

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

I. Who is Mark?

We know very little about Mark. His name occurs a few times in The Book of Acts.¹ We know he was the son of a certain Mary and that he was sometimes called John Mark.

He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on one of their missionary journeys, but evidently returned home before the end of the trip.² His defection became the cause for the split between Paul and Barnabas.³ Peter later adopted Mark, calling him “my son Mark.”⁴ The only place where Mark may have identified himself in his Gospel may be in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was arrested. We read: “A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”⁵

The Pulpit Commentary, referring to Ezekiel’s vision of the throne of God carried by four four-faced angels, (the face of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle,)⁶ compares Mark to the lion.

II. Mark’s Gospel:

The same commentary observes: “If early testimony is to have its due weight, St. Mark wrote his Gospel in Greek, and at Rome, and apparently for Gentiles, certainly not exclusively, or in the first instance, for Jews. There are explanations given here and there in his Gospel which would be superfluous if it were written only for Jews. Jordan, when he first mentions it, is called ‘the river Jordan.’ It is true that many good authorities read ‘the river Jordan’ in St. Matthew (in. 6); but this may have been introduced to make his Gospel more clear to those who were unacquainted with the geography of Palestine. ‘John’s disciples and the Pharisees used to fast’ (*esan nesteountes*); literally, ‘were fasting.’ This would have been unnecessary information for Jews. ‘The time of figs was not yet.’ Every inhabitant of Palestine would have known this. St. Mark alone preserves those words of our Lord, ‘The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath,’ (... Mark 2:27) — a great principle, belonging to all nations alike. He alone quotes the words (... Mark 11:17), ‘of all nations,’ literally (*pasi tois ethnesin*), ‘for all the nations,’ in connection with our Lord’s cleansing of the temple.”

Bible scholars generally believe that Mark received most of his information from Peter. Unlike Matthew and John, he was not a member of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. But he must have been a close observer and, to a certain extent, follower of Christ, particularly when Jesus came to Jerusalem. There are certain events of which he may have been an eyewitness.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary gives the following summary of Mark’s Gospel: “Though the matter of Mark’s work came from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, yet the language seems to be entirely his own: it is very plain, simple, and unadorned; and

¹ Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39

² Acts 12:25

³ Acts 15:37-39

⁴ 1 Peter 5:13

⁵ Mark 14:51,52

⁶ See Ezek. 1:10.

sometimes appears to approach to a degree of rusticity or inelegance. Whoever reads the original must be struck with the very frequent, and often pleonastic, occurrence of *eutheos*, immediately, and *palin*, again, and such like; but these detract nothing from the accuracy and fidelity of the work. The Hebraisms which abound in it may be naturally expected from a native of Palestine, writing in Greek. The Latinisms which frequently occur are accounted for on the ground of this Gospel being written for the Gentiles, and particularly for the Roman people: this, it must be confessed, is only theory, but it is a theory which stands supported by many arguments, and highly presumptive facts. However this may be, the Gospel according to Mark is a very important portion of Divine revelation, which God has preserved by a chain of providences, from the time of its promulgation until now; and for which no truly pious reader will hesitate to render due praise to that God whose work is ever perfect.”

III. Time of writing:

The Navigators’ study on Mark states: “Modern scholars almost unanimously agree that Mark’s was the earliest of the four Gospels. He probably wrote the book after Peter died, but before Jerusalem fell, between A.D. 64 and 70. Mark like wrote in Rome, but some say his book could have been written in Egypt or Syria. It is clear, however, that Mark was written for Gentiles, or non-Jews. Mark revealed certain signs to point us toward this conclusion; for example he explained Jewish practices, which presumes his intended audience did not already know them. Also, Mark translated Aramaic words (the Jewish language of the time) found in the text. If he were writing to Jewish people, he obviously wouldn’t have needed to do that.”

IV. The keyword:

The Greek word *euthus*, “immediately,” is the most typical word in Mark’s Gospel. It is used more than forty times in this Gospel, giving Mark’s story “speed.” Mark gives us the impression that Jesus worked with great intensity, never losing a moment. Yet, we know that our Lord spent hours and sometimes whole nights in fellowship with the Father.

Bible scholars generally consider Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ ministry as coming to earth as “the Servant.”

We could consider Mark’s key verse to be: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,”⁷ a statement we find also in Matthew’s Gospel.⁸

V. Outline:

R. Alan Cole, in Mark⁹, gives the following outline:

⁷ Mark 10:43

⁸ Matt. 20:28

⁹ *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

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The Text:

I. PREPARE THE WAY: THE PREPARATION FOR THE EVANGEL (1:1-13)

A. THE TITLE OF THE BOOK (1:1)

1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, states about the opening sentence: “The subject of this good news is a person named Jesus, a common enough name both in its Hebrew form of Joshua, in Old Testament days, and in this Hellenized form, derived from the Aramaic *Jeshua*, in the New Testament world. Both by common etymology and by historic precedent, the name meant ‘Yahweh is salvation,’ the name given to the divinely-appointed leader, sent to save God’s people in their hour of need. (Jos. 1:1-2). What Moses could not do, Joshua would accomplish: that would make the name ‘Jesus’ even more appropriate for the coming savior.

Not alone, however, is Jesus to be Savior; He is also to be God’s appointed agent upon earth. This singling out for a particular task is described in terms of being ‘anointed,’ as any king or priest of Old Testament days would have been. Both the concept and the word are very common in the New Testament, occasionally in the Semitic form of *Messiah*, but more commonly as Christ, or ‘the Christ,’ using a word derived from the Greek root *chriō* which has the same meaning as the Hebrew root *māshah*, ‘to anoint.’”

There has been some question about whether the words “the Son of God” were in Mark’s original manuscript or whether they are an addition by a later editor.

The Navigators’ study on Mark states: “*Gospel* is an Old English word that means ‘good news.’ It comes from the Greek word *euvangelion*. *Eu* means ‘good’ and *angelion* means ‘message.’”

The Gospel could not have been described more concisely than Mark does here. The content of the message John the Baptist preached was that humanity ought to prepare itself for the coming of the Son of God, that is God coming to earth as a human being; the Creator becoming one of His own creations.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states about Mark’s opening words: “These words stand as a title indicating the content of the book as a whole. The gospel here is not the book, but the message, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. The facts of the life and death of Christ make up the beginning of the gospel, which implies that the apostolic preaching was the continuation. ... To Mark, no less than to John, the deity of Christ is of prime importance, and thus he includes it in the title of his Gospel.

B. THE FORERUNNER (1:2-8)

2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—

3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

According to Mark, the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ began with the proclamation by His royal herald John the Baptist. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It has been well observed that St. Matthew and St. John begin their Gospels from Christ himself; but St. Matthew from the human, and St. John from the Divine, generation of Christ. St. Mark and St. Luke commence from John the Baptist; but St. Luke from his nativity, and St. John from his preaching."

Passing by the birth and early years of Christ's life, Mark turns at once to the opening events of the Lord's public ministry. As predicted in the OT, Jesus was preceded by a herald sent to prepare men for his appearance. John the Baptist came as the last representative of the old order with the express purpose of introducing the key personality of the new."

Barnes' Notes writes about Mark's beginning: "The word 'gospel' literally signifies good news, and particularly the good tidings respecting the way of salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ. Some have understood the word 'gospel' here to mean 'history' or 'life-the beginning of the history,' etc.; but Mark says nothing of the early life of the Savior. The word 'gospel' here has reference rather to the preaching of John, an account of which immediately follows, and means the beginning of the good news, or annunciation respecting the Messiah. It was very customary thus to prefix a title to a book.

[The Son of God] This title was used here to attract attention, and secure the respect of those who should read the gospel. It is no common history. It does not recount the deeds of man-of a hero or a philosopher-but the doctrines and doings of THE SON OF GOD. The history, therefore, 'commands' respect."

Referring to John's ministry as Jesus' herald, Mark quotes two Old Testament prophecies, both of which he seems to ascribe both to Isaiah. The first one, however, is from Malachi, which reads literally: "'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty."¹⁰ The second one is from Isaiah: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'"¹¹ John quoted Isaiah's words himself when he was asked by a delegation of priests and Levites whether he was the Messiah.¹² Actually, all four Gospel writers refer to John's words, although they do not all give them as a literal quotation.

What Mark seems to be saying is that the preaching of the Good News began with John the Baptist. By saying this, Mark actually penetrates to the core of the message. It is

¹⁰ Mal. 3:1

¹¹ Isa. 40:3

¹² John 1:19-23

true that all John the Baptist did was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. In Paul's words: "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus."¹³ But John did also point out that Jesus was "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"¹⁴ So we can say truly that the preaching of the Gospel began with John.

Mark describes briefly that John preached his message "in the desert region," which must have been at the eastern bank of the Jordan River. From a strategic angle, choosing a desert area as a place to preach seems the wrong approach. A preacher is supposed to go to where the people are, not to expect that people come to him. John proved a point, made centuries later by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "If a man preaches a better sermon, or builds a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to his door."

John the Baptist's ministry consisted not only of preaching, but also baptizing. This rite must have been an accepted way of demonstrating a person's determination to follow up on a decision made. John did not invent the rite; he practiced an accepted ritual that was understood by all. We could compare it to people's reaction to a call, such as nowadays would be the raising of a hand in a Gospel meeting. Baptism was obviously some more involved than raising one's hand.

Fausset's Bible Dictionary states about John's baptizing: "John's 'baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' (Luke 3:3) was the pledge his followers took of their determination to separate themselves from the prevalent pollutions, as the needful preparation for receiving the coming Messiah, who remits the sins of His believing people. The 'remission' was not present but prospective, looked for through Messiah, not through John (Acts 10:43). John's baptism was accompanied with confession (Matt 3:6), and was an act of obedience to the call to renounce all sin and believe in the coming Redeemer from sin. The universal expectation of the Messianic king 'in the whole East' ... made all ready to flock to the forerunner. The Jews hoped to be delivered from Rome's supremacy (Mal 3:1; 4:5-6). The last of the prophets had foretold the coming of Elijah before the great day of the coming of the Lord, the Sun of righteousness, the messenger of the covenant. Elijah was to 'turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers,' namely, the disobedient children to the faith and fellowship of their pious forefathers, Abraham, Jacob, Levi, Elijah (Luke 1:17), lest Messiah at His coming 'should smite the earth with a curse.'"

Mark's description of John the Baptist's lifestyle emphasizes his choice of simplicity. This was demonstrated in his clothing and his daily diet. The Greek word used here for "locust" is *akris*, which may refer to the insect we know or to the top of a certain plant. There is, however, no reason to believe that John the Baptist was a vegetarian. According to the list in Leviticus of kosher insects one was allowed to eat, this kind was among the edible ones. We read: "Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper."¹⁵ Clothes made of camel hair, which probably means camel skin, were probably the cheapest kind of clothing one could wear. John may also have worn that kind of clothing in order to dress like the Old Testament prophet Elijah whom he was

¹³ Acts 19:4

¹⁴ John 1:29

¹⁵ Lev. 11:22

supposed to resemble. Describing Elijah to king Ahaziah, one of that king's servants said: "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist."¹⁶

Mark does not go into any further detail about John the Baptist's preaching, apart from the fact that John announced the coming of the Messiah, to whom he compared himself as being so much lower that he would not even qualify as the Messiah's lowest slave. John did not belittle the repentance of those who came to him for baptism. He must have believed in the forgiveness he preached as a fruit of repentance. But he could not guarantee regeneration, which was needed for the new life that God desired. He understood that baptism with the Holy Spirit was needed for spiritual regeneration.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on John's words: "It is as though he said, 'Christ will pour his Holy Spirit so abundantly upon you, that he will cleanse you from all your sins, and fill you with holiness and love and all his other excellent *graces*.' Christ did this visibly on the day of Pentecost. And this he does invisibly in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and in the rite of Confirmation, which is the completion of the sacrament of Baptism. John baptized with water only, but Christ with water and the Holy Spirit. John baptized the body only, Christ baptizes the soul. By how much, therefore, the Holy Spirit transcends the water, and the soul excels the body, by so much is Christ's baptism more excellent than that of John, which was only preparatory and rudimentary." Evidently, this commentary adheres to the rite that administers baptism to infants, who will go through confirmation of their faith as they grow into adulthood. This is not the place to comment on that.

John's reference to baptism with the Holy Spirit was in reference to Joel's prophecy: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."¹⁷

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments further on the baptism John performed: "The word baptize means to dip or submerge and thus refers to an immersion. This was not an entirely new rite, since Jewish proselyte baptism was a form of self-immersion ... John proclaimed the baptism of repentance, that is, a baptism characterized by, and signifying, repentance. In the NT repentance has a deeper connotation than its original sense of a change of mind. It has come to refer to an inner change of direction and purpose, a turning from sin to righteousness. Josephus makes it clear that this was the prerequisite for baptism by John ... The Greek preposition *eis* at times was used with the meaning, 'because of.' Hence, the meaning may be that John baptized because of the forgiveness of sins." What this commentary is saying is that John's baptism did not provide forgiveness of sin but confirmed it as the result of people's confession and repentance.

C. THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (1:9-11)

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

¹⁶ II Kings 1:8

¹⁷ Joel 2:28,29

11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In the reporting on Jesus' baptism, Mark omits the details of the exchange between John and Jesus that took place previous to it. Matthew reports that John said to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" to which Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."¹⁸ In John's Gospel we read that Jesus' baptism became for John the confirmation of his own call. We read that he said: "I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'"¹⁹ Yet, John must have met Jesus earlier in life, since they were related by family ties.

Comparing the various accounts the Gospel writers give about Jesus' baptism by John, we may assume that most people saw the supernatural demonstrations that accompanied Jesus' baptism. Matthew gives us the most complete report of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus' baptism raises the question "Why?" This was not a baptism of repentance. Jesus did not have any sins to confess like the other baptismal candidates. We cannot call Jesus' decision to be baptized identification with sinners either, at least not in the sense in which Jesus became sin for us in His death on the cross. That identification led to His being forsaken by God, which is not the case here. Jesus' baptism seems rather to have been a sacrifice of sweet aroma to the Father.

Jesus' baptism has in common with the baptism of others that it was the outward demonstration of an inward decision. For Jesus, this was the decision of accepting the call God had given Him. Jesus' decision is best expressed in the words of The Epistle to the Hebrews: "Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.'"²⁰

At this point Mark uses his keyword *euthus*, "straightaway," to indicate that the voice from heaven was heard immediately upon Jesus' prayer after His baptism and that the Holy Spirit descended upon Him at the same moment. The Father did not let His Son wait. Actually this is the second time Mark uses the word. It appeared for the very first time in the phrase "make *straight* paths for him (v.3).

Responding to some heretical interpretations of this passage, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The Spirit descending upon him at his baptism was not the descent of the eternal Christ upon the man Jesus. It was rather the conveyance to one who was already prepared for it as God and man, of office and authority as the great Prophet that should come into the world. St. Luke says particularly (... Luke 3:21) that it was when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, that the Holy Spirit descended upon him; plainly showing us that it was not through the baptism of John, but through the meritorious obedience and the prayer of the Son of God, that the heavens were 'rent asunder,' and the Holy Spirit descended upon him."

¹⁸ Matt 3:14,15

¹⁹ John 1:33

²⁰ Heb. 10:5-7

The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove. The Greek word used is *peristera*, which is sometimes used as the equivalent of “pigeon.” *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* explains: “The dove was the symbol of reconciliation with God (Gen 8:8,10) and has since been the emblem of peace. It is also a noted symbol of tender and devoted affection (Song 1:15; 2:14; etc.) and likewise of mourning (Isa 38:14; 59:11).”

D. THE TEMPTATION (1:1-13)

**12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert,
13 and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.**

Mark gives us the impression, as Luke does,²¹ that Jesus was tempted by Satan continuously for forty days. But Mark does not give us any details about these temptations as are given in the other two Synoptic Gospels. We merely read that He was in the company of wild animals and that angels served Him, which probably refers to the end of the temptations.

Mark uses a powerful term to describe the way the Holy Spirit sent Jesus out into the desert. The Greek verb used is *ekballo* which literally means “to eject.” It is the same word used in the phrase: “He *drove out* the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.”²²

We tend to look upon the infilling by the Holy Spirit as a means of blessing and deep communion with God. For Jesus it was the opposite; it meant hunger and temptation. The fact that Jesus needed the presence of the Holy Spirit to withstand temptation ought to be a lesson for us. For the man Jesus, Satan was the same awesome opponent he would be for us. The man Jesus would have been no match for Satan.

This also suggests that Jesus could have fallen, had it not been for the Spirit’s presence. And it proves that the Holy Spirit is God’s agent to lead us into the written Word of God. Jesus needed the Spirit of the Father to remember the verses from Deuteronomy He quoted back to Satan. But Mark does not give us any of these details.

II. HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM: THE EARLY GALILEAN MINISTRY (1:14-3:6)

A. THE KINGDOM OF God IN GALILEE (1:14-45)

i. The first Galilean preaching (1:14-15)

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “At this point, Mark merely refers in passing to the whole story of John’s denunciation of Herod for immorality, and John’s consequent imprisonment and death (for full account, see 6:14-29). The incident serves here only as a date-line, for from this moment began the preaching of the good news by Jesus.”

²¹ Luke 4:1,2

²² Matt. 8:16

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “It seems probable that our Lord remained some time in Judaea after his baptism. From thence he went, with Andrew and Peter, two of John’s disciples, into Galilee, where he called Philip. And then it was that he turned the water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana. This was his first coming out of Judaea into Galilee, related by St. John (... John 1:43, etc.). But the Passover brought him back into Judaea, that he might present himself in the temple; and then occurred his first purging of the temple (... John 2:14). Then came the visit of Nicodemus to him by night; and then he began openly to preach and to baptize (... John 3:26), and thus incurred the envy of the scribes and Pharisees. Therefore he left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee; and this is the departure here recorded by St. Mark and by St. Matthew (... Matthew 4:12). Hence it came to pass that it was in Galilee that Christ called to himself four fishermen — Andrew and Peter, James and John.”

Jesus’ public ministry did actually begin earlier than Mark seems to indicate here. The call of the first disciples is described in greater detail in John’s Gospel. Before the first cleansing of the temple in Jerusalem James and John with Andrew and Peter seem to have begun to follow Jesus. After describing this in some detail, John comments: “This was before John was put in prison.”²³

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on “After that John was put in prison”: “These words suggest that Mark consciously passes over a number of events. See John 1:35-4:42.” It is true that Mark’s words do not imply that Jesus did not minister in Judea before John’s imprisonment. He merely pinpoints the beginning of Jesus’ preaching in Galilee after John’s incarceration.

In His first public preaching Jesus used the same words of John the Baptists’ appeal: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”²⁴ Jesus added the word *euaggelion* “the good message,” or “the gospel.”

ii. The call of the disciples (1:16-20)

16 As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

17 "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."

18 At once they left their nets and followed him.

19 When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.

20 Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

In Luke’s Gospel we read the details about this call of Jesus’ first disciples. Luke describes Peter’s reaction to a miraculous catch of fish, after he and his fellow fishermen James and John had labored all night without any results. We read that Peter blurted out: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”²⁵ Luke renders Jesus’ reply as: “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.”²⁶ Mark’s rendering is probably the most literal one, since he must have received the story from Peter himself.

²³ John 3:24

²⁴ Matt. 3:2

²⁵ Luke 5:8

²⁶ Luke 5:10

iii. Jesus at Capernaum (1:21-28)

21 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

22 The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

23 Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

24 "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!"

25 "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

26 The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

27 The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

28 News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* calls this section, up to v.45, “The first Galilean tour.” We read: “The Galilean ministry is marked by three preaching tours, in which Christ systematically carried his message to every part of Galilee. The first and third of these tours are reported by Mark. In this section the ministry in Capernaum and in the Galilean countryside is described, with greater emphasis being placed on the former. Verses 21-34 are descriptive of one day’s activities in the seaside town.” About Capernaum, the same commentary observes: “Capernaum was an important town on the main road to Damascus, the location of a tax office, the town of the first five disciples whom Jesus called, as well as the headquarters for his Galilean ministry.”

Capernaum was more than an important town from the point of business, it was also Satan’s headquarters. According to Matthew, Jesus chose it as His place of residence.²⁷ Quoting Isaiah, Matthew calls it “Galilee of the Gentiles,” because of the spiritual darkness in which the people there lived.

The NIV states that the people in Capernaum were “amazed” at Jesus’ teaching. The Greek word used is actually more forceful. *Ekplesso* means literally “to strike with astonishment.” “Williams” translates: “And they were dumfounded at His teaching.” It was not only that Jesus performed miracles of healing, but it was the way He handled the Word of God, being filled with the same Holy Spirit who had inspired the Old Testament prophets, that struck the people with amazement. It was like the author reading his own works.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, states: “It was the consistent practice of Jesus to attend both temple and synagogue; but, unlike any other teacher whom his audience had heard hitherto, He neither quoted nor relied on any great rabbinic names as precedent for His teaching. His hearers were amazed, not only at the content of His teaching, but also at the assumption of personal authority displayed in the manner of its presentation. This was in direct contrast to the caution and pettifogging of the scribes, to whom the new handling of law and tradition by Jesus must have seemed cavalier, to say the least.”

The scholars of Jesus’ day showed a great deal of respect for the holy writings of the Old Testament. They treated the scrolls as if the paper and ink were holy in themselves. But their overdoses of respect kept them from obeying what was written. Jesus was not only obedient to Old Testament prophecy, He knew that He was the subject

²⁷ Matt. 4:13

of that prophecy. This led Him to say to the Pharisees and teachers of the law: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”²⁸

Ironically, the devil understood the Old Testament better than the teachers of the law did. It was a demon-possessed man who shrieked: “I know who you are — the Holy One of God!”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “It will be observed that this cry of the unclean spirit is spontaneous, before our Lord has addressed him. In real truth, the preaching of Jesus has already thrown the whole world of evil spirits into a state of excitement and alarm. The powers of darkness are beginning to tremble. They resent this intrusion into their domain. They feel that One greater than Satan has appeared, and they ask, *What have we to do with thee?* Wherein have we injured thee, that thou shouldst seek to drive us out of our possession? We have nothing to do with thee, thou Holy One of God; but we have a right to take possession of sinners.”

The writer of Hebrews states that the main purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world was to destroy the power of Satan and his demons. We read: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”²⁹ The demons knew very well what they had to do with Jesus, but acknowledging this would have meant immediate defeat to them.

It would seem to us that the demon’s advertisement of Jesus’ power would be an advantage to Jesus. But to accept the demon-possessed man’s words as such would have meant a demonic propaganda that would eventually have caused enormous harm to Jesus’ ministry. Jesus only accepted the testimony of the Holy Spirit about Him. Paul and Silas would later come to the same conclusion. A slave girl shouted: “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”³⁰ Paul and Silas refused this kind of advertisement by demonic propaganda. They knew that no one would be saved by listening to the enemy. Satan is more dangerous when he pays compliments than when he appears to oppose us. Someone once complimented John Newton about a sermon he had preached. Newton answered that person: “Thank you! The devil just told me the same!”

Jesus literally told the demon in the man to “shut up.” We do well to tell the devil the same whenever he speaks to us, whether with threats or compliments.

The result of Jesus’ exorcism was that people recognized the power of the Holy Spirit in Him. That was the word that would spread throughout the region. We come back to Matthew’s comment about Jesus’ ministry in Galilee: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”³¹

²⁸ John 5:39,40

²⁹ Heb. 2:14,15

³⁰ Acts 16:16

³¹ Matt. 4:15,16

iv. Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31)

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.

30 Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.

31 So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

It is as Jesus enters the home of Peter and Andrew that He is told about the sickness of Peter's mother-in-law. This is clear proof that, in His humanity, Jesus was not omniscient. It is not clear whether Peter and Andrew knew that the lady was sick. It could be that they took Jesus to their home for the purpose of having a meal together and that they found out that the lady of the house was in no condition to prepare anything.

Matthew tells the same story of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Matthew merely states: "He touched her hand and the fever left her."³² Luke, the physician, in relating the same story, writes: "He bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her."³³ Luke also states that she "was suffering from a high fever," using the Greek verb *sunecho*, which expresses pressure. The same verb is used in the verse where Jesus asked "Who touched me?" and Peter answered: "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you."³⁴

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "There were marshes in that district; hence the prevalence of fevers of a malignant character." This suggests that the illness could be caused by mosquitoes and it could be that her sickness was what is presently known as malaria.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, adds: "This 'domestic miracle' gives us one of the rare glimpses into the home lives of the apostles. Simon's wife may even have accompanied her husband on his missionary travels later, as she is mentioned specifically by Paul in I Corinthians 9:5. This incident is often claimed as a 'Petrine touch;' certainly, of the apostles, only Peter, James and John were present (and Andrew?)."

v. The evening healings (1:32-34)

32 That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed.

33 The whole town gathered at the door,

34 and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

The day being a Sabbath, the people waited till sunset, which probably means around six o'clock, which was the time when the new day began. The Jews counted the day to begin in the evening.

We learn elsewhere that healing was considered to be work and that as such it ought not to be done on a Sabbath day. We read that at another occasion, the ruler of a synagogue said to the people: "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on

³² Matt. 8:15

³³ Luke 4:39

³⁴ Luke 8:45

those days, not on the Sabbath.”³⁵ This must have been the general consensus, which would be the reason people waited till sunset before bringing their sick to Jesus.

We are given the impression that all the sick of Capernaum were brought to Jesus that evening; none were left behind. The sick included some demon-possessed. But it is clear that not all illness was thought to be the result of demonic influence. Modern theologians have a tendency to interpret the term demon-possession as an indication of a mental illness. Some of it probably was that, but the fact that Jesus did drive out “many demons” indicates that there were many cases of literal demon-possession. As we saw earlier, it was this intense demonic activity that made the area a land of darkness.

We could say that the previous incident in the synagogue, where one demon had cried out: “I know who you are — the Holy One of God!” was the reason Jesus did not allow demons to speak anymore. He did not want their demonic advertisement.

The Greek text uses one single verb-form *daimonizomévous*, which could be translated “demonized,” for “demon-possessed.”

vi. From Capernaum to Galilee (1:35-39)

35 Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

36 Simon and his companions went to look for him,

37 and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

38 Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

39 So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Jesus’ need for time to pray is, first of all, proof of His humanity, and also an object lesson for us all. If Jesus needed quiet time for fellowship with the Father, we need it, most definitely, and even more. Elsewhere, Jesus recommended: “When you pray, 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.”³⁶ Evidently, Jesus could not do this Himself, since He did not have His own room. He testified: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”³⁷ When the Creator of heaven and earth came down to live among us, He was homeless.

Jesus got up when it was still dark. The Greek word used is *ennuchon*, which literally means “by night.” This is the only place in the New Testament where this word occurs. Since sunrise in Israel occurs roughly around six o’clock in the morning, it could have been as early as 4 AM. According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, “*The morning* is to be understood the whole space of three hours, which finished the fourth watch of the night.”

When Peter and some of the other disciples got up, they went to look for Jesus. Not finding Him in the place where they had spent the night, they went outside. “Everyone is looking for you!” suggests that it was bright daylight by that time. The exorcism of the previous day and the healing of almost everyone who was sick in

³⁵ Luke 13:14

³⁶ Matt. 6:6

³⁷ Matt. 8:20

Capernaum had made Jesus the most popular Person in town. And that was exactly what He didn't want to be.

vii. The cleansing of the leper (1:40-45)

40 A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

41 Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"

42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

43 Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:

44 "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

45 Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

Capernaum had been Jesus' home for a while.³⁸ The vision for the villages in the vicinity of Capernaum may have been communicated to Jesus during His time of fellowship with the Father. Luke also mentions Jesus' plan, saying: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."³⁹ We are given no details about Jesus' preaching or of specific places where He went with His disciples. The only incident mentioned in detail is of a single healing of a single person suffering with leprosy.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about this healing: "The account of the healing of the leper is only one example of a type of incident that must have been repeated many times in the unrecorded ministry of Jesus, which obviously (3:8-12) was much more extensive than our scanty records show. In this miracle, told by Mark in his usual laconic way, there are only two characters involved. The first character is an untouchable, conscious of his own state, earnestly desiring to be cleansed, humble enough to ask for cleansing and believing that Jesus had the power to heal him. The other figure is the compassionate Jesus, who does not shrink from laying His hand even on the loathsomeness of leprosy. Wherever the compassionate Christ and the yearning sinner meet, there then comes instantaneous and complete cleansing ... In the ancient world, the attitude toward leprosy was not unlike the popular attitude to suspected sufferers from AIDS today. To the pious Jew, conscious of the ritual uncleanness of the leper (Lv. 13:3), the wonder became even more staggering: Jesus was willing to incur defilement (as they saw it), so that the defiled leper might be made clean. The whole of the gospel is here in a nutshell: Christ redeems us from the curse by becoming under a curse for our sake (Gal. 3:13)."

In a way, the miracle is even greater if we see it in the context of Scripture as a whole. We know that sin, and all forms of corruption, are contagious, but holiness is not. Haggai illustrates this well in his prophecy. We read: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food,

³⁸ Mark 2:1

³⁹ Luke 4:43

does it become consecrated?’ The priests answered, ‘No.’ Then Haggai said, ‘If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?’ ‘Yes,’ the priests replied, ‘it becomes defiled.’⁴⁰ When Jesus touches that which is unclean it does not make Him unclean, but it makes the unclean clean. That is the miracle of conversion, which we call regeneration.

Having cleansed the leper Jesus gives him an order to go and show himself to the priest without telling anybody else about his healing. The Greek word Mark uses is remarkable. *Embrimaomai* literally means “to snort with anger,” or “to be indignant.” In this case it can be rendered “to sternly enjoin.” One place where this word is used is in connection with the death and resurrection of Lazarus, where we read: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was *deeply moved in spirit* and troubled.”⁴¹

The main reason for this “strange command” seems to be the testimony of the man’s healing to the priests. The law of Moses was very specific about the ritual to be performed in case of the healing of a leper. Since leprosy was incurable, the ritual had probably never been performed. For the priests to bring the prescribed sacrifices, they probably had to read the book first before knowing what to do. And the Levitical law prescribing the sacrifices was one of the most meaningful images of the death and resurrection of Christ. The ritual involved two birds, one of which was killed and sacrificed, the other one was dipped in the water in which the blood of the first bird had been poured, and then let go to fly away. Other items used in this ceremony were cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop.⁴²

Jesus wanted this ceremony to be performed before the man did anything else. The priests, who would later vote for Jesus’ death on the cross, would have to symbolically enact Jesus’ death and resurrection. That, probably, never happened since the man disobeyed Jesus’ command. God did not receive the glory and the priests never received the testimony. The result was that Jesus could no longer enter the town. It ended His ministry in that place. Our obedience is needed for the Holy Spirit to be able to do His work.

B. THE BEGINNING OF CONFLICT (2:1 – 3:6)

i. The healing of the paralyzed man (2:1-12)

1 A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

2 So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

3 Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them.

4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

6 Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves,

⁴⁰ Hag. 2:11-13

⁴¹ John 11:33

⁴² See Lev. 14:1-9.

7 "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

8 Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?"

9 Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?

10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .
.. " He said to the paralytic,

11 "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

12 He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Matthew briefly tells this story, but he leaves out many of the details. Luke gives most of the details Mark mentions here.⁴³

Jesus' reception at His hometown was so overwhelming that the place where He stayed was so crowded that no one could go in or out. Even the courtyard was congested. That was a problem to four men who came with a friend who was a paraplegic.

Having commented on Mark's eye for detail, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "Here again the minuteness of detail is very observable. It is also interesting to notice how the three writers of the synoptic Gospels supplement and illustrate one another. St. Matthew gives the outline, St. Mark and St. Luke fill up the picture. St. Luke (... Luke 5:18) tells us how they sought means to bring the paralytic into Christ's presence. They carried him on his bed up the flight of steps outside the house, and reaching to the roof; and then both St. Mark and St. Luke tell us how, having first removed a portion of the tiling and broken up the roof, they then let him down through the opening thus made into the midst before Jesus. The chamber into which he was thus abruptly lowered was most probably what is elsewhere called the 'upper chamber,' a large central room, convenient for the purpose of addressing both those who filled it and also the crowd that thronged the outer court below."

One of the moving parts of this story is the compassion and faith of the four men who carried the paraplegic on his bed. They were confident that, once they were in front of Jesus, the healing would occur. To understand what these men did we have to comprehend something about the way houses were built in Palestine.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary explains: "The houses in the east are generally made flat-roofed, that the inhabitants may have the benefit of taking the air on them; they are also furnished with battlements round about, Deut. 22:8; Judg. 16:27; and 2 Sam. 11:2, to prevent persons from falling off; and have a trap door by which they descend into the house. This door, it appears, was too narrow to let down the sick man and his couch; so they uncovered the roof, removed a part of the tiles, and having broken it up, taken away the laths or timber, to which the tiles had been attached, they then had room to let down the afflicted man."

The Greek text of v.4 reads literally: "And when they could not come nigh for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay."

⁴³ Matt. 9:1-8; Luke 5:18-39

The Greek word, rendered “press,” is *ochlos* which elsewhere is rendered “multitude.” We find the word in the verse: “*Large crowds* from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.”⁴⁴

Another interesting word Mark uses is *exorusso*, “to dig out,” or “remove.” The only other place in Scripture where this word is used is in Paul’s statement to the Galatians: “What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have *torn out* your eyes and given them to me.”⁴⁵ Mark’s description is not only detailed, but also very vivid.

The reason these four brought their friend to Jesus was, obviously, to have him healed physically. The paralytic’s sin was not in their mind. Yet, this is what Jesus looked at first. The man’s foremost problem was not his physical condition, but his spiritual one. We must not conclude from this that his paralysis was the result of specific sins in his life, although that may have been the case.

One other remarkable feature is that Jesus pronounced the pardon for this man’s sin, apparently, on the basis of his friends’ faith. We read: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”

That part of the story is what caught the attention and the ire of the teachers of the law who were present. They believed that forgiveness of sin was God’s business, not man’s. The foremost reason Jesus could forgive this man’s sin was that He would pay the price for this man’s pardon in His own body. Isaiah’s prophecy comes to mind: “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. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”⁴⁶

The question for us is whether, as human beings, we have the right to forgive others their sins in the Name of Jesus. When a member of the Roman Catholic Church goes to confession, the priest who hears will give the absolution, saying: “I forgive!” Do we, as believers in Jesus Christ, have that right?

Jesus states specifically that He forgives as “the Son of Man,” which we could interpret as “as one human being to another.” There are several places in Scripture where we read that the forgiveness of our own sin is linked to the forgiveness we extend to others. But that can be interpreted as sin committed to us. The forgiveness Jesus speaks about here is forgiveness of sin to God. We read in John’s Gospel that Jesus said to the disciples: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”⁴⁷

Evidently, the teachers of the law did not voice their objection openly. We read that Jesus read their minds. Evidently, they were thinking that it was easy to say the words, but that that did not settle the matter before God. Only God can forgive sin committed against Him. That is the point Jesus takes issue with. He does this, not as the Son of God, but as the Son of Man.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “He perceived also the direction in which these thoughts were moving. Their feeling was no doubt this: ‘It is an easy thing to claim the power of forgiving sin, since this is a power which cannot be challenged by any

⁴⁴ Matt. 4:25

⁴⁵ Gal. 4:15

⁴⁶ Isa. 53: 5,6

⁴⁷ John 20:22,23

outward sign.’ Now, it is to this form of unbelief that the next words of our Lord are the answer. It is as though he said, ‘You accuse me of blasphemy. You say that I am usurping the attributes of God when I claim the power of forgiving sin. You ask for the evidence that I really possess this power; and you say it is an easy thing to lay claim to a power which penetrates the spiritual world, and which is therefore beyond the reach of material proof. Be it so. I will now furnish that evidence. I will prove, by what I am now about to work upon the body, that what I have just said is effectual upon the spirit. I have just said to this paralytic, ‘Thy sins are forgiven.’ You challenge this power; you question my authority. I will now give you outward and sensible evidence that this is no fictitious or imaginary claim. You see this poor helpless, palsied man. I will say to him in presence of you all, ‘Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thy house.’ And if simply at my bidding his nerves are braced, and his limbs gather strength, and he rises and walks, then judge ye whether I have a right to say to him, ‘Thy sins are forgiven.’ Thus, by doing that which is capable of proof, I will vindicate my power to do that which is beyond the reach of sensible evidence; and I will make manifest to you, by these visible tides of my grace, in what direction the deep under-current of my love is moving.’”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: “The basic conflict concerned the deity of Christ.” But that was exactly what it was not. As mentioned above, Jesus forgave as “the Son of Man,” not as the Son of God. Actually, Jesus hardly ever applied that term to Himself. The only time we find Him saying this is in the verse: “I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”⁴⁸ In some cases the disciples said this about their Lord,⁴⁹ and in most instances some demons or Satan himself used the title.⁵⁰

When the man experienced instantaneous healing, the crowd exclaimed: “We have never seen anything like this!” They said this, not praising Jesus, but praising God. There must have been some realization that the miracles Jesus performed were the result of His faith in the Father’s power.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about this section: “There are two ways of understanding this passage; both lines of exegesis are fruitful, and, if pursued far enough, ultimately merge into one. The first interpretation is, in paraphrase, ‘You say that only God can forgive sins? but I will show you that here is a *human* who has the same power,’ so leading the thoughtful hearer to the equation of the human Jesus with God. This would involve understanding the phrase *Son of Man* as being merely the common Semitic paraphrase for ‘mortal’ (Ezk. 2:1, etc.). The second interpretation would take *Son of man*, in this instance, as Jesus’ own self-chosen title for Himself, as it must be in 8:31, *etc.* If it is taken in this way, then we should paraphrase ‘to show you that I in person have this power to forgive sin ...’ In either case, the miracle has evidential value to prove the divine authority of Jesus. Most, if not all, of the healing miracles recorded in the gospel seem to have had this aim as well as the exhibition of divine love; they certainly produced this result to those who were not willfully blind.”

In a footnote, the author adds: “*Son of man* as a title seems derived primarily from the use in Dn. 7:13, with further development during the intertestamental period. This title of the Messiah speaks of Him in His capacity as ‘representative man,’ the human

⁴⁸ John 5:25

⁴⁹ Matt. 14:33; John 1:49

⁵⁰ Matt. 3:4,6; 8:29; Luke 4:3,9

agent of God, especially as finally vindicated by God and returning in judgment. In Mt. 26:63-64, the title is linked specifically with ‘the Christ, the Son of God.’ This identification of ‘son of man’ with ‘God’s Son’ was the ultimate blasphemy for which Jesus was condemned to die by the Sanhedrin (14:61-64). The title will occur frequently, but this is its first use in Mark ... which, in the context, may be significant.”

ii. The ministry of Jesus (2:13)

13 Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes here: “Jesus is frequently described as engaged in open-air preaching, especially beside the Sea of Galilee, where many villages were clustered round the shore of the lake in thickly populated Galilee ... One reason for this choice may have been that the sloping shore provided a convenient amphitheatre for a large audience, especially if Jesus preached from a boat moored just offshore in shallow water (as apparently in 4:1). Perhaps the same practical reason, as well as the geography of Galilee, influenced the Lord’s fondness for teaching on hillsides.”

Mark does not give us any further details about Jesus teaching at this point. This may have been the place and time Jesus preached His Sermon on the Mount, we find in Matthew.⁵¹

iii. The call of Levi (2:14-17)

14 As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

15 While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

16 When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the “sinners” and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

17 On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

In Matthew’s Gospel we find the same story recorded,⁵² but Matthew does not call himself there by the name Levi. Luke also reports Matthew’s call and he also calls him Levi.⁵³

Jesus’ call of Levi is one of the most direct calls in the Gospels. The only other instance we find in John’s Gospel where Jesus “finds” Philip and says to him: “Follow me.”⁵⁴

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “When [Jesus] went forth on this occasion he appears to have traveled southwards along the sea-shore. There, not far from Capernaum, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the receipt of custom ... more literally, at the

⁵¹ Matt. 5-7

⁵² Matt. 9:9

⁵³ Luke 5:27, 28

⁵⁴ John 1:43

place of toll. This place would be in the direct line for traders from Damascus to Accho, and a convenient spot for the receipt of the duties on the shipping.”

In Luke and Matthew we read that that Levi got up and followed Jesus. That does not mean that he immediately left his family behind, because we next read that Levi threw a party for Jesus and His disciples. Luke states that “Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house.”⁵⁵ Other participants were Levi’s former colleagues. It was particularly their presence that made the Pharisees complain to the disciples that Jesus associated with the wrong crowd. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The first charge against the Lord in the series of conflicts recorded by Mark was the accusation of blasphemy (Mark 2:1-12). A second complaint now is raised in 2:13-17 to the effect that Christ associated with outcasts.”

Jesus Himself answered the question asked of the disciples, saying: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” There is in these words the acknowledgment that tax collectors, generally speaking, were not people who did their job honestly.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Levi, usually equated with Matthew (Mt. 9:9), was a tax-collector and, since he was working in Galilee, doubtless an agent of the hated half-Edomite Herod (*cf.* Lk. 23:6-7). This made him as much an outcast from orthodox Jewish society as the leper of 1:40 had been. Such tax-collectors were often, if not always, rapacious and immoral, apart altogether from the nationalistic prejudice against them, since they were working directly for the Romans or the Herods. Yet, as Jesus had laid His hand on the leper and cleansed him, so He called Levi to be one of the apostles, one of the foundation members of His new society (*cf.* Rev. 21:14 with Eph. 2:20). Levi cannot be said to have been a likely choice for an apostle, but then neither had his ancestor been a likely choice (Gn. 49:5), before God changed him (Dt. 33:8-11), as Jesus would change this Levi now.”

It seems that Levi’s party, for which he had invited his former colleagues, was a celebration of his new-found joy of being saved, cleansed and chosen by Jesus. He, obviously, had enough reason to celebrate. What he did not know at this point that his written record of Jesus’ words and acts would establish his name throughout history.

Jesus’ answer to the scribes about the sick, the doctor and the righteous is, at the same time, a proclamation and a condemnation. “The righteous” in this case, were not sinners saved by grace, but the Pharisees who considered themselves to be righteous because of their zeal in all they did for God.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees: “Jesus never excused or condoned sin; no scribe or Pharisee ever condemned it in stronger terms than He did. But this criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees was ill-based for several reasons. First, when a man or woman became a friend or a follower of Jesus, then he or she ceased to be a sinner, but was changed. Secondly, the reason that Jesus mixed so freely with people of this sort was just because their need was so great, and because they, unlike the ‘religious,’ were conscious of their need and therefore responsive to His message. It was apparently a common complaint that Jesus was not sufficiently particular in choosing His friends, unlike other rabbis. Jesus Himself must have known that the common Pharisaic view of Him was as a greedy and hard-drinking person, and as a friend of tax-collectors and sinners (see Mt. 11:19). Nevertheless, in spite of all this criticism, it is probable that

⁵⁵ Luke 5:29

the main objection of the Pharisees to social intercourse (whether by themselves or by Jesus), with such strata of society was not a truly moral scruple, but merely a fear lest they themselves should contract ceremonial defilement by contact with those who were ritually unclean (*cf.* Jn. 18:28). So Jesus would willingly touch the leper (1:41), but the priest and Levite, because of their office, dared not help even an injured and bleeding man at the roadside (Lk. 10:31-32), for fear of incurring ceremonial defilement.”

Jesus’ seeking of the sick and the sinners, not only saved them for eternity, but also rehabilitated them for life in society. Levi (Matthew) is a clear example of what happens to a person who follows Jesus.

iv. Controversy about fasting (2:18-22)

18 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.

20 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

21 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.

22 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary explains about the fasting of the Pharisees: “Probably meaning that they did not fast so frequently as the others did, or for the same purposes, which is very likely, for the Pharisees had many superstitious fasts. They fasted in order to have lucky dreams, to obtain the interpretation of a dream, or to avert the evil import of a dream. They also fasted often, in order to obtain the things they wished for.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “It is not improbable that the Pharisees and the disciples of John were fasting at the very time when Matthew gave his feast. This was not one of the fasts prescribed by the Law; had it been so, it would have been observed by our Lord. There were, however, fasts observed by the Pharisees which were not required by the Law; there were two in particular of a voluntary nature, mentioned by the Pharisee (... Luke 18:12), where he says, ‘I fast twice in the week.’ It was a custom, observed by the stricter Pharisees, but not of legal obligation. It was not correct to say, but thy disciples fast not. They fasted, no doubt, but in a different spirit; they did not fast to be seen of men — they followed the higher teaching of their Master. It is remarkable to find the disciples of John here associated with the Pharisees. John was now in prison in the fort of Machaerus. It is possible that jealousy of the increasing influence of Christ may have led John’s disciples to associate themselves with the Pharisees. The point of this particular attack upon Christ was this: It is as though they said, “You claim to be a new teacher sent from God, a teacher of a more perfect religion. How is it, then, that we are fasting, while your disciples are eating and drinking?” The disciples of John more especially may have urged this out of zeal for their master. Such an unworthy zeal is too often seen in good men, who love to prefer their own leader to all others, forgetting the

remonstrance of St. Paul, ‘While there is amongst you strife and contention, are ye not carnal, and walk after the manner of men?’”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Both to the Pharisees, and to John himself at times, it must have looked suspiciously as though these disciples had chosen an easier way in following Jesus. Although regular weekly fasting was not part of the law of Moses, by the first century such fasting had become an important part of the practice of Judaism, from which it passed into early Christianity, with only a change in the actual days involved. To the orthodox Jew this one minor point of fasting raised the whole question of the attitude of Jesus to the whole ceremonial law. He had already healed on the sabbath (1:31), though this had not yet become an issue; His disciples ate food without the prior ceremonial hand-washing customary in Judaism (7:2), and they even husked corn on the sabbath day (2:23). Taken together, this was highly suspicious: did this rabbi reject the traditions?”

Jesus’ answer is both delightful and to the point. His presence on earth was a reason for celebration. When the angels announced His birth to the shepherds, they said: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”⁵⁶ Jesus calling Himself “the bridegroom” seems premature since “the bride” that is the church of Jesus Christ had not been born yet. That would happen on the day of Pentecost. John the Baptist had called Jesus “the bridegroom,”⁵⁷ and Jesus may have purposely chosen John’s words in saying this.

But the whole point of Jesus’ words is the joy of His presence for those who believed in Him. At another time, He said: “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”⁵⁸ The fact that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”⁵⁹ was reason for celebration, a celebration even greater than a wedding.

This joyful remark is followed by a reference to His crucifixion and death, which would be a time of sorrow and fasting for the disciples and for all who had put their trust in Him.

In order to clarify His remark Jesus used two short parables, the meaning of which must have been unclear to those who heard them at that time. One is about repairing a torn garment and the other about storage of wine. We still mend garments in present-day society, but wine is no longer kept in leather bags.

What Jesus is saying here means that His coming in the world was the beginning of a new dispensation of God’s dealing with mankind. We could say that the “old garment” and “old wineskin” are images of the people of Israel. The KJV modernized the second parable by using the word “bottles” for “wineskins.” God had chosen Israel to be “a kingdom of priests.”⁶⁰ In God’s new dispensation, “the field is the world.”⁶¹ The fact that Israel had been appointed by God to be “a kingdom of priest” meant that God wanted them to be a testimony to the rest of the world. This Israel had not been. They believed that God’s revelation to them was exclusive and that other nations were to be left in

⁵⁶ Luke 2:10,11

⁵⁷ John 3:29

⁵⁸ John 9:5

⁵⁹ John 1:14

⁶⁰ Ex. 19:6

⁶¹ Matt. 13:38

darkness. That was the reason Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. The “great commission” would be “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”⁶²

There is, probably, in the last picture of the new wine a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Although David does not use the Name of the Holy Spirit, his reference is probably to the Spirit when he sings in one of the psalms: “Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”⁶³

The question is what is represented by the new wineskins? This, probably, refers to those who are born again by the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that, at this point in Jesus’ ministry, no one could really understand what He was saying. Luke adds a prophetic word to this text that refers to unwillingness of the Jewish leadership to accept Jesus’ message: “And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’”⁶⁴

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “A new spirit must find new forms of expression; that is the lesson of the parable. Indeed, the book of Acts shows with increasing clarity the utter impossibility of containing this new Christianity as a mere ‘Reformed Sect’ within Judaism, although fasting is known in Acts even in largely Gentile churches (Acts 13:1-3). It was no accident that not only the Judaisers but even the non-heretical Jewish-Christian churches known to Eusebius (both of whom continued to observe the law), died out in later centuries: they tried in vain to put *new wine* into *old wineskins*. Whenever the fresh life of the Spirit breathes in the church, the same problem arises, as the church seeks for appropriate forms in which to contain and express the new life, without losing continuity with the old. Yet Christianity, for all its outward differences, was not a breach with Judaism, but its fulfillment.”

v. Controversy about the Sabbath (2:23-28)

23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

25 He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"

26 In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “This passage marks with some nicety the time of the year. The corn in that district would be ripening about May. It would, therefore, be not long after the Passover.”

Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath was the most controversial point in His relationship with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. We read in John’s Gospel, in

⁶² Mark 16:15

⁶³ Ps. 4:6,7

⁶⁴ Luke 5:39

connection with the healing of the man who had been born blind, that some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”⁶⁵ Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath is best captured in His words: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”⁶⁶

Commenting on this section, R. Allan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “The disciples were charged with ‘working’ on the sabbath on several grounds. Pulling ears of corn was ‘reaping,’ and that was one of the thirty-nine activities specially forbidden on the sabbath. One wonders what the Pharisees were doing in the cornfields themselves; their sole purpose may have been to criticize the disciples of Jesus. In addition to ‘reaping,’ the disciples not only pulled the ripe ears, but also husked them between their palms, according to Luke (Lk/ 6:1). The actual eating itself was of course not culpable, even in Pharisaic eyes.”

In commenting on the same incident as recorded by Matthew,⁶⁷ we wrote: “We tend to accuse the Pharisees of hairsplitting. One can hardly apply the word ‘labor’ to picking a few heads of grain, can one? We believe that the Pharisees paid too much attention to little things. In doing so we suppose that there are some things that are too small to be called sin.

It is interesting to see in Jesus’ answer that He does not say this. Jesus seems to agree to their premise and to affirm that their accusation is correct in principle. He cites two instances from the Old Testament that speak of people who did what was actually not permitted for them to do. This suggests that what the disciples did was also against the law. The first lesson to be drawn from this incident seems to be that we are guilty before God because of major as well of minor infractions of the law. David broke the law when he took the consecrated bread and ate it. It seems that the only reason he was not punished was because he was David! He was to become Israel’s greatest king and as such he foreshadowed the One who was to come. There is a good deal of sarcasm in the question ‘Or haven’t you read in the Law?’ The Pharisees knew the Old Testament by heart, but the meaning of what they knew had escaped them.

Jesus’ interpretation of David’s trespass casts a new light upon the incident and upon the person of Christ Himself. The only excuse for breaking the Sabbath is the person of Jesus Christ. Here is the key to the mystery of grace. The Apostle Paul would later clarify this in his treatise about not being under the law but under grace. The consequence of a perfect keeping of the law would, in fact, be a life of total bondage in which picking heads of wheat on the Sabbath would be the equivalent of eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is only the person of Jesus Christ who breaks this bondage of the Sabbath.

The more surprising explanation is found in the second part of Jesus’ defense. The priests break the Sabbath while serving in the temple without being guilty. And ‘one greater than the temple is here.’ The Greek text reads literally: ‘But I say to you, that the greater temple is in this place.’

Jesus’ statement that He is greater than the temple opens glorious perspectives. He shows here that God lives on earth, primarily in the heart of man; that is in the heart of ‘the Man.’ It is also important to note that Jesus draws a line from the service the

⁶⁵ John 9:16

⁶⁶ John 5:17

⁶⁷ Matt. 12:1-8

priests perform in the temple to a simple walk through a cornfield with Him. This breaks down any separation between serving God and everyday life activities. In fellowship with the Lord every detail of our life becomes a sacrament, even picking heads of grain when you are hungry. We see this exemplified in Jesus' life in the way He sanctified the performance of simple everyday acts. 'Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.'⁶⁸ He takes a piece of bread and breaks it in pieces. He passes a cup of wine around. And these acts become a memorial that becomes unequalled in this world. The real meaning of all eating and drinking seems to be captured in this. It is as if the real meaning of all eating and drinking is demonstrated. Jesus was the first and only real existentialist! Every act He performed was an expression of His being."

Jesus' answer about the purpose of the Sabbath penetrates to the core. The first reference in the Scriptures to the Sabbath is in the Genesis record of creation, where we read: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."⁶⁹ This seems to say that God created the Sabbath for Himself. The point of Jesus' statement about the Sabbath is best elaborated in Hebrews, where the author of the book explains that the real Sabbath was not about physical labor, but about working out one's own salvation instead of accepting the salvation God made available to us in Jesus, the "Lord of the Sabbath." In Christ, we enter into God's rest. The text in Hebrews reads: "There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest."⁷⁰

It is important to note that, in connection with the Sabbath, Jesus refers to Himself as "the Son of Man," emphasizing His humanity. The Pharisees had made endless stipulations about what constituted "work" that could not be done on the Sabbath and what was allowable. Proclaiming Himself to be "Lord of the Sabbath," Jesus stated that, as a genuine human being, He was the one who determined what could be done and what could not.

