

MATTHEUS' GOSPEL

I. Author:

According to *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* the name Matthew is a contraction of Mattathias, meaning: "gift of Jehovah." The son of a certain Alphaeus surnamed Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). It is not known whether his father was the same as the Alphaeus named as the father of James the Less, but he was probably another."

Matthew calls himself Matthew in telling the story of his call in this Gospel.¹ Both Mark and Luke introduce Matthew to us as a tax collector by the name of Levi. Mark identifies him as "Levi son of Alphaeus."² All three Gospel record Jesus' words: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."³

Nelson's Bible Dictionary observes: "Matthew is an anonymous gospel. Like other gospel titles, the title was added in the second century A.D. and reflects the tradition of a later time. How, then, did the gospel acquire its name? Writing about A.D. 130, Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), records, 'Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew (that is, Aramaic) language, and each interpreted them as best he could.' Until comparative studies of the gospels in modern times, the church understood 'oracles' to refer to the first gospel and considered Matthew, the apostle and former tax collector (9:9; 10:3), to be the author. This conclusion, however, is full of problems. Our Gospel of Matthew is written in Greek, not Aramaic (as Papias records); and no copy of an Aramaic original of the gospel has ever been found. The Greek of the gospel cannot readily be translated back into Aramaic; and this strongly indicates that the gospel is not a Greek translation of an Aramaic original. Moreover, it is now generally agreed that Mark is the earliest of the four gospels and that the author of Matthew substantially used the Gospel of Mark in writing this gospel.

II. Time of writing:

The Fausset's Bible Dictionary observes: "As our Lord's words divide Acts (Acts 1:8) into its three parts, ('ye shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, and all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth': (1) the period in which the church was Jewish, Acts 1-11; (2) the period when it was Gentile with strong Jewish admixture; (3) the period when the Gentiles preponderated,) Matthew's Gospel answers to the first or Jewish period, ending about A.D. 41 AD, and was written probably in and for Jerusalem and Judea. The expression (Matt 27:7-8; 28:15) 'unto this day' implies some interval after Christ's crucifixion."

III. Characteristics:

Matthew carried the style of his former profession as a bookkeeper over into the way he wrote his Gospel. The material is arranged as figures on a balance sheet and the columns are grouped together according to topic. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is probably a compilation of sermons spoken at different places and at different times. Most of the healings are recorded together. The parables are grouped together in one chapter. *Nelson's Bible Dictionary* states: "Matthew offers the most systematic arrangement of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament, and the early church used it heavily for its instruction of converts. Because of its emphasis on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, Matthew is well suited as the opening book of the New Testament. In it the promises of God are recalled and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ is announced."

1. Cf. Matt.9:9-12 with Mark 2:14-17 and Luke 5:27-32.

2. Mark 2:14

3. Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31,32

Place in Synopsis:

The Easton's Bible Dictionary remarks: "As to the relation of the Gospels to each other, we must maintain that each writer of the synoptics (the first three) wrote independently of the other two, Matthew being probably first in point of time. Out of a total of 1071 verses, Matthew has 387 in common with Mark and Luke, 130 with Mark, 184 with Luke; only 387 being peculiar to itself." Although this suggests that the three were aware of each other's existence, it is difficult to prove that Matthew predated Mark or the other way around. Since Matthew was a member of the original group of disciples it is reasonable to assume that he wrote first and that Mark, who probably received his material through Peter, came upon the scene later. The question, however, is academic and it is of no spiritual importance in the study of God's Word.

Structure of the Gospel:

Nelson's Bible Dictionary states: "The Gospel of Matthew contains five main sections. Each section consists of stories of Jesus' life, samples of His preaching and teaching, and a concluding refrain, 'When Jesus had ended' (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The story of Jesus' birth (Matthew chaps. 1-2) and the account of his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion (chaps. 26-28) stand outside this framework; they introduce and conclude the story of Jesus.

Section one begins with Jesus' baptism by John, His temptation, and the beginnings of His Galilean ministry (chaps. 3-4). The Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7) follows; in it Jesus sets forth a new system of ethics, both individual and social, for the kingdom. Throughout the Sermon, Jesus contrasts the law, which was given by Moses, with the kingdom, which is present in Himself-showing the superiority of the kingdom. He highlights the contrast with two recurring phrases, 'You have heard that it was said to those of old...but I say to you.'

Section two begins with a series of miracles by Jesus (chaps. 8-9), continues with Jesus' teaching to His disciples concerning mission and suffering (chap. 10), and ends with the refrain (11:1).

Section three contains stories that emphasize the difference between the ways of the kingdom and the ways of the world (chaps. 11-12) and parables on the nature of the kingdom (chap. 13). The refrain is repeated in 13:53, thus concluding the section.

Section four features further miracles, debates, and conflicts from Jesus' ministry (chaps 14-17). It concludes with words of counsel directed by Jesus to His disciples about the Christian life (chap. 18). The section ends at 19:1. Section five is set in Jerusalem, and it recounts clashes between Jesus and the religious leaders (chaps. 19-22). In the discourses which follow, Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees (chap. 23), teaches of the end times (chap. 24), and tells three parables on judgment (chap. 25). The final refrain occurs in 26:1, and leads into the account of the betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus (chaps. 26-28).

The Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus' command to go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them in His name. He leaves His disciples with this assurance: 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (28:20)."

Purpose and Address of Matthew's Gospel:

Matthew, obviously, had Jewish readers in mind. He presents Jesus as the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the direct descendant from David. *Nelson's Bible Dictionary* states: "The Gospel of Matthew is full of clues that it was written to convince Jewish readers that Jesus is the Messiah. First, the author makes no attempt to translate or explain Jewish words and practices. Also, the gospel quotes more frequently from the Old Testament than does any other gospel. Most important, however, Jesus is portrayed as a descendant of the three greatest personalities of the Old Testament, although he surpasses them. Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham (1:2), the father of the faith.

In the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), Jesus appears as a royal teacher whose authority exceeds that of Moses, the founder of the faith. And Jesus fulfills the hopes of David, the greatest king of Israel. He is born in Bethlehem (mentioned five times in chap. 2), and like David he appears as a king (19:28). He is

frequently recognized as 'the son of David' (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 21:9,15), although in truth He is David's 'Lord' (22:41-46).

Matthew appealed to a Jewish audience, but not exclusively. The visit of the wise men from the (Gentile) East (2:1-12) hints of the gospel's rejection by the Jews and its acceptance by the Gentiles (21:43; also 4:15-16; 8:5-13; 12:18-21; 13:38). Furthermore the Great Commission-the command to 'make disciples of all the nations' (28:19) - indicates an interest beyond the confines of Judaism. We can conclude that Matthew was written to Jews and Jewish Christians to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. It also shows that the gospel does not lead to narrow Jewish concerns (chap. 23), but out into the Gentile world."

The theme of Matthew:

Nelson's Bible Dictionary states: Matthew's main subject is the 'kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God.' This kingdom is mentioned 51 times in the Gospel of Matthew, twice as often as in any other gospel. The kingdom is already here in Jesus (12:28), but it is not yet fulfilled (13:43; 25:34). The kingdom cannot be earned (19:23); it can be received only by those who recognize that they do not deserve it (5:3; 21:31). The kingdom extends like a fishing net, gathering people from every part of society (13:47), offering new life in the life-changing presence of God (8:11). The kingdom is more valuable than a precious gem (13:45-46), and it excludes any and all competitors for its allegiance (6:33). The kingdom of God means the rule or reign of God-in the entire universe, in the world, and in our hearts. The primary indication of the presence of the kingdom in the world is the transformation of life, both individually and socially. A person enters the kingdom not by saying the right words, but by doing 'the will of My father in heaven' (7:21)."

Outline of the Book:

As outline we approximately follow the one given in *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, augmented with my additional sub-sections:

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Part One: The Presentation of the King (1:1—4:11)

I. The Advent of the King 1:1—2:23

1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram,

4 Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,

5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse,

6 and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

7 Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa,

8 Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah,

9 Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,

10 Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah,

11 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

12 After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,

13 Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor,

14 Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud,

15 Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob,

16 and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

17 Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Chapter 2:1 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,

15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt

20 and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,

23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

The first thing we read about Jesus in the New Testament is that He was Jew. God chose Israel for the purpose of giving birth to His Son in this world. One cannot be more Jewish than being "the son of David, the son of Abraham."

Although it was God who prepared Jesus' birth in meticulous detail, the preparation of His coming was subject to all kinds of human emotions. The statement sound cut and dried: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob ..." but when we read Abraham's biography we realize that the promise of the birth of Isaac was the dominating factor of Abraham's life. True: "Isaac the father of Jacob," but not until Isaac prayed for his wife! We read: "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."¹ In the light of God's promise to Abraham that He would make his "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore,"² this is an amazing detail. The Hebrew text reads literally: "And Isaac entreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was entreated of him." That is a startling statement if we look at the end of the line, the birth of the Messiah.

Judah was not born without difficulty. Lea hoped to gain Jacob's affection by giving him several sons, but at the birth of Judah she stopped counting on his human love. We read: "She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'This time I will praise the LORD.' So she named him Judah. Then

1. Gen. 25:21

2. Gen. 22:17

she stopped having children.”¹ The name *Judah* means: “praise.” “I will praise the LORD” is a monument of surrender to Him who can satisfy all souls that crave for love.

The second remarkable feature in this register is the mention of the names of Tamar (v.3)², Rahab (v.5),³ Ruth (v.5)⁴ and Uriah’s wife – Bathsheba (v.6).⁵ Apart from Ruth, there is a scandal of immorality connected to all the women mentioned here. This genealogy foreshadows the saving power of Jesus Christ in whom all these fallen women were rehabilitated. It is difficult to deny the connection between the relationship of this previous genealogical history and the apparent dishonorable pregnancy of Maria. This facet of human failing is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in Jesus’ attitude to women with moral failures.

Luke describes for us the scene when Jesus is invited for a meal at the home of the Pharisee Simon and a woman of ill repute comes in and anoints his feet. We read: “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Simon, I have something to tell you.’ ‘Tell me, teacher,’ he said. ‘Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon replied, ‘I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.’ ‘You have judged correctly,’ Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.’ Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ The other guests began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’ ”⁶

John records another moving scene: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin.’ ”⁷

Although Matthew’s register corresponds with the record in II Kings 2:12vv. there remains some doubt about the question as to whether Rahab was actually the wife of Salmon (vv.4b,5). There appears to be a period of about 400 years between Rahab and Boaz. Bible scholars, therefore, believe that several generations have been omitted from the list. It is difficult to find a reason for such an omission. That this is not a mere oversight is obvious from a comparison with I Chron. 3:11-12, where it appears that Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah have been omitted also. An explanation for the latter may be that Ahaziah only ruled for

1. Gen. 29:35

2. See Gen. 38.

3. See Josh. 6:22-25.

4. See Ruth 4:18-22.

5. See II Sam. 12:24.

6. Luke 7:36-50

7. John 8:3-11

one year and that Ahaziah was the grandson of Jezebel, whose influence affected the royal family in Judah. Joash who miraculously stayed alive when his mother had all her other sons killed in order to ascend to the throne herself, shows his “gratitude” in murdering the prophet Zechariah. Amaziah committed idolatry with the gods of Edom. The relationship of these men with Jesus, the Messiah was neither physical, as the genealogy of Luke established, nor is it spiritual. They have nothing in common with the Savior of the world and they were not links in the chain of His birth.

There is another omission between Josiah and Jeconiah and also between Shealtiel and Zerubbabel. We learn from Jeremiah’s prophecy about King Jehoiachin that he would be the last one from the line of David to rule over Israel. We read: “Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants? Why will he and his children be hurled out, cast into a land they do not know? O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the LORD says: ‘Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah.’ ”¹ The fact that Jesus was not Joseph’s physical descendant is proof of the truth of this prophecy.

V.16 clarifies that this genealogy is the family tree of Joseph. Although Jesus was not Joseph’s child, He acquired the legal right to the throne of David by means of Joseph’s marriage to Mary.

The fourteen generations in which Matthew divides this record turn out to be only thirteen in the last section. Some Bible scholars assume that the reason for this is to leave a space for the name of Mary.

Matthew does not give us the details of Mary’s pregnancy and the birth of Jesus as Luke does in his Gospel. He deals with the event from the viewpoint of Joseph. Engagement to be married was, according to the Jewish law, as binding as marriage itself.

Matthew does not explain how Joseph learned about Mary’s pregnancy. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “That some communication had passed between him and his betrothed, directly or indirectly, on the subject, after she returned from her three months’ visit to Elizabeth, can hardly be doubted. Nor does the purpose to divorce her necessarily imply disbelief, on Joseph’s part, of the explanation given him. Even supposing him to have yielded to it some reverential assent-and the Evangelist seems to convey as much, by ascribing the proposal to screen her to the justice of his character-he might think it altogether unsuitable and incongruous in such circumstances to follow out the marriage.”

The fact that Joseph “did not want to expose her to public disgrace” suggests that he did not want to go through the ritual of the law on jealousy as prescribed in *The Book of Numbers*.² But for giving up Mary, Joseph had to take legal steps to effect the separation. Matthew’s description of Joseph as being righteous refers to his character. The Greek word *dikaïos*, “fair,” “impartial” refers to his character more than to his desire of justice being done. The text suggests that Joseph could not bear the thought of seeing Mary disgraced because he genuinely loved her. But he also did not believe that he could be the husband of a wife who had a child that was not his. Giving her a letter of divorce signed by a few trusted witnesses in a private ceremony, seemed to be the reasonable way.

The words “she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” suggests that this was the conclusion of the situation after it had been completely dealt with. We can hardly assume that Joseph understood immediately that Mary’s pregnancy was from God. This was the argument the angel used to convince Joseph to take Mary in marriage. If Joseph, as some Bible scholars believe, knew how Mary had become pregnant and that, because of that she could not be married to anyone for the rest of her life, why then would he change his mind when the angel tells him what he knew already? The way Matthew puts it, Joseph had to marry Mary “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” If that line of reasoning convinces Joseph, he must not have been aware of the fact before, or he had not believed what he had heard. We could hardly blame Joseph for the latter, could we?

1. Jer. 22:28-30

2. Num. 5:12-31

It could also be that Joseph suspected Mary of licentious conduct. In that case, his being righteous would mean that he did not want to be married to a girl who did not take the bonds of marriage seriously. It seems doubtful that, in case of a quiet divorce, Joseph would carry some personal blame. If Joseph had engaged in premarital sex with Mary, a secret divorce would have left her with the mess, which would have been a dastardly thing to do. In that case, by following the way of a secret divorce, Joseph would indicate that he had nothing to do with it. But when, as a result of his dream, he takes Mary to himself and puts her under his protection he shields her from what slanderous tongues may say. Joseph learned early what it meant to bear “the disgrace for the sake of Christ.”

The first legal act Joseph had to perform, as the adoptive father of Mary’s child, was to give the baby the name Jesus after he was born. A footnote in *The New International Version* states: “Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means the LORD saves.” When we read further: “because he will save his people from their sins,” we have proof that Jesus is the LORD who saves, that He is God.

The two most outstanding people in the Old Testament who bore the name Joshua were the one who succeeded Moses and led Israel into Canaan, and the high priest who stood between the people and God when Israel returned from captivity. Both were types of Christ. Jesus Christ leads us into God’s rest and, after His resurrection He became our high priest who intercedes for us before the Father. All of mankind was reconciled to God in Jesus’ death on the cross of Golgotha. But salvation from sin is only for those who accept God’s settlement on God’s terms. This salvation cannot be separated from the high priest’s intercession.

Matthew connects the message Joseph received from the angel while he dreamed with Isaiah’s prophecy: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”¹ The only difference in Matthew’s quote of Isaiah is in the addition of the word “they.” Matthew indicates that people will draw the conclusion for Jesus’ birth, life, teaching, acts, death and resurrection that “God is with us.” The mention of the two names Jesus and Immanuel refer to the incarnation of the Word. Yehoshuah is the Savior of those who accept Him as such. For people who refuse to believe in Jesus Christ the Name Jesus has no meaning whatsoever. Immanuel does not mean “God with us” in order to condemn us either. It is true that the awareness of God’s presence with bring awareness of sin with it. But, since Immanuel is mentioned here in connection with the Name Jesus, the judgmental feature of God’s presence is excluded. When God appeared to Moses, “The angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.”² “God with us” stands opposite everything that is against us. “If God is for us, who can be against us?”³ God is on our side to save us!

Joseph simply obeys the Lord’s command and takes Mary as his wife. V.25 indicates that the marriage was not consummated until after the birth of Jesus, which Matthew only mentions in passing. The wording suggests that Mary did not remain a virgin for the rest of her married life, as Roman Catholic theology maintains. It was Joseph who gave the name Jesus to his adopted Son, giving Him all the rights of His royal descent.

One of the reasons Matthew tells the story of the visit of the Magi is, undoubtedly, to prove from Micah’s prophecy, as quoted in 2:6, that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The first proof was given in 1:23 with the quotation from Isaiah, that the virgin would give birth to a son. This proof is reinforced by the circumstances in which the miracle was realized. Matthew purposely keeps the colors in the story somewhat blurred. There is no clear description of King Herod. We cannot deduct from this account whether it was Herod the Great, or the son: Herod Antipas. About the Magi we learn nothing except that they came to Jerusalem from the east, wherever that may have been. We also read that they saw a star. All the details are vague, merely given in outline form, in order to make the full light shine upon the prophecy and its fulfillment. That what makes the fulfillment so undeniable, however, is the people who are introduced in the

1. Isa. 7:14

2. Ex. 3:2

3. Rom. 8:31

story. Only the chief priests and scribes could be prejudiced, but they aren't. They do not seem to have any genuine interest in the subject, which keeps them above suspicion. Theologically, they are correct. They spout their knowledge as an automaton. When the right button is pushed, the right Scripture verse appears! The possibility, that the words they pronounce without thinking could have found their fulfillment, leaves them untouched.

We cannot say the same about King Herod. He understood more of what was happening than the priests and teachers of the law. The Magi may not have had any earthly inkling what their search was actually about; otherwise they would not have gone to Jerusalem. Nothing indicates that they understood the "king of the Jews" to be anything but a national figure. Herod's research by means of the priests and teachers of the law is an indication that he understood the spiritual dimensions of the event. This is what makes his behavior so specifically sinful. His reaction is not merely to having a possible rival; it is rebellion against God! Herod distinguished himself from the priests and teachers of the law in that he believed the law. He may not have known the Scriptures but when he was confronted with them he trembled. This indicates who his master was. As the Apostle James states: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder."¹

When Herod calls the Magi in for an audience, he is thoroughly prepared. It is clear why the meeting is held in secret. Any leaking of this conference could cause his dark and evil plans to fail. The Magi must have been rather naïf in that they did not think this secrecy strange. There are other features in this story that ought to have caught their attention. The fact that "King Herod ... was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" ought to have told them something. The people in Jerusalem were not only ignorant, they were "disturbed." It wasn't merely that they didn't know, they didn't want to know. "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."² Herod's "careful search" ought to have raised the Magi's suspicion, as his desire to "go and worship him." If he had had honest intentions, he would have given his own servants to charge to find the place. "After they had heard the king" may express some doubt on the part of the Magi, but that doesn't come through clearly in the text. In their experience in Jerusalem, the Magi's faith must have been sorely tested. But their following of the star was a definite act of faith. When they thought to have reached their goal, they were in for another test that could have brought on disappointment and discouragement. The fact that they were overjoyed when they saw their star again betrays some feeling of doubt. It is always a tremendous experience, when faced with the deception of the so-called hard realities of life, to see that the light of God's revelation keeps on shining.

In the meantime, Mary, Joseph and the child have moved from the stable into a house. Jesus' presentation in the temple must have taken place between this move. It is quite possible that the people who lived close to the inn made place for the new family, after realizing that a baby was born during the night. Or it could be that the business of the census had passed and place had become available again.

There is something very touching in the spontaneous worship of these Magi. Without fully understanding it, they faced the greatest test of their lives. God put them to the test, ignorant Gentiles that they were. They had searched the stars for spiritual values they could not find on earth. God had forbidden the Israelites to engage in that kind of activity. We read in Deuteronomy: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft."³ If we cannot find eternal values in life on earth, searching for them in the stars will bring us into demonic territory. Most people do not seek wisdom in the stars because they have not found it on earth; they refuse to recognize that God reveals Himself in heaven and on earth. Maybe even more on earth than in heaven! The Apostle Paul states: "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the

1. James 2:19

2. John 1:10,11

3. Deut. 18:10

knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”¹ But these people were hungry and thirsty for the living God. That is the reason God intervene radically and made His star to shine for them. The reality of their longing for real values in life is demonstrated in their reaction when they first saw the star and then when they see the child. They recognized Him as the light of the world. After much searching they had arrived at the beginning of all wisdom: the knowledge of the Lord.

They opened their treasures of gold, incense and myrrh. But what were those gifts in comparison with what they received themselves! What can we give to God in exchange for what God gives to us? That realization in itself is already worth more than all the gold in the world. It is wonderful that the Magi recognized the eternal, omnipotent God in this little baby. How embarrassing for Israel that these Gentiles found what Israel proclaimed to seek!

We could call the Magi's return home symbolic. A human being cannot discover and found that for which God has brought him into the world without being changed and becoming a new creature. If our heart has found its rest in God we can no longer continue on the way we always traveled. God's warning not to return to Herod may not have come to them as a surprise.

Reading the following report about the new family's flight to Egypt and the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, the question arises: "Could God not have done this any better?" For those of us who confess God to be the Almighty, all-wise, the One who only does what is right, perfect and good, the answer must be "no!" But the fact that God allowed Mary, Joseph and His Son to flee without defending Him, and that He does nothing to prevent the slaughter of innocent babies, even though we believe that this caused no divine panic in heaven, does not make it any easier for us to accept.

One consoling thought in connection with this is that, if these events make our stomach turn, our human emotions must be an echo of divine suffering, of what God must have felt Himself regarding these matters. That these happenings did not leave Him untouched is obvious from the prophetic word that rings throughout the ages, the lament of Rachel. We read in Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.'"² Centuries earlier God identified Himself with the sorrow of Jacob's wife and with Israel.

The story also proves that Jesus was totally human. God did not give Him any protection He did not give to any other human being. When the Word became flesh it came into a demon-possessed world, in the midst of the enemy camp as we all do.

God preached the Gospel to Herod by the mouth of the Magi and the scribes. But this did not put any restraint on him. God left him with a choice and with full responsibility for his acts. This fact means total justification for God. It was not God who ordered the massacre of infants in Bethlehem; He allowed it to happen and He intervened in order to prevent the worst. The full responsibility of this crime stays with Herod, this incarnation of Satan. Such fruits do not grow on God's tree of life; they are the poisonous parasite growths on the tree of sin.

These reflections may not give us a complete answer to our question. As long as we are here on earth, we may never be given a full understanding of the mystery of evil and the laws that determine God's attitude toward it. What will keep us from doubt and despair is faith in God's perfect character. We do believe in a God who cannot make any mistakes, who controls and understands everything, and who will always make those decisions that will lead us to the restoration of perfection along the shortest way. That is the goal of God's decree.

Returning to Matthew's quotation of Jeremiah's prophecy, we saw already that Matthew's primary goal is to prove that the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Sometimes it seems as if Matthew takes verses out of their context. In Jeremiah's prophecy, Rachel weeps because of the Babylonian captivity.³ Hosea was speaking about Israel's exodus from Egypt when he said: "When Israel

1. Rom. 1:28

2. Jer. 31:15

was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”¹ The next verse in Hosea, “But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me”² can hardly be applied to the Lord Jesus. What Matthew does in the way he uses Old Testament quotations is either irresponsible or it is a totally new way of using prophecy. If the former were the case, Matthew would only go by the sound of the words without paying attention to the original meaning of the texts. In that case his handling of the Old Testament can hardly be considered to be proof at all. That would make the Gospel of Matthew worthless. But if this approach to the Son of God does constitute proof it is, at the same time, a lesson in interpretation of prophecy. The proof then is not meant to convince the skeptics but to guide those who believe in the Messiah into the mystery of the three, or perhaps even, four-dimensional reality of the written Word of God. Matthew takes us to the threshold of a world of wonder in which only the Holy Spirit can be our guide.

Looking at Scripture in this light, it appears that in all God did for Israel in the Old Testament, He had His eye on His Son. Jesus’ flight to Egypt and His return is not a shadowy repetition of the original exodus of Israel from Egypt. To the contrary! Israel’s exodus foreshadowed the reality of Christ. That is the theme of the Bible; what happened to Israel are variations on the theme. In other words, all Old Testament events would have no meaning without the coming of Jesus Christ into this world.

The same is true about the massacre of infants in Bethlehem. Satan’s priority was not Israel, but Christ. The devil did not envision Israel’s destruction in the Babylonian captivity or in Bethlehem’s massacre; he wanted to obstruct the incarnation and its consequences.

King Herod probably did not live long after his crime in Bethlehem. According to Roman dating, he died in 4 A.D. If we put the birth of Christ at 6 B.C. and if we suppose that, since the children who were two years old or younger were killed, there probably was a lapse of time of approximately two years between the birth of Christ and the massacre. This would mean that Herod died only a few months later. Even if we put Jesus’ birth at 4 B.C., and we suppose that the two years were safety margin set by Herod, his death must have occurred shortly after the calamity. God did not leave Herod much time of grace.

The angel tells Joseph “those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” This suggests that it was more than Herod’s death alone that opened the way for the family’s return home. It could include those who carried out the command, but we know nothing about that.

Twice Matthew mentions the fact that Joseph dreamed (three times if we include v.13). The Psalmists states: “[God] grants sleep to those he loves.”³ Jesus owed much to his stepfather because the latter slept well! God’s way of dealing with humans may sometimes seems very strange to us.

Comparing Matthew’s rendering of Jesus’ early life with the account in Luke’s Gospel, we see that Matthew throws a different light on Joseph’s decision to settle in Nazareth than Luke does. Luke, not only omits the flight to Egypt, but from his version we could not deduct that there was any question as to whether the family would go to Nazareth or not. On the other hand, Matthew never reveals that Nazareth was the original place of residence for Joseph and Mary. Fitting the two accounts together, we conclude that Joseph asked himself whether he ought to settle in Judea or go back to Nazareth. We do not read anything about Joseph’s motives, but we do read what God’s motives were. Nazareth was not a place that would give people respect and status in society. When Philip called Nathanael, the latter remarked: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”⁴ Joseph may have asked himself whether a person who possesses gold, myrrh and incense ought not to live in a place that was more in accordance to his dignity. They also owned a donkey! It could be that Joseph had bought a house in Bethlehem and that he wanted to return to it. Whatever the case, there were two things that helped Joseph make up his mind. He heard that “Archelaus was reigning in Judea

3. See Jer. 31:15-17.

1. Hos. 11:1

2. Hos. 11:2

3. Ps. 127

4. John 1:46

in place of his father Herod,” which was the reason he considered that area unsafe. God also warned him not to go to Judea. But God’s specific reason for directing the family to Nazareth was to give His Son the nickname of “Nazarene.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: “The best explanation of the origin of this name appears to be that which traces it to the word [neetser], in Isa 11:1 - the small ‘twig,’ ‘sprout,’ or ‘sucker,’ which the prophet there says ‘shall come forth from the stem (or rather ‘stump’) of Jesse, the branch which should fructify [yipreh] from his roots.’ The little town of Nazareth-mentioned neither in the Old Testament nor in Josephus-was probably so called from its insignificance-a weak twig in contrast to a stately tree; and a special contempt seemed to rest upon it – ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1:46) - over and above the general contempt in which all Galilee was held, from the number of Gentiles that settled in the upper territories of it, and, in the estimation of the Jews, debased it. Thus, in the providential arrangement by which our Lord was brought up at the insignificant and opprobrious town called Nazareth, there was involved, first, a local humiliation; next, an allusion to Isaiah’s prediction of His lowly, twig-like upspringing from the branchless, dried-up stump of Jesse; and yet further, a standing memorial of that humiliation which ‘the prophets,’ in a number of the most striking predictions, had attached to the Messiah.”

The same reasons God had to let His Son be born in a stable and let Him grow up in a surrounding that would label Him as despised. Isaiah prophesied about Him: “He was despised and rejected by men.”¹ This lowly position in life, this ‘low silhouette’ was to be part of Christ’s suffering. From the time Jesus became aware of His identity and call until the high point of His work as redeemer, He bore the stamp of Nazareth. The doctors of the law rejected Him on the basis of His origin. We read in John’s Gospel: “On hearing his words, some of the people said, ‘Surely this man is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘He is the Christ.’ Still others asked, ‘How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?’ Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.’”²

There is a deeper sense in the fact that Jesus was rejected because He came from Nazareth. It is hard for man to be deflated by the sting of the despicable incarnate Word. God has a way of turning our dignity upside-down.

II. The Announcer of the King 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea

2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

1. Isa. 53:3

2. John 7:40-44,52

10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

12 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."

1. John's ministry, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy – 3:1-6

Matthew limits himself to pinpoint the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry as "In those days." Luke's Gospel gives us the exact time as "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas."¹

John's choice of place to minister to the people in preparation for the coming of the Messiah defies all principles of expediency. No preacher would choose to put his pulpit in a place that people prefer to avoid. The choice of the desert is highly symbolic. There were no deserts in paradise, but after sin entered the world, our planet suffered the consequences of man's wrong choice. The fact that John's ministry became so popular and effective challenges all logic. It has been said: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap, than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door."² The world did beat a path to John's door in the desert of Judah! John had something that the hungry masses knew they needed.

We find Isaiah's prophecy that was fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist in Isaiah 40:3-5, the full text of which reads: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' " Isaiah's text leaves open a double interpretation of "the voice in the desert." In John's Gospel, where the evangelist deals with the same incident of John's ministry, John answers the question: "What do you call yourself?" with: "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "³ The message is, of course, more than the voice. John's answer is proof of his humility. Isaiah's words give John's ministry the full authority of the Old Testament. They put the stamp of divine inspiration on John's words, the purpose of which is to give to Jesus' coming the greatest possible introduction. Few people in Israel were inwardly ready to welcome the Son of God; Simeon and Anna among them. Most people were too busy with themselves to be able to recognize the Lord when He came.

John's dress code and Spartan lifestyle seems to have been an object lesson to convey to the people that he fulfilled the prophecy that Elijah would introduce the coming of the Messiah. When King Ahaziah had an accident and wanted to consult an idol to know if he would recover, Elijah intercepted the messengers and told them that the king would die. The messengers did not know Elijah so the king questioned them. We read: "The king asked them, 'What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?' They replied, 'He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist.' The king said, 'That was Elijah the Tishbite.' "⁴ Malachi predicted the coming of John the Baptist in the last verse of the Old Testament: "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."⁵

1. See Luke 3:1, 2

2. Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

3. John 1:23

4. II Kings 1:7, 8

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on John's diet of locusts and wild honey: "Akris (singular) may either signify the insect called the locust, which still makes part of the food in the land of Judea; or the top of a plant. Many eminent commentators are of the latter opinion; but the first is the most likely. The Saxon translator has grasshoppers. [Wild honey.] Such as he got in the rocks and hollows of trees, and which abounded in Judea: see 1 Sam 14:26. It is most likely that the dried locusts, which are an article of food in Asiatic countries to the present day, were fried in the honey, or compound in some manner with it." Locusts were called "food of the poor."

God knows that our way is crooked because of our egoistic attitude in life. Words that typically describe our inward condition are: desert, chasm, mountain and hill, rough, rugged. In Luke's Gospel we read that part of John's ministry was to heal broken family relationships: "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."¹

John's message was a call to repentance. The key to the mystery of salvation is forgiveness of sin. This was the purpose of John's baptism. Luke calls it: "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."² Baptism and repentance are essential elements; without them there cannot be any knowledge of salvation. Zechariah sang at John's birth that the purpose of his ministry would be "to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."³

Repentance means in inward change of direction. The Greek word *metanoeo*, "repentance," means: "reversal." It demonstrates itself in our moving toward God instead of moving away from Him. Baptism constitutes an outward indication of an inward decision. Baptism is a requirement, both for psychological reasons of as well as for a testimony to others. As human beings, we need something we will be able to fall back on. We do well to burn our bridges behind us as we turn to God. It is detrimental to our faith if we allow a door of escape to remain open behind us. It is also dangerous to hide our conversion and not to testify openly about it. This baptism of repentance was for the purpose of receiving forgiveness of sin. John's ministry of baptism differs from the baptism, as we know it at present, in that the forgiveness that it brought about was only a shadow of the reality to come. The reality of forgiveness can only be experienced in Jesus Christ. John's call to repentance was God's last Old Testament call.

2. Judgment of hypocrisy – 3:7-10

In Luke's Gospel the words "You brood of vipers!" seems to be addressed to the public in general, but Matthew makes clear that John zooms in on the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming to be baptized. To talk like this to the spiritual leaders of that day must have been a greater shock than we can imagine in our day of free speech. Matthew does not give us a full picture of John's preaching. What we read is mostly the shocking parts of it. The positive and beautiful part of what John said is left out in this Gospel. John's Gospel, for instance reports: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."⁴ What John says here is directed to the ordained ministers. Although John seems to lump all Pharisees and Sadducees together in his condemnation, we may assume that they were not all equally guilty. But those who rise to the level of leadership expose themselves automatically to more severe criticism. With greater respectability comes a greater moral demand. It is part of human fallen nature, however, to compensate for a lack of surrender to the Lord by a

5. Mal. 4:5,6

1. Luke 1:17

2. See Luke 3:3.

3. Luke 1:77

4. John 1:29-31

show of outward formality. It is also true that it is easier to take Pharisees and Sadducees under fire for the sins they commit than to condemn oneself.

“Brood of vipers” is meant to be an insult. It refers to someone’s origin. Jesus basically said the same thing when He said to the people: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”¹ The viper is one of the venomous species of snakes. Its venom is like the sinfulness of human nature. The bright and beautiful colors of the snake hide a deadly poison. Baptism does not cover sin of the unrepentant. If there has been no conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit, baptism in water is meaningless. If baptism is not backed up by a surrender of the soul, it becomes a devilish sham. For God there is no neutral ground. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “If anyone does not love the Lord, that person is cursed.”²

John exclaims: “Who warned you to flee God’s coming judgment?” The only way to escape God’s judgment is to submit to it before it happens. The person who condemns himself takes the first step on the road to conversion. A healthy conversion begins in the will. It is an act of surrender that changes the course of a life. But Satan never gives up what he has in his hands without putting up a fight. If the human will surrenders, the fight is won in principle. Sometimes, however, we try to accommodate to pressure without giving ourselves up. There is a form of piety that falls short of complete and unconditional surrender. If we surrender our will to God, the Holy Spirit will take responsibility to overcome the rest of our resistance. This may be a time-consuming process, but it is a course of victory. This victory will show itself in our bearing fruit. Spiritual fruit is an outward demonstration of an inward change. This is not the same as baptism being the outward sign of an inward decision. Baptism is the result of a human decision, bearing fruit is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. If there is no fruit, it means that there has been no real inward change. Some conversions are a fake.

In saying “We have Abraham as our father,” people appeal to God’s covenant with His friend Abraham and with the people who were born of Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation.³ This covenant cannot be separated from Abraham’s faith. To appeal to God’s covenant with Abraham without having Abraham’s faith in God constitutes an empty formula. Our human dignity is lost if it is not derived from a personal relationship with God. If Christ lives in us, the heritage of our forefathers is gain. But if we do not have an intimate and believing fellowship with God in the present, the faith of the fathers of the past will do us no good at all.

How do we interpret John’s statement that “God can raise up children for Abraham?” It is easier to believe that God can turn Abraham’s children into stone than that He would turn stone into Abraham’s children. Matthew leaves us without explanation. We may assume that the words are a mere condensation of a longer speech in which the details would have thrown some light on the issue. As it stands now, stones turned into Abraham’s children could not literally be called Abraham’s children.

John compares Israel to a fruit tree that fails to bear fruit. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells a parable that emphasizes God’s grace, more than John does here. We read: “Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ‘⁴ The decision to cut down the tree has already been made, otherwise the ax would not be lying at the roots of the tree. Judgment is already there. Jesus shows in His parable that, in the time between the bringing

1. John 8:44

2. I Cor. 16:22 (New Living Translation).

3. See Gen. 12:2,3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27.

4. Luke 13:6-9

of the ax and the cutting down of the tree, someone pleads for postponement. It is God who planted the tree. This is not about a weed. The tree is an image of the person who wants to be converted, who says he wants to be baptized. Woe to that person if the tree does not produce any fruit, especially in the extra year that is given to him!

Matthew does not record the question, “What should we do then?”¹ asked by the crowd, the tax collectors and the soldiers. John’s answer sounds so simple that we could conclude that the question was actually redundant. That may be the reason Matthew omits it. A change in our relationship with God will inevitably bring a change in our inter-human relationships. Every tree knows what fruit it is supposed to bear. But in order to bear fruit the tree has to be restored to its original purpose. In order for that to happen, the Holy Spirit will have to enter the human life. Only the Holy Spirit can produce the fruit that God wants the tree to bear.

3. Baptism with the Holy Spirit – 3:11,12

John says: “I baptize you with water for repentance” as if it is an everyday matter that is without any value for spiritual purposes. It is as if John wants to draw the attention away from himself by saying: “All I do is baptize you with water.” This is said in the same vein as saying: “I am the voice of someone who calls.”² John puts all the stress upon the real baptism, which is the baptism with the Holy Spirit of which water baptism is merely an image. The Greek word *baptizo* literally means “to submerge,” or “to soak.” It was used to describe the dying of cloth. The material is not only dipped in the dye but it is saturated with it to the point where it acquires the color of the dye. A human being, who is baptized in the Holy Spirit, is being drenched by the Spirit of God. That is the way John describes the coming and the work of Jesus Christ as the One who comes to baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The result of this baptism is a separation between grain and chaff. The Holy Spirit will separate the content from the empty hull, fruit from mere outward manifestation. The author of Psalm One uses this image in comparing the righteous to a tree that bears fruit and the wicked who is like chaff that the wind blows away.³

The combination of Spirit and fire stands for both the bearing of fruit and the judgment of the fruit as well as for the condemnation of the chaff. Fire consumes that which cannot hold up in fire.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the person of Jesus Christ. There cannot be any fruit or any putting away of that which is old without Him. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is nothing else but the full manifestation of Christ in us, the hope of glory.

