes one shudder because death and destruction were everywhere.

Eusebius claimed that at the beginning of the war, three million people were shut up inside the walls of Jerusalem. There was a renegade army inside abusing the people and the Roman army outside killing anyone seeking to flee. Only those Christians that had fled to Pella, heeding the warnings of our Lord and the words of the prophets that the Spirit had sent to warn them, were spared.

Josephus, a Jewish historian, wrote an eyewitness account of the war and the devastation he witnessed. He estimated that between one and one and a half million people perished either by famine or sword. He also estimated that, after the war, about ninety thousand youths were sold into slavery.

I recognize that these numbers may have been exaggerated; but the stories of the horrors they experienced demonstrate that what Jesus said would happen, did happen, and with great fury.

According to Eusebius, the Lord warned the Christians to escape; then the fury of divine judgment fell on the wicked men who were left. They had cried out on the night of the trial of Jesus, "Let his blood be on us and on our children." (Matt. 27:25)

Having gone out of the city and across the ravine to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sat with his disciples privately looking back at the city in a mood of contemplation.

"Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matt. 24:3-14)

The Lord kept his answer rather simple, giving us some signposts to assist us in evaluating the progress of the history of the world with reference to the end. In summary the first part of his prophecy, which seems to be rather general in scope, includes the following: 1. A warning not to be deceived by those who will come claiming to be Christ. 2. The coming of wars. 3. Conflicts between nations, kingdoms against kingdoms. 4. Persecution, martyrdom, and a general environment of hate, faithlessness and betrayal. 5. The coming of false prophets and an increase of wickedness. 6. A growing coldness of love as a result of

wickedness, but with those remaining true to the end being saved. 7. Most important of all is the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations of the world.

It seems that all of the first six must be endured until this last part is completed because the proclamation, more than anything else, is the determining factor marking when the end will come. All the signs that Jesus said would happen are not to be looked upon as the indication of the end; wars, conflicts, persecution, martyrdom, opposition, and so on, but rather, the sign is the proclamation of the gospel. We have a job to do. It almost seems that if we want to see the return of the Lord, we must get serious about evangelism!

Without a doubt the signs Jesus listed are intended to alert us of the coming of the Lord. Though these are not to be taken as “the sign” of his return, they do serve to remind us of the responsibility to the task we are called to fulfill. Jesus indicated that these signs would intensify as the end approached, like labor pains intensify as the time of delivery approaches. This discomfort with the present world motivates us to evangelize.

I am sure God knows the hour of Christ’s return, but it still remains that we must be faithful to the task. If we don’t do it willingly, he will likely help us become willing through the increase of pain from a fallen world.

One Hundred
The Coming of the Lord
Matt. 24:15-27

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. (Matthew 24:15-23)

Just what is being prophesied in this passage is the subject of much discussion and speculation on the part of prophecy students.

Eusebius, who wrote about the events of the early church some three hundred years after the death and resurrection of Christ, believed that these prophecies were fulfilled in their entirety during the siege by Rome in AD 70.

Others protest, believing this siege to have been merely a fulfillment in type only, lacking all the features required to be the fulfillment of prophecy.

I will leave that for others to judge; it was, however, evident that this very scripture laid the foundation of thought among the Christians of that day that prompted them to flee when the warnings came to them. There is no question that the suffering within the city at that time was as great or greater than any that had preceded it. And, so far as Jerusalem is concerned, nothing in its history before or since has come close to what happened at that time.

It is my judgment concerning the passage that the important feature we need to note is the manner of Christ's coming. We may not be experts in matters of prophecy, though some feel that they are, but we can certainly understand the message of Jesus when he said,

For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, "There he is, out in the desert," do not go out; or, "Here he is, in the inner rooms," do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matt. 24:24-27)

The important feature for everyone, in any time period of the church, to remember is that when Jesus comes back, no one on planet earth will doubt that Jesus came nor that this prophecy was fulfilled! Meanwhile, while we are waiting, don't go running around looking for Jesus here on earth, he isn't here yet, nor will he be until he comes in the manner spoken. Many false Christs have come, some using other names,

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but all are frauds. When he comes, we will recognize him because his coming will be like a flash of lightning that is seen from one end of heaven to the other.

One Hundred-one
Be Ready!!!
Matt. 24:28-51

"Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather." (Matt. 24:28) At one time the prevalent view was that the carcass was spiritually dead Israel, and the vultures [eagles] were the Romans who used the eagle as a symbol. If, on the other hand, this scripture foreshadows the end time drama, as is commonly believed today, we may once again see Israel being faced with such an enemy as the Romans.

Once more our Lord gives us a vivid picture of what it will be like for this world when it witnesses his return to earth.

Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. (Matt. 24:29-34)

Some people see the fig tree as a symbol of the nation of Israel and the buds as the formation of the state of Israel. If this symbolism were accurate, then the prophecy that this generation will not pass away until all is fulfilled would mean that counting from that date we should be able to determine when these things will come to pass.

I have heard a number of ideas as to what a generation might be and when the budding begins. One recent theory held that a generation was forty years; thus the Lord was to come in nineteen eighty-eight, an obvious miscalculation. So what is it, one hundred years? In Genesis we read the account of Abraham being visited by God and a prophetic revelation being given to him that his descendants would be in the land of Egypt for four hundred years. Then later the same passage says that in the fourth generation he would bring them out. (Gen. 15:12-16) I am not a math whiz, but I think this means a generation is one hundred years at least in this passage. More recently, it has been thought to be thirty or, in some cases forty. One Bible dictionary says that a generation was eighty-three years, at one time one hundred and thirty at another, and five hundred at still another.

All of this speculation seems to add weight to the words of Jesus, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matt. 24:36)

The conditions on the earth at the time of the coming of Christ will be largely business as usual, with one exception; sin will be prevalent, much like it was in the days of Noah before the flood.

The Lord warns them about the “normalness” of the time when he will appear. He goes on to say, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” (Matt. 24:42)

The message of this passage, in summary, is that it is necessary to be alert and ready because we just don’t know when the Lord may come. I believe that the clearest teaching of the Gospels is that the Lord should be expected at any moment without advance warning. It’s okay to speculate, but never assume that you know it won’t be for a long time because that leads to careless living, a deadly spiritual disease. Likewise, too much emphasis upon the immediacy of his return leads to disillusionment when the time is longer than expected by those forecasting.

One Hundred-two

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Get Oil for Your Lamp Now!

Matt. 25:1-13

Continuing the theme of being ready, Jesus now gives us a parable about ten virgins waiting for the final announcement that the bridegroom is coming and the awaited wedding is about to begin. There is a time lapse between the expected coming of the bridegroom and his actual appearance so that in the intervening time, the virgins succumb to slumber, as might be expected. When at last the call was given, announcing the arrival of the bridegroom, the attendants discover that while they slept their supply of oil in their lamps had run out! Five of the ten brought extra oil; but due to the lateness of the hour, they couldn’t afford to share with the ones who didn’t prepare adequately.

The parable doesn’t have any hidden meanings or complicated lessons woven into it but seems very simple. Jesus is coming at a time when most people will not be expecting him. The right time for a wedding to begin will have come and gone, leaving the guests at a lose to know what to expect. The fact that the virgins slept doesn’t symbolize disrespect for the Lord, in fact, it seems like a given that this was to be expected because sleep is the heritage of the saints. The problem wasn’t the slumber, as the virgins were to be given a wake-up call, but rather the fact that they hadn’t made adequate advance preparations.

Some students of the word may get caught up in trying to determine what these virgins symbolize in the grand scheme of things, but that doesn't seem to be obvious. However, it is quite clear who the bridegroom is, Jesus. The identity of the bride is possibly the church, as in other teachings of the word, or it is entirely possible that the virgins represent the church here. I do not suggest that the church is not the bride or any other implications. The lesson is about time lapse and preparation and Jesus appears to merely be using a common scene to illustrate the point.

Again, the point is that Jesus is coming at an hour when he is not necessarily expected to appear. The methods of calculation will have failed, and a resultant slumber will have taken over, yet at the time of God's appointment the call will ring out and those who are ready will go out to meet him.

Next we notice the emphasis on the oil. What does it represent? It obviously keeps the lamps burning. What is it that keeps the light shining forth from our lives? Isn't it the indwelling Holy Spirit? I suppose that we could also say that the light has to do with the word of God.

In my limited study of science I learned that there are two kinds of energy, kinetic and potential. The heat created by the campfire is kinetic while the woodpile is potential. So it is with spiritual matters. When we store up the knowledge of the Lord gathered from studying his word, we have a good woodpile, as it were. The fire is the kinetic energy. In this parable the oil is the potential energy that produces light when activated by the fire of the Spirit. Lack of preparation in the word could lead to conditions of spirit that would cause the oil to run low or even prevent it from being used!

When there are delays in such matters as the coming of the Lord, we tend to become hard-hearted and disbelieving. Also, when we experience delays, we can become confused, especially when there are unexplainable difficulties or sorrows in the waiting time. Mary and Martha experienced such confusion when Jesus delayed his coming to them and Lazarus died as a result. They were hurt at Jesus for letting the death happen, but Jesus wanted to teach a lesson; he is the resurrection and the life! There is more to our walk with the Lord than knowing when he is going to come.

There is much debate regarding this parable, but no matter; be ready, have what is needed in good supply, and you will find that all other matters will work out. Let the counters count, and the speculators speculate. When those who profess to be wise and make predictions about when Jesus is coming prove to be wrong, be wise and maintain your readiness to react to his call. We don't know when, but we know that when he calls us, we will answer.

One Hundred-three
Use the Talents You Received
Matt. 25:14-30

Apparently, there is no excuse for laziness in the Kingdom of Heaven. That may not be good news to a lot of people who are non-producers in kingdom matters. We have been bought with a very painful price,

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and our King has a right to expect something from us in return for his gift. His expectations are, however, not the lesson of Matthew 25:14-30, but rather I believe, the chapter contains a

discussion of what ought to be the normal experience of every Christian who has received the gift of life—growth.

The story is about a man who was going on a journey. Before leaving he calls his servants and gives them amounts of money called talents. (One talent was about one thousand dollars.) He gave the first servant 5 talents and the second 2 talents and the third 1 talent. They each understood their responsibility to the money and the first two took it and invested it wisely and gained an additional amount equal to the original investment! The one who only received one talent was afraid of losing it so he hid it and did nothing with it. When the man returned he called his servants, and each of them returned his money with what was gained. The man who hid the talent had nothing to show for having had it, but at least he didn't lose it. The master was angry with the man and had him cast out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, a serious judgment.