Some Bible scholars find a problem in the fact that Jesus referred to Abiathar as the high priest, while in the Old Testament record the high priest is identified as Ahimelech.⁷¹ The supposition is that both priests may have been present when David went to obtain food for himself and those who were with him.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments: "The ordinances of religion should be regulated according to their end, which is the honor of God, and the salvation of men. It is the property of the true religion to contain nothing in it but what is beneficial to man. Hereby God plainly shows that it is neither out of indigence or interest that he requires men to worship and obey him; but only out of goodness, and to make them happy. God

⁶⁸ John 13:3-5

⁶⁹ Gen. 2:2,3

⁷⁰ Heb. 4:9-11

⁷¹ I Sam. 21:1

prohibited work on the Sabbath day, lest servants should be oppressed by their masters, that the laboring beasts might have necessary rest, and that men might have a proper opportunity to attend upon his ordinances, and get their souls saved. To the Sabbath, under God, we owe much of what is requisite and necessary as well for the body as the soul.”

vi. The man with the withered hand (3:1-6)

1 Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

2 Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Mark does not give us any indication as to when and where this incident happened. Most Bible scholars believe that the synagogue may have been the one in Capernaum. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The second Sabbath controversy recorded by Mark (Mark 3:1-6) occurred in the synagogue, probably in Capernaum, since 3:7 speaks of a withdrawal to the sea.”

One feature to be noted is that the ones who came to the synagogue had not come to seek God to worship Him and have fellowship with Him, but to spy on Jesus. If we do not go to places of worship to worship God, what is the reason for going? We do well to ask ourselves the question, when we go to a church service, “What am I doing here?”

The Greek verb used in “they watched him closely” is *paratereo*, which can be rendered “to note insidiously or scrupulously.” The same verb is used in the story about Paul’s conversion and the Jewish plan to murder him while in Damascus. We read: “Day and night *they kept close watch* on the city gates in order to kill him.”⁷² The Pharisees were like ferocious animals waiting to kill and devour their prey.

A very human way to proceed under such circumstances would have been for Jesus to quietly hint to the man with the withered hand to see Him afterwards so he could be healed without anybody watching. Jesus did the opposite. Jesus acted fearlessly. He knew that He had come to earth to die, but He also knew that no one could kill Him until the time the Father had determined.

So Jesus provoked the crisis by calling the sick man up front. In Matthew’s Gospel we read that the Pharisees asked Jesus the question: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”⁷³ According to Luke, Jesus replied to the question by asking His own question: “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” The question must refer to the fact that they came with plans to murder Jesus.

⁷² Acts 9:24

⁷³ Matt. 12:10

Matthew also reports that Jesus elaborated on the matter by saying: “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”⁷⁴ Some people treat their pets better than they treat their fellowmen.

Jesus’ answer must have been directed mainly to the Pharisees. The controversial matter was the keeping of the Sabbath; what one was allowed to do and what was not. It was not merely the healing that must have infuriated them, but also the fact that Jesus embarrassed them by exposing their hypocrisy.

There was no love lost between the sect of the Pharisees and the Herodians who were a political party. The latter favored the reign of the Herods, who were of mixed descent. But a common enemy can bind extreme opposites together. The enemies became friends by plotting to commit a crime.

Mark is the only Gospel writer who shows Jesus’ mixed emotions in regard to the Pharisees. We read: “He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.” There was a mixture of anger and distress in Jesus’ feeling towards these men. The Greek word for “distressed” is *sullupeo* meaning “sorrow.” This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used.

The fact that Jesus felt this way towards the Pharisees who would be eager to kill Him, was that there was love for them in His heart.

III. ALL WHO RECEIVED HIM: THE CALL AND TRAINING OF THE DISCIPLES (3:7–8:26)

A. THE CONFLICT INCREASES (3:7-35)

i. The breach with the religious leaders (3:7-12)

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed.

8 When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.

9 Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him.

10 For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him.

11 Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God."

12 But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, introduces this section with: “These verses seem to mark the first decisive breach between Jesus and organized Judaism. If this is correct, it took place near the start of the ministry of Jesus, and is quite as marked and decisive in the synoptic gospels as it is in John. Jesus now moved away from those who had become His enemies, by a deliberate act of separation, and His disciples accepted the consequences of this separation by following Him (7). Not only so, but big crowds poured down, not merely from Galilee now, from Edom in the south to Tyre in the north and Transjordan in

⁷⁴ Matt. 12:11-12

the east (so possibly including Gentiles), they gathered to Him, eager to be healed. It is as if the sabbath healing by Jesus in the synagogue was being vindicated by the common people, though official Judaism repudiated it.”

Apparently, the fact that merely touching Jesus’ garment could effect healing, as we learn from the story of the woman with the blood issue,⁷⁵ brought about the danger of a stampede.

It may seem strange to us that Jesus seemed to think that the pushing of the crowd presented a danger for Him. In the incident in Nazareth when the people were furious and “drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff,” we read that Jesus simply “walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”⁷⁶ It may be that the pushing of the crowd would endanger everyone and that Jesus removed Himself so there would be no stampede.

There was another advantage in the arrangement in which Jesus would sit in the little boat and the audience remained on the beach, in that it provided Him with “a pulpit” from which His voice could be heard clearly over a greater distance. It is difficult for us to imagine how a preacher, even if his voice would be strong, could reach a crowd of several thousand. There were evidently some areas where the acoustics were favorable and everyone could hear without any strain. The little boat, just off shore, must have created such an ideal situation.

Rest the mystery of Jesus’ injunction to the demons He exorcised that they would not reveal Him as the Son of God. Evidently, such demonic propaganda was meant to create a separation between Jesus, the Son of Man, and His fellowmen He had come to serve and save. Jesus rejected sternly the ulterior motives of demons that made propaganda for Him.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “It is worthy of notice that the afflicted people fell upon him ...; but the unclean spirits felt down before him ...; and this not out of love or devotion, but out of abject fear, dreading lest he should drive them out of the ‘possessed,’ and send them before their time to their destined torment. It is just possible that this homage paid to our Lord may have been an act of cunning — a ruse, as it were, to lead the people to suppose that our Lord was in league with evil spirits. *Thou art the Son of God*. Did, then, the unclean spirits really know that Jesus was the Son of God? A voice from heaven at his baptism had proclaimed him to be the Son of God, and that voice must have vibrated through the spiritual world. Then, further, they must have known him to be the Son of God by the numerous and mighty miracles which he wrought, and which they must have seen to be real miracles, such as could only have been wrought by the supernatural power of God, and which were wrought by Christ for this very purpose, that they might prove him to be the promised Messiah, the only begotten Son of God. It may, however, be observed that they did not know this so clearly, but that, considering, on the other hand, the greatness of the mystery, they hesitated. It is probable that they were ignorant of the end and fruit of this great mystery, namely, that mankind were to be redeemed by the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Death of Christ; and so their own kingdom was to be overthrown, and the kingdom of God established. Blinded by their hatred of Jesus, whom they perceived to be a most holy Being, drawing

⁷⁵ Matt. 9:21; Mark 5:28

⁷⁶ Luke 4:29, 30

multitudes to himself, they stirred up the passions of evil men against him, little dreaming that in promoting his destruction they were overthrowing their own kingdom.”

ii. The call of the twelve (3:13-19)

13 Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him.

14 He appointed twelve — designating them apostles — that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach

15 and to have authority to drive out demons.

16 These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter);

17 James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder);

18 Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot

19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

From Luke’s Gospel we learn that Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing His disciples.⁷⁷ Evidently, Jesus felt the need to have the Father’s guidance in this matter. He was not willing to lean upon His own understanding. In making important decisions that would affect His own life and that of others, He obeyed the instruction of *The Book of Proverbs*: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”⁷⁸ In this we do well to take Jesus Christ as our model.

Had Jesus made His choices without acknowledging the Father, He would have had to reproach Himself forever for having chosen Judas Iscariot. Now the mystery of His eventual betrayal which would lead to His death was in the Father’s hands.

The Greek text uses the word *poieo*, (appointed), translating it “ordain.” So Jesus actually held an ordination service in which these twelve men were ordained as apostles. Now, the wording may not have meant the same as it does in the language of the modern church. In most churches ordination is extended to those who have received their education and have graduated. Here, Jesus accepts a dozen “freshmen,” some of whom may still have been illiterate at this point and He declares them to be apostles.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “They were not solemnly ordained or consecrated to their office until after his resurrection. Their actual consecration (of all of them at least but one, namely, Judas Iscariot) took place when he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost’ (... John 20:22). But from this time they were his apostles ‘designate.’ They were henceforth to be with him as his attendants and disciples. They were to go forth and preach under his direction, and by his power they were to cast out devils.”

Mark gives us three reasons for Jesus’ actions. The first one may be the most important – personal fellowship with Jesus Christ for an extended period of approximately three years. Their being with Jesus would be a 24/7 experience. They would sleep together, have their meals together, and go through the daily routines of common human life. Jesus would share His love for them, even to the point where John

⁷⁷ Luke 6:12, 13

⁷⁸ Prov. 3:5, 6

felt that Jesus loved him exclusively. In my opinion, Jesus' divine love radiated to all twelve of these men. And it was the way this love was received by each individual that made each one feel to be exclusive in his relationship with their rabbi. Yet, the love of Christ must have generated a love among them, even in their sinful condition. Eventually the Holy Spirit would sublimate this, but the elements of divine love must have made daily life with Jesus and with one another an extraordinary experience.

At the same time, the apostles' education was a "hands-on" kind of training. They would be sent out on preaching assignments and for this the Lord delegated His authority to them, both for their speaking as for their defense against demonic opposition.

One other interesting feature in Jesus' choice of the apostles was some of the name-changes Jesus made. Simon became Peter, which was to be his real name from then on; the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee, receive the nickname "Boanerges," "Sons of Thunder." It is not difficult to guess why Jesus called them so. The amazing thing is that John, one of the "sons of thunder" turned into the most loving and tender apostle of all. Three years of fellowship with Jesus turned him around completely.

Commenting on some of the names, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Andrew. The brother of Peter (John 1:40-41). Bartholomew. May be identical with Nathanael (John 1:45-51; 21:2). James the son of Alphaeus may be the same as James the less (Mark 15:40). Thaddaeus is also called Lebbaeus⁷⁹ (Matt 10:3) and is the same as Judas the brother of James the less (Luke 6:16). Simon the Canaanite is more correctly designated Simon Zelotes (Acts 1:13), or Simon the Zealot. The word *Canaanite* is misleading, for the term found in the better Greek manuscripts is *Kananaion*, a transliteration of an Aramaic term meaning 'zealot.' Apparently Simon, before becoming a disciple of Christ, was a member of the fanatically patriotic party of Zealots, who were in favor of immediate revolt against Roman overlordship."

If, as a human being, Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him, it is difficult to understand why He chose him. If, however, as suggested above, the choice was made because of the Father's guidance and Jesus may not have known, at this point, what Judas would do, we can fully understand this. Later, maybe after the encounter on the mountain with Moses and Elijah⁸⁰ the Old Testament prophecy must have become clear to Him. Luke tells us the "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."⁸¹

The Pulpit Commentary comments interestingly: "How far our Lord knew from the first the results of his choice of Judas belongs to the profound, unfathomable mystery of the union of the Godhead and the manhood in his sacred Person. We may notice generally, with regard to this choice by our Lord of his apostles, the germ of the principle of sending them forth by two and two. Here are Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, and so on. Then, again, our Lord chose three pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, James the Less and Jude, that he might teach us how powerful an influence is brotherly love. We may also observe that Christ, in selecting his apostles, chose some of his kinsmen according to the flesh. When he took upon him our flesh, he recognized those who were near to him by nature, and he would unite them yet mere closely by grace to his Divine nature. Three of the apostles took the lead, namely,

⁷⁹ Only found in the KJV and NKJV.

⁸⁰ Mark 9:2-4

⁸¹ Luke 9:31

Peter and James and John, who were admitted to be witnesses of his transfiguration, of one of his greatest miracles, and of his passion.”

iii. Mounting opposition: the Beelzebul controversy (3:20-30)

20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat.

21 When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

22 And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

23 So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan?"

24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

25 If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

26 And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.

27 In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.

28 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.

29 But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

30 He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit."

Again, Mark does not indicate the location. There also does not seem to be a chronological line in the account of events. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “There is here a considerable gap in St. Mark’s narrative. The sermon on the mount followed upon the call of the apostles, at all events so far as it affected them and their mission. Moreover, St. Matthew interposes here two miracles wrought by our Lord after his descent from the mount, and before his return to his own house at Capernaum. St. Mark seems anxious here to hasten on to describe the treatment of our Lord by his own near relatives at this important crisis in his ministry.”

History repeats itself in that, when Jesus entered a house, such a dense crowd followed Him that the place became immediately packed out. Space was not the only problem, however. The crowd’s claim upon Jesus’ time became such that there were no breaks in His, or the disciples’ schedule. There was no time to eat. It seems to have been particularly this problem that caused concern among His immediate family. Why this made them conclude that Jesus had lost His mind, is not clear. The Greek text reads literally: “And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, he is beside himself.” There are two Greek words that deserve a closer look: *krateo* “to use strength,” and *existemi*, “to be out of wits.” This last expression does not always refer to craziness. Actually in most places where it is used in the New Testament, it simply refers to amazement, as in the verse: “All the people were *astonished* and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’”⁸²

It is obvious that Jesus’ relatives were of the conviction that Jesus had gone off His rocker and that was the reason they came to take Him away, if needed, in a

⁸² Matt. 12:23

straightjacket. This explains Jesus' reaction to hearing that His family had come to see Him; He knew their intent.

The teachers of the law, who had come from Jerusalem, evidently on a fact-finding mission, came to the same conclusion as Jesus' family, but for different reasons. They wanted an explanation of Jesus' supernatural power that was evinced in exorcising demons. They must have been familiar with the way average exorcists went about this by using certain formulas, requiring so much energy that they were exhausted after each session. Jesus never used any of these strenuous efforts; a simple command made the demon leave his victim. They must have fully understood that Jesus possessed powers that were superior to those available to the Jewish exorcists. Instead of attributing this power to the Holy Spirit, they preferred to accredit it to Satan. In this, they probably acted against their own better knowledge. But acknowledging that Jesus' power came from the Holy Spirit would have required recognition of Jesus as the Messiah to whom they would owe allegiance, which they were unwilling to give.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "Relatives and close friends might misunderstand Jesus; even His followers might be puzzled by Him. But it was left to the theological commission of enquiry to misinterpret Him deliberately. There is a calculated bitterness in their terse judgment which is lacking even in the rough words of His friends or relatives: there is a great difference between *He is beside himself* (21) and *he is possessed by Beelzebul* (the original form of the Hebrew ba'alz'bul, ['Lord of the flies'] probably a mocking alteration of ba'alz'bul, meaning 'Prince of Baal'). The theological commission was less concerned with speaking the truth than with speaking cutting words. We may compare 'He has a demon, and he is mad' (Jn. 10:20)."

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "Observe the contrast between the thoughts of the multitude and of those who professed to be their teachers, the scribes and Pharisees. The multitude, free from prejudice, and using only their natural light of reason, candidly owned the greatness of Christ's miracles as wrought by a Divine power; whereas the Pharisees, filled with envy and malice, attributed these mighty works which he wrought by the finger of God, to the direct agency of Satan."

From Jesus' answer to the teachers of the Law, we conclude that they knew better than they professed. It is clear that they never believed that Jesus was demon possessed in the highest degree. But to recognize that the Holy Spirit was the source of His power would require submission on their part and that they were not willing to do.

Mark 3:23-29 is a difficult section to analyze. It is not too clear why Mark uses here the word "parables." The reference to the divided kingdom and divided house could be seen as an illustration.

We do not know what the unifying factor is among the members of the kingdom of darkness. It is obviously not mutual love, because that would be a divine element. Common hatred against God would, undoubtedly, bind them together. We may take it that Satan rules with an iron hand and that no opposition is tolerated. And the possibility that one demon would be able to do something that would undermine the success of the demonic strategy of opposition against God's rule in this world can be dismissed as an impossibility.

Having established the first rule that Satan cannot exorcise Satan, Jesus proceeds to show that it is only the Holy Spirit who can bind the archenemy. This leads to Jesus' accusation to the Pharisees and teachers of the law that they were in danger of

committing the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. Obviously, at this point in the historical development of theology the concept of the Trinity, that is God consisting in the Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was unknown. But the Holy Spirit was well-known in the Old Testament, so there was no reason why the Pharisees and teachers of the law would misunderstand what Jesus was saying here.

According to the definition by *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “blasphemy” is “the act of expressing lack of reverence for God,” or “irreverence toward something considered sacred.”

In order to understand the severity of these people’s sin, we must remember that, at Jesus’ baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, the voice from heaven declared Him to be the Son, who was loved by God, the Father.⁸³ Some of His accusers may have heard this personally, others must have known about it.

Jesus’ statement that the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the only sin that cannot be forgiven has bothered many people who have searched for assurance of salvation. It has been said that if someone is disturbed because he or she believes to have committed this sin against the Holy Spirit, he or she has not. Those who sin against the Holy Spirit have no conviction of sin, because only the Holy Spirit gives this conviction in the human heart. It was of these people, who accused Jesus of being in cahoots with Satan, that Jesus would later say: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.”⁸⁴

The sin of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in calling the Spirit who worked in Jesus “Satan” instead of “Holy Spirit” was a deliberate lie. They knew the truth but refused to acknowledge it. Jesus calls this “an eternal sin,” meaning that it would pursue the person throughout eternity. This does not mean that some sins are excluded in the load carried by the Lamb of God. But those sins we do not lay upon Him, He cannot carry away.

R. Allan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “These Jewish ecclesiastics could not deny that Jesus had indeed expelled demons. Yet, running counter to all common sense, as Jesus Himself pointed out by a simple illustration (23-25), they attributed this good work to an evil agency. This would assume a dichotomy of civil, a civil war within the kingdom of darkness itself, which would not only be a practical impossibility, but also a theological absurdity (26). Prejudice, in its full sense of a prior conceived judgment, had blinded their eyes to what was at once obvious to simple souls.

Nevertheless, Jesus dealt graciously with them, in spite of their stubborn blindness. He first shows by parables the patent absurdity of their position in this assumption of a fatal division within the realm of evil, which would be tantamount to the suicide of Satan. The other two synoptists add that He also asked the relevant question as to what power was used by confessedly orthodox Jewish exorcists in performing a similar task with similar results; was that demonic power also? (See Mt. 12:27; Lk. 11:19). We may note that casual reference in Mark to the one casting out demons in the name of Jesus, who was not a regular ‘follower’ of His (9:38), and the story of the sons of Sceva, the exorcists of Acts 19:14, as illustrations of the widespread nature of exorcism in first-century Judaism. Exorcism was by no means such a new or isolated phenomenon in

⁸³ Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22

⁸⁴ John 8:44

Judaism that the scribes should misunderstand it so. What may have been new was the universal success with which Jesus employed it, in contrast to the occasional failure even of His own disciples (9:28), and of Sceva's sons in Acts."

iv. The true relatives of Jesus (3:31-35)

31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.

32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"

35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

We read earlier that Jesus' family members were concerned about the heavy schedule Jesus had been following, which allowed no time for normal relaxation and regular meals.⁸⁵ This is the second time Mark mentions their showing up, probably with the same concern.

Regarding these family members, Jesus was considered to be the oldest son of Joseph and Mary and the full brother of at least four other boys. At another point, the crowd asked: "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"⁸⁶

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes under the assumption that Jesus' relatives came to take Him away from His ministry, probably fearing that His overly heavy schedule would damage His physical and emotional health. We read: "Presumably this arrival of His mother and brothers is still to be seen in the context of verse 21, where *his family* was ready to restrain Him by force, through a misunderstanding of the nature of His ministry. A similar total misunderstanding underlay the reaction of Peter in 8:32 to the news that the path of messiahship involved suffering and death. The reason for the misunderstanding was the same in both cases: God's thoughts and plans run contrary to all natural human inclinations (8:33).

There are still crowds coming to Jesus and He is still teaching them, in a systematic fashion, to judge from the verb *sitting* in verses 32 and 34, which to a Hebrew mind would imply a teaching relationship."

Jesus' reply to the person who brought Him the news that His mother and brothers were outside to see Him may sound inconsiderate to us, as if Jesus denied any natural family bonds. We don't know anything about the emotional bond between Jesus and Mary and His brothers. We learn from John's Gospel that Jesus' brothers, at least at that point, did not believe Him to be the Messiah.⁸⁷ That cannot be said about Mary, who had received the angel's message about the baby she was going to bring into the world before

⁸⁵ Mark 3:20,21

⁸⁶ Mark 6:3

⁸⁷ John 7:5

she was even pregnant.⁸⁸ But Jesus' loving consideration for His mother becomes evident, when hanging on the cross, He commits her to the cares of His disciple John.⁸⁹

More than a depreciative denial of natural relationships, Jesus' words are meant to be a declaration of a spiritual bond among those who accept the Word of God as the only guide for their lives. Whenever we pledge obedience to the will of the Father, Jesus comes to our side and presents Himself to us in human form as our brother. The author of *Hebrews* puts this beautifully by saying that "Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers." And the reason He acknowledges this physical relationship is because He is "bringing many sons to glory!"⁹⁰ Jesus' Words are an acknowledgement, not a denial.

B. PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM (4:1-34)

i. The parable of the sower, and the reason for the use of parables (4:1-25)

1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.

4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

11 He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables

12 so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding;

otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

13 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

14 The farmer sows the word.

15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

⁸⁸ See Luke 1:31-33.

⁸⁹ John 19:26,27

⁹⁰ Heb. 2:10,11

17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;

19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop — thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

21 He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?"

22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.

23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

24 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more.

25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

Commenting on the reason for Jesus' use of parables, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "Here is an unusual teacher; His parables are designed to test rather than to illuminate, and to test, not the intelligence, but the spiritual responsiveness of His hearers. Further, there is a sort of arithmetical progression in things spiritual. To one who already has something, more will be given (25), since spiritual insight into the meaning of one parable will lead to further insight into the meaning of other parables (13). Contrariwise, failure to understand will lead us further and further into the fog, until we are completely mystified (12). In this, as in all other spiritual matters, either we *hear* or we do not hear (verse 9). To see the spiritual truth (to *hear*) is the proof that we have received the illumination of that Holy Spirit who alone can open our spiritual eyes, blind by nature, to the truth of God."

The Pulpit Commentary explains about the use and meaning of parables: "This was a new system of teaching. For some months he had taught directly. But as he found that this direct teaching was met in some quarters with unbelief and scorn, he abandoned it for the less direct method of the parable. The parable (*parabolè*) is etymologically the setting forth of one thing by the side of another, so that the one may be compared with the other. The parable is the truth presented by a similitude. It differs from the proverb inasmuch as it is necessarily figurative. The proverb *may* be figurative, but it need not of necessity be figurative. The parable is often an expanded proverb, and the proverb a condensed parable. There is but one Hebrew word for the two English words 'parable' and 'proverb,' which may account for their being frequently interchanged. The proverb (Latin) is a common sentiment generally accepted. The parable (Greek) is something put by the side of something else. Theologically, it is something in the world of nature which finds its counterpart in the world of spirit. The parable attracts attention, and so becomes valuable as a test of character. It reveals the seekers after truth, those who love the light. It withdraws the light from those who love darkness."

The most typical characteristic of the parable is that it is given as a story to illustrate certain truths, but the truths that are being illustrated are usually not mentioned. In the case of the parable of the sower, the audience is left in the dark as to the meaning

of the story. The only ones who hear the meaning are the disciples and they are informed about it at a later time after the meeting has ended.

The way Jesus told the parable to the crowd must have left them baffled. It was as if a preacher in a church would enter the pulpit and say: “This morning, as I came to church, I saw an accident. Two cars were in a head-on collision; both drivers were killed. Amen!” The congregation would wonder what happened to their pastor who preached by merely making such an announcement. The disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ sermon was: “Why did you do this?”

The main reason Jesus resorted to preaching in parables seems to have been the remark of the Pharisees and teachers of the law that Jesus did not perform miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit but with the help of Satan. This made Him hide the truth in stories that might incite people’s curiosity to the point where they would pay greater attention to what was being said. Someone once said that Jesus’ hiding of the truth was “a conspiracy of mercy,” since it diminished the hearers’ responsibility to respond. Since God judges us according to the light we possess, a diminishing of light could lead to a more lenient judgment.

The parable of the sower is a simple story that everyone in Jesus’ audience could identify with. They had all seen farmers walking down their fields with a bag of seed tied around their waist, spreading out seed as they went along. Jesus used this image of His own preaching and the response by those who heard His message. The four kinds of soil in the parable represent four kinds of responses to the Gospel message according to the condition of the hearer’s heart. The four kinds of soil are: the trodden path, the rocky ground, the thorny places and the receptive soil. The point seems to be that the way we hear depends on the condition of our heart.

The sowing method of the farmer was not like any modern mechanical way of sowing wheat a farmer would use nowadays. The farmer’s field was plowed in preparation of the sowing. We must not think that the farmer wasted three-fourth of his seed by throwing it at the wrong places. Most of the kernels landed where they were supposed to be. In that way, the parable is not statistically representative of the result of the preaching of the Gospel. The main point of the story is not the sowing but the condition of the human heart.

“The path” on which some of the seed fell, was representative of those who had heard the Word of God many times without ever responding to it in obedient surrender. These people had heard it so often that it no longer affected them. I have often thought of an experience I had as a young child, staying with my aunt, whose house was close to a train track. The first night I slept at her home, I woke up several times when a train passed. After a night or two, I no longer heard the train and I slept through the whole night. The human brain gets used to repetition of impulses. “The path” at the sower’s field was not a constructed highway but the result of human feet that had trodden the same ground over and over again. Those who are represented by the trodden path had heard the Word of God so often that it did no longer touch their hearts. Yet, Satan knew the power of God’s Word and he was afraid that, if left even in an unresponsive heart, it could begin to sprout and grow. He would, therefore, not take the chance of leaving it dormant in the human soul but made sure it was snatched away so it could not be remembered at a later date. Jesus may have had the Pharisees and teacher of the law in mind in this part of His parable.

The rocky ground must be seen as a thin layer of soil, maybe no more than one inch deep, on a basis of solid rock. The thin layer would be moist after the rain but it would dry out completely once the sun shone on it, because there was no reserve of moisture underneath. We must think of the condition of dry and wet as seasons. The seed would be sown during the rainy season during which the soil would be kept wet for several weeks in which the seed would have time to begin to grow roots. But when the rainy season ended there was no reserve of moisture deeper down from which the young plant could draw, because one inch below the surface was solid rock.

The key word here is superficiality. The human heart is supposed to have depth, but with some people who react spontaneously to anything that grabs their fancy, superficiality prevents them from persisting when good fortune turns into hardship.

We tend to believe that no one can be held responsible for his or her character. Jesus seems to say that we are responsible for who and what we are. Evidently, our choices play an important role in our character development. Superficiality is the result of avoiding the consequences of our acts. If the Word of God cannot grow roots within us, it means that we put up resistance against it.

Mark describes the weeds as “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things.” He is the only one who adds covetousness as a factor that would choke the Word of God in the human heart. Matthew and Luke limit themselves to “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.”⁹¹ Luke also adds immaturity as a factor.

This reminds us of the wise prayer of Agur son of Jakeh, who said to God: “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”⁹² Abundance, more than poverty, can be a very detrimental factor in one’s spiritual life.

Growing up during the depression of the early nineteen thirties in Europe and seeing my mother worry about where the next meal would come from, I never realized that “the worries of this life” could be a sin.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “Riches are aptly compared to thorns, because, like thorns, they pierce the soul. St. Paul (... 1 Timothy 6:10) speaks of some who, through the love of riches, ‘have pierced themselves through with many sorrows.’ Riches are deceitful, because they often seduce the soul from God and from salvation, and are the cause of many *sins*. ‘How hardly,’ says our Lord, ‘*shall* a rich man enter into the kingdom of God.’ They have a tendency to choke the Word of God, and to weaken the power of religion. ‘Those are the only true riches,’ says St. Gregory, ‘which make us rich in virtue.’”

The final category in this parable is represented by those who hear the Word of God and obey it. The result is that the Word bears fruit in their lives. What that fruit is, is not elaborated on in this parable. We know from other parts of Scripture that fruit stands for a change in character and behavior. Paul describes the fruit of the Word of God in our lives as: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”⁹³ James defines it as good deeds. We read: “Who is wise and understanding

⁹¹ Matt. 13:22; Luke 8:14

⁹² Prov. 30:8,9

⁹³ Gal. 5:22,23

among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”⁹⁴

Another kind of fruit, which is the kind exemplified in this parable, is the harvest of human souls for the kingdom. Jesus had told His disciples that He wanted to make them “fishers of men.”⁹⁵

Like Luke, Mark connects the parable of the sower to the image of the lamp that was lit and then hidden.⁹⁶ In Matthew’s Gospel we find it in the Sermon on the Mount.⁹⁷ The light of the lamp represents the testimony of the Gospel in someone’s life. It is a testimony without words. The person’s lifestyle shows that the heart is filled with the grace of God.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, suggests another interpretation of the image. We read: “It is probable that, in this particular instance, the primary lesson of the parable is not that stated elsewhere, as in ‘let your light so shine before men’ (Mt. 5:16). Perhaps the disciples felt as puzzled as any modern reader by His use of parables, and ask Him, ‘Is this teaching in parables a deliberate obscuration of the truth to those outside?’ No, says Jesus, answering as usual on their level: who would light a lamp and then deliberately hide it? If truth is temporarily hidden in the parables, it is only so that it may later be revealed: the ultimate purpose of a parable is therefore not to conceal truth but to reveal it. It is because of this that we must *take heed what you hear*, remembering the double law of ‘spiritual wastage’ and ‘spiritual growth’ according to whether we respond or not. To those who learn, and then pass on to others what they have learned, more will be given (verses 24 and 25). This argument from ‘minor’ to ‘major’ is a favorite with the Jewish rabbis: if even we humans would not act so foolishly with a lamp which we have lit, how much less so would God? The same paradox is seen in the case of Jesus: God is at one and the same time both veiled in Him, and revealed in Him, but the ultimate purpose is that He may be revealed to all (13:26). The ‘messianic secret’ is only temporary.”

ii. Two more parables of growth (4:26-32)

26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.

27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

28 All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

30 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?

31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground.

32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

⁹⁴ James 3:13

⁹⁵ Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17

⁹⁶ Luke 8:16

⁹⁷ Matt. 5:15

There is in the first parable about the way wheat grows a similarity and a difference with the previous parable of the sower. Jesus identified Himself elsewhere with the sower, saying: “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.”⁹⁸ But in this parable it is difficult to see Him in the man who “sleeps or gets up,” while the seed sprouts and grows, “though he does not know how.”⁹⁹ Man may not know the mystery of growth, but God certainly does.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments about the first parable: “It illustrates the nature of the reign of God in the human heart: it suggests the Christian doctrine of ‘growth in grace’ (2 Pet. 3:18); and it inculcates a continued trust in God, who will give a harvest in due time (Gal.6:9 and Phil. 1:6). The sower’s daily sleeping and rising, and his ignorance as to how the seeds grows, is only a part of the human ‘black-cloth’ of the parable and need not be spiritualized. The process of spiritual growth is spontaneous within the kingdom of God, but it remains a total mystery to natural humanity. For the parable of ‘fruitbearing’ compare John 15 (frequently), Luke 6:43-45 and Galatians 5:22-23, where in every case the spontaneity of the process, given the necessary spiritual conditions, is stressed. The last sentence (verse 29) seems to be a warning of the coming end of the age. When the time is ripe, God will intervene decisively in the affairs of humanity (Joel 3:13) and establish His rule, so that all may see. The metaphor of reaping, with its inevitable separation of wheat from weeds (Mt. 13:30), or grain from husks (Mt. 3:12), is a common picture in the Old Testament of the end of the age. It always involves the concept of judgment as well as salvation: chaff and weeds are burnt, wheat is saved. This is to be the final realization of the rule of God, which has begun already in Jesus.”

The Pulpit Commentary adds: “The sower represents human responsibility in the work. The vitality of the seed is independent of his labor. The earth develops the plant from the seed by those natural but mysterious processes through which the Creator is ever working. So in spiritual things, the sower commences the work, and the grace of God perfects it in the heart which receives these influences.”

The question that remains to be asked is why Jesus gave this parable? The obvious point is that there is such a thing as spiritual growth. As with natural birth, no one is born an adult. Fellowship with God is a matter of growth and growth take time.

Another implication of the parable may be that we ask ourselves from time to time if there is spiritual growth in our life. If in the natural a baby does not develop into an adult, we know that something is very wrong. The body is supposed to produce cells that cause physical, emotional and mental development. The same is true on the spiritual level. The complaint of the author of Hebrews was: “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. 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.”¹⁰⁰

In the case of the farmer, human control is not a factor. The farmer cannot make the seed grow faster; he can only create conditions, such as plowing, weeding and fertilizing to allow nature to do its work. In the parable, the soil cannot do anything to

⁹⁸ Matt. 13:37

⁹⁹ Mark 4:27

¹⁰⁰ Heb. 5:11-14

stimulate growth. In reality, we, who are the soil, can cooperate by obedience to the Word of God.

The fact that Mark places the parable of the mustard seed next to the parable about the growth of the wheat constitutes a theological problem for some Bible scholars. In Matthew's Gospel, this parable is paired up with the parable of the woman who prepares dough for baking bread by putting yeast in it.¹⁰¹ Some Bible scholars interpret the yeast in the one and the birds in the other parable as being negative elements, effort by the enemy to corrupt the work of God. Others see it positively as images of the phenomenal spiritual growth of the church.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary takes this positive view. We read: "This parable is a further development of the characteristics of the present, spiritual kingdom of God. The main point here is that the seed of the Gospel message will produce phenomenal growth. From small beginnings, the Kingdom, which had only drawn near in the person of Christ (Mark 1:14-15), will, by reason of its own inner and supernatural vitality, grow to tremendous proportions. This does not mean that it will result in world conversion, nor that man by his efforts will bring in the kingdom of God on earth as a Utopian development, nor that the Kingdom and the Church are identical. The parable does, however, picture the kingdom of grace as including multitudes of redeemed persons who through the years have come to swell its ranks to phenomenal size."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: "The beginnings of the gospel kingdom would be very small, like that which is one of the least of all seeds. When a Christian church was sown in the earth for God, it was all contained in one room, and the number of the names was but one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15), as the children of Israel, when they went down into Egypt, were but seventy souls. The work of grace in the soul, is, at first, but the day of small things; a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Never were there such great things undertaken by such an inconsiderable handful, as that of the discipling of the nations by the ministry of the apostles; nor a work that was to end in such great glory, as the work of grace raised from such weak and unlikely beginnings. Who hath begotten me these?"

That the perfection of it will be very great; when it grows up, it becomes greater than all herbs. The gospel kingdom in the world, shall increase and spread to the remotest nations of the earth, and shall continue to the latest ages of time. The church hath shot out great branches, strong ones, spreading far, and fruitful. The work of grace in the soul has mighty products, now while it is in its growth; but what will it be, when it is perfected in heaven? The difference between a grain of mustard seed and a great tree, is nothing to that between a young convert on earth and a glorified saint in heaven. See John 12:24."

Commenting on this parable in Matthew's Gospel, we wrote: "On the other hand, the interpretation of the growing of the mustard seed, as representing the unnatural growth of the Kingdom, of that which God intended to be a modest organism, into a monster conglomerate, does not seem to fit the picture either. After all, if the mustard seed grows up to be a tree, it obeys the law God embedded into mustard seeds. It has been suggested that the birds that perch in the branches are the same birds that ate up the seed in the Parable of the Sower. But if we start borrowing images from different parables in order to find meaning, we could as well say that the mustard seed in this story is the same as the one that represents faith that moves mountains. Elsewhere in

¹⁰¹ Matt. 13:31-33

Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says: '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.'"¹⁰²

iii. The summing up of the parables (4:33-34)

33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about these verses: "Mark has given the above specimens of the parabolic teaching of Jesus (obviously not an exhaustive account), and he now suggests both a reason for the employment of parables, and also for the careful gradation in their use, in the words *as they were able to hear it*, or 'to understand.' In the school of Christ, none may move to advanced lessons till they mastered the elementary studies. To the outsider there was always the stumbling-block of the form of the parable to be penetrated: only for His own disciples were there private explanations (verse 34), as Mark makes clear on several occasions."

In concluding this section, Mark observes that Jesus spoke to the public in parables "as much as they could understand." The key verb in this phrase is *epiluo*, which can be translated "to solve," or "to explain." The word has a legal connotation as is obvious from its use in another context in which the silver smiths in Ephesus file a complaint against Paul and the matter is given a public hearing. The city clerk quieted the crowd by saying: "If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be *settled* in a legal assembly."¹⁰³

Mark's remark strikes us as strange, because earlier, he stated that the reason for Jesus' use of parables was to hide the Gospel truth in parables to keep people from understanding.¹⁰⁴ One of the reasons for the use of parables was to draw people out of their mental complacency and appeal to their curiosity, which might lead them to want to learn more and eventually to understand and be saved. So Mark's observation is not as strange as it may look at first glance.

C. MINISTRY ROUND THE LAKE OF GALILEE (4:35 – 7:23)

i. Jesus calms the storm (4:35-41)

35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.

37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

¹⁰² Matt. 17:20

¹⁰³ Acts 19:39

¹⁰⁴ Mark 4:10-12

39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

40 He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Matthew records the same incident.¹⁰⁵ Jesus told His disciples to cross the lake of Gennesaret, leaving the crowd behind. Mark uses the strange expression that the disciples took Jesus in the boat “just as He was.” This may mean that Jesus was tired and in need of some rest. The fact that He fell asleep in the boat would clarify this. Most Bible scholars interpret Jesus’ stilling of the storm as proof of His divine power over nature.

It is probably more correct to see “just as He was” in connection with the last verse of this chapter, which reads: “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’”

The great problem in understanding who Jesus was, as the disciples saw Him and as we see Him in the Gospels, is the question whether Jesus lived a totally human life as He walked on earth, or whether His divinity allowed Him to do certain things that would be beyond our reach as human beings. My theology teacher, when I studied in The Brussels Bible Institute, taught that Jesus performed some miracles by His divine power as the Son of God and some as a human being by faith in the Father’s omnipotence.

The key to understanding how Jesus lived on earth should be sought in Paul’s phrasing of the incarnation. In his Epistle to the Philippians, he writes that Jesus “made himself nothing,”¹⁰⁶ which KJV renders: “But made himself of no reputation.” The Greek verb used is *ekénoosen*, which is a form of *keno*, “to make empty,” or to “abase.” The interpretation of the meaning of this phrase has occupied Bible scholars ever since Paul wrote those words.

I believe it means that Jesus laid aside His divine attributes in order to live a life on earth that was totally human. He had no “secret drawers of divine power” that He could open in case of emergency, but that would remain closed for humans as we are. The miracles He performed were performed by faith in the Father’s power and such faith is as available to us as it was to Him during His life on earth. The story we are looking at proves this as it ends with Jesus’ question to the disciples: “Do you still have no faith?”

The definition of faith is given us by the author of Hebrews, who wrote: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”¹⁰⁷ The Greek text of this verse reads literally: “Now faith is [the] substance of things hoped for, the evidence of not seen.” The Greek word rendered “substance” is *hupostasis*, which literally means “a support under ...” We could see it as the pillar that supports the promises of God.

Going back to the story in Mark, we see the disciples crossing the lake in their boat. They had done this many times and they must have battled storms on the lake before. This one must have been of unusual ferocity. Mark depicts the scene in very vivid colors using the present tense: “There arises a storm of great wind.”

¹⁰⁵ Matt. 8:23-27

¹⁰⁶ Phil. 2:7

¹⁰⁷ Heb. 11:1

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary explains: “The lake is about sixty miles from Jerusalem and at one time was thirteen miles long and eight miles wide at its greatest extent, although land reclamation programs have since reduced its length. Its surface is about 700 feet below sea level, and it is about 150 feet deep at its lowest point. The Jordan River flows through it, providing much of its water supply, but that is augmented by springs in the lake floor. The high hills surrounding the below sea-level water combined with abrupt temperature changes contributed to sudden and violent storms on the lake.”

As a missionary in Papua (Indonesia), I have had several experiences that made me feel like the disciples crossing the lake of Gennesaret, while crossing Lake Paniai, one of the Wissel Lakes in the interior mountains of the island. Lake Paniai is surrounded by high mountains and the water level is more than 5000 feet above sea level. Around midday, the wind falls down from the mountains on the lake and whips up the water to waves several feet high. Crossing the lake in a small wooden canoe at that time could be an adventure, even with an outboard motor attached to the canoe.

The disciples must have tried to row across and found themselves at severe odds with the elements. Their fear may have been aroused by more than wind and water. There may have been a demonic element in the severity of the storm. The enemy may have hoped that the wind would tip over the boat and that he could make Jesus drown with the disciples.

In all this Jesus was fast asleep in the stern of the boat with His head on a pillow. He knew that He had come to earth for the purpose of giving His life as a ransom for the sin of mankind and that He would not die until the moment of His sacrifice had come. So He could sleep peacefully through the storm, entrusting Himself to the Father's protection. Jesus knew, what the Apostle Paul would experience later, that God had graciously given Him the lives of all who sailed with Him.¹⁰⁸

In their panic, the disciples awake Jesus, saying “Master, don't you care that we perish?” This is the first time Mark uses the term *didaskalos*, “teacher” for Jesus. The Greek word for “perish” is *apollumi*, which is a powerful term, meaning literally “to fully destroy.” Luke renders the disciples' words as “Master, Master, we're going to drown!”¹⁰⁹ The way Mark puts it, it sounds as if the disciples believed that Jesus would survive, but they wouldn't.

We read that, when He got up, Jesus “rebuked” the wind and the waves, telling them to be quiet and still. Jesus addressed the weather as if it had personality. It is at this point, as we mentioned above, that most Bible scholars believe that Jesus acted as the divine Creator. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, observes: “The combined descriptions of the synoptists show that the storm was very violent, such as no human power could have composed or stilled. So that these words indicate the supreme authority of Christ as God, ruling the sea with his mighty power. Thus Christ shows himself to be God.” In that case Jesus' rebuke to the disciples for the lack of faith would not make much sense, unless we interpret it as a lack of recognition of His divinity. The end of the story, in which the disciples asked themselves the question: “Who is this?” would then be meaningless.

¹⁰⁸ Acts 27:24

¹⁰⁹ Luke 8:24

We may assume that windstorms, hurricanes and similar disasters, were not part of God's original plan of creation. The universe, of which our planet is part, was pronounced perfect by God at the time of creation. And when God put man in charge of the works of His hands, He gave Adam and Eve full authority over everything He had made. The coming of sin changed all this. And it is true that Elihu said to Job: "Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds, how he thunders from his pavilion? See how he scatters his lightning about him, bathing the depths of the sea. This is the way he governs the nations and provides food in abundance. He fills his hands with lightning and commands it to strike its mark. His thunder announces the coming storm; even the cattle make known its approach."¹¹⁰ And Asaph sang in the Psalms: "Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked."¹¹¹ But none of this is an indication that "bad weather" was meant to be, although God can presently show His glory in it.

In addressing the wind and the waves, Jesus demonstrates the power that God originally intended man to have over His creation. If it is true that the archangel Lucifer was the original guardian of planet earth, and that his fall from glory affected our globe to the point that we find it "formless and empty," with "darkness over the surface of the deep,"¹¹² then the world we know now is not what it was meant to be. When God created Adam, He gave him responsibility and authority to protect our world. When Adam joined the enemy, God's creation became what we know it now to be.

In rebuking the wind and the waves, the last Adam picks up the crown that fell from the first Adam's head. He did this by faith in the Father's supremacy, showing the disciples what we all were meant to be in our relationship to God and to creation.

Jesus' demonstration of the authority God meant man to have over creation, scared the daylights out of the disciples. It also caused them to fear Jesus Himself, asking themselves: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"¹¹³ At this point they never concluded that the wind and the waves ought to obey them too. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "In spite of their lack of faith, Jesus calmed the storm with a word. But the disciples, inconsequentially, still feared; a friendly, familiar, human Jesus they wanted, but not a supernatural Son of God. Their reaction at the mount of transfiguration (9:6), and even at the resurrection (16:8), was to be the same."

ii. The Gadarene demoniac (5:1-20)

1 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain.

4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

¹¹⁰ Job 36:29-33

¹¹¹ Ps. 77:18

¹¹² Gen. 1:2

¹¹³ Mark 4:41

- 6** *When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.*
- 7** *He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"*
- 8** *For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"*
- 9** *Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many."*
- 10** *And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.*
- 11** *A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.*
- 12** *The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them."*
- 13** *He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.*
- 14** *Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.*
- 15** *When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.*
- 16** *Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man — and told about the pigs as well.*
- 17** *Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.*
- 18** *As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.*
- 19** *Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."*
- 20** *So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.*

Bible scholars find a problem with Mark's geography. Not all manuscripts, presently available, have the same wording. Some read Gerasa, or Gergesa or Gadara. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about this: "The difficulty is that Gerasa was forty miles from the lake, and Gadara was only six miles away, but with a deep gorge in between. Mark does not say that the miracle took place in any of these towns, however, but only in the general area where they were situated. The manuscripts are confused as to the place name, but this is no reason to accuse Mark himself of lack of knowledge of Palestinian geography, just because his copyists were ignorant of it."

Matthew, in reporting the same incident, mentions two demon-possessed men.¹¹⁴ That does not constitute a contradiction with Mark's and Luke's account. It only means that the latter two Gospel writers only tell the story of one of the men, probably the worst case. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "The Gadarenes were included within the limits of the Gergasenes. Dr. Lightfoot supposes that, of the two demoniacs mentioned here, one was of Gadara, and consequently a pagan, the other was a Gergesenian, and consequently a Jew; and he thinks that Mark and Luke mention the Gadarene demoniac because his case was a singular one, being the only pagan cured by our Lord, except the daughter of the Syrophaenician woman."

Mark describes in detail what methods the people of the area had used in order to subdue the man, probably because he was a threat to his surrounding and attacked people.

¹¹⁴ Matt. 8:28-34

But the outward restraints were no match for the demonic powers that tore the iron chains apart as if they were burned threads. Evidently, the demons were not able to kill the man, but driving him to the tombs of the dead, they may have hoped that their patient would commit suicide, so that they could take his poor soul down with them to perdition.

The only thing the demons could do to the man was to induce him to cut himself with sharp pieces of rock.

When this man saw Jesus, he ran toward Him. We may assume that this was not what the demons wanted him to do, but it was the man's own will that made him do it. The evil powers had not been able to take complete control over their patient's will. But when the man fell on his knees before Jesus, the demons cried out, trying to expose Jesus as "Son of the Most High God." We read before that Jesus always refused this kind of demonic advertisement. The idea that Jesus would torture the man was, of course, absurd. The demons had done the torturing so far and they were the ones who pleaded for mercy, which they had withheld from their victim. One of the amazing features in the story is that they appealed to Jesus to swear by God. The father of lies knew who was the Father of Truth.

This is the only case of exorcism we know of in which Jesus engaged in a conversation with the demon or demons. Jesus asked the name of the evil spirit that possessed the man. The demons answer not with a name but with a number. The devil does not deal in names, because names stand for identity and character, which are features Satan does not respect. As the Nazis did with the inmates of their concentration camps, the devil identifies individuals as numbers.

The Pulpit Commentary states: "The Roman legion consisted of six thousand soldiers. But the word is here used indefinitely for a large number. St. Luke so explains it where he says (... Luke 8:30), 'And he said, Legion: for many devils were entered into him.' This revelation is doubtless designed to teach us how great is the number as well as the malignity of the evil spirits." As it turns out there were probably two thousand demons in this man, since that it is number of pigs that drowned when the herd was invaded.

The demon or demons asked Jesus not to send them out of the area, which was the western part of Lake Gennesaret, which was not Israelite territory. This explains also how there could be such a large herd of pigs, which were unclean animals that Jews were not allowed to eat, and were, therefore, unlikely to keep.

The demons' request may shed some light on the topic of territorial spirits as we find mentioned in the Book of Daniel.¹¹⁵

R. Allan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "There are several puzzles here: why did Jesus allow the demons in this particular case to vent their destructive force on the herd of pigs? Sometimes in the gospels the expelled demon spent his force in a last attack on the patient (e.g. 9:26, the epileptic boy); sometimes we have no record of any special manifestation on exit. We know so little in this realm that we do well to tread reverently: it may be that such an outward sign was required in this case to convince bystanders of the reality of the expulsion. The size of the herd of pigs would in turn make plain to all, by symbol, that the man had been tortured by countless conflicting evil impulses: he was not even 'integrated' in his evil. It may well be that, in some way that we cannot grasp, this was some sort of spiritual 'safety valve' to avert violence from the patient. It is

¹¹⁵ Dan. 10:14

sometimes half-humorously suggested that, if the owners of the pigs were Jewish, presumably engaged in selling what was to them ceremonially unclean pork to the Gentiles of the district, then this was a punishment to them as well. But it seems unlikely that Jesus would take such pains to punish a breach of ceremonial law, when He Himself constantly faced the charge of breaking it (7:5). Even today in Israel, it is not unknown for a ‘kibbutz’ to rear pigs, in spite of all the outcry from the orthodox, although, in deference to scruples, they will be called *haberim*, ‘comrades,’ instead of *hazirim*, ‘pigs.’

Note that the Bible clearly differentiates between various degrees of demonization. Usually the account only mentions ‘a demon’; ‘seven demons’ is a stage worse, seen in Mary Magdalene’s case history (16:9). But this man is, by contrast, filled by a veritable army of militant demons. No-one familiar with the biblical use of symbolism would press the numbers literally. Seven is continually used in the Bible as a metaphor and symbol, not so much of ‘divine perfection,’ as is often said, but of completion and totality (e.g. Gn. 41:2). Yet the inference is quite plain: there are varying degrees of control of humans by Satan, just as there are varying degrees their control by the Holy Spirit. This man of Gerasa was completely bound by Satan as he had never been by the chains and fetters imposed by humans. So, at his healing, equally drastic manifestations of divine power are not to be wondered at. It is worth mentioning that the Bible never uses the term ‘possession’ by demons: humans may be ‘troubled’ by demons, or may be ‘in the power of a demon,’ or ‘demonized.’ ... If the participle is used, RSV as here paraphrases as *the demoniac*, but this has lost its force in modern English. Note also that Mark distinguishes very clearly between the sick and the demonized (e.g. 3:10 – 11); they are not the same.”

One wonders if the demons realized what would happen to them when they had taken possession of the herd of swine; once the animals drowned, they were left disembodied anyhow, which probably means that they had to search for other places of residence. Jesus explained elsewhere that demons will try to retake possession of people from whom they were expelled.¹¹⁶ In the case of this man, that option was not given to them.

The Pulpit Commentary observes about the demons’ request; “They could not enter even into the swine without Christ’s permission; how much less into ‘the sheep of his pasture’”!

The reaction of the people of the area is remarkable. They had known the demon-possessed man as he had been and they had been afraid of him. Now their fear shifted to the One who had performed this miracle of healing. But their fear was not “the fear of the Lord” in the scriptural sense of the word. We could say that they were faced with a choice between a herd of pigs and a human being, and they chose the pigs! It is true that they suffered an economic loss from which they might have a hard time recovering. If they were Jews who had been keeping pigs “illegally,” they may have faced an unwanted conviction of sin. But we do not know whether they were Jews or not.

We read that they saw the man “dressed and in his right mind” and this caused them greater fear than they had ever experienced while he was demon-possessed. So they asked Jesus to leave. They had rather kept their pigs and the demons than to face Him who had the power over Satan.

¹¹⁶ Matt. 12:43-45

Luke put this more beautifully: “they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind.”¹¹⁷ It has been said that this man is here the perfect picture of what every Christian should be.

It has been pointed out that there was a great difference in attitude toward Jesus between the man who had been healed and the crowd. The man wanted to leave his country and stay with Jesus, the crowd wanted Jesus to leave. Jesus had to leave, but the man had to stay. His life would be a living testimony to the grace of God outside of the boundaries of Israel. Jesus ascribed the miracle of healing to “the Lord,” that is to the Father; the man testified to the healing power of Jesus. Jesus left the region of the Gerasenes, but He left behind a living testimony to the grace of God. He wants all of us who have experienced His saving grace to be such a light at the place where He leaves us.

iii. Two more healing miracles (5:21-43)

21 When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake.

22 Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet

23 and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

24 So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him.

25 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years.