John’s humble opinion about himself proves that he must have had a clear insight into the glory of Jesus’ ministry. He acknowledges Jesus’ superiority over him and he recognizes that he is less than the lowest slave. Our vision of God will always demonstrate itself in what we think of ourselves. If we think highly of ourselves we demonstrate that we have little concept of the glory of God. As the Apostle Paul states: “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.”⁴

III. The Approval of the King 3:13—4:11

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

1. Luke 3:10

2. John 1:23

3. Ps. 1:3,4

4. I Cor. 8:2,3

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Chapter 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.

6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

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; 6 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.' ' "1

According to Matthew, John tried to dissuade Jesus from being baptized by him. We get the impression from Matthew's account that John knew Jesus at this point. But in John's Gospel we read that John said: "I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."² This does not mean that John did not know Jesus at all. After all, they were related to each other and they may have met earlier in life. It could be that they had moved apart over the years. It could also be that John had never recognized Jesus as the Christ until this point. It is also possible that John was taken aback by the fact that Jesus had no sins to confess to him. We may assume that every baptismal candidate made a brief confession of sin to John before being baptized. When Jesus said to have no sin, John must have believed Him, saying: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" And so John realized that this was the man whose coming he had been preparing. John's effort to initially keep Jesus from being baptized was a purely human one. It was not inspired by the Holy Spirit. Throughout Jesus' life

1. Heb. 10:5-7

2. John 1:31

on earth Satan tried to influence Jesus through the people who surrounded Him, trying to make Him deviate from the course of life He had set.

Jesus' answer may have sounded incomprehensible to John. But he obeyed and baptized Jesus. Looking back upon this moment, John realized that this was the highlight of his life and ministry. This particular baptism put all other baptisms in the shadow.

What did Jesus mean, when He said: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." The use of "us" makes it unusual. It may mean "a plural of majesty," but it seems more logical to assume that Jesus engages John here in the fulfillment of all righteousness. Every baptism takes two persons: one who baptizes and one who is being baptized. One cannot baptize oneself. In Jesus' baptism, John is as important as Jesus. The one who baptizes is usually more than the one who is baptized. In that sense, Jesus' baptism is part of His humiliation. Baptism in itself is never the fulfillment of all righteousness. But inasmuch as it is the entrance to Jesus' ministry of life, death and resurrection it is the beginning of this fulfillment.

Baptism was not a ritual prescribed by the law, as was circumcision. Jesus' baptism, therefore, was not in fulfillment of the law. The righteousness mentioned here was not the righteousness of the law. That is the reason Jesus speaks of "all righteousness." The Law of Moses was not the complete expression of God's will; it was only part of it. The law was part of God's righteousness. Keeping the law would never lead to fulfill all righteousness. Neither does breaking the law stand for all unrighteousness. In His ministry, Jesus attacks the whole complex of sin and all the damage it has done to God's creation. He fulfills all of God's decree of salvation and restoration.

It almost sounds ridiculous that the Lord speaks about "us" in connection with this. He says to John: "You and I, John." Yet, John was a link that could not be missed. This "us" is still important at present in the working out of this fulfillment. When God tackles the problem of a world in rebellion, He says to us: "You and I are doing this!"

Immediately following this baptism, the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, came down upon Jesus. Luke mentions in his Gospel that this happened "And as he was praying."¹ We do not read what Jesus prayed. Jesus may have used the words of Psalm Forty: "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. I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD."²

Three marvelous things happen during this prayer: heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, recognizable to all, and a voice was heard. The fact that this all happened during Jesus' prayer is an indication of the caliber of that prayer. It happened "as he was praying." Mark states that the heaven was being torn open.³ This suggests that there was an audible noise as of something that was torn apart violently. This reminds us of Isaiah's prayer: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!"⁴ God did rend the heavens and came down, but neither the mountains, nor the people trembled. It could be that the people standing there did not observe the miracle but that it was only visible to Jesus and John. For John it was the sign he had been waiting for. Jesus' baptism may not have had much significance for those who stood around and watched it. What this must have meant for Jesus is difficult to put in words. His baptism was an act of consecration as a holocaust, "a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD."⁵ These three signs constituted divine approval of Jesus' act of surrender.

1. Luke 3:21

2. Ps. 40:7-9

3. Mark 1:10

4. Isa. 64:1

5. Lev. 1:9

Jesus lived in this demon-possessed world by faith like every child of God. The tearing of heaven means a rip in the dominion of the Evil One. The Spirit of God knocks a breach in the iron curtain of the silent planet. Then the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. We could ask: “Why in this way?” If the Son of God was born in this world, why must there be a moment in His adult life at which the Father bound Himself to the Son in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit? We must hold on to the fact that what God does is always perfect. It could not have happened in any other or better way. On the one hand, there had to be a time of youth and adolescence in Jesus’ sinless life, lived in harmony with the will of the Father, but without the complete control of the Spirit of God. There had to be a process of development into personality and will. God could not have been satisfied with a surrender, based on an immature decision of the will. On the other hand, there cannot be a being filled with the Spirit without a complete surrender of the “I.” Whether the “I” is a sinful “I” or a sinless one, makes no difference to the principle of the matter. This being filled with the Spirit of God was also meant to be an equipping for the ministry. No filling with the Holy Spirit is ever meant to be only for the joy of it.

Lastly, the life of Jesus must, in every respect, be the model of the man after God’s own heart. All the things that happened to Jesus are the means God puts at the disposal of every one of His children. Jesus had no secret drawers from which He could take power or help that is not available to us.

Then there is the voice from heaven. Three times during Jesus’ life on earth this voice is heard, first at His baptism, then during the transfiguration,¹ and finally at the eve of His death.² Initially the voice addresses Jesus personally, but then the audience widens. At the mount of transfiguration it addresses the three disciples who are there and at the close of Jesus’ ministry on earth, the large crowd standing around Jesus, heard it. In this whole event Matthew looks through the eyes of John the Baptist.

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” are perhaps the most beautiful words ever spoken. They belong to heaven and they come down from heaven to earth. This is a declaration of love by the eternal God to His Son, another Person, who is no less eternal. The fact that human ears hear them does not diminish their value. We often believe that the absolute value of something is determined by the value we attribute to it. “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” It isn’t! We believe that a flower in the desert or an edelweiss on a rock that is inaccessible is a waste of beauty. Absolute values are values that God considers absolute. If God had spoken these words on planet Mars or in the depth of the universe where no human penetrates, they would not have been any less eternal or glorious. The big difference here is that the Son Himself has human ears. That is what determines our relationship to these words. This greatest of all declarations of love is addressed to a human being, to a man, to the only one who ever earned to have the title “Man.” Anyone who has a relationship with this Man partakes of the value of these words. There are in the Old Testament some people who had opened themselves so much to God that they are called a “friend of God.” The title “friend” is especially applied to Noah and Abraham, and synonyms are used for some others.³ This friendship is ours inasmuch as we are in Christ.

In these words the Father identifies Himself with the Son: “This is my Son.” It is clear that this is not an act of adoption, as if this statement takes Jesus of Nazareth and makes Him God, although He is man. It is a revelation of His natural relationship to God. This is not the acquisition of another identity, but the affirmation of an existing one. In doing this, the Father follows the Jewish tradition of adoption of sons. The Father declares officially that the period of tutelage is over and that the Son enters into possession of His rights as His Father’s Son.

The Father’s heart of love is expressed in the words “whom I love.” God is love and this statement proves that there is nothing here to put any restrictions or limitations to the full stream of this love. If the first part of the statement pertains to the legal relationship between the Father and the Son, the second part expresses the character of the relationship. The Father repeats here, almost verbatim, what He had said

1. Matt. 17:5

2. John 12:28

3. See Num. 12:7; Dan. 10:11.

centuries earlier to Abraham: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”¹ But Abraham’s love for Isaac, as our love for our children, could only be a vague reflection of this love of the Father for His Son. All human love is a copy of the original!

Thus begins Jesus’ ministry on earth with this demonstration of the Father’s love for His Son and it will end with the manifestation of the Son’s love for the Father. That this happened, not on the planet Mars, but on our planet, at a place near the Mediterranean coast, is proof of God’s love for this world. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”²

When the Father says about the Son “with him I am well pleased” He expresses divine delight in what the Son is doing. The Greek word used is *eudokeo*, which has the meaning of “approving” or “being delighted.” Matthew uses it elsewhere in a quotation of Isaiah’s prophecy about the Messiah: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom *I delight*; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.”³ This delight was, undoubtedly, evoked by the surrender Jesus demonstrated in His baptism. We read also about Jesus’ years as a youngster: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in *favor* with God and men.”⁴ There is nothing that stirs up so much God’s pleasure as an act of conscious and complete surrender to the will of God, our Creator.

There is a difference in the sequence of Jesus’ temptations in the desert in the record Matthew and Luke present about the incident. Matthew reports the temptation to turn stone into bread, throwing Himself down from the roof of the temple to test God’s willingness to save His life and the splendor of the world in exchange of worshipping Satan. Luke places this last one before the second. It is impossible to determine the exact order of temptations. It is possible that Luke’s chronology is the correct one and that Matthew follows a psychological succession. The interesting question is how the report of the details of temptation was received. There were, obviously, no witnesses and Jesus must have told His experiences Himself to His disciples. That would give the quotation of Scripture verses as Jesus used them to defeat the enemy an educational character.

The desert in which the temptation took place must have been the desert of Judah. All the synoptic Gospels emphasize the fact that Jesus went into the desert, this place of solitude, under the strong influence of the Holy Spirit. Matthew states that the Spirit led Him there for the specific purpose of being tempted. We are not allowed to seek temptation and we may assume that Jesus did not seek it either, but that the Spirit allowed Him to be tested. Jesus’ purpose for withdrawing for a certain period from public life was probably to reflect and prepare Himself for the ministry that lay ahead. He must have felt a strong need for fellowship with the Father. But the Spirit’s intent was a power confrontation between Jesus and the enemy. That explains the emphasis on the Spirit’s leading in this case.

The very fact that testing occurred, ought to give us some insight in the secret of Jesus’ life. Only faith can be tested. Jesus’ life in this world, His relationship with the Father, and the effect of His ministry were all founded on the basis of faith. The fact that Jesus had no access to any source of power that is not at our disposal makes His temptation so relevant to us. We can identify with Jesus’ experience here and it ought to draw us closer to Him.

It seems that only the end of the temptation is recorded for us. Both Mark and Luke make us understand that Jesus’ fasting and being tempted lasted forty days.⁵ The testing was more relentless than it appears at first sight. Apparently, Christ saw no purpose to reveal the details of this forty-day temptation to His disciples.

1. Gen. 22:2

2. John 3:16

3. Matt. 12:18; Isa. 42:1

4. Luke 2:52

5. See Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2.

We must remember that it was Jesus' faith that was being tested. That means that Jesus' consciousness of being the Son of God was based on faith, not on tangible evidence. Two of the three temptations pertain to Jesus' identity as the Son of God. At the moment of His baptism, the voice from heaven had rung loud and clear "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We can hardly assume that Jesus based His conviction of being God's Son upon this revelation. If He had not known to be the Son of God before His baptism, why would He have come to be baptized? The heavenly voice merely affirmed what Jesus knew already by faith. If Jesus' conviction had been based on anything but faith, the revelation from heaven would have been redundant. And if faith had not been the basis of Jesus' call to being the Messiah, the devil would have had no reason to attack Him at this point.

The way Jesus grew up as a human being, going through all the developments from birth to adulthood, physically, emotionally and spiritually, deserve a separate study. As in every human being, Jesus must have gone through stages of growing awareness, discovering more and more about Himself. His mother may have provided Him with the information about her supernatural pregnancy, the message of the angel, the shepherds and the magi. Jesus must have discovered at one point that the absence of a sinful nature set Him apart of His peers. David's prophecy, "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' "1 must have had a decisive impact upon Him in the process of discovering His identity. All this grew in Him within the limitations of human consciousness.

Now we are at the point where the devil believes he has found a weak spot on which he can launch his attack. When the forty-day fast has left Jesus faint and exhausted, he whispers: "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus must have been susceptible to temptation. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin."² Our thoughts go back to the original temptation when Satan tempted Eve and Adam. Jesus had several great advantages over Eve, but it was not the fact that He was the Son of God. His advantage was in His recognition of the enemy and in His knowledge of the lessons of history. His greatest advantage, however, was that He had already eaten from the tree of life before Satan offered Him the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In His baptism, Jesus had clearly placed Himself at the God's side. When Satan tempted Eve, she stood, so to speak, in the middle. Ever since she fell in sin there is no longer a middle position. Only those who believe are now tempted; the devil will let the unbelievers sleep.

The way Satan approaches this temptation of Christ is very sly. There are various hidden traps in his suggestion that Jesus would turn stone into bread. First of all there is Jesus' hunger. God had kept food from Him for forty days. Breaking this fast by Himself, Jesus would have denied that God takes care of His Son. It takes a lot of faith to say: "your Father knows what you need,"³ while not receiving anything yourself for forty days. Secondly, "If you are the Son of God..." calls for a challenging comparison between the vision of heavenly things during the baptism and the actual circumstances in the desert. Satan confronts Jesus with "the hard reality" of His starving body, saying "What? You are the Son of God? You are a human being and a starving one at that!"

The devil wished that Jesus would try to prove to him that He is God's Son, because any effort to prove would be a sign of unbelief. The way in which the question is presented suggests that Satan believes that Jesus is God's Son, but Jesus Himself may have problems accepting the fact in His human state. So giving proof of the fact by performing a simple miracle of changing stone into bread would give Him the psychological boost He needed. Satan himself performs the miracle often in the opposite direction!

The way Jesus answers this temptation has become a classic example for all who have to struggle with the enemy in one way or another. Jesus does not answer the devil's slyness. He does not react to the

1. Ps. 40:6-8

2. Heb. 4:15

3. Matt. 6:8

suggestion that His faith of being the Son of God needs a boost. Having accepted that fact by faith, all the proof needed is there. The poison is in the word “if.” There is no “If I am the Son of God,” only: “I am the Son of God.” Jesus gives proof of the fact that He had completely understood and accepted the “hard realities” of human life. Whereas Satan will always try to create a distance between Jesus and the rest of humanity with his demonic confession “I know who you are — the Holy One of God!”¹ Jesus consistently identifies Himself with the masses by calling Himself “Son of Man.” Demonic propaganda tries to represent Jesus as different from other men. Satan shouts: “He is not human like you; He has no sin; He is God.” Jesus, on the other hand, demonstrates that He is fully man in the way God wants man to be.

Jesus also proves to be fully human in the way He answers the devil. He does not lean on His own understanding. If ever a human being had the right to lean on His own wisdom and understanding, it would be the Son of Man. But He shows here the same depth of surrender to the Father as He did in His baptism.

Jesus also demonstrates man’s necessity to know the Word of God. As a twelve-year-old boy He had said to His parents: “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”² This eagerness pays off here. He had committed Scripture to memory. It is in this childlike way of handling Scripture that Jesus demonstrates the greatness of His messianic character. In His quotation of Moses’ words,³ Jesus draws a line between the desert of Sinai and this desert of Judah in which He finds Himself, comparing the forty years Israel spent there to His forty days of fasting. What Moses said sounded as if it was meant for humanity at large; Jesus shows that it applies to Him in particular. It was not His own experience that was an image of Israel in the desert, but Israel’s experience foreshadowed His. God had His own Son’s experience in mind when He allowed Israel to have hers. Israel’s time in the desert was a prelude to Jesus’ temptation.

The words “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” do not mean that the spiritual precedes the physical. A human being is an inseparable union of body and soul. When death separates these two, man ceases to be man. As human beings we live by every Word that comes from the mouth of God. The bread that feeds us is part of our life. The Word of God, which is the essence of God, that which gave us life, and the power of God, that which sustains our life is all part of that Word which feeds all of our humanity. Our eating of the bread is part of the whole process. If we eat and drink without recognizing the whole of God’s dealing with us, we eat and drink judgment on ourselves.⁴

As was mentioned earlier, we do not know whether the second temptation Matthew describes was actually the second one in sequence. We may assume that when Jesus said to Satan: “Away from me, Satan!”⁵ the temptation actually ended. The second temptation then, brings Jesus out of the desert to the center of the city on top of the roof of the temple. It may amaze us that Jesus allowed Himself to be led by Satan. This seems contrary to the prayer: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”⁶ Being led by the Spirit into the desert, He is led out of the desert by the devil! It may very well be, however, that this was done in a vision. In that case, the throwing Himself down would not be a physical act, but a spiritual decision, which would not make the sin any less real. It may also be that Jesus followed without knowing what the next temptation would involve. Temptation loses its strength if the outcome is known beforehand.

The circumstances, as they are depicted, are frightening. Satan takes Jesus, so to speak, to church and delivers a sermon on the topic of faith in God’s promises, a sermon based on a text of the Bible! If piety only consists of outward form it has no value. The place is the right one, the text is the Word of God, but the spirit is the devil. The subtlety in this temptation is that the devil basis his sermon on one single text. The

1. Mark 1:24

2. Luke 2:49

3. See Deut. 8:3.

4. See I Cor. 11:29.

5. Matt 4:10

6. Matt. 6:13

speech is well put together. Faith in the Word of God, in the promises of God ought to override our sense of self-preservation. Throwing oneself down would seem to be an act of complete self-surrender. The demonic element is in the fragmentation of the text. The Bible must be taken as a whole and taking text out of context is dangerous. In quoting Psalm 91:11,12, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone," the devil was careful to leave v.13 out: "You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent." Jesus, being full of the Holy Spirit, was sensitive to the slightest aberration of the Spirit of the Word of God. Without hesitation He put the finger on the flaw. "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " This is another quote from *The Book of Deuteronomy*.¹ The pitfall in this temptation was that it appealed to the logic of Jesus' human sound mind. The devil was partly correct in his insinuation that faith is a blind confidence in the Word of God without analysis of circumstances. He may have expected Jesus to retort: "This is ridiculous, this cannot be what God intended for Me." The general lesson we can draw from this temptation is that we may expect God to guide us in our circumstances as we accept the message of the Bible as a whole. Only the Holy Spirit can give us this kind of vision.

The third temptation takes place on a very high mountain. Luke calls it "a high place." When we look at the content of the temptation, we may find it difficult to determine what geographical area is meant. Even on top of the highest mountain in Israel, one cannot see any farther than the other side of the River Jordan and the beach of the Mediterranean Sea. Seeing all the kingdoms of the world requires a supernatural vision.

The wording of both Matthew's Gospel and Luke's suggests that this was not a physical viewing but a spiritual one. Matthew says: "the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." And Luke states: "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world."² It is possible that a supernatural vision would give one the physical sensation of being on top of a very high mountain, while in reality being on the streets in Jerusalem. As far as Satan is concerned, this temptation was the most frank one to which he ever exposed a person. He put all his cards on the table without hiding his identity or intent. He reveals himself as the prince of this world, to whom, initially, all the kingdoms and their power had been entrusted.

It was not Satan's sin that he believed himself to be the prince of this world who had power over creation. His sin consisted in the usurpation of this power independent from God. According to Luke, Satan believed that the fact that this splendor had been given to him, he had the right to be worshipped. We read: "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."³

As usual, the road Satan suggests is never completely crooked. There are some straight stretches in it. In Eve's temptation, it was not the prospect of becoming like God that was the sinful aspect. The suggested shortcut to God's purpose for man was the evil part. God intends to share His glory with man. It was the Father's plan that Jesus would receive all power in heaven and on earth.

Life on earth moves between these two poles: worship of God or worship of the devil. Each person moves toward either of these two poles, whether he realizes this or not. There is no in-between position in these magnetic fields. Worship of God is impossible without an act of the will. Worshipping the devil can be disguised in one form or another. Even in this temptation, Satan puts the emphasis on the power and the glory. The worship part is presented as an appendix.

In Jesus' answer it is clear that He sought nothing for Himself. He did not come into this world to obtain power and splendor for Himself but to do the will of God. Jesus did not deny Satan's claim that the kingdoms of the world belonged to him. In God's infinite wisdom and with all patience, the management of this world is still left to Satan till the time that He that has the right to would come.

1. Deut. 6:16

2. Luke 4:5

3. Luke 4:6,7

It is wonderful to see that, even in connection with the great things that are at stake here, Jesus simply appeals to a verse of Scripture. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” This free quotation is from *Deuteronomy*, where it reads: “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.”¹ These words show us the balance that ought to determine our attitude toward God. Serving God without worship would be like a body without a soul. Without the intimate ecstasy and deep awe toward the character of God, our service would be an empty form. On the other hand, service is impossible without worship. Service means obedience to the will of God. And gazing upon the beauty of God’s perfect will without doing that will is an impossibility.

This shows us how intimate our relationship with God is. Worship is exclusive. It means loving with all our heart, all our soul, all our intellect, and all our strength. It demands all of our personality. It is impossible to worship two different persons in this way. Worship means adoration. Service is also exclusive. It means serving only one Person. If we surrender to the will of God, we say consciously “no” to everything that does not move into the direction of God’s will.

The temptations ended, heaven comes down to earth again. Angels descend and serve Him who is the image of the Father on earth. God has billions of angels at the disposal of His children. The Old Testament testifies to this: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”² And “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”³ Mark’s Gospel adds here that He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”⁴ This detail gives us a good picture of the position God had originally in mind for man. He is to be lord over animals and angels, who are his servants.

1. Deut. 6:13
2. II Chron 16:9
3. Ps. 34:7
4. See Mark 1:13.

Part Two: The Proclamation of the King (4:12—7:29)

I. The Background for the Sermon 4:12-25

12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.

13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—

14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

15 "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

16 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."

17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

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

20 At once they left their nets and followed him.

21 Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,

22 and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

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

24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

Matthew sees in Jesus' decision to leave Judea and preach in Galilee a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It seems that Jesus left Jerusalem for the negative reason of John the Baptist's imprisonment. But in the light of Isaiah's prophecy, the opposite is true. Describing the result of Judah's occult practices, Isaiah stated: "Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan — The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."¹ Matthew's quotation of Isaiah depicts the contrast between the darkness of the demonic and the great light that shines in the birth of "the child." The fact that Jesus met so many cases of demon possession in Galilee proves the truth of Isaiah's prophecy. Yet, few Galileans understood how bright the light was that shone among them. Many loved the darkness more than the light.

Isaiah's prophecy is like the song of the angels that accompanied Jesus' birth. It is likely that, in his quotations of Old Testament prophecy, Matthew reflects Jesus' own understanding of the Old Testament. Jesus allowed Himself to be led by the Scriptures in deciding what He should do and where He should do it. It is wonderful to take the Word of God as a guide through life. Matthew's own insight into Old Testament prophecy must have been the result of the hours Jesus spent with His disciples after His resurrection, when He "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."²

1. Isa. 8:22-9:1,2

2. Luke 24:45

In the synoptic Gospels John's imprisonment is taken as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The theme of Jesus' preaching is the same as John the Baptist's. This sounds like a humble beginning, as if Jesus' would be one of John's disciples. The opposite is of course true. John had just been thrown in prison and Jesus demonstrates that, although he may have been taken out of circulation, the work of God continues. In quoting John's words, the Lord honors His herald. It is also true that the message "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" is still as relevant now as it was then. In *Mark's Gospel*, the message is: "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"¹ This makes us believe that "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" are interchangeable concepts. The good news is that God's reign on earth is at hand. This makes repentance necessary and possible. That is also part of the Gospel, as is faith.

We see that Matthew gives a rather condensed version of Jesus' calling of the disciples. Many details we find in other Gospels are left out here. We get the impression from Matthew that Jesus did not know Peter and Andrew when He met them at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. From John's Gospel, however, we learn that there had been a previous encounter.² There is also a problem of chronology when we compare Matthew's account with Luke. But this is not the place to dig in to that. Matthew omits the miraculous catch of fish which brought about Peter's dramatic confession: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"³ But Matthew adds Jesus' words "Come, follow me," before "and I will make you fishers of men," which is lacking in Luke.

The words "follow me" imply that Jesus wanted these men to follow His example. Mark emphasizes the intimacy Jesus desired with the ones He chose, saying: "He appointed twelve — designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."⁴ It was from this intimacy with the Lord that the disciples learned Jesus' compassion and insight into human nature, His authority and energetic perseverance that brought men out of darkness into light. The disciples must have known moments of despondency when they realized that they were unable to live the kind of life Jesus lived as a human being. They may have thought that Jesus overestimated them and misunderstood their weaknesses and doubts. They must have realized that Jesus meant it literally when He said: "I will make you fishers of men." They certainly were unable to make themselves that. "I will make you" turned out to be the authoritative word of the Creator that makes people into a new creation. Everyone who receives God's creative Word will discover with amazement how the implanted Word begins to blossom and grow in one's life under the care of the Holy Spirit.

When the disciples heard Jesus' call, they reacted immediately by leaving their nets behind and follow Him. They give no further thought to their boats and nets. In their new lives there was no more place for things of the old life. They were too full of the new life that had flooded their soul. For some of us, God's call seems an insurmountable obstacle. We all know what is the touchstone of following or not following. Some people stare at the options till they become blind, others get up and follow without giving it another thought.

In the last three verses of this chapter, Matthew gives a brief summary of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. In later chapters he will describe in greater detail the content of the teaching and the incidents of healing.

II. The Sermon on the Mount 5:1—7:29

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1. Mark 1:15
 2. See John 1:42,43.
 3. Luke 5:8
 4. Mark 3:14,15

The Sermon on the Mount is undoubtedly one of the most famous sermons ever preached. It is, however, doubtful that it was ever preached as one single sermon. When we compare Matthew's version, which is the best known, with other portions of the same content in Luke's Gospel,¹ we may suppose that Jesus, probably, did not speak it at one single occasion.

The Sermon on the Mount, as we know it now, is probably a condensation of Jesus' preaching as he trekked from place to place. As we read these words, we can understand why people hung on His lips and that even His enemies testified: "No one ever spoke the way this man does."²

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia has the following comments on the Sermon on the Mount: "The prevailing opinion among New Testament scholars is, however, that the gospel accounts represent a genuine historical discourse. The Sermon as recorded in Matthew bears such marks of inner unity of theme and exposition as to give the appearance of genuineness. That Jesus should deliver a discourse of this kind accords with all the circumstances and with the purpose of His ministry. Besides, we know that in His teaching He was accustomed to speak to the multitudes at length, and we should expect Him to give early in His ministry some formal exposition of the kingdom, the burden of His first preaching. That such a summary of one of His most important discourses should have been preserved is altogether probable.

On the other hand, it may be conceded that the accounts need not necessarily be regarded as full or exact reports of the discourse but possibly and probably rather summaries of its theme and substance. Our Lord was accustomed to teach at length, but this discourse could easily be delivered in a few minutes. Again, while His popular teaching was marked by a unique wealth of illustration the Sermon is largely gnomic in form. This gnomic style and the paucity of the usual concrete and illustrative elements suggest the probability of condensation in transmission. Moreover, it is hardly probable that such an address of Jesus would be recorded at the time of its delivery or would be remembered in detail.

There is evidence that the account in Matt 5-7 contains some sayings not included in the original discourse. This view is confirmed by the fact that a number of the sayings are given in Luke's Gospel in settings that appear more original. It is easy to believe that related sayings spoken on other occasions may have become associated with the Sermon in apostolic teaching and thus handed down with it, but if the discourse were well known in a specific form, such as that recorded in Matthew, it is hardly conceivable that Luke or anyone else would break it up and distribute the fragments or associate them with other incidents, as some of the sayings recorded in both Gospels are found associated in Luke."

The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the king of this kingdom and this sermon is His inaugural address. It is God's proclamation of the kingdom. It reveals the constitution of the kingdom.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount:

- I. Proclamation of Blessedness 5:1-12
- II. Testimony of the Subjects of the Kingdom Toward Those Who are Outside 5:13-16
- III. Relationship between the Children of the Kingdom and Their Fellowmen 5:17-48
- IV. Relationship among the Children of the Kingdom and God 6:1-34
- V. Some Spiritual Laws governing the Daily Life of the Children of the Kingdom 7:1-12
- VI. Invitation and Warning Regarding Entering the Kingdom 7:13-23
- VII. Conclusion 7:24-27

1. Luke 6:20-49

2. John 7:46

I. Proclamation of Blessedness 5:1-12

- 1 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,
2 and he began to teach them, saying:
3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me
12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus preached this sermon, seated on the side of a mountain with His disciples surrounding Him and a large crowd gathered at the foot of the mountain. He opened His mouth and the first word that came out was "blessed."

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "blessed" as 1: holy 2: beatified 3: delightful. And as one of the meanings of "to bless," the Dictionary gives "to confer happiness upon." The Greek word used is *makarios*, which has the meaning of "supremely blest," "fortunate," or simply "well off."

Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament explains: "The Greek word here *makarioi* ... is an adjective that means 'happy' which in English etymology goes back to hap, chance, good-luck as seen in our words haply, hapless, happily, happiness. 'Blessedness is, of course, an infinitely higher and better thing than mere happiness' (Weymouth). English has thus ennobled 'blessed' to a higher rank than 'happy.' But 'happy' is what Jesus said and the Braid Scots New Testament dares to say 'Happy' each time here as does the Improved Edition of the American Bible Union Version." The commentary continues: "The Greek word is as old as Homer and Pindar and was used of the Greek gods and also of men, but largely of outward prosperity. Then it is applied to the dead who died in the Lord as in Rev 14:13. Already in the Old Testament the Septuagint uses it of moral quality. 'Shaking itself loose from all thoughts of outward good, it becomes the express symbol of a happiness identified with pure character. Behind it lies the clear cognition of sin as the fountain-head of all misery, and of holiness as the final and effectual cure for every woe. For knowledge as the basis of virtue, and therefore of happiness, it substitutes faith and love' ... Jesus takes this word 'happy' and puts it in this rich environment. 'This is one of the words which have been transformed and ennobled by New Testament use; by association, as in the Beatitudes, with unusual conditions, accounted by the world miserable, or with rare and difficult' (Bruce). 'The originality of Jesus lies in putting the due value on these thoughts, collecting them, and making them as prominent as the Ten Commandments. No greater service can be rendered to mankind than to rescue from obscurity neglected moral commonplaces' (Bruce)."

In a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, Spurgeon states: "Not only do the Beatitudes rise one above another, but they spring out of each other, as if each one depended upon all that went before. Each growth feeds a higher growth, and the seventh is the product of all the other six. The two blessings which we shall have first to consider have this relation. 'Blessed are they that mourn' grows out of 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' Matt 5:3. Why do they mourn? They mourn because they are 'poor in spirit.' 'Blessed are the meek' is a benediction which no man reaches till he has felt his spiritual poverty, and mourned over it. 'Blessed are the merciful' follows upon the blessing of the meek, because men do not acquire the forgiving, sympathetic, merciful spirit until they have been made meek by the experience of the first two benedictions.

This same rising and outgrowth may be seen in the whole seven. The stones are laid one upon the other in fair colors, and polished after the similitude of a place; they are the natural sequel and completion of each other, even as were the seven days of the world's first week."¹

Jesus preached this sermon, not in Greek, but in Aramaic, and we may assume that, rather than simply saying the words, He exclaimed them in typical Jewish fashion. A good example of His style is found in the way the NASU renders David's psalm: 'How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!'"² We can imagine that Jesus shouted to the crowd below Him: "O, the blessedness...!" Most translations lose some of the wonderful passion with which our Lord must have preached this magnificent sermon.

When Jesus pronounces His audience "blessed," we must understand that His is a divine proclamation. This is God's creative Word of the same order as the Word that first brought light into being. We read in the Genesis' account of creation: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."³ Jesus did not merely pronounce a blessing; He created blessing for His hearers. David sang: "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."⁴ This Word is not less powerful than the one Jesus spoke to the leper: "I am willing. Be clean!" We read: "Immediately he was cured of his leprosy."⁵

When we comprehend that Jesus' words contain intrinsic blessedness, we also recognize the circumstances in which they were spoken. This is a world of poverty, sadness, weakness, and hunger in which God's voice is heard. It is moving to see that those factors that determine misery in human life become the conditions for receiving the blessing. They become the elements out of which the blessing is built. This is particularly true in verses 3-6, which contain the first four beatitudes. None of the characteristics mentioned here, maybe with the exception of meekness, are positive qualities in the human sense of the word. *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* comments on the word "meek": "The ancients used the word for outward conduct and toward men. They did not rank it as a virtue anyhow. It was a mild equanimity that was sometimes negative and sometimes positively kind. But Jesus lifted the word to a nobility never attained before. In fact, the Beatitudes assume a new heart, for the natural man does not find in happiness the qualities mentioned here by Christ. The English word 'meek' has largely lost the fine blend of spiritual poise and strength meant by the Master. He calls himself 'meek and lowly in heart' (Matt 11:29) and Moses is also called 'meek.' It is the gentleness of strength, not mere effeminacy."

None of these characteristics were part of God's original plan for man. God did not intend men, made in His image and likeness, to be poor, mourning, or hungering and thirsting. All these features are the result of the coming of sin into this world. Without sin there would be no poverty, mourning, or hunger. Yet, Jesus mentions them here as conditions for receiving the blessing.

The problem is that man, who is estranged from God because of sin, does not recognize himself as poor. Blessedness is for "the poor in spirit," but this blessedness is not given automatically. Only confession of spiritual poverty can open the door through which blessing enters and life receives meaning. It is not our spiritual poverty that keeps us separated from God, but the arrogance of our presumed spiritual riches. Luke's version presents this more clearly by contrasting man's poverty and riches.⁶ We can only approach God as poor beggars. We must acknowledge our poverty and act accordingly.

This poverty is spiritual poverty. Spiritual riches is of greater importance for a normal and happy human life than material possessions. The life of a millionaire can be proverbially devoid of content and meaning. The danger of presumed spiritual riches, whether it means being rich in philosophy, in theology, in

1. Spurgeon's Sermons

2. Ps. 32:1 (NASU)

3. Gen 1:3

4. Ps. 33:9

5. Matt. 8:3

6. See Luke 6:20,24

arts, of entertainment, can be a greater and more dangerous obstacle to fulfillment than a fat bank account. If we try to enjoy and experience spiritual values apart from God, we end up empty-handed. It is much more difficult to acknowledge spiritual poverty than material. It is all about us, not about what is ours. This is the reason the church of Jesus Christ consists of “not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.”¹ There are few great philosophers in the body of Christ. There are few great philosophers in this world, period!

There is no greater contrast possible than between a beggar and the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the Kingdom of all kingdoms. Man’s greatest poverty is placed over against the greatest divine riches. These two extremes seem irreconcilable. Our Lord not only reconciles the two, but He makes it clear that holding the beggars staff is the only condition for receiving the royal scepter. Only beggars can be candidates for royal dignity. This is because God created man to be a king, not a beggar. Begging is contrary to man’s intrinsic dignity. Every human being who is born into this world is destined for the throne. What is important is that we acknowledge that we have been reduced to beggary because we have deviated from God’s plan with our life.

The second beatitude may sound less amazing than the first. Like poverty, mourning is closely related to the coming of sin into the world. C. S. Lewis asks the question if suffering is not somehow part of God’s own being. We cannot state summarily that all suffering and sadness come from the devil and only joy comes from God, can we? Suffering is the result of a tension between good and evil. A person who is completely evil doesn’t mourn. In that sense, the devil does not suffer; not only can he not suffer physically because he does not have a body, but he cannot suffer spiritually either because even the smallest grain of goodness is lacking in him that could cause the tension of sorrow. For that reason, I believe that, although God is absolutely good and without a shadow of evil, and although suffering may not be one of His absolute attributes, there is yet a direct link between goodness and suffering.

God did not create evil, but since man is created in God’s image and likeness, and consequently has a free will, evil has always been an implied possibility in creation. If evil had not been an option in man’s choice, he would have been a robot. Maybe Lewis was right! We should all know more in one hundred years or less.

Like poverty, mourning is a recognition of the damage sin has done in creation. But in this beatitude, our Lord takes a step further. As beggars we stand before God; when we mourn we stand on His side. We will mourn, when we understand what a world and a human life according to God’s plan ought to have looked like, and what the present torn condition of life has become. Personal mourning only fits in this picture inasmuch as it is directed toward God. Tears that separate us from God and rebellion against suffering are not part of the mourning that leads to blessedness. It is not a matter of a vague and undirected feeling of melancholy, that what the Germans call “Weltschmerz.” This mourning is a consciously standing on God’s side to share in His sorrow over sin, lostness, and corruption.

What makes these beatitudes so revolutionary is the fact that they are all in the present tense. The comfort may be in the future, but the blessing is in the present. The very fact that we mourn is proof of our blessedness. It is an indication that we are on the Lord’s side.

Blessedness may be different from what we imagine it to be. It is no carefree enjoyment, an innocent delight that knows no evil. The very fact that blessedness and mourning are pronounced in the same breath is an indication of the maturity of the blessedness. Man must learn to be blessed. What we experience in the presence of God must be a tested, pure, durable reality that leaves no room for any shadow of doubt. Without mourning this is impossible to achieve.