This story is insightful concerning the attitude of our Lord concerning what we have been given to do. Our assignment is not so much the use of money but rather, opportunities to propagate the message of the gospel.

Whatever we have been given, money, as in the story, talents, or certain abilities, these should be used with the Kingdom of Heaven in mind. Some people are endowed with the ability to learn and, therefore, as the opportunity arises, should apply themselves to studies so that the gift that has been given increases. The same principle applies to talents in music, art and science.

There are some people who are especially good with money. They have a talent for taking an amount of money and, by wise dealings, increase it. Money is not one of the main themes of the scriptures, but Jesus does talk about it here. In this story, we have servants being given amounts of money that really belong to their master. They recognize that he intended for his money to be used to gain increase. Some of the servants were diligent with it, and the result was that they gained one hundred percent increases.

One poor fellow received only one talent of money. Yet in spite of the fact that it was a small amount, he did nothing with it except hide it. Perhaps he reasoned that it would be better to do nothing than to try and fail.

Many people keep company with this man. They never venture to do any task for their Lord. There are people who never contribute to a church, never volunteer for any tasks, and never share what they have with someone in need. These individuals have never tasted the joy that comes from giving.

I remember a time when I was in Bible school. We went to a street corner in the city where we were and began to share the Gospel to the best of our abilities. We had a megaphone and yelled at the tops of our lungs. Looking back, I wonder what possible good could have been done. Yet, I remember the great feelings we all shared after we left driving back to the school. We were pumped; it was exciting. We really felt as if we had overcome great fear.

Who gained from our giving? Probably no one except us. Was it worth it? Oh yes. It still stands out as one of the highlight experiences of my time there.

Giving to others or giving to God is very much the same, in respect to eternal rewards. It is my belief that no matter what gifts we offer, all are acceptable to God when done as unto the Lord.

One Hundred-four
Judgment is Coming
Matt. 25:31-46

Jesus continued in chapter 25:31-46, his teaching about our responsibilities to him and his kingdom. When he returns he has a right to expect that the job assignments will have been completed. In teaching concerning this he likened his servants to nations that he characterized as being sheep and goats to be separated on the Day of Judgment.

Truly Jesus used the right descriptions of human nature when he spoke of sheep and goats. Goats are stubborn willful creatures that have the ability to frustrate and annoy while sheep on the other hand, are loving gentle creatures that respond to leading rather than driving.

Old Testament types (teaching pictures) show that goats were used in the ceremonies of worship and atonement. They were, in some cases, types of Christ in his role of a substitutionary sacrifice. Christ was

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never goat like, but we are, therefore taking our place on the cross, a goat would picture our character that he was atoning for.

Goats played a very important role in the everyday lives of the Israelites of old. They were used for meat, milk, and milk products, while their hair was used in fabric. They were always included in an accounting of personal wealth. Since they were considered so valuable, they were often used as sacrifice animals. In like manner though we are all too often, goat like, we are valuable to him.

In the passage Matthew 25:31-46, the Lord used goats as symbols for individuals marked for judgment because they are stubborn and self-willed. The individuals symbolized were not referred to as wicked people as we count wickedness, but rather, as wicked because they lack sensitivity to the needs around them.

Those who do the works of God, because it is their nature to do so, were called sheep and were invited to “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (Matt. 25:34)

This quality of doing good, which is so cherished by God, is a quality that must be cultivated in our lives.

Service to others is, from God’s point of view, service to himself. “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Matt. 25:40)

There is, of course, a question about whether Jesus was talking about the need to indiscriminately serve everyone who is deemed to have a need, or to limit service to those who are a part of the Kingdom of Heaven. The key to understanding comes down to who Jesus meant when he said “brothers.” Brother Christians are usually meant where brother is used in the New Testament. It also meant blood brother relationships as well as nationality sharing.

One time a question came up about what was meant by the term “neighbor” to which Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable the person deemed to be

neighbor was the person in need while the person acting as neighbor was the person willing to give aid to the needy man.

In this case, brother is likely to have a similar meaning. However, I don't believe that every single human being would necessarily fall within the intended meaning of this passage, nor should one limit the definition to the brotherhood of Christians.

In the matter of compassionate care and aid, there are limits to what ought to be done for any human being by the general body of Christians. We are instructed that if a man is not willing to work, he should not be permitted to eat. The same sort of instructions is given regarding widows. If a woman is a widow under the age of sixty, she is not to be placed on the role to receive aid, but is to be encouraged to be married. These cases are illustrative of the fact that, even in the case of the brotherhood of Christians, cases will dictate what ought to be done.

In summary, if a person is in need of ministry and the capability to minister is there, compassion requires that we act according to what the need requires. That sort of ministry is deemed to be unto the Lord himself. By the same token, failure to do what ought to be done, will be deemed denial of the Lord!

There are many matters that fall into an uncertain zone. For example, questions may arise as to whether in giving we are supporting a sinful life style. This sort of question is not new because in the early writings of the church we find it was addressed. What believers were admonished to do, in cases of uncertainty, was to give to the needy person without regard to the character of the recipient. The giver was held innocent in such a case, while the receiver was held accountable by the Lord for what he did as a result of the gift. I think the advice was good and should be accepted as practicable.

It is better to give and know that our Lord is pleased with the spirit of generosity, than to withhold and be judged for using discretion as a mask for sin. As in all cases that pertain to the activities of Christians, it is the disposition of the heart that is looked at by God.

Because Christians have hearts in which the Holy Spirit resides, we often do things, as natural flows of our hearts, that we do not even consider worthy of notice. Yet the Lord takes account of them; and on judgment day, we will be given recognition just the same.

In the teaching given by our Lord, the rewards for the righteous come as a surprise to the recipients; they were not aware that what was done was being viewed in such a light. Neither were the ungodly aware that the Lord was watching them.

Judgment day will come whether we are believers or not, and rewards and judgments will be given out on the basis of what is deserved. There will be many very surprised people on that day. The true motives of the heart will be manifest, with some people being terribly disappointed, but God is just.

One Hundred-five

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Jesus Honored at a Dinner.

Matt. 26:1-13

Bad things seem to happen when we least expect them. No matter how much we think we're ready for something, we usually aren't. The time for the Lord to leave this world was rapidly coming, but the disciples were no more ready for it than they had ever been. Having concluded the dissertation on the end times, Jesus spoke to his disciples about his coming death by

crucifixion. I suppose they probably thought that he was just babbling when he spoke of being crucified.

There is an old saying: "Familiarity breeds contempt." Perhaps this saying applied to the disciples. They may have thought that Jesus was giving in to fatalistic thinking. Certainly his crucifixion didn't fit into their concept of relationship with Jesus. If he were to die, it would have to be after he had set up a kingdom and had reigned in fulfillment of the prophecies, as they understood them. And besides, hadn't he promised them each a throne to sit on to judge the twelve tribes of Israel?

Never mind what the disciples thought because God's plan is not determined by what we humans think.

They soon arrived in Bethany where a dinner was planned in honor of Jesus at Simon the Leper's house. This meal would probably be the last formal meal Jesus would eat, except for the Passover meal. The town was Bethany, and Lazarus was in attendance, (See John 12:1-2) Martha, his sister served, while Lazarus reclined at the table with Simon the former leper, and the twelve disciples. There were probably others there as well.

It was no doubt, a very emotion filled atmosphere as they partook of the meal together. This meal was a very awesome occasion because if it had not been for the ministry of Jesus, they never would have come to a leper's house in the first place.

And there was Lazarus; the man who had been dead and placed in the tomb that Jesus had called back life. Had it not been for Jesus, he could not have been there.

Perhaps there were other stories in that room that night, but Mary was to take center stage. Her story must be told; it is a story more incredible than the few words devoted to it fully revealed.

Our first observation is of Mary taking an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and pouring it over Jesus, which really strikes me as an understated event. What would cause a woman to do this? What emotion or contemplation went into this action? Have you ever felt a prompting to do something you couldn't explain?

As Mary listened to Jesus, she must have felt emotions that demanded action. Perhaps she was reflecting on how Simon had been healed and restored back to his place in his family and community. No doubt the memory of how her own brother Lazarus had been dead filled her mind with wonderment, and then there were those times when she had sat at the feet of the Master and listened to his teaching. How could she thank him and what gift could she give him?

I think she got up and slipped away to her own home where, with eyes searching and heart yearning she looked about for some expression of devotion that would be appropriate. At times like that hearts speak louder than reason. Suddenly her eyes caught sight of the jar of nard, a very expensive perfume. A sense of holy worship must have arisen inside her; she had to anoint him with it!

The cost, what about the cost? When you feel what I am sure Mary felt, cost is not on your mind. You do what your heart says. And so it was that Mary went right into that room full of men, violating tradition and reason. She broke the jar and poured the contents on Jesus' head and feet. Probably she poured it wherever skin could be found on which to pour it. As she finished, she bent over and began to wipe his feet with her hair. What an outpouring of love!

Not everyone appreciated what took place in that room that night. Some uncomfortable feelings began to surface. In fact, what began with looks being passed between friends, soon took on a more serious note as Judas spoke up. “Why this waste?” He asked, perhaps for them as well as himself. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” (Matt. 26:8-9)

How much should we care about the poor? Was it really the poor that upset them? Some people do care a great deal about the poor, and I am sure these disciples, for the most part, did.

Maybe it’s just my suspicious mind, but I think, however, that there was something a little less holy that motivated them. Maybe they were worried about finances, giving may have been down. If you as pastor or board member see someone in the congregation give a large gift to someone out of a heart of love, does it bother you that the money didn’t go into the church treasury? In the disciple’s world of struggle, where most people lacked the niceties available to the affluent, seeing something of value consumed in an act that seemed like obscene extravagance, was more than they could watch!

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We live in a world where power politics thrive on people in want. Though we do not lack resources, yet struggle goes on in this world, the reason being mostly sin. Yet, because of sin, God pronounced a curse on this world, the result of which was struggle. There will always be thorns and thistles to make things difficult until God’s anger is past.

This world is not to be loved or sought after; God has better things in mind for us. Yet, while we sojourn here as children of the Most High God, he would have us be liberated from frugal mind-sets. On the one hand, God is not interested in baptizing us in gold dust, (He could do so if he wished!) On the other hand, he doesn’t want us to go about unable to do his will for lack of resources.