26 She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.

27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak,

28 because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

29 Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

30 At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

31 "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

32 But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.

33 Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.

34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

35 While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"

36 Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

37 He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

¹¹⁷ Luke 8:35

38 *When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.*

39 *He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep."*

40 *But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was.*

41 *He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!").*

42 *Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.*

43 *He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

This story brings Jesus back to the western shore of the lake of Gennesaret. He is immediately surrounded by a large crowd that hustles and pushes. Jairus, whose name means "He gives light," approaches Jesus with the request to come and heal his dying daughter. He is identified as "one of the synagogue rulers," which would be the synagogue of Capernaum. As Jesus had made Capernaum His home, according to Mark's earlier statement,¹¹⁸ Jesus must have been a familiar frequenter of that congregation.

Mark uses a strong word for Jairus way of asking Jesus to come. *Parakaleo* means "to implore," or "to beseech." Jesus agreed to go with him and heal the little girl. As they are on their way, a woman who suffered from continuous bleeding approached Jesus and touched Him. According to the Levitical law, her physical problem made her ceremonially unclean. We read: "When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period."¹¹⁹ Mark is quite explicit in describing that the medical treatments she had received had been ineffective and costly. Interestingly, Luke, the physician, is more reserved and makes every effort not to embarrass his colleagues, saying merely: "And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her."¹²⁰

Not only was the woman ceremoniously unclean but if anybody touched her, that person would also become unclean for the rest of that day.¹²¹ That means that, if she touched anybody, she would make that person unclean also. She must have heard that people who touched Jesus experienced instantaneous healing. Luke reports: "The people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all."¹²² So she tried to touch Jesus without being noticed, because that would have caused embarrassment. Luke states: "She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped,"¹²³ indicating that she must have bowed down low in order to reach the edge of Jesus' cloak.

¹¹⁸ Mark 2:1

¹¹⁹ Lev. 15:25

¹²⁰ Luke 8:43

¹²¹ Lev. 15:27

¹²² Luke 6:19

¹²³ Luke 8:44

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “The woman heard of Jesus (27) and acted on what she had heard, by coming to Him. She showed the greatness of her faith, not merely in that she believed that Jesus could heal her, but in that she asked for so little contact: merely to grasp His robe would be sufficient. Such faith on the woman’s part was at once rewarded by a healing of which she was instantly conscious (29). But Jesus makes plain, in His reply, that it was her faith which had healed her, not the mere touching of His robe.”

As we saw above, what the woman did was against the law. In all other circumstances, her touching someone would have made that person unclean. Jesus did not become unclean by her touch, but she became clean. She broke the law, but her faith justified her.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “St. Matthew tells us that ‘she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.’ From this it appears that, though she had faith, it was an imperfect faith. She seems to have imagined that a certain magical influence was within Christ and around him. And the touching of the border of his garment (the blue fringe which the Jews were required to wear, to remind them that they were God’s people) was supposed by her to convey a special virtue. Yet her faith, though imperfect, was true in its essence, and therefore was not disappointed.”

Jesus’ reaction to the woman’s touch, which evidently He did not feel, provides some insight in the mystery of spiritual power. We read that “Jesus realized that power had gone out from him.” He was aware of the fact that some kind of spiritual discharge had occurred, but He, evidently did not know who had touched Him. Unless we assume that Jesus knew, because He was omniscient, but wanted the woman to come forward, we must conclude that this incident was another proof of Jesus’ humanity, which means that His omniscience was something that He had laid aside in His incarnation.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on v.30: “This is an interesting verse, in that it shows that Jesus was at least sometimes conscious of the flow of healing power from Himself to the sick individual. It may have been that such healings cost Him much spiritual energy, for we read of Him escaping for times of recuperation and prayer (6:32 *etc.*). Mark, unlike Matthew (Mt. 8:17) or Luke (Lk. 4:18) gives no theological reason for the healing miracles of Jesus, other than that they were signs of authority (1:27), and that Jesus was moved with compassion (1:41). That was sufficient for the practical Mark; that was all that was necessary for the Gentile mission.”

Jesus’ question as to who touched Him seemed incomprehensible to His disciples. They observed that the crowd was hustling and shoving and that probably dozens of people had had this kind of physical contact with Him.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “This incident shows the mysterious connection between the spiritual and the physical. The miraculous virtue or power which went forth from the Savior was spiritual in its source and in the conditions on which it was imparted, but it was physical in its operation; and that which brought the two together was faith. Multitudes thronged the Savior, but only one of the crowd *touched* him.”

Jesus’ question and His persistent looking around brought the woman to the realization that she could not remain hidden, so she came forward and told her whole story in public. Her touching of Jesus had not only healed her of her illness but also of her embarrassment.

The Greek text of v.34 reads literally: “And he said unto her, Daughter, your faith has made you whole; go in peace and be whole of your plague.” The Greek verbs for “made whole” and “be whole” are not the same. The first is a form of the verb *sozo*, which is derived from a word meaning “safe.” The first time this verb is used in the New Testament is in the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Joseph: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will *save* his people from their sins.”¹²⁴ The second Greek verb is *hugies*, meaning “healthy.” We find that verb in the story of the man with the withered hand, where we read: “Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as *sound* as the other.”¹²⁵

Jesus’ words to the woman were no denial of His power to heal; they emphasized the importance of faith in the application of His power. We read, for instance, that Jesus’ power to heal in Nazareth was limited, “because of their lack of faith.”¹²⁶

The delay caused by the incident of the woman’s healing must have irked Jairus, who was in a hurry to get Jesus to his home in order to heal his daughter while it was still time. We don’t read whether Jairus believed himself that it would be too late for Jesus to do anything, once his daughter had died. But his earnest pleading could be read as an indication. For Jesus, the girl’s death would mean an opportunity to prove, as He would later state in connection with the resurrection of Lazarus, that He is “the resurrection and the life.”¹²⁷ In as much as His healings were the result of the fact that “He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,” and that “He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed,”¹²⁸ so were the miracles of raising the dead He performed while on earth, down payments of His own resurrection to come.

It is obvious, though, that the members of Jairus’ household, who came to tell him his daughter had died, did not believe that Jesus could do anything beyond healing the sick. Their words were: “Why bother the teacher any more?”

The NIV’s phrase “Ignoring what they said” is not in the Greek Interlinear Text. The text reads literally: “[As soon as] Jesus heard the word that was spoken ...” It is true that Jesus did ignore what the messengers were saying to Jairus. There may be a suggestion in this that the whole situation could be a test of Jesus’ own faith. The emphasis in this whole story is upon faith. Most Bible scholars interpret Jesus’ words in the light of His divinity. But I believe that, in this case also, it was Jesus’ faith in the Father as “not the God of the dead but of the living,”¹²⁹ that was the basis of the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter. So the words “Don’t be afraid; just believe” were an encouragement to Jairus to share in Jesus’ own faith. The Apostle Paul referred to Jesus’ faith when he wrote to the Galatians the words that literally read in Greek: “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 *of* the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”¹³⁰

It is not clear at what point Jesus chose Peter, James and John to follow Him, evidently leaving the other disciples behind. It seems to have happened before they

¹²⁴ Matt. 1:21

¹²⁵ Matt. 12:13

¹²⁶ Matt. 13:58

¹²⁷ John 11:25

¹²⁸ Isa. 53:4, 5

¹²⁹ Matt. 22:32

¹³⁰ Gal. 2:20

reached Jairus' home. But from Luke's account we would gather that this selection was made after they had arrived.¹³¹ *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Here we have the first occasion of the selection of three of the apostles to be witnesses of things not permitted to be seen by the rest. The other two occasions are those of the transfiguration, and of the agony in the garden. We now follow our Lord and these three favored disciples, Peter and James and John, to the house of death. They are about to witness the first earnest of the resurrection."

The funeral party had already started at Jairus' home. Mark only mentions people wailing and crying. Matthew reports: "When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd."¹³² This means that the "professional" mourners had already arrived and were playing their music.

It is difficult for us to imagine the kind of expression of grief demonstrated at the occasion of death in Israel of Jesus' day. Some of the people at the scene described here must have come to be paid for their tears and commotion. There was a whole philosophy of death behind these demonstrations that is difficult for us to grasp. Some tribal people we knew during our missionary work in Papua, Indonesia, would set appointed times of mourning for their death, sometimes days or weeks after their departure. A crowd would come and begin to cry and wail. There was no spontaneous emotion, just a superstition that tears and wails were needed to accompany the departed to the realms beyond. Some of this philosophy may have been present here.

The fact that Jesus is laughed at by those mourners is indication that their grief was not what we would consider appropriate at a funeral. It must have taken all of Jesus' authority to dismiss the crowd of mourners from the house.

His words about the girl not being dead but asleep, need a closer look. From the tribal people in Papua, we learned that their concept of death was less than accurate. Any form of unconsciousness would be called "death." People might still be breathing, but when there was no reaction to any stimuli, they were considered dead. Whether this was so in the case of Jairus' daughter cannot be stated for sure. We know that Jesus used the word "sleep" at some occasions when actual death had occurred.¹³³

Bible scholars have argued about the literal meaning of Jesus' words "The child is not dead but asleep," suggesting that the girl was not, what we would call "clinically dead," that is without any brainwaves present. The reaction of the mourners to Jesus' words suggests that actual death had occurred. The mourners made Jesus understand that they knew death when they saw it. Luke's professional opinion as a physician was that the girl had actually died. His words "Her spirit returned"¹³⁴ prove this.

Evidently, the girl's body had been laid in one of the rooms of Jairus' house. Jesus entered there with His three disciples and the girl's parents. We read that Jesus took her hand and called her back to life with the words "Talitha koum!" Mark is the only one of the Gospel writers who gives us Jesus' literal words. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "The words are Aramaic, or Syro-Chaldaic, the then language of Palestine. Mark loves to give such wonderful words just as they were spoken. See Mark 7:34; 14:36."

¹³¹ Luke 8:51

¹³² Matt. 9:23

¹³³ John 11:11-14

¹³⁴ Luke 8:55

Not only did the girl come back to life but her normal energy returned, as did her appetite. During her sickness, she probably had not eaten anything. She was twelve years old and hungry. So Jesus tells the parents to feed her. That detail could easily have been overlooked in the excitement of her resurrection. *Barnes' Notes* observes about Jesus' command: "He had raised her by extraordinary power, but he willed that she should be sustained by ordinary means."

It is difficult to see, however, that the fact of her resurrection could be kept hidden. There had been a crowd at Jairus' home. It is possible that the professional mourners would keep quiet about this resurrection out of pride.

iv. His own city rejects Him (6:1-6)

1 Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.

2 When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!"

3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

4 Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

5 He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

6 And he was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

In introducing this section, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "Jairus had been a synagogue elder in one of the small lakeside towns of the western shore, to judge from the various topographical details. Now Jesus and His disciples seem to have moved inland from the lake to the highlands of Galilee, for He is found teaching, apparently in the synagogue of Nazareth (although unnamed by Mark), which is always *his own country*, the town of His boyhood, though He may later live and work in Capernaum (Mt. 4:13). To the last He is 'the Nazarene, Jesus' (14:67), in spite of His birth in Bethlehem and base in Capernaum. Moreover it is Matthew, not Mark, who sees a prophetic appropriateness in this (Mt. 2:23)."

For greater details about Jesus rejection in His hometown, we have to go to Luke's Gospel.¹³⁵ Luke reports that the people in the synagogue of Nazareth, who recognized Him as one of their own, called Him "Joseph's son."¹³⁶ Mark calls Him simply "the carpenter" "Mary's son," and "the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon." We have no reason to believe that these men were not the sons of Mary and Joseph, Jesus' half-brothers. Yet some scholars believe that they were cousins or sons of Joseph by a former marriage. The Bible gives us no indication that Mary remained a virgin, even after Joseph took her to be his wife.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: "Jesus is called the brother of James and the others, a designation which should be taken literally. There is no Biblical reason

¹³⁵ Luke 4:16-30

¹³⁶ Luke 4:22

whatever for not understanding these four men and their sisters to be the children of Joseph and Mary, born some time after Jesus. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13 ff.) and the author of the epistle that bears his name. Juda is the same as Jude, the author of the general epistle of Jude.”

Instead of being proud of Jesus as their own son, the people of Nazareth rejected Him as such. The Greek text reads literally: “They were offended at him.” Mark uses the word *skandalizo*, from which the English word “scandal” is derived. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “The people of Nazareth ‘knew all the answers’ about Jesus: they were not prepared for any fresh revelation. Familiarity, to quote the English proverb, had bred contempt, as apparently it also had among His own brothers (see on 3:31). Jesus Himself will sadly quote a similar Semitic proverb in verse 4: the only place where the prophet of Nazareth (Mt. 21:11) was not acclaimed was Nazareth itself.”

Mark does not report Luke’s account, that the congregation of the synagogue of Nazareth made an effort to assassinate their preacher by throwing Him off the cliff.¹³⁷ He does tell us that Jesus healed some people by laying His hands on them. No further details are given about these miracles. They may have added, rather than lessened the tension among the people who considered themselves to be believers in God. Jesus must have expected a more favorable reception, since we read that He was amazed at their unbelief.

v. The sending out of the twelve (6:7-13)

7 Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.

8 These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff — no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.

9 Wear sandals but not an extra tunic.

10 Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.

11 And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them."

12 They went out and preached that people should repent.

13 They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

This seems to have been the first time that the disciples were sent out by themselves, that is without the presence of Jesus. But, as R. Alan Cole, observes in *Mark*, the fact that they were sent out two by two, may be in reference to Moses’ ordinance, that no (capital) case could be decided without the testimony of, at least, two witnesses.¹³⁸ In the law of Moses it was a matter of death, in the new dispensation of grace, it was a matter of life, eternal life.

This was to be a major campaign in the struggle against the powers of darkness. Matthew emphasized that Jesus’ establishing Himself in Galilee, particularly in Capernaum, was in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that the people living in darkness would see a great light.¹³⁹ According to The Epistle to the Hebrews, the main reason for

¹³⁷ Luke 4:29

¹³⁸ Deut. 17:6

¹³⁹ Matt. 4:12-16

the Word to become flesh was so that “by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”¹⁴⁰ Here, Jesus transfers the authority the Father had given Him to His disciples. Matthew reports that He “gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”¹⁴¹

We don’t read that anointing with oil of the sick was part of Jesus’ instructions, but we assume that He gave them permission to do so. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “St. Mark here fixes the attention upon the great central object of Christ’s mission — to contend against evil in every form, and especially to grapple with Satan in his stronghold in the hearts of men.”

About the detailed instructions as to how to prepare for and carry out the mission, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “This task demanded a scattering of personnel, a wandering ministry, and a deliberate renunciation, a studied simplicity of lifestyle, designed both to encourage and to demonstrate trust in God.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on “*They were to take no money in their purse*”: “Literally, *brass in their girdle*. St. Mark, writing for Romans, uses this word for money. St. Luke, writing for Greeks, uses the term ‘silver.’ St. Matthew (... Matthew 10:9) says, ‘provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass.’”

Most of Jesus’ instructions pertain to things that were part of the culture of that day, which makes it difficult for us to fully understand. *The New Living Translation* makes it easier for us in translating as follows: “He told them to take nothing for their journey except a walking stick—no food, no traveler’s bag, no money. He allowed them to wear sandals but not to take a change of clothes. ‘Wherever you go,’ he said, ‘stay in the same house until you leave town. But if any place refuses to welcome you or listen to you, shake its dust from your feet as you leave to show that you have abandoned those people to their fate.’” *The Living Bible* reads: “He told them to take nothing with them except their walking sticks—no food, no knapsack, no money, not even an extra pair of shoes or a change of clothes. ‘Stay at one home in each village—don’t shift around from house to house while you are there,’ he said. ‘And whenever a village won’t accept you or listen to you, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave; it is a sign that you have abandoned it to its fate.’” The main point of the instructions was to make the disciples experience God’s provision while they were doing God’s work. It would teach them to pray and trust.

The disciples not only experienced God’s provision, they must also have sensed God’s presence, as we read that “They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” We must remember that Judas was among those who had this experience, which makes it more difficult for us to understand how he could have become a traitor.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, states about the anointing with oil of the sick: “The anointing by the disciples practiced here seems to be the matter-of-fact anointing of James 5:14, which, accompanied by prayer, can heal the sick. Oil is a biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit’s presence (1 Ki. 1:39), and so the very anointing is itself an ‘acted parable’ of divine healing by the Spirit’s power. It seems in the New Testament as if there are two sorts of healing practiced. The first is the dramatic use of healing as a

¹⁴⁰ Heb. 2:14,15

¹⁴¹ Matt. 10:1

‘sign,’ often giving an opening for evangelism: the second is a unspectacular pastoral healing, as in the letter of James, a healing which seems to find a place quite naturally in the ongoing ‘body life’ of the church alongside many other activities of the Spirit.”

vi. Herod’s estimate of Jesus (6:14-16)

14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

15 Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

16 But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, brings out the fact that this is the only story in Mark’s Gospel that is not centered on Jesus. We read furthermore: “The last mention of John the Baptist had been a brief note (1:14) of his imprisonment, as marking the end of his preaching ministry, and the beginning of that of Jesus. Verses 17-29 will give, in a parenthesis, the reason for John’s arrest and subsequent execution: but at this point, his death is simply assumed. The chief interest, and indeed the reason for its introduction here, lies in the instant guilty reaction of Herod to the news about Jesus. True, he had killed John, but that he had not silenced his own conscience is clear from his equation of Jesus with a John ‘returned,’ raised from the dead. It is true that some manuscripts have suggested that this was a widespread view; but that does not alter the fact that Herod showed no surprise at the thought that this greatest of all miracles, a rising from the dead, taking place in John’s case. Even Herod had theological insight enough to see that, if John had truly risen from the dead, then other miracles, like those reported of Jesus, were not only possible but logical. Apparently from this time onwards Herod wanted to see Jesus, hoping to watch Him perform a miracle (Lk. 23:8), but what may in origin have been genuine religious feeling on the part of Herod had dwindled into a mere craving for the sensational and the spectacular. This craving God never creates, and so He does not satisfy it, though it is at times a dangerous temptation to the church. Spiritual life cannot be nurtured on thrills alone; any more than faith, in the true sense, can be created by signs.”

There is some confusion here about who is saying what. The NIV’s text reads: “Some were saying ...” putting the words not in Herod’s mouth but as a matter of public opinion. The Greek text reads literally: “and he said.” The problem in Greek is that the personal pronoun “he” is not specified, but suggested in the verb which is in the third person singular mode. But that tense could also apply to the opinion of the public at large. How the phrase is translated is more or less the translator’s choice.

vii. The martyrdom of John the Baptist (6:17-29)

17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married.

18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife."

19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to,

20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you."

23 And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

24 She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.

27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison,

28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

29 On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Several questions come up in connection with this story about the fate of John the Baptist. The first we could call God's lack of protection of His servant. It is difficult for us to understand how the Almighty would allow this to happen to one of His choice servants. Jesus' testimony about John was: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."¹⁴² John had proclaimed God's truth about the monarch immoral behavior. Yet, God allowed the enemy to take John's life as if he were a bargaining chip.

The second question pertains to the value people of that time seem to have attached to an oath. Herod was faced with the dilemma of the sin of committing a murder and breaking an oath. He did not want to be known as a liar, but it did not seem to have bothered him to be a murderer. Another example of this kind of attitude is Jephthah, who made a vow to the Lord to sacrifice it as a burnt offering whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet him, if the Lord would give him the victory over the Ammonites.¹⁴³ It happened to be his own daughter.

The third problem that stares us in the face is the strength of female hatred. Herod had John incarcerated because he had publicly chastised the monarch, yet Herod was willing to listen to John and live with a guilty conscience. Herodias wanted John dead because she refused to be under conviction of sin.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: "John's condemnation of Herod's incest brought imprisonment by the tetrarch, who could hardly tolerate such open criticism of

¹⁴² Matt. 11:11; Luke 7:28

¹⁴³ Judg. 11:30-35

himself in his own domain: but it also brought something far more dangerous, the undying hate of Herodias. Even while John was in jail, he was probably in no great danger of his life, as far as Herod was concerned: that is clear from verse 20. Herod wished only to stop John's mouth. A humiliating defeat by Aretas, the father of his rejected first wife, was doubtless punishment enough for adultery as far as he was concerned, without John's condemnation. But with Herodias, it was a different matter: she was only waiting her time to kill John. She would have killed him at once, but there had been no opportunity (19); and now the opportunity had come, in the birthday feast of Antipas, as this member of the house of Herod was usually called. A glance at the family tree of the house will show the succession or murders and incest that it contained: one more murder was not surprising."

According to Matthew, Herod did want John dead, but he was afraid of public opinion.¹⁴⁴ Mark does not bring this out.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary suggests that Salome's dancing at Herod's birthday party was part of Herodias' plot to get to John the Baptist. We read: "The daughter referred to was Salome, the child of Herodias by her previous marriage. It is estimated that the girl was no more than twenty years old at this time. For the daughter of a ruler to entertain nobility in this fashion was entirely out of place. It was the work of a slave, not of a princess. This, however, was Herodias' opportune moment (v. 21), and Herod, under the sway of liquor and sensuality, fell into her trap." But it may be pushing interpretations too far to read into the text what is not written. Herodias may have felt that the opportunity to rid herself of John the Baptist was thrown into her lap unexpectedly. She obviously knew how to take advantage of the moment.

Mark reports that "the king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her." So Herod sent one of his men to the prison, who killed John and brought back his head. There has hardly been a more gruesome scene in world history that this one in which a king presents a human head on a platter to his stepdaughter during his own birthday party. Satan must have thrown his own party in hell.

John's disciples heard about it and buried their teacher. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on John's disciples: "Within Palestine, this seems to mark the end of 'John's disciples' as a coherent group, whose ritual practices can be quoted against those of the disciples of Jesus (2:18). Ever since early days, the disciples of John had been gradually leaving him, according to John's Gospel, and following Jesus: and John was content that is should be so (Jn. 3:30). Now, when John was dead and they came to bury him, Matthew 14:12 adds a further significant clause, saying that 'they went and told Jesus,' which probably points to a further amalgamation, although Mark tells us nothing of this. Outside of Palestine, however, John's disciples still persisted as a separate group, as can be seen from Acts 18:25 and 19:3, where they are still 'a sect' waiting for the coming of the Messiah. John's disciples were therefore fully orthodox Jews (2:18), who had a messianic expectation, but little more. Those of them who were not absorbed into the growing Christian church may have slipped back into the pre-Christian Essene movement, to which they had many similarities, or heretical groups like the Mandaeans, in whose writings John the Baptist has a prominent place."

¹⁴⁴ Matt. 14:5

viii. The feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44)

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.

31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

33 But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

35 By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late.

36 Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

37 But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

38 "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five — and two fish."

39 Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.

40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all.

42 They all ate and were satisfied,

43 and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.

44 The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

The occasion is the return of Jesus' disciples from their "mission trip." We don't know how long Jesus had been alone. We can imagine that the disciples were fatigued as well as enthusiastic. They were full of their experiences and they needed to tell Jesus about them. So the group was looking for a solitary place where debriefing could take place. But quietness and solitude would not be granted to them.

According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, more was involved than a chance for Jesus and the disciples to be alone for a time of reporting and recovering. We read: "The Lord had so thoroughly covered Galilee with his message that Galileans in every walk of life were aware of his ministry. Among many of the common people his popularity stood at such a peak that they were ready to set him up by force as their king. The antipathy of the Jewish religious leaders was dangerously near the boiling point. And Herod himself had now become exercised concerning the popularity of Christ. The situation was shaping up toward a premature crisis, while as yet the ministry of Christ had not been completed. The result was that Jesus made four systematic withdrawals from Galilee, one to the eastern shore of the sea (Mark 6:31-56), one to the region of Tyre and Sidon (7:24-30), one to Decapolis (7:31-8:9), and the fourth to Caesarea

Philippi (8:10-9:50). During this time Christ was occupied with the training of the twelve disciples in preparation for the time of his death.”

Part of the hectic conditions may have been the result of the ministry the disciples had just accomplished. Their preaching and miracles they had performed had made the crowds increase to the point where no time was left for withdrawal and relaxation. So Jesus planned a mini-retreat with them. They boarded their fishing boat and rowed across the lake.

According to Matthew, Jesus Himself was also in need of some quietude in order to absorb the news that John the Baptist had been killed. We read: “John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”¹⁴⁵

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “The short lake voyage, back to the old familiar surroundings of the sea, after tramping the dusty roads, must in itself have been a rest and relaxation for the Galilean fishermen. But the small size of the Sea of Galilee made it quite possible for the crowds, traveling along the shore, to outdistance the little ship which probably had no favorable wind ... It is easy to imagine the groan of despair that must have gone up from the exhausted disciples, when they saw, long before they had reached the other shore, that the inevitable curious crowd had forestalled them.”

It seems to be part of Satan’s tactic to frustrate the Lord’s work, sometimes by keeping us away from it, or sometimes by giving us too much of it. Whatever the reaction of the disciples upon seeing the crowd may have been, Jesus reacted with compassion. Mark uses the same expression Matthew used at another place, that Jesus looked upon the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd.” Matthew used those words in connection with the sending out of the disciples.¹⁴⁶ The expression originates with Moses, who used it in his prayer for Joshua.¹⁴⁷

We don’t know what time of the day it was when Jesus and the disciples landed. We assume that it was late afternoon when the disciples suggested to Jesus to dismiss the crowd because they all needed to go and eat. They may not only of thought of the crowd but of themselves also, since, as we read, they had not had time to eat themselves.

Jesus’ answer to them is: “You give them something to eat.” In John’s account of the incident, Jesus has a personal conversation with Philip. We read: “When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’”¹⁴⁸ John also reports that it was Andrew who found the boy who had “five small barley loaves and two small fish.”¹⁴⁹

The Pulpit Commentary suggests that Jesus had His reasons to talk to Philip about the “problem.” We read: “Our Lord, it would seem, asked Philip rather than the others, because Philip was simple-minded, sincere, and teachable, rather than clever, and so was accustomed to ask things which appeared plain to others. We have an instance of this simplicity of mind in the question which he asks (... John 14:8), ‘Lord show us the

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 14:12,13

¹⁴⁶ Matt. 9:36

¹⁴⁷ Num. 27:17

¹⁴⁸ John 6:5-7

¹⁴⁹ John 6:9

Father, and it sufficeth us.” “Simple-minded” does not have the meaning here it has acquired later as being “mentally challenged.”

The crowd was told to divide in groups. As it turned out the groups were composed of fifty or one hundred each. We are told there were five thousand men, whether this included women and children is not clear. If not, then we are facing a crowd that was at least three times larger than the figure given here.

The first thing Jesus did was to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Father. It was Jesus’ faith in the Father’s power that produced this miracle. It is not clear, however, when the actual multiplication took place. It is hard to believe that Jesus broke five loaves of bread and two small fishes into thousands of pieces. Further multiplication must have taken place as the disciples handed out the food.

Commenting on the food, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “St. John tells us (... John 6:9) that the loaves were of barley, and that the fishes were small (*opsapia*); St. Mark says *duo ichthuas*.¹⁵⁰ Barley bread was considered an inferior and homely kind of food, very inferior to bread made of wheat flour. The comparative value of the two kinds of bread is given in ... Revelation 6:6. ‘A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny.’ The psalmist alludes to the greater excellence of wheat flour: ‘He would have fed them also with the finest wheat flour’ (... Psalm 81:16).”

Bible scholars have argued about the kind of basket used in the gathering up of the leftovers. There are two instances of feeding of a multitude. In the second one four thousand men were present and the number of loaves of bread was seven, plus “some fish.”¹⁵¹ Strangely enough, two different Greek words are used in the two stories. In the first instance, the word is *kophinos*, meaning “a small basket,” in the second the word is *spuris*, “a hamper or lunch receptacle.” There doesn’t seem to be any reason to consider the difference significant.

What is particular interesting in both stories is the gathering up of the leftovers. John reports Jesus’ specific command to gather the pieces that are left over, so that “nothing be wasted.”¹⁵² What happened to the leftovers is left up to our imagination. It was not merely a matter of gathering statistics. The leftover bread and fish was either given to people to take home, or the disciples took it along for their own meals in the following days. The lesson seems to be that, while God is generous, He is not wasteful.

John reports the reaction of the crowd to this miracle: “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”¹⁵³ And Jesus knew that they would try to crown Him their king and thus incite a revolution against the Roman Empire, so He withdrew. Their recognition of Jesus as “the Prophet” was, correctly, based on Moses’ prophecy.¹⁵⁴

ix. The walking on the water (6:45-52)

45 Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.

46 After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

¹⁵⁰ Two fishes

¹⁵¹ Matt. 15:32-38; Mark 8:6-10

¹⁵² John 6:12

¹⁵³ John 6:14

¹⁵⁴ Deut. 18:15, 18, 19

47 When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land.

48 He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them,

49 but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out,

50 because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

51 Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed,

52 for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Jesus must have used His authority in a miraculous way, first in forcing His disciples to leave and then in dismissing the crowd. The disciples would probably have joined the crowd in trying to crown Jesus. That was the reason He wanted them to leave first. The people who saw them leaving may have concluded that they had Jesus to themselves and that they could carry out the coronation. More than mere human persuasion was needed to dismiss more than five thousand people. Sometimes it takes more energy to persuade people not to do something than to whip them up into taking action. Jesus' faith in the Father dismissed the crowd.

We assume that the disciples and the crowd were dismissed late in the afternoon, before sunset. Jesus then climbed the mountain and found a place where He could pray quietly. He probably looked for a place where He could kneel.

In the meantime the disciples tried to row back across the lake, but they didn't make much progress. Jesus could see them straining from His vantage point on the mountain. They left before dark, but by "the fourth watch of the night," which was about 3 A.M., they had covered only three and a half miles, according to John.¹⁵⁵ Mark states that this was half the distance of the crossing they had to make. There must have been such a strong wind blowing that the boat was pushed back by the waves while the disciples tried to row it forward.

Mark states that the disciples were "straining" at the oars. The Greek verb used is *basanizo*, which implies suffering as in "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."¹⁵⁶

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: "The Jews, who used to divide the night into three watches, latterly adopted the Roman division into four watches, as here. So that, at the rate of three hours to each, the fourth watch, reckoning from 6:00 p.m., would be three o'clock in the morning. 'So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs' (John 6:19) - rather more than halfway across. The lake is about seven miles broad at its widest part. So that in eight or nine hours they had only made some three and a-half miles. By this time, therefore, they must have been in a state of exhaustion and despondency bordering on despair; and now at length, having tried them long enough, He cometh unto them, walking upon the sea - 'and drawing nigh

¹⁵⁵ John 6:19

¹⁵⁶ Matt. 8:6

unto the ship' (John 6:19), And would have passed by them - but only in the sense of Luke 24:28; Gen 32:26: compare Gen 18:3,5; 42:7.”

Commenting on the event, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “A further touch of the understanding of love on the part of Jesus was to send His overtaxed disciples on in advance, while He dismissed the crowd, perhaps giving them farewell counsel. Yet even after that, He went, not to rest, but to prayer on the hillside: indeed, it was only the sight of the storm-tossed disciples that brought Jesus from prayer to their rescue (48). No supernatural vision is necessarily implied here, although it is possible. The boat could have been clearly visible from the spot where Jesus was praying high up on the hillside above, especially if there was moonlight at the time. The supernatural element will enter later, with the words *walking on the sea* (49).

This whole episode is a good illustration of the life of discipleship, seen as a constant experience of testing and deliverance; for it was again (*cf.* 4:35) not through stubborn self-will, but through direct obedience to the command of Jesus, that the disciples found themselves in this danger. The storm did not show that they had deviated from the path of God’s will: instead, God’s path for them lay through the storm, to the other shore of the lake. Moreover, it again appeared as if Jesus had forgotten them; they were alone, at night, and making heavy weather with the rowing. The storm, however, was no sudden squall such as had preceded the earlier calming of the waves (4:37), but a tiring, continuous head wind, necessitating steady, back-breaking rowing. Then, at the darkest hour of the night, in their time of greatest need, and in a totally unexpected way, Jesus came to their rescue. In both of the storms at sea (*cf.* chapter 4) it must have seemed to the disciples at first as if Jesus was irrelevant: on the first occasion, He was asleep in the stern of the boat, and on the second occasion, absent at prayer on the mountain. On both occasions it must have seemed as if He was careless of their danger, and yet the result showed that nothing could be further from the truth. Why does Mark say that Jesus *meant to pass by them* (48)? Perhaps it was a test of their faith, just as His sleeping in the stern of the ship had been on the previous occasion (4:38). If they had sufficient faith, they would be content even without His presence with them. Perhaps Jesus, on the other hand, wanted His disciples to recognize to the full their need of Him before He came to their help: Mark does not tell us which it was.”

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water they screamed with fear, thinking they saw a ghost. The Greek word used is not the word *pneuma*, which is the regular word for “spirit,” but *phantasma*, “a specter.”

We don’t know if the disciples were superstitious and believed that the spirits of the deceased could come and appear to people. If they did, it would explain their fear. Not to believe in ghosts and then seeing one would even be worse! We might conclude from Thomas’ reaction to the disciples’ story that they had seen Jesus after His resurrection, that belief in specters was not uncommon. His remark: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it”¹⁵⁷ suggests such belief.

Being in the condition in which the disciples found themselves, having rowed for hours and not getting anywhere, being tired and discouraged, they would easily react with panic to anything unusual happening to them in the dark and in the middle of a lake. They could not be expected to react without fear by seeing someone walking on water.

¹⁵⁷ John 20:25

Using the keyword of his gospel, *euthus*, “immediately,” Mark states: “He spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’” “Take courage” is the translation of the single Greek verb *tharseo*. The NIV translates it in most cases with “Take heart!” Once, as in the healing of a blind man, it is rendered “cheer up!”¹⁵⁸

Mark reports that Jesus climbed into the boat and the storm quieted down immediately after this. But Matthew describes Peter’s reaction to seeing Jesus walk on the water. He asked permission to join Jesus. This is given and Peter climbs out of the boat and walks on water. But then, seeing the wind, he began to sink. At this, Jesus rebukes him for his lack of faith.¹⁵⁹ This suggests that Jesus’ walking on water was also an act of faith in the Father’s power. It makes us realize how much of man’s mandate over God’s creation was lost when Adam sinned. Jesus shows us here what could have been.

Mark does not mention lack of faith in this story, but he refers to something worse, hardness of heart! He suggests that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand ought to have opened their heart to the fact that nothing is impossible for those who have faith in God. He makes it sound as if God expects us all to walk on water.

Commenting on this, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Hardness of heart is that lack of spiritual perceptivity, that lack of readiness to learn, for which we are ultimately blameworthy ourselves, and which, in the extreme case of the scribes, can lead at last to the sin against the Holy Spirit. Smallness of faith is a failure to remember God’s working in the past and to apply that knowledge of His nature to our present problems.”

x. Healings at Gennesaret (6:53-56)

53 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there.

54 As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus.

55 They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56 And wherever he went — into villages, towns or countryside — they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

From the storm and darkness on the lake, we find Jesus and the disciples on land and in daylight. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* clarifies: “Jesus probably entered the boat somewhere off the shore from Bethsaida Julias, after which they passed over to the western shore of the lake again. Gennesaret was the name of a plain lying along the shore of the lake south of Capernaum. A small town of the same name was also located in the vicinity.”

As soon as the people recognized Jesus they began to bring the sick people of the region, some of them on their beds. They must have heard that, as in the story of the woman who touched Jesus’ cloak, a simple touch was enough to bring about complete healing.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “The reaction of the crowd was both spontaneous and unselfish. There must have been many a patient carried in on a mat by friends (verse 55), and the faith of the patients in asking only to clutch at the fringe of His

¹⁵⁸ Mark 10:49

¹⁵⁹ Matt. 14:27-33

clothing, reminds us of the faith of the woman with the hemorrhage (*cf.* 5:28). Again, as in her case, it was not the magical touch of a garment which healed them, but their faith in the one who wore that garment.”

xi. A further clash with Judaism (7:1-23)

1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and

2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed.

3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.

4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

6 He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'

8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

9 And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!

10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God),

12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.

13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

15 Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

18 "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?"

19 For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")

20 He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.'

21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

23 All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

We note that v.16 is missing in the NIV. A footnote reads the omitted phrase: “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” The KJV and NKJV include this part in their text.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, suggests that the Pharisees and teachers of the law in this chapter, were a fact-finding commission that had been sent from Jerusalem “to investigate a campaign of healing and preaching that by now must have caused some stir.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary remarks about the topic of this section: “These verses record the clash between Christ and the Pharisees on the basic issue of the source of authority. Does tradition carry divine authority? Is it equal to, or superior to, the written Word of God? Also involved here is the discussion of the real nature of defilement and cleansing.”

Most Bible scholars see in Mark’s explanation of the ritual washings an indication that this Gospel was written particularly for non-Jewish readers.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The Law of Moses prohibited contact with many things deemed to be unclean; and if any one had touched them he was counted unclean, so that he might not approach the temple until he had cleansed himself by the washing prescribed in the Law; the design being that by means of these ceremonial and bodily washings the Jews might be awakened to the necessity of spiritual cleansing. Hence the Jews, and especially the Pharisees, who wished to be esteemed more righteous than others, placing their whole religion in these external ceremonies, frequently washed themselves before their meals, and even at their meals. At the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee we read that there were placed ‘six water pots of stone (*lithinai udopiai*)’ for these purifying purposes; so that if any Jew had by accident come into contact with any unclean thing, and so had contracted any ceremonial impurity, he might remove it. This, however, was only a custom, and not a thing of legal obligation until it was exalted into a law by the Pharisees. Now, this punctilious observance of traditions by the Pharisees and other Jews yielded little or no religious profit; for it occupied their time with external purifications, and so drew away their attention from the duty of far greater moment — the cleansing of the soul from sin. They made clean ‘the outside of the cup and platter,’ but neglected the inward cleansing of the heart. Therefore our blessed Lord, who came to put an end to the old ceremonial law, and to these vain and frivolous traditions which now overlaid it, and who wished to direct all the care of his disciples to the making of the heart clean, cared not to enforce these external washings upon his disciples, although he did not say this in so many words to the Pharisees, lest he should provoke their envy and their malice. He therefore meets their question in another way.”

The kind of ceremonial washing practiced by the Pharisees was not part of the old ceremonial law, as *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests and, at the same time, denies. It was part of the manmade traditions that the Pharisees and some teachers of the law considered to be the authoritative interpretation of the law. The problem was not only, or in the first place, that their interpretation had no divine authority, but that their effort to concentrate on minute details drew the attention away of the vital point of obedience for the love of God. The righteousness of the Pharisees, as Jesus would state later, was like a tombstone; a nice-looking outward cover for something that was dead and corrupt.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes correctly that this fact-finding commission “attacked Jesus, not personally, but through His disciples (verse 5), just as in 2:24 they had attacked His disciples for picking corn on the sabbath, and in 2:18 they had criticized

the failure of His disciples to fast. They here attacked the disciples again on a point of ritual, not of faith, and a point of ritual drawn not directly from the law, but from the body of explanatory tradition that was growing up round the law, later codified to form the Mishnah and Gemara, the modern Jewish Talmud.”

The Pharisees used observance of rituals as a substitute for loving God with all their heart and mind. The Apostle Paul expresses clearly the danger involved in this practice when he writes to the Galatians: “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”¹⁶⁰

The Lord’s objection to the rules of ceremonial cleanness was not that the rules were wrong in themselves but that they were used as a substitute for the love of God. The Pharisees practiced and taught these rules so that they would look clean and pious, while in their heart they were impure and guilty. The law of Moses contained no stipulations for the cleaning practices prescribed by the Pharisees.

The Scripture portion Jesus quoted from Isaiah reads literally: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.”¹⁶¹

The Greek verb rendered in the NIV “let go” is *atheteo*, which literally means “to despise” or “to reject.”

Having said this, Jesus gives an example of how the Pharisees substituted God’s commandments for their own stipulations. The law stated: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you,”¹⁶² which is the fifth of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses. The second part of the quotation about cursing parents is also taken from the law of Moses. In Exodus we read: “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.”¹⁶³ And in Leviticus the law states: “If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother, and his blood will be on his own head.”¹⁶⁴

One of the interesting features in this section is that Jesus interprets the command to honor parents in terms of giving them financial support. Love must be practical and it must be demonstrated in actions that express love. James’ example of how faith must show itself in acts of help may serve as an illustration. Speaking about a person in need, James states: “If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”¹⁶⁵

“Corban” is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for sacrifice. Evidently, some of the Pharisees benefitted from money the people brought to the temple as part of a sacrifice. So in withholding money from their needy parents they lined their own pockets. Little did they realize that God would come to them in the form of a needy person. Jesus would explain this later in the parable of the goats and the sheep, saying to the righteous: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to

¹⁶⁰ Gal. 5:6

¹⁶¹ Isa. 29:13

¹⁶² Ex. 20:12

¹⁶³ Ex. 21:17

¹⁶⁴ Lev. 20:9

¹⁶⁵ James 2:16

eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”¹⁶⁶

We may get the impression that, in declaring all foods “clean,” Jesus swept aside the whole law that stipulated what the Israelites were allowed to eat and what they ought to consider unclean. It is true that, according to Peter’s experience, the Holy Spirit changed the interpretation of that part of the law. Peter had a vision in which he saw a sheet with “unclean” animals and a voice told him to kill and eat. When Peter objected the voice said: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”¹⁶⁷

The Pulpit Commentary states: “Our Lord did not intend to disparage the difference between clean and unclean meats as it had been laid down in the Levitical Law. His object rather was to clear that teaching from the obscurities in which it had been involved by the scribes and Pharisees, who laid stress only on external acts. His object was to show that all impurity springs from the heart; and that, unless the heart is cleansed, all external washings are in vain. It is as though he said, ‘The scribes teach you that it is not lawful to eat with unwashed hands because unwashed hands make the food unclean, and unclean food defiles the soul. But in this they err; because not that which enters from without into the mouth, but that which proceeds from within through the mouth, and so from the heart, if it be impure, — this defiles the man;’ as he more fully explains at ver. 21.”

According to Matthew, it was Peter who asked for an explanation of “the parable.”¹⁶⁸ Jesus’ remark, “Are you so dull,” as the NIV renders it, is the translation of the Greek word *asunetos*, which also contains a hint of being wicked. The Apostle Paul uses the same word in his description of the heathen, saying “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.”¹⁶⁹

In mentioning the heart and the stomach in the same sentence, Jesus distinguishes between the physical and the spiritual. Throughout the ages mankind has tried to pinpoint the seat of emotions in the human body. In New Testament, as in modern times the heart is seen as the place. But it seems that in earlier ages the reins or kidneys were thought to be the organ. The reins are often mentioned in the psalms as the center of emotional life, together with the heart. The KJV, for instance, reads the verse “O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts,¹⁷⁰ as: “God trieth the heart and reins.” The Stone Age tribes in Papua, Indonesia, among whom we worked as missionaries, considered the intestines to be the seat of emotions.

It is true that the Levitical law forbade consumption of certain kinds of meat because it would make a person “unclean.”¹⁷¹ That prohibition is considered to be part, not of the moral law, but of the ceremonial law. The ceremonial law was the part that would be fulfilled, and consequently cancelled by the sacrifice of Jesus’ body on the cross. It is about that sacrifice that the Epistle to the Hebrews states: “We have been

¹⁶⁶ Matt. 25:34-36

¹⁶⁷ Acts 10:9-15

¹⁶⁸ Matt. 15:15

¹⁶⁹ Rom. 1:21

¹⁷⁰ Ps 7:9

¹⁷¹ See Lev. 11.

made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”¹⁷² It was on the basis of His own sacrifice that Jesus could declare all foods “clean,” as Mark puts it.

We learn from Peter’s experience in Acts, that the Old Testament distinction between clean and unclean animals was an object lesson to distinguish between people who were part of God’s covenant and those who were not.¹⁷³ The Apostle Paul could later write to the Christians in Rome: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁴

What Jesus intended to emphasize was, obviously, the evil condition of the human heart without the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. We hardly know ourselves how serious our natural condition is. Jeremiah complained about the condition of the human heart, saying: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ‘I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.’”¹⁷⁵ And the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”¹⁷⁶

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Jesus here (as more explicitly in Mt. 5:28) makes no distinction between sins of thought and sins of deed, unlike the law of Moses, which, like any other law codes, can take cognizance only of outward acts, not the mental attitudes which ultimately find expression in such acts. The one possible exception is the tenth commandment, which forbids coveting. Of course, in view of the fact that the central principle of the Mosaic law was love (Ex. 20:6 ‘those who love me’), ultimately the law was basically concerned with attitudes of the will.”

D. MINISTRY IN NORTHERN PALESTINE: RETURN TO GALILEE (7:24 – 8:26)

i. The Syrophenician woman (7:24-30)

24 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.

25 In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet.

26 The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

27 "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs."

28 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs."

29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

30 She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

¹⁷² Heb. 10:10

¹⁷³ Acts 10:1-48

¹⁷⁴ Rom. 14:17

¹⁷⁵ Jer. 17:9,10

¹⁷⁶ Gal. 5:19-21

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “The previous activity of Jesus had been on the lake shore of Galilee: now He withdrew further north and west to the territory of Phoenicia, on the Mediterranean coast. Possibly it was for a time of rest and preparation, for He wanted His presence kept secret (24), although this proved impossible. Crowds even from this area had already come to Him for healing (3:8): it would be interesting to know if any of them had been Gentiles.

The story of the healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter recorded here reminds us that Elijah the prophet had, in roughly the same territory, worked a miracle for another, presumably also heathen, widow (1 Ki. 17:9ff.). It may be a recollection of this Elijah incident that prompted Matthew to add ‘and Sidon’ after ‘Tyre’ (Mt. 15:21) in his geographic note, from which it entered the text in some MSS. The two towns of ‘Tyre and Sidon’ are often loosely linked together in the New Testament (compare 3:8). This story shows that Jesus was known at least to the Jews settled in those parts, since it must have been in the home of some Jewish disciple or friend that He was now staying incognito. That this miracle of Elijah was already in the mind of Jesus is shown by Luke’s account in 4:25-26, where, after His rejection at Nazareth, Jesus gives clear warning of a coming mission to the Gentiles, using the widow of Zarephath as an illustration. It is in the light of this background that we must read the initial response of Jesus to the woman, for, although Mark does not mention the widow of Zarephath as Luke does, she cannot have been far from his thoughts as he recorded this story.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “This was the only time, so far as the record goes, when Christ went out of Palestine into strictly Gentile territory. His purpose on these tours outside Galilee was not primarily to minister to the multitudes, but to instruct his disciples, which is the reason why he would have no man know that he was there.”

Commenting on the area in which this story plays, *Barnes’ Notes* states: “In ancient times, the whole land, including Tyre and Sidon, was in the possession of the Canaanites, and called Canaan. The Phoenicians were descended from the Canaanites. The country, including Tyre and Sidon, was called Phoenicia, or Syro-Phoenicia. That country was taken by the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and those cities, in the time of Christ, were Greek cities. This woman was therefore a Gentile, living under the Greek government, and probably speaking the Greek language. She was by birth a Syro-Phoenician, born in that country, and descended, therefore, from the ancient Canaanites. All these names might, with propriety, be given to her.”

Mark reports “He could not keep his presence secret,” without explaining what blew Jesus’ cover. It could very well be that the demon in the woman’s daughter recognized Jesus’ presence and made it known.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The woman seems to have come from a distance. She was a *Greek* — that is, a Gentile — a *Syro-Phoenician by race*, as distinguished from the Libyan Phoenicians, of Carthage. She was a descendant from those seven nations of Canaan which had been driven out by God’s command. They were called in their own language ‘Canaanites.’”

In Matthew’s version of the incident we read that the woman addressed Jesus with the words: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!”¹⁷⁷ This suggests that the woman may have been a proselyte, or at least that she believed in the truth of the Jewish religion

¹⁷⁷ Matt. 15:22

and joined in their hope for a Messiah. And she must have heard about Jesus' power to heal the sick and exorcise demons. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Mark's use of the Greek imperfect tense pictures the repeated request of the woman."

Jesus' answer to her strikes us as harsh and rude. The Greek text of Jesus' answer reads literally: "Let the children first be filled, for it is not right to take the children's bread, and cast it unto the dogs." The Greek word for "dog" here is *kunarion*, which stands for a "young puppy." The word "first" suggests that Jesus did not intend to exclude the Gentiles indefinitely from receiving the Gospel message, but the Jews were first in line to hear it, since they were the nation God had elected for His purpose to evangelize the world. Jesus saw it as His first challenge to bring Israel back to its calling as a kingdom of priests.

In her answer to Jesus, the woman indicates that she recognizes the children's right to eat first. Her answer suggests that she was an intelligent and alert person, and also a passionate mother who was willing to abase herself for the sake of her child. No husband is mentioned in this story and it could be that she was a widow.

Matthew records Jesus' reply as: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."¹⁷⁸ Jesus again puts the emphasis on the faith of the person receiving the miracle, as if His own power had little to do with it. It was Jesus' faith, as much as the woman's that drove the demon out of the daughter. As far as we know, this was the only miracle Jesus performed outside of Israel.

ii. The deaf and dumb man (7:31-37)

31 Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.

32 There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

33 After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue.

34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!").

35 At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

36 Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. 37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes that, although Decapolis was not part of the country of Israel, there was a large Jewish population that inhabited the area and that, therefore, the deaf and dumb man in this story was not necessarily non-Jewish.

Mark states about the deaf man that he "could hardly talk." This must mean that he was not deaf from birth, but that he had learned to speak before deafness struck him. Luke might have mentioned the cause of his ordeal, if he had reported this incident. The man probably knew little or nothing about Jesus, since he could not have heard what the people said about Him. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "Here, too, it was the faith of friends that brought the deaf mute to Jesus at first: but, as in the case of the paralytic (2:3-

¹⁷⁸ Matt. 15:28

5), Jesus seems to have looked for at least some response in the man himself as well. All the actions of verses 33 and 34 were miming in the man's present need, the process of healing, and the source from which such healing alone could come, in a way which even a deaf mute could understand (the blocked ears opened, the symbolic removal of the speech impediment from the tongue by spitting, the upward glance and sigh of prayer). So there is no need to assume purely vicarious faith here, any more than there is in the case of the paralytic of 2:3."

The strange feature of this healing is that it doesn't seem to come about without some great difficulties. The people who brought the man anticipated that Jesus had to do more than just speak a word; they wanted Jesus to impose His hand on the man. Jesus did much more than this. He took him aside, put His fingers in the man's ears, and it seems that Jesus touched the man's tongue with His own saliva. He then prayed and sighed deeply, saying "ephphatha." A similar miracle of healing that included the use of physical means was the healing of the man born blind, when Jesus made mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.¹⁷⁹

We read that Jesus uttered a deep sigh. The Greek verb used is *stenazo*, which literally means "to be in straits." We find the same word in the verse: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, *groan* inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."¹⁸⁰

It is difficult to determine the reason for Jesus' sighing. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* states: "He sighed; not as if he found any difficulty in working this miracle, or obtaining power to do it from his father; but thus he expressed his pity for the miseries of human life, and his sympathy with the afflicted in their afflictions, as one that was himself touched with the feeling of their infirmities. And as to this man, he sighed, not because he was loath to do him this kindness, or did it with reluctance; but because of the many temptations which he would be exposed to, and the sins he would be in danger of, the tongue-sins, after the restoring of his speech to him, which before he was free from. He had better be tongue-tied still, unless he have grace to keep his mouth as with a bridle, Ps 39:1."

The Pulpit Commentary asks the question: "Why did our Lord sigh at such a moment?" and then comments: "We know indeed that he was 'a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;' hut now we might almost have expected a momentary smile of loving joy when he was about to give back to this afflicted man the use of these valuable instruments of thought and action. But he sighed even then; for he was touched with the feeling of human infirmity, and no doubt his comprehensive eye would take in the vast amount of misery, both bodily and spiritual, which has come upon the world through sin; and this, too, immediately after having looked up to heaven, and thought of the realm of bliss which for a time he had left "for us men, and for our salvation." *Ephphatha, that is, Be opened.* This word is, of course, addressed to the man himself; and the evangelist has retained the original Syro-Chaldaic word, as he has retained 'Talitha cumi' elsewhere: so that the actual word which passed through the Savior's lips, and restored speech and hearing to the afflicted, might be handed on, as doubtless it will be, to the end of time. The word applies of course, primarily, though not exclusively, to the ear; for not only were his ears opened; but the *bond of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.*"

¹⁷⁹ John 9:6

¹⁸⁰ Rom. 8:23

According to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Jesus must have used the Syriac word Ephphathach. As mentioned before, the use of some words in the original language in which they were spoken is a peculiar feature in Mark's Gospel.