How great this comfort must be! It is great enough so that even in this life, amidst all the misery that overpopulates this earth, its rays beam toward us from a distant future so that we can be blessed in the present. That is not all. We can only speak of comfort if the cause of mourning is taken away, and such is the

1. I Cor. 1:26

case. Sin, which is the cause of all misery, has been atoned. The breach between God and man is healed. The image of God in man is renewed.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes.”¹ We should try to imagine this scene. This will be no official blanket act but a most intimate gesture. God will take each of us individually in His arms and press us against His breast and wipe the tears from our eyes. The apostle Paul must have seen this happen, because he writes: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”²

As with the realization of the blessing for the spiritually poor, so also for those who mourn, the blessedness can only be experienced in the present by faith.

The third beatitude, “Blessed are the meek,” sounds the least paradoxical of the three we have seen so far. There does not appear to be any contradiction between blessedness and meekness. But the incongruity between meekness and world conquest is so much the greater! Meekness is an indication of a structural change of character in natural man. But we may have the wrong concept of what meekness really is. In our everyday use of the word, the emphasis is more on being soft than on being courageous. This is a distortion of the facts. That misrepresentation may be due to our tendency to associate courage with violence and noise. There is indeed a psychological link but it often goes in the opposite direction. Demonstration of power and noise are rather a compensation for a lack of courage. The Bible says about Moses, for instance: “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.”³ Moses demonstrated this meekness several times in his lack of self-assertion. A proof is Moses’ meekness is found when the people of Israel had made the Golden Calf. We read: “So Moses went back to the LORD and said, ‘Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.’ ”⁴ Another incident in which Moses’ meekness became evident was when God took His Spirit off Moses and put it on seventy of the elders of Israel. Two of the men listed, Eldad and Medad, had not appeared at the tent, but they prophesied anyhow. Joshua wanted them to stop, “but Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’ ”⁵ When Miriam and Aaron contested Moses’ leadership, Moses did not defend himself.⁶ The Biblical definition of meekness is a lack of self-assertion.

These beatitudes reveal a climbing line of self-knowledge. There is a greater understanding and deeper penetration into the condition in which we find ourselves. In the first beatitude our eyes were opened to the reality of our poverty. In the second beatitude, we cast our lot against sin and for God. In the third, we do something about the attitude of rebellion against God, which was the main cause of the break with God. To surrender to God means a victory over self. The Book of Proverbs teaches us: “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.”⁷ We understand the relationship between blessedness and the crumbling of the wall we constructed to defend ourselves.

There is a contradiction between meekness and inheriting the earth. Meekness opposes all the principles that lead to inheriting the world, or rather conquering the world. But the point is not world conquest. Conquest of this world is always temporary. The only conquest that turned into an inheritance was the conquest of Canaan. But Canaan was the Promised Land that the Israelites received from the hand of God.

1. Rev. 21:4

2. Rom. 8:18

3. Num. 12:3 (KJV)

4. Ex. 32:31,32

5. Num. 11:24-29

6. See Num. ch. 12

7. Prov. 16:32

The word “inherit” calls up some thoughts that are important in connection with the understanding of the text. As we saw already, inheritance pertains to permanent possession. Inheritance also speaks of a rightful possession. The will by which the inheritance becomes ours transfers the right of possession from the owner to us. In this case, God is the owner. If meekness is the condition for the transfer of the right of possession, then meekness must be one of God’s attributes. And this is true. No one ever demonstrated so clearly that He did not want to assert Himself than the Son of God, “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!”¹ The meek have a right to possess the earth because God is meek.

An inheritance often suggests a family relationship. In many cases a son inherits from his father. Other bonds beside family bonds are, of course, possible. But the fact that God gives the earth to us as an inheritance suggests a family relationship.

In conclusion, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews: “In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it.”² Behind these simple words spoken by our Lord on a mountain in Galilee lies hidden the marvel and the horror of His death on Golgotha. On that hill, God erected the ultimate monument of meekness.

The fourth beatitude borrows its language from the body’s response to privation. Hunger and thirst are the reactions of a healthy body to a lack of food and drink. Prolonged hunger, however, will dull the senses. As in the first two beatitudes, so here blessedness is linked to a condition which is the direct result of sin. It describes the reaction of the soul to unrighteousness. Taken by themselves, hunger and thirst are evil phenomena that, undoubtedly, had no place in God’s original plan of creation. The relationship our Lord establishes here between hunger and blessedness ought to amaze us, particularly because blessedness here also is placed in the present tense. As the Holy Spirit brings about conviction of sin in our hearts, so are intense hunger for God and for the things of God a sure sign that the Holy Spirit is getting a hold of us. David wrote: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”³ If our hunger decreases we have reason to worry. We do well to check ourselves regularly on this point.

Our Lord expresses in these words a passionate reaching out for God. It is a desire that is so strong that it dominates all other longings. Physical hunger and thirst will force us to put other activities aside and take out time to eat and drink. So it is in the spiritual realm. It is a matter of priorities. If our longing for God grows out to hunger and thirst for Him, then our Lord calls us blessed!

Then there is immediate satisfaction. The blessing is usually withheld because of our half-heartedness. Scriptures assures us: “The eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”⁴ A full commitment assures a full blessing.

There is also fullness of blessing in the sense of unhindered fellowship with God. That is the point at which all the beatitudes we have looked at so far come together and form one great unity of riches, comfort, inheritance, and satisfaction. This is fullness to its fullest degree!

Just as the first four beatitudes form one unit, so do the next three. The first four beatitudes describe the conditions that are to be met to obtain blessedness. They are all conditions that are directly related to the presence of sin in this world. They all demonstrate a sense of reality; a waking up of man to the state in which he finds himself.

The second series of beatitudes pertains to the fruit of the blessing. These beatitudes describe the state of the person who has tasted the blessing and in whose heart the root of grace has begun to grow and

1. Phil. 2:6-8

2. Heb. 9:16

3. Ps. 42:1

4. II Chron. 16:9

bear fruit. Being merciful, showing purity of heart, and being a peacemaker can hardly be understood as being conditions for receiving the blessing.

Being merciful, in the fifth beatitude, stands for being compassionate. It means being moved inwardly by the suffering of fellow human beings. This does not refer to the situation in which we find ourselves, or to our reaction against sin as a personal experience; it is our answer to the need in the lives of the other person. It is the attitude of the man, who stands himself on a firm foundation, toward someone who is sinking in a quagmire. Mercy is practical. It consists of bandaging wounds, loaning out one's donkey, paying the hotel bill for someone else.¹ It consists of dying on a cross in behalf of someone else. Compassion always comes back on one's own head, sometimes from the side of men, but always, in abundance, from the side of the Father of compassion. God is compassionate.

All human compassion with the fate of others is a reflection of the mercy of God. God revealed His compassion to Moses when He called him at the burning bush: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."² Later, when Moses asked to see God's glory, God passed in front of him, proclaiming: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."³ And Paul calls God: "The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort."⁴

God plants the seed of compassion in the heart of man and He pays man for the harvest of what He Himself planted. Compassion or mercy is the first fruit blessing will bear in our lives. The first result of the Gospel is social concern.

The sixth beatitude speaks of purity of heart. Here again, we see the *fruit* of salvation and not a condition, found in the heart of man, which entitles him to be blessed. As there is a logical link among the beatitudes in the first section, so we also find a connection between the two series: poverty corresponds with mercy, mourning over sin with purity of heart, meekness with peace making. The first and the third link relate to that what surrounds us, the second (in the second section it is the fourth) has to do with that which is within us.

"Blessed are the pure in heart!" It can hardly be more intimate than this. It means purity at the core of our mind, our will, and our emotions. Pure means free of additives. A pure heart is a heart that is full of love for God. In the words of the Old Testament, it is: "[Loving] the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."⁵ It means a will that is in accordance with the will of God. It is acting without ulterior motives. It behooves us all to pray with David: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."⁶

The Greek word rendered "pure" is *katharos*. It is the same word used for the cleansing of a leper. Jesus said to the man who pled with Him: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean," "I am willing, be clean!"⁷ The Greek word there is *katharizo*. The law also distinguished between "clean" and "unclean." The word "kosher" has found a place in the English language. This pertains to certain situations in which a person can find himself, or certain acts he performs. That is the sense in which "pure" is used in this verse. It concerns the cleansing of our conscience in our relationship with God. Everything that spoils or interrupts that relationship is impure or unclean. There is a leprosy of the heart, a defilement of the mind caused by our

1. See Luke 10:33-35

2. Ex. 3:7,8

3. Ex. 34:6

4. II Cor. 1:3

5. Deut. 6:5

6. Ps. 51:10

7. See Matt. 8:2,3

touching of that which is dead. Cleansing is only possible through the blood of Jesus. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”¹

Jesus says of the pure in heart: “They will see God.” This is, beyond doubt, the greatest promise in the Bible. Man aspires after great things in life. We pay sums of money to travel to faraway places. The exploration of space speaks to our imagination. How much more then ought we to get excited about the greatest of all adventures: seeing God! In the English language the verb “to see” covers a lot of ground. The Greek differentiates among various ways of seeing. The word used here is *optomai*, which can be rendered “to gaze with wide-open eyes, as at something remarkable.” It differs from *blepo*, which simply means: “to look at.” It also differs from the word *eido*, which means: “to know,” or from *theoreo*, which can be rendered: “to discern.” We use “to see” in the sense of investigating for the purpose of drawing a conclusion. Moses approached the burning bush that way. “Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up.’”² Peter and John went to the grave to see what had happened.³

In that kind of seeing, we are still in control of the situation. What we discover will not necessarily change us inwardly. But there is a seeing that transforms us. When Moses asked God: “Now show me your glory,”⁴ and God heard his prayer, Moses was transformed. John testifies: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”⁵ That kind of seeing is life changing. It means more than merely “getting involved.” The apostle John writes in his First Epistle: “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁶

So we ask the question, what kind of seeing is this? In some cases, as with Isaiah, Paul, or John, the change was abrupt. In most cases, however, seeing God will be a gradual process that helps us to enter into the secret of God’s being. The image of God will slowly show itself more clearly on the screen of our heart. According to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the secret of Moses’ perseverance was that “he saw him who is invisible.”⁷

It is obvious that we will never be one hundred percent pure in heart as long as we are here on earth. So there cannot be any seeing of God as He is in all His fullness. The fulfillment of all our desires will be when we wake up in glory and, to use David’s words: “I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness.”⁸ We have the promise that: “His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”⁹

The last of this section is the seventh beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” This utterance runs parallel to the ones about the meek and the merciful. A peacemaker brings peace where there is no peace. In order to make peace, one must first have peace oneself. The point here is not personal peace of heart and in our circumstances; it is primarily peace with God. Rebellion against God is the basis of all human conflicts. Peace with God, therefore, is the only basis on which human beings can live together in peace. Making peace begins with reconciling man with God, which is done by preaching the Gospel. Making peace, therefore, is always a second phase in our ministry. Blessed are the peacemakers is the other side of the coin of Paul’s utterance: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”¹⁰

1. Heb. 9:13,14

2. Ex. 3:3

3. John 20:3-8

4. Ex. 33:18

5. Rev. 1:17

6. I John 3:2

7. Heb. 11:27

8. Ps. 17:15 (NKJV)

9. Rev. 22:3,4

This blessedness also is stated in the present tense. Doing the work of peacemaking is, in itself, a source of blessedness. The medium is the message! A person who gives himself for world peace, and who does not experience full satisfaction in his work, is probably after the wrong kind of peace. This is not about a means without a goal.

It is not clear in this beatitude if the main point of the blessedness is to be found in heaven or on earth. Jesus' words sound more earthbound here than in the other utterances. Thus, these words form a bridge to the next section that deals with persecution, which pertains, of course, totally to this earth.

The question is, who calls us sons of God? The answer is: first of all those who witness the establishing of peace. The testimony of our life, what we accomplish, will prove to our fellowmen that God lives in our heart. This proves that even the person who lives without God yet somehow recognizes the reality of God. Every man knows deep in his heart that God is Peace. When God calls Gideon to battle the Midianites, we read: "So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace."¹ There is a deep lesson for us in this paradox. The circumstances in which Gideon came to know God could easily have given to him the wrong impression that God's character was "war." The fact that he called his altar, "The LORD is Peace" is proof of the fact that he had understood something of God's reality under adverse circumstances.

The distinction between being a child of God or not being His child is made in this life. This is obvious from John's statement in his First Epistle: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."² Once we are like Jesus, no further distinctions will be necessary. Jesus speaks in this beatitude about a world in which it is difficult to distinguish between wheat and tares unless fruit can be seen. Blessed are they who can be identified as being with God.

The eighth beatitude is actually the last one. Although the word "blessed" is used twice in verses 10 and 11, it pertains to the same subject. The topic is persecution, insult, and slander as the reaction of an unbelieving world to the revelation of righteousness. Persecution and abuse are symptoms of rejection of the world's sick body to the transplant of the healthy organ of righteousness.

This is a third category of blessedness. The first four beatitudes pertained to conditions to be met to enter the Kingdom, the following three pertained to the fruit of blessedness in the heart of man, and here we see blessedness in the form of the reaction of an evil world.

Persecution supplies a twofold proof. It proves the reality of our blessedness and the rottenness of the world. The fact that the Lord spends so much time on this subject indicates how close the matter is to His own heart. It speaks of His compassion and sympathy for those who suffer persecution.

Richard Wurmbrand wrote a book entitled *Tortured for Christ*, in which he describes his own suffering for the cause of the Gospel. The thousands who have been tortured for their faith in Christ in Russia, China, and other communist countries, in Africa, and in the Balkans, and all over the world are included in these verses.

The suffering is both physical and emotional. The persecution in vs. 10 pertains to the physical suffering, although the Lord does not specifically define this. It may be that He wanted to include the whole complex of suffering, both physical and spiritual. Vs. 11 clearly emphasizes the emotion part. Persecution here consists of insult and slander.

The reason for the persecution is stated differently as "because of righteousness," and "because of me." Both are, of course, identical. The Lord's cause is righteousness and there is no righteousness apart from Him. Peter's First Epistle is an extended commentary on this truth.

If blessedness is ever a faraway concept for man, it is when he undergoes physical and spiritual suffering. It seems that the two are complete opposites. It is not so, of course, that our Lord sees suffering in

10. I Cor. 9:16

1. Judges 6:24

2. I John 3:2

itself as blessedness, in a masochistic fashion. The blessedness here is in spite of outward circumstances. In the words of the apostle Peter: “*But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.*”¹ The important point in this verse is what has priority in our thinking, our present sufferings or our future glory. In Paul’s words: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”² In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, he states: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”³

These verses are full to the brim with resistance to what the devil pushes on us so closely that we tend to lose our perspective. The city that lies at a distance of 2 miles is not really smaller than the tree that is in front of us.

Jesus’ words also indicate how victory over Satan is achieved. The devil always tends to overstep his boundaries. That is the cause of his defeat. Jesus defeated Satan by exposing him. Paul says: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”⁴ Satan’s strength is in the fact that he goes around incognito.

The reason given here for blessedness is the same as in the first beatitude. Thus all the beatitudes form a unity together; the circle is closed. It begins and ends with the Kingdom of Heaven as a closed ring. It also begins and ends with poverty; but they are two different kinds of poverty that are the complete opposite of one another. The former was an inner spiritual poverty, a realization of being lost outside God. The latter is poverty in comparison with a rich world, a lack of honor and respect one human being owes another. This is offset by riches of fellowship with God that compensates all else, even the lack of those things that are considered to be of vital importance to our well-being.

Lastly, it is moving to see how our Lord Jesus Christ, in a sense, gives His autobiography in these beatitudes. Everything mentioned in them can be applied to Him personally. In His incarnation, He fulfilled all the aspects of the first series of beatitudes. Who was poorer than He? Think of His sorrow, His meekness, and His hunger for righteousness! The characteristics of the second group are more applicable to Him than to anyone else. Compassion, purity of heart, and peace-making are His. With the last series, He indicates the kind of death by which He would glorify God. In doing this, Jesus gives us, on the one hand, proof of His humanity, on the other hand He sets for us the example of what it means to be human. The keyword for His existence and ours is “blessed.”

II. Testimony of the Subjects of the Kingdom Toward Those Who are Outside 5:13-16

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

In the following verses the Lord compares the life of the person who partakes of His blessing with a) salt, b) the light of the world, c) a city on a mountain, and d) a lamp in a room. It is clear that all this

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1. I Peter 3:14
 2. Rom. 8:18
 3. II Cor. 4:16-18
 4. Col. 2:15

pertains to man as a new creature. What is said here is a continuation of verses 7-9. These are people in whose heart the fruit of blessing is flourishing.

We find a contrast between these verses and verses 10-12. The world mentioned here is not the hostile world that rejects and persecutes but a world of civil people who ought to glorify God but who will never be able to do so without the testimony of those who live in close fellowship with God.

The images Jesus uses here reveal in different ways certain aspects of the testimony of a Christian in this world. "Salt" speaks of the influence a Christian exercises in secret. This influence becomes the more evident when he is no longer present. Ten righteous could have saved the city of Sodom. Seven thousand who had remained faithful to God kept Israel from complete disintegration in the days of the prophet Elijah.¹ The first task a Christian has in this world is to keep God's judgment at abeyance. We ought not to analyze the picture in too great a detail; it is only meant as a comparison. It is tempting, however, to make some applications. The picture speaks of the influence of a small group. Lumps of salt in the food make it unpalatable. What matters is the unnoticeable influence. Salt is effective because it is soluble. Salt that tries to preserve itself does not exercise any influence; it turns into stone.

The image of "the light of the world" represents almost the opposite aspect of the witness. Jesus probably refers here to the sun. In John's Gospel, He compares Himself to the sun. We read: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."² The comparison makes us shiver a bit. It is difficult to see ourselves playing such a vital role. After all, without the heat and light of the sun no life on earth would be possible. It is understandable why, in many pagan religions, the sun is considered to be a god. In this image, Jesus ascribes to us His own characteristics. In comparing us with Himself, He places us on a height that tends to make us dizzy. David says in the Psalms about man: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."³ All this means that without the presence of people, who are filled with the Spirit of God, no spiritual life would be possible on earth.

The principle of the new creation also becomes evident in this illustration. There is no better example of the position of the Christian as being in the world, but not of the world. The sun is another world; so is the child of God. If this picture of warmth and life-generating energy, with which we are being compared, will not make us humble, nothing will!

It is also obvious that Jesus calls Himself "the light of the world" because He is a human being. That is the way God looks upon His creation, upon man after his purification from sin.

The context of the text shows us that Jesus did not mean to contrast the hidden part of the testimony with the exposed. The illustration of the sun is hedged between the image of the salt and the city. Nothing can be less hidden than the sun. A city on a mountain cannot be hidden and a lamp ought not to be hidden. This is the nature of the beast. Even if a city wanted to be hidden, it could not. One cannot camouflage a whole city. So it is with the witness of the Christian. If the Holy Spirit has transformed a life, it is impossible not to have a testimony. There is a hidden witness in Jeremiah's statement: "All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, 'Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him.'⁴ And the apostles Peter and John declared before the Sanhedrin: "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."⁵ That what is within us is greater than ourselves. The picture of the lamp under the bowl speaks of the irrationality of wanting to hide and suppress what is meant to shine. The question is not

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1. See I Kings 19:18
 2. John 8:12
 3. Ps. 8:5
 4. Jer. 20:10
 5. Acts 4:20

whether a lamp can be hidden or not, but what is the purpose of it. We are a lamp lit by God and God wants us to glow.

These words convict us of our shortcomings. It is typical for all the illustrations our Lord uses that they describe our testimony as spontaneous, self-evident, and unconscious. Salt does not try to be salty and light cannot help but to shine. One cannot try to be a Christian; one is or one isn't. In the words of Oswald Chambers, "God makes us conscious sinners and unconscious saints." We can trust God to make us what we are. The only evaluation we have to submit ourselves to is to ask if whether we seek honor for ourselves or whether it is our hearts' desire that our Father in heaven be praised. When we seek the honor of God, we will shine automatically. That is the reason God lit us up.

III. Relationship between the Children of the Kingdom and Their Fellowmen 5:17-48

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

19 Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,

24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'

32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'

34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;

35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.

36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

- 37 *Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*
- 38 *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'*
- 39 *But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*
- 40 *And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*
- 41 *If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*
- 42 *Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*
- 43 *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*
- 44 *But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*
- 45 *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*
- 46 *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?*
- 47 *And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*
- 48 *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

This section can be easily divided into five parts:

1. verses 17-20 – General Introduction: Righteousness as the basis for our relationship with our fellowmen
2. verses 21-26 – Our relationship with our brother
3. verses 27-32 – Our relationship with someone else's wife and with our own wife
4. verses 33-37 – Our speech
5. verses 38-48 – Our relationship with our enemy

1. Righteousness as the basis for our relationship with our fellowmen - verses 17-20

"Do not think ..." points to the wrong opinion people have formed, first of all about Jesus Himself, and also about the law, God's demand for righteousness and, the righteousness people believe themselves to possess. The supposition that Jesus would make changes in the existing situation is an indication that the law was felt to be a heavy burden and that the people wanted to be freed from it. They had the mistaken notion that a person without a law would be a freer person. The problem, however, is not in the law but in man himself. Jesus expresses here in a few words what Paul says in his Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Galatians. Jesus describes His ministry with the few words "not abolish, but fulfill." Thus He basically formulates the solution for man's problem. By abolishing the law and the prophets, man's problem would not be solved. Fulfillment means that the inner conflict in man is resolved.

Jesus' words contain a warning and a promise. The tension between sin that rules man's life and God's demand that we live a life of righteousness could only be solved by the death on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fulfillment means, in the first place, that the shadow of the Old Testament in the form of sacrificial rituals is replaced by the reality of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."¹ It also means that the tension is resolved in the experience of atonement and forgiveness. And, finally, it means that God's demands for a life of holiness are met.

It is to be noted that Jesus, in connection with the above, mentions the Law and the Prophets in the same breath. It appears that "the Law and the Prophets" is an idiomatic expression used for the whole of the Old Testament. What Jesus means to say is that, not only the law will be fulfilled, but also that all that was prophesied about Him would be accomplished. The use of the expression demonstrates how deeply conscious Jesus was that His life was determined by what was written about Him in the Scriptures.

The validity of the law is connected to the existence of heaven and earth. As long as this world exists and as long as the relationship between heaven and earth is ruled by the presence of sin, the law of

1. John 1:29

God will remain in force in the minutest detail. The law is the expression of God's character. It reveals God's attitude toward sin and the way of atonement by the shedding of blood. Those principles are unchallengeable. God could not change His attitude without violating Himself. Fortunately, atonement is immutable also. The whole principle of the law has been fulfilled in the death on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which both sin was condemned and atonement was achieved. Looking at the relationship telescopically, we can say that nothing would prevent the present relationship between heaven and earth to end at any moment.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of every detail of the law. This is expressed in the words "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen." The NKJV stays closer to the Greek with the words "one jot or one tittle." The reference is to the Hebrew script. *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* explains: "Jot is for 'yod' (é) the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Tittle is the little bend or point which serves to distinguish certain Hebrew letters of similar appearance. Jewish tradition mentions the Hebrew letter yod (é) as being irremovable; adding that, if all people in the world were gathered to abolish the least letter in the law, they would not succeed. The guilt of changing those little hooks which distinguish between certain Hebrew letters is declared to be so great that, if such a thing were done, the world would be destroyed!" "Jot or tittle" is parallel in meaning to "one of the least of these commandments" in the following verse. God's law is like a piece of art in which the smallest detail expresses the essence of the whole. We can recognize the character of God both in the Passover lamb and in the little gold bells at the hem of Aaron's robe.¹

Our own greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is related to our vision on the law of God, that is, on the character of God. This vision will express itself in our keeping of the commandments and our teaching them to others. It is also obvious that our entering the Kingdom will depend on this vision. In connection with this, Jesus mentions the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Knowledge of the Scriptures and understanding of the message of the Bible are not the same things. The important factors are the impression the Word of God makes upon us and the changes this operates in our life. Evidently, the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law was considered to be the highest ideal one could reach. But the source of their righteousness was in themselves. The righteousness Jesus mentions here is the righteousness of God. The apostle Paul gives a clear commentary on this truth in his Epistle to the Philippians. We read: "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."² The greatest hindrance a person can experience in entering the Kingdom of Heaven is to put his trust in himself.

2. Our relationship with our brother verses 21-26

The commandment "Do not murder" does not primarily refer to fratricide, that is the murder of someone with whom we are linked by blood or by spiritual bonds. In applying the commandment to a brother, Jesus does not change the commandment but He brings it closer to home. The same principle that drives man to take someone else's life is also present in the despising of a fellowman, in the unwillingness to forgive or to accept forgiveness, and in the borrowing of someone else's belongings without intent to return the items. If we do not honor our fellowmen, if we do not love our neighbor, we are, in principle, murderers. The apostle John writes in his First Epistle: "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should

1. See Ex. 28:33-35

2. Phil. 3:4^b-9

love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. 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?"¹ The distinction is not between love and hatred; all that is not love is murder.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember..." indicates the way God wants us to approach the altar. It is in the presence of God that we remember things that are crowded out in the hurry of daily life. Our relationship with our fellowmen requires the greatest care in our fellowship with God. Our conscience always works better in the presence of God than elsewhere. We see our sin in the right perspective under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In the Lord's presence it becomes evident that what others do to us is of no consequence, but the wrong we do to others hinders our fellowship with God. The text does not specify what the brother may have against us, but the context suggests that one of the things our Lord had in mind may have been indebtedness. Borrowing money from someone who is our brother in Christ can have serious consequences in spiritual relationships. Jesus makes it clear that laxity to act in this respect can be fatal. Making right wrong relationships is such an urgent matter that we must leave our gift at the altar and first makes things right.

The urgency Jesus puts in these words may seem strange to us, but the Lord uses rather strong terms to make His point: "answerable to the Sanhedrin" (the NASU reads, guilty before the supreme court), "taking you to court," "be thrown into hell." This is said about offences we would not even consider being punishable! This proves how darkened our understanding is on this point. We do not recognize sin in this camouflaged form as murder, but as a doctor can recognize in a small mole on the skin, cancer that can kill the whole body, so Jesus diagnoses anger, derision, and lack of love as the sin that leads to murder.

Verses 25 and 26 are, first of all, a parable. What makes us think that God would treat us differently than our creditors? If we can only escape being taken to court and being thrown in prison by making a settlement with our adversary, reconciliation with God must be the only way to escape the wrath of God. All this is said in the context of our relationship with our brother. What we do to our fellowmen, we do to the Lord. But borrowing money is more than a parable or an illustration in this text. It is one of those sensitive points that develops into a tension between brothers that will hinder our fellowship with God.

3. Our relationship with someone else's wife and with our own wife verses 27-32

The subject here is divorce. As with the subject of murder, so here Jesus introduction "but I tell you" does not mean a change of the commandment but an analysis of its background. The key to obedience or to trespass is in our own heart. Adultery begins in the mind and the only protection against falling into sin is within ourselves. As with murder, God judges the motives that precede the act. We stand guilty before Him even if we never get to the point of committing the act.

There is probably no other portion of Scripture with such a sweeping condemnation of man as this one. Nowhere is the tendency to let our mind wander greater than in the domain of sex. The recognition that there is no real difference between the thought and the act is the beginning of victory over unclean thoughts. It is important to honestly confess sin as sin. Keith Miller does this in his book *The Taste of New Wine*. When he sees a girl whose skirt is blown up by the wind, he suppresses the excuse that "boys will be boys" with the confession: "Lord, this is the way I am; I wanted to go to bed with her." I heard of a man who was bitten in his foot by a poisonous snake and immediately reacted by taking his machete and cutting off his

1. I John 3:11-17

foot. That is a good illustration of the meaning of Jesus' radical advice: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." What Jesus wants to say here is that sin is a fast working poison that causes death.

Our Lord's attitude toward sin is completely opposite to our tendency to play with life-threatening poisons. Jesus speaks from a position of holiness and fellowship with the Father, but we often have a mentality of corruption and death. A compromise is impossible. These words would leave us behind as the most miserable of all creatures if salvation were not available to us and if God would not give us new life, on the basis of which we rather gouge out our eye or amputate our arm than to fall into sin.

The words "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce" in verses 31 and 32 are taken from the Book of Deuteronomy.¹ The text in Deuteronomy does not contain a command to man to give a certificate of divorce the context only indicates that this was customary at that time. Evidently, the text deals with a marriage that had been newly consummated when the husband discovers that his bride was not a virgin. This gave him the right to send her away. Adultery was considered a capital crime.² In Jesus' time people had evidently deviated from the original norm. Otherwise the question of the Pharisees: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"³ and the disciples' disconcerted reaction: "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry"⁴ would be difficult to explain. Jesus' mention of "marital unfaithfulness" in vs. 32 confirms the law in Deuteronomy. The point is probably immoral behavior before marriage rather than adultery after marriage. The Greek word used is *porneia*, from which the English word pornography is derived. It may include adultery as well as fornication. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines it as: "illicit sexual intercourse." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* calls it: "An unusual phrase that perhaps means 'except for a matter of unchastity.'"

The question arises what should be the attitude of a Christian who no longer lives in a society where adultery is punishable by death? We find no binding directives in Scripture on this point. It seems to me, however, that immorality in a Christian marriage could be a ground for divorce. But this would only be the case if the road to forgiveness and reconciliation is blocked because of the unrepentant attitude of the offending party. It is interesting to read the story of the woman who was caught in the act of committing adultery in this light.⁵ There Jesus emphasizes forgiveness. We must remember, though, that the breaking up of a marriage mentioned in verses 31 and 32 is a sin punishable by death. This gives to this passage the same kind of urgency as in the preceding ones that dealt with the amputation of a hand or the gouging out of an eye.

4. Our Speech verses 33-37

Swearing by the Name of God was a command in the Old Testament. We read in Deuteronomy: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name," and "Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name."⁶ It seems as if, in this case, Jesus does modify the commandment. We must remember, however, that the swearing of an oath always is a voluntary

1. See Deut. 24:1-4

2. See Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24

3. Matt. 19:3

4. Matt. 19:10

5. See John 8:2-11

6. Deut. 6:13; 10:20

act. When Moses commanded to swear by the Name of God, he did not order the people to take an oath, but he ordered them to only to appeal to the Name of YHWH and not to any other authority, when they did swear. It appears from what follows in this text that, in Jesus' days, the oath was not so much used to confirm the truth as to circumvent the truth. Jesus reacts against this misuse of appealing to the Most High. People would no longer swear by the Name of YHWH but "by heaven," "by the earth," "by Jerusalem," or by their own head. Jesus would condemn the practice later in His ministry.¹ There was a tendency to avoid the consequences of a binding oath. Swearing by the temple was not binding, but swearing by the gold of the temple was, etc.² That which ought to have been the only solid ground in a drifting world had become the domain over which the deceitful heart of man had taken control. Unreliability in speech is ultimately nothing else but unreliability of the heart. If our hearts are established with grace our "Yes" will be "Yes," and our "No," "No"; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

5. Our relationship with Our Enemy verses 38-48

We can divide this section into two parts: (1) verses 38-42 – our reaction to the acts of people who want to harm us and (2) verses 43-48 – our attitude toward our enemy as a human being.

The expression "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" is found three times in the Pentateuch.³ In the first instance it is used in the context of a fight between two men in which a third party, a pregnant woman, is injured. The fine imposed is "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." In the second instance, the context is a variety of offences, covering blasphemy of the Name of YHWH, to manslaughter, to physical injury such as the breaking of a tooth. The punishment must be in accordance with the severity of the crime. The third instance deals with a false accusation brought by one person to another. What the accuser wants to be done to the accused falls back on his own head if his accusation proves to be false. Jesus' mention of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth," probably best fits the last category, because the element of revenge seems to be most prevalent in it. We miss the point if we do not understand that, in the Law of Moses, the commands pertain to the handling of justice in a court of law. Moses formulated government regulations that aimed to limit acts of personal vengeance. In Jesus' day, this kind of execution of justice was no longer in the hands of the Jews but in those of the Roman government. There were, evidently, Jews who insisted in handling their personal grievances themselves and in taking revenge for injustice they suffered.

We are commanded not to resist "evil." The Greek word *poneros* can be taken to mean either the evil person or the evil act. In some cases it refers to evil spirits or to "The Evil One." It is less important to determine what is meant here than to realize that the Evil One is behind the scene of every evil act. After all, we are never solely "[struggling] against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁴ Jesus says this in the context of a righteous person, a child of the Kingdom, who suffers harm because of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus warns us not to respond in the same spirit as the spirit of the attacker. We will never be able to overcome evil with evil, or the Evil One with evil. The devil can only be conquered by good.

What has made Jesus' advice so famous is the fact that it goes against all the laws that govern the struggle for existence. We think that, unless we defend ourselves against the efforts of others to make life impossible, we will be swallowed up hide and hair. But Jesus' words pertain to people who know to be part of the Kingdom, who are convinced that their "to be or not to be" does not depend upon the good graces of

1. See Matt. 23:16-22

2. See Matt. 23:16

3. Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21

4. Eph. 6:12

their fellowmen but on their being hidden in the hollow of God's hand. Turning the other cheek then becomes a testimony.

Striking someone on the right cheek is a sign of derision. Using one's right hand to hit someone, one would strike the left cheek, not the right. Striking with the left hand is like a grazing shot intended to insult a person. Insults always touch our carnal nature; the new man can never be insulted. If we try to exonerate ourselves we always stand alone. The biblical position is that we do not defend ourselves. If we have surrendered ourselves to God, our honor is His business. When David was insulted, he said to God: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."¹

The taking of the tunic and the cloak in vs. 40 is in reference to what Moses stipulated in Deuteronomy regarding the security for a loan. We read: "When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into his house to get what he is offering as a pledge. Stay outside and let the man to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. If the man is poor, do not go to sleep with his pledge in your possession. Return his cloak to him by sunset so that he may sleep in it. Then he will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God."² Taking the tunic or cloak of a poor man was specifically forbidden. The obligation to provide a security was always linked to a person's getting into debt. It led to a situation in which a person arrived because of his own fault. Then, the Evil One, in the form of a fellowman, could come and use this situation with illegal means to destroy the debtor. Jesus could only give His admonition to people who knew their sins to be forgiven. Only those who know that God is on their side can afford not to defend themselves.

The picture of forcing of a person to go one mile is borrowed from the custom of government authorities to requisition people, horses, or vehicles. The Greek *aggareuo* word used here is very interesting; it means "to be a courier," or "to press into public service." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* explains: "This word is said to be derived from the Persians, among whom the king's messengers, or posts, were called Angaroi, or angari ... The Persian messengers had the royal authority for pressing horses, ships, and even men, to assist them in the business on which they were employed. These angari are now termed chappars, and serve to carry dispatches between the court and the provinces. When a chappar sets out, the master of the horse furnishes him with a single horse; and, when that is weary, he dismounts the first man he meets, and takes his horse. There is no pardon for a traveler that refuses to let a chappar have his horse, nor for any other who should deny him the best horse in his stable." Under the authority of the Roman government, the Jews were often requisitioned to give their time, either with or without their donkey or horse, to perform courier services. A person who was on his way to a certain destination could be forced to retrace his steps and walk for the government. We can understand how such requisitions to go one mile would meet with resistance and cause feelings of bitterness.

Jesus' advice is meant to overcome this resistance. Behind this pronouncement lies the biblical philosophy of what the attitude of a Christian should be towards the government, whether good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable. The Bible leaves us little room for "civil disobedience."

The fourth admonishment pertains to "the small things of life." It still falls into the category of resisting the Evil One. We have to pay close attention to the two sides of the problem, because the fact that we are Christians places us on the same side of the line as in the preceding three situations depicted. In the three previous examples, it was clear that a Christian has to see himself on the giving side. We see, however, that in the matter of borrowing or loaning, most Christians switch sides without blinking an eye. It may be very difficult to see where the line of partition is drawn. It is obvious that not every case of borrowing or loaning calls for resisting the Evil One. There are situations in which borrowing is absolutely legitimate and others where it becomes a fertile soil for all kinds of tensions and quarrels. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius gives the following pertinent fatherly counsel to his son Laertes: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be; for loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry." As long as we are

1. Ps. 3:3

2. Deut. 24:10-13

on the giving side, the Lord's advice is clear: "Give always." Nothing is said to those who stand on the receiving end of the line, and that is where we find the greatest difficulty in our text. When is borrowing an innocent matter and when is it dangerous? The fact that the Lord brings up the subject several times in His teaching proves that borrowing was very customary in Israel.¹

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus calls this kind of borrowing "impudence." In the parable of the friend who wakes up his friend at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread, the NIV uses the word "boldness," which may be misconstrued in a positive sense. The KJV reads more correctly: "because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth."²

It is important for us to realize that behind the scene of the four, apparently unconnected incidents the Lord depicts here, a war is raging in the invisible world. We find the key in the words: "I tell you, Do not resist an evil person."³ The Evil One endeavors to entrap us in wry relationships so that we will suffer defeat. Our victory is based upon the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only by unselfishness, lack of self-assertion, and trust in God that we will defeat the Evil One. As we saw in the quotation from David's Psalm above, God is our shield and our honor; He will see to it that no one will take our cloak if we leave the matter in His hands. Without this positive basis of faith in God, Jesus words would be an unrealistic and idealistic fantasy. When seen from the viewpoint of trust in God, it appears that, with the four examples He used, Jesus has penetrated to the core of the problems of daily life.

In verses 38-42 the topic was Satan who hid behind a human being, in verses 43-48 the subject is the person being behind whom the devil has hidden. It is important to make this distinction. The devil is no human being and no human being is a devil. Man can be used and even possessed by the powers of darkness, but he remains a creature made in the image of God who can either be saved or lost. God wants us to identify so much with Him that we overcome all human prejudice in our interpersonal relationships. We must give up the tendency to divide mankind into two parts: the ones we like and the ones we dislike. We must accept all those who have surrendered themselves to God as brothers and sisters in Christ and those who have not as potential brothers and sisters.