It’s easy, if your wallet is empty and your bank account shows zero, to cry poor; but should we? God is very anxious, I am sure, to deal with the love of money, that is, greed for this world’s goods and pleasures. In the end, he will also deal with us about our greed for power, influence, attention, or the resources of others. It is also true that our lack of faith can cause frugal attitudes. The Kingdom of Heaven is not dependent upon the resources of the world, yet this world’s goods can become instruments of worship.

A pint of nard, worth a whole year’s wages, to a mind-set with limitations is a lot of money! I don’t think that mattered to Mary in the least. Mary’s heart seemed intent on her expression of gratitude and love. It’s lesser men who do not understand this sort of thing. They complain when the widow puts her mite into the treasury, when buildings are too beautiful, when worship is too noisy. They complain when people don’t dance when they worship and others complain when they do. They complain and complain because they do not understand a heart in love with God! Can men love a God whom they cannot see, a God they cannot touch? As incredible as it may seem, the answer is yes.

Does God care that we build beautiful buildings in which to worship? Does he care if people indulge in expensive clothes, cars, homes and goods? Indeed, he does if such extravagances are expressions of our love for pleasure.

How delicate the balance is in such extravagances! Which building was built out of sincere worship and which was built to the God of pride? Which building reflects a frugal, little faith, and which shows the builders' desires to place their faith and worship in evangelism instead of in buildings? All such actions seem very complex; who can judge them?

To Mary it was all very simple because she was not in tune with the world. Thoughts of economics, charities, impressions, or properties, were far from her mind. She was in worship! Nard was the instrument through which she poured her love. Cost was not considered; only how much nard it took to pour out such love. When the nard was gone her love still remained, what else could she do? With a gesture too swift to stop, she brought her hair down to use as a towel; she began to soak up the surplus and to massage in the contents.

Worship on such an intense level is hard for fallen man to understand. The disciples loved Jesus, but Mary's actions were too much for them, yet it was at this point that Jesus revealed his gratitude for such worship.

There was more to Mary's actions than even she understood, because she didn't act on her own; she had been divinely motivated! She was an instrument of God at that moment. Jesus would die for the sins of the world, and the nard was to prepare him for burial.

The disciples were not in tune with his death, their hearts were too set on the world and its needs. No doubt these men had often walked past the poor, probably not having had any money to give them. Perhaps they had seen some overwhelming human needs, just as some of us have.

Who can worship when the world is dying? Can we understand that worshipping hearts prepare the way for the entry of the Spirit of salvation? Was it really a waste after all? Mary's story, Jesus said, would be told wherever the gospel was preached.

As Mary left the room that day, having poured out her heart and the contents of the alabaster box, she smelled so good! Everywhere she went the air was filled with the fragrance of nard.

It's always true that those who love, those who worship, those who care not for the world, the flesh, or the devil, but who worship God in Spirit and in truth, spread sweet fragrances everywhere they go. Mary left to add joy to everyone who would meet her or hear of her, but another left for another purpose!

Part Eight

The Climatic Hour

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One Hundred-six

Judas Sells Jesus

Matt. 26:14-25

Judas had had it; it was time to do something. He had witnessed Jesus doing many wonderful miracles but where was the kingdom? Where was the relevancy to the desires of the people to be a free and independent nation?

We can only speculate about what was in his heart. Was it power he sought, or was it money? In Judas' case the dominant desire seemed to be money. In others it might have been something else. John said that it was Judas who had spoken up at Simon the Leper's house and further, that he was a thief and stole from their moneybag.

I find it very interesting that Jesus would make Judas treasurer when he knew that he was a thief. Also, why would Judas go on stealing? Perhaps Jesus was giving Judas a chance to repent.

Many Christians do the same sorts of thing. They go to church, participate in some way, and then as soon as the service is over, they go to their sin like a duck to water.

One of the great mysteries to perplex my mind is why some people continue to pursue their own ways in the face of even obvious rebuke. I have to accept the fact that they do. Judas did, even though he had followed Jesus for over three years.

Was Judas a believer? To a point he was; he was there participating and listening, but sinning all the while. Judas never denied the Lord; he just sold him! It wasn't doctrine; it was money. Pure and simple, Judas evidently liked to get little goodies for himself. After all, he didn't steal big amounts, but eventually the sin grew. What had started small was now big enough and bold enough to sell Jesus.

What's the big deal anyway, a little pleasure here, a little breaking of a moral law there, as long as no one gets hurt by our sin does it really matter?

Judas may have reasoned that selling Jesus wouldn't really matter. After all, couldn't Jesus easily escape from their midst? With his supernatural power, he could easily stop them at any point; and besides, how could anyone kill a man who had raised the dead? They had tried to capture Jesus before, but he had simply moved through their midst and escaped.

Judas may have reasoned many different things. I don't think he thought that they would really succeed in killing Jesus. I have heard elaborate theories about Judas and what his motives may have been, but the gospels paint a simple picture of this man, nothing complicated; he was a thief. This accusation may not seem soul damning, a coin or two here, failure to own up to a debt, a small deceit or larceny. Was it really the act of stealing that caused Jesus to call Judas a devil on occasion?

Sin is a symptom; the reason we sin is that we're sinners. How could Judas have gotten by so long? Why didn't Jesus just go to him and say, "Now Judas, you sinned today; you swiped a dollar from the bag." But evidently he didn't.

It seems to me that part of the scheme of things in this world is that sin must be abandoned as a decision of the heart. Cleansing comes in response to a cry for mercy. Judas had a devil heart! Why was he with Jesus?

Why didn't Jesus choose another? Didn't he know what sort of person Judas was? I believe Jesus did know, and that that's why he chose him.

Judas was a representative of a segment of the human family. His evil was irrevocable, not because it was too great for God, but rather because he would not see it! Judas even tried to repent, but failed. Why? He failed for the same reason he had failed to repent before. I wonder how many times Judas wept in the night because he had sinned that day? I wonder how many times he said, "God forgive me," but found no repentance.

Judas sold Jesus. Later, when he saw what was happening, he was sorry. He returned the money and he wept, but to no avail. He had missed the point! Tragically, many people miss the point. Judas sold Jesus, but Peter denied him; what was the difference? The difference was as vast as day differs from night.

Peter loved Jesus, so when he erred, he repented. Judas seemed to only be sorry his sin was hurting Jesus while Peter was bitterly repentant. Judas was sorry his sin was so wicked. There is a whole class of humanity like Judas. Who go to church week after week, dress like Christians, talk like Christians, and even

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think they are Christians. They are people who have gone through all the training classes, been accepted by the church, and even may be one of its leaders! They make outward pretenses of conformity, try very hard to get rid of sin, and do pretty well, by the way. They're faithful to most functions and pay tithes to the church, yet they have Judas hearts. What is this I speak of?

There are such people spoken of in the Bible, in fact, it is full of them. They were people who thought that God was looking for outward religion; therefore, they practiced their religion faithfully. They didn't want to be judged by God, so they tried to obey him; but deep inside, they hated him. God represented an unwelcome restraint.

These people would really rather be sinning, but who wants to burn in hell? They live good enough to get by, they hope; they feel that it would be better to be in heaven with a boring God, than to be in hell with Satan. Actually, if they could have what they want, heaven would be quite different from God's heaven. Heaven, for them, would be a place where every fleshly enjoyment could be indulged without restraint. It's not God they yearn to see or Jesus they want; in fact, heaven really sounds like a bore to them. If they could sin without consequence, they would!

These people are wolves in sheep's clothing. They are religious through and through, but deep inside they hate God, thinking he is a scrooge. They think God has played some sadistic trick on them and only wants to spoil their fun and restrict their lives. They do not know God, or understand God, nor do they want to do so. They would gladly sell him if that would end the matter. For how much? Thirty pieces of silver would do!

Zechariah saw the condition very clearly when he prophesied concerning the ministry of Jesus and his resultant rejection and sale. He put it this way,

So I pastured the flock marked for slaughter, particularly the oppressed of the flock. Then I took two staves and called one Favor and the other Union, and I pastured the flock. In one month I got rid of the three shepherds. The flock detested me, and I grew weary of them and said, "I will not be your shepherd. Let the dying die, and the perishing perish. Let those who are left eat one another's flesh." Then I took my staff called Favor and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations. It was revoked on that day, and so the afflicted of the flock who were watching me knew it was the word of the LORD. I told them, "If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. (Zec 11:7-12)

What did he mean, "In one month I got rid of the three shepherds"? Could he have meant Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah? Remember them? They were those older brothers of King David, followers of King Saul, whom we discussed earlier. If you will recall, they represented the popular answer to the cry of man for a leader to satisfy their needs. Eliab represented the father image, Abinadab, the prosperity advocate, and Shammah, the man with the charm and charismatic demeanor. Were these the shepherds of whom the prophet spoke? That's what I think; they certainly fit. Did Jesus get rid of them? If we're looking at principles, he certainly did!

The failure to give fleshly relevancy to the gospel is to make it nearly worthless to the class of humanity that doesn't value the eternal or the divine.

Isn't the revelation that God is seeking those who will chose to love him the whole point? Isn't that why God created man on earth instead of heaven? I think God created us far enough away and small enough so that we wouldn't mess heaven up! This Judas class of humanity cares only for the now and really has very little interest in God and none in a Jesus who doesn't fit into the ideas of utopian planners, social engineers, or religious reformers.

There is another class of humanity, a minority group, but they do exist. They're of different hearts, and different minds, are often misunderstood, and hated, and seem to have a characteristic longing for something not of this world. They are the people of God, the people of the New Covenant!

One Hundred Seven
In Him Was Life
Matt. 26:17-20,26-30

Jesus is more than a king, so in order to tell his multi-faceted story, we must at times see him in different roles.

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The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is also a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews says that only Jesus could possible qualify for priesthood in this order.

Hebrews also says that humanity does not need sacrifices of animals because the blood of an animal never did help redeem anyone. The most that was derived from animal sacrifices was outward purification and ceremonial cleansing because no amount of sacrifices ever changed any man's heart.

Jesus was a priest of a different order from the ones at the temple. As high priest of this different order, he also became the mediator of a New Covenant that required blood for ratification. The blood had to be unblemished human blood from a sinless sacrifice. The only blood that would ever have qualified was the blood of Jesus. The tabernacle in which it must be offered is not on the earth, but rather in Heaven.

In a most incredible way, Jesus was God's provision to humanity, God's lamb, if you will, offered by God for the redemption of mankind. Then Jesus, acting as high priest, having been raised from the dead, offered that same blood he had shed, in the heavenly tabernacle!