It seems that this particular healing caused greater amazement of Jesus' wonderworking power than anything else He had done so far. The NIV reads: "People were overwhelmed with amazement." The Greek text reads literally: "They were astonished beyond measure." It was this enthusiasm that made the crowd disregard Jesus' command to keep this healing a secret.

iii. The feeding of the four thousand (8:1-9)

1 *During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said,*

2 *"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.*

3 *If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."*

4 *His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"*

5 *"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied.*

6 *He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so.*

7 *They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.*

8 *The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.*

9 *About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away ...*

Some Bible critics assume that this story is another version of the feeding of the five thousand, recorded earlier.¹⁸¹ A closer look shows that there are too many differences in detail to make this likely and it would also make no sense if an author would tell the same story twice in his own manuscript.

The crowd that followed Jesus was hungry for the Word of God to the point where they forgot about their physical needs. They had followed Him into the desert and they had hung on His lips to hear every word that came out of the Lord's mouth.

To be able to preach to a large crowd of spiritually hungry people must have been a great satisfaction for Jesus Himself. The fact that He did this for three days suggests that He Himself got very little rest, if any. At the end of three days both the preacher and his congregation must have been exhausted. It was time to go home for everyone. But Jesus did not want to send the crowd away on an empty stomach.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "We may here notice the burning zeal of the multitude. They were so intent upon hearing Christ, that they forgot to provide themselves with the necessaries of life. They continued with him for three days and had nothing to eat. Whatever small supplies they might have brought with them at first were now exhausted; and still they remained, 'esteeming his words to be more than their

¹⁸¹ Mark 6:35-44

necessary food.’ Our Lord on his part was so full of zeal for their good, that during all that time, with little interval, he had been preaching to them, denying himself rest, refreshment, and sleep.”

It seems that the seven loaves were provisions that disciples had brought for themselves. The text does not mention that they belonged to anyone in the crowd.

The Greek word for “loaf” is *artos*, which, according to *The Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* is “‘a small loaf or cake,’ composed of flour and water, and baked, in shape either oblong or round, and about as thick as the thumb.” We could compare it to a small Belgian waffle. Seven of those would not even be enough to feed the disciples, let alone a crowd of over eight thousand, including women and children.

Jesus ordered the same arrangements to be made as in the feeding of the five thousand. The people were told to sit down; Jesus offered a prayer of thanksgiving and began distributing the bread and some fish to the twelve disciples. Here also, the multiplication must have been an ongoing process as the disciples handed the pieces to the people and the people continued to break the loaves and fish into pieces and pass them on.

At the end of the meal, after everyone had eaten his full, Jesus ordered the disciples to pick up the leftovers, which filled seven baskets. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains about the baskets used here: “The Greek word here rendered ‘basket’ (*spuris*) is a different word from that used for ‘basket’ in the record of the other miracle (... Mark 6:43). There it is *kóphinos*. The *kóphinos* was a hand-basket of stout wicker-work. It was a much larger basket, made of a more flexible material, perhaps ‘rushes.’ ... It was by means of such a basket, called in ... Acts 9:25 *spuris*, but *sargáne* in ... 2 Corinthians 11:33, that St. Paul was let down through a window at Damascus. This supplies another evidence, if it were needed, that these two recorded miracles took place on different occasions.” Evidently the *spuris* was twice the size of the *kóphinos*, “which was a large basket carried by two.”

R Alan Cole, in *Mark*, explains further: “The kophinos was essentially a Jewish ‘traveling-bag’ as we can see from Roman accounts, commonly used by traveling salesmen, or ‘bagmen’ in the ancient world. Luggage made of wickerwork is still standard in many parts of the third world today for its cheapness and lightness.

There is not need to see any spiritual symbolism in the numbers. The twelve ‘vendor’s baskets’ would doubtless be those regularly carried by the twelve apostles, hence the number. The seven baskets now borrowed (it is unlikely that peripatetic preachers carried such things around with them) simply pin the story to history as surely as does the number ‘four thousand’ for the crowd. Such a figure as this could in no sense be used either symbolically or metaphorically for a large number, as five or ten thousand could perhaps have been.”

iv. The Pharisees demand a sign (8:10-13)

10 he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

11 The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. 12 He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it."

13 Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

Matthew records that Jesus went to a place in “the vicinity of Magadan,”¹⁸² which must be just another name for the same place as Mark mentions. It was probably located on the opposite shore of the lake. *The Pulpit Commentary* pinpoints it at “about the middle of the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.”

There a delegation of Pharisees, probably also sent from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus’ activities, approaches Him and asks Him to perform a miracle. Mark tells us that they did this “to test Him.” R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “This demand by the Pharisees for a sign is so significant that it is recorded in all four gospels. The reaction of Jesus (he sighed deeply in his spirit, 12) may be impatience which He always showed towards lack of faith in those who might be expected to possess it. Compare His reaction toward the faithless and powerless disciples, at the foot of the mountain of transfiguration (9:19). It is clear that unbelief lay at the root of the Pharisaic attitude too. To those in such a state of unbelief even a sign if given would not convince, for these Pharisees must surely have already heard of some at least of the many miracles which had already taken place in Galilee, such as the feeding of the four thousand just before. John’s Gospel rightly says that the difficulty lies in the will, not the intellect, as far as acceptance of the ‘signs’ of Jesus is concerned (Jn. 7:17).”

It is obvious that the Pharisees had no intention to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and that they only asked for a sign as proof of Jesus’ claim. As Mark mentions, they wanted to test Jesus with the intent to accuse Him. At a previous occasion they had suggested that Jesus’ power to perform miracles was satanic in origin. Jesus’ reaction to their request was rather emotional. We read that “He sighed deeply.” The Greek verb used is *anastenazo*, which only occurs here in all of the New Testament. Mark simply reports Jesus’ refusal, without adding, what Matthew and Luke add, that Jesus promises “the sign of Jonah.” We read: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”¹⁸³ And: “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.”¹⁸⁴

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “The question of Christ is better translated, Why is this generation continually seeking a sign? (cf. John 2:18; Matt 12:38). Matthew adds an exception to the statement of Christ that no sign would be given (Matt 16:4). The sign of Jonah is explained in Matt 12:39-40 as referring to Christ’s resurrection, the most significant miracle of all.”

After this brief encounter with the Pharisaic delegation, Jesus crosses the lake again, returning to the place where the miraculous feeding of the four thousand had taken place.

v. The danger of yeast (8:14-21)

14 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.

¹⁸² Matt. 15:39

¹⁸³ Matt. 12:39,40

¹⁸⁴ Luke 11:29,30

15 "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

16 They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread."

17 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?"

18 Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?"

19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

"Twelve," they replied.

20 "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven."

21 He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Jesus and the disciples were returning from a place where they could have been buying supplies and they were returning to the desert-like area where nothing was available. Evidently, the encounter with the delegation sent by the Pharisees in Jerusalem, and the more or less hostile exchange that had taken place had occupied their minds to the point where provision for the trip had been overlooked.

The recent incident occupied Jesus' mind also, because He commented on "the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod." It is obvious that Jesus did not refer to the ingredient that was used in baking bread, which was a piece of fermented dough, kept from previous baking. The fermentation referred to here was the corruption of the soul and the mind. It is interesting that, in this context, Jesus mentions the Pharisees and Herod in the same breath. The Pharisees would certainly have objected to be put in the same category as Herod, whom they must have despised.

Jesus' mention of yeast brought on quite a different reaction among the disciples. It made them think of bread, which they had forgotten to buy while at the west shore of the lake. They were heading back to the place where there was no bread and all they had was one little bun for thirteen people. The fact that Jesus had performed the miracle of multiplication of bread at the place they were heading for and that, after the miraculous feeding there had been seven baskets of leftovers, was not part of their thinking. Evidently, they had not taken any of the seven baskets for themselves.

The Pulpit Commentary suggests that it was not that no bread would be available once they arrived at the other shore, but that bread would be needed during the crossing, which would take approximately six hours.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about Jesus' mention of leaven: "*The leaven of the Pharisees* was hypocrisy (7:6), while *the leaven of Herod* (a variant reading had *Herodians*) may have been that procrastinating time-serving which had led Herod first to imprison John the Baptist, then to execute him, though fighting his own conscience all the time (6:14-29). Matthew 16:6 has 'Sadducees' in place of *Herod* or *Herodians* here: they were the shrewd, wealthy, aristocracy, with a worldly leavening influence at least as dangerous as that of the hard religious formalism of the Pharisees."

It seems a rather large jump from "the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod" to bread for the journey of the disciples, but it was bread that had been forgotten that was in the disciples' mind and so they believed that Jesus was using a little parable by way of

reproaching them for their oversight. Theirs was a reaction of a guilty conscience. They could have thought that if Jesus multiplied bread before, He could do it again. But it is never pleasant to have to depend on a miracle as a solution to a problem we have.

Jesus' reproaching the disciples for their attitude of unbelief shows frustration. He accused them of hardening their hearts. This is the second time this expression occurs, both times in connection with the multiplication of bread. When they saw Jesus walking on water, we read: "They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."¹⁸⁵ Hardening of heart is an attitude of unbelief for which God holds us responsible. The Greek word used is *poroo*, which is derived from *poros*, "a kind of stone." This makes us think of the promise God had given to Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."¹⁸⁶ It is the new heart we receive at our regeneration when we first put our trust in God and Jesus Christ, that will allow us to believe in God's promises.

In reproaching His disciples their lack of faith, Jesus uses the words God give to Isaiah: "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."¹⁸⁷ Those words sound like a verdict, a condemnation, but they contain a promise of healing. Jesus doesn't mention healing specifically, but the promise is implied in the quotation.

Faith is built up by previous experiences. It is the remembrance of what God has done in the past that gives confidence that He will take care of the future. The two miraculous feedings of the multitude ought to have given the disciples faith that God would not let them starve.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: "The disciples credited Jesus with spiritual insight, and did see in His previous remark supernatural perception, but limited that perception to material objects: they thought that He was referring to their lack of bread. They were so blinded by their immediate bodily needs that they had again forgotten to seek first God's kingdom, with the faith that, as they did this, their bodily needs would be met, as those of the hungry crowds had been twice already (verses 19 and 20). As Jesus said, they still did not understand (verse 21): see again 6:8, where Jesus had forbidden them to make provision for their own needs, and yet those needs had obviously been met by God (Lk. 22:35)."

vi. The blind man of Bethsaida (8:22-26)

22 They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.

23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

24 He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

25 Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

¹⁸⁵ Mark 6:51,52

¹⁸⁶ Ezek. 36:26

¹⁸⁷ Isa. 6:9,10

26 Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, introduces this section as follows: “The disciples had been blinded to spiritual truths by their constant preoccupation with their own immediate bodily needs. It was only fitting therefore that the next miracle should be the opening of the eyes of the physically blind man of Bethsaida, as a picture of what God would yet do for them. It is also fitting that 8:29, immediately below, should contain the account of the opening of the eyes of Peter to the Messiahship of Jesus, and that chapter 9 should contain the story of the transfiguration. Of course, we are specifically told that Jesus healed many blind in the course of His ministry (Lk. 7:21), but this particular miracle is recorded only in Mark, naturally enough, if it occurred in Bethsaida, the home town of Peter (Jn. 1:44).”

As in the healing of the deaf mute person in the previous chapter, this healing also did not come about spontaneously by Jesus simply saying the word. When Jesus healed this person, we read that He spit and touched the man’s tongue, sighed deeply and spoke the word “Ephphatha.”¹⁸⁸

In most cases of blindness, we read that Jesus touched the person’s eyes, sometimes applying mud and saliva to them. But in the healing recorded here, the ritual is even more elaborate. First of all, Jesus did not perform the healing inside the village; He took the man outside. That may mean that no crowd was present when the healing occurred. The Jesus spit on the man’s eyes; He did not merely apply saliva, but He spit! And finally, He placed His hand on him. The immediate result was only a partial healing. In the case of blind Bartimaeus, Jesus merely had to say: “Go, your faith has healed you.”¹⁸⁹ In this case it was more complicated. No explanation is given for this. Demonic resistance may have been more powerful, but we find no mention of this.

The Greek verb used in “He took the blind man by the hand” is more powerful than the English translation would make us understand. The word *epilambanomai* means “to seize.” We find it in the verse where Peter tries to walk on water and begins to sink and we read: “Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and *caught* him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’”¹⁹⁰

In this case of healing Jesus did three things: He spit on the man’s eyes, He placed His hands in his eyes and He asked him the question “Do you see anything?” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “From the analogy of the miracle in the last chapter (... Mark 7:33), we may perhaps infer that our Lord touched the man’s eyes with saliva on his finger, and that the hands were withdrawn before he asked him if he saw aught.”

The man answered that he could see something, but his vision had not been restored perfectly. It is not clear whether he could not distinguish between people and trees, except for the fact that people walk and trees do not, or whether he saw everything magnified, knowing that the proportions were not correct. After Jesus put His hands again on the man’s eyes, his vision was restored completely.

Looking at this miracle, we could say that we share in the man’s problem in that a full understanding is withheld from us also. We are not given any explanation for the

¹⁸⁸ Mark 7:33,34

¹⁸⁹ Mark 10:52

¹⁹⁰ Matt. 14:31

elaborate way this healing came about. Some Bible scholars suggest that the various stages in which this miracle occurred were meant to build up of this man's faith.

There are alternate readings of v.26. A footnote in the NIV reads, instead of "Don't go into the village": "Don't go and tell anyone in the village." These instructions are the more mysterious since the man had been brought to Jesus by other people for the obvious purpose of healing. Jesus had taken him away from those who had brought him, but it cannot be supposed that those people could be left in the dark indefinitely about the man's healing.

IV. HE FIRMLY SET HIS FACT: THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM (8:27 – 10:52)

A. CONFESSION AND TRANSFIGURATION (8:27 – 9:10)

i. Peter's confession: the first passion prediction (8:27-33)

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

We read that Jesus was in the general area of Caesarea Philippi, that is at the border of the Israelite territory. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: "This Caesarea, located in the northwest section of the tetrarchy of Philip, was designated Philippi to distinguish it from Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast."

At this point, at a certain distance from Jerusalem, the center where most of the Pharisees and teachers of the law were, Jesus asks a question about, what we could call "an opinion poll."

The Pulpit Commentary writes the people whose opinion Jesus asked about: "The great body of them was offended at his poverty and humility; for they thought that Messiah would appear amongst them with royal state as a temporal king. So that when some said, moved it might be by the sight of his miracles, 'This is that Prophet that should come into the world,' they did but give utterance to a momentary and fugitive feeling, and not a firm or abiding conviction. The mass of mankind are fickle, easily led to change their opinions. Perhaps some of the Jewish multitude thought that the soul of one of the ancient prophets had entered into Christ, according to the Pythagorean notion of the transmigration of souls; or perhaps they thought that one of the old prophets had risen again in the person of Jesus. For though the Sadducees denied a resurrection, the great body of the Jews believed in it. Some thought that Christ was John the Baptist,

because he resembled the Baptist in age (there was only six months difference in age between them), as he also resembled him in holiness and in fervor of preaching. It was but a short time before, that John the Baptist had been put to death by Herod. His character and actions were fresh in their memories; and Herod himself had given currency to the idea that the Baptist had risen again in the person of our Lord. Then there was Elijah. Some thought that our Lord was Elijah, because it was known that Elijah had not died, and because there was an expectation, founded on Malachi's prophecy (... Malachi 4:5), that he would return. They thought, therefore, that Elijah had returned, and that our Lord was Elijah."

Jesus' question about what the people in general thought about Him led to what the disciples thought. That may have been the point Jesus wanted to bring up. Peter answered for all: "You are the Christ." "Christ" is the Greek word for the Hebrew "Messiah." Like the Greek word "Christ," the Hebrew word *mashiyach* literally means "anointed." In the Old Testament it was used for anyone who had been consecrated to God's service.

Mark omits the following exchange given by Matthew. We read there: "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. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this 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.'"¹⁹¹

Jesus' prohibition to mention to the public at large that He was the Messiah must be related to the expectations the people had about the work the Messiah would accomplish when He came. Most of the expectations were political; the people thought that the Messiah would deliver Israel from Roman imperialism and restore the Davidic kingdom. Even the disciples had similar thoughts, as is evident from their question after Jesus' resurrection: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"¹⁹² It had been Satan's strategy to publicize who Jesus was, probably in an effort to influence public opinion about Him in a way Jesus wanted to avoid. We read for instance in Luke's Gospel: "Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ."¹⁹³

The fact that Jesus had come to earth as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"¹⁹⁴ was incomprehensible to most and it did not fit their concept of what the Messiah would have come to do. Jesus' announcement that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"¹⁹⁵ had also failed to leave an impression.

Here, Jesus begins to prepare His disciples for what would be for them the most traumatic experience imaginable. But when He told them clearly that He would not only be rejected by the Jewish leaders, but also killed, the disciples refused to believe Him.

¹⁹¹ Matt. 16:16-19

¹⁹² Acts 1:6

¹⁹³ Luke 4:41

¹⁹⁴ John 1:29

¹⁹⁵ Matt. 20:28

From Peter's reaction we see that the disciples believed that Jesus went through a phase of emotional depression from which He must be delivered by a straight talk. So Peter rebuked Jesus, telling Him to stop talking like that. Peter seemed to be well-meaning, making an effort to cheer up Jesus. What Peter didn't realize was that his kind words were demonically inspired. It was Satan, who must have understood what was at stake, who tried to talk Jesus out of His act of obedience to the Father's plan of salvation.

Jesus' sharp answer to Peter suggests that Peter's words were a genuine temptation to Jesus. Jesus' determination to obey the Old Testament prophecy was put to the test here. He had responded to David's prophetic Psalm: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'"¹⁹⁶

None of the disciples could understand what was at stake. They had no idea that the only way for the Son of God to conquer death was to go through death Himself and thus break death's tyranny. That seemed a foolish way to them. They still had to learn that God's foolishness is wiser than man's wisdom.

The Apostle Paul would later be able to write to the Corinthians: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."¹⁹⁷

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "No sterner rebuke ever fell on any Pharisee than fell on this disciple of Jesus, this proto-Christian. In speaking as he did, Peter was voicing, not the mind of God revealed by His Spirit, but the 'natural' mind which is the mind of the enemy: and so Peter could be addressed by Jesus directly as *Satan*. The avoidance of the cross had been a temptation faced and overcome by Jesus in the wilderness, to judge from the fuller account of the temptations contained in the other synoptists (e.g. Lk. 4:1-13). For Peter to suggest it was therefore to think in human terms, and not in divine terms ... Note that Satan's suggestion is not blasphemous or obviously evil: it is smooth, attractive and 'natural,' appealing to all 'natural' human instincts. That is why it is so dangerous."

ii. The cost of discipleship (8:34-38)

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

36 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

37 Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

¹⁹⁶ Ps. 40:6-8

¹⁹⁷ I Cor. 1:22-25

Jesus' appeal to the crowd, which follows upon the intimate conversation He had just had with His disciples, is the most amazing and profound call ever issued. Jesus had just passed by a temptation, initiated by Satan who used Peter as his spokesman. Accepting the fact that He had come into this world for the purpose of sacrificing His body must not have been an easy decision for Jesus. It took more than normal determination for Jesus to set out on His last trip to Jerusalem. Luke reports: "Jesus *resolutely* set out for Jerusalem."¹⁹⁸ It took all human determination to begin this last journey to the cross where He would give His life.

It is difficult for us, from our present cultural setting, to fully appreciate the shocking effect Jesus' words must have had on His audience.

Crucifixion was introduced in Israel by the Romans, which made it a shameful way of execution to begin with. But execution by crucifixion was reserved from those who were considered to be the scum of the nation, people who were so debased that they were considered unworthy to remain alive. The cross was identical to shame. Death by crucifixion was the most horrible kind of death imaginable.

Jesus' call to deny oneself was a call to give up any concept of self-worth or respectability. It made sinners into villains. Jesus invites us to consider ourselves to be incorrigible criminals in the face of God, people who are worthy to be put to death in the most shameful way. The only way we can bring ourselves to this kind of self-denial is to realize that the King of Glory gave us the example and went ahead of us. Salvation will only become meaningful to us, if, like the Apostle Paul, we consider ourselves to be "the worst of sinners."¹⁹⁹

In the phrase "For whoever wants to save his life," the Greek word used is *psuche*, which corresponds to the English "psyche." It is the same Greek word as in "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his *soul*?" The object is the immortal part of our human existence. It is that what distinguishes us from the animals. It is the organ God created when He breathed the breath of life into Adam's nostrils.²⁰⁰

In the context of the image of the cross, wanting to save one's life could be interpreted as trying to maintain a form of respectability. As long as we do not see ourselves as totally worthless before God, we miss the point. We tend to believe that, although we are not perfect, there ought to be enough good characteristics in us to make us acceptable to God. The following example could serve as an illustration: If I participate in an outdoor picnic and while I sit under a tree with my plate of food, a bird on a branch above me drops excrement on my dish. I will throw away the whole dish, not just the affected part. Even if we only had one imperfection before God, He would have to disregard all of what we are. Before God we have no respectability at all. That makes us worthy of the cross; the cross that Jesus took up and carried for us. What He asks us to do is to identify with Him and confess that it is in our stead that He carried the cross that we ought to have carried ourselves to the place of our own execution.

Our soul is so valuable that not even all the riches of the world would be enough to pay as a ransom. If we consider ourselves to be above Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, who came down to take our filth and dung upon Himself, we will do irreparable damage to our eternal soul. We will choose the adultery of this world instead of the love of God

¹⁹⁸ Luke 9:51

¹⁹⁹ I Tim. 1:16

²⁰⁰ Gen. 2:7

and the sin of mankind for His eternal glory and we will lose it all. Jesus will not mention our name in heaven because it will not be on the list of those invited.

iii. The transfiguration (9:1-10)

1 And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

7 Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

Jesus' statement that some people standing there would still be alive at the coming of the kingdom, has puzzled Bible scholars over the centuries. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, asks the questions what Jesus meant by saying this and what the disciples understood Him to mean. Since the text does not seem to give any answers to this, we are still left in the dark.

Since Jesus' statement about the coming of the kingdom of God is followed by the story of Jesus' transfiguration, so there may be some connection between the two. On the other hand, it is obvious that there was no visible change of conditions after the group of Jesus and the three disciples came down from the mountain. There is mention, however, about Jesus' resurrection, which seems to point in the direction of an answer.

Answering his own questions, R. Alan Cole writes: "We know that many in the early church expected the Lord's second coming to be within the lifetime of the first generation of apostolic witnesses. The first apostolic generation may well, then, have thought that this saying of Jesus was a direct reference to His *parousia*, the second coming of Christ for judgment and establishment of His reign. This view could of course nowadays be maintained only if we understand *will not taste death* in a mystical sense as 'will not perish eternally,' which is possible, but unlikely. In Semitic idiom, *taste death* is simply poetic for the blunt 'die,' and so the apostles themselves would presumably have interpreted it. But the supposed views of the first generation have for us now only a past historical interest. By the date of the writing of the Gospel of Mark, even Peter had probably passed away, so this literal interpretation, with reference to the second coming would not have recorded a saying which was meaningless to him and also useless to the church. The verse must, therefore, refer either to the transfiguration which follows immediately after, which seems reasonable; or to later events, still within a human lifespan, such as Christ's triumph on the cross, confirmed by the resurrection (Col. 2:15);

or to the coming of the Spirit; or to the later extension of the blessings of the kingdom to the Gentiles as outlined in the book of Acts. Of these, perhaps the combined event of cross and resurrection is the best interpretation, if we reject the transfiguration as the meaning.”

Having quoted the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke: “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,”²⁰¹ and “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God,”²⁰² *The Pulpit Commentary* proceeds: “All these evangelists connect their record of the Transfiguration with these predictive words — a circumstance which must not be lost sight of in their interpretation. The question, therefore, is whether or how far the Transfiguration is to be regarded as a fulfillment of these words. One thing seems plain, that the Transfiguration, if a fulfillment at all, was not an exhaustive fulfillment of the words. The solemnity of their introduction forbids us to limit them to an event which would happen within eight days of their utterance. But there was an event impending, namely, the destruction of Jerusalem, involving the overthrow of the Jewish polity, which, coming as it did within forty or fifty years of the time when our Lord uttered these words, might reasonably have been expected to take place within the lifetime of some of those then standing there. And that great catastrophe was frequently alluded to by our Lord as a type and earnest of the great judgment at the end of the world. What relation, then, did the Transfiguration hold to these two events and to the prediction contained in this verse? It was surely a prelude and pledge of what should be hereafter, specially designed to brace and strengthen the apostles for the sight of the sufferings of their Master, and to animate them to endure the toil and the trials of the Christian life. So that the Transfiguration was an event, so to speak, parenthetic to this prediction — a preliminary manifestation, for the special advantage of those who witnessed it; though given also ‘for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.’”

It seems safest to me to interpret the words in the light of the events that formed the culmination of Jesus’ ministry in this world, viz. His death as an atonement for the sins of the world, followed by His resurrection as proof of His victory over death and over the one who, up to that point, had held the keys of death, Satan. It cannot be denied that Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was a manifestation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in the most powerful way imaginable. And when Jesus revealed Himself to John at a much later date, He said: “I hold the keys of death and Hades.”²⁰³

The following report of the transfiguration serves as an illustration of what the full manifestation of the Kingdom would look like. As the three disciples saw Jesus in His transfiguration, the Apostle John saw Him in His glory as the resurrected Lord of life.²⁰⁴

The transfiguration was one of the most unique events in Jesus’ human life on earth. As He came from heaven and lived His human life on our planet, He could outwardly not be distinguished from any other human being. He must have been a man of average height and stature, but differing from others in that He did not have a sinful

²⁰¹ Matt. 16:28

²⁰² Luke 9:27

²⁰³ Rev. 1:18

²⁰⁴ Rev. 1:12-18

nature. This made Him different from us, but not less human. Sin in human life is a foreign element introduced by God’s enemy. God did not create man as sinful. Man became sinful by choice. When Jesus became a human being, He laid aside His divine attributes. The Son of God lived on earth as a human being, going through life and living victoriously by His faith and fellowship with His heavenly Father. In a way, the transfiguration may have been as much a surprise for Jesus Himself, as it was for His three disciples who witnessed the event.

The transfiguration was, in a sense, a meeting of “the Big Three,” a heavenly gathering on earth for the purpose of mapping out the divine strategy of the struggle ahead. Luke reports that: “They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”²⁰⁵ Interestingly, the Greek word used for “departure” is *exodus*. During the Second World War the three allied leaders, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin had several meetings to discuss a strategy that would lead to the fall of the Third Reich. But this heavenly “Big Three” gathering dealt with an issue that was eternally more important than any political conference that ever convened on earth.

We may have the impression that Peter simply blabbered something at the spur of the moment. But R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about Peter’s reaction: “Luke adds the detail (9:32) that the disciples had been asleep, as in Gethsemane, which suggests that the transfiguration took place by night. The briefer account of Mark mentions none of these things, but they would fit with his story. Peter, suddenly awakened from sleep in time to see the glory, was talkative in his terror, as some are. Now that they had seen the shekinah-glory that had once covered Israel’s meeting-tent of old (Ex. 40:35), Peter thought that another such tent, or even three such tents, was appropriate now (5). Peter did not realize that the shekinah-glory, the manifestation of God’s presence, was already ‘living in a tent’ on earth, in the body of Christ (Jn. 1:14). ... The use of *rabbi* by Peter here is another interesting touch, which may be original. Matthew (17:4) has the usual polite *Kyrie*, ‘Lord,’ or ‘sir,’ and Luke (9:33) has the Gentile title *epistata*, ‘master’ or ‘overseer’; but Mark keeps the original Semitic word, used by Peter, the usual title for their teacher used by the apostolic band.”

The memory of this glorious event stayed with Peter till the end of his life. In his Second Epistle, he wrote: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”²⁰⁶ And, although the Apostle John does not specifically mention the transfiguration, he may have had it in mind when he wrote in the Prologue of his Gospel: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”²⁰⁷

The Pulpit Commentary states about the appearance of Moses and Elijah: “Moses and Elijah were there because Moses was the lawgiver of the old covenant, and Elijah was conspicuous among the prophets; so that they were the representatives, the one of the

²⁰⁵ Luke 9:31

²⁰⁶ II Peter 1:16-18

²⁰⁷ John 1:14

Law, and the other of the goodly fellowship of the prophets. They appear together to bear witness to Christ as the true Messiah, the Savior of the world, prefigured in the Law, and foretold by the prophets. They appear to bear witness to him, and then to resign their offices to the great Lawgiver and Prophet whom they foreshadowed. Then, further, Moses died, but Elijah was translated. Moses, therefore, represents the dead saints who shall rise from their graves and come forth at his coming, while Elijah represents those who shall be found alive at his advent. Our Lord brought with him, at his transfiguration, Moses who had died, and Elijah who had been translated, that he might show his power over both ‘the quick and the dead.’”

The message the three disciples received from God was that the Father loved the Son and that the disciples ought to listen to what the Son had to say to them. Since the topic of conversation of the “Big Three” had been Jesus’ crucifixion and death, the disciples must understand that, when they witnessed Jesus’ suffering and dying, it was not because He was not loved by the Father. That understanding was of the most importance, because it would have been easy for them to come to that conclusion. Not only that He died, but the way He died must have been totally incomprehensible to them. The resurrection would make it all clear to them, but before the resurrection and at Jesus’ death on the cross, none would make sense to them. That the Lamb of God would have to die for the sins of the world and conquer death in being raised from it, was something that even Satan could not understand, let alone Jesus’ disciples. Had they understood, they would all have been at Jesus’ tomb on the morning of the third day, waiting for the glorious event to happen. They talked about what “rising from the dead” could mean, but they never came to a conclusion until it actually happened.

There is, in fact, a paradox between this revelation of glory and the shame of death. The disciples were not alone in their lack of understanding. The Apostle Paul writes: “None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”²⁰⁸

B. THE PASSION FORETOLD AGAIN (9:11-50)

i. ‘Elijah returned’ (9:11-13)

11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?"

13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."

Introducing this section, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “The appearance of Elijah upon the mountain had raised another question in their minds. Was not Elijah still to appear, not merely in a vision, but in bodily form, to usher in the messianic age? As they descended the mountain, they put this question to Jesus. This at least proves that all of them now believed in His Messiahship, however they understood it. Otherwise the question, as to whether or not the teachers of the law were correct in their exegesis, would have no meaning.”

²⁰⁸ I Cor. 2:8

The disciples' question about Elijah was, evidently, not based on personal knowledge of the Scriptures. Their reference to "the teachers of the law" indicates that they had heard them say this; not that they had read this themselves. It may have been that most of these simple fishermen were illiterate.

The Scriptures referred to is Malachi's prophecy that closes the Old Testament, in which both Moses and Elijah are mentioned: "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."²⁰⁹

Jesus answered the disciples' question with a question of His own, to which no answer is given. "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?" is probably a statement, more than a question, put to the disciples for the purpose of preparing them for the trauma they would face at the crucifixion.

The fact that God sent His herald to announce the coming of the Messiah, and that both the herald and the Messiah were rejected by a fallen and hostile world, would become the core of the Gospel message. But it was impossible for the disciples to understand this at this point.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "Jesus not only agreed with this scribal interpretation of Malachi 4:5 pronouncing its fulfillment in John the Baptist, but also showed the parallelism between John's and His own case. The problem now was not whether 'Elijah' would come again or not (for he had come already), but why the Son of man (for whom 'Elijah' had prepared the way) should be rejected. In rejecting John, the Pharisees and scribes had rejected God's counsel for them (Lk. 7:30) and made it all the more sure that they would reject the Messiah when He came. None of this took God by surprise, for all was as it had been written (vv. 12-13). This must mean that Jesus linked both the 'Son of Man' and 'Elijah Returned' with the 'suffering Servant' of Isaiah 53:3. As John's rejection was a heralding of the rejection of the Messiah: and both alike were in fulfillment of Scripture. It is standard exegesis to say that in Mark there are three passion predictions by Jesus to His disciples, for so there are. But this is a fourth, usually unrecognized, for it is made only to the 'inner ring' of the three: doubtless there were others too."

ii. The epileptic boy (9:14-29)

14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

16 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

²⁰⁹ Mal. 4:4-6

19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered.

22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead."

27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

The first question mark must be put at the title of this section. Was the boy's problem epilepsy or was it demon possession? We gather from this story that it was the latter. We can hardly assume that Dr. Cole believes that all epilepsy is a manifestation of demons in a person. It is, of course, true that all sickness is the result of man's fall into sin, but that does not mean that all malfunctions of the human body or mind are forms of demon possession. We must therefore look at this incident, not as the healing of a sickness, but the exorcism of a demon. Dr. Cole does express some reservations about his own wording when commenting on vv.17 and 18. We read: "The outward symptoms of the boy are certainly those of epilepsy, but we should always observe a reverent agnosticism on matter of demonization."

According to Luke, this incident occurred on the day following Jesus' transfiguration.²¹⁰ Seen the fact that, as mentioned above, the transfiguration probably happened in the evening or during the night, this makes perfect sense.

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast than the glory manifested on the mount of transfiguration and the darkness found at the foot of the mountain, in the valley. Oswald Chambers makes quite a point of this discrepancy in his book *My Utmost for His Highest*.

Mark describes the reaction of the crowd to the arrival of Jesus and the three disciples as being "overwhelmed with wonder." The Greek word used is *ekthambeo*, which means literally "to be utterly astonished." It is a strange expression, only found in Mark. The other times Mark uses the word is in "He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be *deeply distressed* and troubled,"²¹¹ and in "As they entered

²¹⁰ Luke 9:37

²¹¹ Mark 14:33

the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they *were alarmed*.²¹² No explanation is given about this strange reaction.

The Pulpit Commentary asks the question why the crowd was “greatly amazed.” We read: “It seems most probable that they saw in his countenance, always heavenly and majestic, something even yet more Divine, retaining some traces of the glory of his transfiguration, even as the face of Moses shone when he came down from the mount (... Exodus 34:29). It hardly seems likely that the amazement of the people was simply caused by our Lord having arrived at an opportune time to relieve his disciples of their difficulty. The Greek word expresses something more than would be satisfied by the fact of our Lord having come upon the scene just when he was wanted. Even if there were no remains of the transfiguration glory upon his countenance, the vivid recollection of the scene, of the conversation with Moses and Elijah, and the subject of it, and the voice of the Father, must have invested his countenance with a peculiar majesty and dignity.”

We are not given any details about the argument between the disciples and the teachers of the law. It must, obviously, have been in connection with the demon possessed boy. We gather from the words of the boy’s father that the nine disciples, who had not accompanied Jesus on the mountain, had tried unsuccessfully to exorcise the demon. The fact that the disciples had found themselves unable to help the father may have caused the ridicule of the teachers of the law, who then argued that Jesus’ ministry was as much of a scam of that of His disciples. This must have deeply hurt the disciples who had just returned from their very successful campaign in which demons had been defeated and cast out.

Jesus’ question “What are you arguing with them about?” could be used as an argument to prove that the Man Jesus Christ was not omniscient in His days in the flesh on earth. That is, unless we believe that Jesus knew, but faked ignorance, which would even be more difficult to explain.

Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples seems unusually harsh, calling them an “unbelieving generation,” adding the word that sounds like exasperation: “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Luke even adds the word “perverse” to “unbelieving.”²¹³

When the boy is brought to Jesus the demon in him reacted violently by throwing the poor child into a convulsion. Jesus again asks a question, indicating that He needed information like any other human being. Upon Jesus’ question when the demonic attacks began, the father answers that they started in early childhood. The core question that sets this incident apart from all other miracles of healing in the Gospels is the father’s “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” We must not judge the father too harshly for his doubts. After all, the experience with the disciples, who probably initially assured the man that they had been given power to heal the sick and cast out demons, must have shaken his faith to the core.

Jesus’ answer “Everything is possible for him who believes” puts the emphasis again on the faith of the person in need, rather than on His own divine power to heal. To this the father responds by, what could be called, “a prayer for faith.” It is important to realize that faith in God’s power originates with God. The Holy Spirit is the source of our faith and we must lean on Him to supply what is lacking in our own heart. A confession

²¹² Mark 16:5

²¹³ Luke 9:41

to God that we don't have what it takes may be the beginning of a series of miracles in our own life.

The father's prayer "I believe, You help my unbelief!" is a classic example of a righteous prayer that has great effect. In this case it was all that was needed for Jesus to command the evil spirit to leave the boy once and for all. The command to the demon "never enter him again" must have been necessary in the case of a young boy who would not have the maturity to defend himself against demonic influences.²¹⁴ Although the demon put up a fierce fight, it did leave the boy. The child must have experienced this as exhausting to the point where he collapsed and had to be helped up.

When the disciples ask Jesus why they were unsuccessful in casting out the demon, Jesus answers: "This kind can come out only by prayer." The NIV omits "and fasting" found in older versions. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: "Unbelief and prayerlessness are sure to result in spiritual impotency. Many of the best Greek manuscripts omit the reference to fasting, as well as the parallel passage in Matt 17:21. It is to be noted that there would have been no opportunity for the disciples to meet this situation with fasting, but they surely could have trusted and prayed."

In Matthew's version we read Jesus' answer as: "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." A footnote there adds v.21, which is lacking in all modern translations: "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

Evidently, the demon that had taken possession of the boy's body was a member of a higher satanic hierarchy than normally encountered in cases of possession. Like the disciples, we stand here at the border of a kingdom we know little or nothing about.

iii. The second passion prediction (9:30-32)

30 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were,

31 because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."

32 But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "This is commonly called the second prediction of the passion, and is to be found in all the synoptic gospels. In point of fact ... a second 'private' prediction had already been given on the path down from the mountain of transfiguration, in answer to the question of the three apostles about Elijah's return (see verse 12), while yet another 'private' prediction will be made to James and John in 10:38, whether understood or not. This, then, would be the third such prediction, but only the second given to the whole body of the disciples."

It is amazing to see how Jesus made such intensive efforts to prepare His disciples for the event of His crucifixion and death, followed by His resurrection, and how completely He failed in this. We may deduct from the fact that Jesus didn't want anyone to know about His presence in Galilee, how important the lesson was that He wanted to imprint upon the disciples' mind. In spite of all His efforts to save them from the despair they would experience at His death, they remained ignorant and close-minded. Satan's

²¹⁴ See Matt. 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26.

propaganda about death being the finality of life had been so effective, and still is, that very few people look forward to their own death and glorification. J. S. Bach composed a cantata entitled: "I rejoice in my death." But who would say "amen!" to that?

Satan not only closed their mind to the possibility of a resurrection from death, he also sowed fear into their hearts, which kept them from asking questions.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "Our Lord repeats this prediction, in order that, when these events actually took place, his disciples might not be alarmed or offended, or abandon their faith in him, as though he could not be the Messiah because he underwent so terrible a death. It will be remembered that, notwithstanding these repeated warnings from their Lord, when these events actually took place, 'they all forsook him and fled.' It was therefore necessary that this coming event of his crucifixion should be repeatedly impressed upon them, that they might thus be assured that he was willing to undergo this bitter death; that he was not going to his cross by constraint, but as a willing Sacrifice, that he might do the will of his Father, and so redeem mankind. Therefore he repeated all this in Galilee, when he returned from his transfiguration, and after he had cast out the evil spirit from the epileptic child, and so had gained to himself great renown. He would thus restrain the excited feelings of his disciples, and impress upon them the reasons for his journey to Jerusalem, and prepare them for the dread realities which were awaiting him there. All his words staggered them, but especially those which spoke of his rising again. They did not understand whether it was an entrance into a higher state or a restoration to a common life. They did not understand why he was to die, and how these words of his about his death could agree with those in which he had told them that his kingdom was at hand. Perhaps, on the whole, they inclined to the view most pleasing to them, that Christ would not die; for this was what they wished and most desired. And so they tried to persuade themselves that his words respecting his sufferings and death had some other hidden meaning; and were to be understood in a figurative sense and not a literal. But anyhow, they dreaded to ask him."

Luke introduces Jesus' teaching of His disciples on the point of His death and resurrection with the words: "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you..."²¹⁵ But this also failed to have the desired result. The fact, however, that Luke records this means that the Holy Spirit brought this to the disciples' mind after Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost; otherwise Luke could not have received the exact wording from his sources that provided him with the material for his Gospel.

iv. The greatest in the kingdom (9:33-37)

33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

36 He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,

37 "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

²¹⁵ Luke 9:44

Capernaum, at this point, may still have been considered the place where Jesus was “home.”²¹⁶ It may have been the same house where He had been staying earlier, where He now asked the disciples the question about their argument on the road. The Greek verb used is *dialogizomai*, from which the word “dialogue” is derived. In the context in which it is used here, it probably means “to dispute.” They may have raised their voices in arguing about their “pecking order.” We are not told whether Jesus actually heard what they had been arguing about. But He must have sensed their state of mind, which was probably one of irritation and frustration. Jesus’ question caused them to be embarrassed. They had reason to be and they realized that, because they refused to answer Jesus.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “This sense of awe, induced by the as yet not understood words of Jesus, did not last long. As they walked along, they were strung out in a long line behind their rabbi. No ancient pupil would dare to walk abreast of his teacher, nor indeed would the narrow footpaths of the time allow it. They had been arguing up and down the line as they went (although sometimes *dialogizomai* may be used simply of reasoning in the heart, as in 2:6), and doubtless occasional angry words had reached the ears of Jesus, as He was walking in front (10:32). So His question sounded natural enough, no doubt but there was already a hint of rebuke in His use of the verb *dialogizomai* (discuss), which often implies argument as well as reasoning. He did not rebuke His disciples in public: they had been already sufficiently humiliated in front of the crowds. Instead, He waited for the privacy of the evening halt, till they were *in the house* (33). Not unnaturally, the disciples were reluctant to answer His question, to which Jesus already knew the answer.”

In arguing about their own importance, the disciples left Jesus out of the picture. The fact that He was the most important One among them, evidently, never came up. They compared themselves with each other, not with Christ. The healthier conclusion of the Apostle Paul comes to mind, who, comparing himself with the other Apostles, wrote: “I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”²¹⁷

At another occasion, Jesus would tell His disciples: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”²¹⁸ The disciples had not yet understood the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which He predicted to them. They did not grasp the fact that it was for them and in their stead that He died. Had they understood that, they would have said with David: “How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.”²¹⁹

Jesus and the disciples must not have been too far away from the public road, even though they were “in the house,” because Jesus was able to call a child and use it as an example. It may have been that the child belonged one of the of the home.

²¹⁶ Mark 2:1

²¹⁷ I Cor. 15:9,10

²¹⁸ Luke 17:10

²¹⁹ Ps. 116:12,13

There seems to be more than one way of interpreting Jesus' words "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." "Must be," (Greek: *éstai*) is the future tense of "to be." It could, therefore, be translated "will be," indicating that the person who exalts himself will be humbled. God only honors the humble. We return again to Paul's testimony, who considered himself the least of all the Apostles, feeling that he had reason to be because of his past acts of persecuting the believers. Even if we know ourselves to be forgiven and sanctified, remembrance of our past ought to be enough to keep us humble.

We can interpret Jesus' words as a motto to strive for. We can make ourselves the servant of others, because of the example of true humility we have in Jesus who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."²²⁰

One problem with humility is that it is a self-defeating feature. If we believe we are humble, we aren't! Jesus was the only Person who could ever say of Himself: "I am gentle and humble in heart."²²¹ True humility has nothing to do with being low and worthless. If a maid cleans the dishes, we do not call her humble. If the queen of England would take her own teacup to the kitchen and wash it, we would say she was a humble person. There is a sense in which humility can only be exhibited by people of high rank.

One of the most interesting features in this object lesson about humility Jesus gives to His disciples is that a child is not necessarily humble. That is, a child will not consider him/herself to be less than another child. The boast "My daddy is stronger than your daddy" is not expression of humility. The main feature in childhood that makes a member of that class humble is his dependence. A child needs parents and he knows this. We are humble if we acknowledge that without Christ we can do nothing.²²²

Actually, in the object lesson, Jesus never said that a child was humble. He defined humility in terms of the disciples' attitude toward the child. There had been indications that the disciples didn't consider children to be important members of society. We read in all three of the synoptic Gospels that people brought their children to Jesus and the disciples tried to prevent them from coming. Jesus' answer was: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."²²³ Maybe the best interpretation of Jesus' object lesson is that we ought to consider ourselves as unimportant, as unworthy servants, who only do what is their duty.

The punch line of the lesson is that Jesus comes to us in the form of unimportant people. The point is our attitude toward those who we consider to be on the lowest step of the ladder. Our human tendency is to get close to people who are high up in society. Jesus comes to us in the person of a stranger who is hungry and thirsty.²²⁴

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "This then makes the lesson of humility plain: not only is it the law of Christian service, but it is also the law of entrance into the kingdom of heaven (*cf.* 10:15, a very similar instance in Mark). This humility, which is the basic law of the kingdom, demands a complete reversal of our previous scale of values, a reversal which God will one day vindicate (10:31). In this humility, we receive a child as we would the King himself, treating this child as an ambassador of the King (*in my*

²²⁰ Matt. 20:28

²²¹ Matt. 11:29

²²² John 15:5

²²³ Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16

²²⁴ Matt. 25:34-40

name), not as we see him or her outwardly. Similarly, even Jesus Himself is to be seen in the light of God, His Sender, and not as He appears outwardly to the false sense of values in this world.”

After all, the Lord of glory, the Savior of the world came as a little baby, born in a stable.

v. The man casting out demons (9:38-40)

38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

39 "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me,

40 for whoever is not against us is for us.

Most Bible scholars see this conversation between Jesus and John as an episode immediately following the previous one in which Jesus spoke about welcoming a child in His Name. Here was a man who used the Name of Jesus to exorcise demons, and apparently, he was successful.

We are told nothing about the identity of this person. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "It can scarcely be supposed that a man who knew nothing of Christ, or who was only a common exorcist, could be able to work a miracle in Christ's name; we may therefore safely imagine that this was either one of John the Baptist's disciples, who, at his master's command, had believed in Jesus, or one of the seventy, whom Christ had sent out, Luke 10:1-7, who, after he had fulfilled his commission, had retired from accompanying the other disciples; but as he still held fast his faith in Christ, and walked in good conscience, the influence of his Master still continued with him, so that he could cast out demons as well as the other disciples."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "The whole theology of the Spirit was at stake here: the scribes had seen the work of the Spirit, yet deliberately misinterpreted and opposed it, putting it down to Beelzebub (3:22). But here were His own disciples, seeing and admitting a work of the Spirit, done in the name of Jesus, and still forbidding it, on theological grounds. What is the difference between disciples and scribes, if both alike oppose the Spirit's working, although for very different reasons?"

What seems strange in this passage is the fact that Jesus does not appear to be requiring an act of personal surrender to Him or of recognition of His Messiahship. The tenet is simple absence of negative elements, not even active commitment. In the incident in Matthew, referred to by Dr. Cole, Jesus had said to the scribes: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."²²⁵

An incident that would occur years later, and which is mentioned by Luke in Acts, could throw some light on the issue here. We read: "Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. [One day] the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them

²²⁵ Matt. 12:30

such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.”²²⁶ The fact that the demons did not react this way to the exorcism performed in Jesus’ Name by the unidentified believer indicates that what the man did was legitimate and effective.

It is obvious that the person could not have performed miracles in the Name of Jesus without faith in that Name. Yet, at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”²²⁷

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The lesson which both these apothegms teach is the same, that there is no such thing as neutrality in reference to Christ and his cause. We must be either with him or against him. [One Bible scholar] on St. Mark in this place says, ‘When in applied morals we sit in judgment on ourselves, we should in ordinary circumstances apply the law obversely and stringently, ‘he who is not with Christ is against him.’ But when we are sitting in judgment on others, into whose hearts we cannot look directly, we should in ordinary circumstances apply the law reversely and generously, ‘He that is not against Christ is with him.’”

vi. Stumbling-blocks (9:41-48)

41 I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

42 "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,

48 where "“their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

We note that vv. 44 and 46 are lacking in the NIV. Footnotes at two places read: Some manuscripts: “their worm does not die, | and the fire is not quenched.” It is impossible for us to determine whether the lacking verses were left out by copyists for the purpose of avoiding repetitions that seemed unnecessary, or whether the repetitions were inserted in certain manuscripts for added effect. Older versions and even the NKJV leave them in.

It must be admitted that Jesus’ mention of giving a cup of water to someone in the Name of Christ, could easily be connected to the event in the preceding section, about the unidentified person who performed acts of kindness of a more dramatic sort: casting out demons in Jesus’ Name.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “If this next saying of Jesus is still in the same context, then there must be a return in thought to the child, standing in front of Jesus; and

²²⁶ Acts 19:13-16

²²⁷ Matt. 7:21-23

verse 41 would be the bridge-verse. The link then is the words you bear the name of Christ (41). Of course, we could equally well take verse 41 closely with verse 40, and see the gift of a drink of water as being a proof of support of Christ. If this ‘belonging to Christ’ is such an important bond, then nothing is too precious to sacrifice (not even hand, foot, or eye), in order that we may retain it. In the kingdom, all rules of moral conduct are based on theological principles. Therefore, to trip up or impede one, even the least important outwardly, who enjoys this close relationship to Christ is so terrible a crime and merits such a terrible punishment. The incidental touch of verse 42, *one of these little ones who believe in me* may suggest that Jesus was staying in the house of a disciple and believer at the time. ‘Little ones’ could perfectly well mean ‘lowly disciples,’ but in this context, it is best to take it literally as ‘children.’ We, too, dare not allow ourselves to be thus tripped: for the consequences for us are so serious. Compared with the attainment of the kingdom of God (47) or of ‘life’ (43), no sacrifice is too great to make. So hand, foot or eye, the most important members, must be sacrificed, if need be, for the good of the whole. As in 8:36-37, Jesus is stressing the infinite value of the soul, compared with which all else is unimportant.”

Jesus uses the instance of the person who used His Name for the purpose of casting out demons and applies it to those who associate themselves with Him. What people do for Christ becomes what people do for Christ’s followers; in this case the disciples. The context of the passage makes the giving of a cup of water into a small act of kindness. The idea seems to be that a follower of Christ is allowed to take a drink from the well owned by the owner of the house and that this is done in recognition of the fact that the thirsty person belongs to Christ. Yet, in the Palestine in which Jesus lived during His days on earth, water was a precious commodity. In Christ’s use of the example, however, it was the least that could be done. The point is that God cannot be outdone. Whatever we do for Him will be rewarded.

The next example is in complete opposition to the previous one. From help to one who professes Christ, we go to one who leads one of Jesus’ followers into temptation that leads to sin. Although “one of these little ones” is not identified specifically as a little child, the example only makes sense if we see in it a person who does not have the maturity to distinguish between good and bad. The act of temptation must be seen as intentional. An effort to corrupt an innocent person will be met with the most severe punishment imaginable: death by drowning. The millstone adds to the drama of the execution. The Greek text uses two words, *múlos onikós*, literally “donkey stone,” for “millstone.” It was the kind of large round stone, used to grind grain and usually operated by attaching a donkey that would tread in a circle to make the equipment turn. It was a stone too heavy for a person to lift. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* explains: “It is supposed that in Syria, as well as in Greece, this mode of punishing criminals was practiced; especially in cases of parricide; and when a person was devoted to destruction for the public safety, as in cases of plague, famine, etc. When a person was drowned, they hung a weight, a vast stone about his neck.”

Such a punishment sounds extreme, but, according to Jesus, it is mild in comparison to the punishment God metes out to those who intentionally try to corrupt children or others who lack moral judgment.

From there Jesus moves to any kind of sin a person can commit that would incur God's wrath upon him or her. Jesus wants us to hold sin in such horror that we would be willing rather to lose a limb than to lose our soul.

The illustration reminds me of a story a man told me when I was a student in the Brussels Bible Institute in Belgium. The man had been a coalminer and a staunch unbeliever. His wife would go to church and when the pastor came to the man's house to visit the woman, the man would leave the house through the bedroom window in order not to encounter the pastor. But an accident in the mine caused him to have one of his legs amputated. After the surgery, the pastor visited the man in the hospital. Jumping through the window was no longer an option and during one of the visits, the man accepted Christ in his life. When I met him, he told me how glad he was he had lost his leg!

Another illustration comes from the mission field. A man, walking through the jungle, stepped on a poisonous snake that bit him in his foot. Knowing that death would follow such a bite, the man took his machete and immediately cut off his leg, thus saving his life.

It seems obvious that Jesus is not propagating physical self-mutilation. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "As in 8:36-37, Jesus is stressing the infinite value of the soul, compared with which all else is unimportant. Physical self-mutilation, utterly abhorrent to the Jew, is not in question here, though some of the early church Fathers may have taken it so ... What we have is a vivid metaphor, couched in extreme terms that assure us of its dominical nature, for this appears typical."