The basis for Jesus' words here is a quotation from the Old Testament: "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁴ But nowhere in Scripture do we read that we should hate our enemies. David may have come close to this when he said in one of his psalms: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies."⁵ The enemies in David's psalm, however, are the enemies of God. David identified himself with God to the point of considering an enemy to be one who opposes God.

In the context of Leviticus, from which the quote "Love your neighbor as yourself" is taken, the issue is the absurd notion that a man would hate members of his own nation. God gave instructions to Israel to kill certain individuals and even to exterminate whole peoples, but there never was any suggestion in this of hatred and individual revenge. That personal revenge did occur from time to time is beyond doubt.

Jesus' quotation: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy" is, therefore, a mere repetition of a popular belief, not a quote from Scripture as in the previous instances. The people had drawn, what seemed to be, a logical conclusion of loving one's neighbor. Even if some failed to love their neighbor they were zealous in obeying the latter part of this "commandment."

The point Jesus makes here is that our relationship to our fellowmen must not rest on reciprocity. Yet, the general rule is that one only gives to those who give in return. We pay derision and contempt to those who disdain us. Jesus' admonition is a reversal of this human tendency. If love must be fed by the

1. See also Luke 6:34,35; 11:5

2. Luke 11:8

3. or "evil," as the KJV has it

4. Lev. 19:18

5. Ps. 139:21,22

recipients of that love it has no value whatsoever. Genuine love radiates irrespective of the object that ought to reflect it. Jesus' own life provides a rich model for this kind of love.

What Jesus does not say, of course, is that by being kind to our fellowmen, we work ourselves up to the level of becoming sons of our Father in heaven. The principle rather works in the opposite direction. It is inasmuch as we become aware of the fact that God has forgiven us and we see how God treats His enemies that our attitude toward others will change. The apostle Paul expresses this in his Epistle to the Romans: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"¹ Loving our enemies is not a condition for fellowship with God; it is the fruit of it.

The words "sons of your Father in heaven" refer to our testimony in this world. It is the witness of our life that makes others acknowledge that we are children of God.²

God's impartiality, His perfection, or "maturity" is demonstrated in the rising of the sun and the coming down of the rain upon all men. Every human being, born in this world, lives in a world that, although scarred by sin, is a good habitat for men. Evil people do not breathe air that is more polluted than good people. Sun and rain represent the whole of natural blessing, fertility, and happiness. For us, sun and rain are not always symbols of blessing, because sin has disturbed the balance of nature to the point where, sometimes, there can be too much of either and become man's enemy. That, however, was not God's original plan for the sun and the rain.

"What reward will you get?" If love pays back love, we receive as much as we pay. So what do we gain? The law of the Kingdom consists in diminishing returns: gain increase as the yield decreases! The same principle is evinced in Paul's words to the Corinthians: "What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it."³ In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' words are recorded: "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."⁴ The vision of doing more for others as the reward diminishes makes one great in the Kingdom of Heaven. When I studied in the Brussels Bible Institute in Belgium, there was a guest, a missionary to the Belgian Congo, Rev. Davy, who made it a point to accompany every person who left the building for the train station, often carrying the luggage. We seldom realize that such an attitude is a characteristic of the Father, and that we resemble Him inasmuch as we give without chasing gratitude.

No emotionally healthy life is possible for man without love. It is, therefore, imperative to give and receive at least some measure of love. All this is part of natural life. It is not even a sign of spirituality that we love God because He loves us. The reward begins when we rise above the level of the natural and we realize that "it is more blessed to give than to receive."⁵

Greetings are an outward detail of human life. The whole complex of the masks we wear in our social relationship is just as important as the inward side of life. Politeness can be a cover-up for inner

1. Rom. 5:6-10

2. See also Matt. 5:9; James 2:23; I John 3:1

3. I Cor. 9:18

4. Luke 14:12-14

5. Acts 20:35

falsehood, but if our hearts are full of the love of God it will also be visible in the outer forms of our behavior.

“Be perfect!” That demand sounds almost ridiculous. It seems hardly worth the effort to try. Yet, this is God’s standard by which our lives will be measured. There will come a day on which there will no longer a place in this world for imperfect people, that is people who refuse to be included in the perfection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

IV. Relationship among the Children of the Kingdom and God 6:1-34

1 *"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

2 *"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

3 *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*

4 *so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

5 *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

6 *But 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.*

7 *And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*

8 *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

9 *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,*

10 *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

11 *Give us today our daily bread.*

12 *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

13 *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'*

14 *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

15 *But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

16 *"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

17 *But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,*

18 *so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

19 *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*

20 *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

21 *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

22 *"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light.*

23 *But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*

24 *"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*

25 *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?*

26 *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*

27 *Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*

28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

As in chapter five, this chapter also can be divided into five sections:

1. Giving Alms – verses 1-4
2. Prayer – verses 5-15
3. Fasting – verses 16-18
4. Serving – verses 19-24
5. Searching – verses 25-34

1. Giving Alms – verses 1-4

Some scholars interpret vs. 1 as an introduction to all of the following passages, particularly verses 2-18. The Greek uses some very expressive words in connection with charity. The NIV renders the word *dikaioisune* "acts of righteousness." The NKJV uses the words "charitable acts." The KJV uses the word "alms" both here and in vs. 2, where the Greek has the word *eleemosune*, which means "acts of compassion."

We could say that all of the following topics, not only the giving of alms, but also praying and fasting, are "acts of righteousness." This means that giving of alms is not optional. If one has come to the point where he realizes that God has redeemed him and he does not ask himself: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"¹ something is, obviously, wrong. According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "alms" is "something given freely to relieve the poor." God does not need our "alms," but He comes to us in the neediness of our fellowmen, so that we would have an outlet for our gratitude. On the Day of Judgment, the King will say: "I was hungry and you gave me something to 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."² The apostle Paul makes the following important statement: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."³

The first words that set the tone for this chapter are: "Be careful!" The Lord places a warning sign at the beginning of the road of righteousness. There are hidden dangers lurking in giving, praying, fasting, and serving. The dangers are so great that they can make these necessary manifestations of our spiritual life into a hollow and useless ritual. The danger is in the mixing up of the invisible world with the visible one. The giving of alms pertains to both worlds. It consists of the giving of tangible things via visible people to an invisible God. Not seeing the Invisible will shipwreck the whole operation; because in that case, we do not give to God but to man, leaving God completely out of it. Reducing giving to a mere transaction on a human level is "dead giving."

Then there is "[lifting] up the cup of salvation and [calling] on the name of the LORD," as the psalmist says.⁴ That ought to be the basis for all our giving. A person, who does not give to God, ultimately

1. Ps. 116:12

2. Matt. 25:35,36

3. Eph. 4:28

gives to himself, even if others are the recipients. Where gratitude is absent in giving, giving is done for the purpose of being noticed by others, which is nothing but a manifestation of egoism. That was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira.

Our Lord calls people who thus camouflage their egoism: “hypocrites.” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines hypocrisy as: “A feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not; *esp*: the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion.” A hypocrite plays the role of the saint he does not want to be. There is a relationship between the outward appearance and the inner reality. That is why the hypocrite knows no gratitude. Only he who recognizes the reality of his sin can experience the reality of forgiveness.

So we come back to our starting point, which is gratitude that brings us to “repay the Lord for all His goodness” in helping the needy. The hypocrite, ultimately, only wants to help himself. In her book *My Several Worlds*, Pearl Buck speaks of people who have the psychological need of helping others. She advises to stay away from those who help others because they need that boost for their own ego.

Jesus’ words deal with more than merely giving money. The whole complex of the preaching and ministry of the Gospel is included in them. Peter gave the best “alms” he could give when he said to the crippled man at the temple gate: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”¹

The danger, of course, does not begin with the blowing of trumpets. We can give silently and yet yearn for recognition. Because of the deviousness of our heart, this tendency will, probably, never be completely absent in all giving. The important thing is that we are aware of the danger and that we act accordingly. The Lord advises, not without a touch of humor, that our left hand should not know what our right hand is doing.

2. Prayer – verses 5-15

In this section, the Lord first issues some warnings regarding prayer (verses 5-8), and following that, the content of prayer – The Lord’s Prayer (verses 9-15). The warning concerns the “how,” “where,” and “why” of prayer.

How do we pray? Not like the hypocrites! As giving alms is giving to God, so prayer is speaking to God. When prayer is no longer addressed to God it becomes an empty comedy. No higher form of fellowship exists than prayer. Corruption of prayer, therefore, is worse than the corruption of one’s sexual life. Yet, the deterioration of prayer is the most common form of degeneration. Many examples can be given of prayers that are said for the benefit of those present. In that case God is used as a sounding board on which the message that is meant to be conveyed bounces off to the hearers. Ultimately, this amounts to ignoring the presence of God while talking to other people. In a human society, that would be considered the greatest possible insult to a person.

I once read a book entitled *Games People Play*. It analyzed the hidden codes of communication, the body language, and the roles we assume when we communicate with people. The author characterized those as “games.” It would be interesting to psychologically analyze the “games” of the religious hypocrite. Why is it that a person wants to give the impression of being someone who has fellowship with God, and goes through the rituals of fellowship, without ever entering into real contact with God? Not wanting to enter into a genuine relationship with God means a flight from reality. It is a common phenomenon among men not to surrender to God but to maintain one’s independence. Is it man’s desire to be noticed by others that brings him to camouflaging his unwillingness to capitulate with a white flag? Wanting to be noticed is an indication of the desire to “hold one’s own.” The person who does not want to surrender to God, obviously, is convinced in his heart that he does not have much that is worth holding on to, and the pious disguise serves

4. Ps. 116:13

1. Acts 3:6

as an insurance against a total collapse. It is clear, therefore, that the basis of prayer must be surrender to God.

There is, again, a touch of humor in Jesus' remark: "I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." The prayer of those who want to be noticed has already been answered. There won't be any further answer to prayer for them. The conclusion as to how to pray is that prayer must be directed to God and not to ourselves, or to other people.

Where do we pray? Prayer is a form of intimacy. It is done "in the closet." A love-relationship that is acted out in public is not an intimate relationship.

The words: "go into your room, close the door" also suggest that there is a danger of distraction and interruption. Prayer should not be interrupted. It is about God and, consequently, we must shut out everything that would hinder fellowship with Him.

The word "reward" sounds strange to us in the context of prayer. It gives the impression that we comply with God's desire when we pray instead of God giving us what we ask for. In a sense, this is true. There is in our prayers satisfaction for God, if we understand the matter correctly. In speaking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus said: "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for *they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.*"¹ God wants our persistent prayers to be one of the most important facets of our humanity. This is the reason prayer occupied such an important part in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: "[Jesus] says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.' And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again he says, 'Here am I, and the children God has given me.'"² If we lead a life of prayer, we answer to God's goal for our life. Hence the reward! The reward of prayer is so great that it seems incomprehensible that we would say pseudo prayers that are addressed to ourselves or to other human beings instead of to God.

Why do we pray? The greatest misconception about prayer is that it consists of asking for things we need. There is a lot of playacting in most prayers. We act as if there are things that God is not aware of, so that we must inform Him about them. Even worse, the way in which we pray may reveal that we consider ourselves to be people who plead a case before a hardhearted God whom we must mollify. That is the psychological background for the use of "many words" in prayer. If we understand the meaning of the words "Your Father knows ..." our attitude toward prayer will undergo a revolution.

What then is prayer? Prayer is more God's being involved with us than our dealing with God. We do not mitigate God but God assuages us. God does not change because of our prayers but we do. Our attitude toward our fellowmen and to our circumstances will change according to the measure of our prayers. Nehemiah experienced the change of his life as he began to pray for the city of Jerusalem. Having received the sad report of the condition of the city in ruin, we read: "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." His prayer ended with the request: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man [the king of Persia]."³

I used to think that the warning against using "many words" in prayer meant that I should not spend too much time in prayer, as if God would not be pleased if I would be on my knees for one hour. A sermon by the Rev. Roland Brown, whom I heard as a young Christian, made me understand that progress in prayer was related to the time we devoted to it. A self-respecting professional pianist is someone who spends 8 hours a day behind his piano. If prayer is God's way to change our lives, it is important that we spend more than 5 minutes a day on it.

Although the purpose of prayer is not to inform God about our needs, an important part of prayer is taken up by mentioning our needs and the needs of others before God. The key to answered prayer is in the

1. John 4:23

2. Heb. 2:12,13

3. Neh. 1:4,11

knowledge of God's will. As the apostle John states: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."¹ The great prayer warrior George Mueller testified that he spent the greater amount of time in prayer to know the will of God about certain matters. Once he was certain about that and began to pray for the matter at hand, the answer would usually come in a short time. Our first goal in prayer, therefore, ought to be to find the will of God regarding our needs and the needs of others. We must not too easily say: "Lord, give me this or that," but rather: "Lord, show me what I need." Our Father knows what we need before we ask Him, but we do not always. In prayer we learn to know as much about ourselves as about God.

The Lord's Prayer – verses 9-15

In the light of what is said above, we must see this prayer Jesus gives to His disciples as a model for their prayer life. The important part is not asking for things God knows we need, but learning to know our own needs in learning to know God.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia observes about the Lord's Prayer that it "consists of six petitions. These are arranged in three equal parts. In the first part, the thought is directed toward God and His great purposes. In the second part, the attention is directed to our condition and wants. The two sets of petitions are closely related, and a line of progress runs through the whole prayer. The petitions of the first part are inseparable, as each includes the one which follows. As the hallowing of God's name requires the coming of His kingdom, so the kingdom comes through the doing of His will. Again, the first part calls for the second, for if His will is to be done by us, we must have sustenance, forgiveness and deliverance from evil. If we seek first the glory of God, the end requires our good. While we hallow His name we are sanctified in Him. The doxology of Matthew and our rituals is not found in the leading manuscripts and is generally regarded as an ancient liturgical addition. For this reason it is omitted by the Revised Version (British and American)."

The Pulpit Commentary adds a Homily by W. F. Adeney, who outlines this prayer as follows:

1. It is addressed to the Fatherhood of God
2. It honors the holiness of God
3. It seeks the glory of God
4. It trusts God's daily care
5. It confesses sin and asks forgiveness
6. It craves deliverance from evil

Volumes could be written about the opening statement, the Name "Our Father." These words constitute one of the most revolutionary declarations ever made in this world. The Old Testament only knew God's fatherhood in covered form. The very first mention is in Moses' farewell address to the people of Israel: "Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?"²

Another indication appears in connection with King Solomon who is an image of the Lord Jesus. God said to David regarding Solomon: "I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men."³

In one of the psalms, David calls God: "A father to the fatherless"⁴ In another psalm God is compared to an earthly father in His attitude toward mankind: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him."⁵

1. I John 5:14

2. Deut. 32:6

3. II Sam. 7:14; see also I Chr. 17:13; 22:10; 28:6

4. Ps. 68:5

5. Ps. 103:13

Isaiah addressed God with the words: “But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.”¹ God said to Jeremiah: “They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.”

And in Malachi we read: “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me?”² But no one had ever addressed God as “Father” in the way Jesus did. The Old Testament saw God’s fatherhood as the picture of an earthly relationship. There the reality was the man as father of his children and the image was projected upon the invisible God. Jesus demonstrates that the reality is the reverse. God’s fatherhood is not an image of ours; He is *the* Father and we can be fathers to give an earthly expression of the heavenly reality, the true fatherhood. *The* Son was needed to show us *the* Father.

The full Gospel is revealed in our invocation: “Our Father.” The possessive pronoun is an indication of the riches of our position in Christ. After His resurrection, Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: “Go ... to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”³ Inasmuch as we are one with the Son, we have the same relationship to the Father as He has.

The words “hallowed be your name,” lead us immediately into the center of prayer. Not man and his needs are at the heart of prayer but God and His “needs.” The most important matter in the whole universe is the Name of God and its being hallowed.

The Name of God is God Himself, His being, His character, and His glory. Everything in this world and in all of space is geared toward the knowledge of God, and all of Satan’s efforts are aimed to undermine this knowledge. The final victory will be won when all “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”⁴ As human beings, we are all caught in this process of justification of God’s Name. It is of the utmost importance for us to have this vision. That is the theme of the Book of Job. The desire expressed in the words “hallowed be your name,” is the starting point of all spiritual life.

Every human life consists of a battlefield. We either build a monument that profanes the Name of God, or we erect a testimonial that sanctifies His Name. When King David sinned, the prophet Nathan told him: “By doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt.”⁵ The apostle Paul accused the Jew because: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”⁶ On the other hand, Jesus encourages us: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”⁷ And Peter advises: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”⁸ What we build will depend upon our personal knowledge of God. Knowing God means eternal life.⁹ The gate to this life is the forgiveness of our sins. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, stated in his song of praise that God would “give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”¹⁰

1. Isa. 63:16

2. Mal. 1:6

3. John 20:17

4. Hab. 2:14

5. II Sam. 12:14

6. Rom. 2:24

7. Matt. 5:16

8. I Peter 2:12

9. John 17:3

10. Luke 1:77

Only people who have already entered the Kingdom of Heaven can pray: “Your kingdom come.” The condition that creates within us the desire for God’s rule in this world is personal surrender to His rule. Why would we wish for God to rule over the lives of other people if we have not given Him the right to rule in ours? We can only participate in the coming of the Kingdom if we have given the keys of our heart to God. Only God’s servants will be kings in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is in our own interest that the Kingdom comes as soon as possible.

What is this Kingdom? It consists in the subjection to God of all that the devil had removed from God’s authority. It consists in the conversion of those who have rebelled and also in the acknowledgment of others that God has the right to rule, even if they do not want to personally submit to that rule.

Man plays a pivotal role in the coming of this Kingdom. The Bible teaches that all of creation is subjected to frustration because of the fall of man.¹ The coming of the Kingdom will heal the relationship between animals and man, and between one animal and another, which is now corrupted because of sin. The coming of the Kingdom will be the ultimate healing of man’s relationship with God. Isaiah describes this beautifully: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. 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. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”²

For those who have come into the right relationship with God, the Kingdom has already begun. The topic in this prayer, however, is not about personal conversion but about the sum of all personal renewals of life. The coming of the Kingdom is not only an event that will occur in the invisible world; it also constitutes drastic changes in the events of this world. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be the greatest revolution this world has ever known. It will be the reversal of all dominion, the reversal of the process of dying and corruption. What else can we call the resurrection from the dead? The coming of the Kingdom of God will mean the death of death itself. And a world without death is a new world. The coming of the Kingdom will be determined, both by spiritual, as well as by physical factors. It is important that we keep these factors in mind when we pray for the coming of the Kingdom.

“Your will be done.” The will is the seat of personality. Our personality is the seal of God upon us. We all have different personalities, and yet our personality is the image of God in us. We resemble God because we differ from Him. The miracle and goal of God’s creation is wrapped up in our personality. Without personality it would be impossible to love. We often presume that, since our will is proof of our personality, the unbridled exercise of our will is of vital importance. God created man as an independent being, with his own will and character, with the intent that man would make himself knowingly and willingly dependant upon God. As a woman finds the fulfillment of her womanhood in surrendering to a man, so man (I use the word generically) finds his realization in surrender to God. This has nothing to do with being sinful or with being without sin. The purpose of our free will is the surrender to the will of God. The independent exercise of our will is, in itself, not an indication of sin. But God would never be able to

1. See Rom. 8:20

2. Isa. 11:1-10

accept the surrender of the will of a person whose sin has not been atoned for. The surrender of our will can only be done on the basis of the atonement.

This principle is nowhere exemplified so clearly as in the life of the Lord Jesus Himself. The meaning of His baptism was the surrender of His will to the will of the Father. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane: “Not as I will, but as you will.”¹ The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews comments on this prayer: “He learned obedience from what he suffered.”² This kind of surrender of the human will to the will of God is expressed in the grain offering prescribed in Leviticus.³ That offering was a bloodless sacrifice, without any references to the atonement of sins committed. It was a sacrifice of fruit of the field that was in perfect condition. When a human being thus presents his body as a living sacrifice to God, it is “an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”⁴ When we surrender ourselves to God in this way, we know that we have reached the goal for which we were created.

“...on earth as it is in heaven.” These words compare man with the angels who have remained faithful to God. The obedience of the angels is certainly no automatic, run-away-with notion. Angels obey God’s will wholeheartedly, with freedom of choice, and with the involvement of their whole personality. Their obedience is perfect, with an eye on detail.

Obedience in heaven rises above the level of sin. This does not mean that sin cannot be a factor in heaven. Sin began in heaven. In the opening chapters of the Book of Job we see Satan standing among the angels.⁵ But heaven is not polluted by sin. There is a difference between the polluted air of one of the world’s big cities and the pure air of a mountain peak. On earth, obedience to the will of God is based on victory over sin. Angels, who in the order of creation are inferior to humans, serve as an example of obedience to us.

Although obeying God’s will is, first of all, a matter of personal responsibility, these verses do not merely speak about the angel and me. The field of vision is heaven and earth, which is a wider perspective than usually meets the eye. It is a sign of good spiritual health if, in our prayers, we devote ourselves to matters on such a cosmic scale.

“Give us today our daily bread.” In Luke’s Gospel, the NKJV renders this request: “Give us day by day our daily bread.”⁶ This request seems to be redundant. If our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask Him, there is no need to remind Him of the fact that we must eat every day. As we said above, the purpose of prayer is not primarily to remind God of our needs, but to remind us. But don’t we know what we need?

Yet, in the light of what precedes, this request acquires a special meaning. The point is not food, but our attitude toward our needs. If we ask the Father, on a daily basis, for our daily bread, we recognize where the source of our physical strength and the satisfaction of our needs lies. It means the recognition of our dependence upon God for those things upon which our very existence hinges. Our physical life hangs on a thin thread and that thread is in the hand of God. That is the confession of faith that assures the victory over the curse and the judgment that was pronounced upon man when he fell into sin. A person, who eats his bread apart from God, eats it “by the sweat of [his] brow.”⁷ But those, whose sins have been forgiven, whose spirits have been made alive, and who are no longer merely dust that will return to dust, live “not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”⁸ The psalmist says: ““In vain you rise

1. Matt. 26:39

2. Heb. 5:8

3. See Lev. ch. 2

4. Lev. 2:2

5. See Job 1:6

6. Luke 11:3

7. Gen. 3:19

8. Deut. 8:3

early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat--for he grants sleep to those he loves.”¹ Reconciliation with God and realization of dependence upon God form the basis of this prayer for daily bread.

The words “to day” and “daily” are words that are heavily laden with meaning. They make this prayer bounce back upon ourselves. After all, we are the ones who must become conscious of our needs, not the Lord. The words limit the time and the amount. A healthy person lives in the present, which is what God wants us to do. The past and future do not belong to the actuality of our life. The reality is the presence in which we live. The limitations of “today” this prayer puts on us, makes it necessary for us to live in the reality of God’s presence. God has put a watch at the gate of our heart so that we would not fall into the trap of being worried about tomorrow.

The word “daily” determines the amount. A good illustration is found in the record of the Israelites gathering the manna in the desert. God had said to Moses: “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.” “Then Moses said to them, ‘No one is to keep any of it until morning.’ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.”² The key verse in that story is: “Each one gathered as much as he needed.”³ If this could be said about every human being on earth, many of this world’s problems would be solved. It is because we imagine ourselves to live in a vacuum, an empty universe without God, that we begin hoarding things for a carefree retirement. For those who see themselves in the center of God’s will, the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews apply: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”⁴ There is a kind of worry, a chasing after an assurance for the future, which is nothing but a lack of trust in God. This does not mean that one ought not to be busy to provide for one’s family. But the effort of most people goes far beyond this. The Lord Jesus Himself underlined the words of this prayer during His temptation in the desert. For forty days, the Father gave Him nothing to still His hunger. His conclusion was: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁵ We must realize, when we ask for our daily bread, that we are only asking for part of our total need.

What was said about regarding the prayer for bread can also be said about the prayer for the forgiveness of sin. God paid the price for our sin by sending His only Son into the world as a propitiation for our sins. If God, in such a unilateral manner and so radically laid down the basis for our pardon, it is almost ridiculous to beg for forgiveness. Every notion that we must mollify God on this point ought to be far from us. The Scriptures abound with assurances that God is more eager to forgive than we are to receive forgiveness. David says in one of the Psalms: “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”⁶ And God assures us by mouth of Isaiah: “Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ”⁷ Micah exclaimed: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”⁸

1. Ps. 127:2

2. Ex.16:4,19,20

3. Ex. 16:18

4. Heb. 13:5,6

5. Matt. 4:4

6. Ps. 86:5

7. Isa. 55:7-9

8. Micah 7:18

Our verse, therefore, does not deal primarily with God who must forgive us, but with us who must receive forgiveness. The problem lies with us. The condition of our heart is often such that we are willing to be pardoned but unwilling to forgive others. The key words in this verse are “as we also ...” No one can pray this prayer without searching his heart to see if it is true that there is willingness to forgive. The words “as we also ...” not only make us forgivers, as God is a forgiver, but they also determine, in a sense, the measure of our own forgiveness. We receive pardon in the measure in which we give it.

We must remember, however, that the rule only applies to a process that has already begun. In forgiving others, we do not lay the basis for our own forgiveness. The rule pertains only to those who have already been reconciled to God. The sins for which we need to receive forgiveness are our daily stumblings on the road to sanctification. Jesus illustrates this principle in the parable about the hardhearted servant whose debt of ten thousand talents was wiped out, but who did not want to forgive a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii. (TLB paraphrases the amount as \$10,000,000 and \$2000). A person who finds himself unable to forgive others has, obviously, never accepted pardon for his own sins. Jesus concludes this parable by saying: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”¹ This presupposes a change of heart. Joseph understood this, as is evident from the way he treated his brothers who had wanted to murder him. At the moment he revealed his true identity to his brothers, he said: “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”² And when, after Jacob’s death the brothers feared Joseph’s revenge, he told them: “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”³

One of our problems is that we often see the sins of others as bigger than our own. Being able to forgive requires a measure of self-knowledge and self-criticism. God does not accept us on the basis of what we think we are but as we are in reality.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” We are again reminded of the fact that God knows our needs. Nothing would be more contrary to God’s plan with this world and more against His will for our lives than that we were caught in the snares of the devil. The first purpose of this prayer, therefore, is that we would learn to know ourselves and that we understand the danger that threatens us. We are people who are prone to be led into temptation. The greatest danger is that we deceive ourselves in thinking to be immune for certain temptations. There are in the heart of every human being germs of every imaginable sin, waiting for the right moment to sprout and bear fruit. Those are the weaknesses of the flesh. The seed is not sown into our heart from the outside, but it is already inside us. James warns us: “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”⁴

The purpose of this prayer does not seem to be that we are saved every form of testing and that all obstacles are removed from our way. There are two kinds of temptations. God may put us to the test for the purpose of making our faith root deeper in the soil of His promises. A tree is tested by the wind in this way. But there are also temptations that the devil manipulates for the obvious purpose of making us fall. We need discernment in order to pray this prayer and to differentiate between the former and the latter. In connection with Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, we read: “God tested Abraham.”⁵ That is the kind of testing about which James writes: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be

1. Matt. 18:35

2. Gen. 45:5

3. Gen. 50:19,20

4. James 1:14,15

5. Gen. 22:1

mature and complete, not lacking anything.” And: “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.”¹ We must fear more than the plague the temptations that are meant to make us fall. Self-assurance in such a situation is a sure recipe for a certain fall. The reason for this prayer is, first of all, that we learn to discriminate between the sources of our temptations. And, secondly, it is a prayer for protection against ourselves. We can easily become a toy of the devil if we are so conceited as to think that we can remain standing in our own strength. This prayer can be paraphrased: “Lord, teach me to know myself as I am, with my needs and weaknesses.

The doxology “For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” is not found in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament and, consequently, the more recent translations omit it. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about this: “If any reliance is to be placed on external evidence, this doxology, we think, can hardly be considered part of the original text. It is wanting in all the most ancient manuscripts; it is wanting in the Old Latin version and in the Vulgate: the former mounting up to about the middle of the second century, and the latter being a revision of it in the fourth century by Jerome, a most reverential and conservative as well as able and impartial critic. As might be expected from this, it is passed by in silence by the earliest Latin fathers; but even the Greek commentators, when expounding this Prayer, pass by the doxology. On the other hand, it is found in a majority of manuscripts, though not the oldest; it is found in all the Syriac versions, even the Peshito-dating probably as early as the second century-although this version wants the “Amen,” which the doxology, if genuine, could hardly have wanted; it is found in the Sahidic or Thebaic version made for the Christians of Upper Egypt, possibly as early as the Old Latin; and it is found in perhaps most of the later versions.”

Some commentators believe that this doxology is an interpolation from the Book of First Chronicles, where David presents the material for the building of the temple to be done by Solomon, and speaks the words: “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.”² The words remind us of John’s doxology in Revelation: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”³

Even if the words are not part of the original prayer, they are, even as a later addition, a very appropriate conclusion of this wonderful prayer. They are a joyful shout of praise by those who lived through this prayer, who have realized their needs, and have come to the conclusion that God, the Father, will open His hand and will satisfy with good things all that lives.⁴

3. Fasting – verses 16-18

The Hebrew word for “fasting,” *tsum, innah nephesh*, meaning literally “afflicting the soul,” is not found in the Pentateuch, but it occurs in some of the records in Second Samuel, First Kings, etc. The Pentateuch uses the word, *nesteia* for “denying one self.” The Greek word *nesteuo* simply means: “to abstain from food.”

Jesus Himself practiced fasting in the sense of abstaining from food. Before entering upon His public ministry, He fasted for forty days and forty nights.⁵ We find the words: “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting”⁶ in connection with Jesus’ expulsion of a demon from a boy, but the most

1. James 1:2-4,12

2. I Chron. 29:11

3. Rev. 1:5^b-6

4. See Ps. 104:28

5. See Matt. 4:2

6. Mark 9:29 (NKJV)

reliable manuscripts omit the word “fasting” in the text. The early church, however, practiced fasting in searching for the will of God in certain matters. We read, for instance, in the case of the sending out of Paul and Barnabas, that the church of Antioch fasted and prayed.¹ And Paul and Barnabas themselves followed the practice when they appointed elders in Asia Minor. We read: “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”²

In this section, the point is, of course, humbling oneself before God, not merely a neutral abstaining from food. Eating or not eating is only of secondary importance in fasting. There is a way of fasting which ought to be a daily attitude before God. For the Jews it was required to deny themselves in this fashion once a year on the Day of Atonement.³ We may live daily on the basis of the atonement of our sins; our heart and our attitude ought to be in accordance with this. Denying ourselves before God consists in more than confessing certain sins. It is an acknowledgment to the depth of our souls of our natural condition as it developed without God. And even after our conversion and the surrender of our life, we still manage to credit ourselves for those things that are the result of God’s direct intervention in our lives. We are liable to adapt the attitude that we are, after all, good and pious people. This is the structure that must be torn down from time to time in order to maintain a living relationship with our Lord. In cases of stubborn resistance it may be necessary to compliment the humbling of ourselves with abstaining from food. There is hardly a greater joy and deeper peace we can experience than, after having discovered another piece of our incorrigible self, to realize that this also is covered by God’s forgiving grace.

Humbling oneself can only take place when we find ourselves in the presence of God. Without the realization that we are standing before Him who is the eternal, omnipotent God, who knows every fiber of our inner life, we cannot really deny ourselves. But this kind of humility can be simulated. As we saw in connection with prayers prayed to oneself, it is possible for a person to play a pious role. In such a case there is no question of a real humbling of oneself. This is, in fact, the opposite. It is a piece of theater in which we act as if we dismantle our defenses before God, whilst in reality we build up the image of a pious person before men. Such acting must make God “sick to His stomach.” I am tempted to say that He would rather see us commit adultery or theft than that we deceive ourselves and others in this manner. Yet, self-deception is never one hundred percent complete. A hypocrite knows what he does, even though he may not want to listen to himself. How repulsive this all is when looked upon in the proper light. Yet, who among us is without this sin? No one among all the saints has never known a moment of dishonest piety. How repulse must we appear before God!

Jesus rebuke here is addressed to the hypocritical way the Pharisees demonstrated their piety, letting everyone know how earnestly they were denying themselves. It will be difficult, though, to completely hide real brokenness of heart. In that respect however, God wants us to wear a mask. “Put oil on your head and wash your face!” You some deodorant and Cologne! What takes place between you and God is no one else’s business. God wants us to be ashamed of ourselves that we only dare tell Him about it.

Again Jesus speaks about receiving a reward: “I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full,” and “Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” What hypocrites are looking for is that people will be amazed about so much piety. Well, they will be!

If we do not dare to come to God personally, we will have no desire that others will be drawn to Him either. We will receive what we try to achieve: others will be repulsed. The attitude Jesus describes produced the empty churches we are looking at today.

God’s reward to our humbling of ourselves before Him will be the same as the reward of the father of the prodigal son. The boy said to his father: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants: “Quick! Bring the best robe and

1. Acts 13:3

2. Acts 14:23

3. See Lev. 16:29-31; 23:26-32

put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." God will celebrate.¹

4. Serving – verses 19-24

In order to get a clear understanding of this passage it must be read backwards. Vs. 24 indicates what it is: the cause. Verses 22 and 23 show how it happens: the means, and verses 20-21 show the results, or the goal. Another way of outlining these verses is to say that they deal with the heart, the eye, and the body.

Our Lord begins with the heart. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." This statement is reversible. We can say that where our heart is, there will be the place where we gather our treasure. The apostle Paul admonished us: "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."² That is the same as saying: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

There is a touch of humor in the warning concerning the moth, the rust, and the thieves. The Lord mocks our desires for riches. As missionaries among the primitive tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, we used to be amused about the value the people attached to their cowry shells. James is even more sarcastic in the way he scolds the rich: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days."³ Even diamonds are not forever. These are mere symbols of eternal things, but man gathers them in order to obtain power apart from God.

The Pulpit Commentary refers to an observation by Bishop Lightfoot. We read: "Lightfoot ... quotes an interesting Haggada from Talm. Jeremiah, 'Peah,' 15b ... in which 'Monobazes, the king,' when blamed for giving so much to the poor, defends himself at length: 'My fathers laid up their wealth on earth; I lay up mine in heaven,' etc." Jesus must have been familiar with the expression and His audience was, probably, also.

The first section also contains a suggestion about the tensions that divide the human heart. We can try to convince ourselves that our heart is in heaven and, at the same time, give all our energy to gather treasures on earth. The Lord warns against this self-deception. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our heart receives its strongest impulses via the eye. The attitude of the heart will be influenced by the data the eye feeds into it. An eye that is not surrendered to the control of the Holy Spirit presents a great danger to our spiritual life.

Jesus calls the eye "the lamp of the body." The way we see depends on the light we shed upon what surrounds us. Two people can see the same thing; for one it can become a snare in which he is caught and for the other a stimulus to holy living. Eve presents us with a classical example. The way she looked at the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil made her attribute qualities to the fruit, which it obviously did not possess.⁴

The very fact that the Lord calls our eye "the lamp" means that the eye is meant to be a blessing to us. What the sun is to the earth, the eye is to the body. The eye has a double function. It allows light to pass through it into our heart and it lets the light that is in our heart shine out. How much goes in can be determined by what radiates from it.

1. See Luke 15:21-24

2. Col. 3:1,2

3. James 5:1-3

4. See Gen. 3:6

Vs. 23 contains one of the most serious warnings the Lord has ever given. If that which ought to enlighten us is darkness, what will be the darkness that awaits us! If a person uses that what God has given to enlighten him in the service of darkness, how can any light then penetrate into his life?

Vs. 24 states that there are only one of two masters we can serve. A person who stores up treasures is under the illusion that he does this for himself. There is, however, no question of self-service. He, who thinks that he serves himself, ultimately, serves “mammon.”

Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament explains: “Mammon is a Chaldee, Syriac, and Punic word, like the Greek word [Plutus] for the money-god (or devil).” We all must make a choice, and everybody does make a choice. The intent of people who endeavor to become rich is not to serve but to rule. That is the snare. Mammon is not anybody’s servant; he is a harsh slave driver who blackmails those who are in his power. He, who honestly and wholeheartedly, surrenders to God, is not only freed from the slavery of self, but he receives from God the royal dignity which God intended him to have since the beginning of creation.

5. Searching – verses 25-34

“Therefore I tell you ...” “Therefore” refers to that which preceded. One cannot serve both God and Mammon, therefore, “do not worry.” That is the attitude of him who has thrown himself upon God. The line between not worrying and irresponsibility is very thin, as is the line between a sense of responsibility and worry because of unbelief. Jesus’ words do not relieve us from the duty to care but they show us where the limitations of our duties lie. The essence of our existence is not in our own hands. A person who does not see himself as dependent upon God has no basis upon which to stand. Worry amounts to distrust of God. It is the attitude of a person who thinks that God will not fulfill the responsibilities He has as Creator toward His creation. It is a denial of God’s character, as if God would have created a world of men, in order to, sadistically, enjoy seeing them die. Distrust of God means attributing to Him characteristics that are more cruel than those we assign to men.

Jesus calls us out of this deception to reality by asking some magnificent questions that are meant to make us realize how rich we are in God: “Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” This puts the emphasis on the greatest riches one can possess in this world. The realization to be alive can bring the dullest person to ecstasy. Often this awareness is brought about when we witness a death. People have often dedicated their lives to the Lord after having gone through an experience of narrowly escaping death. It is a strange paradox that we can cling to life in the face of death and yet show little appreciation for the riches of our possession.

The same can be said about the body. If we would show as much gratitude to God for the miracle of our body as we complain about the smallest ailment, we would be constantly on “cloud nine.” Our body is such a complex of miracles that we can hardly grasp all of it. Every single organ in our body represents a world of ingenuity and efficiency. Man has lately come to appreciate this more as he tries to emulate the technical functions of the various parts of the body. Our bodies are literally God’s masterpiece. We are, however, more perturbed about one lame leg than about the perfection of the rest of the body. Our Lord expressed Himself rather euphemistically when He asked the question: “Is not the body more important than clothes?” We better understand the value of our bodies when we see how eager demons are to take possession of them. This demonic jealousy ought to make us realize our riches.