As Jesus was preparing to make that all-important sacrifice, he and his disciples gathered for the Passover meal, the Last Supper.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:26-28)

Luke phrased the statement a little differently; "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20)

Each writer of a gospel wrote and quoted according to his memories of words and events. Thus, slight variations bring additional information to light so that each account is important. In

Matthew and Luke we have an interesting difference. Probably Jesus said much more than either author reported or could have reported but the gospel writers were inspired to write the essential and important events as concisely as they could. So we have Matthew speaking of the blood of the covenant, and Luke the new covenant in his blood.

From Matthew's legal point of view, which is what we would expect from a man writing about the king and his kingdom, it is vital to see the blood as the blood of the covenant. Luke, on the other hand, wrote from the perspective of Jesus, the son of man; therefore, he spoke of what is important to man.

Some manuscripts of Matthew, from which the translators of the Bible worked, do have the word "new" in them, but the majority of them simply say "blood of the covenant". In Luke it is definite.

This subject of the new covenant in the blood of Jesus is much more important to us in our daily life experiences than the blood of the (new) covenant. When we speak of the blood of the covenant, we speak of an event, historic, but very important. We look back at that event with gratitude and awe, but it is the new covenant in his blood that bears an on-going significance. Saying, "the new covenant in his blood" draws attention to what was in the blood of Jesus that gave it the redeeming quality, that it might be the blood of the covenant. John tells us what it is that made Jesus different from all other men. "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." (John 1:4)

What did John mean? Isn't everyone alive? Obviously yes, but John spoke of spiritual life which not everyone possesses. In fact, no one did, ever, not even Adam. Jesus had life "in himself." (John 5:26) Adam was alive, spiritually and physically, but the source of his life was the tree of life.

All created beings are dependent creatures since God did not give any created being the ability to self-sustain. Satan thought that he could exist without God, but that notion was pure folly. When Satan broke off with God, he didn't cease to exist, but he did change from the beautiful creature God had made him to a despicable creature.

Jesus was different; he was not a created being, but is creator. The body Jesus occupied as a man was created, but Jesus was pre-existent. Not only does Jesus have the power of life to sustain himself but he is the source of life to those who receive him. Thus, the blood of Jesus was different from the blood of any man including Adam; it contained life.

Leviticus, chapter seventeen, explains the importance of blood; verse fourteen says that the life of every creature is in the blood. If Jesus had life in himself, then that life would be in the blood, according to Leviticus. How much life was there in that blood? Well, I can't prove it, but I am as confident as faith will enable me to be that there was enough life in his blood to meet the needs of every person who has ever lived and ever will live. When Jesus held the cup and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20), he made one of the most important statements of his life.

First, we note that the cup was the Passover cup that in itself was full of meaning. The feast of Passover was celebrated the day before the beginning of the feast of unleavened bread.

Passover was the fourteenth day of the first month, the feast of unleavened bread lasted seven days, during which time believers remove all yeast from their diets, eating only unleavened bread (bread made

without yeast). In fact, they removed all yeast from their houses as well. This feast week was a memorial to God's delivering Israel from servitude in Egypt.

The cup was the focal point of that Passover event since the wine it held represented the blood it held in Egypt on the night of judgment. The blood was vital to their protection. They took the blood and applied it to the doorpost and lintel so the death angel would pass by their house. The whole event was so full of symbolic significance that justice to the subject would take much more time than I can devote to it here.

To summarize, this festival symbolized deliverance from sin by entry into redeeming relationships with Christ, who is our Passover. The eating of unleavened bread was their commitment to not mixing the bread of life with the leaven of sin. Committing themselves to this feast was symbolic of committing themselves to Christ Jesus as their conductor of safe passage out of this world, from under the curse and this body of death, into the full joy of sins forgiven and resurrection life. Unleavened bread symbolized the total purity of Jesus Christ, untainted by the contaminating influences of sin, the world, or the devil. Eating of this bread was commitment to what we did not naturally desire. The week's diet was not very appealing to the flesh, but it spoke of salvation.

The cup contained wine that was symbolic of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This symbolism had not been revealed prior to the night of the Last Supper, nor do I feel that it is very well understood even yet. To understand the symbol of the wine as representing the blood of Christ, I wish to draw attention to the fact that there are two kinds of life and two kinds of death, natural and spiritual. Jesus had both natural and spiritual life.

When we study the laws of sacrifices, we find strict regulations concerning blood and how it was treated. It was never permissible to drink blood or to eat blood products because the life was in the blood! (Duet. 7:10-14) When sacrifices were made the blood shed was collected in a bowl and used to sanctify objects or people by sprinkling it on that which was being purified, the remainder was poured out. It was a symbol of the atoning blood of the coming Lord Jesus.

The drink offering, which was offered in the form of fermented fruit of the vine, wine, was also another part of the sacrifices. Wine is used in the scriptures, to portray a truth that speaks to us of things spiritual in nature, though its use is discouraged as a beverage and forbidden in abuse. In the scriptures we find a reference to wine being the blood of the grapes. (Gen. 49:11) The fermented juice we know to be wine has the power to change the behavior of the partaker. Small amounts tend to relax the recipients or mellow their behavior. We note, however, the admonition, do not get drunk on wine because it leads to excesses. Actually, due to the tendency to over indulgence that is so prevalent, I endorse the position of total abstinence. Nevertheless, whatever we believe about the use of wine, or abstinence, we are forced by the scriptures to look at wine through the pure eyes of the spiritual man and see that God used it to speak to us of the blood of Jesus.

Jesus ran straight against the tide of Jewish doctrine and tradition when he boldly proclaimed,

I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh

and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever. (John 6:53-58)

These people who heard these words had been ignorantly partaking of Christ each year in symbolic form; but when they heard the symbolism explained; they found it offensive and repugnant. “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” they said. Indeed it was a hard teaching. On the face of it, it sounded as if Jesus had finally gone too far. Was he advocating cannibalism? Of course not, what he spoke of was spiritual. After most who heard him turned off their hearing ears, he went on to explain. “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63)

John had already explained the principle, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...” “The word was made flesh and lived for a while among us.” (John 1:1-2,14) Now in this teaching Jesus was reversing the principle once more. What had been Spirit had become flesh; now that which had been flesh for a while among us, would become Spirit once more. All that believe spiritually would do what the priests had done symbolically when they ate of the sacrifices. What had been symbolized in the drink offering would be realized spiritually in the lives of the believers.

Now let’s look at the blood again. As I pointed out, there are two kinds of life, natural and spiritual. Jesus made it clear that there are people who are alive physically but dead spiritually. He was alive both physically and spiritually. On the night when he was celebrating the Passover, he took the cup and said, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 22:20) Let’s pause and ponder on that thought.

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Jesus held the cup that night, and in my mind’s eye, I see him tap it as if to draw attention to it. “This cup is” -Whatever that cup had been, no matter, now it was something noteworthy. It had been symbolic; now it was fact! It held the blood of the new covenant!

What really happened there? Once more I refer to John, chapter one, verse four: “In him was life.” That statement descends upon my mind with the weight of the most pivotal of all truths. Man had sinned in the Garden of Eden; the penalty was death. From that day on humanity was dead because of transgressions and sins. The only hope was in God’s promises that there would be a redeeming sacrifice for sins. The source of life was removed from accessibility, and mankind could only approach God through faith in his promises and obedience to his commands.

Then Jesus came! “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” (John 1:4) The blood of Jesus Christ was different from the blood of any man that had ever lived and thus was an acceptable sacrifice. His blood was far superior to the blood of any animal; animal sacrifices only did in symbol what Jesus did in fact. If I understand the logistics of what transpired here, I believe a transfer was made, spiritually not physically. In Jesus, who was different from all other men, was “life,” the light of the world. It was access to that life that had been lost to mankind at the fall that now would be made accessible once more.

The Spirit of Life in the blood of Jesus qualified it to have the power of redemption. A purpose was served, a transfer made. Now the cup held the new covenant in his blood! Spiritual life was transferred from the physical blood of Christ to the cup. The outward act was only for

the benefit of the eyes and ears of man, but spiritually we were permitted to witness the process of transition. That transition was the taking of the spiritual life from the blood of Jesus, setting it aside long enough to accomplish the work of redemption, and then making it accessible to man through the operations of the Holy Spirit. The actual cup was of little importance; it was no more “holy” after the occasion than it had been before. Nor was the juice more “holy” than before; however, it served to speak of heavenly matters.

Jesus would shed actual physical blood; however, the spiritual life he possessed would not be lost but once released into the human spirit, would bring about change. The life that had once been in the bloodstream of Jesus would be made available to mankind once more. He set his life aside by the statement made in order to take on our deaths. Now, having set aside the spiritual life, the process began. The blood of Jesus was now to be the blood of redemption. This spiritually pure blood, this precious blood because sin had never tainted it became the sin offering for the world!

When we partake of the Lord’s supper, we don’t drink his blood because it was poured out as an offering for our sins. Instead when we drink of the cup of communion, we drink of the “life” which is eternal. The life of the flesh was poured out.

On the day of Pentecost, when the hundred and twenty believers were in prayer, a remarkable thing transpired.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:2-4)

This event caused quite a stir because nothing like it had ever happened before. People came from all over the city, many from places that spoke languages other than those spoken in Jerusalem. They were amazed to hear the believers speaking in languages they understood. Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” Do people sometimes act as if they are drunk when they are filled with the Spirit? Yes, in fact they do! Could it be that the life in the cup Jesus had used was now being poured out on the waiting church?

God said, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:16-18) Notice the words “pour out.” What is being poured out? It’s the Spirit! What about the life? “The Spirit gives life.” (John 6:63) That’s right; what was once in the blood of Jesus is now in the outpoured Spirit. Here is one more verse to consider: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor. 3:6)

It is my belief that the Spirit now performs the same function in the “body of Christ” that the blood of the natural body of Jesus once performed in his body. When we come together and begin to worship the Lord, the Holy Spirit is there, enabling us to worship. He is there when the ministry is taking place, enabling the minister to minister the life-giving word of the Lord. In fact, all that happens to us spiritually happens because of the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing happens to us of spiritual significance that is not from the Lord by the Spirit!

When we take the cup of communion, let us remember what the cup represents and all that Jesus did for us. Take it in faith. It is for redemption. Take it in faith. It is life giving. Take it in remembrance of him. He will fill you with his Holy Spirit. Life will flow into you; changes of heart and life will result.