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The hand, or the foot, or the eye represents any instrument by which sin may be committed; and it applies to those who may be the means of drawing us into sin. If your relative or your friend, who is useful or dear to you as your hand, your foot, or your eye, is drawing you into sin, cut him off from you, lest he should draw you into hell, into the *unquenchable Gehenna*. Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, lay to the south of Jerusalem. Originally a pleasant suburb of the city, it became in later times the scene of the worship of Molech, 'the abomination of the children of Ammon.' On this account the valley was polluted by King Josiah. It thus became the receptacle of everything that was vile and filthy. These noisome accumulations were from time to time consumed by fire; and the things which were not consumed by fire were the prey of worms. Hence 'Gehenna' became the image of the place of eternal punishment, where 'the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.' These terrible images are conclusive as to the eternity of future punishment, so far as our nature is concerned and our knowledge reaches. They are the symbols of certain dreadful realities; too dreadful for human language to describe or human thought to conceive."

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia explains about the word *Gehenna*: "That 'the valley of Hinnom' became the technical designation for the place of final punishment was due to two causes. In the first place the valley had been the seat of the idolatrous worship of Molech, to whom children were immolated by fire (2 Chron 28:3; 33:6). Secondly, on account of these practices the place was defiled by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), and became in consequence associated in prophecy with the judgment to be visited upon the people (Jer. 7:32). The fact, also, that the city's offal was collected there may have helped to render the name synonymous with extreme defilement. Topographically the identification of the valley of Hinnom is still uncertain. It has been

in turn identified with the depression on the western and southern side of Jerusalem, with the middle valley, and with the valley to the East.”

The Greek text defines *Gehenna* as “the fire that shall never be quenched.” The Greek word for “unquenchable” is *asbestos*. John the Baptist used the word, announcing the coming of Christ as: “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*.”²²⁸

vii. The salt of the earth (9:49-50)

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

50 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Bible scholars consider these two verses among the most difficult to interpret in the Gospels. If “the fire” here is the same as the unquenchable fire in the previous verses, we have the problem to explain how it could affect all people. “Everyone will be salted with fire,” would then mean that no one would be saved.

What ties salt and fire together is their purifying effect. In our mind the two are quite different and are not used simultaneously to achieve its purpose. Some food items need to be salted to preserve them from corruption; other things are cleaned by heat.

“Salted with fire” may contain a reference to the bringing of certain sacrifices. We read in Leviticus: “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.”²²⁹ The grain offering was a non-bloody sacrifice, representing the offering of a person’s body to the Lord. It stood for a dedication of one’s person to the Lord’s service.

It is also difficult for us to grasp the image of salt losing its saltiness. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, explains: “Those who have lived in the third world may not be able to give a chemical explanation, but they will know that salt is often adulterated, as sugar is, and may another commodity, by unscrupulous local retailers. But to enquire what process the adulterated substance goes through, and how it results in final tastelessness, is beside the point, although scientifically interesting. The real point is that such salt, salt only in name, is now useless: and if the very thing designed to bring flavor to other substances is itself flavorless, how can its flavor be restored?” The native salt we were familiar with on the mission field contained more ashes than salt. This was due to the fact that wood was saturated in salt water and then burned so that the salty ashes could be used to add to food.

Another mind teaser is in the phrase “have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” The second part of this admonition is easy to understand. It refers to the quarrel of the disciples as to who was the greatest among them. Having salt in oneself must have been an expression easy to understand for the disciples in the context of their culture. We don’t read that they asked any questions about it. Paul uses a similar term in his Epistle to the Colossians, saying: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”²³⁰ Salt and grace are

²²⁸ Matt. 3:12

²²⁹ Lev. 2:13

²³⁰ Col. 4:6

used as synonyms in that sentence. *Barnes' Notes* interprets this as: "Have the preserving, purifying principle always; the principles of denying yourselves, of suppressing pride, ambition, contention, etc., and thus you will be an acceptable offering to God."

Elsewhere Jesus had said: "You are the salt of the earth."²³¹ In the same way as ten righteous people could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah from total destruction, this earth can be saved by people who are filled with the grace and righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the lack of "salt" that has caused the church to split into multiple contending groups.

C. DEPARTURE FROM GALILEE (10:1-34)

i. The local setting (10:1)

1 Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "Up till now, in chapters 1-9, we have had the record of a basically Galilean ministry of Jesus. Now, from chapters 10 to 15, Mark records a Judean ministry, and the natural assumption would be that this followed immediately afterwards. But, against this view, in between the two, Luke has a great mass of material, covering roughly chapters 9-18 of his gospel, usually call the Lucan travel narrative, which Mark seems to omit altogether ... The region of Judea which Jesus enters now is different in every way from the Galilean highlands in the north. Rugged Galilee, with its simple and strongly nationalistic peasantry, was very different from the sophisticated city dwellers of the south. Galilee was always the most stubborn center of Jewish revolts, possibly because the 'Circuit of the Gentiles,' as its full name means, was surrounded by Gentile and bitterly anti-Jewish populations: even in the AD 70 revolt, Galilee was a hard nut for the Romans to crack, as Josephus shows. Judea was dominated by Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was dominated by the temple, with its Sadducean aristocracy and Sanhedrin: vested religious interest and rigid religious orthodoxy were stronger there than in the north."

ii. The teaching of Jesus on marriage (10:2-12)

2 Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

3 "What did Moses command you?" he replied.

4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

5 "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

6 "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'

7 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,

8 and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one.

9 Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

10 When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this.

11 He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her."

²³¹ Matt. 5:13

12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Matthew records the Pharisees' question as: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"²³² Their question was not meant to throw light on a matter about which they had concern; they were looking for an opportunity to trap Jesus in making inconsistent pronouncements that could be used against Him in a trial.

According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, there were two schools with different opinions on the matter in Jesus' day. We read: "The question put by the Pharisees concerned one of the debated subjects of that day. The scribes who followed Hillel held that a man could divorce his wife for almost any cause. The followers of Shammai, on the other hand, insisted that divorce was lawful only in case of adultery."

The law of Moses Jesus referred to, read: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance."²³³

There was a difference between what the law ordered and what the law permitted. The question was not whether a man could divorce his wife because of adultery. The punishment for adultery was death.²³⁴ Pre-marital sex was not allowed either.²³⁵ The definition of "something indecent," as Moses' law stated, left opportunity for multiple applications, of which some men took advantage.

Jesus brought out that the law that permitted divorce did not reflect God's original intent about marriage, but was an accommodation to a human sinful tendency. It was, as R. Alan Cole observes in *Mark*: "the lesser of two evils in Israel, but its very existence showed a fatal flaw in humanity, to which Jesus drew attention. Perhaps the toleration of polygamy in Old Testament times is another instance of the outworking of the same principle, as being something permitted in early days, but never praised, and never seen as God's plan for humanity." The law of Moses did not order divorce, but allowed it in certain circumstances. In New Testament times, when the Gospel of salvation brought separation between partners in marriage, the early church, evidently, permitted married couples to separate. Paul's advice was: "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"²³⁶

Jesus said to the Pharisees that the law allowed for separation, "because your hearts were hard." The Greek expresses this condition with one single word *sklerokardia*, "hearthardness." It refers to a sinful condition that makes one unwilling to repent. Referring to the Genesis record, Jesus quoted two verses from the first two chapters of

²³² Matt. 19:3

²³³ Deut. 24:1-4

²³⁴ Lev. 20:10

²³⁵ II Sam. 13:12

²³⁶ I Cor. 7:15,16

the book; the full text of which reads: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them,”²³⁷ and: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”²³⁸

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “God himself has joined them together; he has not only, as Creator, fitted them to be comforts and helps meet for each other, but he has, in wisdom and goodness, appointed them who are thus joined together, to live together in love till death parts them. Marriage is not an invention of men, but a divine institution, and therefore is to be religiously observed, and the more, because it is a figure of the mystical inseparable union between Christ and his church.” The observation that marriage is a figure of the union between Christ and the church could, of course not be used as an argument in Jesus’ answer at this point. But it has become an important truth for us who live in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. It gives to our present marital unions a value and meaning that could not be understood in Old Testament and even early New Testament times.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “This report of the teaching of Jesus on divorce is, again, only of a skeleton nature, and therefore it is by no means a full treatment of a difficult problem. For that, we must turn to the full treatment in Matthew 5:32, with its co-called ‘exceptive clause,’ however this is interpreted, and to Paul’s letters, where the bluntness is somewhat qualified pastorally. But, because of its very bluntness, this is clearly a genuine utterance of Jesus. No early Christian, whether Jewish or Gentile, would have dared to make such a drastic statement, though the Qumran community seem to have appealed to the same biblical principle of strict monogamy ... Further, Mark’s is the downright formula for a Graeco-Roman Gentile church, where immorality was doubtless a grave danger: finer points would be lost on them. Jesus was not creating a new legalism: He was recalling to God’s absolute standard and intention. The first century was a time in which divorce was perilously easy and common, whether in Judaism or paganism. Jesus, it is noteworthy, assumes as a matter of course that a divorced party will, in the either case, remarry; it is such remarriage after willful divorce which is branded as adultery. But, however we explain them, we must not water down the strong words of Jesus, even if they are as unwelcome and unfashionable to us as they were to His disciples when first spoken.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, we read that the disciples react by saying: “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”²³⁹ To this Jesus replied with an observation about abstinence “because of the kingdom of heaven.”²⁴⁰

iii. Let the little children come (10:13-16)

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

²³⁷ Gen. 1:27

²³⁸ Gen. 2:24

²³⁹ Matt. 19:10

²⁴⁰ Matt. 19:11,12

15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

16 And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

There is a logical sequence between the preceding verses about marriage and divorce and this section that places children, the fruit of a marriage relationship, in the spotlight. Children were not mentioned in the part about divorce, although they are usually the greatest victims in the matter.

The Greek word used in this context for "child" is *paidion*, which is best rendered with "infant." Although in the story about the resurrection of Jairus' daughter it refers to a girl who was twelve years old. In Mark's story the children are old enough to come to Jesus and touch Him.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, states: "Whether they were actually *paidia*, children, (13) or *brephē*, infants (as said in Lk. 18:15), is uncertain and indeed immaterial here. There have been those who see something almost superstitious in the action of these parents. But, if it was faith and not superstition to touch the garment of Jesus in hope of healing (5:28), then this is faith too. It was apparently not uncommon for Jewish rabbis of the time to lay on hands and bless similarly."

The NIV rendering suggests that the disciples rebuked the children. Some older versions read the text as if the disciples rebuked the parents who brought the children. Jesus' indignation is with His disciples who prevented the children from coming to Him.

The disciples seem to have had a problem accepting children as genuine members of the kingdom. We saw in the previous chapter how Jesus took a child and placed it in the middle as an object lesson of humility. Here the child becomes an example of citizenship. As we saw before, the attitude of the child is one of dependence. The child knows that it needs parents in order to become what it is intended to be. As members of the kingdom, we must realize that without Christ we can do nothing. We must touch Him and He touches us.

iv. The rich man (10:17-31)

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good — except God alone.

19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

28 Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"

29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel

30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "The story of the rich man is found in all three synoptics, with individual additions, as the narrators recalled different points. From Matthew (Mt. 19:20) we learn of his youth, while the Lucan source records that he was 'a ruler' (Lk. 18:18). *His great possessions* (22), so different from the 'evangelical poverty' in which the disciples lived, deeply impressed the naïve Galileans, as did the splendors of Herod's temple later (13:1). He probably belonged to a social group as yet scarcely touched by the gospel, although converted tax collectors like Levi would undoubtedly have been wealthy too (2:14-15), like the rest of the 'sinner,' no doubt. From the very start, some women of this circle were numbered among the followers of Jesus (15:41, and *cf.* Lk. 8:3), and used their wealth to further His cause, as indeed Joseph of Arimathea did at the last (15:43). Jesus does not condemn wealth as wrong in itself, but this whole story is a poignant warning of its dangers.

Many comments have been made about the way this man came to Jesus, indicating youthful enthusiasm. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "Much instruction may be had from seriously attending to the conduct, spirit, and question of this person.

1. He came running (Mark 10:17), for he was deeply convinced of the importance of his business, and seriously determined to seek so as to find.
2. He kneeled, or caught him by the knees, thus evidencing his humility, and addressing himself only to mercy. See Matt 17:14.
3. He came in the spirit of a disciple, or scholar, desiring to be taught a matter of the utmost importance to him-Good teacher.
4. He came in the spirit of obedience; he had worked hard to no purpose, and he is still willing to work, provided he can have a prospect of succeeding-What good thing shall I do?
5. His question was the most interesting and important that any soul can ask of God-How shall I be saved?"

Jesus' reaction to the man calling Him "good" is remarkable, to say the least. Elsewhere, Jesus said to His accusers: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"²⁴¹ suggesting that He would be "good" and even perfect. Matthew's version of the encounter puts Jesus' question as "Why do you ask me about what is good?"²⁴² That puts the emphasis on the act, rather than on the person.

²⁴¹ John 8:46

²⁴² Matt. 19:17

In addressing Jesus as “good teacher” the man used a comparison on a human level. Compared to other people, Jesus was “the better one.” Jesus’ refutation of the predicate forces the man to see goodness in relation to God, not to humans. Ultimately, it is the goodness of God that is the yardstick against which all human acts are will be measured. At this point, Jesus does not elaborate this, but He draws the man’s attention to goodness in inter-human relations, which is what the second table of the Ten Commandments is all about. Mark does not give us the addition “love your neighbor as yourself,” which we read in Matthew’s record.²⁴³

Many Bible scholars see the man’s problem as a lack of recognition of Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God. But we gather from other instances in the Gospels that Jesus did not want His deity to be broadcasted. It seems, therefore, doubtful that He would endeavor to correct the man here at this point.

Of course, the real problem is that salvation cannot be attained by being good. But since that was what the man had endeavored all his life, Jesus puts his efforts to the test by quoting the commandments to him. The man’s answer intimates a superficial acknowledgment of the divine commands. He must not have known anything about Jesus’ definition of sin, as given in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said that looking lustfully at a woman was tantamount to committing adultery.²⁴⁴ If the man could truthfully confess that he had never had a lustful thought, he would be so perfect that a quest for eternal life would no longer be an issue.

The real issue in this conversation was the man’s lack of knowledge of his own sinful nature. He lacked understanding of his own condition because he never compared his own character with the character of God. Sin is more than a failure to obey the commandments; it is falling short of the glory of God.²⁴⁵

The Greek text of v.21 reads: “Then Jesus beholding him loved him.” He looked at him with the eyes of love. Mark is the only Gospel writer who inserts this point in the story. This must have been the point that caught Peter’s attention and which he passed on to Mark in recounting the event. It would ultimately be this love of Jesus, not the man’s efforts, that saved life. It was also that love that put the man to the final test: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor ... Then come, follow me.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “Jesus looked intently and searchingly at him, and He loved him. No doubt He recognized the sincerity of the man’s search for something to meet his spiritual need; He saw the potential represented in this upright young leader. Then He went to the heart of the man’s problem, his devotion to his wealth rather than to God. Therein lay the one thing he lacked. In order to follow Jesus, he must remove the obstacle, his love of money. It was not works of charity that would gain for him eternal life; it was becoming identified with Christ.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about Jesus’ advice: “‘*Give to the poor*’: is this renunciation in favor of the poor the very heart of the injunction? Or is the central point, the command for the giving up by the man, of what has become a spiritual impediment? Older commentaries would stress the second interpretation, most modern commentators the first. Probably there is no contradiction between the two, for, while the New Testament does not say that ‘God is on the side of the poor,’ yet Jesus always showed

²⁴³ Matt. 19:19

²⁴⁴ Matt. 5:28

²⁴⁵ Rom. 3:23

special concern for the poor. Wealth is not seen as necessarily sinful in the New Testament: it is, however, seen as highly dangerous (23), as well as a great responsibility. Jesus does not accuse this man of acquiring his wealth at the expense of the poor, as a tax collector almost certainly would have done. To the Jew of Old Testament days, honestly gained riches were a sign of God's blessing (Pr. 10:22), but this must not be exaggerated into a 'prosperity cult,' for 'the poor' are often equated with 'the righteous.'"

The NIV renders the man's reaction with "the man's face fell. He went away sad" for what the Greek text gives as "And he was sad at this saying, and went away grieved." The reason was the enormity of his wealth. It was the amount of his earthly possession that made him too poor for the kingdom.

Jesus commented on the man's disappointment by saying and repeating: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples' amazement must have been due to their Jewish concept of wealth being proof of God's blessing. The embedded verse in Proverbs in the commentary above captures well the Jewish philosophy of life: "The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it."²⁴⁶ Jesus saw the man's case as representative for all of humanity. Sometimes wealth is not proof of God's blessing but a test of stewardship. The Scottish writer George MacDonald suggested that sometimes God punishes people by making them rich.

Much has been written about the illustration Jesus uses of a camel passing through "the eye of a needle." It is generally accepted that Jesus referred to a proverbial expression, but whether the eye of a needle was what we know it to be, a tool for sewing, or whether it was part of the entrance through the city wall, cannot be concluded. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* writes: "The idea that the eye of a needle, referred to here, was a small gate through which a camel could enter only on his knees is without warrant. The word for needle refers specifically to a sewing needle. Furthermore, Jesus was not talking about what man considers possible, but about what seems to be impossible (cf. v. 27). With man it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a sewing needle."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "It is tempting to read in this vivid saying the like-sounding (in *koinē* Greek) word *kamīlos*, 'rope,' for *kamēlos*, *camel*, but there is no good early MSS evidence for the change. Likewise, it makes somewhat banal what is a palpable folk-proverb of impossibility. The camel was by now the largest animal found in Palestine. There does not seem to be any good early evidence for the view that the phrase eye of a needle means a postern-gate in the city wall, with a consequent need for the camel to kneel and be unloaded if it is to be pushed through. The ninth century AD is the earliest reference that [Bible scholars] can find for this interpretation: it therefore reads like a pious late fabrication. It is better to see the metaphor as one of sheer impossibility. Is the choice of the camel, traditionally most sulky of all beasts, suggested by the sorrowfulness of the rich man leaving Jesus (22)?"

Evidently, there was a popular expression about an elephant passing through a small gate. *The Pulpit Commentary*, quoting a Bible scholar, states: "Quotes one rabbi disputing with another, who says, 'Perhaps thou art one of those who can make an elephant pass through the eye of a needle; that is, 'who speak things that are impossible.' St. Jerome says, 'It is not the absolute impossibility of the thing which is set forth, but the infrequency of it.'"

²⁴⁶ Prov. 10:22

The Greek text of v.26 reads literally: “And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved?” R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on this: “The indignant *kai*, ‘and,’ translated here as *then*, at the beginning of the disciples’ question almost defies translation. It implies exasperation and indignation and was not by any measure the first time that the seeming lack of ‘realism’ shown by Jesus drew this response from His impatient disciples. ‘*Saved*’ here equals ‘enter the kingdom.’”

The Greek text of v.27 reads: “[And] looking upon them, Jesus says ...” The Greek verb used is *èmblépo*, meaning “to turn one’s eyes upon.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: The Greek verb implies an earnest, intense looking upon them; evidently narrated by one who, like Peter, had watched his countenance.”

The obvious point is that man cannot save himself. As a man who is drowning needs the help of others to pull him out of the water, so every human being needs the hand of God to be saved from hell. Paul advises Timothy that God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”²⁴⁷ And Peter writes “The Lord ... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”²⁴⁸ There is no biblical basis for the idea that God would predestine certain people to hell.

It seems that Peter missed the point when he spoke up for himself and for the other disciples, saying: “We have left everything to follow you!” It is true that he and Andrew as well as James and John “left their nets and followed him.”²⁴⁹ But they must have realized that the price they paid for following Jesus was not a very high one. Yet, Jesus takes Peter seriously, saying that all who leave everything to follow Him will be rewarded a hundred fold. Elsewhere, He had said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple.”²⁵⁰

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “Everyone who follows Christ ultimately makes the same sacrifice, for everyone must give all that they have, and Christ does not reckon the sacrifice as great or small by the amount given, but by the amount withheld for self. This will be the lesson of the widow’s gift (12:42). So Jesus does not rebuke Peter, for what Peter say is true; at the call of Jesus, the fishermen had indeed left nets and boat and followed Him (1:18-20). It may be that some among them, awed by the wealth of the young man and his refusal to give it up as the price of Christ, were ruefully rethinking their own initial sacrifice, and badly needed this reassurance that Jesus saw and valued it.” The same commentary continues: “Here it is Mark among the evangelists who has the fuller text with *for my sake, and for the gospel*, or perhaps ‘because of me, and because of the good news’; he thus makes the goal of the sacrifice clearer. The disciple makes the sacrifice for his Master, so that the gospel of his Master may be spread: the possible extent of the sacrifice is given in a solemn roll call of items involved.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on Jesus’ statement that the first may be last and the last first: “Most fitly does our Lord add this weighty sentence to what has just gone before. For thus he places himself, his grace, and his gospel in direct opposition to the corrupt teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Perhaps the disciples thought within

²⁴⁷ I Tim. 2:4

²⁴⁸ II Peter 3:9

²⁴⁹ Mark 1:18

²⁵⁰ Luke 14:26

themselves, ‘How can it come to pass that we, the poor, the unlearned, the despised, are to sit upon thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, amongst whom are men far our superiors in station, in learning, and in authority, such as are the scribes and Pharisees, and that rich young ruler just mentioned.’ Our Lord here teaches them that the future will reveal great changes — that some who are first here will be last there, and some who seem last here will be first there. The disciples, and others like them, who, having forsaken all and followed Christ, seemed to be last in this world, will be first in the world to come — most dear to Christ, the King of Heaven, in their lives; most like to him in their zeal for his cause.”

Referring to the believers’ authority in Christ, the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!”²⁵¹

v. The third passion-prediction (10:32-34)

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,

34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

Whether this is the third or the fourth announcement of Jesus’ upcoming passion and resurrection depends on whether we include the one given shortly after the transfiguration, which was only given to the inner circle of disciples.

There must have been something strange in the way Jesus took the lead in going to Jerusalem, which caused the disciples’ astonishment and fear.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary suggests that Jesus walked alone. We read: “This journey to Jerusalem was, as Jesus knew, the one that would take him to his death. The fact that Jesus went before them, walking alone, was a surprising departure from his usual practice of companionship with his disciples. No doubt there was something about his strange aloofness that amazed them and made them afraid. The tenses used here indicate that this was a continuing situation that went on for some time.”

Jesus knew that this would be His final journey that would take Him to the cross and the grave and, ultimately, to the Father’s House. Luke describes it as Jesus setting out for Jerusalem “resolutely.”²⁵² The KJV reads: “He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Mark states that the disciples were “astonished” using the Greek word *thambeo*, “to astound.” The word is only found in Mark’s Gospel. The disciples must have felt something of the enormity of the struggle that lay ahead of their Master, yet without understanding in depth what would happen.

²⁵¹ I Cor. 6:2,3

²⁵² Luke 9:51

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The whole scene is before us. Our blessed Lord, with an awful majesty on his countenance, and eager resolution in his manner, is pressing forwards to his cross. ‘How am I straitened until it be accomplished!’ His disciples follow him, amazed and bewildered; and even the miscellaneous crowd, who no doubt gazed upon him with keen interest as the great ‘Prophet that should come into the world,’ felt that something was going to happen, though they knew not what — something very dreadful; and they too were afraid. In the case of the disciples, [one Bible scholar] says that the chief cause of their amazement was their own imminent fear of death. They were amazed that their Master should hasten forward with such alacrity to his cross, and they feared lest they too should have to suffer with him.”

At this point, Jesus gives His disciples the most complete explanation of the events ahead, preparing them, most of all, for His resurrection. And it was at this point that the disciples would draw a complete blank. As far as they were concerned, it was all over when Jesus died and was laid in the grave. Had they believed Him, they would have been waiting with great anticipation outside the grave on the third day. But nobody would be there, except the guards, placed there by the Jewish leaders.

D. THE SONS OF ZEBEDEE (10:35-45)

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,

40 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."

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “Although the disciples may have failed to understand the meaning of the passion-prediction, yet something in the manner of Jesus had convinced them that the hour of the establishment of His kingdom was near; perhaps it was this that had already either astonished or frightened them (10:32). But two at least of the twelve disciples are quick to take advantage of it. Ironically, however, although the request of the two ‘Thunderers’ was wrong-headed, yet at least it denoted faith in the ability of Jesus to establish His kingdom. So Jesus dealt gently with them, more gently

than the ten would have dealt, as we can see from verse 41 below. The petty selfishness of His followers at a time like this, when His mind was full of all that lay ahead at Jerusalem, must have cut Jesus to the quick, like their earlier argument as to who was the greatest among them (9:34).”

In Matthew we read that it was the mother of John and James who made the request in behalf of her sons.²⁵³ Mark’s “shortcut” doesn’t mean that the request was not actually made by the mother. The two sons may have used her to make the request in their behalf.

The painful feature of this incident is the complete lack of comprehension on the part of the disciples as to the enormous price Jesus was about to pay as the Lamb of God that would carry away the sins of the world. They had no idea that Jesus would give His life as “a ransom for many.” They did not know what that meant. But in their carnal minds they saw their Master sitting upon a throne of glory and they wanted to have a part in that. Not only that, but they wanted seats of honor. They took Jesus up on His promise: “At the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”²⁵⁴ But that was not enough, they wanted more. How much Jesus would have to pay for them to occupy the throne was unimportant to them.

Jesus’ immediate answer was that the two disciples did not know what they were asking. He alone knew what was involved in drinking the cup and being baptized in death. The images used are powerful and striking.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “Our Lord here describes his passion as his cup. The ‘cup’ everywhere in Holy Scripture, as well as in profane writers, signifies a man’s portion, which is determined for him by God, and sent to him. The figure is derived from the ancient custom at feasts, by which the ruler of the feast tempered the wine according to his own will, and appointed to each guest his own portion, which it was his duty to drink. Our Lord then proceeds to describe his passion, which he had already spoken of as his cup, as his baptism. He uses this image because he would be totally buried, immersed, so to speak, in his passion. But it seems probable that the idea of *purification* entered into this image. It was a baptism of fire into which he was plunged, and out of which he came forth victorious. The fire of his bitter passion and death tried him. It was his ‘salting with fire.’ It pleased God thus to ‘make the Captain of our salvation perfect through sufferings.’ Our Lord asks these ambitious disciples whether they could drink his cup of suffering, and be baptized with his fiery baptism.”

Jesus’ earthly ministry began with a baptism, administered to Him by John the Baptist; it would end with a baptism administered by the Roman government as representative of all of mankind. The cup was the Father’s, given for the salvation of the world; the baptism the world’s that failed to recognize its Creator and Redeemer.

The two sons of Zebedee had no idea what Jesus was saying to them, but they flippantly answered that they would have no problem with the cup or the baptism. They didn’t even ask what Jesus meant. Jesus answered them that they would indeed go through the same kind of experience He was about to undergo. James would be one of the

²⁵³ Matt. 20:20-23

²⁵⁴ Matt. 19:28

first martyrs of the church. He would be executed by King Herod.²⁵⁵ John is supposed to have died of old age, though in exile.

There is a sense, though, in which all who are in Christ are baptized in His death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul states: “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.”²⁵⁶

The limitations that were put on Jesus in His humanity become obvious in His statement that it was not up to Him to decide who would sit where in the Kingdom. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “This is a reminder that even the Son is in loving submission to His Father; it is not left to Jesus but only to the Father to dispense such honors at will. So, too, the time of the ‘last hour’ is hidden from Jesus deep in the mind of God (13:32); and yet this is not theological ‘subordinationism,’ for it is voluntary acceptance of this position by the Son.” It was not until after His resurrection that the divine attributes He had laid aside in His incarnation would be returned to Him, at which point also decisions regarding rewards and punishment would be His to make. Jesus knew all His life that the Father had entrusted judgment to Him.²⁵⁷

Although the request of the two may have been made privately and not in the presence of the other ten disciples, word somehow got out, and the others were indignant. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “*The ten*, in turn, betrayed their spiritual shallowness by being indignant at the ambition and place-seeking of the two, who had so skillfully got in ahead of them. No doubt they felt that they were ‘righteously indignant,’ and indeed, the verb used here, *aganakteō*, is the same as that used in 10:14 to describe the reaction of Jesus to the disciples when they summarily dismissed the mothers of Jerusalem. But our basic character is shown by those things that provoke our strongest reactions, and there is a world of difference between what had stirred the indignation of Jesus and the indignation of the ten. So Jesus justly rebukes both the two and the ten at once, by showing to them their common ignorance of the very nature of Christian leadership (*cf.* 9:35). All such leadership is only humble service, for it takes its color from the example of Jesus, who is above all, the Servant. Closeness to Him is not therefore something at which to grasp thoughtlessly. Such ‘position’ is only a prize to be grasped at by those who are ignorant of its nature and cost (verse 38): Christ rejected even such legitimate ‘position’ for Himself (Phil. 2:6).”

The indignation of the ten pertained not to the topic of sitting on the thrones of glory that had been promised to them, but to the fact that two of them tried to get there ahead of, and at the expense of, the other ten. They felt strong professional jealousy in this matter. The topic was again the “pecking order”; who was first among them; who was the more important one of them. Jesus’ putting a child as an example had failed to make them change their minds.

Commenting on the words “When the ten heard about this ...” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “How did they hear it? It is most likely that Salome and her two sons sought this favor secretly from Christ, lest they should excite the envy of the others. But they, the ten, must have noticed the approach of James and John with their mother to our

²⁵⁵ Acts 12:1,2

²⁵⁶ Rom. 6:3,4

²⁵⁷ John 5:22

Lord. They came in a formal manner, worshipping him first, and then making their request (see Matthew 20:20). The ten would naturally be desirous to know the nature of this interview; and when it was explained to them, they began to show indignation. Our Lord perceived that they were disputing; and he then called them and addressed the whole body. For he saw that they were all laboring under this disease of ambition; and he wished to apply the remedy at once to all, as we see in the words which follow.

Ver. 42. — In these words our Lord does not find fault with that power or authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, which is exercised by princes or bishops; for this is necessary in every state, and so is sanctioned by Divine and human law. What he condemns is the arbitrary and tyrannical exercise of such power, which the princes of the Gentiles were accustomed to.

Vers. 43, 44. — In these words our Lord enjoins him who is raised above others to conduct himself modestly and humbly; so as not to lord it over those beneath him, but to consider for them and to consult their security and happiness, and so to conduct himself that he may appear to be rather their minister and servant than their lord; ever remembering the golden rule, ‘All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, even so do to them.’ At the same time, our Lord here teaches all alike, whether superiors or inferiors, by what way we should strive to reach heaven, so as to sit at the right or left hand of Christ in his kingdom, namely, by the way of humility. For those who are the lowliest and most humble here will be the greatest and most exalted there.”

In the saying “Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” there is a danger that would affect people who run for important offices in life. Politicians who are up for election will make it a point of shaking hands with people they do not care for and of holding babies they don’t want to hold, just for the purpose of presenting the image that would make them electable. One must not “play the slave in order to become the first.” The whole concept of running for the highest office is difficult to reconcile with the biblical concept of humility. The problem is created by the fact that we tend to compare ourselves with other people and believe ourselves to be more important than our neighbor. What makes us important as human beings is that we are created in the image and likeness of God. As such we must compare ourselves with God’s character in order to get the right perspective. Every effort of such comparison will make us understand how deeply we have fallen and how far we are from what God intends us to be. Recognizing what we look like in the presence of God will create a spirit of true humility in us. Thus we become the person that God will put in the first place in human society. We read in James: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”²⁵⁸ And Peter writes: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”²⁵⁹ It is God’s lifting us up that makes us important, not our talents or achievements.

Commenting on the last part of the phrase “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served,” R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “This is an argument of the ‘how much more’ type, often used by Jesus in the gospels. Even Jesus came not to enjoy the service of others, but to accept a lowly servant’s place: how much more His servants! But He also came *to give his life as a ransom for many*. This last saying is rich in meaning: the Son of man concept, found in the Psalms, Ezekiel and Daniel, has been already linked to

²⁵⁸ James 4:10

²⁵⁹ I Peter 5:6

the servant concept of Isaiah, and both are here linked with the great ransom theme of Old Testament days (Ps. 49:7). Even the wording *for many* is a memory of Isaiah 53:11-12. Jesus gathers into one, as it were, all these different strands of Old Testament thought, and uses them in combination to explain the full meaning of His Messiahship. This ransom-price metaphor was one greatly beloved by the early church, and it is one of the great biblical statements of the purpose and efficacy of the atonement, and of its cost in the death of Christ (I Peter 1:18-19). Of course, no single line of explanation is in itself exhaustive, nor can any one metaphor do justice to all biblical evidence.”

The Apostle Paul describes the purpose of Jesus’ coming in a powerful and poetic fashion in his statement in Philippians, putting Jesus’ attitude as an example for us to follow: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”²⁶⁰ We cannot do more than He did, but was must not do less either.

E. BLIND BARTIMAEUS (10:46-52)

46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging.

47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you."

50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

52 "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Jesus’ healing of blind Bartimaeus was the last miracle of healing of His earthly ministry; that is if the healing of Malchus’ ear is left out of the picture.²⁶¹

There is a textual problem in this story that Bible scholars have tried to reconcile, without complete success. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: “The Jericho of Jesus’ day was located about five miles west of Jordan and fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. The site of the Canaanite city of Joshua’s day lay one mile to the north. There is a difficulty in harmonization here. Matthew and Mark say that the miracle occurred as Jesus went out of Jericho; Luke places it as he was come nigh unto Jericho (18:35). Perhaps the most plausible solution is that the healing occurred as Jesus left the site of old

²⁶⁰ Phil. 2:6-11

²⁶¹ Luke 22:50,51

Jericho and entered the new city of Jericho. The difficulty with this explanation is that there is no evidence that the old Jericho was inhabited in Jesus' time. This problem arises, no doubt, from our lack of complete historical and geographical information. We may be assured that no discrepancy would exist if all the facts were known. Meanwhile, the divergence is a testimony to the independent character of the two accounts." We will leave this problem for the experts to solve.

Another problem is that Matthew reports the healing of two blind men.²⁶² Matthew does not give us any names, but the way these men appealed to Jesus, calling Him "Son of David," makes it hard to deny that the stories are the same. The easiest solution is to suppose that Mark just reports one of the two healings that took place. The fact that Mark explains the meaning of the name Bartimaeus as "son of Timaeus" does not mean that the man would not have been called by that name.

Bartimaeus heard a crowd passing and caught the excitement of the moment as something unusual taking place. He asked some by-passers what was going on and he was told that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by.²⁶³ So, he began to shout: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The words "Lord, have mercy!" are preserved in the opening chorus of the Mass that reads in Latin: "Kyrie Eleison!"

It is obvious that Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus and about the miracles He had performed. He may have been told that Jesus had healed blind people. There are several reports of Jesus healing the blind in the four Gospels. Matthew records five of such healings.²⁶⁴ John's record of the healing of the man who was born blind is the most elaborate report of such a healing.²⁶⁵ Bartimaeus may not have known about all these healing, but he had heard enough to give him hope. He had also heard enough to conclude that this Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, for he called Him "Jesus, Son of David."

He must have used all the power of his vocal cords to call Jesus, because he was heard over the noise of the large crowd that surrounded Him. He was so loud that people told him to shut up. He responded to this by doubling the volume. He was loud enough that Jesus heard him and stopped, telling the people to call him. The Greek text puts it powerfully, stating: "Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called." The same people who had told Bartimaeus to be quiet, not told him to "cheer up!" The Greek word used is *tharseo*, which is derived from a verb meaning: "to have courage." We find the same verb in one of my favorite verses: "In this world you will have trouble. But *take heart!* I have overcome the world."²⁶⁶

Bartimaeus did something that no blind person would ever do, he threw his cloak aside. A blind person would be very particular about where he put certain things so that he would be able to retrieve them by touch. In his excitement he did something that proved his faith. He knew that he would be able to find his cloak because he could see where it had fallen.

Jesus' question "What do you want me to do for you?" sounds like asking for the obvious. Evidently, Jesus wanted this man to express his faith in Jesus' power to heal, so

²⁶² Matt. 20:29-34

²⁶³ Luke 18:35-37

²⁶⁴ Matt. 9:27-31; 20:30-34; 21:14

²⁶⁵ John 9:1-41

²⁶⁶ John 16:33

He could emphasize the importance of faith in the person who received the healing. Bartimaeus' answer reads literally in Greek: "Rabboni, that I might receive my sight." In Greek this is expressed with the single verb *anablepo*, "to look up," or "to recover sight."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: "The healing was in response to the man's faith, demonstrated, as it was, by his persistent eagerness, by his recognition of Jesus as Messiah, and by the term rabbouni. The verb *anablepo* (receive . . . sight) means to have sight restored, indicating that the man had not always been blind. . . . The Greek word is *sozo*, meaning 'to save,' a term often used in the Gospels to refer to physical healing. It may be paraphrased, 'Your faith has healed you.'"

We read that Bartimaeus followed Jesus after being healed. We are not told whether he was present at the crucifixion. The fact that his name has been preserved in the Gospels suggests that he may have become a well-known member of the early church.

V. ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE: THE JERUSALEM MINISTRY (11:1 – 13:37)

A. ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM (11:1-14)

i. The entry (11:1-10)

1 *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples,*

2 *saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.*

3 *If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"*

4 *They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it,*

5 *some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?"*

6 *They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.*

7 *When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it.*

8 *Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields.*

9 *Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

10 *"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!"*

It is obvious that Jesus intended to be fully guided by the Old Testament prophecies about Him. The one that would be fulfilled in His entry into Jerusalem is found in Zechariah, where we read: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."²⁶⁷

Another prophecy that would be fulfilled here, particularly by the people who welcomed Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, is in Psalm 118, where we read: "Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the

²⁶⁷ Zech. 9:9

capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.”²⁶⁸

The peoples’ cry of “Hosanna” is the transliteration of the Hebrew word *howshiyah*, “save now,” that is used in the Old Testament text.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem: “Comparison with John 12:1 reveals that Jesus came first to Bethany, where he spent the night. Then on the day after the Sabbath he made his entrance into Jerusalem. Bethany lay a little less than two miles to the southeast of Jerusalem, not far from the eastern slope of the mount of Olives. The location of Bethphage is more difficult, but the best evidence seems to point toward a place at the foot of the eastern slope. Mark’s order is the reverse of the direction taken by Jesus, but he is viewing the locations of the towns from the standpoint of Jerusalem, which is mentioned first. John gives reason for believing that Jesus arrived in Bethany on Friday (Mark 12:1). Since the journey to Jerusalem was more than a Sabbath day’s journey, it is assumed that Christ spent Saturday in Bethany and that the ‘Triumphal Entry’ occurred on Sunday.”

The instructions given to the two unnamed disciples show Jesus’ prophetic gift. They remind us of Samuel’s prophecy to Saul, whom he had just anointed as king over Israel. He told Saul: “When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel’s tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, ‘The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, ‘What shall I do about my son?’ Then you will go on from there until you reach the great tree of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there. One will be carrying three young goats, another three loaves of bread, and another a skin of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread, which you will accept from them. After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.”²⁶⁹

According to Matthew, Jesus told the two disciples that they would find a donkey with her colt and that they were to bring both animals to Him.²⁷⁰ We may assume that the mother donkey walked ahead and that the colt, with Jesus riding on it, followed her mother. Since no one had ever ridden the colt, Jesus actually broke it in. In other circumstances that would have taken some time, since animals that have never been used before tend to resist anyone sitting on them. But this colt must have recognized its Creator.

The difference between Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and the triumphal entry of other human beings, such as a military commander, shows a graphic difference in style. A Roman general who entered a city as a hero, who had won a victory, would probably

²⁶⁸ Ps. 118:19-26

²⁶⁹ I Sam. 10:2-7

²⁷⁰ Matt. 21:1-3

ride a full bred stallion instead of a donkey. He would either own the steed, or requisition it. Jesus borrowed the colt. The Creator of the universe came to His own creation, saying: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Jesus lived on earth like a homeless person. The Apostle Paul would call this an example of God’s grace, saying: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”²⁷¹

We must also bear in mind that Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem was for the purpose of dying on the cross. Jesus would conquer death by dying. He would defeat the enemy with his own weapons. Paul would say: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”²⁷²

Whether Jesus had made some previous arrangements with the owner of the donkey and the colt, we are not told. It seems unlikely that the disciples would not have known about this if arrangements had been made.

Things went as Jesus had foretold. The two disciples found the animals, the people did react the way Jesus told they would and the disciples came back with a donkey and her young.

Evidently, the disciples understood some of what was going to happen. They were the ones who took off their outer clothing and put them on the donkey for Jesus to sit on. The public responded to this in a spontaneous manner. They took their clothes and spread them on the road for Jesus and the donkey to ride on.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: “Mark is so singularly precise here, that it is impossible to doubt that the description is fresh from one of the two disciples sent on this errand; and in that case, who can it be but Peter, of whose hand in this Gospel all antiquity testifies and internal evidence is so strong? Probably John was the other (compare Mark 14:13, with Luke 22:8). ‘And they went their way (says Mark), and found the colt tied by the door without in a place where two ways met; and they loose him.’ Had not the minutest particulars of this grand entry into Jerusalem burned themselves into the memory of those dear disciples that were honored to take part in the preparations for it, such unimportant details had never been recorded.”

ii. The return to Bethany (11:11)

11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “Mark alone makes clear that Jesus made a preliminary inspection of the temple on the evening of arrival in Jerusalem, but that, probably owing to the lateness of the hour, nothing further was done until the next day. This, again, is a small piece of factual information, maybe derived from the Petrine reminiscences, which was lost in the other traditions, overshadowed in them by the magnitude of the actual cleansing of the temple on the next day. It also gives one of the little details of the domestic life of Jesus: He did not sleep in Jerusalem itself, crowded with pilgrims for the festival and full of His enemies, but at a welcoming home in Bethany, (presumably that of Mary and Martha, Jn. 11:1). Even Bethany, with all the

²⁷¹ II Cor. 8:9

²⁷² Col. 2: 15

other surrounding ‘outer suburbs,’ was probably crowded with pilgrims over festival time, so that the presence of Jesus and the twelve would not arouse particular comment. Is it symbolic that Israel’s Messiah could find no place within Jerusalem, but must lodge outside the walls at Bethany?” It was not only Jesus, who needed a place to rest, but a group of twelve disciples also, maybe even several others who were following.

It must have been at this time that Jesus saw the merchants and the display of their merchandise, which He would clear out the next morning. Since it was getting late, these people may have been packing up their stuff in order to leave; so Jesus let them go. Cleaning out the place at that time of the day would have been unnecessary. Most Bible scholars agree that the day of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem was the first day of the week, a Sunday. In the days ahead the real temple of the Lord would be broken down and destroyed. One week later He would rise from the dead.

iii. Cursing the fig tree (11:12-14)

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs.

14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

In my commentary on Matthew, I wrote the following paragraph about these verses: “The cursing of the fig tree is considered one of the most difficult episodes to explain in the New Testament. In his book *The Passover Plot*, author John Schonfield quotes someone’s statement that the Bible would be more acceptable if Jesus’ unreasonable anger at an innocent tree could be explained away.

The quotation represents the superficial reaction some people could have in reading this passage. It seems that Jesus had no reason to be angry at a tree that could not be blamed for not having any fruit when fruit was not in season. It would mean that Jesus was irritated because of an empty stomach. We understand that the Creator of all fig trees could be hungry because He had willingly subjected Himself to all human limitations and humiliations that the sinful condition of creation imposed upon Him. But if He becomes furious because He is hungry that would mean that sin had affected His character. Then He would no longer be the spotless, perfect Lamb of God and His sacrifice at Golgotha would be worthless. So the question as to whether Jesus had a right to be angry at the fig tree is a very important one.

It is not difficult for us to accept that Jesus became angry at the sight of merchants peddling their wares inside the temple. That was a demonstration of His righteousness in the sight of human unrighteousness. We could say that Jesus only had the right to be angry at the fig tree if the tree could be held morally responsible or if the tree had become an instrument in the hands of one who had moral responsibility. That would mean that the real issue was more than merely a few figs.

Another option would be to see the incident in the light of the symbolic significance, in which the tree would represent in outward form what in reality is a spiritual condition. It is obvious that a fig tree cannot be held personally responsible because trees have no personality and consequently no responsibility. Matthew only

reports that Jesus went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. But Mark adds: “because it was not the season for figs.”²⁷³

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on the incident: “Unless we realize that this whole event was an acted parable we shall be puzzled by all sorts of irrelevant questions. The tree gave outward promise of fruit but nothing more: so its punishment was to remain eternally barren. In a sense, this withering of the tree was only a perpetuation of its present fruitless condition. The fig tree and the vine are two time-honored symbols of Israel (*cf.* 12:1-12 for the symbol of the vine), to whom God’s Son had now come, looking for fruit and finding none, though there was outward religious profession in plenty. Henceforth, Israel was to be withered and fruitless; the physical judgment of AD 70 was only an outward sign of this. Immediately below the fig tree passage, in verses 15-19, there comes the further acted parable of the cleansing of the temple. God came to His temple looking for spiritual fruit and found none; so it was inevitable that the judgment of 13:1-2 be pronounced, that, of the temple in all its splendor, not one stone would be left standing upon another. Like tree, like temple; like temple, like nation; the parallel is exact ...

Not the season for figs (13). As it stands, the Greek clearly means ‘It was not the right time of the year for figs,’ and it would be unfair to translate ‘its season for figs,’ as if referring to this tree only, just to avoid a difficulty. But it is fair to say that presumably Jesus was hoping for the small ‘early ripe’ figs, small protuberances that ripen with the leaves, before the main fig crop, and are considered a great delicacy (Ho. 9:10). It is absurd to suggest that a country person like Jesus would not have known at what time figs were ripe. See 13:28 for the leafing of the fig tree as a sign of summer’s coming, indeed, the first sign.

The Greek particle *ara, if*, suggests that the finding of figs was only an unlikely possibility contemplated by Jesus. He was therefore in no sense surprised by the tree’s unfruitfulness, as He would have been had it been the time of regular fig crop. This ‘nature miracle’ is unusual in that it is the only one of a destructive nature performed by Jesus, unless we include the drowning of the Gadarene swine. This was necessarily so, in the case of the fig tree, if it was to be a ‘sign’ in the gospel, it is performed by Jesus Himself and not by a disciple acting on His behalf, as in the case of healings and expulsion of demons.”

B. THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE (11:15-19)

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves,

16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.

17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, they went out of the city.

²⁷³ Mark 11:13

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “There were two occasions on which our Lord thus purged the temple — one at the beginning of his public ministry, and the other at the end of it, four days before his death. There was a regular market in the outer court, the court of the Gentries, belonging to the family of the high priest. The booths of this market are mentioned in the rabbinical writings as the booths of the son of Hanan, or Annas. But this market is never mentioned in the Old Testament. It seems to have sprung up after the Captivity. Our Lord adopted these strong measures (1) because the temple courts were not the proper places for merchandise, and (2) because these transactions were often dishonest, on account of the avarice and covetousness of the priests. The priests, either themselves or by their families, sold oxen and sheep and doves to those who had need to offer them in the temple. These animals were, of course, needed for sacrifices; and there was good reason why they should be ready at hand for those who came up to worship. But the sin of the priests lay in permitting this buying and selling to go on within the sacred precincts, and in trading dishonestly. There were other things needed for the sacrifices, such as wine, and salt, and oil. Then there were also the *money-changers* (*kollybisten* from *kollybos*, a small coin) — those who exchanged large coins for smaller, or foreign money for the half-shekel. Every Israelite, whether rich or poor, was required to give the half-shekel, neither less nor more. So when money had to be exchanged, an allowance or premium was required by the money-changer. Doves or pigeons were required on various occasions for offerings, chiefly by the poor, who could not afford more costly offerings. From these also the priests had their gain.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “In a context like this, it is important to notice how different were the aspects of the situation which angered the Pharisees and priests from those which angered Jesus. Both had a high concept of the nature of the temple; but their concepts were fundamentally different. The Pharisees, according to other gospels at least, had been shocked beyond measure by the words of the children calling out in the temple (Mt. 21:15), but were not in the least perturbed by the uproar of the merchants and the money-changers. After all, they may have reasoned, these services were for the furtherance and convenience of the ceremonial worship, that outward religious form which means everything to them. There is plenty of early evidence to suggest that the priests also benefited financially by this traffic; the high priest in particular seems to have owned shops in the temple area, presumably around the ‘Court of the Gentiles,’ the only area into which non-Jews might enter. They were doubtless also shocked by the prediction by Jesus of the ruin to the holy place (13:2), of which they must have heard, and certainly scandalized by His prediction, as they thought, of building the temple again in three days (14:57). But for Him, the supreme blasphemy was that this place, which was to have been in God’s purpose a place of prayer for non-Jewish people of every nation, instead of being exclusively a Jewish national sanctuary, should have become a business-house, and for dishonest business at that (11:17). Those familiar with such markets can easily imagine all the petty cheating and haggling that took place in the very shadow of the temple that symbolized God’s presence. It is natural that Mark, a gospel written for Gentiles, should record the passionate concern of Jesus that Gentiles should be able to worship God in the temple.”

It is significant to note that the commerce was not being carried on in the Jewish section of the temple area. The Jews must have had some awareness that commerce and religion did not mix. So they arranged for their trade to be done in the area meant for

Gentiles alone. God’s concept that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation,²⁷⁴ was completely lost on them. They had no vision of what was to be their *raison d’être* in this world.

One of the amazing aspects of the cleansing of the temple is the authority Jesus demonstrated as a single human being. He did not appear to the merchants as an angel of light. He looked like every other human being, a male of average height, without any particular features that distinguished Him from His fellowmen. None of the merchants, and there must have been scores of them, thought of resisting Him as He drove them out, overturned their tables and expelled their animals. Humanly speaking Jesus did what was impossible.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the temple, which was built by Herod and which Jesus entered: “Herod became king de facto by the capture of Jerusalem in 37 B.C.. Some years later he built the fortress Antonia to the North of the temple (before 31 B.C.). Midway in his reign, assigning a religious motive for his purpose, he formed the project of rebuilding the temple itself on a grander scale ... To allay the distrust of his subjects, he undertook that the materials for the new building should be collected before the old was taken down; he likewise trained 1,000 priests to be masons and carpenters for work upon the sanctuary; 10,000 skilled workmen altogether were employed upon the task. The building was commenced in 20 B.C. - 19 B.C. The *naos*, or temple proper, was finished in a year and a half, but it took 8 years to complete the courts and cloisters. The total erection occupied a much longer time (compare John 2:20, ‘Forty and six years,’ etc.); indeed the work was not entirely completed till 64 A.D. - 6 years before its destruction by the Romans.”

No one at that time realized the historic significance of Jesus’ entering this temple. When Solomon completed the building of the first temple, we read: “When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.”²⁷⁵ Sometime before the destruction of that temple, the glory of the Lord left the house of the Lord. We do not read that there was any physical demonstration of this, but Ezekiel saw it happen in visions that were given to him.²⁷⁶ When the Babylonians destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and led the nation of Israel into captivity, the Ark of the Covenant disappeared and was never found again. The temple built by Zerubbabel at the return of the captives, was never filled by the glory of the Lord as Solomon’s temple was at its dedication. Herod’s temple had never had any supernatural and glorious visitation either. But now Haggai’s prophecy is being fulfilled. We read: “‘I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”²⁷⁷ This is the day about which the *Hosanna Psalm* prophesied: “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ Ex. 19:6

²⁷⁵ I Kings 8:10,11

²⁷⁶ Ezek. 9-11

²⁷⁷ Hag. 2:7-9

²⁷⁸ Ps. 118:24

But the glory of the Lord entered the temple in a way no one recognized. “God was manifested in the flesh,”²⁷⁹ and entered the house that bore His Name. The real temple of the Lord entered the shadow of the temple and filled it with its real meaning.

This was a time of judgment. The people and the leaders of the people had completely lost the vision of what it meant to have a building erected to the glory of God. And when the glory of the Lord entered the house of the Lord, those who were there asked Him what He was doing there!

At the same time, Jesus’ cleansing of the temple was the fruit of His human anger. This was His Father’s House. It was to be the monument that would draw all nations to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. The court of the Gentiles was filled with animals and money changers. Gentiles who entered there had to be careful to avoid stepping into the animal dung and other wastes that littered the place. What a testimony!

The full text of the quotations of Isaiah and Jeremiah Jesus uses here, reads: “And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”²⁸⁰ And “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.”²⁸¹

The reaction of the chief priests and doctors of the law to Jesus’ cleansing of the temple was not new. We read that plans to kill Jesus were already made when He healed the man with the withered hand at the beginning of His ministry.²⁸² The plot merely thickened at this point. The spiritual leaders of the people saw that Jesus’ ministry eroded their influence over the people. Added to this came fear. There must have been in this fear traces of recognition that Jesus’ authority was more than a human quality. They must have recognized some of the divine in Jesus, which made them fear “the wrath of the Lamb.”²⁸³

The Greek word, rendered “to kill” is very powerful; *apollumi* actually means “to destroy.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “They were seeking how they might, not only put him to death, but ‘utterly destroy him,’ stamp out his name and influence as a great spiritual energy in the world. This action of his raised them to the highest pitch of fury and indignation. Their authority and their interests were attacked. But the people still acknowledged his power; and the scribes and Pharisees feared the people.”