The Lord uses two illustrations: of birds that are looking for food, and of the beauty of flowers. It is true that birds seldom starve to death. Even animals that live in very cold climates survive hardship most of the time; and then to think that they do not take precautions as humans do. The illustration emphasizes both man’s responsibility as well as his limitations. We must take care of ourselves as much as we can and trust God for what we cannot do. The example of the lilies is even more embarrassing. The lily surpasses the human body in beauty. Maybe the Lord wants to tell us that we would dress better if we trusted Him more. God knows where we can get good clothing!

Jesus' second question, "Are you not much more valuable than they?" ought to increase our faith in our relationship with God. It is logical to assume that, if God has established certain ranks in the order of creation, He will give more attention to that which is higher than to that which is lower. Think of Hagar, Abraham's slave girl, the people of Israel in the desert, and of Elijah during the three-and-a-half-year famine.

The next question is about the use of worry. Does a worrying person live longer than a person who does not worry? The opposite is often true. Worry never touches the real issues of life; it only makes life miserable. A lack of worry is what ought to make the difference between a Christian and a pagan. If faith in God for the fulfillment of our daily needs is characteristic for a Christian, how few Christians there are in the world!

The question is, what is the cure for worry? It seems to be the inclination of the human heart that is most difficult to evade. Our makeup is such that our spirit must be kept occupied. The solution must be sought, not in ceasing to worry, but in directing our energy to something else. Jesus advises: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." Worry is the result of wrong priorities in life. There is a story in John's Gospel, where Jesus reproaches the people that they are more concerned about their own needs than about the Kingdom of God. He says: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe."¹ God will give priority to our needs if we give priority to His! The problem of the world is not a lack of food or clothing, but a lack of recognition of God's rule over this world. Our needs and misery are the result of man's attitude toward God and of his desire to be in charge of his own affairs.

What does it mean to seek God's Kingdom? First of all, it means wanting it, longing for it. Secondly, it means opening up ourselves for its influence upon our lives. The apostle Paul defines it: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."²

Seeking its righteousness has both a negative and a positive side. It means rejecting our own righteousness and leaning upon the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, which God has made available for us. We are often more hindered in our fellowship with God by our own righteousness than by our sins. This camouflage of our desire for self-preservation resists surrender to God as long as it can hold out. If we give up our right to ourselves and begin to draw from the source of God's eternal righteousness, every trace of worry about clothing, food, and the things of tomorrow will disappear also. "All these things will be given to you as well." What will be given depends on what is already there.

The conclusion of the chapter gives us a peek into the compassion and love that prompted the words our Lord spoke here. The humor in Jesus' words rather emphasizes than diminishes the depth of feeling. "Each day has enough trouble of its own," or, in the rendering of the KJV: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Our Lord is not a happy idealist when He says that we should not worry about tomorrow. He fully recognizes the darkness and evil into which Satan wants to lure us. It is only because of His conviction that the good of God is stronger than the evil of the Evil One that He tells us not to worry. Every man encounters enough daily evil that he must digest. To add to this tomorrow's evil is not necessary. God is the God of today!

V. Some Spiritual Laws governing the Daily Life of the Children of the Kingdom 7:1-12

1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

1. John 4:48

2. II Cor. 10:5

3 *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"*

4 *How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"*

5 *You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

6 *"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.*

7 *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*

8 *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

9 *"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?"*

10 *Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"*

11 *If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

12 *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*

a. Judging and Condemning Others verses 1-6

The spiritual law that determines our relationship with our fellowman is the law of reciprocity. Jesus formulates this law with the words: "In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." The words "judged" and "measured" are more than parallel expressions. "Measure" refers to our actions, while "judging" pertains to our character. It is what we think and say of others that determines what they think of us. We should, however, not exclude the possibility that our judgmental attitude will also be a factor in God's final judgment of our life. That means that the judgment of our life is, in a way, in our own hands; we may choose how we will be judged.

On that basis, Jesus gives us the advice (or is it an order?): "Do not judge!" The judgment we pronounce upon others will bounce back upon our own head.

There are, of course, circumstances in which a judgment is called for. If we are responsible for other people, it is our duty to judge. Parents must judge their children, teachers their pupils, supervisors their subordinates, etc. In those relationships one must use critical judgment within the scope of responsibility. There are also situations in a peer relationship when it would be wrong not to judge the actions of others. Paul admonishes the church in Corinth to discipline one of their member whose behavior hurt the church.¹ The fellowship of the church and the character of the act committed, which was clearly a breaking of the law, made judgment inevitable. Outside those well-defined limits, however, we have no business judging others. In judging others, we often put the other one down in order to elevate ourselves. We always look beautiful in the mirror of someone else's life. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."²

Some sins are committed in ignorance. Our judgment over them is an indication that we are not ignorant ourselves. We can only judge others if we have the victory over the sin we judge in the life of others. The background of Jesus' observation is the problem of the person who, instead of being victorious over his own sin, diverts the attention by focusing on other people's faults. That is the lesson of the illustration of the speck of sawdust and the plank Jesus uses in the verses 3-5.

1. See I Cor. ch. 5

2. Rom. 2:1

There are two possible interpretation of “the plank.” One is that the small fault we detect in others is present in our own life, but in much a larger measure; so large that we cannot even see it ourselves. The other explanation is that that which in the other person’s eye is no larger than “a speck of sawdust” is enlarge by our eye, by way of an optical illusion, to the point where it appears to be a “plank.” We tend to see the faults of other much larger than they really are. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “It often happens that the faults which we consider as of the first enormity in others are, to our own iniquities, as a chip is, when compared to a large beam. On one side, self-love blinds us to ourselves; and, on the other, envy and malice give us piercing eyes in respect of others. When we shall have as much zeal to correct ourselves, as we have inclination to reprove and correct others, we shall know our own defects better than now we know those of our neighbor.”

Removing the plank amounts to seeing the faults of others in their right proportions. Jesus’ advice to “first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye,” indicates that our ability to help others in their weaknesses is related to our experience of having our own sins forgiven. Removing the plank would be impossible without forgiveness. The difference between judging and not judging is in the foundation upon which our lives are built. We can judge others because we want to cover up our own sin, or we can help others to receive pardon for sin because we have received forgiveness for our own.

A speck of sawdust in the eye can lead to a painful and dangerous condition. Jesus indicates that there are brothers who need our help. But the help they need may be quite different than the help we can give. We may personally be more deeply involved in the matter than we would anticipate.

Vs. 6 gives us a short parable without explanation other than the context of the text. Jesus compares some people to dogs and pigs. (The Germans have a derogatory expression, which was liberally used by the Nazis: “Schweinhund,” which literally means “Hog-Dog.”) We assume that those are not the same as “the brother” from the previous verses. The Lord also mentions “what is sacred” (or holy), and “pearls.” The comparison emphasizes specifically how precious the pardon of sin is that God has given us. The grace of God in our lives is a treasure that we must handle with a lot of care. There are some people who are so far removed from the truth that they keep themselves beyond the reach of God’s grace. It would be a waste of energy to try to explain the way of salvation to them. God has not called to us meddle in the sins and problems of every other human being and to force our help upon those who do not want it. Only God can give us the gift of discernment to know when apparent hardness is a cover-up for spiritual hunger or when a person’s heart is truly hardened beyond hope. This whole section seems to emphasize the importance of this gift. General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, seems to have disregarded the Lord’s advice. He ordered the members of his organization to seek out those in the gutters of life, the lowest of the low, and God has obviously blessed his passion for souls.

b. The Constitution of Prayerverses 7-12

- 7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.
8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.
9 "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?
11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!
12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*

The key to the understanding of these verses is in vs. 11: “If you, then, ... how much more will your Father....” This gives us a comparison between God’s way of acting and ours. Prayer answers to the same laws as those that govern human relationships. What those laws are is explained in the verses 7 and 8.

Prayer consists of asking, seeking, and knocking on doors. The simplicity of this baffles us. It cannot get much easier, can it? Even a child can do it.

“Asking,” reminds us of a child that is hungry and asks for something to eat. That is one aspect of prayer. We must ask for things we need. In the previous chapter, we saw already why this is so. Our Father knows what we need, but we do not.

When Jesus compares prayer with seeking, it means that there are certain things in the spiritual realm that are hidden for us, or things that we have lost. That is a facet of prayer that rises above mere asking. There are hidden things that can only be found when we pray.

The third picture compares our spiritual life to a door. Prayer is a knock on a door; it means entering into a new situation: entering into the presence of the Father. These three pictures give us, at the same time, the contents of prayer.

The Lord also clarifies that the laws that govern our prayer life are foreshadowed in our daily contact with our fellowmen. We ask in order to receive, we seek to find, and we knock on doors to be let in. Nobody can pretend that prayer is something that is too difficult to practice. Everyone practices the routine of prayer on the level of his daily earthly life many times a day. Prayer to the Father recognizes that fellowship with Him is as simple, if not easier, than intercourse with our fellowmen. In our social contacts, fellowship is made more difficult because of the presence of sin, which forces us to put on all kinds of masks. There even falls a shadow of “you, then, though you are evil,” over our most intimate relationships. But in our relationship with God, we come under the liberating cover of the “how much more will your Father...” Although prayer to God is like fellowship with our fellowmen, it is actually much more because God is more and is greater than man. The relationship between God and men, and vice versa, is just as natural, or even more so, than the relationship between a father, or a mother, with a child. As we have seen before, our fatherhood (we though we are evil) is a shadow of the reality of God’s fatherhood. For that reason, it is only natural for us to give our children bread and fish. If someone gives his child a stone or a snake, we call that unnatural. As we recognize our own nature in those acts, we must also recognize the nature of God. In the parallel passage in Luke’s Gospel, “the good gifts” is called “The Holy Spirit.”¹

A superficial glance would indicate that vs. 12 does not fit in the context. “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” is called “The Golden Rule.” With this, the Lord returns to what He said at the beginning of this chapter, but what was earlier stated negatively is restated here in a positive sense. We find the standard for our fellowship with others within ourselves. We know our own needs and desires, and thus we know what our fellowmen need. From this recognition to helping constitutes an important step. To move from one’s own need to the need of others is one of the most important steps we can take in life. The connection between this step and prayer becomes clearer when we remember that our human relationships are an image of our fellowship with God. What God does for us depends for a good deal on what we do with Him. If our eyes are open to the fact that, as human beings, we mean something to God Almighty, there will be no end to the blessings we receive.

The Law and the Prophets determine the measure of our love in the command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” God’s involvement in our life will become clear when we break through the limitations of our only being concerned about ourselves and make our love run in other channels. This marks the difference between Christianity and most other world religions. Buddhism, for instance, denies the goodness of life, and that the value of life is love. Our love for God must govern everything in our life and we must learn the secret of the love that draws a strait line from Him to our fellowmen. The fact that Jesus calls this “the Law and the Prophets” means that this is the expressed will of God for our lives and that God will judge us on this point accordingly. At the same time, it indicates the basis on which our prayer life is built and the level on which it is experienced.

1. See Luke 11:9-13

VI. Invitation and Warning Regarding Entering the Kingdom 7:13-23

13 *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.*

14 *But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

15 *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.*

16 *By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*

18 *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.*

19 *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

20 *Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

21 *"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.*

22 *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?'*

23 *Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

This section constitutes the altar call of the Sermon on the Mount. After having said all He had to say, Jesus puts the question to us what we will do with His words. In doing so, our Lord gives us a paradigm of what all preaching should be like. Preaching the Word of God without forcing a decision is not real preaching. The inescapability of the hearing of the Word is proof of the fact that we are dealing with prophecy in the real sense of the word.

Jesus also indicates that accepting the Gospel is not easy. The Gospel may be simple it is not easy. We should never deceive people with a rosy presentation of the hard facts. It is not true that the road to heaven is easy and the road to hell difficult. The opposite is true: it is much easier to let oneself go with the current than to swim upstream. Being lost is our natural condition. It is not a matter of easy or not easy but of life or death.

Thirdly, the picture Jesus draws shows the double aspect of our spiritual life, whatever the direction of it may be. There is a gate and a road. The gate represents the moment of decision; the road stands for the life that follows after the decision is made. There is in every life a moment of decision. The gate to hell is so large that one may pass through it without being conscious of it. This does not mean that it is not a matter of decision. Some decisions that have far reaching consequences are made without much thought or long deliberation. Psychologically, there may be a difference whether we change directions after much thought or struggle or on the spur of the moment, but as far as the change of direction is concerned it makes no difference.

The question whether there are many or few who pass through the narrow gate has no quantitative value. Jesus' words: "only a few find it," should not be interpreted as if heaven would be sparsely populated. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' words are the answer to a question. We read there: "Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.'"¹ Jesus' answer puts the emphasis on our attitude toward the problem. The Greek word rendered "make every effort" is *agonizomai* from which we have derived the word "to agonize." It means: "to struggle, literally (to compete for a prize), figuratively (to contend with an adversary)."² Taking the matter lightly means eternal loss. We conclude from this that entering the gate never involves a mass movement; it is a struggle on a personal level. We do not enter on the basis of someone else's decision, or because of a majority vote. It is not even a giving in to a personal

1. Luke 13:23,24

2. Strong's Definitions

desire or a natural inclination. The struggle is a struggle against self. Entering means a victory over self. The narrowness and smallness of eternal life is not due to the fact that God made it small for us but that we are too big for it! The gate is made to the measure of man as God created him. The hindrances to enter come from within us.

In the following verses (15-20) the subject is the hindrances that others put in our way. The fact that Jesus speaks about “false prophets” indicates that it is a matter of twisting the truth. It is impossible to enter the narrow gate without any knowledge of the truth. To say that it doesn’t matter what one believes, as long as one has faith, is a lie. It is possible that some aspects of the truth may be more or less clear to some people, but if we pursue an illusion instead of the truth, we will not enter. One crosses a river over a bridge. To step beside the bridge, under the illusion that we step where we think the bridge is, will make us fall in the water. It is, therefore, important not to believe everything that is preached as the truth. Paul’s advice is: “Test everything. Hold on to the good.”¹ The first test of the word spoken is the test of the life that backs up the spoken word. This is the most elementary form of judgment. This is followed by what the apostle John calls “testing the spirits.” We read in his First Epistle: “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”² It is our duty to examine whether kindness and humility are truly the result of a life spent in intimate fellowship with God, or whether the “sheep’s clothing” is a cover for all kinds of sinful tendencies.

In the verses 21-23 the Lord turns against those who were called “false prophets” in the preceding verses. His words indicate that true prophecy is always accompanied by obedience to the will of the Father and an intimate personal relationship with the Lord. This throws a new light on the concept of truth. Truth is not only the opposite of the lie, that which is correct as over against that which is incorrect, but it is the organic unity of reality, obedience, and love. It is possible for a person to say what is true and yet be a false prophet, because what is said is not backed up by surrender to the will of God and love to the Lord. Jesus demonstrates that the mere words “Lord, Lord” only have a relative value, as has prophecy and the exercise of spiritual authority and the performance of miracles. The only true basis for a normal Christian life consists of obedience, love, and truth. The absence of any of those three elements makes life abnormal. It must be a horrible discovery for people to believe to serve the Lord and hear the Lord pronounce the verdict: “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” We thought we were looking at good people who were full of good intentions but who did not have enough insight in the truth. Our Lord’s words indicate that corruption goes much deeper than meets the eye. There is no in-between position between good and evil.

It is difficult to image what impression Jesus’ words must have made on the audience of His day. What they saw was a human being, as they were themselves, a man of average height and strength, of average age, and He says: “There comes a day when you will stand before me and I will pronounce judgment upon you. You will try to enter where I entered and you will not be able to.” Some may have taken those words as coming from the mouth of someone who had allusions of grandeur. Yet they sounded real and inescapable. No one ever had given such an “altar call” before, or since. No one ever preached such a sermon either!

On Christ’s Day of Judgment all human illusions will disappear. Many who may have thought that they were important in the Kingdom of Heaven will realize that they had deceived themselves, and others will turn out to be more important than they ever thought they would be. The status one had on earth will have no bearing on our position beyond.

VII. Conclusion 7:24-27

1. I Thess. 5:21

2. I John 4:1

24 *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

25 *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.*

26 *But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.*

27 *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

The image of the house built on the rock or on the sand has lost some of its vividness over the ages. We have heard it too often to make a profound impression on us. It is difficult for us to image what impression these words must have made on the people who first heard them. No other teacher would ever dare to describe the impact of his teaching with this kind of illustration.

The parable tells the story of two men who built a house, one on a solid foundation and the other without any. There were places in Israel where one had to dig into the sand 30 feet or more come to rock bottom where a foundation could be laid. No one in his right mind would think of building a house without a foundation. That which, in every day life, on a material level is self-explanatory can sometimes be completely ignored in spiritual life, as if there are no laws that govern that domain. A businessman, who builds his concern on a basis of responsible financial stability, may squander his soul as if it has not value whatsoever! The difference between the two builders is a difference in insight, or of realism. The man who built upon the sand did not expect any rain or wind. He who things that life will always be a smooth sailing is indeed a fool. The person who builds on sand acts as if he is not building at all. But building is a must for each of us. Whoever is alive will build, whether he wants to or not. The person who does not realize this is also a fool, as is the one who blames the rain and the wind for his failure. The words: "It fell with a great crash," or rather: "And great was its fall,"¹ describe the terrible tragedy of a human life that collapses. The Lord says this not without a great deal of compassion. How terrible it must be the discovery at the end of one's life that one has lived in vain.

Matthew's description of the reaction of the crowd to Jesus' teaching is somewhat of an understatement: "He taught as one who had authority." That is the least that can be said of the Lord of glory who preached the sermon of all sermons. It is obvious that the teachers of the law, who could do no better than prudently comment on the words of Moses and the prophets, come out with the shorter end of the stick in their comparison with Jesus Christ. Everyone who had been gripped by the truth could preach better than they did. How much more then when the Lord of life opens up the wellspring of life and reveals the life-giving Word, as is the case here.

Those who heard Jesus' words must not have understood most of what He said. It is only after the heart of man is filled with the Spirit of God, he knows what God is saying. Woe to the person who is even unable to muster amazement about what Jesus said here!

1. NKJV

Part Three: The Power of the King (8:1—11:1)

I. The Demonstration of the King's Power 8:1—9:34

1 When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him.

2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.

4 Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

5 When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help.

6 "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

7 Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.

9 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

10 When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

11 I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

12 But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

13 Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

14 When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever.

15 He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.

16 When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

17 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

18 When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.

19 Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

20 Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

21 Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

22 But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

23 Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.

24 Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.

25 The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

26 He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

27 The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

28 When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.

29 "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?"

30 *Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding.*

31 *The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."*

32 *He said to them, "Go!" So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.*

33 *Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men.*

34 *Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.*

Chapter 9:1 Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town.

2 *Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."*

3 *At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"*

4 *Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?"*

5 *Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?*

6 *But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home."*

7 *And the man got up and went home.*

8 *When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.*

9 *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.*

10 *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.*

11 *When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

12 *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*

13 *But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

14 *Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"*

15 *Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.*

16 *"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.*

17 *Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."*

18 *While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live."*

19 *Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.*

20 *Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak.*

21 *She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."*

22 *Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.*

23 *When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd,*

24 *he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.*

25 *After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up.*

26 *News of this spread through all that region.*

27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"

28 When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied.

29 Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you";

30 and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this."

31 But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

32 While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. 33 And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

34 But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

Matthew is emphatic about the fact that the healing of a leper took place immediately after Jesus had preached His sermon. The first thing that strikes us in this story is the attitude of the sick man. It is moving to see that he is certain of Jesus' power to heal, but not sure of Jesus' willingness. This in itself is not wrong. This man was searching for the will of God for his life. As far as that is concerned he was healthier than many people with a healthy body.

Our search for the will of God ought to occupy an important part of our time and prayer-life. George Mueller testified that it took him often longer to discover the will of God regarding certain matters than, once having received the assurance, it took to see his prayers answered. Yet, there is something wrong in the way this man searches for the will of God. There was certainly something wrong in what he did after God revealed His will to him. Could he have known that God wanted to heal him? The fact that there were certain regulations in the law of Moses¹ regarding sacrifice a healed leper had to bring, could have been an indication for him that God wanted lepers to be healed. If the will of God is revealed to us in the Bible we must hold on to it. Reading Leviticus 13, we see that a person like this man ought to have gone to the priest at least twice. The first time the priest declared him to be impure because of his leprosy and, secondly, the priest would declare him pure when it turned out that the leprosy had covered him completely.² In the account Luke gives of this incident, the man was "was covered with leprosy."³

"If you are willing" stands for this man's search for God. He knew about the power of God, but there was a blank spot in this search, larger than the leprosy that covered him. God's power is revealed universally, not only in the miracles Jesus performed. That is the blank spot that is accentuated in this story.

If we want to learn more about God's interest in our personal affairs, of His love for us, there must be a growing personal relationship with Him. The Lord's love for us is more powerfully expressed in Mark's version of this story: "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing.'"⁴ Actually, it is a silly question to ask whether God wants us to be healthy and happy and perfect. If God is called "not the God of the dead but of the living,"⁵ and we base upon this statement our hope of the resurrection, because death is not part of God's character, we may also believe that the sick will be healed, the broken hearts mended, and the defeated be made victorious. Because our God is not the God of the sick, the broken and the defeated either.

Mark the love and compassion with which this principle is applied here to the life of this leper. The application of God's love upon this man's life is not merely a matter of applying the doctrine of healing, but a warm and loving embrace. It is the touch of a human hand. According to the Levitical law a leper was

1. See Lev. 13 and 14.

2. Lev. 13:12,13

3. See Luke 5:12.

4. Mark 1:41

5. Matt. 22:32

untouchable because of the danger of infection he posed. Jesus is not only immune to this contagious disease, He “infects” this man with His own health and purity by touching him.

Jesus’ answer: “I am willing, be clean!” sounds self-evident: “Of course, I am willing!” It is a perfect mixture of compassion and creative power. The word “be clean!” has the same creative power as the original “Let there be light!” This cleansing is the result of the Word of the Creator.

Mark’s Gospel clarifies that the man did not obey Jesus’ command. We read: “Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.”¹

The tragic feature of this story is the man’s disobedience. There is no attitude of obedient service as a result of this miracle, as we find it in the instance of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. We read there: “He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.” This former leper follows his own impulses. We may want to excuse him by saying that this man was so happy that he hardly heard what Jesus said and that he hardly knew what he did. Yet, Jesus’ warning is stern: “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” He can hardly not have heard this. His body reacted upon the powerful command of the Lord and he became clean, but his will refused to bend to the Word of God and he went his own willful way. The Lord gave him, first of all, a gag order and then he was told to give his testimony to the priest. Sometime we need courage to speak, but we need strong discipline to keep silent when the Lord tells us to. If the Lord works in our life, as He did in the body of this man, we must consciously set ourselves to obedience. Discipline begins where the miracle of God’s revelation in us has begun.

We cannot know what would have happened had this man had gone and shown himself to the priest. The priest would have had to recognize that a miracle had taken place. That could have meant a breakthrough among the whole priest caste, which might have led to the salvation of all of Israel. The amazing part in the Law of Moses is that there is a section that prescribes the ritual for cleaning of lepers. Leprosy was incurable. How many lepers were ever healed in Israel? The whole law in Leviticus chapter 14 points to the few cases of healing Jesus performed. Yet, this man refused to apply this Word of God upon himself and fulfill Moses’ prophecy! What a fulfillment this would have been when the priest took the two birds, as prescribed in Lev. 14, killing the one and, after dipping the life one in the blood of the first, enacting symbolically the death and resurrection of the Lord! This man would have become a living example for everyone to see of what purification and restoration was meant to be, not only of leprosy but also of sin of which this sickness was a symbol.

In the rite of purification the healed leper had blood and oil applied to his earlobe, his hand and his foot, to symbolize cleansing and the filling of the Holy Spirit to those whose sins have been atoned for. God takes possession of the hearing, obeying, the acting and going of the person He heals. This man, by refusing to obey Jesus’ command, exemplified the person who wants to be saved but who is not willing to surrender completely to the Lord. In doing so, he not only missed out on the greatest blessing, but he also hindered the work of the Lord in the lives of others.

In Mark’s version of the story we read how this man’s disobedience became a hindrance to Jesus’ further ministry in the area. We read: “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.”²

The next miracle in Matthew’s account is the healing of the slave of a Roman centurion. Matthew’s version is more concise than Luke’s.³ From Luke’s account we learn that Jesus never met the centurion personally, but that the whole conversation was carried on via a third person or persons. According to Luke, Jesus even sets out to go to the home of the Roman. We don’t know how close Jesus came to the place, but before He entered the house, the message was conveyed to him that the man considered himself unworthy of such attention. In Luke’s story the Jews insist that this man is worthy, but the man himself considers himself

1. Mark 1:45a

2. Mark 1:45b

3. See Luke 7:1-10.

unworthy. This pagan understood more about the glory and greatness of the God of Israel than the Israelites themselves did. From what this man says about himself, we conclude that the Holy Spirit had done a deep work in his heart.

This man could not have known that Jesus was the incarnate Word of God. But, without even meeting Jesus personally, he had discovered the relationship between the God of the Jews whom he sought and this rabbi who healed the sick. That was the reason he saw himself standing before Jesus as he would stand before God. If we compare ourselves with other human beings we try, in a way, to escape reality. Comparing ourselves with others always makes us come out favorably. After all, we can choose with whom we want to compare ourselves! It is obvious that this Roman officer was head and shoulders above most other Roman military. But when we stand before God, we do not stand as officers, clergy or teachers, we are naked human beings. Here is the ultimate rule of comparison between God and me, Jesus and me. That is why this man says: "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof." In saying this he proves that he is deserving. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his life that makes him say this.

The second proof of God's work in this man's heart is his insight in Jesus' authority. "Just say the word." As we saw in the previous story, it is the Word of the Creator that brings about healing. This man must have heard the story of Jesus' miracles of healing and he understood that this Word of Power was the principle upon which everything rests. He recognized in Jesus the One who was "sustaining all things by his powerful word."¹ And he understood that all human authority in this world finds its origin in this authority. He realized that the authority that was over him and that had been given him to exercise over others was God-given and operated according to God's laws, as did Christ's authority. This insight that all power and authority obeys Him, even as my soldiers obey me, had not been revealed to him by flesh and blood but by the Father in heaven.

Jesus compliments this man on his faith in an extraordinary manner. The first word He says is "Amen," translated in *The New International Version*: "I tell you the truth." The unexpected feature about this kind of faith is that it is found where it is not expected. And there where one would expect to find faith, among the people of Israel, it was not found. It is also remarkable that there was this breakthrough with someone who had grown up in idol worship and that it was absent among those who were familiar with the old truths.

As Jesus would do over and over again, He stops and draws a line from the present situation to a reference point in eternity, from which perspective He judges the importance of that point in time. If we could only look at our daily experiences from the viewpoint of eternity! Jesus demonstrates a gift of perfect understanding of the present which indicates the depth of the way He lived His life as a human being. For Him there was no life in a rut, no dull and meaningless everyday routine. All His reactions were direct and uncovered as of a person who is conscious of being in the presence of the Father. In a prophetic way, Jesus depicts how the Gospel will take root and flourish among people who are still far away. "Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." They will come from all over and follow the example of the faith that this Roman demonstrated. Jesus erects a monument for this man as He would do later for Mary, saying: "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."² The Lord gives this credit to this man and to all other non-Israelites who put their faith in Him. This man, who had said: "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof" is now in heaven as the first of the Gentiles, next to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jesus' statement in vv.10-12 demonstrates what kind of faith He expects from Gentiles who accept the Gospel. It is this sense of unworthiness and the realization of divine authority and what this means in terms of practical application to daily life, that are the factors determining the life of those who come from the east and the west.

1. Heb. 1:3

2. Matt. 26:13

Jesus' words here constitute a missionary message, but they are also a warning to those who ought to have been missionaries, but who are not, or not enough. It is true that this Roman officer had somehow been attracted to the Jewish religion, but that can hardly have been the result of the Jews' clear testimony. We read elsewhere that this man was a philanthropist, who had built a synagogue for which the children of the kingdom had not had enough money.¹ The Lord tells the Jews that they will eventually lose themselves what made others rich. It is ironic that some churches that used to be the greatest powers in proclaiming the Gospel overseas have become the saddest backsliders at home. We see manifestations of new and glorious life on some mission fields that put the average Christian in the motherland to shame.

Jesus' words also give us a sideways glance at the kind of glory that awaits us. He calls it "take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." The fact that this glory is unspeakable is emphasized by the fact that the source of the glory is not even mentioned. It is not the fact that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are there; they are human beings like we are. The host, who sits at the head of the table, the God of glory Himself, is not named.

"Take their place" is the translation of the Greek word *anaklino*, which literally means: "to recline." The term refers to participation in a meal to which we are invited. God honors us by inviting us to His table. Among the guests of honor we find Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as this Roman officer. And who am I to receive this kind of invitation?

Although Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not the important features of this celebration, it is significant that they are mentioned. As God revealed Himself to Moses by using the Name "I am, who I am," so He still reveals Himself to people today. God calls Himself "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He links His Name to the names of human beings; He entrusts Himself to us. He wants to be known through the behavior and lifestyle of those who call themselves by His Name. He said to Moses: "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."²

There is a world of sadness in the words "the subjects of the kingdom." The Greek text reads "the children of the kingdom." This is what the Israelites were called, not because they had entered the kingdom of heaven, but because they had been given the first chance to enter. They were the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They represent the tragedy of people who know the truth but do not embrace it. This must have pierced the Lord's heart; otherwise He would not have said this. "Outside, into the darkness" is the ultimate consequence of unbelief.

The Gospels of Mark and Luke indicate that the healing of Peter's mother-in-law took place immediately after Jesus' visit to the synagogue in Capernaum. Matthew does not give us any details about this healing. In Luke's Gospel we read that she had a "high fever." As a medical professional, Luke would make sure he got this right. Luke also says that Jesus was called in and that He rebuked the fever.³ This story illustrates best the purpose of all divine healing. Peter's mother-in-law understood that her healing was not for her own benefit but in order to serve God. The miracle that took place in her body was for her a stimulus to service of the Lord. God does not demand service as a condition for healing, but service is a logical answer to the Psalmist's question "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"⁴ Service is not only a reasonable answer to healing, it is "for all his goodness to me." In the quoted Psalm, the Psalmist puts "Selah" after asking the question, meaning "stop and think about this."

1. See Luke 7:4,5.

2. Ex. 3:15

3. Luke 4:38,29

4. Ps. 116:12

Via the death and resurrection of our Lord we enter into this universe of forgiveness, redemption and renewal. We realize that “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”¹

Matthew simply states: “she got up and began to wait on *him*.” Luke says: “She got up at once and began to wait on *them*.”² There is no contradiction. Serving the Lord means serving others. And if we serve others it is for the Lord’s sake. Thus the mother-in-law serves her son-in-law because he followed the Lord, and vice-versa.

The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law must have happened on a Sabbath if it occurred shortly after Jesus visited the synagogue in Capernaum, where He healed a demon possessed man.³

The thought of keeping the Sabbath holy must have held most people from bringing their sick to Jesus before sunset. But as the new day began in the evening they came up en masse. That evening became a most memorable day in the history of salvation. It seems as if the mystery of divine healing and grace was accentuated by the quietness and coolness of the evening air. Form and content were fused into one. This evening was a parallel to the one in which Adam and Eve heard the voice of God.⁴ Luke reports: “When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them.”⁵ In laying His hands on the sick the fellowship with God was restored for each of those persons. The cry of demons was silenced. This was not their hour. Dusk and darkness ultimately belong to God. What is so striking in this story is the completeness; everybody was healed. They all experienced the power of His touch upon their lives.

Matthew intones a hymn with the words of Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.” In doing this, this evangelist shows his deep prophetic insight in quoting Isaiah’s prophecy. He understood what Jesus did that evening, although he may not even have been present. He was able to see himself in that event, hearing the testimony of eyewitnesses, because he saw this kind of miracle happen over and over again after his own calling. He understood that Jesus did much more than simply heal physical bodies. Much more was at stake than sickness alone. Isaiah spoke about the atonement. Jesus brought peace with God in the hearts of men. Matthew indicates that Jesus did not heal as an outsider. For Him healing was not just a matter of removing sickness, but of taking our sickness into His own body.

This leads us to the core of physical and spiritual healing. It reveals the deepest meaning of the incarnation of the Son of God. What Jesus did here was closely connected to the fact that He was born into this world as a human being. Because there was this becoming one with humanity on the inside, there could also be a taking upon Him from the outside. It shows that infirmities, sickness and sin are not original human characteristics. Jesus was more human than any of us has ever been because He always remained free of all human sin. The more we think about this mystery the more mysterious it becomes!

What Jesus did here was an act of the will inspired by love. No one forced Him to take up our infirmities and carry our diseases. We see Him go around among the mass of sick people with compassion for all who were not as free as He was.

Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah makes clear how Jesus took our infirmities and sicknesses upon Himself. Isaiah 53 is a prophecy about Jesus’ death on the cross at Golgotha. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, Jesus’ death and resurrection were accomplished facts. Matthew did not quote Isaiah without being aware of the fulfillment of his prophecy. His quotation was a conscious interpretation of the events of that evening in the light of the ultimate realization.

1. II Cor. 5:15

2. Luke 4:39

3. See Mark 2:21-28; Luke 4:31-37.

4. See Gen. 3:8.

5. Luke 4:40

This means that Jesus could heal sick people and take their infirmities upon Himself because He was going to pay the price in full. In doing so that evening, Jesus took a down payment on a future accomplishment. In the same way He could forgive the sins of a paraplegic because He would make the atonement in His own body on the cross. If we isolate the events of that evening from His death on the cross, as some Bible scholars do, we fail to see the logic of Jesus' acts. Healing is included in the atonement! The fact that Matthew quoted Isaiah at this point does not mean that the prophecy was at that point fulfilled once for all.

The question remains whether we may see healing as part of the redemption Jesus provided for us in His death or is it an add-on that we cannot claim as our right as we can forgiveness? This would not be a problem if every believer were always in good health and only unbelievers got sick. However absolute this all may sound, our experience of forgiveness of sin and of healing does not always run parallel. The measure of our faith has undoubtedly something to do with this, but we learn from the life of Paul that there can be a place for sickness in the life of a child of God. We must not overlook the fact that Matthew only quotes Isaiah partially. In the same way Jesus closed the book in the middle of a verse,¹ so Matthew draws a line between "he took up our infirmities" and "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him." This does not make what happened on that evening into a separate event, but it does indicate that the whole of God's work does not always reveal itself always in all its fullness. There are aspects of the Gospel that will have more impact upon us one time or another.

It is difficult to decided upon the right sequence of events at this point. From John's Gospel we could conclude that Jesus made a trip to Jerusalem before crossing the lake.² A solid reason for crossing the lake does not seem to be given. Matthew records: "When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake." This does not mean that Jesus tried to separate Himself from the needs of humanity. At a later point, Matthew states: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."³ Jesus' seeing of the crowds became a reason for His emotional call for volunteers.

When a crowd gathers it does not always mean that people are conscious of their need. That is not to say that the need is not there, but people are not always aware of it. When we don't feel needy we will not seek help and where help is not sought it cannot be given. It could be that this was the situation our Lord faced here. People's thirst of sensation may have built a wall which divine compassion could not penetrate.

The lack of recognition of real need is demonstrated in the following conversation our Lord has with two people, just before He stepped in the boat. Matthew calls the first man "a teacher of the law" who said: "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Our first reaction would be: "How wonderful, here is a man who knows his Bible, who is willing to give up all and follow Jesus!" We are amazed at Jesus' skeptic reaction. It was obviously not against following to which Jesus objected, because to the next person He says: "Follow me." The great call in life is to follow the Lord. This teacher must have understood that much. But Jesus saw through this man and concluded that his desire to follow was not based on an awareness of sins forgiven. His was not the natural outcome of a renewed life, but rather a compensation for a lack of renewal. Some people enroll into overseas mission work in the hope of conquering problems that they cannot overcome at home. If one is an addict at home he will be one on the mission field also. As a matter of fact the sins of home often grow larger elsewhere.

The teacher sounds exuberant in his declaration "wherever you go." Peter demonstrated the same unbridled enthusiasm when he said: "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."⁴ The Lord knows what such words are worth. We cannot know ourselves unless the grace of God has invaded

1. See Luke 4:18-20.

2. See John 5.

3. Matt. 9:36

4. John 13:37

our life. A person who says to God “I will lay down my life for you” has no inkling of his own weakness or of the power of the enemy. The call to follow is always connected to “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”¹

When Jesus answered this teacher “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” He does not indulge of self-pity, but He simply depicts reality. This statement does not contradict either what He said in the Sermon on the Mount, about human being more valuable than the birds of the air and the grass of the field.² The Lord simply revealed that His life did not rest on human security, such as a good house to live in and a steady salary, but on the solid foundation of “your heavenly Father knows ...” For people who cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven these may be good sounding words but they will never be a living reality. We need people who can work with God’s promises as with numbers.

We could ask ourselves how it is possible that a human being, such as the Lord, who is worth more than foxes and birds that do have holes and nests, ends up with less. If the Son of Man, the pretender to the throne of the universe, does not have a place to lay His head, then there is obviously something wrong with our world. That is exactly the point the Lord wants to make here. This is part of His humiliation, “because He suffered death,” that He “as made a little lower than the angels,”³ than other human beings, than the foxes and the birds. It demonstrates both the tragedy of His humanity and the triumph of it. He lived right out of the Father’s hand!