One Hundred Eight

A Scene of Horror, a Scene of Wonder

Matt. 26:31-46

Jesus went from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed in deep agony of soul. The psalmist David seemed to capture the moment: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God." (Ps. 69:1-3) Such was the agony of what Jesus was going through, but his agony didn't end in the garden. "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me." (Ps. 69:4)

The pain of that night was more than words could relate. God had given sacrifices to symbolize the pain, but none of the sacrifices were adequate symbols. No wonder God was upset when people brought inferior offerings and treated such a holy event as if it were a bore and a burden! Why should our iniquity be laid on Jesus? Why should he have to suffer for us?

The Psalm continues, "I am forced to restore what I did not steal." (Ps. 69:4) The words of Jesus echo in my mind, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." (Matt. 26:39) It was Satan who stole our right of access to the tree of life; now Jesus was being called on to restore access to the Spirit of life. Before what was in the cup could be given to be "drink indeed," Jesus had to suffer and die in our places. Without his sacrifice, the justice of God could not release his life in us. Life is what we need; but without atonement being made, it could not be given. Jesus took our sins and follies that night.

The Psalm continues, "You know my folly, O God; ..." (Ps. 69:5) It had been done! The transaction had been made, he accepted our guilt, and he was standing in our place. He was no fool, but fools we are. "My guilt is not hidden from you." (Ps. 69:5) the psalm continues. Whose guilt? Again it is our guilt! He took it as his own to pay our penalty.

Then an incredible thing happened in his prayer, "May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel." (Ps. 69:6) The success of the mission of Jesus depended upon the total accuracy of his understanding, and the correct application of righteousness into every situation of life; one mistake would invalidate the effectual sacrifice of his blood, a very real concern.

Then he went on to reveal one of the most painful parts of what he bore, "For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons; ..." (Ps. 69:7-8)

Why did Jesus suffer so? Why was he willing to do it? "For zeal for your house consumes me." (Ps. 69:9) We know, of course, that we are the temple of God. It was his zeal for us that drove him on!

There was a price to pay, being God's Son, the sin sacrifice of the world. The real Jesus was not popular with those who looked for a son of David to save the nation from Roman oppression. Jesus didn't come to save humanity from its external enemies. What Jesus came to do, they didn't want! "The insults of those who insult you fall on me." (Ps. 69:9) Not all the pain that night of crucifixion was physical. Perhaps the physical pain served to distract from the deeper pain of the heart. On and on the Psalmist goes, expressing the agony of soul of the suffering Christ.

His blood was shed for all humanity, but not all would benefit. The Psalm reveals that all that scorn him, who reject him, and who are his enemies, must be cut off. He prays for justice to be visited upon the guilty.

May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. (Ps. 69:22-28)

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(Even though the Lord also prayed for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him, forgiveness is dependent on the repentance of the person committing the sin. Judgment is the reward of unrighteousness, only faith in Jesus will stop it.)

How could Jesus bear the pain and abuse? His sacrifice was his song, his praise, his thanksgiving!

I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me. I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the LORD more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hoofs. The poor will see and be glad — you who seek God, may your hearts live! (Ps.69: 29-32) (Emphasis mine)

No wonder his blood atoned; it was his offering of worship! Imagine that; Jesus' offering was his thanksgiving! It's described in Leviticus 7:11-15

Offerings of unleavened bread, prepared with oil and cakes made with fine flour, well kneaded and mixed with oil were offerings to show thankfulness. These were obviously not meant to be gourmet meals but were symbolic offerings that prefigured this night of suffering. When Jesus was falsely accused, spiritually attacked by their anger, mocked, his beard plucked—they were grinding the grain of wheat into fine flour. When they beat his back, the oil for our healing was being added.

Why was Jesus so long suffering? Why did he bear it so lovingly? The Psalmist said that his sacrifice was his song, his praise, and his thanksgiving. When we face difficulty in life, pressed in on every side, do we offer God a sacrifice of thanksgiving? When you are falsely accused, taken advantage of or taken for granted, do you gather the fragments of pain, sorrow, and loneliness and make them an offering to the Lord? Do you pour oil on your suffering that there might be healing. This was the method, I believe, Jesus used to triumph over his enemies. He knew the secret of overcoming. The Psalmist said, "This will please the LORD more than an ox, more than a bull (symbols of strength) with its horns (symbol of power) and hoofs." (symbol of a

life of righteousness) (Ps. 69:31) What life flows from the life poured out in thanksgiving! “The poor will see and be glad — you who seek God, may your hearts live! The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.” (Ps. 69:32-33)

There you have it, the sacrifice that pleases! God’s wrath is abated and justice is served triumphantly, making the Lord’s mercy available to all! “Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them, for God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah. Then people will settle there and possess it; the children of his servants will inherit it, and those who love his name will dwell there.” (Ps. 69:34-36)

One Hundred Nine
The Arrest of Jesus
Matt. 26:47-58

Jesus and his disciples had left the upper room where they had celebrated the Passover and were now in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus liked to come here to pray and that was why they were there that night. Three times Jesus withdrew to a spot alone to pray asking his disciples to pray with him, but they all succumbed to sleep. Finally a crowd of people arrived in the garden to arrest Jesus.

Here they came, swords and clubs in hand, a large crowd of evildoers, ready to take God into custody! Why were they so eager to arrest Jesus? What had he done? He had healed the sick, cast out tormenting demons, cured every manner of sickness known to man, and restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. For which of these offenses did they come?

What was the hurry that they had to come in the middle of the night, armed as if coming to capture a rebel army? Daily, ever since Jesus had arrived at Jerusalem, he had been at the temple teaching and healing the sick. Why had they not arrested him there?

Evil deeds like the cover of darkness! If your deeds are righteous, broad daylight is most desirable. When people act evasively, sneaking about, suspicions are aroused. What drove these people?

The good people of the city were all asleep; that’s what good people do at night. Restful sleep is the gift of God to the righteous. They don’t toss and turn with worry; they pray and, having found assurance that all will be well, they sleep.

Sometimes they even sleep when they shouldn’t. Such was the case with the disciples that night. Jesus was going through the greatest trial of his life, so he needed them to back him with prayer; but they

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were too dense-minded to grasp the anguish of the moment. Nor did they understand that they needed to be in prayer that night for they were about to enter the most distressful period of time in their entire lives.

Judas came into the garden that night, his heart hardened with sin, without a clue as to how despicably evil his actions were. That’s the way it is when people sin; the more they sin, the less sin matters to them. They say, “What’s the big deal anyway? Who am I hurting?” They do their drugs, get drunk, sleep around, cheat on their time cards, steal little things, you name it; but who is being hurt? It all seems so harmless, but is it? Who can see the hardening process of the heart? Who can detect that the selfishness of their actions is blinding their eyes to what is real? We

note, too, that one sin seems to inevitably lead to another. Sin requires sneakiness, so only the most hardened criminals do their crimes in broad daylight where everyone can see.

Shame is the nudge of the conscience. Without shame, people commit unthinkable crimes. It is alarming when we see people doing violence to their sense of shame! That violence is deadly to the conscience, but does the conscience ever really die?

Judas came that night, boldly leading a band of evil men. Callously he approached Jesus, as he evidently was accustomed to doing with the usual greeting of a kiss. The kiss looked like an act of friendship, but why the clubs and swords? All that was needed was for them to come and say to Jesus that the high priest wanted to talk to him; he would have gone. Did they think they could make him come with them if he didn't want to go? If Judas had remembered, they had tried to capture him once before, but he slipped through their midst and disappeared because his hour had not yet come. All of their actions were so foolish. How did they think they could kill a man who performed such miracles as Jesus did?

Jesus said, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matt. 26:53-54) There was no need to slip around in the night with a mob of violent men. Jesus was ready to go with them, not by their will, but by God's will.

As the mob moved in and seized Jesus, Peter drew the sword he had with him and somehow managed to cut off the ear of one of the men. I suppose he aimed a little lower than the ear and probably had more serious intent. No matter, Jesus was right there ready to practice what he preached. He picked up the ear and healed the man right in the midst of this violent scene!

I am sure Jesus' action had a profound effect upon Peter. Here he was risking his life to defend Jesus, and what did Jesus do? He healed the man and rebuked Peter! All of Peter's great dreams of being a mighty warrior were suddenly dashed at the feet of Jesus. What sort of man was he? Who could wage a war in his behalf if he healed everybody you hurt?

I believe Satan was right there ready for the moment. You know what he does; that voice comes into the ear of your mind and the sense of despair sweeps over you. What's the use? Why even try? Peter, like all the disciples, had great ideas about what it would be like when Jesus became king. However, this man in the garden, who was he? Kings don't act like that; they take charge, set the battle in array, and destroy wicked men. They don't heal the enemies and surrender without a fight. They don't go with them as a sheep to the slaughter; but Jesus did, willingly, quietly, serenely, in obedience to his Father and in answer to the words of the prophets.

There was also a possible prophetic note to all of this because Peter was later recognized as the first pope of the Catholic Church. In the course of history, the Catholic Church, for a time, held the people of their parishes in ignorance of the teachings of the Bible to a degree. The Catholic leaders only told them what they wanted them to hear and kept them away from instructions in the Word. This was accomplished by forbidding the reading of the Bible and, conducting the services in Latin even though very few people understood Latin. In effect, what they did was cut off the hearing of the people. Isn't it ironic that it was Peter who committed the act of cutting off the ear? Was that prophetic of what the church that calls him their first pope later did? Peter, Peter, don't cut off the ear! The ear is the hearing through which the gospel is

received! Give God that ear; he will heal it. And so it has come to pass that Jesus has moved upon that ancient church, and the hearing is being restored.

One Hundred Ten
Jesus Stands Trial
Matt. 26:59-75
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“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and his Anointed One.” (Ps. 2:1-2)

When there is sin in the heart, Satan’s will becomes our master. They took Jesus to the high priest’s house and began a night of interrogation and false accusations.

There is little doubt that Satan was calling the shots in the Sanhedrin that night whose rulers were already in tune with his purposes, determined to have Jesus executed. His crime? None. Why? Politics, selfishness, fear of loss of power if he were permitted to continue with his ministry and also, they were angered by his attacks upon them and by his teachings that exposed their ignorance and their willful misrepresentation of truth.

Surely, they must have reasoned, it wouldn’t be hard to find something to put Jesus on trial for, but the harder they tried the more difficult it became. They weren’t even able to make false charges that could be upheld with some measure of truth against him.