It would, therefore, not have been safe for Jesus and the disciples to spend the night in Jerusalem. So they returned to Bethany and slept there.

C. EXHORTATION AND DEBATE (11:20 – 12:44)

i. The meaning of the withered fig tree (11:20-26)

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.

21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

²⁷⁹ I Tim 3:16 - NKJV

²⁸⁰ Isa. 56:6,7

²⁸¹ Jer. 7:11

²⁸² Mark 3:6

²⁸³ See Rev. 6:16.

22 "Have faith in God," Jesus answered.

23 "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.

24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Upon their return to Jerusalem, on Tuesday morning, the disciples passed the fig tree Jesus had cursed the day before. In Matthew's record of the event, the intervening night is not mentioned. Matthew makes it sound as if the tree withered before the disciples' eyes.²⁸⁴ Mark corrects this by recording the night of rest in between. Mark also indicates that it was Peter who spoke up.

Jesus answered the disciples' amazement by making the withering of the fig tree an object lesson about answered prayer. The first thing we must conclude from this is that Jesus must have asked the Father to kill the tree and what the disciples saw the next morning was the answer to Jesus' prayer of the day before.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, suggests that the disciples' amazement may have been a reflection upon their faith in Jesus. We read: "Jesus is, in addition, rebuking their lack of faith in Him, shown by their utter astonishment when His cursing of the fig tree produced such sudden and drastic results. Wither a fig tree? Given faith, they could uproot mountains (a common rabbinic phrase), and hurl them into the sea. It is obvious, then, that this need for faith when praying was a constant point of the teaching of Jesus which He reiterated to His disciples in various forms to fit different occasions. Faith is not chosen arbitrarily as a condition of prayer: it is the basic condition of all our relationship with God (Heb. 11:6), including prayer."

If we disregard the symbolism of the cursing of the fig tree and the moving of mountains, we miss the point of the overall message of the Bible. Faith in the power of God must not be applied to the rearranging of God's creation. Even though the sun stood still in answer to Joshua's prayer,²⁸⁵ we must not waste our spiritual energy on those kinds of prayer requests. The point is best illustrated in Zechariah's prophecy about the rebuilding of the temple at Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity. We read: "What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'" Then the word of the Lord came to me: "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel."²⁸⁶ The phrase: "What are you, O mighty mountain?" may also be rendered: "Who are you, O mighty mountain?" making the mountain symbolic of demonic opposition. Faith in the power of God will defeat the enemy who tries to put obstacles on our way.

²⁸⁴ Matt. 21:19,20

²⁸⁵ Josh. 10:12-14

²⁸⁶ Zech. 4:7-10

The Matthew Henry's Commentary has the following interesting comment on Jesus' cursing of the fig tree: "This represented the character and state of the Jewish church; which, from henceforward, was a tree dried up from the roots; no longer fit for food, but for fuel only. The first establishment of the Levitical priesthood was ratified and confirmed by the miracle of a dry rod, which in one night budded, and blossomed, and brought forth almonds (Num 17:8), a happy omen of the fruitlessness and flourishing of that priesthood. And now, by a contrary miracle, the expiration of that priesthood was signified by a flourishing tree dried up in a night; the just punishment of those priests that had abused it. And this seemed very strange to the disciples, and scarcely credible, that the Jews, who had been so long God's own, his only professing people in the world, should be thus abandoned; they could not imagine how that fig-tree should so soon wither away: but this comes of rejecting Christ, and being rejected by him."

The assurance Jesus gives about answered prayer appears to be limitless. He does not even mention that prayer must be according to God's will, as the Apostle John would later affirm in his first epistle. We read: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of him."²⁸⁷

Jesus spoke from His own experience of intimate fellowship with the Father. There was no obstacle whatsoever that hindered answers to His prayer; His relationship with the Father was perfect, which made Him understand the Father's will intuitively. The great prayer warrior George Mueller stated that he spent more time in prayer searching for God's will regarding the matter he wanted to pray for than, once understanding that will, receiving the answer to his prayers. Evidently, knowledge of God's will was understood in Jesus' advice to His disciples.

The most important factor in prayer is the awareness of being forgiven. It is the miracle of atonement that forms the impetus to prayer. As long as we remember that we approach God on the basis of the forgiveness of our sins by the sacrifice of the Lamb, we will see our prayers being answered. The Belgian priest and poet Guido Gezelle expressed this beautifully in the words:

"Jesus Christ is my sacrifice, my altar and my right.

Nothing gives me more boldness than this sacrifice, this altar, this right,
upon which I base all of my salvation."

Awareness of salvation is demonstrated in the way we forgive those who have harmed us in life. God makes His forgiveness of our sins dependent upon the forgiveness we extend to others. If God's grace does not change our heart and make us tender toward our fellowmen, we indicate that we have not experienced grace at all. It is not that God will not forgive until we do, but He revokes His forgiveness if we do not allow it to bear fruit in our lives.

The NIV gives v.26 as a footnote, which reads: "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins." R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on this omission: "This verse is omitted in several important MSS and may have entered from the very similar saying in Matthew 6:15. In any case, whether properly belonging here or not, the verse not only expresses a logical deduction from verse 25, but also a solemn theological truth. This is not an arbitrary refusal by God to forgive us. We, by our

²⁸⁷ I John 5:14,15

own unforgiving spirit, have made it impossible to accept the forgiveness freely offered by God, since we refuse to adopt the only attitude in which it can be appropriated.”

ii. By what authority? (11:27-33)

27 They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him.

28 "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?"

29 Jesus replied, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

30 John's baptism — was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!"

31 They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'"

32 But if we say, 'From men'" (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

33 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

As Jesus returned to the temple, a delegation of high priests, teachers of the law and elders, came to ask Him for His credentials. Nothing was known about Jesus' schooling. In John's Gospel, the question is asked: "How did this man get such learning without having studied?"²⁸⁸ The suggestion is that without proper education, without a doctor's title, one has no authority to make definitive theological statements or bring about liturgical changes. The question was, of course, prompted by Jesus' cleansing of the temple, which resulted in financial losses for those who had invested in the trade that went on.

This debate of the Pharisees and scribes with Jesus is one of several confrontations that took place on this Tuesday of the last week of Jesus' life on earth. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "The debates recorded in this section all took place on one busy day-Tuesday of the passion week. They concerned the following subjects: the source of our Lord's authority (Mark 11:27-33); the parable of the vineyard and the husbandmen (12:1-12); a question about taxation (12:13-17); the resurrection (12:18-27); the greatest commandment (12:28-34); the Messiah's relationship to David (12:35-40). The section closes with an account of the widow's gift of two mites (12:41-44)."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: "True, Jesus taught in His own name, unlike the scribes, with their continual quotation of precedents (1:22); but He also claimed, and clearly displayed, God's direct authority in so doing. It was a realization of this divine authority that drew His disciples to Him (4:41); it was failure to see it, or rather unwillingness to admit it, that condemned the Pharisees. So Jesus, instead of giving them a direct answer, tells them that His authority stems from the same source as that of John the Baptist. Their greatest condemnation is that they do not seem to have considered this question as a moral probe, but purely as an intellectual trap. Their query as they sought to reply was not 'true or false?' but 'safe or unsafe?' Similarly, the popular conviction (verse 32) that John's authority was of God was seen by them, not as an example of a truth hidden from the wise and revealed to the simple, but only as a possible personal

²⁸⁸ John 7:15

danger, if they dissented from it. So, as a crowning irony, they blandly said they did not know (verse 33), whereupon Jesus showed what He thought of such deliberate pretended ignorance by saying, *neither will I tell you*. The root of the trouble lay not in their intellect, but in their stubborn wills: they stood self-condemned. The question of Jesus to them was not a trap; it was yet another opportunity for them to realize and confess their blindness, and to ask for sight. Theirs was the unforgivable sin, that constant willful opposition and blindness that is the sin against the Holy Spirit (3:29). If it is true that there is a way to hell from the gates of heaven, as Bunyan has it. Then it is equally true that there is a way to heaven from the gates of hell: yet here were those who contemptuously refused to take it.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The argument is incontrovertible. It is this: ‘You ask from whence I derive my authority — from God or from men? I in my turn ask you from whom did John the Baptist derive his authority to baptize and to teach? from heaven or from men? If he had it from God, as all will confess, then I too have the same from God; for John testified of me, saying that he was but a servant, the friend of the Bridegroom; but that I was the Messiah, the Son of God: and this too when you sent messengers to him for his special purpose, that you might know from him whether he was the Messiah.’ (See ... John 1:20; 10:41.) ”

One of the most dangerous philosophies in life is to allow one’s convictions to be dictated by public opinion. The only reason the Pharisees and scribes told Jesus: “We don’t know,” was because “they feared the people.”

iii. The wicked tenant-farmers (12:1-12)

1 He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.

2 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

3 But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

4 Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully.

5 He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

6 "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

7 "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

8 So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

9 "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

10 Haven't you read this scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;

11 the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

12 Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Jesus told the parable of the tenants who refused to pay the owner of the vineyard what they owed him in the hearing of the Pharisees and doctors of the law. He told it for their benefit. They fully understood this, because they wanted to arrest Jesus on the spot, but again, fear of public opinion kept them from doing that. Earlier attempts to arrest Jesus had already failed, because the people who had been sent to take Jesus into custody were so spellbound by His preaching that they forgot what they had come for.²⁸⁹

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “As soon as Jesus began to speak, seeing that the Old Testament ‘back-cloth’ of the parable was Isaiah 5:1-7, everyone would know that He referred to Israel – referred to them, in fact – and that this was yet another parable of judgment. All the details of the landowner’s care and preparation of the vineyard are borrowed from Isaiah, though the concept of the tenant farmer is new. Whatever the mistakes of the Pharisees, one common mistake of ours they did not make. Their very anger showed their realization that the words of Jesus were directed to them personally (verse 12) and not innocuously aimed at some third party.”

One difference between Isaiah’s parable and Jesus’ is that in Isaiah the vineyard was the subject; in Jesus’ parable the laborers are. Isaiah says that God looked for good grapes in His vineyard, but the vineyard only produced bad fruit.²⁹⁰ Jesus says nothing about the fruit. The point in His parable is that the tenants refuse to pay their rent, which was to be paid in produce. They acted as if they were the owners instead of the leaseholders. Going through life without a sense of accountability is a dangerous way of living. God will call us to account for the way we live. He has entrusted life to us and we are accountable, whether we want to or not.

In Jesus’ parable, the servants who were sent to collect the rent in the form of some of the fruit, were the Old Testament prophets. A little later that same week, Jesus would exclaim: “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.”²⁹¹

One point in the story that must have irked the Pharisees and scribes more than anything else, was that Jesus presented Himself, not as one of the prophets, but as the Son. What He actually said was: “Israel is rightfully Mine. You are the renters, I am the owner.”

In Mark’s version of this story, Jesus answers His own question as to what the owner of the vineyard ought to do with the tenants. According to Matthew, those who heard the parable replied: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”²⁹²

Jesus reveals to the leaders of the people that He knows they were planning to kill Him.

Mark leaves out parts of the dialogue between Jesus and the public that stood around and heard what He had been saying to the Pharisees and scribes. When Jesus mentioned the possibility that Israel’s status as God’s most favored nation could be taken away from them, Luke writes: “When the people heard this, they said, ‘May this never

²⁸⁹ John 7:44-49

²⁹⁰ Isa. 5:2

²⁹¹ Matt. 23:37

²⁹² Matt. 21:41

be!’ Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.’²⁹³

Jesus’ quotation about the rejection of the stone is from Ps. 118:22, 23, which reads literally: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” The reference is clearly about Jesus’ death at the hand of the leaders of Israel, followed by His resurrection by the hand of the Father. Jesus is the capstone in God’s building of the New Testament church. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The others unto whom the vineyard was to be given are further described in Matt 21:43; where Jesus is quoted as saying, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. This is an obvious reference to the Gentiles and the Church.”

There is also a more hidden reference to Zechariah’s prophecy in connection with the rebuilding of the temple, which reads: “What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’”²⁹⁴

iv. Tribute to Caesar (12:13-17)

13 *Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.*

14 *They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

15 *Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."*

16 *They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.*

17 *Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.*

Once again the Pharisees and Herodians set aside their differences and came together in an effort to entrap Jesus. We saw earlier that the two opposing parties plotted to kill Jesus when He healed the man with the withered hand.²⁹⁵ R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “Now begins the terrible game of ‘cat and mouse,’ the endless Pharisaic maneuvering that will end in the death of Jesus. The first question about the source of His authority had left them helpless (11:33), but perhaps He can be caught in the same way Himself, and be condemned on political a charge. If Jesus had placed them upon the horn of a dilemma, where either answer was unsafe because of the crowd, they will try to do the same with Him.”

The way the delegation approached Jesus and paid Him compliments would make anyone suspicious. For people who allowed themselves to be guided by public opinion, their statement that Jesus was not “swayed by men,” was self-condemnatory.

²⁹³ Luke 20:16-18

²⁹⁴ Zech. 4:7

²⁹⁵ Mark 3:6

Compliments are sometimes more dangerous than critical attacks. Once a person complimented John Newton on a sermon he had preached. He answered: “The devil just told me that also!” Compliments can weaken our defenses and make us less alert.

Evidently, it was felt that there was no safe answer Jesus could give to their question. If He recommended that they ought not to pay taxes to the Romans, they could report Him to the Roman occupational forces and have Him arrested. If He told them that it was OK to pay, He would have lost public support, because He would have sided with Israel’s enemy.

Jesus recognized the hypocrisy of those who asked the question. Theirs was not a search for truth but an attempt to kill.

The incident has become an object lesson about a Christian’s attitude toward any government. The question as to whether Rome was the legal government of Israel never came up. Ultimately, no nation has the right to impose its power upon another nation. Hegemony of one nation over another cannot be seen as the will of God. It is part of man’s rebellion against God that makes people want to rule over others. The fact that the Israelites were under Roman dominion was the result of their disobedience to God. He had taken away their right to rule themselves when they rebelled against His rule.

According to *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* “The tribute in question was a poll tax which had to be paid personally into the Roman treasury.”

Jesus asked for a denarius, which was the coin in which the tax had to be paid. According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, “the value of the denarius would be about 20 cents and this was the ordinary wage of a soldier and a day laborer.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “The production of a coin as an illustration was a typical rabbinic touch, but the use made of it here was new. It is significant of His poverty that Jesus had no coin Himself, but had to ask for one. By the acceptance of the imperial coinage, marked by the head and title of the reigning emperor, the Jews had already whose their acceptance of imperial rule, even if unwillingly. There is a world of bitterness in the terseness of their one-word replay, *Caesar’s*; not even Pharisees or Herodians would have chosen that position.

So came the reply of Jesus, with its irresistible logic, which is: the coin already belongs to Caesar: give it back, then, to him. Translated into theological terms, it becomes the Christian acceptance of the state, as an institution ordained by God; this is strongly advanced by Paul (Rom. 13:1-2) and Peter (1 Peter 2:13-14). If we accept the amenities of the state, in law and order, expressed in a guaranteed coinage as in other things, then we have no right to seek to escape the burdens imposed by the state. But this lesson Jesus would leave His audience to infer.”

It may be a hasty conclusion that Jesus was too poor to produce a denarius Himself. It was the fact that the Pharisees and Herodians had those coins on them that proved they had no qualms in using Roman money. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes a saying from antiquity: “Wheresoever the money of any king is current, there the inhabitants acknowledge that king for their lord.”

v. The Sadducean question (12:18-27)

18 Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.
19 "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother.

20 Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children.

21 The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third.

22 In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too.

23 At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

24 Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?"

25 When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

26 Now about the dead rising — have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?

27 He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

The Sadducees were the liberals among the Jewish theologians. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: "These Sadducees accepted the Pentateuch, and probably more than the Pentateuch; but they rejected any oral tradition. They were known in the time of our Lord as denying those doctrines which connect us more immediately with another world, such as the existence of spirits and of angels, and the resurrection of the body. They altogether denied fate, affirming that all things are in our own power."

Luke reports in Acts: "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all."²⁹⁶

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "For different reasons, both Pharisees and Sadducees alike saw in Jesus a dangerous enemy, although it is unlikely, owing to their bitter antagonism (*cf.* Acts 23:6), that they ever acted in conscious collaboration here. The Sadducees were attempting, in this instance, to make spiritual truth look ridiculous by interpreting it with the grossest of literalism. By doing this, they hoped that the whole concept of the resurrection would be laughed out of court. The case they presented was doubly absurd, since they themselves did not believe in any such thing."

The Old Testament law decreed that a man's name must be preserved in the male offspring he produced. If he died without leaving a son who would carry his name, one of his brothers ought to marry his widow and provide a son in his brother's name. We read in Deuteronomy: "If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me.' Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, 'I do not want to marry her,' his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, 'This is what is done to the man who will not build up

²⁹⁶ Acts 23:8

his brother's family line.' That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled."²⁹⁷

Implied in this law, although not specifically granted, is that bigamy or polygamy was allowed in Israel. The law did not state that the brother who married the widow had to be single.

This "grey area" in Scripture, which would be unlawful in our present age and culture, is not justified or explained here. It is merely presented here by the Sadducees as an example to prove how ridiculous the concept of resurrection of the dead would be.

Jesus' answer is given in typical Jewish fashion by making a statement in the form of a question: "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" Although the Sadducees maintained that they believed the Scriptures, at least the Pentateuch part of it, they did not understand the way God revealed His power in the written Word.

Jesus gives the Sadducees two answers which, humanly speaking, may be called brilliant. The first one clarifies that human sexuality pertains to life on earth only. We could conclude from Jesus' answer that the resurrection body will no longer be either male or female, but that the two sexes that together reflected the image of God will be blended into one. We read about the creation of the first human pair: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."²⁹⁸ Evidently, the full image of God will be made visible in every resurrected individual.

Some of the mystery of this new existence is already foreshadowed in the church as the body of Christ, of which the Apostle Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."²⁹⁹ It would have been difficult to explain if Jesus had spoken of that new condition before the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

In His second answer Jesus redefines the concept of death and resurrection. The Sadducees believed that death meant the total cessation of life; not only the body died, according to their philosophy, but the soul also. From Jesus' reply we may conclude that the human soul cannot die. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not live physically in God's presence. Their bodies had been buried in the cave of Machpelah. And since the soul cannot die, resurrection pertains exclusively to the body.

The fact that when God called Moses, He called Himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"³⁰⁰ proves that those patriarchs were alive. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "The truth demonstrated here is the fact of immortality. To be the God of Abraham is to be in fellowship with Abraham. It is therefore not possible to be the God of the dead, but only of the living. Thus when God spoke out of the burning bush, though the patriarchs had been dead for years, he was still in fellowship with them. The argument of Christ then assumes that since there is life after death, this is sufficient to prove that resurrection will follow. Perfect human existence demands the union of soul with body."

²⁹⁷ Deut. 25:5-10

²⁹⁸ Gen. 1:27

²⁹⁹ Gal. 3:28

³⁰⁰ Ex. 3:6

One of the great statements of the New Testament is “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” Numerous times in Scripture God is called “the living God.” He has life in Himself,³⁰¹ and He gives this life to those He created. Death is not part of God’s creation; it is the result of the cutting of the lifeline with God.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The force of the argument is this, that ‘God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.’ Their souls are still alive; and if these patriarchs are still alive, there will be a resurrection. If men are to live for ever, they will, sooner or later, live again in the completeness of their being, namely, of body and soul and spirit. Our Lord would, therefore, say this: ‘In a few days you will put me to death; but in three days I shall rise again from the dead. And after that, in due time I shall raise them from the dead at the last day, and bring them in triumph with me into heaven.’ The Sadducees and the Epicureans denied the resurrection, because they denied the immortality of the soul; for these two doctrines hang together. For if the soul is immortal, then, since it naturally depends upon the body, it is necessary that the body should rise. Otherwise the soul would continue to exist in a dislocated state, and would only obtain a divided life and an imperfect existence. Hence our Lord here distinctly proves the resurrection of the body from the immortality of the soul. When he speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he does not speak of their souls only, but of their whole being. Therefore, though they are for a time dead to us, yet they live to God, and sleep, as it were, because ere long God will raise them from death, as from a sleep, to a blessed and endless life. For all, though they have passed out of our sight, still live to him.”

Finally, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “The reply of Jesus is a marvel of patience and forbearance, although He rebukes the Sadducees for two things. The first is their failure to understand the very revelation of God upon which they claim to lean by thus quoting Moses. The second is their failure to appreciate God’s power, supremely manifested for Bible writers both in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Rom. 1:4) and ultimately in the general resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-26). This Jesus will prove from the very law of Moses upon which they lean.

Jesus first, then, demonstrates the patent absurdity of the hypothetical case, showing that the question is meaningless in the form in which it is put by the Sadducees, because marriage ceases to have any sexual significance in heaven. There is an irony in the way in which He shows that the particular concept of resurrection cannot be grasped apart from a whole general ‘universe of belief,’ already rejected by the Sadducees, comprising the spiritual world of which ‘angels’ form part. In other words, such a question is a problem only to the Sadducees, not to the Pharisees, and that is because they have already in advance rejected the only terms upon which a solution could be found. There is therefore a subtlety in the statement that those resurrected are *like angels in heaven* (25), which does not appear on the surface, but which would scarcely be lost on either Pharisee or Sadducee, for different reasons. Verse 28 seems to show that at least one Pharisaic scribe heard it with approval.

But, having dealt with the Sadducees on their own terms, Jesus as usual proceeds to give a far deeper proof of the resurrection, and one which would be incapable of being caricatured. He has already explained what He meant by their ignorance of God’s power; now He will explain what He meant by their ignorance of the Scripture, by basing Himself upon that very Moses on whom, rejecting what they regarded as later accretions,

³⁰¹ John 5:26

they relied. In God's self-revelation made to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:6), God describes Himself as the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. Now to talk of Himself as being a God of the past experience of these men, as a western philosopher might describe Him, would be nonsense to a Hebrew mind: for where is the experience apart from the person? Assuredly the experience is not within God; if it was so, God would have described Himself simply as 'I AM,' as he did elsewhere (Ex. 3:14). But to describe Himself as Abraham's God, Isaac's God and Jacob's God is obviously felt to be adding a further revelation. Therefore, if God can still so describe Himself to Moses centuries after the death of these men, their spiritual experience must still be existent. If so, these three patriarchs must still be in existence; and the guarantee of their 'eternal life' is not the nature of their experience of God, but the nature of the God whom they experienced. His is the God of the living because He is the living God Himself (Mt. 16:16). So too, it was that, even in the physical realm, contact with Jesus brought new life to the dead (*cf.* 5:41); while to know God, and the Christ whom He sent, is the definition of eternal life (Jn. 17:3)."

vi. The greatest commandment (12:28-34)

28 *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"*

29 *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

30 *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*

31 *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

32 *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.*

33 *To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

34 *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

In Mark's account there is no indication that the teacher of the law who asked the question had any devious intent. Since he was a teacher of the law, we may assume that he knew the answer himself. But Matthew states that the question was a test and that the teacher of the law represented a group of Pharisees.³⁰²

The Pulpit Commentary comments: "The question was one much mooted amongst the Jews in the time of our Lord. 'For many,' says [one Bible scholar], 'thought that the first commandment in the Law related to offerings and sacrifices, with regard to which so much is said in Leviticus, and that the right worship of God consisted in the due offering of these.' On this account the Pharisees encouraged children to say 'Corban' to their parents; and hence this candid and truth-loving scribe, when he heard our Lord's answer

³⁰² See Matt. 22:34-36.

about the love of God and of our neighbor, said that such obedience was worth ‘more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “The words, *Hear O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord*, from the creed known as the ‘Shema’ and recited daily by devout Jews. It asserts the distinctive principle of Hebrew faith, that God is one.”

Jesus combined two sections of the Pentateuch in His answer. The first one is a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, which literally reads: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” The addition “with all your mind” may be taken from Old Testament scrolls that are no longer available to us.

The second part of the answer is taken from Leviticus, from a verse that reads: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”³⁰³

In combining these two commandments from the Pentateuch, Jesus related the love of God to love of our fellowmen. The Apostle John worked out this principle of love in his first epistle, stating: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”³⁰⁴ And how this is worked out practically is clear from John’s admonition: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”³⁰⁵

Whether the questioner had meant to test Jesus or not, he was obviously impressed by Jesus’ answer. He showed understanding of the relationship between sacrifices to God and inter-human relationships. Jesus had emphasized this relationship in His Sermon on the Mountain, where He stated that a person who had issues with someone else ought to make an effort to resolve those before going to the temple and bringing sacrifices to God.³⁰⁶

The Pulpit Commentary explains: “In the remainder of the scribe’s answer we find a different word used in the Greek for ‘mind,’ or ‘understanding,’ from that just used by our Lord. In our Lord’s answer the word is *dianoia*. Here it is *sunesis*. Both words are well rendered by ‘understanding.’ It is an act of understanding.”

If, as Matthew asserts, the scribe’s question was a test, Jesus passed it. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “The lawyer had weighed and appraised the answer that Jesus had made; but to his surprise and the consternation of the bystanders, he found that, even as he was answering, Jesus had been appraising him. When humans dare to sit in judgment on the claims of Christ, they find instead that Christ is sitting in judgment of them: they stand either self-condemned or justified by their attitude to Him. It is not

³⁰³ Lev. 19:18

³⁰⁴ I John 4:7-12

³⁰⁵ I John 3:16, 17

³⁰⁶ Matt. 5:23, 24

surprising that, after this, no-one dared to ask Jesus any further question. We are nowhere told that this scribe, so close to the kingdom, ever actually entered it. We know that there were some believers in Jesus, however, even among the ruling Sanhedrin group at Jerusalem (15:43), and priest and Pharisees within the church later. Nevertheless, this is the only ‘teacher of the law’ who appears in favorable light in Mark.”

vii. The son of David? (12:35-37)

35 While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David?"

36 David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' "

37 David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight.

This is the only time Jesus comes close to revealing His divinity to the public at large. When, previously, demons declared Him to be the Son of God, He ordered them to be silent. It is true that He did not specifically identify Himself here as the Messiah.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “The quotation is taken from Ps 110:1, a passage which the Jews had long recognized as Messianic ... His purpose in using David’s words was to press home from the Scripture itself the truth of the deity of the Messiah.”

In Matthew, Jesus’ question to the Pharisees and scribes is given as: ““What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” ‘The son of David,’ they replied.”³⁰⁷

In the Hebrew text, the first verse of Psalm 110 reads literally: “*Yahweh* said unto *Adonai* ...” In the Greek text both *Yahweh* and *Adonai* are translated with *Kurios*, ascribing divinity to the Son.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “Mark simply records that the scholars could find no answer, and that this marked the end of attempts to trap Jesus in His speech, at least until His trial (15:1-5). We today, in the light of the rest of the New Testament, can see clearly how the Christ can both be born of David’s physical line, and yet still be David’s Lord, because He is identical with God Himself, but Jesus made no attempt to explain this as yet even to His disciples. It was enough that He was hailed as ‘Son of God’ (5:7; 15:39), or ‘the Son’ (13:32). Whether or no this Psalm can have another historical interpretation is beside the point; the above interpretation was accepted by every orthodox Jew, and so the question asked by Jesus was unanswerable, as far as the scribes were concerned. The large crowd of listeners seem to have greeted this discomfort of the scribes with delight (verse 37); but even greater discomfiture was to follow for the scribes.”

It is obvious that, to the Jewish mind, a son could not be superior to the father. It is also clear that, in Jesus’ case, the mystery of the Incarnation could not be explained. As far as the leaders and the public was concerned, Jesus was the carpenter’s son, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Simon and Judas.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Matt. 22:42

³⁰⁸ Matt. 13:55

viii. The warning against the scribes (12:38-40)

38 As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces,

39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.

40 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

In Matthew we read a more complete text of Jesus' criticism of the scribes.³⁰⁹ Mark mentions that they like to walk around in flowing robes. In Matthew we read: "They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about the scribes: "The teachers not only loved the outward show and empty glory of religious observance, which is the sin of pride, they also loved money, which is the sin of covetousness. Yet all the time they did this under the cover of lengthy prayers, a fact which invested all their other sins with the new and awful quality of hypocrisy. The widow and orphan should above all other have been the objects of their compassion and prayer because they are the objects of God's special concern (Ex.22:22; Ps. 146:0) and instead, they robbed them. It is precisely because they pray, that their condemnation will be the more terrible than that of a rogue who robs outright without pretence of prayer or religion. So comes the irony that Jesus preached love to the sinner, but judgment to the religious, not of course because they were religious, but because they were inconsistent and indeed hypocritical. Greater knowledge and greater opportunities only bring greater responsibility, which can, if rejected, bring greater condemnation."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the scribes' devouring of the widows' houses: "They took advantage of their helpless condition and confiding character, to obtain possession of their property, while by their 'long prayers' they made them believe they were raised far above 'filthy lucre.'" The idea is probably that the scribes owned the houses which they rented to poor widows, charging exorbitant rent. Or they took the houses as pledges for money the widows borrowed from them, setting the poor women out in the street if payments were late.

Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "They devoured widows' houses, made themselves masters of their estates by some trick or other; it was to screen themselves from the suspicion of dishonesty, that they put on the mask of piety; and that they might not be thought as bad as the worst, they were studious to seem as good as the best. Let fraud and oppression be thought the worse of for their having profaned and disgraced long prayers; but let not prayers, no nor long prayers, be thought the worse of, if made in humility and sincerity, for their having been by some thus abused. But as iniquity, thus disguised with a show of piety, is double iniquity, so its doom will be doubly heavy; These shall receive great damnation; greater than those that live without prayer, greater than they would have received for the wrong done to the poor widows, if it had not been thus disguised. Note, The damnation of hypocrites will be of all others the greatest damnation."

³⁰⁹ Matt. 23:1-7

ix. The widow's gift (12:41-44)

41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on."

The way people who entered the temple donated money to the temple treasury made it into a display of generosity that boosted the givers' ego and gave them a reputation of piety. This is far removed from the advice Jesus gave in The Sermon on the Mount: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." The givers did not give to God, but ultimately they gave to themselves. What interested them was not what God would think about them, but what the public would think. Therefore, they gave ostentatiously.

Commenting on the amount of money given by the poor widow, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Of the Greek synonyms for poverty, Mark chose a word descriptive of the beggarly condition of a pauper in order to characterize this poor widow. She gave an amount equal to two mites or a farthing. A mite (*lepton*) was the smallest of copper coins, normally equal to one-eighth of a cent. The farthing (*kodrantes*) was a Roman coin valued at one-quarter of cent."

In evaluating the amount given, Jesus observed that the poor widow gave more than all the other people who had given larger amounts. God judges our generosity, not by what we give to Him, but by what we keep for ourselves. The general public gave "out of their wealth," she gave, in Luke's words "out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."³¹⁰

The poor widow performed an act of faith when she put her money in the temple treasury. In giving her money to the Lord, she gave her life, trusting God to take care of her daily needs.

D. THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE (13:1-37)

i. The doom of the temple (13:1-4)

1 As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

2 "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,

4 "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

³¹⁰ Luke 21:4

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, introduces this section with the following: “It is noteworthy that Jesus makes no attempt to gratify mere curiosity here; instead, His aim is practical and ethical. Indeed, wherever the disciples expressed such idle curiosity, He at once heartily discouraged them (verse 4) ... There is a ring of patriotic pride in the words of the unnamed disciple here. Built by the hated Herod it might be, but the ‘third temple’ was one of the architectural wonders of the Roman world, unfinished at the date of its destruction. The ‘fox’ (Luke 13:32) built well, with the help of his borrowed Roman engineers: Herodian masonry is noted for its excellence everywhere in Palestine. So, too, there is a note of sadness in the reply of Jesus: for nothing in all Jerusalem could match the temple for splendor and apparent permanence. Jesus was here preparing His disciples for the days when every familiar and outward religious help would be taken away from them, in the expulsion of the Christian ‘sect’ from the parent body of Judaism, when the danger was so great that the infant church would waver or even go back to the well-loved institutions of Judaism (see Heb. 6:4-6).”

The sight of the temple complex must have been a breathtaking view, especially from the perspective of the Mount of Olives. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “In the light of Josephus’ descriptions of the Temple, it is not surprising to find one of the disciples exclaiming concerning the manner of stones and the buildings. Josephus depicts the stones as being thirty-seven by twelve by eighteen feet in size. He further states that the ‘... front was all of polished stone, insomuch that its fitness, to such as had not seen it, was incredible, and to such as had seen it, was greatly amazing.”

Evidently, Jesus’ prediction that, when the temple would be destroyed, “Not one stone here will be left on another” was literally fulfilled. Apparently, in setting fire to the building, when Titus destroyed the city of Jerusalem in AD 70, the gold of the temple roof melted and ran between the huge blocks of stone. In order to recover every ounce of gold, the Romans made sure that not one stone was left on another.

These remarks were most likely made before Jesus and the disciples left the city; probably as they left the temple site. Once on the slope of the Mount of Olives and with the view of the beautiful temple complex before their eyes, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus “privately” about the details of His prophecy. Whether this means that these four were the only ones present when Jesus gave His explanation is not clear. Mark is the only one of the evangelists who identifies the disciples by name.

ii. The signs of the end (13:5-8)

5 Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you.

6 Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.

7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

8 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question goes well beyond their lifespan; it seems to cover the whole of world history until the end of time. It seems to be meant more for generations following their own than for themselves. The danger that any of the eleven disciples would be deceived by the appearance of someone who claimed to be the Christ would seem to be impossible. It is true that Satan can impersonate and make good

imitations, but for people who have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be deceived by that seems unlikely. It is true that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light,” as the Apostle Paul warns the Christians in Corinth. But those people had not lived with Jesus for three-and-a-half years.

For us, who live approximately twenty centuries after these words were spoken, the fulfillment of the prediction is clear. The twentieth century experienced two world wars, an event unprecedented in world history. Earthquakes, famines and other natural disasters have plagued our planet for centuries.

For first-century Christians the danger of being deceived by people who proclaimed to be Christ, returned, must have been much greater than for us at present.

But deception is a concept that covers a lot of situations. One of the greatest errors to plague mankind may be for people to blame God for wars, earthquakes and famines, conditions that insurance companies qualify as “acts of God.”

Wars are human inventions. And when God created our planet, He said it was good. It was Satan who dragged our world into a condition in which one animal devours another and all of nature, including the human race, goes through the pains of childbirth. When Christ returns and establishes His kingdom,

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,

and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”³¹¹

Although Jesus’ audience at that time did not experience all He predicted here, they did go through some of the suffering He foretold. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “If a local and temporary ‘primary’ fulfillment is to be sought, as distinct from a continuous or even final one, then the ‘year of the four emperors’ (AD 69), as the imperial throne at Rome changed hand with astonishing rapidity, while all the time the fortified cities of Galilee were falling, would fit well. In a wider sense, this is a continual picture of the present age of turmoil, in the midst of which the church must live and witness. It is to be noted that neither the ‘primary’ nor ‘continuous’ interpretation rules out an additional final eschatological fulfillment. If Mark’s original readers were situated largely in Rome, these references would be very meaningful and indeed encouraging.”

iii. The beginning of the troubles (13:9-13)

9 "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.

10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

³¹¹ Isa. 11:6-9

12 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.

13 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Jesus warned the disciples to be on their guard. The Greek word used is *blepo*, which literally means “to look at,” or “beware.” We find the word used three times in this chapter, here and in vv.23 and 33. There is a danger that the physical pain of torture would make one prone to deny the truth. But there are also instances in which persecution has accelerated church growth. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

The Apostles experienced a good deal of the opposition and suffering Jesus predicted here. We read that persecution began in Jerusalem, shortly after Pentecost and the birth of the church. The Sanhedrin persecuted the Apostles. We read: “They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”³¹²

The Apostle Paul is an example of one who had the opportunity to “stand before governors and kings as witness.” That way Roman governors heard the Gospel message that, otherwise, they would never have heard. It is even possible that Peter and Paul had an opportunity to proclaim the message to the emperor in Rome, although nothing is known about that.

A concern that some of the martyrs may have had was that they would be unable to find the right word at the right time. To them the promise was given: “I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”³¹³

Mark gives Jesus’ words more concisely than Matthew, who adds that Jesus’ second coming would not occur before the whole world had been evangelized. We read: “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.”³¹⁴

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “The greatest danger is lest any Christian should be led *astray* (verses 5 and 22) or ‘tripped up’ by the bitter persecution they will assuredly suffer for their faith: again, this would be a special word for a Roman church in the first century. At this time, as the disciples saw the mounting tide of hostility against their Master, they must have begun to understand what was to come, although the full force of persecution did not strike the church until the days of Acts (Acts 8:1). Each of these ‘testings’ cuts closer to the bone than the testing before it, for such is God’s way of dealing with His children (Jb. 1:9 to 2:7). This last test is no exception; the persecution is now to be so bitter that it destroys the closest natural ties known to humans (verse 12). But even this must not make us stumble, for Jesus has warned us beforehand just so that this stumbling on our part may be avoided (13:23).”

Obviously, the words “he who stands firm to the end will be saved” do not refer to the salvation of the soul.

³¹² Acts 5:40-42

³¹³ Luke 21:15

³¹⁴ Matt. 24:14

“Stand firm” is the translation of the Greek verb *hupomeno*, which in this context is best rendered as “to persevere.” Sometimes it can be rendered: “patience,” as in the verse: “Be joyful in hope, *patient* in affliction, faithful in prayer.”³¹⁵ James uses it in the verse: “Blessed is the man who *perseveres* under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”³¹⁶

In order to be able to persevere in trial, one has to have a clear picture of the controversy between God and Satan. In the case of Job, Satan suggested that Job’s reason for fearing God was that God blessed him. Satan said to God: “Does Job fear God for nothing? But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.”³¹⁷ Satan could not, or would not, envision that a human being would serve God out of love. God allows His children to undergo suffering to prove Satan wrong.

iv. The ‘desolating sacrilege’ (13:14-20)

14 *“When you see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong — let the reader understand — then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*

15 *Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out.*

16 *Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.*

17 *How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 18 Pray that this will not take place in winter,*

19 *because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now — and never to be equaled again.*

20 *If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.*

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on Jesus’ use of the term “the abomination of desolation”: “The abomination of desolation is an expression taken verbatim from Dan 12:11 (LXX). It is also found with slight variations in Dan 9:27; 11:31. Among the Jews the term abomination was used to describe idolatry or sacrilege (cf. Ezek 8:9-10,15-16). It seems, therefore, that both Daniel and Christ were speaking of an appalling profanation of the Temple. The first fulfillment of Daniel’s prophetic use of the term, some writers claim, was the erection of an altar to Zeus on the altar of burnt offering at the command of Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. (1 Macc 1:54,59). Christ’s use of the words had immediate reference to the profanation of the Temple by the Romans (A.D. 70). It must be remembered that the disciples had asked concerning the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:2,4). Furthermore, the instructions given in 13:14b-18 seem to fit that occasion best. However, the close relation of these conditions to Christ’s second advent (vv. 24-27) demands an additional application to the time of the end. The conditions of the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and of the Roman destruction of the Temple were foreshadowings of the days of the Antichrist immediately prior to Christ’s return (cf. 2 Thess 2:3-4; Rev 13:14-15).”

³¹⁵ Rom. 12:12

³¹⁶ James 1:12

³¹⁷ Job 1:9, 11

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the term: “The ‘abomination of desolation’ is a Hebrew idiom, meaning ‘the abomination that maketh desolate.’ St. Luke (... Luke 21:20) does not use the expression; it would have sounded strange to his Gentile readers. He says, ‘When ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her desolation is at hand.’ This reference to the Roman armies by St. Luke has led some commentators to suppose that ‘the abomination of desolation’ meant the Roman eagles. But this was a sign from without; whereas ‘the abomination of desolation’ was a sign from within, connected with the ceasing of the daily sacrifice of the temple. It is alluded to by the Prophet Daniel in three places, namely, ... Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. We must seek for its explanation in something within the temple, ‘standing in the holy place’ (... Matthew 24:15) — some profanation of the temple, on account of which God’s judgments would fall on Jerusalem. Now, Daniel’s prophecy had already received one fulfillment (B.C. 168), when we read (1 Macc. 1:54) that they set up ‘the abomination of desolation upon the altar.’ This was when Antiochus Epiphanes set up the statue of Jupiter on the great altar of burnt sacrifice. But that ‘abomination of desolation’ was the forerunner of another and a worse profanation yet to come, which our Lord, no doubt, had in his mind when he called the attention of his disciples to these predictions by Daniel. There is a remarkable passage in Josephus ..., in which he refers to an ancient saying then current, that ‘Jerusalem would be taken, and the temple be destroyed, when it had been defiled by the hands of Jews themselves.’ Now, this literally took place. For while the Roman armies were investing Jerusalem, the Jews within the city were in fierce conflict amongst themselves. And it would seem most probable that our Lord had in his mind, in connection with Daniel’s prophecy, more especially that at ... Daniel 9:27, the irruption of the army of Zealots and Assassins into the temple, filling the holy place with the dead bodies of their own fellow citizens. The Jews had invited these marauders to defend them against the army of the Romans; and they, by their outrages against God, were the special cause of the desolation of Jerusalem. Thus, while St. Luke points to the sign from without, namely, the Roman forces surrounding the city, St. Matthew and St. Mark refer to the more terrible sign from within, the ‘abomination of desolation’ — the abomination that would fill up the measure of their iniquities, and cause the avenging power of Rome to come down upon them and crush them. It was after these two signs — the sign from within and the sign from without — that Jerusalem was laid prostrate.

Luke’s version of Jesus’ words makes clear that the immediate fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy was in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman army in 70 AD. We read: “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.”³¹⁸ Matthew adds that Jesus referred to Daniel’s prophecies about the end time. We read: “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel — let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”³¹⁹

There are several instances in the Book of Daniel that fit the Old Testament prophecy Jesus referred to. We read first: “Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, ‘How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled — the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?’ He said to me, ‘It will take

³¹⁸ Luke 21:20

³¹⁹ Matt. 24:15,16

2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.”³²⁰ The second one reads: “In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing [of the temple] he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.”³²¹ And finally: “From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days.”³²²

The Apostle Paul applied Jesus’ prophecy to the revelation of the Antichrist, who proclaimed himself to be God. We read: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”³²³

Based on these prophecies, some Bible scholars believe that there must be a literal and physical reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem before the end-time arrives. Whether the Antichrist’s proclamation is dependent on the reconstruction of a building is an open question.

It makes most sense to interpret Jesus’ prophecy as being fulfilled, at least for the first time and partly, in the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70. But as with most prophecies, there may be multiple fulfillments. It has been said that fulfillment of prophecies can be compared to throwing a pebble in a pond and see the rings of water go from the center to the edge.

There are, however, in Jesus’ words, several factors that cannot be applied to Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 AD. There was no proclamation by an Antichrist at that time. And although the siege of Jerusalem would be a time of terrible hardship for its population, it was not the end of Jewish suffering in this world. The Romans may have slaughtered Jews, but they did not come close to, for instance, Stalin’s pogroms or Hitler’s “Final Solution.” The ultimate fulfillment will, most likely, occur during the period that is called “the great tribulation.”

Luke compares the end time to the Noah’s flood and to the destruction Sodom and Gomorrah. In His advice for those involved not to go back home to retrieve certain items, Jesus takes the example of Lot’s wife, which Mark doesn’t mention. We read: “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot’s wife!”³²⁴

It is difficult for us to imagine living on the rooftop of one’s house and not going inside when leaving. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “The roofs of the houses were

³²⁰ Dan. 8:13,14

³²¹ Dan. 9:27

³²² Dan. 12:11

³²³ II Thess. 2:3,4

³²⁴ Luke 17:26-32

flat, with frequently a little ‘dome’ ... in the center. The people lived very much upon them; and the stairs were outside, so that a person wishing to enter the house must first descend by these outer stairs. The words, therefore, mean that he must flee suddenly, if he would save his life, even though he might lose his goods, he must escape, perhaps by crossing over the parapet of his own housetop, and so from house-top to house-top, until he could find a convenient point for flight into the hill country.”

We can understand Jesus’ compassion for pregnant women who would have a much harder time in their flight than those who could run. But the advice to pray that their flight would not have to be in the winter, strikes us as strange. Palestine does not suffer from severe climate changes throughout the year. The Mediterranean influences the weather to the point where no harsh winters occur. Yet, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Our Lord thus specifies the winter, because at that season, on account of the cold and snow, flight would be attended with special difficulty and hardship, and would be almost impossible for the aged and infirm.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, suggests that Jesus’ prophecy about the upcoming hardships has a larger application than only the fall of Jerusalem. We read: “Here God’s immediate judgment on His people at one particular point in history is almost imperceptibly dovetailed into His universal judgment on all humanity at the last day. Since both are manifestations of God’s continual ongoing judgment on human sin and rebellion, the whole makes sense. Here, then, in the first place are portrayed the devastations of the Roman armies. Here, too, is pictured the flight of the Jerusalem church to Pella, as the Roman legions purposely delayed their attack on Jerusalem, hoping to persuade this great stronghold to surrender voluntarily. It must indeed have seemed, in the final mopping-up operations of the war, as if the entire population of Palestine was to be extirpated; but God, *for the sake of the elect* (20), would cut short those days. Imperial Rome had greater interests now, in the form of the sudden scramble to establish the new Flavian dynasty at Rome: many of the troops would be hastily withdrawn. The Christian church would now see a new and deep meaning in the use of whom he chose (20), for the word could not now refer to Israel, coming as it does in the context announcing God’s judgment on the nations. The infant church at Pella, in Transjordan, had survived; here is God’s new chosen people, Jew and Gentile alike.”

v. False Christs and false prophets (13:21-23)

21 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it.

22 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect — if that were possible.

23 So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.

It is obvious that the primary application of these words is not to the disciples who heard them from Jesus’ mouth. Having known Jesus personally and travelled with Him for more than three years, they would not be deceived by someone who posed as the Messiah. Jesus spoke those words for the benefit of “those who will believe in me through their message.”³²⁵

³²⁵ John 17:20

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “This is really a return to the theme of verse 6 and the reference to signs may be drawn from Deuteronomy 13:1-3, with its solemn warnings against signs and wonders performed by misleading prophets. The primary reference may be to the numerous ‘religions’ and pseudo-messianic Jewish rebellions that both preceded and followed AD 70. But for the Christian church, the relevance here may equally well be to the many Jewish-Christian (especially Gnostic) heresies of the first century, although the application could be widened to cover all ages.”

And *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Every age has produced its crop of such deceivers; and it may be expected that, as the time of the end draws nearer and nearer, their number will increase. Sometimes those idiosyncrasies in them which show themselves in lying wonders, are the result of self-delusion; but still oftener they are deliberate attempts made for the purpose of imposing on the unwary. Sometimes they are a combination of both. In the cases to which our Lord refers there is evidently an intention to lead astray, although it may have had its origin in self-deceit. In our day there is a sad tendency to lead men astray with regard to the great fundamental verities of Christianity. And the words of St. Jerome may well be remembered here: ‘If any would persuade you that Christ is to be found in the wilderness of unbelief or skeptical philosophy, or in the secret chambers of heresy, believe them not.’”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: “It is not possible to limit this verse to the situation in A.D. 70. None of the suggested explanations based on such a limitation is satisfactory. There are elements here that go beyond that time and are more correctly associated with the end of the age. The reference to ‘the elect’ seems to point to the saved during the days of the Great Tribulation just prior to Christ’s return. For their sake God has shortened the days of that period of terrible affliction.”

vi. The coming of the Son of man (13:24-27)

24 "But in those days, following that distress," 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;

25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

26 "At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “Next comes a clear foretelling of the coming of *the Son of man* in a passage which is a veritable jigsaw of quotations from the apocalyptic books of the Old Testament, especially in verses 24 and 25. Verse 26 seems to mark the break, if there is a break, between the immediate judgment of God on His chosen people and His ultimate judgment on all creation. Political stirrings on a world scale are here described in terms of astronomical phenomena, a pattern derived particularly from the book of Isaiah (Is. 13:10; 24:23). This is typical of all eschatological usage and might refer just as much to toppling first-century roman rulers as to a twentieth-century of ‘north’ and ‘south,’ ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’ But verse 26, with the clear imagery of the return of the Son of man to judgment (Dn. 7:13), can refer only to one event in history, the second coming of Christ.”

In spite of Dr. Cole’s interpretation of the astronomical phenomena as “political stirrings,” in our opinion there can be little doubt but vv.24-27 refer to the end of creation

as we know it. Jesus' words are mostly a quotation of two references in Isaiah, which read: "The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." And: "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree."³²⁶

John, in Revelation, paints the same picture at the opening of the sixth seal. We read: I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place."³²⁷

The composition of the universe, which consists of stars and planets, is the same as that of molecules with its atoms. The author of Hebrews describes Christ as "sustaining all things by his powerful word."³²⁸ All of creation came into being by this "powerful word." It will cease to exist also by Jesus speaking it into non-existence.

Some of the old church fathers also interpreted Jesus' words allegorically. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Augustine, who wrote: "The light of truth shall be obscured; because in the great tribulation that shall come on the world, many will fall from the faith, who had seemed to be bright and firm, like the sun and the stars. And the moon, that is, the Church, 'shall not give her light.'" But it seems more logical to take Jesus' words literally.

vii. The parable of the fig tree (13:28-29)

28 "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.

29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "It is unnecessary to read into the parable of the fig tree in this context a reference to the subsequent earthly history of the Jewish nation. It is true that vine and fig are traditional symbols of God's people in the Old Testament, and that the fig tree cursed by Jesus (11:12-14) seems to have been an acted parable of contemporary Judaism. Nevertheless that does not prove that every biblical mention of the fig tree conceals a reference to Israel, or that we can predict the date of Christ's second coming from political events in Israel's life today, like the 'return' to Palestine. This saying of Jesus seems to be merely a general countryman's parable; compare the shrewd piece of weather-lore in Matthew 16:2, 3. When the trees burst into leaf, summer is coming – and very quickly in Palestine ... In the same way, says Jesus, these happenings will warn us that the second coming is at the very door (verse 29)."

The fact that Jesus uses the following of seasons as a picture of the world events that will occur at the time of His return does not mean that we can predict the date. This is clear from the verses following this section. Although calendars, as we know them, did not exist in the Old Testament, some time-of-the year reckoning existed.

³²⁶ Isa. 13:10; 34:4

³²⁷ Rev. 6:12-14

³²⁸ Heb. 1:3

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia explains: “The Hebrew or Jewish calendar had three stages of development: the pre-exilic, or Biblical; the postexilic, or Talmudic; and the post-Talmudic. The first rested on observation merely, the second on observation coupled with calculation, and the third on calculation only. In the first period the priests determined the beginning of each month by the appearance of the new moon and the recurrence of the prescribed feasts from the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. Thus, the month Abib, the first month of the year according to the Levitical law, in which the Passover was to be celebrated, was determined by observation (Ex 12:2; Deut 16:1). After the exile more accurate methods of determining the months and seasons came into vogue, and calculation was employed to supplement and correct observations and the calendar was regulated according to the Babylonian system, as is evidenced by the names of the months which are derived from it. In later times the calendar was fixed by mathematical methods ... The difficulty of ascertaining the first day of the new moon by observation, in the early period, led to the celebration of two days, as seems to be indicated in 1 Sam 20:27. We have only four names of months belonging to the pre-exilic period, and they are Phoenician. Of these Abib was the first month, as already indicated, and it corresponded to Nisan in the later calendar. It was the month in which the Exodus occurred and the month of the Passover (Ex 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Deut 16:1).”

Yet, the beginning of summer in the month of June as we know it now, was unknown to the people in Jesus’ time. In the same way as the sun was the only time-piece, corresponding to our present-day watch, so was the sprouting of leaves as the equivalent of our present-day calendar.

There is much in Jesus’ announcement here that may sound contradictory. On the one hand we are exhorted to be aware of the time of day and the date on the calendar of eternity, on the other hand we are told that the day is known by anyone by the Father.

viii. The date of the coming (13:30-32)

30 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

32 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes correctly: “In the midst of many details that are puzzling, two main principles are clear. First, the Christian is to avoid unhealthy interest in the actual date, and secondly, we are to see the very uncertainty as to the date as a strong stimulant to ceaseless watchfulness. In other words, like every other Christian doctrine, that of the second coming has a moral and spiritual goal; we must be watchful, lest our Master, when He returns, finds us sleeping (36).”

Peter, who was present when Jesus spoke these words, emphasizes what our attitude ought to be. We read: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”³²⁹ The

³²⁹ II Peter 3:11,12,14

principle of interpretation of biblical prophecy must be an admonition for holy living, not for satisfaction of our curiosity.

Jesus' mention that no one knows the date of His Second Coming has been puzzling to many Bible scholars and laymen. The Father, He says, has kept this knowledge to Himself alone. We find this confirmed in His answer to the disciples' question after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He told them then: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."³³⁰ It is true that, at that time, Jesus did not say whether He knew the date Himself or not, only that it was not the disciples' business to know.