Jesus’ answer to this teacher of the law was not an effort to keep him from genuinely following Jesus, but to bring him to the point where he would look at his motives. This teacher was outside the kingdom but he wanted to follow Jesus instead of entering into a kingdom relationship.

The second person addressed is someone who, evidently, has entered the kingdom. In the parallel passage in Luke’s Gospel, we read Jesus’ answer to the man’s objection: “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”⁴ This man, however, was not ready to accept the consequences of his position of being in the kingdom.

This conversation is full of electrical charge. The Word of God has come to a human being: “Follow me.” This has caused a terrific tension in this man’s soul. He is a child of God and has accepted the forgiveness of his sins. God knows him, but there are other, perfectly legitimate, relationships. The Lord does not ask him to give up a sinful connection. The real question is not whether this man ought to bury his father or not, but whether he was willing to make God the very first priority in his life. It was not a matter of chronology. We do not always do first what we think is most important, but we do it more often.

Some Bible scholars believe that “bury my father” is an idiomatic expression that does not necessarily refer to a death in the family. They believe that it points to a taking care of family matters in general. It would be hard to image that Jesus would demand that this man would not fulfill his filial obligations to a father who just died and who must be buried that day. Jesus’ answer: “Let the dead bury their own dead” is an indication that the Lord considered this man to be spiritually alive.

Matthew emphasizes the fact that this man was in fact a disciple. Jesus draws a line of separation between human beings. What He means is clear from another statement in John’s Gospel: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”⁵ We are all born in a condition of spiritual death. The transition is not what is expected, from life to death, but from death to life. If, during our life on earth, we do not cross over from death to life, we are on the same level as those who have died physically. It is terrible if the corps of a

1. Luke 5:8

2. See Matt. 6:26 and 30.

3. See Heb. 2:8,9.

4. Luke 9:60

5. John 5:24

person must be used to illustrate our spiritual condition. If we realize that this is what we were, but no longer are, Jesus' words acquire a glorious ring for us. It speaks of victory of life over death. It is full of the consciousness of being alive and it demonstrates a unique sense of reality. The realization "I am alive" ought to spark hope in the most arid soul.

Existentialism is built upon the premise of the realization of being alive. If that philosophy of life, that is based upon despair and senselessness is able to survive because it preaches an awareness of being alive, how much more ought we, who know the meaning and goal of life, glory in its celebration!

In this harsh paradox "Let the dead bury their own dead," our Lord places the Gospel of eternal life in the full light of the day. He shows this disciple that he possesses much more than he is aware of. If we understand what God, in His grace, has given us, we have enough to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom all of our life.

Having said this, Jesus steps into the boat with His disciples to cross the lake. Jesus sleeps! That is an interesting detail of this story. Jesus' sleep is a sleep of faith. The Bible has a lot of good things to say about sleep. We read in the Psalms: "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves."¹ Sleep is one of the most mysterious gifts of God's grace. David sings in another Psalm: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."² In our sleep we give the clearest proof of trusting in God's to keep us safe. Jesus sleeps here in the midst of a storm, like Peter would sleep later on the eve of his supposed execution.³

That sleep is proof of faith is clear from Jesus' reproach to His disciples: "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" (v.26). There is a connection between faith and relaxation. Our general belief is that the link is between circumstances and repose. This story constitutes a personal accusation for me. I have literally been afraid in storms on a lake. I have known fear during warfare, both in Europe and Indonesia. Jesus' lack of fear condemns me. As with all forms of sin, we cannot work ourselves up to victory. Fear can only be overcome by confession and by accepting the grace of God's forgiveness. God can give us what we don't possess by nature.

The conditions of the Lake of Gennesaret must have been similar to those of Lake Paniai where I lived during part of my missionary career in West Papua. The lake was surrounded by mountains, where from time to time sudden winds would fall upon the lake and stir up rather violent waves. Such must have been the storm in which the little boat of the disciples was caught. But, evidently, this storm was heavier than usual, because we read that the waves swept over the boat. Mark's Gospel states: "the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped."⁴ And Luke states: "the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger."⁵

Against this background, the fact that Jesus slept and the reproach of unbelief of the disciples acquires a deeper meaning. Much fear is caused by non-existing causes, but this was an emergency. The disciples were in danger of losing their lives. Who would no the danger better than these disciples? They saw that their boat was going under. It is under these circumstances that the Lord offers help. It is interesting to see what the disciples thought about their Lord at this point. Matthew merely reports their cry: "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" but in Mark's Gospel we read: "The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' "⁶ Our attitude toward God in case of emergency is often "He doesn't care!" Our heart confirms this with: "I have known this all the time!" This suspicion of God's intentions is the root of unbelief and its most embarrassing aspect. It is like a man who has been happily

1. Ps. 127:2

2. Ps. 4:8

3. See Acts 12:6.

4. Mark 4:37

5. Luke 8:23

6. Mark 4:38

married for years, who, all of a sudden, becomes suspicious of his wife, saying in his heart “I always thought so.” If there is no basis for suspicion and such emotions are brought to light they can cause great emotional harm. That is the effect our unbelief has upon our relationship with God. It is embarrassing and humiliating for our ego.

Jesus does not downgrade the menace and danger: “Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.” These were not imaginary foes, neither were they dumb, impersonal forces of nature. Before man’s fall in sin, there were no storms and floods in the universe God had created. There is a connection between this storm and the power of Satan. This is obvious in Job’s story where a tornado swept away the house in which Job’s children were feasting,¹ after God had given Job in Satan’s hand. This raging of the powers of nature belongs to the same category as sickness and death, of which we read that Jesus rebuked them.²

It seems unfair that someone who can stand up and say to the wind and the waves “Quiet! Be still!”³ says to sinful mortals “You of little faith.” It seems unfair until we understand that there is more to our human life than we are aware of. We see Jesus here, as a human being, facing the powers of nature. Like Elijah, Jesus “was a man just like us.”⁴ And in simple faith in His Father’s power, He accepts the mandate over wind and waves. For fishermen who knew the hostile force of the water, this was a reversal of all they knew. And this is too much for them. No one recognized himself in the Person of the Lord. Full of amazement they fall down before Him and they say: “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” And they were right! Everyone who ever asked the question “What kind of man is this?” needs time to answer the question. We will never cease to be amazed looking at Jesus. He is what we ought to be. That is why this is so strange and wonderful.

Mark and Luke give us the story of the healing of a demon-possessed man in greater detail. Matthew reports that there were two men. We may assume that there were two and that Mark and Luke focus in upon one of them and tell us what happened to that person. The man in the other two Gospels may have been the one who was the worst of the two. Look at the damage the devil can do in a human life! Luke adds the detail: “For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs.”⁵ A graveyard is a most unhealthy place for a healthy person. The fact that this man, or these men, were driven from life into a place of death shows the character of demons. More than any other fallen creature Satan was cut off from the source of life when he sinned the first time. What we see as death when a human body decomposes occurs spiritually in the devil and his demons. A spirit, created by God, becomes a non-spirit. C. S. Lewis believed that this same kind of decomposition takes place in every spirit in hell, and he may be right. When the human soul decomposes, a human being becomes less and less human. This was the conflict in the souls of these two demon-possessed. Their souls were still alive and intact, and they resisted the process that was going on inside them. These men clung to life, but the evil powers within them tried to bring them to destroy themselves. Demons do not have the power to kill humans. But a human being, who has received life from God, has the power to destroy himself.

There are no words that can describe the depth of suffering and darkness in these men. People had tried to bind them to protect them against themselves and the outside world, but they were so bound inside by evil powers that no outward shekels had any effect. These people were no longer themselves; Satan had robbed them of their personality.

The conflict between these men and the demons that possess them reached its crisis at the coming of Jesus. The fact that they came to Jesus was probably not the result of their being possessed but the coming

1. See Job 1:18,19.

2. Luke 4:39

3. Mark 4:39

4. James 5:17

5. Luke 8:27

of souls in need to a Savior. But the words they uttered were demonic hypocrisy. The demons immediately recognized their opponent as the Word become flesh. What they said was a strange mixture of truth and lie, which is the most convincing form of deceit. "What do you want with us, Son of God?"

There can be no bond of fellowship between God and demons, but there certainly is a relationship between one human being and another. The devil acts as if this encounter is exclusively a meeting between God and Satan, instead of an engagement among humans. This is a meeting between the Man Jesus Christ and human beings stolen and illegally possessed by devils. Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. In using these hypocritical words, Satan tries to deny the miracle of humanity. He acts as if these people belong to him by right. He speaks as if his battle had already been won. According to Mark's report the demons swear an oath, saying: "Swear to God that you won't torture me!"¹ In saying this, they insinuate that God is responsible for their suffering and the suffering of their victims. What must Jesus have felt when Satan swears to God! As if God created sin and hell and Satan is the victim of divine cruelty. Hell is inhabited by volunteers who decorate it according to their taste. These demons say to Him who heals the sick and raises the dead: "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" This sounds like a communist who preaches democracy!

In the mean time Jesus must have given the order to the demons to depart. Up to that point this story differs not from any other case in which Jesus delivered people from demons. The first difference here is the dialogue, which Matthew omits. This is the first time Jesus allowed the demons to speak. This gives us insight into the kind of demon possession of this particular case. In Mark and Luke Jesus asked: "What is your name?" and the reply is: "My name is Legion, for we are many."² Mind the contrast! In the kingdom of light a name reveals the character of a being, the content and personality of the creature. This was particularly true of the name Jesus, which means Jahweh saves. But in the kingdom of darkness names do not count. By asking a demon for its name, Jesus reveals this defect. The question itself marks a sign of victory of light over darkness. Satan's power consists in quantity, not in quality. The demon's name is "Legion." We do not know how many that stands for. But it does reveal the worth of a human soul. On the one scale of the balance is a human being and on the other scale a legion of demons. The one soul turns out to be heavier than all the demons together. These men who are cringing here before Jesus may be possessed, but they are still human.

By the sound of it, the rest of the story seems to be a form of blackmail. In the distance is a herd of pigs. Pigs were unclean animals in Jewish society. If these people who kept the pigs were Jews who kept pigs for themselves, they broke the law. If they raised the pigs in order to sell them to gentiles, they gave a poor testimony. In either case the pig farmers were not irreproachable before God. The demons' request to be allowed to enter the pigs was not a plea for mercy. The enemy had a double goal. First of all, this was meant to be a trap for Jesus. If the existing conditions were illegal and Jesus allowed this to continue, He would be wrong. If Jesus granted the demons' request the owners of the pigs would turn against Him. In a way, here is played out on a small scale what happens in the world at large. The fact that Jesus finds Himself in a forced condition is the result of His holiness. The result seems to be a victory for Satan. The drowning of the pigs would have a decisive influence upon public opinion. This world in general is not on God's side. Satan must have thought he had won the game when the whole town came to Jesus and asked Him to leave.

We must not forget that Jesus had just left a crowd hungry for sensation on the west side of the lake. If the Gadarenes had accepted Jesus' miracle of healing, Jesus would have merely exchanged one miracle hungry crowd for another. Jesus' victory in this case consists in that He leaves behind two men who had been demon possessed and are now a living testimony to what God had done in His grace. Their presence in the town will have demolished quite a few demon strongholds. They did not even have to preach; it was enough that they were there. This is on a small scale what God does at large in the whole world!

1. Mark 5:7

2. Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30

This does not make the attitude of the people less incomprehensible. “They pleaded with him to leave their region.” They were afraid, not merely because of the loss of their business but even more because of the demonstration of Jesus’ holiness. In one of C. S. Lewis’ books the hero meets a good spirit. The man realizes that this is real goodness, but he asks himself if he actually wants what is real good. That seems to be the reaction of this town toward Jesus. Our unconscious reactions often travel faster than our conscious ones. These people were aware of the healing of the demon-possessed men. They also realize that this healing exposed their illegal practices of keeping pigs. They knew that Jesus could see through them and they did not want that kind of soul searching. As a reason for their request for Jesus to leave they will have given the loss of their herd. But was that a valid reason? Jesus acquiesces and leaves the area, knowing that nobody would be willing to hear His teaching. No one thought that this Rabbi could also heal their paralyzed brother of blind sister. The evil of their hearts had been revealed too clearly for such thoughts to occur.

The following story happens on the other side of the lake in Capernaum. Matthew gives the impression that it happened as Jesus stepped out of the boat, but in Mark’s Gospel we read that it took a few days for the people in Capernaum to understand that Jesus was home.¹ Matthew does not provide the details of the other two Gospels, who describe the crowded house, the climbing on the roof by the paraplegic’s friends and the opening of the ceiling. Luke even adds that Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem to hear Jesus teach.²

Luke also adds that “the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.” This contrasts to Matthew’s remark, at Nazareth Jesus “did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”³ The faith of the people in Capernaum was probably generated by the power of the Lord to heal which streamed through Jesus. We could wonder, though, whether our Lord was really dependant upon such conditions. We may assume that it was not that Jesus was “in the mood” that made the difference. It must have been the working of the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus had said: “The wind [the Spirit] blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”⁴ The atmosphere at that place was charged even in the presence of the theologians who were present!

All three Gospels emphasize that Jesus noticed the faith of the men who brought the paralytic. We draw the lesson from this that faith in our intercession for others is a very important factor. Matthew, Mark and Luke differ in the way they report Jesus’ words. Matthew says: “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” In Mark we simply read: “Son, your sins are forgiven.”⁵ And Luke reads: “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”⁶ All three highlight a different aspect of the miracle of forgiveness. This three-dimensional representation creates a living image.

In all three accounts there is a hidden reference to Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus identifies Himself with this man. He guarantees forgiveness because He will personally pay for this man’s debt. This refers to the basis of all forgiveness of sin. At that moment, the ransom had not yet been paid. That is why Matthew adds the meaningful words “Take heart, son.” This evokes the possibility of hope and despair, not only for this man, but for mankind in general. There is the realization of a need and the fact that there seems to be no way out. But this is offset by the intuitive knowledge that there ought to be a way. That is the way God made man. The fact that Jesus says to the paralytic: “Take heart, son” shows that He understands our human needs. Jesus also calls him “son.” This emphasizes the effect of forgiveness. The payment for this man’s sin would take place later on Calvary, but the rehabilitation begins immediately. This poor wretch is

1. Mark 2:1

2. See Luke 5:17.

3. Matt.13:58

4. John 3:8

5. Mark 2:5

6. Luke 5:20

being addressed as a person because of forgiveness because the image of God is being restored in him at this point. The pardon takes effect immediately, not when the payment is made later.

It should not be difficult for us to understand the reaction of the teachers of the law. For them this was more than they could digest. They could not know what the basis for this forgiveness could be. Nobody could have known at this point that Jesus would die on a cross and what the meaning of that would be. The fact how Jesus identified Himself with this man and his need was hidden for them. Jesus' words shocked them deeply and they considered them to be blasphemy. But, for some reason, they don't say anything, at least not openly. They are still in the stage of investigating Jesus' ministry. It was too early to react openly. But in their hearts there was a huge question mark. Jesus sees through their polite façade and says what they think in their hearts. That makes this encounter so dramatic and even more inexplicable to the lawyers and Pharisees.

The question remains, where the Pharisees right? Does a human being have the right to forgive someone else's sin? We believe the answer to this is simple, if we say that Jesus is not a mere human being but the Son of God. But that answer is defeated by Jesus' answer when He says: "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He does not call Himself here "Son of God," but "Son of Man." He speaks and acts as a human being. In forgiving this man's sin, Jesus does not appeal to His divinity but to His humanity! Matthew emphasizes this by stating that the crowd "praised God, who had given such authority to men."

It is good to pause and reflect at this point. What the Bible teaches us here seems to go completely against all we tend to think naturally. The fact that Jesus appeals here to His humanity and not His divinity makes us believe that we would not have reacted differently than the teachers of the law and Pharisees. We all reason from the mentality of the paralytic or the Pharisee. We believe that Jesus lived in a world different from ours. Jesus demonstrates that He lives in a world in which we all ought to live. We all hesitate to enter into a world of reconciliation and think and act as if we never committed any sin. For us who were conceived and born in sin it is so difficult and frightening to draw the full consequences of a restored relationship with God. We must remember that Jesus speaks to us over the head of this paralytic and says: "You forgive the sins of this man." In the history of the church only few have dared to accept such consequences of reconciliation. In the Roman Catholic Church the priests have practiced absolution. Whether the spirit of Christ's Word has been preserved in this ministry is not for us to judge here. After all, "who is equal to such a task?"¹

Jesus performed the miracle of healing as proof of the mandate of forgiveness He possessed. The disquieting part of this is that we know that this kind of mandate is not completely beyond our reach. Our intuition tells us that the power to forgive sin is part of our human nature; not the nature that has been corrupted by sin, but the nature of man God restored to its original image. There is in this a promise of what will once come to light in all its fullness when all things are made new. The saints will judge the world. It will be fallen man, the person who received forgiveness who will pronounce the verdict over Satan and his minions. To power to forgive is part of that authority.

In how far a fallible human being can exercise this kind of authority in the world is another question. Jesus' words: "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"² and "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven"³ seem to point to this mandate. With this gift, it is undoubtedly, as with all other workings of the Holy Spirit, they are only effective if the church represents the living body of the Lord in this world.

1. II Cor 2:16

2. Matt. 16:19

3. John 20:23

When the paralytic stands up immediately as a result of Jesus Word of power, the crowd breaks out in spontaneous praise. Luke indicates that this praise started by the healed paralytic himself.¹ The initial experience of being forgiven, followed by the renewing of his body leaves no doubt in this man's mind about the source of his blessing. He glorifies God. The crowd reacts with amazement, awe and praise. This clearly proves that God had revealed Himself among them. We always react with awe when we realize who God is. All praise is a mixture of fear and joy. The crowd had seen reality and they understood. One wonders what the Pharisees and teachers of the law thought of this.

At this point Matthew himself enters the picture. Mark is the only one of the evangelists who states that, after this miracle, Jesus began to teach at the shore of the lake. Jesus must have had the ear of the crowd after this impressive miracle.

The call of Matthew, or Levi, is another miracle, a miracle of simplicity. One would get the impression, reading this, that nothing is easier than to get up and follow Jesus. In a way, this is true. In his book *God's Smuggler*, the author Anne van der Bijl describes his conversion. He says that when he lay on his bed one evening, he said to God: "O.K, go ahead!" "It was as simple as that." The difficulty is not in being called but in not wanting to get up and follow. It is when we remain seated and say: Yes, but ..." that the problems begin. After having followed Jesus for many years, while writing this Gospel, Matthew looks back to the moment it began for him. And he writes with amazement how simple it was. It was so clear and logical, that when he saw the Lord and the Lord gave him this brief command: "Follow Me!" he realized how unnatural his position as a tax collector was with all the sinful implications of the office. Rarely so much is said in so few words.

"Got up" and "follow" is probably not literally what happened, because we read in the following verses that Matthew remained home and put out a big meal for Jesus, His disciples and many of his own colleagues, plus some people of ill repute. Luke adds to this that Matthew "left everything and followed him."² This must mean initially that Matthew detached himself emotionally and spiritually from all he had been before. Matthew does not turn into an apostle overnight either; that would come later. Here he is called from darkness into light. And that had to be celebrated. Matthew understood that, if there is joy in heaven, there must be a demonstration of joy on earth also. Our Lord often "throws a party" when someone crosses over from death into life. That is why there is often, shortly after one's conversion such a flush of joy. That experience is usually not lasting; it disappears after a while. It seems that the Lord wants to give us a foretaste of what heaven will be like.

Here, it is Matthew who organizes the feast. He must have been a realist, a man with a profound insight in what had happened to him. He not only understands the importance of his conversion, but he also realized that God had given him earthly means to do good, especially to show his love for the Lord. This party also turned into a testimony to show what God does when He renews a person's life. See how many sinners attend the feast. Mark observes: "many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him,"³ indicating that there were several who had nothing to do with Matthew, but who were following Jesus because they were drawn to Him. Whatever the situation, Matthew opened his home widely for Jesus.

The feast gives the Pharisees reason for some sharp criticism. This is not only limited to Jesus, but it also applies to the disciples. According to Luke, the question was "*Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?*"⁴ Although this kind of attitude is not uncommon even in our day, it is good to have a closer look at the Pharisees' reaction. Their judgment over tax collectors and "sinner" was not unfounded. Those were people who disobeyed the law of God. The Pharisees understood that God was too

1. Luke 5:25

2. Luke 5:28

3. Mark 2:15

4. Luke 5:30

holy to look at such sinful behavior. They wanted to reflect this understanding in their attitude. They believed they were taking it up for the character of a holy God. This would have been good, if it were not for the fact that there were two flaws in their philosophy. Their criticism ought to have been tempered considerably by the fact that they were not without sin themselves. They concentrated on God's holiness without taken the other facets of God's character into consideration. That made them into frozen, dogmatists who did not really know God at all. Knowledge of God can only be obtained through the forgiveness of our sins. But without conviction of sin, one cannot obtain forgiveness. Their God was too small.

Matthew gives the most complete version of Jesus' answer. As always, Jesus' words are sufficient for the occasion. "It is not the healthy..." is filled with sarcasm as well as with compassion. It places both the Pharisees and the tax collectors before the question: "Am I healthy?" Jesus could openly demonstrate His compassion to the tax collectors and their friends, but it would bounce off on the hard breastplate of righteousness of the Pharisees.

Jesus uses this short parable to demonstrate the relationship between sin and sickness. They both follow the same pattern. A person cannot rid himself from sin; and we cannot shake off any kind of sickness as we wish either. The Pharisees did not consider the tax collectors to be poor slaves bound by sin. They had no eye for the misery of those people. Only a person who is saved from his sin understands the misery of others. Those who believed to be healthy turn out to be as miserable as the ones who knew they were sick. The Lord makes also clear that He had come to be the healer of those who are sick in their sin. In this He distinguishes Himself clearly from all other people. It is impossible for us to have this kind of compassion and sympathy for others. This feature belongs uniquely to the Lord. There is no other basis to relieve human suffering than the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the lesson we all have to learn together with the Pharisees. If we try to work ourselves up to a certain level of compassion and neighborly love, we are on shaky ground. Being filled with the love of God for others is always preceded by confession of personal sin.

"Go and learn ..." is the beginning of all mission work. The Pharisees were willing to bring sacrifices, but they knew no concept of mercy. It is strange that it is so hard for us to show mercy. God wants us to treat others the way He treats us, with mercy. Jesus' short sermon penetrates to the depth of a problem that corrupts much missionary work. God wants us to love those to whom we bring the Gospel. He wants us to be moved with compassion as He is moved with us.

The fact that Matthew repeats Jesus' words here is an indication of the way he personally experienced God's love. That must have been the realization that caused the change of his life. It changes us also. Jesus says: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus does not call the righteous, because there aren't any! Those who believe themselves to be righteous live an illusion. If our eyes are opened to the reality of what we are, we know ourselves to be sinners. That realization is the only condition for salvation. God only justifies the wicked. As the Apostle Paul says: "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."¹

The topic in vv.14-16 is fasting. This is probably not a fast in which people refrain from eating and drinking in order to dedicate themselves totally to a time of prayer. John's disciples who ask the question infer that Jesus and His disciples did not practice the same kind of fast they and the Pharisees observed. Jesus is known to have fasted from time to time, as when He met with the Samaritan woman.² This fast was probably a specific ritual in connection with a certain event that was commemorated. We find an example in Zechariah where people fasted to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. We read: "The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, 'Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?' Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: 'Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ' 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?' ' "³ In the case of Zechariah it was

1. Rom. 4:5

2. See John 4:31-38.

not only a mere ritual in which fellowship with God was not at the center, but it also pertained to a commemoration of a defeat, a symbol of human failure.

The question here was asked by John's disciples and by the Pharisees. Jesus answers the question with a declaration of victory. He proclaims the end of human failure. His words mean the end of a history of human failure and a declaration of a new time of salvation and victory.

Jesus' answer consists of three short parables: a wedding, a garment, and a wineskin. All three images are connected to one another. The Lord compared Himself with a bridegroom and His disciples with the wedding guests. The familiar New Testament illustration is of a bridegroom and a bride. But that is not the point here. The accent in this parable is not on the wedding; it is too early to bring that up. The topic is the joy of the feast. One could say that fasting, as a ritual, would miss what the matter is all about. In the same way, in this parable, the Lord only touches the outside. The important point is the ambiance. Jesus' ministry was characterized by what Nehemiah called: "the joy of the LORD [which] is your strength."¹ That is what the disciples experienced.

Incidentally, this parable gives us an impression of what life with Jesus must have been like for the disciples. There must have been a joy that put everything else in the shadow. No loss or grief could compete with that. It would have been impossible to be truly miserable in Jesus' presence. God is the source of all joy. As David sang: "Surely you have granted him eternal blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence."² Jesus Himself, who is the source, drew joy from it. Even today, centuries later, these words have lost none of their power. The joy is still there. The Apostle Paul discovered in prison that the joy of the Lord was his strength. The Hebrew word for "strength" here is *ma'owz*, which means: "a fortified place." Elsewhere it is translated "stronghold" as in: "The LORD is the stronghold of my life."³

The Lord borrowed here the words of John the Baptist, who said: "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."⁴

The parable remains in the sphere of the Old Testament, of which John was the last prophet. We find ourselves here on the threshold of the New Testament. If the joy of Old Testament anticipation was that great, what must be the joy of acquisition? We live on the other side of the step. We are the bride.

But we don't have to tell each other that our joy is not perfect. We may have passed the divide but the powers that are out to rob us of our joy are still very active. We will experience that same kind of joy in heaven, but we are not in heaven yet and the hindrances are still there. Jesus refers to the time "when the bridegroom will be taken from them," speaking of that which will keep us from the fullness of joy. Much more is meant here than things that make life miserable for us. Jesus knew the price He would have to pay to assure the fullness of joy for us. In comparison with the suffering of our Lord none of our difficulties in life hold up. Without His death on the cross, this joy would not be what it is: deep, moving, unshakable and inexpressibly precious. This being the case, no human suffering or sadness can undo this joy.

The fasting when the bridegroom is taken away cannot be put on the same level as the ritual fast mentioned earlier. That fasting would be an expression of the struggle to maintain fellowship with the Lord in His absence. That which came naturally to the disciples as long as Jesus was with them, later became an effort that would take all their spiritual energy. There is great comfort in the fact that Jesus said these things at this moment. Not only did He know what would happen to Him, but He knew the whole picture. He knew the place joy and sadness would have. His thoughts were with His disciples and with the things they would experience as He accepted His own suffering. He understands what we all go through.

3. Zech. 7:2-5

1. Neh. 8:10

2. Ps. 21:6

3. Ps. 27:1

4. John 3:29

The next parable about the garment to be patched puts the accent on renewal. The repair Jesus speaks of is a fundamental and total change. The old existing stuff is not merely repaired. That which sin has shrunk and pulled apart is not merely covered up by a new piece of cloth. The old order is replaced by a totally new one. All human life moves in the direction of death. The new life that is put before us by means of the death and resurrection of our Lord is not merely a reversal of the process, it is victory of life over death. Jesus did not just stand in the face of death and then turned around, He went through and came out on the other end. The new patch of unshrunk cloth is symbolic of life that has death behind it. We cannot take something that precious and wonderful and tear it apart to use it to repair something that is old and without value. To put a piece of new life upon an old and sinful existence only makes things worse. Jesus says that it is impossible to compromise.

How can this be applied to the fast that is the topic of these verses? The fast to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity was a miniature of that which determines the cosmic struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. This parable is both a proclamation of victory as a call to drop the images in order to see reality. This parable speaks about the essence and the working of the new life.

The parable of the bridegroom speaks about the content of the new life and also the way in which this life is obtained. The third parable about the wine and the wineskin speaks about the way joy can be preserved. As the way to store wine is an art, so preserving the joy takes skill. The quality of wine improves with the years if it is stored skillfully. That is probably the meaning of the remarkable appendix Luke gives to this parable: "And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'" ¹ There seems to be some contradiction between those words and the rest of this parable. We must remember, though, that the point this parable wants to make is not the comparison between old wine and new, but between old and new wineskins. The Lord wants to tell us that we must be alert as to how we experience and maintain our fellowship with Him. A person who has been renewed in his daily life by the grace of God will discover that the joy of fellowship with God, has not only withstood the storms, but that it has been intensified by it, gained depth and become richer. The old wine is, in a way, the same wine as the new, but it has become better.

In conclusion, we can say that there is a joy that cannot be undone by anything. It is the joy the Lord bought for us with His own blood. This joy can be dangerous and destructive if it is not accompanied by a complete renewal of our life. If we keep in step in our thinking and acting with the revelation of Jesus in us, we will end up with a treasure that is incomparably precious.

In the story of the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the woman with the blood issue, Matthew seems to give us the most accurate chronology. Interestingly, Matthew never mentions the name of the father of the child; he calls him "a ruler." But as far as chronology is concerned, Matthew insists that the following two incidents occurred "While he was saying this," that is while He was telling these parables.

Some Bible scholars have found contradiction in the way the three evangelists render the account. We can only say that Matthew gives in one sentence what the other two elaborate. According to Mark, the girl was still alive when the father came to Jesus. The word that the girl had died reached the father as Jesus and he were on their way. It must have been at that point that Jesus gave Jairus this glorious encouragement to Jairus: "Don't be afraid; just believe."² According to Matthew, Jairus did believe because he said: "come and put your hand on her, and she will live."

The interruption while Jesus is on His way to Jairus' house increases the tension of the story considerably. That would especially be the case if Jairus believed that his daughter was still alive while they were on the way. There will have been the tensed hope "if only He is in time." The divine command to wait and be patient must have been very difficult for this poor father. It looks cruel to us that God seems to care so little about our nervousness. Faith without nervousness makes faith real but it is rare.

1. Luke 5:39

2. Mark 5:36

The intermezzo creates a precious moment. It even seems to have surprised Jesus. He only became conscious of what happened after it had occurred. His attitude toward the incident illustrates the way in which He accepted the Father's guidance in all circumstances. It also proves that Jesus lived His life on earth within the boundaries of His human nature. The incident shows that the Man Jesus was not omniscient. Jesus finds Himself in a crowd that pushes Him around. From all sides people touch and shove Him unintentionally. But the sick woman consciously seeks the touch. She believes she could do this without being noticed, but that proves impossible. Everyone who consciously comes in touch with Jesus Christ is detached from the crowd and becomes a personality. There is no anonymity before God. There is a world of difference between the way the crowd touched Jesus and what this woman did.

What did she think? What brought her to do this? She knew that she needed an intimate touch with Jesus, but she was afraid to hug Him or even shake hands with Him. To touch the edge of His cloak was enough. If that was enough for her, how about us who have the most intimate fellowship with Him through the Holy Spirit? If touching His cloak already releases such power, how about the fellowship with His Spirit?

There is an interesting and almost amusing difference between the way Mark and Luke report the woman's history. Mark states mercilessly: "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."¹ Luke, the physician, only remarks dryly: "no one could heal her."² That is part of the hidden humor of the Bible.

As soon as the woman touches Jesus she is healed. It seems that her touch triggered the working of an existing law. Matthew does not give us the details which we gather from Mark and Luke's account. He does not report Jesus' question about who touched him. Unless Jesus purposely fakes ignorance to draw the woman out of herself, which we can hardly assume, the events seem to take care of themselves. As a stone that is detached from the mountain must fall down according to the law of gravity, so the power of healing in Jesus' body streams through the body of this woman. The faith of this woman made her push the right button, so to speak, which set the process of healing in motion. This being the case, it shows that there are laws in the spirit world that run parallel to the material universe. If we, in faith, fulfill certain conditions, the divine laws that rule the Kingdom of Heaven release the divine power that is needed. God obeys His own laws. Jesus' body reacted in a complete and reliable manner to this woman's touch. Jesus' own amazement emphasizes this. The discovery of these spiritual laws ought to encourage us.

Matthew does not elaborate on the reason for which the woman wanted to remain hidden. The nature of her ailment was an embarrassment to her. That was not the kind of disease one confesses in public. Matthew respects her privacy and simply reports that Jesus saw her and told her that her faith had healed her. Although it was her touch of Jesus' cloak that released the power of healing, the Lord makes it look as if she directly touched the edge of God's robe of glory, which in a way she did.

After this incident the story of Jairus' daughter continues. Matthew picks up the thread when Jesus arrives at the house. Matthew omits the details of when the word of her death reached Jairus. This makes us miss out on the wonderful response of the Lord: "Don't be afraid; just believe."³

Death was not the end of all for Jesus, as it seems to be for the rest of mankind. He makes it seem so easy. Jesus attitude toward death was founded upon His own future death and resurrection. Jesus reached forward in faith to what would happen to Him shortly after. We are unable to see over the wall of death. We feel as if we hit that wall and that there is no way through. Jesus' faith was built upon the promise of the Father, which determined His action at this point. As in the case of forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man, Jesus uses the death of His own body as a surety for this resurrection.

We get the impression that in every case in which a person was called back to life, the victory had to be won individually. Everyone must die. During Jesus' ministry on earth only a few were made alive in

1. Mark 5:26

2. Luke 8:43

3. Mark 5:36

order to continue living the same pre-resurrection life they had had before. The Apostle Paul touched upon the general rule when he wrote: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”¹ The resurrection of this little girl falls outside the rule that affects all of mankind. This is something extra. God breaks in festive fashion through the law of destruction that became effective at man’s fall into sin.

This is not an open manifestation either. According to Luke, on the parents and three of Jesus’ disciples were present.² And Mark adds that Jesus “gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this.”³ All this raises questions to which it is difficult to find the answer, as does Jesus’ remark “The girl is not dead but asleep.” As we saw earlier, Jesus tried to keep sensation away, so that people’s faith would not rest upon that. But that does not explain everything. If Jesus had only said: “She is asleep,” it could have been construed as an image of death. But now He clearly stated: “The girl is not dead but asleep.”

We know little about the Jewish conception of death. It could have been the same as of some primitive tribes’ people who call every form of unconsciousness “death.” They may have said that she was dead while in reality her brain functions had not ceased. Jesus used the word “asleep” for “death,” but “The girl is not dead but asleep” excludes the use figurative language. In the case of the death of Lazarus, Jesus said to His disciples: “ ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.’ His disciples replied, ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’ ”⁴

The people at Jairus’ home respond with laughter to Jesus’ words. They knew for sure that the girl was dead. If our sad impossibilities clash with God’s possibilities, we laugh in His face. How much worse can it get! The medical doctor Luke observes that when Jesus called her back, “her spirit returned.”⁵ This makes it difficult for us to believe that the girl had not died. But why did Jesus say then “The girl is not dead but asleep?” Maybe the Lord says that she had not died in the absolute sense of the word, in the hopeless sense we give to this word. The Lord did then not change the fact of death but He corrects our conception of death. He says that death is a temporary condition, as is sleep. This does not take away any of the mystery of Jesus’ words. In Luke’s Gospel we read “Stop wailing ... She is not dead but asleep.”⁶ I understand the “stop wailing” part. Jesus leads us with this through our sorrow. He shows that He understands our pain and tells us that our sorrow will end.

Matthew is the only one who tells us the story of the healing of two blind men. They follow Jesus on the way, crying: “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” For some reason they do not succeed in catching up with Jesus on the road, but they find Him after He has gone into a house. It could be that Jesus had not heard them call, or that He did as if He had not heard to put them to the test. It is also possible that there were so many people crowding around Jesus that they never had a chance to come close. Here again, Matthew’s account is so concise that it is difficult for us to reconstruct what actually happened. The blind men’ words are the same as those of Bartimaeus (and friend), which Matthew and the other synoptic writers recount.⁷ In that story Matthew withhold Bartimaeus’ name.

There is in the words “Son of David” a world of meaning. It is questionable that those men really knew Jesus to be a physical descendant of King David. They probably rather recognized Him as the Messiah on the basis of the miracles He had performed. Their conclusion is that, if the Messiah has come, they ought to bring their blindness to Him. They succeed in doing this after Jesus has entered the house.

1. I Cor. 15:22

2. Luke 8:51

3. Mark 5:43

4. John 11:11-14

5. Luke 8:55

6. Luke 8:52

7. See Matt. 20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Luk3 18:35-43.

Matthew omits any previous conversion. In the encounter with Bartimaeus and his friend, Jesus asked: "What do you want me to do for you?" and they answered: "we want our sight."¹ If such words were exchanged here, which can be assumed, they are not recorded. It could also be that, with the question: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" Jesus wants to penetrate to the core of the matter, indicating that He understood their plight. Healing is made dependent upon faith. This is obvious from the words "According to your faith will it be done to you." There are certain conditions to be met when we get in touch with the Lord. It is not merely a mechanical matter of touching Him and having the experience. Our attitude of is great importance. If we honestly examine ourselves, we often discover that there is a lack of single-mindedness. We like to be healed, but there are some fibers of subconscious enjoyment of malady that are attached to our soul. Such a conflicting condition cannot be the basis of faith. Faith often goes together with self-discovery and with confession of resistance and of lack of faith. In the real of healing also, the Lord will not do for us what we can do ourselves. He respects us to the point where He does not insult us by taking from us the dignity of faith.

This raises the question: "What is faith?" It sounds so easy and yet we suspect that there is more behind it. There is so much in life that complicates that which is simple. Why do we differentiate between the faith we have in the chair we sit on and faith that entrusts our soul and spirit to God? We tend to shift the center of gravity from where it belongs to somewhere else. We would rather emphasize the fact that Jesus touched their eyes than the words He spoke. Yet, "According to your faith will it be done to you" puts the burden upon them. It seems that Jesus' touch would have had no effect if these men had not believed.

If we give to this incident the title "The obedience of faith," we must call the rest of the story "The disobedience of the believer." Jesus told these men specifically: "See that no one knows about this." Jesus obviously wanted to avoid the kind of popularity that is based upon sensation. By being disobedient to this gag order, these men do not leave God and Jesus in the center, although their mouths seem to do so. They draw all the attention upon themselves and their wonderful experience. They had been transformed in an instance from poor blind beggars to interesting people who had become the object of a miracle. As human beings we are vessels of contradiction. We are very sly, even when it pertains to giving glory to God instead of to ourselves.