The life of Jesus was so pure, so righteous that they were at a loss to find something, anything that would at least appear correct. Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” (Matt. 26:60-61) This charge was, of course, a correct accusation. He had said he could destroy and rebuild the temple but bragging was not a capital offense, if that’s what they thought he had done. Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” (Matt. 26:62-63)

They obviously were having a hard time finding an offense and needed some help, so Jesus, now being placed in a position of having to answer gave them what they thought they needed. He answered, “Yes, it is as you say, but I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt. 26:64)

Why did he say all that? Wouldn’t it have been better to give a more evasive answer? Perhaps a simple “maybe” might have been sufficient. However, we need to understand that Jesus had come to be crucified, and whatever it took to get that accomplished was what had to happen. It is not at all surprising that Jesus engineered his own conviction. He knew just what to say to push the mob over the edge. Not only did he say, “yes” to the question, but also further emphasized his divine role. This outraged the high priest. “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’

‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered.” (Matt. 26:64-66)

Having come to the conclusion that they had a justifiable case, they let the abuse begin. “Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’” (Matt. 26:67-68)

“Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee,’ she said. But he denied it before them all. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, ‘This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ He denied it again, with an oath: ‘I don’t know the man!’ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, ‘Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.’ Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’ Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.” (Matt. 26:69-75)

How tragic this scene had become! Even Peter the “rock,” was corrupted by what he saw. I think Peter was horribly disappointed in Jesus. This was the man he had left all to follow, trusted with his life and future, and believed in when everyone else was having serious second thoughts. Now, here in this courtyard, Peter, no doubt, was hoping for the old triumphant Christ to be seen, the one he so admired, who always had an answer to every attack in order to put his enemies on the run. What was happening? It was all so confusing! Jesus had never acted this way before. Peter was not only disillusioned, but I believe, incensed. However, the anger of man does not work the righteousness of Christ, so Peter’s did not either! He didn’t just deny the Lord but, with curses, denied he even knew him!

One Hundred Eleven

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Who’s on Trial Here?

Matt. 27:1-26

“Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’” (Ps. 2:1-6)

The chief priests and the elders of the people had made up their minds; Jesus had to die. Now the only problem remaining was how to convince Pilot, the governor, to put him to death. Each year, at the time of the feast, Pilot delivered a prisoner to be crucified, while another prisoner was released; the elders planned to create an uproar among the people present, calling for the death of Jesus. They knew they didn’t have a case; but since Pilot was not known for being a strongly principled man, perhaps he could be intimidated into an action against his better judgment.

A messenger came to Pilot from Pilot’s wife to warn him about a dream she had that day concerning Jesus. She told him in the message not to have anything to do with Jesus because he was a just man. Pilot like many, if not most men, only paid slight attention to what his wife said.

I don’t suppose it occurred to Pilot that it was he, not Jesus, who was on trial. One can only speculate about what might have been if Pilot had listened to his wife with a whole heart. Instead, he did what he thought best, but tried to absolve himself of the guilt by calling for a pan of water in which to wash his hands, a symbolic act that said, in effect, “Now it is your responsibility.”

Judas was somewhere nearby when all of this was going on and saw how determined the chief priests and elders of the people were. I don’t think he thought that Jesus would really be put

to death. If the theory was correct that Judas thought Jesus should be king but lacked the will to overthrow the government, then it is reasonable to assume that he may have been trying to force Jesus' hand into action.

Judas wanted to reign with Christ and may have even thought he was doing the right thing. He may have thought that Jesus would commend him for his ingenious plan of action. However, things were not going as Judas had evidently thought they should and he became deeply distressed over what was happening. Now that he saw what was happening to Jesus, he wanted to stop the action, but it was too late. He tried to return the money he had been given but they refused it.

As is the case with many people in such circumstances, he tried to get out from under the guilt, but like Pilot, found that guilt is not something one can easily escape. When our actions go against the warnings of those who are in a position to hear from God, or are more able to see clearly than we, they can have tragic results. His wife had warned pilot, Judas had been warned by Jesus, and the chief priests and elders should have known from all the evidence and the testimony of the prophets.

The people who made up the crowd that stood before Pilot made a fateful mistake; not only did they participate in the plot to kill Jesus, but they also called for the guilt for his blood to be on them and their children. I wonder what they would have done that day if they had known the final result of their actions?

All too often people resist the warnings of God and his prophets about the seriousness of their actions. It's so easy to slip into a sinful act, especially in this day of advanced technology when one must be constantly on guard against the inroads of the enemy. Every conceivable means today—TV, VCRs, magazines and telephones are nurturing lusts of the flesh, and now even computers are vehicles for the filth of the world. Children and young adults are especially at risk, due to their natural curiosity and high-level hormonal activity. Once appetites are stimulated, they can run rampantly toward destruction. Wise parents are always alert for even the slightest hint that the destroyer is seducing their children.

The crowd of people who gathered at Jerusalem that day came as a result of their religious fervor. Little did they know how subtly their minds would be twisted to convince them to call for the murder of an innocent man! Being a pawn in the hand of another, unfortunately, does not allow us to escape the responsibility for our actions.

The people who were a part of that crowd that day were, however, the targets of the first evangelical thrust of the gospel. They were given an opportunity to hear the message and to receive pardons for their sin. The love of the Lord is expressed to a lost world in the call of the Spirit to come to Jesus and repent of sin. We can all come; you can come, won't you?

One Hundred Twelve

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The Coronation of the King!

Matt. 27:27-30

Soldiers brought Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him, put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns to set upon his head. They put a staff in his right hand, and knelt in front of him, and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck

him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” (Matt. 27:28-31)

They thought they mocked him, indeed, they did in their hearts and actions. However, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs.” What a scene! Jesus must have looked awfully silly to them, standing there in a discarded robe, a thorn crown on his head and a staff for a scepter. But wait—what is that I hear? Laughter coming from heaven? Yes, I believe so! But who is being laughed at? Jesus? NO. It is they! The Lord Almighty is scoffing at them! Then his laughter turns to anger, and he promises to terrify them with judgment; but he says, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.” (Ps. 2:6)

Yes, the tables had been turned; they had just installed the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. This was CORONATION DAY! This meek one would inherit the earth! “I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.’” (Ps. 2:7-8) His kingdom is a kingdom made up of all nations because Israel gave the world its king. Before him every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (see Phil. 2:5-11)

Yes, they thought they mocked him when they wove that crown of thorns, but do we now understand that no other crown would do? The wisdom of the thorn bush is well taught in the scriptures.

We saw that wisdom on the mountain when Abraham offered Isaac as an offering to the Lord and found there instead a ram caught by its horns in a thicket (most likely a thorn bush), God’s provision for his obedient believing servant.

Adam and Eve had fled to the trees (symbolizing strong things or things natural men trust in, such as, physical strength, intellectual resourcefulness, education, talents, special skills, occupation, charisma, wealth, friends, family, peers, and connections) to hide from God, their sin having awakened their consciences.

Mankind needed coverings so God in his great love provided and answer; a ram caught in a bush by its horns (Horns were a symbol of strength.). The ram represented the coming Christ and being caught by his horns meant his strength (Love) was held captive by the bush! (Man’s need.)

The bush with the ram caught in it represented the only possible answer to the need of man. God’s love for Adam and his race required a sacrifice for sins, thus Jesus had to come and die for the sins of the world.

Was there a thorn bush in the Garden of Eden; is that where Adam and Eve ran to? Of course not; thorns were added as the result of the curse. That bush became a curse because of us! Those thorns were meant to hurt the flesh of man. Adam ran to the trees, but God provided the wisdom of the thorn bush to provide an answer to his need for salvation. Instead of trees for security, God gave pain so that we would be able to understand our need.

The ram, Jesus, found himself helplessly caught in the thorn bush. It was God’s strength, his great love that captured him and tied him to the plan of salvation! The wisdom of the thorn bush became the foundational concept for the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven, but sin required a redemptive sacrifice, and Jesus would be that sacrifice.

Man ran to the trees; but God took a bush, added thorns to it, clothed it with wisdom, then added a ram and finished the work of redemption!

Moses too encountered a bush, which Josephus said was a thorn bush, and got a revelation of God from it. He learned that the fire of God could not burn it because it was God's bush. He also learned that man must recognize the absolute authority of God and submit to it if he is to be delivered from bondage. In response to the question about God's name, God said to Moses, "I Am that I Am." To say "I am" was to declare his eternal existence. God can only make such a statement for he is the only self-sustaining being that exists. The Israelites had to trust in the message of the thorn bush and the messenger who brought it.

Thus, they wove the crown of thorns that day, not by man's choice, but by God's!

When Jesus stood in the Praetorium that day, they decided to mock him by placing a scarlet or purple robe of royalty upon him. Such robes were very expensive and therefore worn only by kings.

The source of the color, I am told, was the shells of a unique shellfish that lived in the Mediterranean Sea and were gathered off the shores and crushed.

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Shellfish are interesting creatures. In themselves, they are not very attractive, a kind of glob. They are spineless, quite lacking in any kind of beauty, and without any special features. We would have very little interest in them if it were not for their very special organs called mantles through which the shellfish secretes their body fluids that harden into shells. As the shellfish grows, the organ grows, and all the while the shell is being formed. According to its species, each shell forms shapes, sizes and colors of fascinating beauty. In a spiral, each segment of shell is a mathematical wonder, of exact ratio of increasing size to that which preceded it.

Long after the shellfish is gone the shell remains, a glorious witness to its Creator. Those little creature and their shells, so insignificant in themselves, bear witness to the glory of God.

Elijah, too, had a mantle, (a long, cape like garment) which symbolized the hand of the creator upon a rather insignificant creature, Elijah. Without the hand of God upon him, he too was quite spineless. In fact, it is very likely we would not even know of him if this were not the case. He had a great name, "Eli," meaning Almighty, and "Jah," Jehovah; thus, Almighty Jehovah would be the approximate meaning. However, it took more than a name to make him a part of history; it took God's hand in action that made Elijah a name to be remembered.

Elisha too, had a meaningful name, "Almighty in supplication", but what did that get him until he received the mantle? Once Elisha received the mantle of Elijah, which had become the symbol of the prophetic office, he too was able to do exploits in Israel.

The robe they placed upon Jesus was almost certainly dyed in a very costly dye. Those shells that were produced by the shellfish, the products of their lives, were gathered on the seashore and taken to be crushed to get royal purple dye. The color thus represented sacrifice.