We understand from Jesus' remark that, in the Incarnation, He must have laid aside all His divine attributes, including His omniscience. As a human being, He lived within the same boundaries and limitations as all of humanity. He, obviously, was not omnipresent while living in Palestine. This does not mean that He was not God. It was the Word that became flesh. But in doing so, He became as human as we are.

Having said that He did not know the day or the hour, Jesus proceeds to say that "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." And even more far-reaching is the statement that heaven and earth will pass away, but that His words will never pass away.

Jesus' announcement that "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" is another puzzler. If taken literally, it would mean that, those who were alive when these words were spoken, would witness the Second Coming, which obviously was not what happened. If we restrict the events referred to to the destruction of Jerusalem, we explain away other parts of the statement. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "This is one of those prophecies which admit of a growing fulfillment. If the word "generation" (*genea*) be understood (as it may undoubtedly be understood) to mean the sum total of those living at any time on the earth, the prediction would hold true as far as the destruction of Jerusalem was concerned. The destruction of Jerusalem took place within the limits of the generation living in our Lord's time; and there might be some of those whom he was then addressing who would live to see the event. His prediction amounted, in fact, to this, that the destruction of Jerusalem would take place within forty years of the time when he was speaking. But it *may* have a wider meaning. It may mean the Jewish people. Their city would be destroyed their power overthrown. They would be 'peeled and scattered.' But they would still remain a distinct and separate nation to the end of the world. And there are other prophecies which show that with their national conversion to Christianity will be associated all that is most glorious in the future Church of God."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "*This generation* must surely be the generation of Jesus' earthly ministry, some of whom would indeed have lived to see the awful days of the siege of Jerusalem. But the generation of the ministry would not of course see Christ's second coming, so some have striven, rather unnaturally to interpret *genea* as meaning 'people,' and refer it to the whole Jewish nation, which will not pass away before that time. Undoubtedly, the delay in the second coming of the Lord (the *parousia*) was a puzzle to the early church, many of whom seem to have expected it in their lifetime, and were therefore saddened and troubled when, one by one, death carried them away before it (2 Pet. 3:4). It is therefore better to restrict the reference in *these things* to

³³⁰ Acts 1:7

the temporal judgment of AD 70. But, in anticipating the Lord's return at any moment, the infant church was making no mistake, for every generation should continually be eagerly looking for and expecting the coming (2 Pet. 3:12). In the purpose of God, no event now stands between Christ's ascension and His second coming, and so it is eternally near."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary interprets Jesus' words as a prophecy that allows for multiple interpretations. We read: "The most natural explanation of the expression, this generation, is that it refers to the generation of people alive when Christ was speaking. During their lifetime all these things were to come to pass in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This event is employed by Christ as a preliminary picture prefiguring, in all its essential characteristics, the end of the age (cf. Mark 9:1)." That may be the most logical approach to take here.

ix. The end of the discourse (13:33-37)

33 *Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.*

34 *It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

35 *"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.*

36 *If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.*

37 *What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'*

The Greek text reads literally: "Take heed and watch ..." The Greek word, rendered "watch" is *agrupneo*, which literally means "to be sleepless." It has, of course, the sense of purposely staying awake. Luke gives Jesus' words here as: "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."³³¹

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "The final verses underline the moral and spiritual incentive provided by the doctrine of the second coming. Much of this brief parable appears to be 'back-cloth' in the particular context, so that there is no need to press the details. Here, it is the watchfulness of the door-keeper that is the main point of the parable; we must stay awake and on duty, a constant emphasis in Mark.

Some feel that the doorkeeper is only part of the 'scenery' of the parable, and therefore requires no special exegesis. But there is some evidence to show that the simile of the 'porter' was used by the early church for those engaged in Christian ministry. The master of the house, when he arrives after his long absence, must not find us sleeping, but doing our duty and carrying out the particular task which he has left to us. True, the doorkeeper must keep special watch, because that is his special task (Ezk. 3:17), and perhaps therefore this has special relevance to those in pastoral positions who are 'watchmen' in the church."

The Pulpit Commentary explains about the principle of night-watches: "According to the Jewish reckoning, there were only three watches — namely, the first watch, from sunset to 10 p.m.; the second watch, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.; and the third watch, from 2 a.m. to sunrise. But after the establishment of the Roman power in Judaea,

³³¹ Luke 21:36

these watches were divided into four; and were either described as the first, second, third, and fourth respectively; or, as here, by the terms *even*, beginning at six and ending at nine; *midnight*, ending at twelve; *cockcrowing*, ending at three; and *morning*, ending at six.

It is obvious that the Lord does not intend us to physically stay awake indefinitely. It is the mentality that is emphasized here, not the physical condition.

We may quote here what C. S. Lewis observed about the danger of living in an atomic age. We read: “If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (any microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.” Even if we live in joyful anticipation of the Second Coming, “life must go on” for the time being.

VI. THE PASSION NARRATIVE (14:1 – 15:47)

A. THE LAST SUPPER (14:1-25)

i. The death of Jesus is decided (14:1-2)

1 Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him.

2 "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “Verse 1 introduces the most definite decision so far made by the religious leaders, Jesus must die, and as soon as possible; all that the chief priests now lack is an opportunity. Even their objection to this judicial murder at Passover time is not a moral hesitation because of its incompatibility with the nature of a religious ceremony, but purely prudential, lest a riot should break out among the excitable Passover crowds. The exact chronology of the crucifixion has long been in dispute, and the discussion has been revived in recent years. At least the crucifixion clearly took place in the general period of Passover, whether or no it corresponded in time to the actual moment when the Passover lamb was being killed.”

In a footnote, the author adds: “So John undoubtedly seems to take it, from his careful dating. Whether or not sectarian Judaism, such as the Essene community at Qumran, observed Passover on a different date, following a different calendar, it is most unlikely that Jesus and His disciples did. Because the Passover was set by the moon, a wide divergence would seem to be impossible, although conceivably a day or two either side would be possible.”

Although the priests and teachers of the law did not want to kill Jesus during the Passover celebration, Jesus would have to die according to God’s calendar, not theirs. The Jews had celebrated the Passover since their departure from Egypt. But no one had ever fully understood the typical meaning of the feast. The Passover lamb was known to be a substitute for the oldest son who had to die. It was the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the house that protected the family from the angel of death. The Lord had said to the Israelites in Egypt: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you

are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”³³² The name of the feast, Passover, referred to the fact that the angel had passed over the house without striking the family. The blood of the lamb substituted for the blood of the oldest son in the house.

David fully understood the Lord’s intent when he wrote: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll.’”³³³ The Septuagint renders this: “But a body you have prepared for me.” That is the way the verse is quoted in The Epistle to the Hebrews.³³⁴

None of the leaders of the people remembered the title John the Baptist had given to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”³³⁵ Or if they remembered they didn’t believe it.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the leader’s fear to cause a public uproar if they arrested Jesus during the feast and had Him killed: “The feast brought a great multitude of Jews to Jerusalem, amongst whom would be many who had received bodily or spiritual benefits from Christ, and who therefore, at least, worshipped him as a Prophet; and the rulers of the people feared lest these should rise in his defense. Their first intention, therefore, was not to destroy him until after the close of the Paschal feast; but they were overruled by the course of events, all ordered by God’s never-failing providence. The sudden betrayal of our Lord by Judas led them to change their minds. For when they found that he was actually in their hands, they resolved to crucify him forthwith. And thus the Divine purpose was fulfilled that Christ should suffer at that particular time, and so the type be satisfied. For the lamb slain at the Passover was a type of the very Paschal Lamb to be sacrificed at that particular time, in the predetermined purpose of God; and to be lifted up upon the cross for the redemption of the world.”

Mark sets the time of the events preceding Jesus’ arrest and condemnation as two days before the Passover celebration. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The point from which these two days were figured was probably late Tuesday afternoon, at which time the Jewish leaders were seeking how they might take him by craft. This would place the Passover meal on Thursday evening.”

Much has been written about the actual time of the killing of the Passover lamb. It seems to us that the original instructions are pretty clear as to when the killing was to occur. We read: “Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight.”³³⁶

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the original instructions about the time of celebration, given in Exodus 12: “*In the evening*. Literally, ‘between the two evenings.’ This phrase has been explained in two ways. Some regard the first evening as commencing when the sun begins visibly to decline from the zenith, *i.e.* about two or three o’clock; and the second as following the sunset. Others say, that the sunset introduces the first evening, and that the second begins when the twilight ends, which they consider to have been ‘an hour and twenty minutes later’ ... The use of the phrase in

³³² Ex. 12:12

³³³ Ps. 40:6, 7

³³⁴ Heb. 10:5

³³⁵ John 1:29

³³⁶ Ex. 12:6

ch. 16:12, and the command in ... Deuteronomy 16:6 —‘Thou shalt sacrifice the passover at even, *at the going down of the sun,*’ seem to be decisive in favor of the second explanation. The first arose out of the later practice. When the lambs were sacrificed in the temple by a continual succession of offerers, it became impossible to complete the sacrifices in the short time originally allowed. Of necessity the work of killing the victims was commenced pretty early in the afternoon, and continued till after sunset. The interpretation of the direction was then altered, to bring it into accord with the altered practice.”

ii. The anointing at Bethany (14:3-9)

3 *While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.*

4 *Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?"*

5 *It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.*

6 *"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.*

7 *The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.*

8 *She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*

9 *I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*

Bible scholars have argued about the location at which this anointing took place. From John’s account of the incident we could deduct that Jesus was at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. But John does not specifically mention this. We read: “Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.”³³⁷ Since both Matthew and Mark place the incident of the anointing at the home of Simon the Leper, we may assume that, although Jesus spent the night at Lazarus’ home, the meal was at the place indicated here.

There also is no contradiction in timing, which Mark gives as “two days before” and John as “six days.” John merely mentions the time of Jesus’ arrival and Mark the time of the meal.

Mark does not identify the woman who anointed Jesus. We learn from John that she was Mary, the sister of Lazarus.³³⁸

Mark describes the woman’s (Mary’s) action in detail as she brings a receptacle made of alabaster containing “very expensive perfume, made of pure nard,” which she opens by breaking the neck of the bottle and pouring it on Jesus’ head. According to

³³⁷ John 12:1, 2

³³⁸ John 12:3

John, “she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair.” There is no discrepancy in the accounts if we assume that Mary anointed both Jesus’ head and feet.

Adam Clarke does not believe that Mary actually broke the neck of the bottle. We read: “It was a custom in the eastern countries to seal the bottles with wax that held the perfumes; so that to come at their contents no more was necessary than to break the seal, which this woman appears to have done; and when the seal was thus broken, she had no more to do than to pour out the liquid ointment, which she could not have done had she broken the bottle.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: “The Greek text is best translated ointment of genuine nard. The nard plant was used to make perfume.”

There can be little doubt about the reason Mary performed this anointing of Jesus. Not only had she been the most receptive to Jesus’ teaching,³³⁹ but the resurrection of her brother Lazarus made her realize that nothing was too much to express her gratitude to Jesus. The Greek text states that the value of the ointment was “more than three hundred denarii.” According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, a denarius was “the standard gold coin of the empire in the time of Augustus, which was equal in value to about ... \$5.25.” That would amount to almost \$1600 in modern currency, which, even in terms of our inflated values would be quite an amount of money to spend on someone’s deodorant.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about the disciples’ reaction to the waste of money involved: “Judas obviously thought that the attitude of Jesus to money was quite inconsistent and unrealistic. First had come the appraisal of the widow’s gift (12:43), and now came the acceptance of the sacrifice of the alabaster jar of ointment: it did not make sense.

Yet the attitude of Jesus both to this costly gift and to the widow’s slender gift was fundamentally the same. He regarded both gifts as priceless, but accepted such giving, whether directly to God or indirectly through Him, as right and natural. This was a strange reversal of earthly values; and although Mark does not record either that Judas was the apostolic treasurer or that he was dishonest (Jn. 12:6), it is understandable that on this basis, Judas felt misgivings. The world despised the widow’s mite as too small, while it criticized the anointing of Bethany as wasteful, exhibitionist and unrealistic. What the disciples said about the value of the ointment and the need of the poor was perfectly true, but Jesus looks for uncalculating devotion to Himself rather than fine wisdom and balanced judgment in giving. The Lord, as Paul says, loves a cheerful giver, not a carefully calculating one (2 Cor. 9:7). A year’s wages were involved here ... however: it was no small sum to be written off. Perhaps the poverty of the disciples increased their indignation at what to them was a senseless waste of good money.”

We must not see Jesus’ remark about giving to the poor as insensitive to the condition of the poor. If we look at His words in the light of what He said in the Sermon on the Mount about the giving of alms, we get a clearer picture of what is meant. Much giving was done hypocritically, not for the purpose of helping those in need but in order to create an image of generosity of the giver.³⁴⁰

None of the disciples, or Mary, could have understood what it meant that three days later Jesus would die a death that would atone for the sins of the world. Mary cannot

³³⁹ See Luke 10:38-42

³⁴⁰ Matt. 6:1-4

have intended to anoint Jesus for His burial, but Jesus accepted it as such. As far as Jesus was concerned, Mary poured out her soul for Jesus when she poured the ointment on His head and feet. That is why Jesus makes her an emblem of a true response to the preaching of the Gospel. Mary's act was a response of love. Our reaction to the message ought to be that we "love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength."³⁴¹

Matthew and John also record Jesus' words about the poor, but Mark is the only one who adds: "you can help them any time you want."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: "The reference to the continual presence of the poor, in verse 7, is a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11. It does not of course mean that we should accept poverty as an inevitable fact, and therefore do nothing to try to abolish it, for the whole Law is aimed at doing that. It is simply a practical recognition that, whatever we do, in this fallen world, there will always be some in need, whom we may and should help, as Deuteronomy also points out."

iii. The betrayal by Judas (14:10-11)

10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.

11 They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The betrayal follows immediately after the anointing by Mary. We may suppose that the other disciples who had murmured on account of this waste of the ointment, were brought to their senses by our Lord's rebuke, and felt its force. But with Judas the case was very different. The rebuke, which had a salutary effect on them, only served to harden him. He had lost one opportunity of gain; he would seek another. In his cupidity and wickedness he resolves to betray his Master, and sell him to the Jews. So while the chief priests were plotting how they might destroy him, they found an apt and unexpected instrument for their purpose in one of his own disciples. Judas came to them, and the vile and hateful bargain was concluded. It marks the tremendous iniquity of the transaction that it was 'one of the twelve' who betrayed him — not one of the seventy, but one of those who were in the closest intimacy and nearness to him."

Judas' role in bringing about the death of Jesus is open to a great deal of analysis. The fact that this betrayal had been prophesied in the Old Testament does not mean that Judas had no choice in what he did. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Judas' reaction to the rebuke of Jesus was traitorous. A complete analysis of the man's motives for going unto the chief priests is not possible with our limited knowledge. Luke explains it by saying that Satan entered into him (22:3). We know that his love of money was a partial reason for the betrayal (cf. Matt 26:14-15). It is also possible that he had been disillusioned by Christ's failure to rise up against Rome and establish a free Jewish kingdom."

Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would be betrayed for the price of thirty pieces of silver, that Judas would end up throwing the money in the temple and that the Pharisees and priests would use it to buy a potter's field. We read: "And the Lord said to me,

³⁴¹ Deut. 6:5

‘Throw it to the potter’-the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.’³⁴²

Jesus also quoted David’s prophecy about Judas’ betrayal, as He and all the disciples were eating the Passover meal together: “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”³⁴³

iv. The owner of the upper room (14:12-16)

12 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

13 So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him.

14 Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'

15 He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

16 The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

Bible scholars have argued about the date of the celebration of this Passover feast. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “It is known that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was regarded as beginning on the day of the Passover ... This was Thursday. The Passover lambs would have been killed in the afternoon, and the Passover meal would have been eaten after sundown on the beginning of Nisan 15.”

One of the problems is John’s statement that Jesus celebrated a feast “just before the Passover Feast.”³⁴⁴ As we saw earlier, there was a difference between the religious groups as to the actual day of celebration of the feast. The only observation R. Alan Cole makes about the problem in *Mark* is: “The plain reading of the text of Mark here would suggest that this was the very day on the evening of which the Passover was killed and eaten, but the question is a difficult one, especially in view of the Johannine evidence. In either case, both the last supper and the crucifixion were in the general context of Passover, and that is the only important point theologically, whether or not the last supper was a Passover meal.”

We may assume that God’s calendar is the correct one and that “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” was sacrificed on the actual date as the Israelites celebrated the first Passover in Egypt.

We learn from Luke that Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the Passover celebration,³⁴⁵ so we may assume that they were the ones who asked Jesus the question as to where it would be. Jesus’ answer poses the intriguing question whether Jesus had made prior preparations with someone in Jerusalem regarding the Passover celebration. We get the impression that “the owner of the house” would not be someone who was uninformed. There is a temptation to see more of a miracle in this situation than there

³⁴² Zech. 11:13

³⁴³ Ps. 41:9

³⁴⁴ John 13:1

³⁴⁵ Luke 22:8

actually was. But it could also be that God had prepared this person in a dream or a vision that he would entertain Jesus and His disciples for the feast.

There can be no doubt, however, about the miraculous aspect of the way Peter and John would find the house and its owner. Jesus' instructions to the two disciples are a clear example of the gift of prophecy He possessed. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: "Jesus here shows a combination of supernatural knowledge and practical preparation, as in the events surrounding the triumphal entry. In view of the fact that the upper room of verse 15 was ready for them, it suggests that Jesus had already made some prior arrangements to keep Passover at the home of this resident of Jerusalem. This was apparently a common practice of country pilgrims. But it needed supernatural foreknowledge, again of the kind manifested by Samuel and other prophets (1 Sa. 10:2-6), to tell His disciples of the signs that would lead them to the right house."

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the man bearing the water pitcher: "The bearing of the pitcher of water was not without its meaning. It was a solemn religious act preparatory to the Passover. This man bearing a pitcher of water was not the master or owner of the house. The owner is distinguished afterwards by the name *oikodespotes*, or 'goodman of the house.' The owner must, therefore, have been a man of some substance, and probably a friend if not a disciple of our Lord. Tradition says that this was the house of John whose surname was Mark; and that it was in this house that the disciples were assembled on the evening of our Lord's resurrection, and where, also, they received the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost." From our point in time we have no way of knowing whether the above-mentioned tradition is historically correct or not.

Although carrying water was considered the work of women, carrying large pitchers may have been a man's job because of the weight involved. As in most Eastern and Mid-Eastern countries, the man would have carried the jar on his head. The fact that in this case it was a man carrying water made it easier for the disciples to identify the person and the place.

Peter and John, evidently, found everything the way Jesus had predicted and they prepared the Passover meal. As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "This would consist in obtaining the Paschal lamb, and taking it to the temple to be sacrificed by the priests. It would then be brought to the house to be cooked; and the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs and the wine would have to be provided, and the water for purification. After all these preparations had been made, the two disciples would return to their Master." It was a preparation that would take the better part of the day. The Passover celebration would not be until after sunset.

v. The prophecy of the betrayal (14:17-21)

17 When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.

18 While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me — one who is eating with me."

19 They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?"

20 "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me.

21 The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “All the gospels show the knowledge of Jesus that one of the twelve would betray Him; the quotation of verse 18 of Psalm 41:9 makes plain some of the agony which this created in His heart. As so often, if we note the Old Testament Scriptures either quoted or paraphrased by Jesus, we can see by what biblical types and analogies He understood His own experience, and thus we, in our turn, can comprehend it more deeply.”

Throughout His life Jesus was guided by Old Testament prophecies about Himself. Here He came to the crucial point about which David had written: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”³⁴⁶

The imbedded reference to the Psalm in Cole’s comment reads literally: “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”³⁴⁷

Matthew and John give a more detailed account of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ announcement about the betrayal. Matthew records that this created doubt in the heart of all and that each one asked Jesus if he was the one. Even Judas asked the question, although he knew the answer. In John we read that Jesus identified to John who it was by dipping the bread in the bitter sauce and handing it to Judas.³⁴⁸

Jesus issued one last very serious warning to Judas, saying that it would be better for him if he had never been born. Judas was the only person about whom this could be said in all of Scripture. It is true that he was a pawn in the game Satan tried to play with God, but he was a willing pawn. Satan could not have entered his heart without his permission. He may not have fully understood what he did, but what he did he did by choice, not by coercion. We may not understand the paradox between predestination and free will, but that does not eliminate responsibility. Judas was responsible for what he did, even if the devil made him do it. If this were not so, Jesus’ warning to him would have been hypocritical.

The Pulpit Commentary truthfully asserts: “Better not to have lived at all than to have lived and died ill. Existence is no blessing, but a curse, to him who consciously and willfully defeats the purpose of his existence.”

vi. The Lord’s Supper (14:22-25)

22 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

23 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

24 "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.

25 "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."

Some Bible scholars have asked the question as to whether the meal Jesus took here with His disciples was the actual Passover or just a regular meal. If it was not the

³⁴⁶ Ps. 40:6-8

³⁴⁷ Ps. 41:9

³⁴⁸ John 13:22-26

Passover meal then there would be no lamb to eat. The disciples' question in v.12 should be a sufficient answer.

It has been observed that Jesus took the bread and made it into a symbol of His death by crucifixion. From our historic perspective we would have expected Him to take the Passover lamb and make that the emblem of His suffering and death. After all, it was the slaying of the lamb that was at the core of the whole celebration as it was first instituted in Egypt. The application of the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites from certain death. Paul clearly identifies the lamb with Jesus in writing to the Corinthians: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."³⁴⁹

The lamb was eaten only one time during the Passover celebration at the evening of the first day; the unleavened bread was eaten during the whole week that followed. The two elements that determined the celebration both represented Jesus' crucial sacrifice that brought about the atonement of sin for the whole human race. Jesus only died once on the cross and that death had a lasting effect upon the lives of all who identify themselves with this death. The whole week that was called the feast of the unleavened bread, represents a lifetime. In choosing the bread and the wine as emblems of His death, Jesus emphasized the life-changing effect His death would have in the lives of those who ate the flesh of the lamb and identified themselves with Christ in His death. The initial act of identification was only done once. The effect of this choice was lifelong. Malice and wickedness will die in the lives of those who identify with Christ in His death, and they will be replaced by sincerity and truth. In dying for us on the cross, Jesus ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil so that we could eat from the tree of life. That is the mystery of godliness Paul speaks about in I Tim. 3:16.

The meat of the lamb has never become an element in the celebration of the Lord's Supper as we practice it in most of our churches. We go by the instructions left to us in the Gospels and by what Paul says about it in some of his epistles. The Lord's Supper, as we celebrate it in our churches consists of bread and wine; bread as an element of sustenance of life and wine as the element that adds the joy of the Lord to the experience.

Jesus emphatically identified the broken bread, the *matzōth*, with His body that would be "broken" in the terrible suffering of the crucifixion. From a human viewpoint this is the greatest tragedy that ever occurred in our world. And yet we commemorate the event as a celebration. Jesus became a curse for us, as Paul states clearly. We read: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."³⁵⁰ Jesus was the only human being who was ever cursed by God. When Adam sinned, God did not curse Adam, but He said: "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you

³⁴⁹ I Cor 5:7,8

³⁵⁰ Gal. 3:13,14

return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”³⁵¹

Roman Catholic theology interprets Jesus’ words about the bread and the wine so literally that the church teaches transubstantiation, that is that the bread and wine actually turn into Jesus’ flesh and blood when the ordained priests pronounces his blessing upon it. *The Pulpit Commentary* inserts a quotation from Augustine in its commentary which reads: “*This is my body*; that is sacramentally. St. Augustine says, ‘How is the bread his body? and the cup, or that which the cup contains, how is that his blood? These are, therefore, called sacraments, because in them one thing is seen while another thing is understood.’”

In some Protestant celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, however, some of the mysticism of the celebration is lost by the emphasis upon the fact that the elements are merely symbols. There is a sense in which the Lord is nearer to us when we partake of His body and blood than at other times. Or at least it can be a greater blessing if we know Him nearer.

Luke adds the words “do this in remembrance of me” to the giving out of the bread and “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” to the passing of the cup.³⁵² During the Passover celebration the cup was passed four times. And as *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “the contents would have been wine mixed with two-thirds water.”

Something of the symbolism of the unity of the body is lost in the way communion is served in many churches in the United States, where small individual communion cups are used instead of the common cup that was passed around at the Passover celebration. Hygiene and fear of infection have triumphed over fellowship and unity.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: “The blood of Christ is the blood of the new covenant promised in Jer 31:31-34 (cf. Heb 8:6-13).” The text referred to in Jeremiah reads: “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 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 of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’”³⁵³

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on the words “for many”: The wording *for many* is a direct link with the interpretation of the Messiah’s work and office in terms of Isaiah 53:12, in spite of [some theologian’s] view that this is only a Semitic commonplace. But [the theologian] is right in emphasizing that ‘many’ in Hebrew is ‘inclusive,’ not ‘exclusive’ and therefore virtually equivalent to ‘all’ in English.

³⁵¹ Gen 3:17-19

³⁵² Luke 22:19,20

³⁵³ Jer 31:31-34 (cf. Heb 8:6-13).

Christ's death is here seen in terms of the Passover; it is seen as the inauguration of a new covenant; and it is seen as a sacrifice, presumably a sin offering (Is. 53:10). All three are distinct, though all three are sealed by bloodshed; but, while it may be academically possible to isolate one concept from another for the purpose of study, yet to gain a clear picture of the work of Christ, we must combine all three into one."

Actually, Jesus' death was the ultimate fulfillment of all Old Testament sacrifices as prescribed in the first seven chapters of Leviticus. Jesus gave Himself to the Father as a burnt offering, expressing the love of the Second Person of the Trinity, to the First. He sacrificed Himself as a grain offering, presenting His human body to the Father as a living sacrifice. He was the fellowship offering; an expression of human gratitude to the Creator. He was our sin offering, dying for people with a sinful nature, although He was without a sinful nature Himself. And finally, He died for our sins, paying the price for our offenses.

Jesus' remark that He would drink no more wine "until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God" seems to be refuted by the fact that He did take a sip of wine while hanging on the cross.

Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus refused to drink the wine mixed with gal that the soldiers offered to those they crucified, that would serve as a kind of pain reducer. That wine Jesus did not drink. But John records that Jesus asked for wine at the end, just before His death. We read: "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."³⁵⁴ We could conclude from this that, at this point, Jesus took "the first sip" of the new cup of the kingdom of God. Having finished His suffering and paid the debt of mankind, the kingdom had come.

B. THE AGONY IN GETHSEMANE (14:26-42)

i. The road to Gethsemane (14:26-31)

26 When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."

28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

30 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today — yes, tonight — before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

The phrase "When they had sung a hymn" is the translation of the single Greek verb *humneo*, "to hymn." What they sang may have been a series of hymns consisting of Psalms 108-118, which is the "Hallel" usually sung at the end of the Passover. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* suggests that it "would have been a portion of the Hallel Psalms (Ps 115-118)."

³⁵⁴ John 19:28-30

It was probably on the way to the Mount of Olives that Jesus warned the disciples about their desertion. The Greek word used is *skandalizo*, “to entrap.” The word is related to the bait used to entrap animals. We could see it as an effort by Satan to make the disciples fall. The English word “scandal” is derived from the Greek word.

Again, Jesus followed closely the Old Testament prophecies about His suffering and death. The quotation is from Zechariah’s prophecy, which reads literally: “‘Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.’”³⁵⁵

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “The disciples all forsook him and fled, when they saw him actually in the hands of his enemies. They felt doubtful for the moment whether he was indeed the Son of God. ‘They trusted that it was he who should redeem Israel;’ but now their hopes gave way to fear and doubt. They fled hither and thither like frightened sheep. But God gathered them together again, so that when our Lord rose from the dead, he found them all in the same place; and then he revived their faith and courage.”

Jesus’ quotation of Zechariah’s prophecy was meant to encourage the disciples in the circumstances that would seem inexplicable to them. Although Jesus had clearly and repeatedly told them that He would be taken captive, condemned and put to death, they had not believed Him. And the miracle of resurrection from the dead was a complete mystery to them.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary observes: “Christ tells them that they would be offended in him, would begin to question whether he were the Messiah or no, when they saw him overpowered by his enemies. Hitherto, they had continued with him in his temptations; though they had sometimes offended him, yet they had not been offended in him, nor turned the back upon him; but now the storm would be so great, that they would all slip their anchors, and be in danger of shipwreck.”

The desertion by the disciples in Jesus’ hour of suffering must have added considerably to the depth of His pain. His question “Could you not keep watch for one hour?” as He went through the agony in Gethsemane indicates that He must have hoped that they would somehow share in His struggle. Jesus was more alone than anyone has ever been in this world.

Peter’s self-confidence created the condition in which the enemy could make him trip and deny his Master. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “All the gospels show the same picture of impetuous Peter, full of false pride in his own fancied strength, and scorn for the weakness of the others; he had no difficulty in believing the words of Jesus to be true of his fellow disciples. But it is well to remember that all the other disciples protested their own strength too (31); they too were proud and self-confident. Peter may have distinguished himself from the others, but he has not succeeded in isolating himself.

As Peter had distinguished himself by boasting, so he was to distinguish himself by failure, so that others, as well as he, might learn to distrust of natural strength. As often, Jesus adds a prophetic ‘sign,’ for the cock crowing is more than a note of time, although it certainly includes that. This sign was doubtless given so that Peter might be reminded of the forewarning when the incident occurred (see verse 72). Only Mark records the second cock-crow ... ‘Second cock-crown’ is a definite point in time in the

³⁵⁵ Zech. 13:7

early morning, very distinct from the sleepy first cock-crow at midnight; but whether Jesus meant this, or just two cock-crows in quick succession, it is idle to speculate.”

Mark leaves out that Jesus warned Peter about Satan’s involvement in his denial of Christ. Luke gives Jesus’ words as: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”³⁵⁶

The crowing of the cock in the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus has become symbolic of a call to repentance and conversion. In the Netherlands where I grew up, a crowing rooster could be seen on the steeple of all the Christian Reformed churches.

In a society where time-pieces were unknown, the hour of the day was referred to by the position of the sun in the sky and the hour of the night by the crowing of the rooster. The Jewish day began in the evening at sundown, approximately at 6 PM. It is supposed that Jesus stood before Caiaphas around 2 AM.

Peter countered Jesus’ warning with a double denial. The Greek uses the two words *ou* and *meé*, which are both negatives. The Greek text of v.30 reads literally: “But he spoke [the more] vehemently, if I should die with you, not in any wise, not in any wise, will I deny.” Peter was saying to Jesus: “You don’t know me!” It must be said that the other disciples made the same vow Peter made here. But, evidently, Peter did not present himself as their spokesman, for he said emphatically that he would not fall away, even if the others would.

As it turned out, Peter’s life would never be in danger. It was not an armed Roman soldier who would confront him about his relationship with Christ, but an unarmed servant girl.

ii. The agony in the garden (14:32-42)

32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."

33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"

38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing.

40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

41 Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

³⁵⁶ Luke 22:31,32

Supposedly, the walk from Jerusalem to the garden of Gethsemane took approximately twenty minutes. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The word ‘Gethsemane’ means literally ‘the place of the *olive-press*,’ whither the olives which abounded on the slopes of the mountain were brought, in order that the oil contained in them might be pressed out.”

All eleven of the disciples must have followed Jesus to the garden. Entering the garden, Jesus told eight of them to stay behind, probably close to the entrance and He took Peter, James and John with Him to a spot further in. But for His last prayer before His capture, Jesus told the three that formed the inner circle to stay behind also.

Mark also leaves out the conversation with Jesus and the eleven about the swords. Evidently, it was felt that, at one point the disciples might have to defend Jesus, or themselves against capture. We find that story in Luke’s Gospel.³⁵⁷

John tells us that Jesus often went into this garden and that Judas knew he would be able to find Jesus there that evening.³⁵⁸

Before separating Himself from His disciples, Jesus tells them that His “soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” and He asks them to “stay here and keep watch.” R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, sees in Jesus’ words a quotation from Psalm 42:5 and 6, which reads: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. The Hebrew word rendered “downcast” is *shachach*, which conveys the idea of being depressed. The Greek word used in Mark is *perilupos*, which can be rendered “intensely sad.” But Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek.

Jesus adds to this that His depression was “to the point of death.” We should look at these words as more than an exaggerated expression of despair. There is a possibility that Jesus was facing actual death in the Garden of Gethsemane. If Satan would have been able to make Jesus succumb physically at this point, without allowing Him to give His life as a ransom for the sins of mankind, he would have prevented the salvation of mankind.

Commenting on the words “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Speaking absolutely, with God nothing is impossible. But the Deity is himself bound by his own laws; and hence this was impossible, consistently with his purposes of mercy for the redemption of the world. The Lord himself knew this. Therefore he does not ask for anything contrary to the will of his Father. But it was the natural craving of his humanity, which, subject to the supreme will of God, desired to be delivered from this terrible load.”

It is very difficult for us to understand what actually took place at this point and what the subject of Jesus’ prayer was when He asked the Father to take “this cup” from Him. The author of Hebrews, undoubtedly, referred to Jesus’ prayer here when he wrote: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”³⁵⁹ If we interpret “this cup” to mean His death on the cross, Hebrews’ comment could not apply to Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, because the Father

³⁵⁷ Luke 22:35-38

³⁵⁸ John 18:2

³⁵⁹ Heb. 5:7

did not save Him from that death. It seems therefore likely that Jesus actually faced death while in the garden. The words “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” may apply more to Jesus’ own physical condition than to the disciples’.

Luke describes the intensity of Jesus’ prayer with some of the physical symptoms that accompanied His agony. We read: “He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”³⁶⁰

Hebrews’ conclusion about Jesus’ prayer is that it was for Him the ultimate test of obedience. We read: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”³⁶¹ The Greek text of this verse reads literally: “Though he were a Son, yet he learned *the* obedience by the things which he suffered.” No one was ever tested like this on this level of obedience.

Evidently, Jesus repeated His prayer to the Father three times, because we read that He returned three times to the disciples after saying His prayer. Jesus particularly addressed Peter, reproaching him for falling asleep. It was Peter who had said that he was ready to die for Jesus. Now Jesus says to him: “You were ready to die for Me, but you are not ready to stay awake for Me.” Peter’s staying awake would not have changed Jesus’ situation, but it would have helped Peter. Neither Peter, nor any of the other disciples had an inkling who the enemy was they were facing. They entered the “hour of darkness”³⁶² and they didn’t know it.

Bible scholars have puzzled over the meaning of the expression “it is enough.” Mark uses the Greek word *apechei*, which is only found in this text in the New Testament. *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “There has been much difficulty in determining the meaning of this phrase. Campbell translates it, ‘all is over’ - that is, the time when you could have been of service to me is gone by. They *might* have aided him by watching for him when they were sleeping, but now the time was past, and he was already, as it were, in the hands of his enemies. It is not improbable, however, that *after* his agony some time elapsed before Judas came. He had required them to watch-that is, to keep awake during that season of agony. After that they might have been suffered to sleep, while Jesus watched alone. As he saw Judas approach he probably roused them, saying, It is sufficient-as much repose has been taken as is allowable-the enemy is near, and the Son of man is about to be betrayed.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “Some have thought that our Lord here uses the language of irony. But it is far more consistent with his usual considerate words to suppose that, sympathizing with the infirmity of his disciples, he simply advised them, now that his bitter agony was over, to take some rest during the brief interval that remained. It is *enough*. Some commentators have thought that the somewhat difficult Greek verb (*apechei*) would be better rendered, *he is at a distance*; as though our Lord meant to say, ‘There is yet time for you to take some rest. The betrayer is some distance off.’ Such an interpretation would require a full stop between the clause now rendered, ‘it is enough,’ and the clause, ‘the hour is come;’ so that the passage would read, ‘Sleep on

³⁶⁰ Luke 22:41-44

³⁶¹ Heb. 5:8

³⁶² Luke 22:53

now, and take your rest; he (that is, Judas) is yet a good way off.’ Then there would be an interval; and then our Lord would rouse them up with the words, ‘The hour is come; behold, the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.’ This interpretation all hangs upon the true rendering of the word (*apechei*), which, although it might be taken to mean ‘he,’ or ‘it is distant,’ is nevertheless quite capable of the ordinary interpretation, ‘it sufficeth.’”

The Greek text of v.42 reads literally: “Rise up, let us go; look, he that betrays me is at hand.” “He that betrays me” is the translation of the single Greek verb *paradidomi*, “to surrender,” turned into a noun.

C. JESUS IS TAKEN PRISONER (14:43-52)

43 *Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.*

44 *Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard."*

45 *Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him.*

46 *The men seized Jesus and arrested him.*

47 *Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.*

48 *"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?"*

49 *Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled."*

50 *Then everyone deserted him and fled.*

51 *A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him,*

52 *he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*

Mark, significantly, identifies Judas as “one of the Twelve,” emphasizing the fact that Judas had been having an intimate relationship with Jesus and with the other disciples for a lengthy period of time. He must have expected a good deal of resistance from the side of the other disciples. The fear that made them flee and abandon their Master, must have taken Judas by surprise.

Judas’ way of identifying Jesus by giving Him the kiss of peace has made his betrayal into a heinous matter that has become proverbial. A “Judas kiss” is symbol of an ultimate reversal of values. A kiss is a sign of affection. Judas made that which was to symbolize love and life into an icon of falsehood and betrayal. Judas’ kiss was a kiss of death.

Mark does not record Jesus’ comment on the kiss. Luke gives us Jesus’ words: “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”³⁶³ According to Matthew, Jesus called Judas “friend.” We read that He said: “Friend, do what you came for.”³⁶⁴ No sharper contrast can be imagined than this show of affection and the band that accompanied Judas, armed with swords and clubs. Johan Sebastian Bach gives vent to his

³⁶³ Luke 22:48

³⁶⁴ Matt. 26:50

indignation in his oratorio St. Matthew's Passion, in which an angry choir calls upon thunder and lightening and the forces of nature to avenge the false betrayer and his murderous blood. But nature remind silent that night. Judas sealed Jesus' death and his own doom under a starry sky.

John gives us some more moving details of Jesus' arrest and of the reaction of those who came to arrest Him. We read: "Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, 'Who is it you want?' 'Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'I am he,' Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, 'Who is it you want?' And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' 'I told you that I am he,' Jesus answered. 'If you are looking for me, then let these men go.' This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: 'I have not lost one of those you gave me.'"³⁶⁵

Mark reports that one of the disciples drew his sword and cut off the ear of one the servants of the high priest. John identifies this servant as Malchus.³⁶⁶ Luke, who analyzed the event from a physician's perspective, reports that Jesus touched Malchus' ear and healed it.³⁶⁷ This was the last miracle of healing Jesus performed before His death. Mark does not say that it was Peter who caused the damage.

All three synoptic Gospels records Jesus' words to those who came to arrest Him. Jesus probably intended these people to report His words to the members of the Sanhedrin. They were only following orders; they were not the ones who had planned to perform the arrest at night, away from the public eye.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on Jesus' reference to Old Testament scripture, which was being fulfilled in Jesus' arrest: "Such a violent arrest of the Messiah was a fulfillment of many prophetic *scriptures* (49). The passage especially in mind here may be that quoted in Luke 23:37, 'and he was reckoned with the transgressors'; especially since it is also taken from Isaiah 53:12. Those who have seen secret police at work in any part of the world will understand this passage well. Arrests are usually made at night, for two reasons; the victims are liable to be confused and offer less resistance, and the neighbors are not likely to gather and protest. Life changes little over the millennia."

Mark is the only evangelist who mentions the presence of "a young man," dressed only in "a linen garment." The Greek word used is *sindon*, which stands for a piece of bleached linen cloth. The only other place in scripture where the same word is used is in the context of Jesus' burial.³⁶⁸ It is generally supposed that the young man was Mark. If so, this is the only place where the author of this Gospel brings himself into the picture, in the same way as an artist would put himself in a painting of a group of people. No explanation is given as to how this young man had joined the disciples in Gethsemane, or why he was only dressed in a sheet of linen. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about him: "Whoever it was, it was a lad, hurriedly aroused from sleep, with a sheet wrapped around him; presumably one of the frightened disciples had dashed back with the news to the house where the last supper had been held." But this is only one of the suppositions that cannot be proven. The suggestion that it must be the author of this Gospel does make the most sense. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "It has often been suggested, perhaps

³⁶⁵ John 18:4-9

³⁶⁶ John 18:10

³⁶⁷ Luke 22:51

³⁶⁸ Matt. 27:59; Luke 23:53

correctly, that Mark was making a veiled reference to himself. There seems to be no other reason why this insignificant event was included.”

The Pulpit Commentary supposes that the Last Supper had been celebrated at the house of John Mark in Jerusalem. The commentary states: “If the conclusion in an earlier part of this commentary be correct, that it was at the house to which John Mark belonged that our Lord celebrated the Passover, and from whence he went out to the Mount of Olives; what more probable than that Mark had been with him on that occasion, and had perhaps a presentiment that something was about to happen to him? What more likely than that the crowd who took Jesus may have passed by this house, and that Mark may have been roused from his bed (it was now a late hour) by the tumult.”

D. THE FALL OF PETER (14:53-72)

53 They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together.

54 Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

55 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any.

56 Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

57 Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him:

58 "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'"

59 Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

60 Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"

61 But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

63 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked.

64 "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death.

65 Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophesy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by.

67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said.

68 But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.

69 When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them."

70 Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean."

71 He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."

72 Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “It is interesting to note that Mark is once again ‘sandwiching’ the account of the fall of Peter between accounts of the trial of Jesus: the faithfulness of Jesus to death and the unfaithfulness of Peter are thereby contrasted vividly.”

Mark does not give us any detailed chronology of the process that led to Jesus’ condemnation and death. He leaves out, for instance, Jesus’ appearance before Annas. John tells us: “They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.”³⁶⁹ And afterwards: “Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.”³⁷⁰

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes about Jesus’ appearance before Annas and Caiaphas: “Now, as the first three Evangelists place all Peter’s denials of his Lord after this, we should naturally conclude that they took place while our Lord stood before the Sanhedrim. But besides that the natural impression is that the scene around the fire took place overnight, the second crowing of the cock, if we are to credit ancient writers, would occur about the beginning of the fourth watch, or between three and four in the morning. By that time, however, the Council had probably convened, being warned, perhaps, that they were to prepare for being called at any hour of the morning, should the Prisoner be successfully secured. If this is correct, it is pretty certain that only the last of Peter’s three denials would take place while our Lord was under trial before the Sanhedrim. One thing more may require explanation. If our Lord had to be transferred from the residence of Annas to that of Caiaphas, one is apt to wonder that there is no mention of His being marched from the one to the other. But the building, in all likelihood, was one and the same; in which case He would merely have to be taken, perhaps across the court, from one chamber to another.”

The Pulpit Commentary states about Annas: “Annas, though not then high priest, must have had considerable influence in the counsels of the Sanhedrim; and this will probably explain the fact of our Lord having been first taken to him.”

There must have been a lot of political intrigue in the way the high priests’ family wielded power in Israel in Jesus’ day. Caiaphas and Annas belonged to the same family. Annas had been the high priest.

The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary states about Annas: “He was first appointed high priest by Quirinius, proconsul of Syria, about A.D. 7 but was removed after seven years ... by Valerius Gratus, procurator of Judea Annas is mentioned in Luke 3:2 as being high priest along with Caiaphas. Our Lord's first hearing was before Annas (John 18:13), who sent Him bound to Caiaphas (v. 24). In Acts 4:6 he is plainly called high priest. He had four sons who filled that office, besides his son-in-law, Caiaphas. There have been several theories advanced to reconcile the application of high priest to Annas and Caiaphas at the same time. [One Bible scholar] thinks that Annas was regarded as being high priest *jure divino* and having authority in spiritual matters, whereas Caiaphas

³⁶⁹ John 18:12-14

³⁷⁰ John 18:24

was the pontiff recognized by the government. The probability is that his great age, abilities, and influence, and his being the father-in-law of Caiaphas made him practically the high priest, although his son-in-law held the office.”

We learn from John how Peter was able to get into the courtyard of the palace where Jesus was on trial. We read: “Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.”³⁷¹

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about the process before the Sanhedrin that would lead to Jesus’ death sentence: “Even if the high priests could find some clear breach of the Torah, sufficient in Jewish eyes to warrant a death sentence, their task was still only half done. They also had to produce some political charge, adequate in Roman eyes to warrant the carrying out of the death sentence. Both Pilate (Mk. 15:14) and Gallio (Acts 18:14-16) show Roman reluctance to condemn a provincial on purely religious grounds, especially when that religion was to them an offensive oriental cult, practiced by an unpopular subject people. The Mishnah makes frequent bitter reference to the fact that the Romans had taken away the cherished power of capital punishment from the Jewish courts, even when dealing with their own people (*cf.* Jn. 18:31, where this is made explicit). Especially in explosive Jerusalem at Passover time, with the city tense and full of milling throngs of nationalistic Jews, the Romans were on their guard. Such legal murder, especially if it provoked an uproar (14:2), might have dire consequence for the Jewish leaders, if not to the whole Jewish state (Jn. 11:48), as they knew well.”

The court case against Jesus turned the gathering of the Sanhedrin into a kangaroo court. Several instances of this kind of procedure are known in history, particularly in country ruled by dictatorship. In most of those conditions legality and justice are crushed under foot, but the legal system is often used to produce such illegality. Such was the case here.

In the case of Jesus’ condemnation to death, the Sanhedrin sinned against its own rules; they condemned Jesus and had Him put to death the same day. *The Pictorial Bible Dictionary* states: “To avoid any hasty condemnation, where life was involved judgment was passed the same day only when it was a judgment of acquittal. If it was a judgment of condemnation, it might not be passed till the day after. For this reason, cases involving capital punishment were not tried on a Friday or on any day before a feast.”

It is also obvious that no one could be condemned legally on the ground of any testimony by false witnesses. The law stipulated that at least two witnesses were needed for a death sentence. We read: “No one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.”³⁷² And, irony of all ironies, if the witnesses turned out to be false witnesses, the high priest was responsible to see that they received the punishment they intended to inflict upon the accused. We read: “If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the

³⁷¹ John 18:15,16

³⁷² Num. 35:30

evil from among you.”³⁷³ Here, it was the high priest who produced the false witnesses and probably paid them for giving their testimony.

As it turned out, none of the witnesses corroborated the testimony of another witness. They all contradicted one another. The most serious accusation anyone could come up with was the Jesus was supposed to have said that He would destroy the temple and then rebuild it in three days. That too was a distortion of Jesus’ statement, as we find it in John’s Gospel: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”³⁷⁴ To apply those words to the demolition and reconstruction of buildings would have made no sense. John, therefore, added in his Gospel: “But the temple he had spoken of was his body.”³⁷⁵

Jesus met those accusations with a stony silence. He also did not answer the high priest when asked to defend Himself against that kind of nonsense.

Finally, Caiaphas asked the crucial question about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “The high priest must have known that Jesus had at least accepted the title of *Christ* (Messiah) from those around Him (8:29), even if, by the ‘Messianic secret,’ He had avoided making such a claim openly in the presence of His enemies, until God’s time had come. Matthew 26:63 makes clear that this was no casual enquiry by the high priest, but a question put ‘under oath,’ as it were, in the solemn name of God.

But would He deftly extricate Himself from this ensnaring question, as He had from their well-planned trap about paying tribute to Caesar (12:14)? As with modern Moslem, for Jesus to claim to be the Messiah, the Anointed, God’s prophet, would be no blasphemy, although it might be hotly contradicted and a sign would be demanded. But to claim to be *the Son of the Blessed* would be to them intolerable blasphemy, and, for such a blasphemy, He could be condemned to death by the Sanhedrin, as He indeed was.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments on Caiaphas’ question: “It was common for the Jews to use some such term as the Blessed when referring to God, in order that they might not become guilty of taking the divine name in vain. Matthew makes it clear (26:63) that the high priest placed Jesus under solemn oath, which made it obligatory for him to answer. He had no way out but to bear witness which would be turned against him.”

Jesus answered with a quotation from Daniel. Jesus had used the title “son of man” frequently during His teaching, while traveling around the country. The full text of Daniel’s prophecy to which Jesus referred reads: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”³⁷⁶

Caiaphas had no legal means of proving that Jesus’ claim was a fraud. Daniel had not only prophesied about the coming of the Messiah, but he had also clearly predicted

³⁷³ Deut. 19:16-19

³⁷⁴ John 2:19

³⁷⁵ John 2:21

³⁷⁶ Dan. 7:13,14

the date of His coming and of His condemnation.³⁷⁷ But the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin chose to ignore Daniel’s message. Upon hearing Jesus’ confession in which He identified Himself with the son of man in Daniel’s prophecy, Caiaphas committed an act that was clearly forbidden by the law: he tore his clothes. We read in Leviticus: “Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the Lord will be angry with the whole community.’”³⁷⁸

Before this high priest stood the Man of whom David had prophesied: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”³⁷⁹ Caiaphas’ priesthood had been a foreshadowing of the real priesthood of the Messiah. Caiaphas did not know himself or his position in the order of God. When he condemned Jesus, he condemned himself.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on Caiaphas’ act of blasphemy: “The Greek verb here rendered ‘rent’ implies violent dramatic action. The Jewish tunic was open under the chin, and large enough to receive the head, so that it could easily be placed over the shoulders, by inserting the head. When the wearer wished to give this sign of indignation or grief, he would seize the garment at this opening with both hands, and violently tear it asunder down to the waist. But it was unlawful for the high priest to do this in a private grief (... Leviticus 10:6). Some of the Fathers think that by this action Caiaphas involuntarily typified the rending of the priesthood from himself and from the Jewish nation.”

As mentioned before, the Sanhedrin sinned against its own rule by condemning Jesus to death on the same day as His interrogation.

After pronouncing the death sentence, the whole congregation went wild. We read: “Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, ‘Prophesy!’ And the guards took him and beat him.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about the abuse by the members of this august body: “With this condemnation, away went all restraint; no longer did the judges trouble to observe even outward forms of legal impartiality. Peter at least never forgot the patient endurance of Jesus amid the taunts and blows (1 Pet. 2:21-23), a fulfillment of Isaiah 50:6.”

While this abuse was going on inside the building, Peter sat in the courtyard warming himself at the fire. One of the servants of the high priest recognized Peter as one who was “with that Nazarene, Jesus.” Peter reacts to this recognition as if that remark would put his life in danger and he denies the accusation, if an accusation it was. A few weeks later there would be a similar kind of recognition with a different result. Peter and John would stand before the Sanhedrin, the same council before which Jesus stood now, and we read: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”³⁸⁰ Peter was obsessed with a spirit of fear and he reacted violently to being recognized as one of those who followed Jesus, saying: “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

³⁷⁷ See Dan. 9:25,26.

³⁷⁸ Lev. 10:6

³⁷⁹ Ps. 110:4

³⁸⁰ Acts 4:13

The Pulpit Commentary states: “Every word here is emphatic. It amounts to this: ‘So little do I know who this Jesus is, that I know not what you say or what you ask concerning him. I know not who or what he is or anything about him.’ A question has been raised as to the number of times that Peter denied our Lord. The narratives are best explained by the consideration that all the denials took place in the house of Caiaphas. Furthermore, the accounts of the evangelists may be reconciled thus: First, Peter denied the Lord in the court of the high priest, when he was first asked by the maidservant, as he sat over the fire (... Matthew 24:69); secondly, he denied him with an oath; thirdly, when urged still more, he denied him with many oaths and execrations. The cock crew the first time after the first denial, when we read (... Matthew 26:71) that he went out into the porch (*proauliov*). This crowing would be about one or two in the morning. The second crowing would not be until five or six. This shows us the length of time that the proceedings lasted. It was doubtless as Jesus through the court that he gave Peter that look of unutterable pain and grief which moved him at once to repentance.”

After being identified twice by the same servant girl, a larger group of people, probably people working for the high priest or for the Sanhedrin, confronted Peter, suggesting that he could be a follower of Jesus since he was a Galilean. Evidently, Peter spoke Aramean with a Galilean accent. The accusation made no sense, since Jerusalem would be filled with people from all over Palestine who had come to celebrate the Passover at the temple. The accusers made it sound as if all Galileans were disciples of Jesus.

In John’s Gospel we read that the accusation was more detailed and definitely more threatening. A relative of Malchus, whose ear Peter had cut off in Gethsemane, recognized him.³⁸¹

Peter’s reaction was more violent than the accusation. We are not given the exact wording of his denial, but we are told that he put himself under a curse and called God as his witness, stating that he had nothing to do with the Jesus to whom he had pledged to give his life.

Luke tells us that, at that moment Peter caught Jesus’ eye looking at him from inside the courtroom.³⁸² That glance and the crowing of the rooster brought Peter to his senses.