It is hard to understand that faith and unbelief can exist so close together in the same human heart. The fact that this is so ought to be a serious warning to us. When God performs a miracle in our life, we see ourselves confronted by a whole complexity of egoism and egotism that has to be overcome. The first step is to recognize that the two are there and that they must not continue to coexist.

As the two blind men go out of the door, another person who is demon-possessed is brought in. The man is deaf and dumb. Luke suggests that the demon in him was mute.² Matthew does not bother about the medical details of the man's condition. We know very little about what demons can do and cannot do. Evidently there are demons that can speak and others that cannot. In this case the demon possessed the person to the point that he had imposed his own muteness on him. Muteness occurs most often in people who are born deaf. We could gather from Matthew's account that this was the case with this man. But Luke seems to correct this, suggesting that this man may have been born normally and that he became deaf and dumb at a later age because of this demonic takeover. Otherwise he would not have been able to speak normally after the demon was driven out. If this were not the case, the Lord would have had to create a whole world of understanding and ability to express in the vacuum of this man's soul. That would have taken a second, even greater miracle because it would go against all we know about the development of human personality. A tailor-made ability to speak also seems to contradict human dignity. To the crowd that witnessed this miracle, however, it must have seemed as if the Lord gave this man by an extraordinary act of creation the ability of an adult, which he had not possessed before. It created a huge stir, which made them say: "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

1. See Matt. 20:32,33.

2. Luke 11:14

Matthew's account here runs parallel to the account in chapter 12.¹ The fact that we find both stories in the same Gospel indicates that they are not identical, although similar. There are some minute differences in the details. The remark of the Pharisees that Jesus drove out demons by the power of Beelzebul is found several times in the Gospels. We will see in chapter 12 how Jesus reacts to that accusation.

II. The Delegation of the King's Power 9:35—11:1

35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Chapter 10:1 He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;

3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;

4 Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans.

6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

7 As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'

8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

9 Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts;

10 take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

11 "Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave.

12 As you enter the home, give it your greeting.

13 If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.

14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.

15 I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

16 I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

17 "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.

18 On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

19 But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say,

20 for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

1. See Matt. 12:22-24.

21 *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.*

22 *All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*

23 *When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

24 *"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.*

25 *It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!*

26 *"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.*

27 *What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.*

28 *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

29 *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.*

30 *And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

31 *So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

32 *"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*

34 *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

35 *For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—*

36 *a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'*

37 *"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;*

38 *and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

39 *Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

40 *"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.*

41 *Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.*

42 *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

Chapter 11:1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

Matthew's words in 9:35-38 introduce a new phase of Jesus' ministry. Thus far the Lord had been alone in His work. The disciples were there but they were not actively involved in the job. Everything fell on Jesus' shoulders. Then comes a crisis point when Jesus sees the enormity of the task. It was as if He saw one great vision of what had to be done.

The words "like sheep without a shepherd" originate in the Old Testament. It was said in connection with the death of Moses: "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."¹ And when Micaiah foretold the death of King Ahab, saying: "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'"²

1. Num. 27:16,17

2. I Kings 22:17; II Chron. 18:16

The vision stirs deep emotions in Jesus' heart; He was moved with compassion for the masses and He decided that more must be done. The fact that there was a large crowd was, in itself, proof of God's glorious creative power. Sometimes, however, Satan uses crowds as a weapon. I remember once flying over the city of Bombay in India and being gripped by a feeling of oppression. One of the tactics of the enemy is to send such an overwhelming crowd that we feel we cannot handle it. The Lord resists the enemy here with the only possible weapon: prayer. Satan will ultimately lose because the result of his crowds is that more people will get involved, first twelve then seventy and finally one hundred forty-four thousand!

Jesus' call for prayer is one of the most moving appeals in Scripture. He sees the crowds of people as a harvest to be brought in. Interestingly, there is no direct call for laborers. Jesus' call is to the Father. He asks for a reinforcement of prayer. This shows that Jesus had a clear grasp of the problem that both the Father and the devil presented to Him. His prudent way of approach is an indication of the enormity of the problem. The point is the conversion of people, which is not a mass movement but an individual change. If the whole crowd could be converted, Jesus would only have to preach a couple of sermons and that would have achieved the goal. The whole harvest would have been brought in as far as His voice could reach. More laborers are needed because conversion means one-on-one. There must be private conversations, talks from one person to another to lead individuals to the Lord. The laborers cannot be unskilled either; they must know how to deal with people. Jesus' prayer is just as much about the training of the laborers as it is about the crowd that has to be harvested. The Holy Spirit does the training of laborers.

The fact that Jesus asks us to join in prayer is also very significant. As we begin to pray this harvest prayer, we will soon discover that the need of this world was much less of a burden to us than we thought. Our prayer will change us and prepare us to become laborers ourselves.

Jesus speaks here as a human being who is faced with the problems of the world. He feels His responsibility as a man. There is no contradiction in the fact of feeling responsible and acknowledging that the Father is the Lord of the harvest. God works through people who give their all, as if it all depended upon them, but who recognize at the same time that the harvest belongs to God. God controls the mystery of growth and fruit bearing.

Seeing the crowds like sheep without a shepherd depicts clearly the frailty and vulnerability of mankind. It seems a long such a long and impossible way from sheep to laborer. Yet, that is the point in these verses. Jesus puts the full emphasis on this potential in man. That is why the Lord treats us with such respect!

We don't really know how prayer works. We do see in Scripture, however, that prayer is part of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Heaven. Almost everything in the spiritual realm comes into being through this bond between God and man in which man bears his soul before his Creator and God makes His love and compassion shine upon him.

We rarely realize how urgent the situation is. The world is going down in lostness. God cannot abandon the fundamental principles of personal freedom of choice. If He did, salvation would lose its meaning. Only those who choose, with all that is within them, to love the Creator of life will be saved. God does not accept anything less. That would diminish His glory and our human dignity. That is the reason mass conversion is out of the question and that conversion cannot be forced. It must be on the basis of one person drawing another one. I do not believe that God will ever change this method.

In the phrase "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field," the Greek word rendered "to send out" is *ekballo*, which literally means: "to eject." The same word is used in the verse: "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?' " ¹ God's burden must be so heavy on our hearts that we cannot be held back. "A curse on him who is lax in doing the LORD's work!" ²

1. Matt. 7:22

2. Jer. 48:10

We understand from the accounts of the other Gospel writers about the sending out of the laborers that, what Matthew gives here as one single story is actually a combination of various incidents. The list of names of the disciples seems to refer to the moment at which Jesus chose His disciples.¹ Then there is the sending out of the apostles.² After that Matthew gives us details of a speech that Luke has in connection with the sending out of the seventy-two.³ Matthew seems to be using a telescopic lens that cuts out the distance between events and fuses them all in one.

Jesus chose His disciples after a protracted time of prayer in which He must have saturated Himself with a sense of the Father's presence. Mark observes, in connection with the choosing of the disciples that the first purpose of it was: "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach."⁴ The Lord is equally concerned about the laborers as about the harvest. That is why the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."⁵ That does not mean that the Lord does not require us to sacrifice ourselves or that He will spare us as we labor. We may lose our goods, our health and even our life in the process. But we will never be able to say that God considers the work more important than the person. Both are the objects of His saving grace.

In Mark's account we read that Jesus "sent them out two by two."⁶ That is an important principle that, unfortunately, has been neglected in modern evangelism and mission. This is another proof of our Lord's concern for the well-being of His servants. We are an easier prey for Satan when we are alone than when we have fellowship with other believers. We need one another in the battle.

The first thing Jesus does in giving His marching order is give authority over evil spirits. We must consider this authority as an down payment of faith. Jesus, at this point, had not yet died on the cross. Yet, He reaches forward in faith to the victory and clothes His disciples with it. For us it means looking back in faith on a victory that has been won.

It is important to comprehend that the topic of this chapter is the preaching of the Gospel. Without authority over the Evil One, the Word of God will not penetrate the heart of man. The main concern here is not the casting out of demons, although that is part of the mandate, but discernment of resistance and a breaking through that which would oppose the preaching of the Word. We do well to understand that the authority Jesus gives to us is against everything that stands in the way of the Gospel. There is nothing Satan can use to block the coming of the Kingdom that will be able to stand against the victory of Jesus Christ. That does not mean that all satanic obstacles will be removed smoothly. In the lives of the disciples there were moments where they found themselves unable to gain the victory. They failed to deliver a demon-possessed boy.⁷ Casting out demons is never an automatic process. The use of our authority is linked closely to our fellowship with the Lord. When there is a lack of faith, or uncleanness in our daily walk, or a tendency to seek glory for ourselves, we will find ourselves powerless like Samson after his hair had been cut.⁸ There is always the subtle danger that we no longer recognize the power as coming from God and we stick our own nametag on it.

One question that is difficult to answer is the fact that Judas Iscariot was among those who received the power. Whatever else we may conclude from this, it seems to prove that the exercise of a divine mandate

1. See Luke 6:12-16.

2. See Luke 9:1-6.

3. See Luke 10:1-20.

4. Mark 3:14

5. I Tim. 4:16

6. Mark 6:7

7. See Matt. 17:19-21.

8. Judg. 16:18-21

is not identical to personal salvation. Jesus seems to emphasize this when He said to His disciple: “However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”¹

Matthew emphasizes that this campaign is limited to “the lost sheep of Israel.”² The Gentiles and Samaritans are specifically excluded. This does not mean that the Gospel was not meant for them also. The great commission carries the same emphasis to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”³ The exclusion of the Gentiles and Samaritans at this point was temporal and chronological. The Gospel had to be preached to the Jews first before it could go into all the world. It is logical that the children of the Kingdom are raised to life first so that the potential labor force would increase. The starting point of all this was the prayer that the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers into the harvest. The Apostle Paul was careful to adhere to this principle: “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”⁴ It is wise investment to first bring the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit to those who already possess it. Ten Christians who are revived at home can accomplish more than one missionary in a heathen country. If we use our greater energy to the building up of Christians than to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard, we are on solid ground. Where there is a living nucleus of believers the Gospel will spread itself. Weakening of the church will do unimaginable damage to the outside world. A silent light speaks louder than a hollow sermon.

Matthew states: “As you go, preach this message.” The content of the sermon is outlined clearly: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” This stands for the healing of the church, not for an outside manifestation. Those who have the Word of God must make the discovery that “The kingdom of heaven is near.” They are the ones to be healed, raised from the dead, cleansed and delivered. We do not read that the disciples really completed their task. We don’t read that they raised any of the dead, for instance. Even in Jesus’ own ministry, raising of the dead occupies a very modest place. Beside hundreds, or maybe even thousands of healings (“he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick”)⁵ we read only about three people being raised from the dead.⁶ Peter later raised Dorcas and Paul Eutychus. This suggests that the command pertains more to “things to come” than to “things that are.” As we saw earlier, Jesus breaks through the circle of present circumstances and time. His words pertain to all Gospel-preaching as well as to the coming and the presence of the Kingdom. At best, in our present condition, we live toward the Kingdom and preach in the direction of the Kingdom-to-come. Jesus stands in the center of the Kingdom and speaks from there. This is obvious from the grandeur and uplifting character of His Word. Where Jesus is, there the Kingdom has come.

The command is accompanied by “Freely you have received, freely give.” Our attitude in serving others must be the same as God’s attitude toward us. God gives us grace from the abundance of his riches. We must share these riches with others in the same manner. There is always the danger that we try to profit from our ministry. There is, of course, a way in which we profit infinitely from our ministry. And it is true that a laborer is worth his labor. But our greed and egoism may not interpose itself between God and our fellowmen. That is why Jesus issues this warning here. God will provide for us in abundance, unless we provide for ourselves.

There is one problem in the text that is difficult to explain. Matthew and Luke both states that Jesus says not to take with them “a staff.”⁷ Mark, however, reports Jesus as saying: “Take nothing for the journey

1. Luke 10:20

2. Matt 10:6

3. Matt. 28:19

4. Rom. 1:16

5. Matt. 8:16

6. Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:22-43), a widow’s son (Luke 7:11-15), and Lazarus (John 11).

7. Matt. 10:10; Luke 9:3

except a staff.”¹ Maybe *Barnes' Notes* gives the most plausible explanation: “In the margin, in all the ancient versions, and in the common Greek text, this is in the singular number – ‘nor yet’ a staff. But Mark says that they might have a ‘staff.’ ‘Jesus commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only.’ To many this would appear to be a contradiction. Yet the ‘spirit’ of the instruction, the main thing that the writers aim at, is the same. That was, that they were ‘to go just as they were, to trust to Providence, and not to spend any time in making preparation for their journey.’ Some of them, probably, when he addressed them, ‘had staves,’ and some had not. To those who ‘had,’ he did not say that they should throw them away, as the instructions he was giving them might seem to require, but he suffered them to take them (Mark). To those who had not, he said they should not spend time in procuring them (Matthew), but ‘they were all to go just as they were.’ ”

Matthew adds “sandals” to the list of forbidden items. This probably refers to an extra pair, since Mark specifically mentions: “wear sandals.”² The whole tone of this story suggests that it was Jesus’ intent to keep His disciples from carrying things to fall back on in case of emergency. It was not their outfit, but their reserves. Jesus did not want them to go out as beggars; they were to be equipped, but for their sustenance they had to trust their heavenly Father and not what they had in store. They go as laborers worth their keep, not as misers. The greater our faith in God for the provision of our needs the greater will be the dignity of our daily life. A preacher I heard once remarked that a Christian could always afford to pay his bills. When the king of Judah worried about the loss of money he had invested in the Israelite army he was told to discharge, we read these comforting words: “Amaziah asked the man of God, ‘But what about the hundred talents I paid for these Israelite troops?’ The man of God replied, ‘The LORD can give you much more than that.’ ”³

“Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts” (v.9) suggests that the disciples were men who would have the means to provide themselves with such reserves. It would make little sense to say things like this to people who were dirt poor to start with. Jesus wanted them consciously to burn their bridges behind them. It is more difficult to say: “I trust the Lord” when you have a nest egg stored away somewhere for the days to come. Yet, when Jesus traveled around with His disciples He did carry a purse, or at least Judas Iscariot did for the group. It was not a matter of getting rid of everything as soon as possible, but of definitely putting one’s trust in God instead of in material things. That is the ground rule for all Christian living. The Lord particularly wants those who preach the Gospel to other to model this kind of lifestyle.

The Lord also emphasizes the need to have a bridgehead in every town or village. The disciples were not allowed to travel as salesmen from one motel to another; there had to be a base in every place where they could strike down. This was meant, not only to keep the disciples from traveling around like nomads, but also to test the willingness and generosity of those who would receive the message. Without that kind of receptiveness of a nucleus of people there is little possibility for the preaching of the Gospel to take hold of a place.

We must bear in mind that we are looking at preaching to the nation of Israel. The people who hear the message are those who know it already, but who, for the most part, have kept their distance from it. This is a “recovery mission.” This is reinforced by what Jesus says about extending a greeting of peace, of pronouncing “shalom” upon every home the disciples would enter. The target was not individuals but communities, places where “brothers live together in unity,” where “the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”⁴ We can think of such oasis where it is easy to have faith in God, where people experience healing and deliverance. Those are the kind of homes God seeks.

1. Mark 6:8

2. Mark 6:9

3. II Chron. 25:9

4. Ps. 133:1,3

The blessing the disciples were supposed to pronounce was more than a simple greeting like the “good morning” we say to people. Our greetings have generally lost their meaning. There is in the biblical blessing still a trace of the original creative power that called the worlds into being. The greeting of peace creates peace in the homes that show to have the prerequisites for peace. Jesus speaks about this greeting as if it is a person: “If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.” We see in John’s Gospel how Jesus pronounced this peace upon His disciples: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”¹

There is a clear connection between the coming of peace upon a home and a family and the influence of the Holy Spirit upon that home. We all must ask ourselves that question whether our homes are worthy of God’s peace. In Israel, the families were those who lived honestly according to the light they possessed. If we will be judged according to the light God has given us, our homes ought to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The mandate our Lord gave here to His disciples is indeed an awesome one! The Spirit of God Himself is here at work to empower the words of some simple fishermen. “What is man that you are mindful of him?”²

Jesus reveals in these verses an aspect of the preaching of the Gospel that is not disclosed in, for instance, “The Parable of the Sower.” The sower sows the seed in the hope that it will bear fruit. He does not turn back and curse the earth that does not yield. But here the Lord says that preachers must take a stand against those who reject the message. It is part of preaching to formally leave a place and shake the dust of your feet. Paul took this command literally.³ Charles Finney reports that at one point in his revival ministry he cut short his campaign because the people refused to accept his message. Such an attitude emphasizes the need for a decision. We are not given the option to listen to God’s Word and lay it aside. Satan tries to tell us that we can say “yes” and “no” at the same time. The Lord wants us to know that we say “no” if we don’t say “yes.” If we could only see for one minute what the consequences are of our acts, we might receive a healthy shock that is needed to turn around. Judgment over Sodom and Gomorrah was a terrible thing. A worse thing awaits those who heard the Gospel and never reacted to it.

God’s announcement of judgment is always an act of grace. As long as the Word is being preached there is hope and there is the opportunity to respond. The purpose of the proclamation of judgment is to produce a shock that make people turn away from their sinful ways and be saved. The thought that God would announce judgment and then make it inescapable is inconceivable. Even for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah there was an opportunity for repentance. If Lot escaped, so could they! But the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not yet finished. When Jesus says: “It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment,” He speaks about something still to come, as if there still was an opportunity. God’s turning the cities upside-down in Abraham’s day was only a shadow of the spiritual judgment to come. All bombardments, earthquakes, catastrophes, revolutions, wars and accidents are merely shadows of what the Bible calls “the day of judgment.” God wants us to understand that our acts of deception and of adultery are what will cause the bowls of wrath to be poured out over this world. He wants us to take the decision to live in such a way that we cannot be held responsible for the judgment to come. He wants us to turn from our evil ways and allow Him to renew us.

When we read the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it strikes us that there is a link between the number of righteous people in the cities and the judgment. Humanly speaking, it is as if the Lord says to Himself: “Did I give Sodom and Gomorrah a fair chance to escape?” God appears to be deeply moved by the fate of those who are lost. On the Day of Judgment He will give consideration to the amount of light we had received. The men of Sodom didn’t know much about the Gospel. All they had was the

1. John 20:21,22

2. Ps. 8:4

3. See Acts 13:46.

testimony of Lot and that was rather weak. Lot's life gave little indication that he was a child of God. And when he talked to his future sons-in-law, his testimony did not have a ring of genuineness. We read: "So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, 'Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!' But his sons-in-law thought he was joking."¹ The cities in which Jesus had preached Himself and in which He had performed miracles would face a more severe judgment, because they had clearly seen the light and had not acted upon it. That is the reproach Jesus would make to Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum in a later chapter.² And what will He say about us, who do not only have Moses and the prophets, but the whole Bible and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and who continue to live as if nothing changed in the world since the days of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Vv.16 and 17 reveal two topics. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves" does not speak about our relationship with our fellowmen, otherwise the following word "therefore" would not make any sense. Being a sheep among wolves refers to the presence of demonic powers. The Lord shows in this image that we are defenseless and that our attitude must be governed by this understanding. We have nothing in ourselves that will help us to stand up against the powers of darkness. Therein lies the secret of our victory. If we know ourselves to be sheep we resemble the one who "was led like a lamb to the slaughter." The fact that He was slaughtered in our stead is our only guarantee for victory. If, even for one moment, we think that we have anything in ourselves that could defeat Satan, we have already lost the battle. It is by the power of Jesus' Name and under the cover of His blood that we have been given "authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy."³ If we are thus aware of our position, we must consciously adopt the attitude of shrewdness and innocence Jesus speaks about in the second part of the verse.

A snake has to be shrewd. It has to know where it can go. It cannot afford to go to places where sharp rocks would tear its skin. It has not legs to walk and the fact that it crawls limits its movements to smooth ground. We also have to choose our paths carefully. These instructions warn us against the sometimes reckless way we move in occult territory.

"Innocent as doves." The dove has become the symbol of peace ever since Noah let it fly out of the ark after the flood. The Greek word rendered "innocent" is *akeraios*, which is derived from a word meaning "unmixed." The idea seems to be an absence of ulterior motives. The Apostle Paul uses the word twice in his epistles, once in "I want you to be wise about what is good, and *innocent* about what is evil"⁴ and once in "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and *pure*, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe."⁵ The intent seems to be that we demonstrate a peace-loving mentality, not abrasive or aggressive. We come back to Jesus' model of being "like a lamb." This all is said in connection with our relationship with the Evil One. We are not allowed, under any circumstance, to repay Satan tit-for-tat. As Christians we are innocent from the inside out. Our character is pure, not suspicious, but without evil intent or mixed motives. That is the wall of protection against which the enemy will hit his head. He will only have power over us if he finds a foothold inside us. If the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ has made us innocent Satan will have no handle on us. His power consists in blackmail.

"Be on your guard against men" (v.17). As long as we are dealing with demons we know the kind of enemy we are facing. No one who has any spiritual discernment will believe he can trust the devil. But our relationship with fellow humans is much more complex. We all have a need for fellowship with others. The Lord warns us not to lean too heavily on that. We cannot build our life on the basis of human friendships

1. Gen. 19:14

2. Matt. 11:20-24

3. See Luke 10:19.

4. Rom. 16:19

5. Phil. 2:14,15

only. We do need one another and we must be a blessing for others, but we are not supposed to collapse when human contacts fall away. As the Psalmist says: “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.”¹ The source of our life is in God, not in our fellowmen. This does not mean that we ought to fall into the other extreme of not trusting anyone at all. We must be realistic enough to know what people are able to do to one another and we must not be overly surprised when we are betrayed by one we supposed to be a brother. The Lord does not say that we must avoid suffering and persecution at any price. “Be on your guard against men” speaks of the proper balance, a balance between hope and fear.

What does it mean to “be on guard?” It means to be watchful, realizing that Satan can use human beings to attack us. If Job had recognized this fact when Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar came “to comfort” him, it would have lightened his sufferings considerably. Jesus understood this when Peter tried to keep his Lord from drinking the cup of suffering. We read: “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”²

When we decide to follow Jesus we must realize that it could cost us a lot. Being handed over to the local councils and flogged in synagogues means physical suffering. We have to take this into account. We cannot weapon ourselves beforehand against such experiences. We cannot build up reserves against physical pain. We do better to trust God to give us the grace to endure when we need it rather than try to store up reserves we will not be able to keep. In that sense, being on guard, means to be on guard against ourselves!

It also means to utilize the time. There is the danger that we become overwhelmed with self-pity to the point that we do not recognize the opportunity given to us to give our testimony. It is not human beings who take us to court to see us judged, (that is only a small part of the process), it is the Lord who calls the judges together so they can hear the Gospel from the accused. They would have no other change to get the message. Jesus took this opportunity when “while testifying before Pontius Pilate [He] made the good confession.”³

“On my account” ought to run as a red thread of guidance through all our circumstances. Peter would later write: “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”⁴ “Commendable” is the translation of the Greek word *charis*, which actually means: “grace.” Sometimes the Lord has no other opportunity to make His message heard to governors, kings and nations but through the martyrdom of His children. If we are not ready to be used for this purpose, or if we are not aware of the opportunity give to us, we may face some very unpleasant surprises.

Another thing we must be on guard about is worry in connection with persecution. It is logical that we ask ourselves the question whether we will be able to meet the challenge of meeting the Lord’s goal. It is one thing to be ready to be used by God, but to give a clear and effective testimony is another thing. As far as the content of our testimony is concerned we must not even try to feel responsible for it. That is the responsibility of the Spirit of God. What He says through us is His business.

We could put a “be on your guard” at each of these verses. There are, of course, ties that bind human beings together. The family is an expression on an earthly level of a spiritual relationship of the divine Trinity. That is the reason we feel family ties so strongly and they are considered to be part of human nature. We experience them as natural because they are natural to God and we are created in His image. The corruption of sin has penetrated so deeply that, in opposition against the Gospel, even family ties can be broken. “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.” This goes against the very core of life. Throughout the ages people have tried to

1. Ps. 118:8

2. Matt. 16:22,23

3. I Tim. 6:13

4. I Peter 2:20

hold God responsible for this kind of distortion. But God is not “human” in that sense of the word. God cannot be divided against Himself. But He gives us a freedom of choice that can have disastrous consequences.

Another point of watchfulness is in connection with perseverance. “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” The more we radiate the love of Christ, the more we will be hated for it. People will hate us not because of who we are but because they see Christ in us. To persevere simply means to keep on loving when we find ourselves surrounded by hatred.

“Be saved” in this context does, of course, not pertain to the salvation of the soul. We are not saved because we counter hatred with love. “Stands firm to the end” raises the question “what end?” The end of our life will probably not coincide with the end of the world. Even if this were so, it would have little importance. Our perseverance will be under circumstances that seem to conquer us. Salvation would then mean rehabilitation. It will become evident that these downtrodden creatures, those who are hated by everybody, are in fact the ones who experience salvation. It will be a revelation of reality.

Jesus’ advice to flee from one place to another when persecuted is a strong argument against the tendency of some (there are not many) who seek suffering. It is natural to want to escape suffering. If this is not our tendency, something is wrong inside. We are allowed to flee if needed. God does not call us to be heroes. The suffering and persecution Jesus mentions is not something we must seek, it is sometimes inevitable.

Jesus’ mention that He will come before we have done the rounds of all the cities raises, of course, some questions that are difficult to answer. G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Gospel According to Matthew*, believes that Jesus speaks in these verses about the disciples’ witnessing in the period between the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He interprets the words “before the Son of Man comes” to refer to the Lord’s judgment over the city. History seems to justify that interpretation. After the fall of Jerusalem there has been little persecution of Christians by Jews. There has been persecution, but it was rather of Jews by Christians. To see the fall of Jerusalem as the coming of Christ, however, requires some stretch of imagination, or at least a deviation from the common meaning of the words. There may be here an application of the prophetic principle that states that prophecy has a ripple effect; it plays itself out in a series of events that continue till the ultimate fulfillment of all prophecy at the end of time, to the great tribulation, at which time the Lord Jesus Christ will return.

V.24 opens the last part of Jesus’ commands to His disciples. The line of separation between this verse and the preceding ones is not too clearly drawn. Some of the content can be applied to the disciples’ ministry in the cities of Israel, but the general application seems to be much wider. There are here principles that apply to all persecution at all times. Jesus draws a triangle of relationships. One angle is the Lord Himself, the second one is the people who have put their trust in Him and the third represents those who resist the Gospel. The question put before us is which angle we, who proclaim to confess Christ, consider to be the most important one. Vv.24-33 emphasize relationships from our angle. Beginning with v.34, the Lord speaks of His view of these relationships.

The master must be the model for the servant. The words sound positive but they are used in a negative context. Here it does not mean that the servant will not share in the glory and riches of his Lord, but that he will not be spared when his Lord is being humiliated and murdered. The servant will be despised in the same way as the Master was loathed. “Is not above” means here that the same lot that came to the Master will come to the servant. We will not be kept out of harms way. It sounds so simple: “It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”

There is in these plain words a truth hidden that leads to a life of living fellowship with God. The context is about persecution. That is the framework in which we must interpret the words “concealed” and “disclosed,” “hidden” and “made known.” The relationship with God will be unaffected by circumstances, just as in the bond of marriage. It is the relationship with the Master that forms the unity of this passage. Both parties are clearly defined. He is the Master, we are the servants; He is the Lord, we are the disciples. Unless we have a clear understanding of this, there will not be a “being like.”

Then there is the “it is enough.” This does not merely mean: “Let this be enough. Don’t try for more.” It speaks of being sufficient, of giving satisfaction. It means really becoming like Him.

There seems to be a play-on-words in v.25 – “If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul.” Some Bible scholars interpret the name Beelzebul as “Lord of the house,” but according to others it means “Lord of dung,” or “Lord of the flies.” The author of *Hebrews* calls Jesus “Lord of the house” as in the verses: “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.”¹ If Beelzebul is “lord of the house” he is the tyrant of the family. Tyranny is an exercise of authority in a forced and absolute manner, mostly unlawful and oppressive. That is not the way God rules over His children. His power over us is only absolute in as much as our surrender to Him is absolute. There is in God’s rule over our lives no question of tyranny. Only those who do not recognize the Lord’s right over their lives consider Him to be a tyrant on the same level as Satan.

It seems difficult to enter into the meaning of v.26. On the one hand is the fear of men, as in v.28 and following. But there is also mention of hidden things that will be revealed. The same thought seems to be continued in v.27. Where is the logical connection in all this? There must be a link between “do not be afraid of them” and things concealed. The Lord says that there is no reason to be afraid because there is nothing that can remain concealed. Everything will be brought to light. What is the fear that Jesus talks about here? People can cause us to fear because of what they can do against us in secret. The fact that one can be arrested and shot at night and that nothing will ever be known about it, gives us the impression that unrighteousness will never be triumphed over by righteousness. This kind of fear goes deeper than the fear to lose one’s life. It will be terrible if I am being killed, but if righteousness becomes the victim of unrighteousness the whole universe will collapse. Jesus assures us that this will never happen. I may lose my life, but things more important than life, such as God’s lovingkindness, goodness and righteousness will be fully revealed on that great Day of the Lord. My file will be there and it will be read and justice will prevail. That seems to be the meaning of Jesus’ words here. There is some hidden, secret work of Satan that will be unmasked in time.

But over against this is our hidden relationship with the Lord. It is our responsibility that this relationship be revealed. The Lord speaks to us “in the dark.” That does not mean in physical darkness. God will speak to us in circumstances that the Evil One tries to darken for us. God will be our comfort in such circumstances, as we read in the verses: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me,”² and “Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.”³ There need to be no darkness for us in which the Word of God cannot reach us; even if we are in the dark by our own fault. As Jesus puts it here, our dark circumstances may be the basis for our testimony. God wants us to be His loudspeaker, His PA system.

There is also a warning in these words that we must not give in to the temptation to keep our mouths shut. There are some things we can only understand when we are in the dark with the Lord. We need

1. Heb. 3:1-6

2. Ps. 23:4

3. Ps. 107:10-16

isolation and intimacy to listen. One does not have faith in broad daylight, but in the dark. The point of this verse is what we do with what the Lord tells us in the dark. What the Holy Spirit whispers to us must be shouted from the rooftops. That is the victory we must win over ourselves. This is said in connection with persecution. We are not asked to give our testimony only to a receptive audience. We must shout it out in the face of the enemy. That can cost us our lives. What the Lord asks us here is if we are willing to pay for our confession with our life.

It is impossible to understand v.28 and following without believing that life on earth is merely a preparation for life to come. If death were the worst that can ever happen to us, Jesus' words here would be nonsense. Jesus is obviously aware of the fact that most people are not ready to die. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body..." is, first of all, meant as an encouragement. We are not created to die. Our resistance against death is a natural reaction against that which is against the grain of God's intent with creation. Death is an insult. But people who know that they will die are often clothed with great dignity. In the city of Haarlem, in the Netherlands, is a statue, commemorating the massacre of some hostages by the Nazis during the Second World War. The statue shows a man facing the fire squad. He is a shaved-head prisoner, looking into the barrel of the guns with a peace and quietness that is not of this world.

By putting things in their right perspective, the Lord shows us how the victory is won. One of the first heads of state of Bangladesh, Sheik Mujib Rahman, said after his imprisonment that West Pakistan had been unable to dispirit him, because he had been willing and ready to die. A person's readiness to be defeated is often his greatest victory. Our vision of death is related to our vision of God. Fear of God, respect for Him as a result of our vision will exclude fear of man. When human beings try to exercise power over others, they try to imitate the power that actually belongs to God alone. People who do that try to be surrogate creators. All this is related to man's rebellion against God. The deeper our understanding of God, the smaller will be our fear of man. Knowing that God is the God of the living, not of the dead,¹ gives us a guarantee about our own resurrection. It is only in that light that we can see life on earth for what it is. The tree that is close to us is not bigger than the mountain in the distance, even though it covers the mountain from our eyes. God is the One who "can destroy both soul and body in hell."

It seems strange to us that Jesus puts soul and body on the same level. After all, we believe that the soul is immortal. That is the reason man cannot kill the soul. Yet, Jesus says that God can "destroy" the soul. The Greek word is *apokteino*, which does mean: "to slay." Although the word is used almost exclusively to signify physical death, the Apostle Paul uses it a few times in a different sense, as in: "For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment *put me to death*."² And: "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant- — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter *kills*, but the Spirit gives life."³ C. S. Lewis believes that in hell the fate of man consists in the fact that his soul decomposes, meaning that he loses the image of God in which he was created and becomes less human. Contrary to this, the soul of the redeemed will develop in the opposite direction and become more human as he becomes a clearer image of God. The image will begin to look more and more like the original, as the image of the doomed will become less and less recognizable.

Although Jesus mentions in passing the wrath of God, the main emphasis is on the compassion of our heavenly Father. Even though in the previous verse God is called "the One who can destroy," in v.29 God is referred to in all His glory as "your Father." This gives us a deeper insight into the character of God's reign. God is aware of and rules over the minutest details of creation. A sparrow is singled out among the millions of birds that fly around on earth. How many hairs are there on the heads of the trillions of people who live, who lived before and who will live? For people who have a relationship with such a God, accidents are impossible.

1. See Matt. 22:32.

2. Rom. 7:11

3. II Cor. 3:6

The Lord makes a simple comparison between people and sparrows and He concludes: "You are worth more than many sparrows!" These words sound so simple that we tend to pass them by without noticing them. "So don't be afraid" points to the fact that we often fear because we think we are worth less than the birds. Fellowship with God is always linked to our human dignity. God never tires of showing us who we are in His sight. Our first reaction in our encounter with God is the realization that we are sinful creatures, but that is not the end of our spiritual life. Awareness of sin is followed by a sense of being forgiven and the experience of cleansing. We acquire a new appreciation of life in the light of God. The fact is simply that we are more than the lilies and the birds. It is strange that there are not more people who experience this. Yet, we all know this to be true. People who overindulge their pets are in danger of failing to recognize the image of God in themselves and in others. I believe Jesus had a twinkle in His eyes when He spoke these words. He may have winked to Peter. The sparkle of humor is in the words "more than many." Jesus does not say how many because the number is infinite. The implication is that God is willing to give all the sparrows in the world in exchange for one human soul. The equation would be the same as asking how much is a diamond worth in cowry shells? The answer is both "many" and "none."

In vv.32 and 33, we come to the quintessence of Jesus' words. All this is said against the background of our witness of Jesus Christ. It is God's intent with us that we bear witness of His Son. That is the issue, both for the Lord and for the devil. All persecution and hardship is nothing but Satan's effort to make us keep our mouths shut. We have to keep our eyes on the real values. Our life is not our most valuable possession. God's lovingkindness is better than life.¹ He who chooses his own life instead of God loses both. He who chooses God instead of his own life gains both.

The miracle of v.32 is in the reciprocity of the confession. When we have discovered the truth, it is only natural for us to speak of it when the occasion presents itself. It seems hard to imagine that someone who really knows God, who is of sound mind, who knows what he does, would deny God. It is obvious that human cruelty can, through torture, bring a person to do what he does not want to do. But this is different from making a well-reasoned logical decision. What I cannot understand is that the Lord Jesus Himself would acknowledge my name in the presence of the Father; not only mention my name but "acknowledge me!" The Greek word used is *homologeō*, which has the meaning of confessing. We find the same word used in the story of Herod and Salome where we read: "he *promised with an oath* to give her whatever she asked."² The other side of the coin of our confession of Christ in this world of unrighteousness is so awesomely glorious that we can hardly imagine it. In John's Gospel Jesus says the same thing in different words: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."³ Will God Almighty get up from His throne and honor a human being, honor me? We do better not to dwell too much on that possibility. Our heart is not humble enough to follow our head!

We would rather pass by the negative part of the confession as expressed in v.33. But it states clearly that Jesus will deny knowing us if we deny to know Him. *The New International Version* uses the word "disown." The Greek word is *arneomai*, which can mean "to contradict," or "to reject." It is the same word that describes Peter's denial of Christ.⁴ As in Peter's case, it amounts to telling a lie. In practical terms it means that, when we are asked if we are a Christian, we say "no." But the denial Jesus speaks about here amounts to more than telling a lie about Him. When we disown Him before men, we say "no" to God. There is some consolation in Paul's statement on the subject: "Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."⁵

1. See Ps. 63:4.

2. Matt. 14:7

3. John 12:26

4. See Matt. 26:69,70.

5. II Tim. 2:11-13

The painful part in this is that we actually do speak the truth when we tell a lie about God. If we disown Him, we prove that we never knew Him. In the same sense of the word does the Lord speak the truth when He disowns us. In the general sense of the word God knows everything and everybody. But it is also true that God only knows those who love Him. As the Apostle Paul says: “The man who loves God is known by God.”¹ What Jesus had said earlier gives us a more complete picture of what is meant here. We read: “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!’”² The essence of our confession is in doing the will of the Father. The Lord will evaluate our motives. Not all verbal denial means that we disown Christ. It is possible that we act as if we speak the truth and yet we lie, but it is impossible to act as if we lie and yet speak the truth. What this means is that, as with all acts of sin, it begins with a letting go of the Lord in our heart. No one will say, at the spur of the moment and under the pressure of circumstances, “I don’t know Him,” without first having denied Him inwardly.

G. Campbell Morgan gives the following interesting division of this section:

1. The result of the disciples’ personal identification with the Lord Jesus – vv.24-28
2. The result of the disciples’ identification in their relationship with God – vv. 29-33
3. The result of the disciples’ identification with Jesus in their relationship with the outsiders to whom they were sent – vv.34-42.