In like manner, the robe of Jesus foreshadowed another robe that he will wear one day. John saw him in vision coming again to the earth to execute judgment upon the wicked, and told us he would be wearing a robe dipped in blood. One of the prophets saw him in vision, coming from battle with his garments splattered with blood. Some believe the visions are the same; but unless

the translators made errors, there is a big difference between a garment splattered with blood and one dipped in blood, which indicates a deliberate act. If the latter were true, then whose blood would the garment be dipped in, his? I don't think so, what reason would there be in that? I think the blood is that of the martyrs who, because of the touch of the master upon them, have so lovingly laid down their lives for him. Wearing the color of their blood would show his great reverence for such sacrifices, a sort of credential, if you will, to come back to execute justice on the earth.

They put a staff or reed in his hand. If the crown of thorns and the robe had symbolic value, then we can expect the staff to have also been symbolic! Kings hold scepters in their hands as symbols of power and authority! However, an iron scepter, which speaks of firm and hard rule, is not representative of the internal rule of the Kingdom of Heaven but of the reign of Christ over the nations. Jesus wasn't being crowned for the millennial reign at that time, but rather as the king of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, we have the quote in Hebrews: "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.'" (Heb. 1:8) And then again, concerning Christ's rule over the nations, "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—he will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery." (Rev. 2:26-27)

When the Roman court was crowning Jesus, it was with the Kingdom of Heaven in view, thus the symbols referred to the internal order of the kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven will rule all the nations of the earth, but the symbols were not for the purpose of showing that rule. There is a big difference between being "in Christ" and being ruled by Christ and his kingdom. The staff suggested quite a different picture from the iron scepter. A staff may be used for correction, but is more commonly used as either a unit of measurement, a pointer, or as something to support the body while a person is walking or standing.

The scepter of Christ's kingdom is a scepter of righteousness. Those who are of this kingdom have willingly come under the authority of this scepter and have embraced the principles of the kingdom with their very hearts. There is no need for a symbol of power here; those who are here are the righteous ones and Jesus is their king. He need only apply the rule of righteousness to any question to get peace as the result. For those who are in this kingdom, truth put in righteous perspective by the light of the Holy Spirit is all that is needed to correct an errant heart.

They thought they were mocking him by dressing him as they did, but he who watched from heaven laughed at their futile efforts. God had succeeded in turning the tables on those wicked men. Actually, they were giving Jesus the needed credentials to become their judge. He was disarming their power and authority while making them public spectacles.

Those evil men had their day. While they wove a crown of thorns, their attention was on the thorns, their sadistic hearts rejoicing in Christ's pain when they would press them into his skin. They knew nothing of the wisdom of the thorn bush. Neither did they understand that those thorns were the symbols of the curse

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that God had pronounced to afflict Adam and his race because of sin. Nor did they understand that thorns only hurt the flesh of man. How could they understand that in bearing the pain of those thorns, Christ bore the curse for us so that full release from that curse is now guaranteed?

Unwittingly, they were the instruments God used to begin the process of salvation and the restoration of mankind. The price was paid, the debt was canceled, and the slate was wiped clean for all that will receive and believe him.

Many have received him and committed themselves to him in love, making him their king. They have served him faithfully. He has manifested his love to them and achieved mighty works through them. They love not their lives unto death.

How could those evil men know that? How could they know that the robe they threw upon him symbolized the loving service of those who believe on him, and that the scarlet color symbolized the blood they would shed on account of him? Could they understand such devotion to one so unlovely to the perceptions of natural man?

How could they understand that this same Jesus would come again, riding on a white horse with a robe dipped (dyed) in blood? Just as the shells of the shellfish were crushed in the hands of wicked men, the blood of the warriors of the faith have been spilt, but not forgotten. It is therefore, my belief, that it is their blood in which he dipped his vesture, his credential to execute justice on the earth. The crimes against the saints were crimes against him, so with the sword of his mouth (his words) he will slay the wicked.

One Hundred Thirteen
The Crucifixion of Jesus
Matt. 27:31-50

In the madness of their murderous stupor they led him to the hill Golgotha, and there they nailed him to the cross. There he spoiled Satan's powers, seized authority over him and paid the debt we owed.

From that day the cross has had a very special significance. What had been the symbol of terror now became the symbol of hope. To us who have believed on this Jesus who died on the cross, the cross has become the place where we gave up futility, hopelessness, and certain death. There at the cross, our old life, with all its pain, sorrow, false dreams, and vain hopes, died. There at the cross, faith was rewarded with real blessed hope; and new lives of joy, peace, love and relationships with God began. That which was meant to be the end became the beginning. There at the cross, our deaths became his death that his life might become our life.

The cross stands as the "little gate" on the "narrow" road that leads us to new lives in Christ Jesus. All who receive the message of the gospel may enter through that gate by believing in Jesus as their personal Savior. To enter we must believe in what was done at the cross. To believe in him is to believe in the accomplishments of his sacrifice. Once we believe, we may enter.

Having entered, we find ourselves in a new and wonderful place, "In Christ." To be "In Christ" means to be a part of his body, the church. That is why it is so important to become a part of a fellowship of like-minded believers with whom you can interact and who can nurture you in your faith. Something wonderfully spiritual happens at church when you go to worship the Lord and to receive the nurturing power of the Holy Spirit.

Once we have come to Jesus and been added to the church, we have new responsibilities to him that we didn't have before. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24) What a deal! We gave up a life of pleasure, self-will, and vain pursuit, a life that was leading us straight to the destruction of hell.

We were dead in trespasses and sin: but now we have hopes that are founded at Calvary, that reach to eternity, and lives of abundant joy and peace. All we have to do is follow Jesus!

However, taking up our crosses may involve some emotional or physical pain. Remember, however, that the crown of thorns only pained the flesh. The part of us that wants its own way and gets hurt in this instance! Jesus continued. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” (Matt. 16:25)

What good is a dead Christ? We could suggest that his memory has enriched us or that his teachings have inspired us, but what about his life? The death of Christ was important, for without it there would have

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been no salvation, but death is not salvation. Death was the penalty for sinning, but life restored is salvation! We proclaim his death that we may receive his life.

They crucified Jesus on the cross where he died in the place of each lost sinner who will accept him. This event was the single most important event for humanity that ever took place historically. It made possible a gift of awesome magnitude for each person who will believe it, the impartation of eternal life.

Churches, the world over, have built steeples on which to place this symbol, the cross. Chains of gold display it about the neck. Gadgets, trinkets, pictures, and plaques remind us of the crucifixion that took place there. The symbol has led armies to battle, stood over institutions of learning, and influenced the thinking and cultures of the world. It has been used and abused, revered, respected and sometimes cursed, but its shadow is still cast over every life on earth.

What will we do with the man who died on the cross for us? Symbols don't save us; they serve only to remind us. Faith is not a gesture of the hand, but an action of the heart. It is not the cross that saves us from eternal judgment but faith in the sacrifice of the life of Jesus Christ. His life and the blood he shed serve to redeem us.

They hung Jesus on the cross; and since that day, the Holy Spirit has been ushering generation after generation and nation after nation by that scene of suffering and death. Why? So that we might decide what to do with that holy event. Everyone deserves the chance to view that scene and to hear its message. Everyone deserves the chance to see the real Jesus, to understand his message, to view his character, and to believe in his sacrifice.

Without atoning blood, there can be no entry into heaven because there is no atonement outside of Jesus. His blood is the only blood, none before and none ever again, that can redeem a lost soul. It was a sacrifice of God, by God, and for God, the only one there ever was and ever will be. By this sacrifice alone, man can be saved. There is no other way; he is the Way: there is no other door; he is the Door: there is no other gate; he is the Gate. Heaven stand ready to receive you today. Won't you believe?

Jesus paid the price in full; every righteous requirement was met and every shadow cast by sin fell on him. Matthew tells us, “From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’— which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matt. 27:45-46)

Neighbor, he was there not as God's Son, but as you, sinner friend, and I too. We were the ones whose place he took and whose sins he bore. Sin separates man from God. It was done; God laid the iniquity of us all on him! Had that darkness not come, not only outwardly, but also inwardly, as expressed in his cry, we might have wondered: Was his sacrifice really acceptable? Did he really take our places, and our sin?

The event was real; he felt the pain of our separation from God. Isaiah prophesied the event: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

The crucifixion was real; it was finished. The price was paid, the debt canceled and we set free! The prison doors of our doom now stand open so that we can leave death and enter life. He bore our darkness so that we may now enter his light!

One Hundred Fourteen
A New and Living Way
Matt. 27:51-54

There was, at that time, a giant curtain hanging from the floor to the ceiling in the temple at Jerusalem that separated man from God. Man could come only as close to God as symbols and ceremonies permitted, but never behind the curtain, with the exception of one man, once a year, in behalf of the people in acts of atonement. The curtain hung there as a reminder that sin separates man from God.

Matthew relates an incredibly symbolic part of the crucifixion story.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. (Matt. 27:53)

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The book of Hebrews comments:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19-22)

This event that happened when Jesus died was no accident. Matthew reported that the veil, which was very heavy, was torn from top to bottom indicating no man tore it, nor is it likely that the earthquake had anything to do with it. It has been said that God took hold of it and tore it, a story I believe to be true. You see, because Jesus died for our sins it is no longer needed.

We, as people of God, can now enter right into this previously forbidding area, albeit reverently. To enter here one must come with faith in the blood of atonement. The law taught that men were never to approach God without sacrificial blood; that was symbolic of how we enter now, by faith in the power of the blood of Jesus. We now may enter to make supplication and receive mercy, to express our submission to the authority and priesthood of Christ, to

discover his nature through studies in the law, and to feed on him who is our bread from heaven, all that were symbolized by the objects within the Holy of Holies.

What happened at the crucifixion that day has changed the whole outlook for mankind who were given the potential for a future with God, a future filled with joy, peace, love, happiness and life. As a result, genuine fellowship with God is now available to us.

Will we accept it? The price has been paid: now it is up to us to enter. The hard part has been done so all that remains is for us to come to him, lay down our lives, and take up the spirit of the cross, and follow him into life everlasting.

One Hundred Fifteen
Jesus Was Dead
Matt. 27:55-66

It all seemed so final; 'Jesus was dead.' They had seen it happen so they knew for sure. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons had all been there and witnessed the event. The disciples, too, were sure because the women had told them; and besides, John had been there as well. These four were all reliable witnesses whom the disciples knew well. That was it; Jesus was dead!