The Greek text of the last part of v.72 reads literally: “And when he thought [thereon] he wept.” “Thought thereon” is the translation of the Greek verb *epiballo*, which can be rendered: “to throw upon.” We find it in the verse: “Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him.”³⁸³ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “The word *epibalon* has long been a problem of translation here. Probably the RSV rendering, he broke down, is best. Whereas *epibalon* describes the onset of the weeping, the imperfect tense *eklaian*, he wept, depicts the continuation of it.” Matthew states: “And he went outside and wept bitterly.”³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ John 18:26

³⁸² Luke 22:61

³⁸³ Matt. 26:50

³⁸⁴ Matt. 26:75

E. THE TRIAL BEFORE PILATE (15:1-15)

i. The stage is set (15:1)

1 Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “This reads as if the previous night’s proceedings had been only an attempt by a ‘steering committee’ to clarify the charge with the legal experts. Now a plenary session of the Sanhedrin formally bound Jesus, and brought Him before the Governor. So begins, not the trial before Pilate, but the trial of Pilate, for he stands self-revealed as he attempts in vain, first to avoid the issue, and then to escape responsibility for the decision. But as in the case of Peter, Pilate is pushed inexorably to a verdict, and his verdict is condemned every time that we repeat in the creed the clause ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate.’ The decision of the Sanhedrin had already been made, but Pilate was no more compelled to carry it out than Judas was compelled to betray Jesus.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The proceedings recorded in the last chapter terminated probably between five and six; the cockcrowing helps to fix the time. Now came the more formal trial. The whole Sanhedrim united in consultation. All the proceedings hitherto had been irregular and illegal. Now, for form’s sake, they tried him afresh. But there was another law which was also violated. It was now Friday. In capital cases, sentence of condemnation might not legally be pronounced on the day of the trial. Yet our Lord was tried, condemned, and crucified on the same day. They ‘bound him,’ that he might be impeded in any attempt to escape. They ‘carried him away’ (*apénegkan*), with the semblance of force; although we know that he went ‘as a lamb to the slaughter.’ How truly might it be said of these chief priests and elders, ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood!’ *And delivered him up to Pilate.* Judaea now was added to the province of Syria, and governed by procurators, of whom Pontius Pilate was the fifth. It was necessary for the Jews to deliver Christ over to the Roman power; because the power of life and death had been taken from them since they became subject to the Romans. ‘It is not lawful for us,’ they say (... John 18:31) ‘to put any man to death;’ that is to say, they could not put to death without the authority of the governor. Our Lord predicted of himself, ‘They shall deliver him to the Gentiles.’”

ii. Pilate condemns Jesus (15:2-15)

2 "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

3 The chief priests accused him of many things.

4 So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."

5 But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

6 Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested.

7 A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising.

8 The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

9 "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate,

10 knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

- 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.**
12 "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.
13 "Crucify him!" they shouted.
14 "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"
15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: "The trial proper begins (as we can see from other gospels), with a confused mass of general accusations (*many things*, or *many charges*, 3 and 4), designed to paint Jesus in a black light politically as a revolutionary, a trouble maker, one who forbade the payment of Caesar's taxes and one who claimed to be an earthly ruler Himself. At this period the word *basileus*, *king*, was used generally of tetrarchs, subject kings, and the emperor (1 Pet. 2:13), although the latter might also be called *sebastos*, corresponding in meaning to the Latin *augustus*. The crime in this court would have to be one of sedition against Rome, and so any and every flimsy charge was added as a make-weight; but at the mention of the claim to be another petty Jewish kinglet, Pilate jumped into action. That charge might well have some substance, and, if so, imperial Rome would take notice of it. No 'client king' must rule except with Rome's consent. To Pilate's abrupt question, Jesus gave a tranquil answer which was a full admission (2), not evasive, as some translations would suggest. In Mark's Gospel, the nature of Christ's kingship is not defined, as it is in John 18:36, but it is just as central an issue in the crucifixion story (9, 12, 18, 26)."

Pilate's first question in this interrogation is whether Jesus is the king of the Jews. Jesus answers this question in the positive. As noted above, Mark does not give the explanation we read about in John's Gospel, which made Pilate conclude that Jesus made no attempt to overthrow the Roman government. Little did he, or any other Roman official, understand that this "king of the Jews" would overthrow all human governments, as exemplified in Daniel's explanation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Jesus was the rock cut out, but not by human hands that would crush the whole human system of government that ruled, but not by the grace of God.³⁸⁵

Mark does not specify the accusations made against Jesus by the chief priests. We merely read: "The chief priests accused him of many things." To all these accusation Jesus made no reply. That means that He offered no defense. That was what amazed Pilate. He must have expected that Jesus would at least have denied the charges and proclaimed His innocence.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "St. Mark omits here what took place next in the order of events, namely, the sending of our Lord by Pilate to Herod (... Luke 23:5). This was Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee; and Pilate, apparently convinced of our Lord's innocence, hoped to escape the responsibility of condemning an innocent man, by handing him over to Herod; for Pilate had heard that our Lord was a Galilean. Moreover, he hoped to accomplish another good result, namely, to recover the favor of Herod, which was desirable on political grounds. The first intention failed; for Herod sent our Lord back to Pilate in mockery, 'arraying him in gorgeous apparel' (*peribalon esthete*

³⁸⁵ Dan. 2:34

lampran). But the second succeeded: ‘Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day’ (... Luke 23:12). There was now, however, another resource.”

That other “resource” was the release of a prisoner at the occasion of a Jewish feast. Mark records that the request came from the people. Matthew gives the impression that the idea came from Pilate. Both parties may have thought of it; the people, because they favored Barnabas’ release, and Pilate, because he thought, naively, that the people’s choice would be for Jesus. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “It seems that the crowd was requesting the release of Barabbas, since he may well have been a kind of hero to them because of his part in the rebellion against Rome. At this point the crowd might have been tempted to request the release of Jesus, but the priests moved the people to ask for Barabbas. The word *anaseio* means ‘to incite, to stir up,’ or more literally, to shake up, showing their excited agitation of the mob.”

Mark’s observation that Pilate knew that the reason Jesus was brought before him was the envy of the priests indicates that he was more aware of the religious tensions among the Jews than he is usually given credit for. Some of the accusations brought against Jesus may have helped the governor to understand that Jesus had committed no crime against the Roman government.

The Pulpit Commentary comments on Pilate’s attitude: “Pilate doubtless hoped that they would ask for Jesus. He knew that the chief priests had delivered our Lord for envy. That he could not help observing, as a shrewd Roman judge, from their gestures and manner. And then he knew also, at least by report, of the purity of Jesus, and of the holy freedom with which he rebuked their vices. So he thought, reasonably enough, that if the chief priests wished to destroy him for envy, the people, who had experienced so many kindnesses from him, would desire that he should live. Envy was the low passion that influenced the chief priests. They saw that Jesus was gaining a great and increasing influence over the people by the sublime beauty of his character, by the fame of his miracles, and the constraining power of his words. And hence they concluded that, unless he was arrested in his course, and put out of the way, their own influence would soon be gone. The whole world was going after him. Therefore he must be destroyed.”

Commenting on the attitude of the crowd in this process, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “Attention is often drawn to the fickleness of crowds by comparing the cheering crowd at the triumphant entry (11:9-10) with the hostile courtroom crowd here. But, although such rapid change is quite possible, yet, right up to the trial, the popularity of Jesus with the crowd was undoubted (12:37). Indeed, it was precisely because of this popularity that the religious leaders dared not arrest Him openly (14:2). The simple answer is that these were two different crowds involved. The crowd at the triumphal entry was made up of pious pilgrims, no doubt many from Galilee, and an equally pious group from Jerusalem which met them (Jn. 12:12ff). These last may themselves have been earlier arrivals among the pilgrims. But as Luther found, when he made his famous pilgrimage to Rome, piety is apt to flourish more away from a Holy City than in it; and doubtless there were many residents of Jerusalem who were far from pious. We know from other gospels that, even among the ordinary people of Jerusalem, there was much strife concerning Jesus (Jn. 7:43). This crowd at the trial must have been composed, in part at least, of the followers and servants of the high priests, seeing that all had moved apparently together from the high-priestly hall to Pilate’s palace. So we are probably dealing here with a mere section of the Jerusalem mob, a section specifically stated in

verse 11 to have been deliberately inflamed by the high priests. Pious pilgrims had more to do at Passover time than to gape at Roman trials; indeed, even the priests themselves had scruples about incurring ceremonial defilement at such a time (Jn. 18:28).”

Pilate calling Jesus “the king of the Jews” was an obvious taunt, meant to bring home to the crowd and the leaders of the people that they were under Roman authority. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus had explained clearly to the governor that was “not of this world.”³⁸⁶ But then, the release of Barabbas, who had been involved in an uprising against Rome, would not enhance Roman’s clout either.

The crowd cried for Barnabas’ release, which made Pilate ask what they wanted him to do with Jesus. In answer to this question, the frenzied crowd, stirred up by the high priests, shouted for Jesus’ death by crucifixion. In John’s Gospel we read that Pilate used their cry to add another taunt by asking “Shall I crucify your king?” And the chief priests lowered themselves by hypocritically proclaiming: “We have no king but Caesar.”³⁸⁷

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments: “Even allowing for a natural preference for the freeing of Barabbas, the ‘patriotic’ figure, it is hard to see why the crowd should then shout, demanding a Roman death for Jesus, unless the priests had deliberately inflamed them, perhaps by stories of His supposed blasphemies (*cf.* verse 11). Beheading was the Roman death for a citizen, as traditionally for Paul; crucifixion for a slave or foreigner, as traditionally for Peter (Jn. 21:18); stoning was the normal form of Jewish death-sentence, from the earliest days (Jos. 7:25). After death by stoning, the criminal’s body might be displayed hanging upon a ‘tree’ until the evening (Jos. 10:26; Dt. 21:22-23). This to the Jew was a sign that the one who so died was under the wrath and curse of God (Dt. 21:23). So, in God’s providence, the cross, besides its Roman associations of shame and a slave’s death, had the deeper Hebrew meaning of God’s curse (Gal. 3:13), borne for us.”

Mark leaves out several details of the procedure, which we find in Luke and John. We read nothing about Pilate’s effort to appeal to the people’s compassion by presenting the bleeding Jesus to them. His willingness to comply with the demands of a riotous mob suggests political motivations. Nothing is mentioned about Pilate’s symbolic hand washing as an indication that he was not responsible for the verdict he pronounced on someone he considered innocent.

It is not clear, therefore, whether Jesus was flogged before His condemnation or afterwards. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about the flogging: “Scourging was a vile punishment, inflicted on slaves. But it was also inflicted upon those who were condemned to death, even though freemen. This scourging, which was a part of the punishment of crucifixion, was of frightful severity. ... But it appears from St. John (... John 21:1) that the scourging of Jesus took place before his formal condemnation to be crucified; we may therefore suppose that it was not a part of the ordinary punishment of crucifixion. At all events, there is nothing, upon a careful comparison of the narratives, to lead us to the conclusion that our blessed Lord was scourged twice. In fact, Pilate anticipated the time of the scourging, in the vain hope that he might by this means save our Lord from the capital punishment.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary explains how the punishment was carried out: “This act was accomplished with a whip made of strips of leather having rough pieces of

³⁸⁶ John 18:36

³⁸⁷ John 19:15

metal tied at the ends of the strips. The victim was bent forward over a short post, and the punishment was administered to his naked back. Often the resultant deep gashes opened the flesh to the very bone.”

Commenting on Pilate’s attitude in this whole process, R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Nothing could be more cynical than the total disregard for truth and justice in this man who, knowing Jesus to be innocent (14), yet flogged and crucified the Son of God, simply through a desire to ingratiate himself with the Jews (15). As usual, Mark does not ‘highlight’ the picture, either by making excuses for Pilate, or by passing judgments on him. He simply states the facts; that is sufficient condemnation.”

F. THE CRUCIFIXION (15:16-47)

i. The mockery (15:16-20)

16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

17 They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him.

18 And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

19 Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him.

20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

At this point Jesus had already been flogged and now He was handed over to a band of Roman soldiers to be executed by crucifixion. Some Bible scholars believe that the soldiers may have been Pilate’s bodyguard.

These soldiers were, obviously, a band of sadistic individuals, who saw their chance to enjoy the suffering of their victim. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines sadism as: “a sexual perversion in which gratification is obtained by inflicting physical or mental pain on others.”

Jesus was obviously in severe pain after the flogging. His back had been torn open to the bone and He must have been weak from a loss of blood. Although, humanly speaking, Jesus was to be pitied; these men were infinitely more to be pitied. One day they would stand before the One they not only put to death, but despised and mocked. In putting Jesus to shame, they lost all human dignity themselves. These soldiers would be first among those of whom John writes in Revelation: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.”³⁸⁸

Besides sadism, there was a demonstration of Roman despicability of the Jews. These Roman considered themselves to be far superior to the contemptible Jews, whose country they had occupied and whose people they ruled. It is not clear where they had picked up that the title “king of the Jews” had been applied to Jesus. Some of them may have been present at Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus.

³⁸⁸ Rev. 1:7

To be able to treat the “king of the Jews” with such contempt must have given them a feeling of great superiority as Romans. What they did to Jesus was a perfect mixture of sadism and political disdain.

In twisting together a crown of thorns these soldiers fulfilled an important part of the curse Adam incurred upon the human race when he sinned. God had said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”³⁸⁹ In a way, these soldiers gave to Jesus the crown which was theirs. In that way Jesus took upon Himself the curse Adam had merited for the whole human race, Roman soldiers included.

Satan played an important role in this mock worship of Christ. He was the one who inspired these soldiers to fall on their knees and pay Him homage. In mocking Jesus, he mocked God Himself. The time will come, however, when even Satan will be forced to bend the knee before the Son of God. The Apostle Paul states that because of the insults Jesus underwent here and on the cross, “God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”³⁹⁰

ii. Carrying the cross of Jesus (15:21)

21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

We learn from John’s version of the crucifixion that Jesus began by carrying His own cross on the way to Golgotha.³⁹¹ Although we have no way of knowing exactly what was put on Jesus’ shoulders, we assume that it was only the crossbar of the cross that He carried to the place of execution. We do not read in any of the Gospels that Jesus at any point on the way succumbed under the weight of the cross. But the fact that He had been flogged and that His back was severely bleeding makes it likely that He stumbled or fell down more than once on the way. That may have been the reason the Roman soldiers conscripted Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about Simon: “Simon of Cyrene might be taken figuratively as a picture of every disciple, bearing the Lord’s cross for Him. His Greek name may mean ‘snub-nosed’ (the form *simos* certainly does), but as, in the case of the apostle, it may represent the good Hebrew name ‘*Simeon*’ (cf. Acts 15:14 for the full form). If so, he was probably a Cyrenian Jew; they had their own shared synagogue in Jerusalem (Acts 5:9). He may have been a visitor to Jerusalem for the Passover, although his entry from *the country* at such an early hour might suggest that he was a resident of Jerusalem, as might the fact that his sons Alexander and Rufus (21), even if himself was not. Certainly the indefinite Greek particle *тина*, ‘somebody called Simon,’ does not suggest personal knowledge of Simon himself by the Christian community.”

³⁸⁹ Gen. 3:17-19

³⁹⁰ Phil. 2:9-11

³⁹¹ John 19:17

The Pulpit Commentary states about Simon: “He must have been a Hellenistic Jew, a native of Cyrene, on the north coast of Africa. Alexander and Rufus, his sons, were no doubt, at the time when St. Mark wrote his Gospel, well-known disciples of our Lord.”

Simon’s act of carrying Jesus’ cross made him into the first person to fulfill Jesus’ prediction about what it would mean to be one of His disciples. Jesus had said earlier in His ministry: “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”³⁹² Although Simon cannot have possibly understood the theological implications of the act he was conscripted to perform, it has become the emblem of all true discipleship. Even more dramatically would Jesus’ crucifixion become the crucial experience that would bring us into an intimate relationship with God by being, as Paul calls it, “crucified with Christ.”³⁹³

iii. The cross (15:22-32)

22 *They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).*

23 *Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.*

24 *And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.*

25 *It was the third hour when they crucified him.*

26 *The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

27 *They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.*

29 *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,*

30 *come down from the cross and save yourself!"*

31 *In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!*

32 *Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*

Many efforts have been made to identify the location of Golgotha in present-day Jerusalem. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “With deference to some topographers, who see plainly the two staring ‘eye sockets’ in ‘Gordon’s Calvary’ at Jerusalem as proof of identification, to Hebrew and Greek minds, the chief impression left by a ‘skull’ was its roundness and smoothness, to judge by etymology. In any case, the two ‘eye sockets’ of Gordon’s calvary were probably only caused by later subsidence or collapse of the walls of water cisterns, cut into the rock on the site. The true site of the crucifixion is almost certainly that now occupied by Holy Sepulcher Church, although now altered beyond recognition.”

We may assume that Dr. Cole’s opinion about the actual location of Golgotha does not carry any scientific weight, since no one can be sure about it. At our visit to Jerusalem in 1968, the sight of Gordon’s Calvary, with right below it the Garden Tomb, looked a very likely place where the crucifixion and the subsequent burial could have happened. But then, I cannot claim any expert knowledge either.

³⁹² Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27

³⁹³ Gal. 2:20

At the site of the crucifixion the soldiers wanted to administer to Jesus a drink that would serve as a kind of sedative. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, states about this: “The sour local wine which they gave Him was ‘laced’ with myrrh; this would give it a bitter taste, but a soporific effect, and was an act of mercy. Jesus, however, would not take any such anesthetic; all His faculties must be unclouded for what lay before Him.”

Rather than an act of kindness by Roman soldiers to people about to be crucified, the giving of such a sedative may have been more an act of selfishness than of mercy. It would be much easier for the soldiers to nail someone to a cross who was duly drugged than a person who would struggle and kick against the pain. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Myrrh served as a drug administered to deaden the torture of the horrible death of crucifixion. Jesus, however, refused to allow such a stupefying potion to cloud his senses.”

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the name Golgotha: “‘Golgotha’ is a Hebrew, or rather Chaldaic, word, applied to the skull on account of its roundness, that being the idea which lies in the root of the word. The Greek equivalent to the word is *kranion*; and this is rendered in the Vulgate, *Calvaria*, a skull, from *calva*, bald. St. Luke is the only evangelist in whose Gospel (... Luke 23:33) this word is rendered ‘Calvary.’ In the Revised Version it is rendered ‘the skull’ The place was so called, either from its having been the spot where executions ordinarily took place (though in this case we might have expected to find it called *topos kranion*³⁹⁴ rather than *kranion*); or, more probably, it was derived from the configuration of the place itself, perhaps a round-like mound, or knoll, sufficiently elevated to be seen at a little distance and by a large number.”

Evidently, the victims of a crucifixion were nailed on the cross naked. Their clothing became the property of the soldiers who carried out the execution. John goes into more detail than Mark does here. We read in his Gospel: “When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.”³⁹⁵

In pictorial representations of the crucifixion we never see the victims as represented completely naked, but that must have been the case in reality. The Flemish poet/priest Guido Gezelle wrote appropriately: “All rights denied, naked Christ died.” God denied His Son what He had provided for Adam and Eve. This way Jesus became the cover for the nakedness of our soul in order to take from us the shame of our sinful condition. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “He divested himself of these garments of mortality, that he might clothe us with life and immortality.”

Mark does not refer to David’s prophecy about the division of Jesus’ clothes and the gambling that accompanied it. David wrote in Psalm Twenty-two: “They have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”³⁹⁶ What David expressed poetically, became a harsh physical reality for Jesus.

There is some confusion among Bible scholars about “the third hour” which Mark mentions as the time of the crucifixion. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “It

³⁹⁴ Place of skull

³⁹⁵ John 19:23

³⁹⁶ Ps. 22:16-18

has been before observed, that the Jews divided their night into four watches, of three hours each. They also divided the day into four general parts. The first began at sunrise. The second three hours after. The third at mid-day. The fourth three hours after, and continued until sunset. Christ having been nailed to the cross a little after mid-day, John 19:14-17, and having expired about three o'clock, Mark 15:33, the whole business of the crucifixion was finished within the space of this third division of the day, which Mark calls here the third hour. Commentators and critics have found it very difficult to reconcile this third hour of Mark, with the sixth hour of John, John 19:14. It is supposed that the true reading, in John 19:14, should be tritee, the third, instead of hektee, the sixth; a mistake which might have readily taken place in ancient times, when the character gamma, which was put for tritee, three, might have been mistaken for final sigma (episema), or sigma tau, which signifies six. And tritee, the third, instead of hektee, the sixth, is the reading of some very eminent MSS. in the place in question, John 19:14."

The sign placed on the cross above Jesus' head read as the reason for the capital punishment. It was Pilate's last effort at sarcasm. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "*King of the Jews*: this ironical and no doubt sarcastic wooden identification-tag nailed to the cross was Pilate's last revenge on those who had forced him into such a difficult position. To the disciples, it was no irony, but God's own vindication of His Son, even in the hour of His death." All four Gospels make mention of the inscription, although with slight difference in wording. The one in John's Gospel is probably the full text, which read: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS."³⁹⁷ John also mentions the fact that the sign was written in three languages: Aramaic, Latin and Greek.

Mark does not mention either the chief priests' protest to Pilate about the inscription, wanting him to add that Jesus merely claimed to be king of the Jews.

Two others were crucified at the same time with Jesus. This makes R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observe: "This suggests that an execution had been impending in any case, and that Jesus was only taking the place of Barabbas, as the third victim. The just dies for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty (1 Pet. 3:18). Mark simply gives the general statement that even these two criminals heaped insults on Jesus (verse 32); for more detail, we must turn to other gospels."

It is difficult for us to understand that those who witnessed the crucifixion could indulge in mockery and show no pity at the sight of suffering. Mark mentions passersby and chief priests. The fact that they quoted Jesus' alleged words about destroying the temple and building it up in three days suggests that these were people who had participated in His trial and condemnation. It was probably from them that the other victims took up the same taunt.

Luke is the only Evangelist who records the moving story of one of the crucified, who turned to Jesus in recognition of His innocence and greatness and asks Him to remember him in his death. Jesus responded to this by saying: "I tell you the truth [Amen], today you will be with me in paradise."³⁹⁸

The Pulpit Commentary quotes Augustine, who commented on the scene: "This cross, if you mark it well, was a judgment-seat. For the Judge being placed in the midst, the one who believed was set free; the other who reviled him was condemned; and thus

³⁹⁷ John 19:19

³⁹⁸ Luke 23:43

he signified what he will do with the quick and the dead. Some he will place on his right hand, and some on his left.”

The NIV does not incorporate v.28 in its version; the verses skip from 27 to 29. A footnote, however, states: “Some manuscripts left, [28] and the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘He was counted with the lawless ones’ (Isa 53:12).”

The by-passers who shouted to Jesus: “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” had no idea that Jesus’ temple was at that moment being destroyed and that it would be rebuilt gloriously within the space of three days. They did not understand what they were saying but what they were saying was true. What was probably not true was their promise to believe in Jesus as the Messiah if they saw that miracle occur. Miracles rarely bring people to faith. Faith is found in the search on the road to reality. Once we see God’s truth and realize that we have been living in a lie, we may come to the surrender of our will that allows God to make us into a new creation.

Part of the words that were meant as an insult was also true. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: “There was prophetic truth in these bitter words. If Christ wanted to save others, then He could not come down from the cross; that temptation He had rejected first in the wilderness (1:13), then at Caesarea Philippi (8:33), and lastly in the garden of Gethsemane (14:36). To descend from the cross was not indeed a physical impossibility, but it was a moral and spiritual impossibility for the Messiah. If He did so, He would cease to be God’s Christ, treading God’s path of Messiahship; instead, He would become a mere human Christ, and such a Christ could never save the world. The only path by which to save others was to refuse to save Himself: in a way totally unexpected by them, the priests were correct.”

iv. The death (15:33-41)

33 At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.

34 And at 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?"

35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

36 One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

40 Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.

41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

It has been established that this three-hour-long darkness could not be an eclipse caused by the moon blocking the light of the sun. The moon at the time of Passover was always a full moon. That was the astronomical indication for the date of the Passover celebration. But full moon cannot cause solar eclipses. Some Bible scholars have seen in

this darkness the fulfillment of Amos' prophecy: "‘In that day,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.’"³⁹⁹

At the end of the hours of darkness Jesus cried out the verse that was a quotation from Psalm 22, which Mark renders with "‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’-which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’" The Hebrew text of the Psalm reads literally: "‘Eeliy, Eeliy, laamaah zabtaaniy.'" Most Bible scholars assume that the discrepancy between the Old Testament text and the New Testament quotation is due to the fact that Jesus used the Aramaic adaptation which was also used in the Targum.

A more important question is why Jesus uttered that cry and what does it mean? Jesus may have been quoting the Psalm to Himself during the whole crucifixion. When excruciating pain blurs the mind, parts of memorized texts tend to come to the top, which may have occupied Jesus' mind at this moment. David's cry certainly was fulfilled in Jesus' suffering on the cross while the Lamb of God was carrying away the sins of the world.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on Jesus' cry: "Here we have the agony of one suffering the experience of abandonment by God, and yet certain by faith of ultimate vindication and triumph. But to what, and why, was He abandoned? To betrayal, mockery, scourging and death – yes: but to limit the explanation to these things would be superficial exegesis, for all of these He had faced and foretold for years. There was a far deeper spiritual agony which Jesus endured alone in the darkness, an agony which we can never plumb and which, thanks to His endurance of it on the cross, no created being need ever now experience. No explanation is adequate other than the traditional view that, in that dark hour, God's wrath fell upon Him. Because wrath is no abstract principle, but a personal manifestation, this means that His unclouded communion with the Father, enjoyed from all eternity, was temporarily broken. Some commentators have held that Christ suffered all the pangs of hell in that time; and if hell is at the root of separation from God, then He certainly did. But on such mysteries Scripture is silent, and Mark tells us nothing here. If there was a barrier between the Father and the Son knew that moment, it could only be our sin that cost Him such agony. Here is the heart of the cross; here is the mystery which no painting or sculpture, with distorted face, can ever begin to show, because we fail to realize the true nature of the punishment for sin, as separation from God, and therefore the true nature and depth of agony borne by Him. Both spiritual punishment and reward are ultimately to be seen in terms of God and our relationship to Him, either utter severance from Him or the closest communion with Him; all else is consequent definition. This is not to minimize the seriousness of the concept of eternal punishment and reward; instead, it projects them on to a far wider screen, and gives them a moral depth unthinkable otherwise."

The Apostle Paul probably gives us the best definition of being forsaken by stating: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’"⁴⁰⁰ Jesus knew the text in Deuteronomy that stated: "‘Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.’"⁴⁰¹ Thus, Scripture itself became part of Jesus' agony.

³⁹⁹ Amos 8:9

⁴⁰⁰ Gal. 3:13

⁴⁰¹ Deut. 21:23

The Pulpit Commentary states about Jesus' cry: "It is generally supposed that our blessed Lord, continually praying upon his cross, and offering himself a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, recited the whole of the psalm (22.) of which these are the first words, that he might show himself to be the very Being to whom the words refer; so that the Jewish scribes and people might examine and see the cause why he would not descend from the cross; namely, because this very psalm showed that it was appointed that he should suffer these things."

We assume that the reaction of some of the bystanders to Jesus' cry, saying that He was calling Elijah, was an act of mockery. Jesus spoke in the vernacular and there was no reason why anyone would not understand what He meant. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes correctly: "Thus did they represent him as praying to saints, either because he had abandoned God, or God had abandoned him; and hereby they would make him more and more odious to the people."

Mark does not state, as John does, that Jesus complained of thirst. The person who offered the drink to Jesus, at the same time made a mockery out of it by saying: "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down."

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "There may even have been a touch of rough kindness in the deed in spite of the coarse jest which accompanied it, especially if, as John 19:28 says, it was brought in response to a request from Jesus. The vinegar of this verse is taken from Psalm 69:21, another messianic Psalm which begins in sorrow and ends in triumph. This Psalm too must therefore have been in the mind of Jesus, and helps us to understand His thoughts at this time. Whatever the motives of the bystander who gave the drink, Jesus certainly neither asked for it nor drank it through a mere desire to fulfill the wording of Scripture, but in order to gather His strength for the loud cry that followed, immediately before He died. Mark does not particularize the cry, other than noting how it rang out (37) and noting its effect on the Roman centurion on duty at the execution (39). Indeed, the only saying on the cross that Mark records in detail is the 'cry of abandonment' (34), in keeping with his usual clipped style."

All three synoptic Gospels record the tearing of the curtain that separated the holy from the holy of holiest in the temple. Although the Ark of the Covenant no longer occupied the holy of holiest, the place was still closed to the priests and Levites and, most of all to the public. The holy of holiest was symbolic of the presence of God where no one could enter. The fact that the curtain was torn "from top to bottom," as both Matthew and Mark state, means that it was not done by human hands. It was God Himself who tore the curtain, thus ending the separation.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes: "The symbolism of this is used later in the New Testament to illustrate the tearing down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile, in the broken body of Christ, by which all barriers between God and man were abolished (Heb. 10:20; Eph. 2:14). Both Jewish priesthood and Jewish temple had ceased to have any future religious significance, as shown by the tearing of this curtain, since now there was direct access for all to God through Christ. Jerome reports that the 'Gospel of the Hebrew' does not mention the torn curtain, but says that the great lintel of the temple cracked and fell. An earthquake could produce both results, and an earthquake is specifically mentioned by Matthew in this context (Mt. 27:51). Mark, as usual, simply mentions the fact of the torn curtain without any explanation, physical or theological."

The author of Hebrews gives the spiritual application of this tearing of the curtain, saying: “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.”⁴⁰²

The tearing of the curtain symbolized the tearing of Jesus’ body on the cross, which opened for us the way to intimate fellowship with the Father. This is what Jesus meant when He answered Thomas: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”⁴⁰³

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, comments on the centurion’s reaction to Jesus’ death: “For the puzzled Roman *centurion*, or non-commissioned officer, on duty with his squad at the cross, the evidence had been overwhelming. He must have watched and wondered until this point: now at last, he was convinced. What he, a pagan, really meant by the title *the Son of God*, has been much disputed. It many not have been by any means the unique position that such a title conveys to the Christian. But for Mark, writing for a Gentile public, this is one of the two high points of his whole gospel. As Jewish Peter had already recognized Jesus as Christ (8:29), so now a Gentile centurion had recognized Him as Son of God: as Peter had denied Him, so now the centurion would confess Him.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary adds: “The centurion’s declaration that Jesus was the Son of God ought not to be taken in the full Christian sense. In the first place, the article does not appear in the Greek text. It should, therefore, read ‘a son of God’ or, at the most, ‘God’s Son.’ The pagan background of the Roman officer must not be overlooked. He may well have viewed Jesus as a superhuman being, but that he possessed the full Christian concept of the deity of Christ is unlikely. Furthermore, Luke records that he declared Jesus to be a righteous man (23:47).”

Mark mentions in general that there were several women who witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion. Three of them he mentions by name: “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.” Matthew mentions the same women, adding “the mother of Zebedee’s sons,”⁴⁰⁴ who may be the one Mark calls Salome. Luke doesn’t give any names, but states that several women had followed Jesus from Galilee.⁴⁰⁵ Only John mentions that Jesus’ mother was present.⁴⁰⁶

v. The burial (15:42-47)

42 *It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached,*

43 *Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.*

44 *Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.*

45 *When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.*

⁴⁰² Heb. 10:19-22

⁴⁰³ John 14:6

⁴⁰⁴ Matt. 27:56

⁴⁰⁵ Luke 23:49

⁴⁰⁶ John 19:25

46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes here: “It was now the evening of Friday, as Mark carefully explains for the benefit of his Gentile audience. Quite irrespective of the question as to the relative time of the Lord’s death and of the Passover, Jesus certainly died on the day before a Jewish sabbath (John 19:31). The time was now therefore just before sundown on Friday, when sabbath actually began for the Jew, since for them a day was reckoned from sunset to sunset. This accounts for the haste in removing the body of Jesus from the cross, lest the sabbath be profaned, if the body was left hanging there. A pious Jew would have removed a body at nightfall in any case (Dt. 21:23), especially in the case of one regarded by the public as a convicted criminal.

So, if the body of Jesus was hastily buried with temporary arrangements (verse 46), no proper burial would be possible until after sunset on the sabbath (Saturday night). In point of fact, no action was taken by the women until early morning on Sunday, for the various preparations would require both time and daylight to carry out. After sunset on Saturday, the spices and linen could be bought (16:1), for it is unlikely that costly spices were ready to hand in any but wealthy circles: but for the actual embalming, the women must wait for the dawn of Sunday (16:2).”

There is no further information in Scripture about Joseph of Arimathea than what we read in the Gospels about him in connection with Jesus’ burial. We are told that he was a member of the Sanhedrin and that, according to Luke, he had not voted for Jesus’ execution.⁴⁰⁷ Matthew states that he had “become a disciple of Jesus.”⁴⁰⁸ We are told that he went “boldly” to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, so he could provide the Lord with a decent burial. The use of the word “boldly” suggests that Joseph’s discipleship may have been in secret to prevent any action against him from the side of fellow members of the Sanhedrin. That caution was thrown in the wind in his asking for an audience with the governor.

The Pulpit Commentary states about Joseph: “St. Matthew says he was a rich man. It is evident that he regarded himself as a settled inhabitant of Jerusalem, since he had thus provided himself with a place of sepulture.”

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes about him: “Joseph of Arimathea, mentioned in passing here, is often overshadowed in our eyes by his fellow-counselor Nicodemus, who appears with him in the Johannine account (Jn. 19:39). Nicodemus appears to be known only to John, however, while all the synoptists know of Joseph, the wealthy member of the Sanhedrin, although he appears only in the context of the burial of Jesus. The text, here, reading *euschēmōn*, *respected*, suggests an influential and highly honored man: in popular parlance, it meant ‘well to do’ as well as influential. He was one yearning for, and looking for, the establishment of God’s reign upon earth, doubtless through the earthly Jesus of Nazareth. It showed real courage, for a man of his position to confess an association with a leader already fallen and thus apparently incapable of benefitting him further. But even Joseph’s loving care for the dead body of Jesus showed that he had no

⁴⁰⁷ Luke 23:51

⁴⁰⁸ Matt. 27:57

immediate expectation of a resurrection. The ‘linen shroud’ and the stone rolled against the door of the sepulcher are too final for that (verse 46). There may be, however, an implied contrast between the denial of Peter and the confession of Joseph.”

Had Joseph not acted, Jesus’ body would have been “dumped” in a hole, dug somewhere in the vicinity of the cross, where, probably, the bodies of the other two crucified ones were buried. Joseph’s action meant a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.”⁴⁰⁹

Pilate was amazed that Jesus had died so rapidly. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “It was not common for persons crucified to expire under two or three days, sometimes not until the sixth or seventh.”

The Pulpit Commentary states: “It must have been somewhat early in the afternoon, probably not long after three o’clock, when Joseph went. The day being the Preparation, the Jews were anxious to satisfy the letter of the Law (... Deuteronomy 21:13), and that, more especially, because the coming sabbath was a ‘high day.’ So they had gone early to Pilate to obtain permission to accelerate the deaths of the sufferers by the terrible additional punishment called *skelokopía*. This violence was not inflicted upon our Lord, because he was already dead; and so another Scripture was fulfilled, ‘A bone of him shall not be broken.’ But it was necessary that Pilate should be assured of the fact that death had taken place before he gave up the body; and thus, in the providence of God, another evidence was given of the reality of Christ’s death. Joseph asked for the body (*sōma*). Then Pilate asked the centurion ‘whether he had been any while dead.’ The verb here is in the aorist, and the adverb means ‘formerly’ (*ei palai apethane*); literally, *if he died some time ago.*”

Mark tells us that two of the women, both called Mary, observed the place where Jesus’ body was laid. R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, writes: “Burial was necessary lest people said Christ’s was not a real death: hence the creed says with finality ‘dead, and buried.’ Nevertheless, this burial was only temporary; Joseph must have hurriedly wound the *linen shroud* of fine gauze (Greek *sinдон*), which he had just bought, around the body. He then laid the body in the tomb, hewn out of the rock near the site of the crucifixion, and rolled across the blocking stone that served as a door to secure it. After this, he must have departed in haste, for it cannot have been far from the legal commencement of the sabbath.

The kings of Judah had been buried in this way, in garden tombs and with spices (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 21:26), although the modern attribution to royalty of the old rock-hewn tombs of Jerusalem are by no means certain. Nevertheless, sufficient examples of such rock-hewn tombs remain from the turn of the first century to give a fair idea of the type that Mark is describing. The so-called ‘Garden Tomb,’ near ‘Gordon’s Calvary,’ while almost certainly not the tomb in question, reproduces very well the atmosphere and appearance, much more indeed than the traditional and probably correct site of ‘Holy Sepulcher.’ Wherever the exact site of the tomb was, the two Marys *saw where he was laid* (47) and then returned home to prepare spices (16:1), ready to return after the sabbath and to complete the process of embalming the body; that was strictly a woman’s task in Israel custom, not men’s, as in Egypt (as Herodotus records). It was very necessary that they should witness where Jesus had been buried, lest they be later of accused of mistakenly coming to the wrong tomb on the morning of the resurrection, a charge made in ancient

⁴⁰⁹ Isa. 53:9

as in modern days by opponents. The witness of women might not be accepted in Jewish law, but it was essential to the plan of God: the disciples themselves could not act as witnesses, for they had all fled.”

VII. THE THIRD DAY: THE RISEN LORD (16:1-20)

A. THE RESURRECTION (16:1-8)

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb

3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The Pulpit Commentary comments: “A hasty but lavish embalming of our Lord’s sacred body had been begun on Friday evening by Joseph and Nicodemus. They had ‘brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight’ (... John 19:39). This would be a compound — the gum of the myrrh tree, and a powder of the fragrant aloe wood mixed together, with which they would completely cover the body, which was then swathed with linen cloths (*othónia*), also steeped in the aromatic preparation. Then the sindon would be placed over all. What had been done on the Friday evening had been done in haste, and yet sufficiently for the preservation of the sacred body, if that had been needful, from decay. The remaining work could be done more carefully and tenderly at the tomb. Observe the aorist in this verse (*eegórasan*) ‘they bought;’ not ‘they had bought.’”

No one, neither the disciples, nor the women who followed Jesus, believed that He would be raised from the dead, although He had clearly foretold this. They had heard Jesus say that God was not the God of the dead, but of the living.⁴¹⁰ But since this was said in connection with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were all dead, they had not considered the possibility that Jesus would be raised from the dead.

It is not easy to piece together a total picture of the events that accompanied Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Some of the confusion in the reporting of the event may be due to the excitement that it had caused.

Mark mentions three women who went to the tomb early that Sunday morning: “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome.” Matthew only mentions

⁴¹⁰ Matt. 22:32

Mary Magdalene “and the other Mary.”⁴¹¹ Matthew also records the moment of Jesus’ resurrection, which was accompanied by a violent earthquake, during which an angel came down and rolled away the stone from the tomb, scaring the Roman guards out of their wits.⁴¹²

John only tells the story of Mary Magdalene. We read: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’”⁴¹³

We assume that Mary Magdalene was with the other women as they approached the tomb. Seeing the stone rolled away, she jumped to conclusions and ran away to report to Peter and John what she thought had happened. The other women walked on and saw the angel, whom Mark describes as “a young man dressed in a white robe.”

Luke reports two angels “in clothes that gleamed like lightning,” who say to the women: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”⁴¹⁴

According to Matthew, the rolling away of the stone was the work of an angel. It seems there would have been no need to roll away the stone for Jesus to rise from the dead and leave the tomb. John tells us that Jesus came and stood among the disciples in a room in which the doors were locked.⁴¹⁵ Evidently, locked doors are no obstacle for a resurrection-body to enter a room. The rolling away was, first of all done, so that the women and disciples could enter the tomb and see that Jesus’ body was no longer there. John tells us that, when he and Peter went to the tomb, they saw the shroud that had covered Jesus’ body lying there. It must have preserved the shape of Jesus’ body, but it looked like an empty cocoon. Jesus’ body went through the windings in the same way as it went through the walls of the upper room.

There was another reason for the stone to be rolled away. As Israel entered the Promised Land, the Lord ordered all the men to be circumcised. This was done at a place called Gilgal. A footnote in the NIV states: “Gilgal sounds like the Hebrew for roll.” And God said to Joshua: “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”⁴¹⁶ The reproach of Egypt had been the fact that the Israelites had been treated there as slaves. Death is the reproach of mankind. It is the most shameful thing that can happen to a living creature. In rolling away the gravestone and sitting on it, the angel demonstrated that death had been, to use Paul’s expression, “swallowed up in victory.”⁴¹⁷ And in conquering death, Jesus conquered the one who held the key of death, Satan. As the author of Hebrews writes: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that

⁴¹¹ Matt. 28:1

⁴¹² Matt. 28:2-4

⁴¹³ John 20:1,2

⁴¹⁴ Luke 24:4-8

⁴¹⁵ John 20:19

⁴¹⁶ Josh. 5:9

⁴¹⁷ I Cor. 15:54

is, the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”⁴¹⁸

In rolling away the stone and sitting on it, the angel tells us that death is no longer an experience to be feared. For us, who have surrendered our lives to the Lord, it means to “be with Christ, which is better by far.”⁴¹⁹

Mark reports that the angel said to the women: “Don’t be alarmed.” The Greek word used is *ekthambeo*, which only appears in Mark’s Gospel. At one point it is rendered “overwhelmed with wonder,”⁴²⁰ another time with “deeply distressed.”⁴²¹ It is as if the angel means to say: “Why are you so amazed that He came back to life?”

The women must have seen the same thing John and Peter observed when they went to the tomb, that the grave cloths were left behind, but the body was no longer inside.

One touching feature in the message given to the women is the mention of Peter: “Go, tell his disciples and Peter.” Peter was, obviously, singled out because of his denial of Christ. For Peter it was a message of pardon. Peter did meet with Jesus, evidently before Jesus met with all the disciples. In his chapter about the resurrection in his Corinthian Epistle, the Apostle mentions Peter, stating: “He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.”⁴²²

Both Matthew and Mark record that Jesus left the message to the disciples to meet Him in Galilee. Strangely enough, however, the first meetings of the risen Jesus with His disciples happened in Jerusalem. But, as John reports, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene.⁴²³ According to Matthew, Jesus also revealed Himself to the other women.⁴²⁴

Mark states that the women didn’t say anything to anyone, but according to Luke they did report the news to the disciples, who thought they were talking nonsense.⁴²⁵ “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” should be read, therefore, as “they said nothing to anyone on their way to report to the disciples.”

B. THE LONGER ENDING (16:9-20)

9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.

10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.

11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

⁴¹⁸ Heb. 2:14,15

⁴¹⁹ Phil. 1:23

⁴²⁰ Mark 9:15

⁴²¹ Mark 14:33

⁴²² I Cor. 15:5

⁴²³ John 20:11-19

⁴²⁴ Matt. 28:8-10

⁴²⁵ Luke 24:9-12

14 Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

15 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;

18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

19 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.

20 Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

The NIV has a note in brackets that states: “[The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.]” Mark 16:8 is considered to be the end of this Gospel, since the remaining verses do not appear in all existing manuscripts. But since this appendix is in our Bible, we will have to have a look at it.

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, introduces this section with the following lengthy observation: “This section contains the so-called ‘longer ending’ of Mark, omitted in some MSS, and rejected as spurious by most early authorities, such as Eusebius and Jerome. Certainly the style is quite unlike that of the rest of Mark. This poses a problem which may be put briefly as follows. To end the gospel with verse 8 is not only abrupt linguistically, but also abrupt theologically. Nevertheless, this so-called ‘longer ending’ is not found in some important manuscripts, and seems to be deliberately excluded. In addition, between verses 8 and 9, several early MSS and versions read ‘But they told Peter and his group briefly all the things that had been commanded them. And after these things Jesus himself appeared to them, and sent out through them from east to west the holy and incorruptible proclamation of everlasting salvation.’ This reads like an early attempt to tidy loose ends; the last clause in particular does not sound Marcan in its expression. One MS actually ends with this summary, omitting verses 9-20 altogether, which is even more suspicious.

As regards the longer ending itself, it may be fairly described as showing knowledge of the subject matter of John 20:1-8 (the story of Mary Magdalene), along with that of Luke 24:13-35 (the story of the Emmaus road), and Matthew 28:19-20 (the great commission). If so, it must be later than these other gospels, and therefore later than Mark.

It is, in fact, a short harmony of resurrection appearances, a skeleton outline which can be easily filled from the other gospel narratives. But verse 9 itself seems to be introduced without reference to verse 1 above, virtually as a fresh beginning, which is suspicious. Indeed, the whole summary seems to have been drawn up independently of Mark’s Gospel, without reference to any of the preceding verses.

Therefore it seems reasonable to see the longer ending as an attempt, known at least as early as Irenaeus, to ‘round off’ a gospel whose original ending was either felt to be inadequate or had been lost; that several such attempts were made is obvious from the

different versions circulating. Further general textual uncertainty is shown by the addition of another long saying added to verse 14 by one authority. Jerome knew of its existence in several MSS of his day

What, then, is the theological value of this longer ending? It may be compared with the story of the woman caught in adultery, in John 8:1-11, as an example of a Christian tradition which may well be genuine and is undoubtedly early, but does not belong to the actual gospel as it stands. In the case of Marcan ending, we can go further; the contents are in any case authentic, even if perhaps derived from other evangels, and there is even the strong possibility that this is an ‘official ending,’ added by the early church to a sort of ‘second edition’ of Mark. We know so little about the actual circumstances of the primary composition and first written forms of the gospel that it is unwise to be dogmatic.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary provides a “textual note” on this section from which we copy: “Both Eusebius and Jerome state that the ending was missing from most of the manuscripts of their day. In addition, several texts and versions offer a shorter substitute in the place of 16:9-20. By far the greater number of manuscripts have the longer conclusion, but many of them are of a late date and an inferior quality. By the recognized standards of textual evaluation, both the longer and shorter endings must be rejected, and this is the judgment of almost all textual scholars. ... In addition, an examination of verses 9-20 cannot fail to impress the careful student with the fact that these verses differ markedly in style from the rest of the Gospel. Perhaps the most acceptable explanation is that the end of the original Gospel may have been torn off and lost before additional copies could be made. Perhaps others attempted to supply a substitute ending, the most successful of which was that which now appears in 16:9-20.”

Both Luke and John mention Jesus’ appearing to Mary Magdalene. John gives us the most detailed report about this encounter.⁴²⁶ Luke backs up Mark’s account that Jesus had exorcised seven demons from Mary Magdalene.⁴²⁷

Then there is mention of the encounter of the two men traveling to Emmaus with Jesus, of which we find also more details in Luke’s Gospel.⁴²⁸ A strange discrepancy between Luke’s account and Mark’s is the fact that Luke reports the disciples’ reaction to the two from Emmaus, as saying: “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Mark, however, states: “they did not believe them either.” That may suggest that this section is not originally from the hand of the one who wrote the actual Gospel.

Mark’s text of the “great commission” is more detailed than Matthew’s. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It would seem that this charge was delivered to them in Galilee, and that it is the same as that recorded in St. Matthew (... Matthew 28:19), which was again repeated immediately before his ascension from Bethany. *Go ye into all the world*; not into Judaea only, but everywhere. This command has expanded with the discovery in later times of new portions of the inhabited earth; and must ever be coextensive with geographic discovery. *Preach the gospel to the whole creation*; that is, ‘among all nations.’ Man is the noblest work of God. All the creation is gathered up in him, created after the image of the Creator. *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.* These words are very important. The

⁴²⁶ John 20:11-18

⁴²⁷ Luke 8:2

⁴²⁸ Luke 24:13-35

first clause opposes the notion that faith alone is sufficient for salvation, without those works which are the fruit of faith. *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*; that is, he that believeth, and as an evidence of his faith accepts Christ's baptism, and fulfils the promises and vows which he then took upon himself, working out his own salvation with fear and trembling, shall be saved. *But he that disbelieveth shall be condemned* (*ho dè apistesas katakrithesetais*). The condemnation anticipates the doom which will be incurred by continual unbelief.

Such evidences were necessary in the first dawn of Christianity, to attract attention to the doctrine; but our Lord's words do not mean that they were to be in perpetuity, as a continually recurring evidence of the truth of Christianity. St. Gregory (on ... 1 Corinthians 14:22) says, 'These signs were necessary in the beginning of Christianity. In order that faith might take root and increase, it must be nourished by miracle; for so even we, when we plant shrubs, only water them until we see that they are taking root, and when we see that they have rooted themselves, we cease to water them. And this is what St. Paul means where he says 'Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to the unbelieving' (... 1 Corinthians 14:22).' *In my name shall they cast out devils*. St. Mark, of all the evangelists, dwells most perhaps on this, as characteristic of our Lord's work, and as the evidence of his supreme dominion over the spiritual world. *They shall speak with new tongues*. This was the first intimation of the great miracle to be inaugurated on the day of Pentecost. The gift was continued but for a very limited time. *They shall take up serpents*. The instance of St. Paul at Melita (... Acts 28:3-5) would be familiar to St. Mark's readers. *And if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them*. There are some few traditionary notices of the fulfillment of this promise; as in the case of 'Justus Barsabas,' mentioned by Eusebius ... and of St. John, mentioned by St. Augustine. It may be observed of this passage, that no one could have interpolated it after the cessation of the signs to which it refers, which took place very early."

These comments reveal a rather strong doctrinal conviction about such issues as baptism and speaking in tongues. There is, in the context of these notes, no need to either voice agreement or disagreement to the Commentary's position on these points.

I do not believe that this text teaches that a person must undergo water baptism by immersion in order to be saved. Such doctrine would contradict other parts of New Testament teaching that salvation is by faith and nothing else. We could also take issue with *The Pulpit Commentary's* stand that speaking in tongues is no longer a gift of the Spirit that is valid for the present-day believer.

We see baptism as an indication of the fact that a decision to follow Christ has been made. Whether this is affirmed by water or not, should not be the issue. The sacrament of baptism as an indication of conversion is practiced in many churches. The more Calvinistic churches that practice infant baptism consider it to be an expression of belonging to God's covenant with believing parents that is applied to the children.

Mark mentions four signs that would accompany the preaching of the Gospel that Jesus promises: exorcism of demons, speaking in tongues, protection against poisoning in various forms and healing of the sick by laying on of hands. The Greek word used for "sign" is *semeion*, which, in most cases refers to something supernatural. The first time the Greek word is used is in the text: "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.' He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it

except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”⁴²⁹

R. Alan Cole, in *Mark*, observes about the mentions of signs in connection with the preaching of the message: “Here again is a great rule of the spiritual life; signs are to be given to those who believe, not primarily in order that they may believe. This was the ceaseless battle between the Pharisees and Jesus, with the Pharisees reiterating their demands for a sign, and Jesus equally adamant that no sign would be given to unbelief (8:11-12). Incidentally, the word used for ‘sign’ here is not used by Mark of Jesus’ miracles, although it is so used by John: ... this may also show a later date, and certainly suggests non-Markan authorship for the longer ending.

This promise is a word for the church; it is for those within, not for those outside. Every one of these evidential ‘signs,’ except possibly the drinking of lethal draughts, is recorded in the history of the early church in Acts. The speaking of *new tongues*, for instance, is frequently found from Pentecost onwards (Acts 2:4). For the rest, in Acts 16:18 Paul expels a demon; in Acts 28:5 he shakes off a snake into the fire; in Acts 28:8 he lays his hand on sick and heals them. Whether or not such spectacular manifestations were intended to be continuous in the life of the church, or to be restricted to this period, or sporadic throughout church history, must be decided in the light of the rest of the New Testament. In view of the uncertain textual evidence for this longer conclusion, and therefore its doubtful canonical status, no dogmatic assumptions should be made from this particular passage alone. If, as suggested, these verses are a sub-apostolic attempt to restore a lost ending to Mark, then we must assume that there was some known extra-biblical case of Christians drinking lethal draughts without harm; otherwise, there would have been no point in including the phenomenon here amid a list of other well attested miracles.”

Mark’s Gospel ends with a condensed history of Jesus’ ascension and present status as seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, directing and confirming the preaching of the Gospel by the disciples. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The closing verse of the Gospel could well serve as a very brief summary of the book of Acts.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary adds: “Jerome mentions certain Greek copies, which have the following remarkable addition to Mark 16:14, after these words-and reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he was raised up ... ‘And they confessed the charge, saying: This age is the substance of iniquity and unbelief, which, through the influence of impure spirits, does not permit the true influence of God to be apprehended. Therefore, even now, reveal thy righteousness.’”

Not much is known about the extent of the apostles’ preaching of the Gospel in the first century. We know about Paul’s desire to take the message to Spain.⁴³⁰ There is a tradition that Thomas traveled as far as India to preach. It took several centuries for Jesus’ vision to “preach the good news to all creation” to be put into practice. Some nineteenth century Christians caught the vision again and the burden to take the Gospel “from Jerusalem to Irian Jaya” came back to life. A group of Chinese Christians envision

⁴²⁹ Matt. 12:38-40

⁴³⁰ Rom. 15:24, 28

retracing “the silk road” and taking the Gospel back from China to Jerusalem. The sad truth is that at places where the Gospel had been preached and accepted, the church has grown cold or died and needs revival.