Joseph of Arimathea had been there too, and knew Jesus was dead. Now what? What would be done with his body? Joseph had just made a tomb, cut out of a rock. No matter, he could make another; he would give it to Jesus. It was the least he could do for the man of Galilee, so he got permission to take the body of Jesus. He then wrapped it in a cloth, laid it in the tomb, and rolled a stone over the entry. The body was there; they all had seen it. The disciples, the women, the priests and elders of the people, and the soldiers all knew and some began to worry.

Jesus had been no ordinary man. The elders of the people were used to zealous young men coming along stirring everyone up, claiming to be great. Their claims would flourish for awhile and then come to nothing. Jesus was different, however, because he didn't just create a stir and then fade away but taught, healed, cast out devils, raised the dead, and prophesied. This last was what bothered them the most; he was too good, too special, too right. If only he hadn't claimed to be God's Son, they thought.

Jesus, they thought, had gone too far. If he had just been content to be a prophet, they would have allowed him to continue. But claiming to be God's Son, with all that miraculous power and authority over demons, was threatening to them. If it were true, they had to honor him so their choice was clear; what had to be, had to be. What else could they have done?

Maybe it was the darkness that day, or the earthquake, or that veil in the temple ripping apart that jogged the priest's memories. However, remember they did, and now they were worried. He had prophesied his death, but he had also prophesied that he would rise from the dead on the third day. Still convinced that he was a deceiver, they assigned a detail of soldiers to secure the tomb, thinking the disciples might try to steal his body.

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Thus, they misunderstood the followers of Jesus who weren't religious zealots but ordinary people doing ordinary things. They followed Jesus because they loved him, not because they had any special interest in politics. Oh, they had their fanciful moments, but for the most part, they were quite normal. They weren't as impressed with the prophecy about Jesus as the elders were.

To them this was the end. If the elders had looked in on the disciples, they wouldn't have worried about them stealing Jesus because they were grief-stricken and disoriented. Thoughts of stealing the body weren't even close to being in their minds and hearts.

The soldiers were there, watching the tomb, faithful to their orders. They took their positions, put a seal of Rome on the tomb, and waited. Would the disciples come? No need to worry; the disciples were too confused to even help the women embalm the body!

How quick we are to believe the worst. The disciples, no doubt, had been warned not to follow Jesus and now it appeared that the prophets of doom had been right. You know how it is when it appears you were wrong. "We should have listened; now what do we do? Were we fooled? To think, we actually thought he was the Christ!" Such statements were probably a part of their conversations. There was no belief in them now, no expectancy of a resurrection. No one stood over the tomb, calling for the spirit of Jesus to return. He was dead and they knew it.

One Hundred Sixteen

He is Risen!!

Matt. 28:1-20

A possible resurrection was only in the minds of Jesus' enemies; yet it happened, not by the will of man, of the practice of some religious or mystical ritual, but by the sovereign will and power of God. What actually happened we can only partly understand. We know, as the day broke that third day, that an angel appeared, the earth quaked, and the stone rolled away. The angel sat on it, and the soldiers were terror stricken.

Inside the tomb an awesome thing happened also! How it happened we don't know for sure. What we do know is that the body that had been dead was now alive! It could be seen and touched and could speak and hear. It was Jesus alive, but different because a mighty change had taken place. He was flesh and bone, but had no blood! The blood had been shed, poured out a sin offering for mankind, yet he was alive. But how? What sustained him?

Concerning Jesus in his resurrection state, Luke supplies some helpful information: "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence." (Luke 24:36-42)

What is a resurrection body like? We are told that we will be like him, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Phil 3:20) Jesus could be touched, and could breath, talk, eat; yet he could enter their presence without opening a door. We are told we will be like him!

He spent awhile with his disciples and followers, confirming the fact of the resurrection. There were a number of appearances. More than Matthew recorded. They were of a sufficient number and variety so as to establish the fact of his resurrection beyond any reasonable doubt. He appeared to them, talked to them, and gave them many proofs and instructions. Then he was caught into heaven with the promise that just as he had left, he would return.

The disciples were instructed to go to Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father. On the day of the feast of Pentecost, precisely at the right time, a sound from heaven broke the stillness of the early morning, the sound of a mighty rushing wind filled the house where a hundred and twenty people waited. Suddenly, tongues of fire appeared upon each of them, the same sort of fire Moses had seen upon the bush in the desert. A strange yet wonderful power filled them, and they began to speak; but the sounds they uttered

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were a language they had not learned or understood. Also, each seemed to speak a different language. They became extremely excited; in fact, the power of the Holy Spirit that had come upon them caused them to act as though they were drunk on wine!

Could it have been that something marvelous was taking place in the heavens?

There was a temple in Jerusalem, but there is an eternal temple in the heavens. That which man had created was a mere model of the real temple. The book of Hebrews explains that Jesus entered heaven with the blood sacrifice he had made and by which we are forgiven and redeemed.

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. (Heb. 9:23-24)

I believe that Jesus took evidence of his death and its atoning quality to present to the Father; it might have been the very blood he shed. How could that be? Well, if we are going to think like natural man thinks, we might scoff at such an idea. When we think in terms of natural laws as we perceive them, then we have to pass the idea up as absurd. However, if we think in terms of God's power, we can readily accept the possibility. When the priests of old entered the presence of God, they always carried atonement blood to be presented to God for the people. Jesus, too, as our high priest, presented his blood as a sin offering once and for all. Whether he actually took physical human blood, his blood, into the heavenly temple or not, is not an important issue from our perspective. It was important, however, that the justice of God be fully met and that the evidence of that fact be presented before him.

Remember the cup? On the night Jesus was arrested, he took the cup and held it before the disciples and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood." I believe what he had done in symbol was done in the heavens as well. If what appears to have happened did happen, then the life that was in the blood of Jesus had been held in a sort of escrow for the right moment, while all the legal matters were being transacted, so that we, as a hopelessly lost human race can have access once more to the life we so need.

That Jesus had to appear before the Father as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek is explained in Hebrews:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean

sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:11-14)

As a priest, he was to intercede for the people he represented. His appearance before the Father was, without a doubt, for the express purpose of making intercession for us. “For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.” (Heb. 9:24) Jesus having completed the redemptive work, the cup’s contents could now be delivered to man.

There must have been great excitement in heaven as the first rays of morning light filled the Jerusalem air. The day had finally arrived, so why wait any longer? “Get the cup! Pour it out! Let them all drink of it freely!” They did and it was so good, the power of the Spirit going into them, thrilling them, as the inner chambers of their spiritual man began to awaken, responding to the life-giving power. They rejoiced in a language they had never learned nor understood, but through which they were able to give expression to the joy they now possessed.

People came from all over the city. What excitement filled the air! Sure it was a feast day, but why were these people drunk so early? What a strange drunk! They acted funny, but—this language, how could it be? What for many had been done symbolically in celebration on these feast days was now happening for real.

The church was alive and growth began as its form appeared. The life of Jesus had entered his body, the church, and each individual who received him received his life.

Once started, the process has gone on and continues to this very day. First to the hundred and twenty, then it spread to over three thousand and then to five thousand and now all over the world.

If you want life, dear reader, open your heart to him and drink deeply of the cup. Let Holy Spirit power enter your life. This cup is not a cup placed to the lips of this body of flesh, but is drunk with the heart!

Have you heard with your heart the invitation to come to him? Do we not now know that salvation is a divine act in response to a repentant heart, a heart that longs to be united spiritually with the great King from heaven? Life is available and is what we need, and is given by the Holy Spirit when we are united with

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Christ. To be united with Christ we must enter through the door that is our identification with him first at the cross, then in the tomb, and then in his resurrection.

Let’s review. Identification with Christ’s death happens when we lay down self-interests and concerns for worldly matters and affections. Identification with the tomb happens when we establish non-interest, non-concern, and non-love for the world; where our hearts embrace heaven, God and God’s will. Identification with his resurrection is realized when we begin to receive (drink) into our spirits the Holy Spirit and manifest his mighty power through the lives we now live. (Note. I wanted to use the word drink for receiving the Spirit’s power, but some would object that the Holy Spirit is a person and therefore not drinkable? Yet, drink seems appropriate as a spiritual concept to which we can relate.)

After we have accepted his crown as our ruling crown, the thorns sometimes pierce our flesh, as his will becomes known to us and some messenger of Satan buffets us. Can these thorns be removed? Not yet. His grace is sufficient for us. We must walk as he walked and must proclaim his message to the entire world so that men may choose. What will the ungodly do with us? Will we be delivered from the madness of their demonically infested human hearts? Will we be spared the fury of satanic vengeance? The decision rests with our loving heavenly Father who has promised that no temptation will come upon us unless a way of escape is also available. Dare we trust him?

There is a prize for all who will bow. To those who will trust a thornbush king, there is a heaven to be gained. Yes, it is a way that doesn't seem right, but it is a "new and living way". This "new and living way" is the way into the glories of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In these pages we have read about the King and his Kingdom and I am sure our hearts have both rejoiced and been challenged. It is my sincere prayer that you have been able to see Jesus in a fresh light.

Today we enjoy the privilege of accepting him by faith and entering into a relationship with him that will surely result in a changed heart, mind and life-style. Sinful ways and desires will be cleansed away from us as we dwell in his presence. The Holy Spirit who was given to us by the Father in answer to the life, love and request of our Lord Jesus will bring comfort, hope, love, faith and an overcoming power into our lives. He was given to us to also teach us and lead us into all truth.

If you have not yet received Jesus, won't you bow your head in prayer? Just simply ask him to enter into your heart and wash away your sins. He has promised that if you will believe on him you will have eternal life and that your name will be written in the Lamb's book of life.

This is how it begins, believe on him, accept the gift of the Holy Spirit into your heart, and begin a new life of obedience to him by studying his word and praying to him.

Finding a place of worship where the truth of God's word is proclaimed is also very important. Just as life in the natural must be fed and cared for, so spiritual life also must be fed and nurtured. Giving God a place in the center of our life is vital to a satisfactory relationship with him. Nothing is more important in your life than your faith experience with Jesus.

Find someone you can tell about your new faith. Do it boldly and enthusiastically. If they reject you, they also rejected him, but do not be discouraged, find another. Jesus told us that we must not be ashamed of him before men. If we are ashamed of him before men he will be ashamed of us before our Father in heaven.

God's great love is upon you right now. He is calling to you to come to him. Won't you do it now?