This last section is where we find ourselves at present. It deals with more than only our relationship with unbelievers. It is actually difficult to give a clear description of the content of these verses in a few words. The paradox Jesus uses gives to the words a power that makes them penetrate deeply. We seldom hear these verses as texts for sermons preached. If we take them out of context they are inexplicable. Our first reaction upon hearing “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” is: “That can’t be true!” Jesus did come to bring peace, didn’t He? Peace on earth, peace with God! But the peace Jesus speaks of here pertains to the relationship of people with one another. But also in human society, Jesus brings peace, doesn’t He? The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”³ Yet Jesus states emphatically: “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” The Bible teaches clearly that there can only be peace with God if we allow ourselves to be reconciled with God through the forgiveness of our sins. There can only be peace in inter-human relations if both parties have been reconciled with God.

In the context of these verses, however, Jesus speaks about two kinds of people: those who know God and those who do not know Him. The coming of Christ has not eliminated this difference; it has rather become greater. Jesus’ coming does not offer a ceasefire to those who rebel against God. His coming demands our unconditional surrender. By choosing against God, people choose against their own life. Jesus came to open people’s eyes for the reality of sin. He came to bring a sword. The abscess of sin has been covered up by healthy-looking skin. The Lord is like a surgeon who opens a boil. The immediate result is an apparent worsening of the symptoms, but it is the only way to save the body.

Vv.35 and 36 are an almost literal quotation of Micah. We read there: “Do not trust a neighbor; put no confidence in a friend. Even with her who lies in your embrace be careful of your words. For a son dishonors his father, a daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man’s enemies are the members of his own household.”⁴ Jesus’ words here run parallel to what He said earlier: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents

1. I Cor. 8:3
2. Matt. 7:21-23
3. Eph. 2:14
4. Micah 7:5,6

and have them put to death.”¹ Jesus does not only say that it is inevitable that intimate relationships break up, but that the purpose of His coming is to bring about discord. This does not mean that father-son and mother-daughter relationships are sinful, but that Satan can penetrate such relationships and dig himself in. Not every family is a model of God’s love. What Jesus exposes here is the rot that is kept hidden behind the walls of family homes.

Jesus’ wording gives a clear picture of the situation. He does not say that the conflict is between father and son, but “a man against his father.” These are two adults. This is not a matter of rebellion against parental authority. Jesus does not give freedom to children to run away from home, not even if the issue is the Lord’s testimony. The split is between adults who ought to have an intimate relationship with each other because one is the father and the other the son. The same will apply to the mother-daughter relationship mentioned. The Greek word used is *thugater*, not *thugatrion*, which would denote a young girl. The Greek word used for daughter-in-law is *numphe*, which has the more intimate meaning of “bride.” It suggests the freshness of a newly entered marriage relationship. These terms accentuate the sharp and bitter character of the controversy.

The following verses reveal the essence of real love. The real meaning of love is defined in the command: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”² All other types of love occupy a second place. All forms of love that take up the first place and are not focused exclusively upon God are surrogate. When Jesus says to the church in Ephesus: “You have forsaken your first love,”³ He means that their love for God does no longer takes the first place in their lives. We have to be careful that we always love God more than anyone else, spouses and children included.

Words like these usually cause much misunderstanding. They evoke feelings of jealousy. In the situation Jesus depicts here such jealousy may play an important role. But to love human beings more than God amounts to idolatry. Healthy love, love without egoism, is only possible if we love God above all, with all we have and in all situations. A radiant example of this kind of love, that puts God above all else, is Hannah, who asked God for a son for the specific purpose of consecrating him to the Lord.⁴ What Jesus asks of us here is to have this normal love for God. Whoever loves a sinful human being more than the perfect person does not qualify for perfection! Jesus’ words are put in the negative here; try to turn them around and make them positive! Anyone who loves the LORD his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength is worthy of Him. The Gospel of John has much to say about that kind of love for the Lord.

The context of Jesus’ words indicates that the topic is particularly our relationship to our loved ones amidst persecution. Everything, even our own life, comes in perspective when it is put to the test. Jesus puts His own death on the cross as an example for all who want to follow Him. For us who look at the crucifixion as a historic event, these words have become too familiar. It is difficult for us to imagine what impression they must have made upon the people of that day. We look at the cross in terms of atonement and redemption. For the people of Jesus’ time, the cross was a means of executing criminals, not people who were innocent and were condemned wrongly, but of guilty ones. Jesus’ identification with that category of people must have been particularly shocking. We must hear Jesus’ words as they sounded at that time. That gives us a picture of a right punishment of sin.

The whole topic of vv.34-39 is more about sin than a casual reading would give us to understand. It is of great importance for us to understand that taking up our cross is what we deserve. We are not condemned unjustly. If we only look at ourselves as respectable persons, as we may seem to be outwardly, we would never come to the conclusion Jesus forces here upon us. We would never believe that God’s verdict for us is right. But if our eyes are open to the perverse possibilities within us, if we begin to realize

1. Matt. 10:21

2. Deut. 6:5

3. Rev. 2:4

4. I Sam. 1:10,11

what potential of evil we harbor in our heart as soon as we are stripped of respectability, we must agree with God's judgment on our "I." It is clear from Jesus' statement about our crucifixion that we must be ready to acknowledge our sin before God and not hide behind a mask of false righteousness.

Our misunderstanding about the meaning of these words is also evinced in what we consider to be the things in our life that represent "the cross." We call "a cross" that what is not. In one old formula pronounced at baptism in the Christian Reformed Church in which I grew up in the Netherlands, the words were used: "in order that he (or she), daily following Christ, may joyfully carry his (or her) cross." We cannot call a cross all adverse things that happen to us in life. There are many things that befall us that we try to shake off. But Jesus does not speak of things that fall upon us, He commands us to take up our cross. It is our attitude toward our circumstances that makes our experience of them into an imposition or into a cross we take up. Many people speak about a cross that they carry while groaning and moaning. This proves that they have not seen their cross as something they took up themselves. There has never been a decision of the will that faces adverse circumstances in the Name of the Lord. We have the option to transform our circumstances and make them our cross by consciously accepting them as the will of the Lord for our life. Otherwise there can be no joyful carrying of our cross.

There is, obviously, nothing attractive in the cross itself. A person who takes up his cross without any vision of purpose is not in his right mind. Our Lord did not do this Himself either. We read in Hebrews: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."¹ Without the hope of glory, our circumstances and adversities will merely be enemies that are out to bring us down. That is not carrying our cross in the biblical sense of the word.

Our hope consists in the fact that the Lord Jesus took His cross upon Him and passed through the dark tunnel of death, coming out on the other end. The accent is on our following Him in this. The strange conclusion in all of this is again that, if we understand that God's condemnation of our life is just, if we accept and take up what He assigns us, if we go where Jesus went, (He says) we are worthy of Him!

Our acknowledgment of who we are and our insight into God's verdict upon us and upon the world in which we live, is much more important than we realize. It is the foundation of our life as a Christian. It was the principle upon which Jesus built His life on earth. Although He was without sin in this world, He came as the Lamb of God. He made no effort to justify Himself; He never contested the verdict. It is important for us to understand this, because otherwise we will never be able to follow the Lord as we should.

Evidently, Jesus repeated these words about taking up the cross, self-denial and following Him several times at different occasions.² There are slight differences in wording, as in "whoever finds his life ..." and "whoever wants to save his life..." We are all going through life, looking for ourselves, trying to find our identity, our own life. That is the particularly the challenge and danger of youth. We think that we will find happiness and joy of living if we can only find ourselves. There are in us enough traces left of the image of God to make each of us a fascinating personality. But, however interesting our personality may be, without fellowship with God, we are like an unfertilized egg under a chicken; it is doomed to rot. He who only finds himself has, evidently only been looking for self. But he who, knowing or imagining who he is, gives himself to the living God enters into the real mode of living. It is not objectionable if we give ourselves to a good cause. For some of us the thought to give ourselves for our country, for science, or for whatever good cause there may be, may have some attraction. God appears to some people as the great attractive One. He who loses himself in Him finds life of which any other form of existence is but a shadow. He who only discovers himself, without discovering God, does not know himself at all. He who gets to know and love God will be known by Him and begins to understand some of the mysteries of the life that is within him.

1. Heb. 12:2

2. See Matt. 16:24,25.

The context suggests that Jesus does not promise that, by taking up our cross and denying ourselves we would escape persecution. The text may seem to say so, but the way in which Jesus says these things indicates that the first step toward death is taken before physical death comes. Dying is the fruit of the seed of surrender that may have been planted years earlier. The actual loss of life occurs when we place ourselves in the hand of God. Physical death is the end of a process of ripening.

If we give to God that which we do not value, we cannot say that we really sacrifice something. If we believe that we are not worth anything to begin with, giving ourselves to God seems meaningless. There must be a certain way of finding our life, before we can lose ourselves in Him. Jesus exemplified this in His own baptism. He knew who He was and what His calling was. For Him baptism was the seal of His decision of complete surrender to the Father. It was His way of saying: “Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll.”¹

The point here is that we lose our life for His sake. We are not asked to throw away our life but to lose it in our search for something greater. “A hart in search of higher good, hit by the arrows of God’s love, I bled to death in the arms of my Father.” He who really loses his life in this manner, discovers that he hasn’t lost anything at all. If dust and energy cannot be lost in this universe in which we live, how could soul, spirit and personality disintegrate? As far as our losing our life is concerned, we may think that the question is “to be or not to be,” but that turns out not to be the case at all. It is not a crisis of existing or not existing but of holding on or letting go. Our life is in whose hands, ours or His? It is always a matter of the right to choose, not the right to exist. It is a liberating experience to discover that life continues to exist after we have surrendered it to God. From being uprooted it has become rooted again.

Between the first finding of life in v.39 and the second finding is the experience of dying. In that manner Abraham gave up Isaac in order to receive him in a deeper sense than before. In that sense Jesus could say: “I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!”² We can read the amazement of the Lord Himself in the words “and behold.” Finding our life in the Lord is a find that leaves our earlier, hesitant search for our identity way back in the shadow.

In the last verses of this commission, 42-44, Jesus describes the nature of the person who has found his life in the Lord. First of all, he is an ambassador. He represents the Kingdom of God. Jesus backs him up completely, so much so that receiving that person is tantamount to receiving Christ Himself and the Father. This means that we receive a powerful mandate from the Lord. It seems almost embarrassing that the Lord puts so much confidence in us. This mandate cannot be separated from the losing of our life. There are two sides to this matter. Not only must we be careful that people can receive us as Christ’s ambassadors, we must also be ready to receive those, who give evidence of Christ’s new life in them, as Christ’s ambassadors. The Lord wants us to mutually respect one another.

Furthermore, the Lord explains how this receiving must be done. In the preceding verses the topic was the person, here it is the way of the person. The Lord makes a distinction between a prophet and a righteous man. It is obvious that this distinction is not absolute. We cannot say that one is a prophet and the other is righteous. One cannot be a true prophet without righteousness. But one can be righteous without having the gift of prophecy. A prophet who does not have righteousness is not worth receiving. The point here is that we recognize the gift and the fruit. Prophecy is the gift and righteousness is the fruit. We can probably see the gift of prophecy as representative of all spiritual gifts. In that case, righteousness would be symbolic of all the fruit of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life. The Lord expects us to recognize the gifts and the fruits in the lives of others and that we receive others on the basis of that recognition. Receiving here stands for the whole of hospitality: a bed, food, and whatever help is needed. That is why there is mention of a reward in these verses.

1. Ps. 40:7

2. Rev. 1:18

In the third part Jesus gives the reason for the reception: “because he is my disciple.” The point of the text, however, is not the amount of help, the abundance or the luxury involved, but the motivation. A cup of cold water will do, if the incentive for giving is the fact that the person is a disciple of the Lord.

Looking at the last three verses as a whole, we see that the Lord puts His words in an larger perspective. “He who receives you” pertains to the twelve disciples. “A prophet” and “a righteous man” widens the circle to the next generation. And the “disciple” is depicted in the vaguest lines. There is also a difference in the way these people are being received. Receiving the apostles amounted to a clear and conscious reception of the Lord, honoring the Father and the Son. Recognizing someone as a prophet or a righteous person is drawn in lines that are less clear. It is as the recognition of Jesus by the man who was born blind, who said: “He is a prophet.”¹ Receiving a disciple suggests a period of confusion, maybe persecution. One gives a cup of cold water to a refugee. Giving it to an ambassador might amount to an insult. Finally, the reward is left vague as if it is the least important of all. The reward of the person who receives the ambassador is the greatest of all: God is his reward! There is nothing beyond that! Receiving the Son and the Father is the fulfillment of all a human being can wish for. The reward of the prophet and the righteous is even less. The Lord does not spell out what the compensation would be. In the light of what precedes we assume that, if receiving of the Lord means fellowship with the Father, we are enriched by an encounter with a prophet and a righteous person. It is an honor to rub shoulders with an honorable person.

Yet, there seems to be a greater promise in this than have fellowship with other human beings. The reward of the prophet will ultimately also be the fullness of fellowship with God Himself. Via the person sent by God we are led to Him who did the sending.

As far as time and spiritual level is concerned, the reward for giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty disciple is left in the vaguest of terms. The awareness of who does the sending is kept unclear. There is a sense of pity for a person in need. This is a basic instinct. But it leads eventually to being filled with the presence of the Lord Himself, although that is in the distance. It is farther from the Lord but closer to us. That is where most of us begin. Unfortunately many never get beyond this point. An important factor in our spiritual growth is the way we look upon our fellowmen. What we see in our neighbor determines how our personal fellowship with the Lord will be. In this case what the reward is not even mentioned. It is only stated that there will be one. As we advance with the Lord our comprehension will become clearer. The Lord does not bother to give any more clarification if we don't bother to get to know Him better. The only thing He mentions is that there are rewards. He wants us to believe His Word. As we build our life upon the promises of God, we will draw closer to Him. Our final destination is the Father Himself, which means being filled with the Holy Spirit.

This ends this chapter which speaks about the laborer and the harvest.

1. John 9:17

Part Four: The Progressive Rejection of the King (11:2—16:12)

I. The Beginning of Rejection 11:2-30

2 *When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples*

3 *to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"*

4 *Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:*

5 *The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*

6 *Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*

7 *As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?*

8 *If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.*

9 *Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*

10 *This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'*

11 *I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

12 *From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.*

13 *For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.*

14 *And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.*

15 *He who has ears, let him hear.*

16 *"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:*

17 *"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'*

18 *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'*

19 *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."*

20 *Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent.*

21 *"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*

22 *But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.*

23 *And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.*

24 *But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."*

25 *At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.*

26 *Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.*

27 *"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

28 *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*

29 *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

30 *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

The first one to put his doubts into words is John the Baptist. Yet, the topic of vv.2-15 is not what John says and thinks but what Jesus says in reply. Vv.16-24 give Jesus' words to the crowd that was there to hear Jesus speak. They report particularly what He said about the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. If there is any chronological value in Matthew's reporting of events it suggests that Jesus spoke these words in the vicinity of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. Luke's Gospel states that, previous to the scene here, Jesus raised a young man from Nain from the dead.¹ Nain was in the area of those cities.

John the Baptist had come to prepare the coming of Jesus. He knew that. He was aware of the fact that the merit of his own ministry was in the fact that Jesus would come. The tragedy of John's life was that when Jesus did come, John did not recognize Him. He failed to know himself and the value of his own work! There is a shrill disparity between John's testimony about Jesus, immediately after the Lord's baptism in the River Jordan and the dark doubts that assailed him while in prison. At that time he had said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." And: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 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.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."² And later John testified: "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less. The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."³

It is tempting to put John's doubts on account of his imprisonment. But Jesus' comment: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" disturbs the peace of our logical conclusion. The Greek text uses the word *skandalizo*, from which our word "scandalize" is derived. In the original it refers to apostasy. Our circumstances are never the root of our problems. The fact that John was "scandalized" by Jesus would probably have remained repressed under more favorable circumstances, but it would have been there. A fact that is recognized or one that is repressed makes no difference in the principle of the fact. What makes John's problem such a pertinent matter for us is that for all of us, the fulfillment of our life is related to our vision of the Lord Jesus. From the very beginning, John had been willing to sacrifice himself to a goal that was worth the sacrifice. Such an attitude can give great value to a life and provide deep satisfaction. But all of a sudden all of this became senseless to John because he could not see the totality of the goal.

Jesus lived and worked as a local evangelist, more or less in the same manner as John had lived himself. John seems to have projected his self-criticism or self-evaluation upon Jesus and he comes to the conclusion that God deceived him. The bitterness of this conclusion probably consists in the fact that, deep in his heart, he always thought that it would end this way. Man has this invincible suspicion that God cannot be trusted.

In a combination of suspicion and prejudice, John must have made for himself a detailed image of what the Messiah ought to be. And Jesus did not fit the image. We cannot make God fit in our picture frame; He created us in His image, not the other way around! God has the bad habit of not being what we want Him

1. Luke 7:11-16

2. See John 1:29-34.

3. See John 3:27-36.

to be. G. Campbell Morgan, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, is probably correct when He writes that Jesus, in John's opinion, ought to have meted out judgment upon the iniquity of His day. That is what John would have done. Jesus' preaching of the Gospel did not fit well in John's character.

In His answer to John, Jesus tries to open his eyes to the reality of the present. Very few people live in the present and even fewer can see today for what it really is. Only Jesus was always able to judge every moment in the light of eternity. John had heard what was going on with and around Jesus. That was why he sent his disciples to Jesus with his question. In His answer, Jesus simply repeats what John already knew. It is as if the Lord wants to say: "Think about the meaning and value of what is going on." Jesus often answers our question by simply repeating them back to us. He wants us to answer our own questions, or rather that we become aware of what we knew already. We may call ourselves realists, but we rarely understand reality and we interpret poorly what we see and hear. It is not for God to change, but for our eyes to be opened for who He is and what He does. If we abandon our attitude of resistance and open our heart in love for God, we will receive His revelation. We will realize that it is not our circumstances that must change, be we must.

Jesus never says in so many words: "I am He!" He wants John to draw his own conclusions, which are based, not upon subjective emotions, but upon insight that comes from the knowledge of the Word of God. Jesus' answer is a paraphrase of Isaiah's words: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped," and: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."¹ Jesus wants John to answer his own question, but He gives them all the material needed to come to the correct deduction. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."² She had no other way to come to this understanding. But John had Moses and the prophets. It is interesting that Jesus specifically quotes to John from Isaiah, since John had quoted Isaiah when he said about himself "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'"³ So it has come to a full circle, from Isaiah to John to Jesus and back to Isaiah. With this answer, Jesus gives to John a double affirmation.

This is one of the rare instances in which Jesus explains the miracles He performs in the light of His messianic mission. But here also this is not done in plain language. With most of the miracles of healing Jesus emphasizes the faith factor, either His faith of the faith of the person who is healed.⁴ This may sound contradictory to us. We tend to think that Jesus performed miracles because He is the Son of God. Or, if He did them as man, He did it in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the faith that was in Him. But one must exclude the other. It is true that Jesus says nowhere that He healed people because He was the Word of God incarnate. He always makes clear that genuine faith in God will produce miracles. This makes us conclude that such was the case in His own life.

The fact that the power of God could reveal itself through Jesus without any resistance is proof of the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. There is no other explanation for His purity of heart, His victory over all circumstances, His perfection. Everything He does and says testifies to the fact that the Father is well pleased. It cannot be but He is the one to come; how could we expect someone else?

In v.7 and following verses Jesus turns to the crowd and comments to them on the person of John. The people who were with Jesus used to be those who followed John. We could paraphrase Jesus' question "What did you go out into the desert to see?" with: "What inspired you do it?" The fact that a large number of people went into the desert proves their hunger for the Word of God. It also shows their belief that John had that Word. We must pause to see how abnormal that situation was. A preacher who has something to say usually goes to the people. We read nowhere that John ever went to Jerusalem to preach. We suppose that

1. Isa. 35:5; 61:1

2. John 4:26

3. Isa. 40:3

4. See Mark 9:23,24; 10:52; 11:20-24.

someone met John “accidentally” in the desert and was impressed by the conversation he had with that hermit. He must have told the people in the city that there was a prophet in the desert. It may have started with small groups going to the desert to check it out. At the end John drew a crowd that would have been impossible to gather in the city. This put John in a position in which he could preach the truth without any limitations. Ralph Emerson is credited with saying: “If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap, than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.” John the Baptist fit that picture; he had the Word of God.

If John had preached the same message to the teachers of the law and Pharisees in Jerusalem that he preached in the desert, he would have been taken to task. But now, the Pharisees had come to him to hear him pronounce God’s judgment upon them. Those who did not want to hear would not come. Many may have come out of curiosity. The early ones were probably those that had come because of their hunger for the Word of God. John was in an ideal position. People did not go to the desert to see what grew there, but because deep inside they were hungry. It is true that man does not live by bread alone. For some this spiritual hunger will demonstrate itself only in a restless heart, in seeking of surrogates, some refined, some gross. We can hardly put Bach and basketball under the same denominator, yet both can be an indicator that man searches for satisfaction of his deepest desires.

The “reed swayed by the wind” (v.7) symbolizes man’s search for the highest good. The “fine clothes” speak of a disguise that can be seen through. The people knew that what John had was the Word of God, even though he was dressed as a beggar and lived as a homeless person. Even as riches and affluence cannot cover up the emptiness of the human soul, so can poverty and simplicity not cover up the riches of God. We all know this, unless we are in the process of camouflaging our own inner poverty.

This means that no one who heard Jesus had an excuse for not recognizing Him as the Messiah. That the Lord of glory was born in a stable and walking about in Israel as a rabbi could not cover up the fact that He was the living Word of God.

Those who heard John preach concluded that he was a prophet. The sensation of his ministry was accentuated by the fact that John was the first prophet in 400 years who brought the Word of God with such power. The last person through whom God had spoken directly had been Malachi.

There may have been a romantic aura people weaved around John that diminished the reality of his work. The preaching of a prophet can provide a very spiritual and convenient cover for us to hide from God. The same factors God uses to draw a person to Himself can be used by man as a pretext to remain hidden from God. When Moses had an audience with God, God said to him: “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.” And: “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord’s presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.”¹ Our admiration of a prophet may give us the feeling that we are under no obligation to hear and obey God’s voice personally.

Jesus says about John that he was “more than a prophet.” The question is, did the people want someone who was more than a prophet? John was more than other prophets, not because of his own personality but because he was closest to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is interesting to look at both facets of John’s ministry. We have John’s own evaluation of his relationship to Christ. He was deeply aware of his

1. Ex. 33:21-23; 34:29-35

own insignificance. He considered himself to be less than Christ's slave, unworthy for any comparison with the Lord. Jesus, comparing John with other prophets, concludes that, because of John's humility he was greater than any of the others.

This seems to be a valid and eternal principle of evaluation. Our human tendency is to compare ourselves with other people. Since we choose with whom we want to compare ourselves, we usually come up with a favorable self-image. To come to a valid assessment of ourselves we always must compare ourselves with the eternal and absolute standards of God's character.

A second principle that the Bible teaches as rule of life is demonstrated in John's relationship with Jesus. John saw himself as the Lord's slave, but Jesus treated him as friend. Similarly, Jesus does not call us slave. He says: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."¹ For us, however, it is safe to consider ourselves to be God's slaves of righteousness, as Paul writes in Romans: "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness."² We do well to take Jesus' advice: "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.'"³

Quoting from Malachi: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you,"⁴ Jesus does not only say plainly who John is, but He also reveals indirectly who He is Himself. John's greatness consisted in the greatness of Him he proclaimed. This may have been one of the reasons of John's sad doubts that the people wanted to listen to the herald but had no interest in the One whose coming he announced. We all know that when an envoy becomes more important than the message he brings, he has failed in his task.

Jesus' next pronouncement raises some questions. "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." The phrase "those born of women" places John's greatness on the level of the natural. "Natural" here is not the opposite of spiritual. It does not mean: "separated from God" or outside the sphere of influence of the Holy Spirit. We read about John's mother Elisabeth that she was filled with the Holy Spirit and that the unborn baby leaped in her womb when Mary came to visit her.⁵ But John lived in an Old Testament dispensation. He stood on the threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven but without being able to enter it. In John, fellowship with God, personal holiness and fearless testimony of Old Testament truth reached its highest point. But the dividing line between the old and the new covenant is drawn in John. Here begins a new dispensation of forgiveness and fullness of the Holy Spirit. The difference between the Old and the New Testament is demonstrated best in the difference of meaning between the Hebrew and Greek words for forgiveness.

The Hebrew word *kaphar* occurs first in God's instructions to Noah to build an ark, where it simply means "to cover." We read: "So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and *coat it with pitch* inside and out."⁶ But the word is more often used in the meaning of making atonement, as in:

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1. John 15:15
 2. Rom. 6:16-19
 3. Luke 17:10
 4. Mal. 3:1
 5. See Luke 1:42.

“They are to eat these offerings by which *atonement* was made for their ordination and consecration. But no one else may eat them, because they are sacred.”¹ The New Testament Greek word *katharizo* means: “to cleanse.” As such we find it in the verse: “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, *cleanse* our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”² In the Old Covenant the sin of the people was covered up by animal blood, but it remained; in the New Covenant the blood of Jesus Christ removes sin and cleanses the heart.

Similarly, there is a fundamental difference between being filled with the Holy Spirit before Pentecost and after. The fact that the Spirit of God would make people into His temple and bind them organically together into the body of Christ was impossible before Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. In the line of those who sought God and longed for salvation, John had reached the highest level. But in comparison with the simple individual who experienced this salvation in the Lord Jesus, John’s experience was less. To find is more than to seek and arriving is more than being on the way.

At this point in the text, Matthew’s account begins to differ from Luke’s. Matthew reports what Jesus says about the people’s reaction to John’s ministry of preaching about the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Greek text of v.12 reads literally: “And from the days of John the Baptist the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” *The New International Version* reads it: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.” *The New King James Version*: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” *The Living Bible*: “And from the time John the Baptist began preaching and baptizing until now, ardent multitudes have been crowding toward the Kingdom of Heaven.” *The New Living Translation*: “And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it.” The Greek word *biazo*, “to force,” can be taken to be either in the reflective or the passive mode. It can be read as violence people do to the kingdom or to themselves. In Luke’s Gospel, the verb is in the middle voice, in Matthew it is passive. *Vincent’s Word Studies* suggests in a footnote that Jesus uses the terms to depict the intense excitement John’s ministry generated; that it expressed the expectation of the masses for the promised Messiah/King. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Our Lord is describing the energy with which some souls are pressing in, and urging the need of such energy if salvation is to be obtained.” It has also been suggested that the words refer to John the Baptist’s believe that Jesus ought to have taken the law in His own hands and that He ought to have used other and more forceful means to establish His kingdom.

The first and foremost conclusion we can draw from all of the above is that we are dealing with a verse that is difficult to interpret. We ought to approach it with caution. The observation can be made that violence is nowhere in *The New Testament* a characteristic of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus’ parables about the kingdom in a later chapter will shed some more light on the problem. The prophet Zechariah uses the concept of human strength and God’s power as opposites in the verse: “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”³ The Apostle Paul, in Romans, says about the kingdom of God: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”⁴

6. Gen. 6:14

1. Ex. 29:33

2. Heb. 9:13,14

3. Zech. 4:6

4. Rom. 14:17

Looking at the context, we see that Jesus spoke about the natural factors that influenced John's ministry. He was "among those born of women." It could be that John's question marks regarding the messianic character of Jesus' coming in the world was the fact that violence was totally absent. John had said about Jesus' coming: "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."¹ This would point in the direction of violence of sorts. It speaks of overpowering judgment. On the other hand, John said about the Lord: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"² One of the factors here that characterizes violence is what Paul calls "the flesh." People tried to force their way into the kingdom without following the way of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. In that way the kingdom would be violated by people who refused to give up their sinful nature and yet wanted to enter.

Yet, it does not seem that Jesus looked only at man's carnal endeavor to take heaven by storm. There is undoubtedly a hidden reference to demonic resistance against the reign of God. Satan is the instigator here as he was in the construction of the tower of Babel. He also sometimes attacks openly. Jesus must have experienced a constant bombardment by demonic forces. These attacks would show themselves in the influx of the masses of people who were only interested in sensational miracles, as well as in the rock hard unbelief of the Pharisees. It must not amaze us that He says: "From the days of John the Baptist until now..." Before the coming of John the Baptist there was no mention of the coming of the Kingdom. Both Matthew and Luke mention resistance against John and Jesus' preaching. Luke reports: "All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John."³ Jesus says about them: "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."⁴ These are people who are unrighteous but pass themselves for righteous. They want to enter the Kingdom without conversion and regeneration.

The whole concept Jesus speaks about must have been difficult to understand for the people of that time. Jesus told them that they lived in the days in which the Old Testament was being fulfilled. No one at that time understood the times, except Jesus. Sin makes blind for the realities of life. Only He who knew no sin could look beyond the limitations of time and says what time it was. It is obvious that Jesus was conscious of being the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He knew that the Old Testament prophecies found their fulfillment in Him. His complete openness for the Word of God gave Him this understanding. Such understanding cannot be achieved apart from a life in intimate fellowship with God. If, therefore, He clearly states that John is the one foretold by the prophet Malachi as the coming Elijah, He asks the audience if they are ready to accept this. "And if you are willing to accept it" does not refer to an opportunity but to a choice.

We find the first part of vv.16-24, with the same context in Luke's Gospel.⁵ Jesus pronounces judgment upon the generation of His day. Every century has its own characteristics, its own generation, and its own peculiarities. We are again confronted with the fact that Jesus is able to judge with perfect correctness the people and age in which He lived on earth. People are generally not able to bring into focus the happenings and development of way of thinking of the time and generation of which they are a part. We cannot even see how the century in which we live evolved from the previous one. In order to depict the spirit of His day, Jesus uses some striking images.

We observe that the explanations given seem to be the opposite of the content; it is the playfulness of the parable. Jesus says that the people of His time were like children who play, at the same time "a party"

1. Matt. 3:12

2. John 1:29

3. Luke 7:29,30

4. Luke 16:15

5. See Luke 7:31-35.

and “a funeral.” And while doing so they complain that the others do not play with them. A straight-line application would be to say that John and Jesus are being accused of not conforming to the spirit of the age. But we do not read that here. Strangely enough, in the practical application of the image, Jesus is the flute player. He came “eating and drinking.” John was the one who sang a dirge, the one who did not eat and drink. In the eyes of the people Jesus and John are the “spoil-sports.” This accusation still stands today. Everyone who wants to follow the Lord is being accused of going through life without enjoying it. Or, if we show signs of rejoicing in the Lord, people suspect that the suffering of our fellowmen leaves us untouched.

Jesus reverses the roles here. Who is the one who does not enjoy life, the person who perishes in his sins or the one who surrenders to the source of life? Who is untouched by the suffering of others, the unconverted egoist or the person who goes and testifies of the love of God? So Christ reversed the roles, but the image still stands. Jesus plays the flute and John sings dirges but the people are too seriously minded to join in. They do not want to become children and exchange the realities of life for a play. Yet, that is what Jesus wants us to do. If we understand Jesus’ words correctly, in the reversal of the image, He says: “You are what you accuse others to be.” The Apostle Paul would later say about the Christian life: “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.”¹ In the vision in which Isaiah sees God surrounded by singing and dancing seraphim, we see a joyful play that corresponds much better to the character of God than we often think. To be playful with the devil would be fatal. But life with the Lord has all the elements of play in it: it is relaxing, joyful, honest, expressive, growth stimulating.

We read nowhere else in Scripture that John was accused of being demon possessed, except in this passage. The Pharisees would fling the same accusation at Jesus’ head at a later time.² This makes us believe that the Pharisees also made the accusation of John. We read in an earlier chapter that the Pharisees objected to Jesus participating in a feast with tax collectors and sinners.³ That is probably the occasion Jesus refers to here.

Then Jesus asks the question as to who is wise. The Pharisees and doctors of the law passed themselves for being the wise ones. They base their accusations on their wisdom. The Lord implies that wisdom that does not bear fruit is no wisdom at all. Wisdom gives birth to children. Luke’s Gospel states: “But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”⁴ With all their learning and theological knowledge no people were being converted. But when people were being converted under John’s preached, they said this was the work of the devil.

There was a wall of separation between the Pharisees and doctors of the law on the one hand and the tax collectors and sinners on the other. When Jesus broke down that wall and began to visit the other group, He was being accused of doing it from impure motives. Jesus justifies the purity of His acts in His wisdom. In His acts He proves Himself to be God’s wisdom incarnated. He is *The Book of Proverbs* in the flesh.⁵ We can draw many parallel lines from the incident reported here, throughout all of church history, up to the present day.

Following this, the Lord reproaches the cities in which He preached that they had not repented. In Luke’s Gospel these words are connected with the sending out of the seventy witnesses.⁶ In Matthew the connection seems to be the sending out of the twelve apostles. This makes us think that there must have been several evangelistic campaigns, the first one probably with the twelve and the others with much larger teams. Even for that day, these must have been crusades of great proportions.

1. I Cor. 5:8

2. See Matt. 12:24.

3. Matt. 9:10-13

4. Luke 7:35

5. See Prov. 8:22-36.

6. See Luke 10:1-15.

The cities in which Jesus' miracles were performed remained spiritually untouched. This does not mean that there were no converts at all, but the masses were not brought to repentance by the proofs of authenticity of the messages preached. This is illustrated clearly in the miracle John reports when Jesus revisited Cana. We read: "Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. 'Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,' Jesus told him, 'you will never believe.' The royal official said, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus replied, 'You may go. Your son will live.' The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, 'The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour.' Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he and all his household believed. This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee."¹ That scene is typical of the people's lust for sensation and Jesus' desire to see people being renewed in their heart. When God pronounces His judgment over our life, He will not ask if we experienced divine healing, but if we have renounced sin and have loved Him.

People usually do not come to faith in God because they are convinced by the truth. That fact is demonstrated in these verses. Otherwise Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum would have become the spiritual capitals of this world. Lack of eternal life is not by lack of knowledge. A person does not sin because he does not know any better, but because he does not want anything else. In some case a person will even hide behind the truth he possesses. Knowledge of the Gospel can turn a life into a fortress that even the Lord cannot demolish. That is why Jesus launches the attack from the inside. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin in the deep recesses of the heart. Every stronghold that is pulled down is torn down from the inside out. The fact that Jesus reproaches these cities that they had not repented suggests that repentance would have been a reasonable reaction to seeing the miracle the Lord performed there. Why do people think of themselves as reasonable when they do not act reasonably? One of my relatives once told me that he did not believe in God because he was an intellectual! He did not realize that his intelligence and reason was limited to his field of mathematics. His lifestyle gave little justification to the label "intellectual."

The people of Galilee were probably proud of their orthodoxy and expectation of the Messiah's coming. It was not only to their shame but to their ruin that they did not recognize Him when He came. Even when He identified Himself with extraordinary miracles, they remained untouched. People have the ability to deceive themselves in the way they think, in what they confess and what they do. One can confess the truth with his mouth and see it in his mind, and yet with the will and the soul, continue to live a lie. Every unconverted person is inconsistent in this way. A holy life is a life that constantly draws the consequences of its surrender. It is very dangerous to live close to the truth and not accept it. "Woe" is one of the most terrible words in the Bible. If God pronounces that word over us, the shadow of judgment and death fall upon us. Salvation is only possible if, like Isaiah, we pronounce the "woe" upon ourselves.²

When Jesus says "woe to you" He represents the third party in the conflict between God and man. The judge pronounces the verdict and the convicted person bursts out in "woe is me" as an expression of self-pity. Here, in the mouth of Jesus, it becomes a word of compassion. Jesus is not threatening. He is not judgmental, but He shows the consequences of people's attitude. He knows what happens when people go against the character of God. He sees what the people themselves do not see. His "woe to you," therefore, is a warning. We often forget that everything in creation obeys certain fixed laws. It is impossible for man to sin and not suffer the consequences. Even worse, if we close the only door of escape, "woe" is the only thing remaining. What made the condition of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum so desperate was not that they had sinned but that they imagined that they did not need salvation.

1. John 4:46-54

2. Isa. 6:5

The Lord draws a comparison from these cities in Israel to Tyre and Sidon. The Bible gives sparse information about the judgment that hit those cities and that primarily in the form of a prophecy.¹ We do not read how those prophecies were fulfilled. In the time of Israel and Judah's captivity, those cities must have flourished and occupied a domineering position in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The fact that those cities that had been symbols of a spirit of commercialism and human initiative, had been reduced to naked rock where fishermen dried their nets, must have made an undeletable impression upon following generations. If five centuries later Jesus takes these cases as an example of judgment executed, everybody seems to understand what He speaks about.

Jesus' words refer to that which is a mystery to us. We may suppose that Jesus spoke in an assuming way here. That being the case, this is not a prophetic statement about a fact that took place in ancient history. But if we take this statement as a prophecy, we ask why the miracles of Capernaum had not been performed in the ancient cities. We will never know the answer to this. God's goodness and love will always overshadow such events for our comfort and consolation. There must have been facts in play about the fullness of time that had not yet come and that there are some pieces of evidence that put limits on God's omnipotence, which is hard for us to understand, but what we will have to accept. Omnipotence is subject to the laws of the Almighty. What Jesus is saying here is that gross sin and human egoism is easier to overcome by means of manifestation of divine power than pious self-satisfaction.

Evidently, judgment that is executed in this world within the framework of life on earth is a shadow of the final judgment. If there were only one judgment, there would be no point in referring to Tyre and Sidon in connection with "the day of judgment."

Capernaum had been lifted up to the skies because that is where Jesus had made His home. We read in Mark's Gospel: "A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home."² That fact had constituted for a time the greatest glory that could befall any city on earth. Sadly, the people of Capernaum were never aware of this. "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."³ But the people preferred to live in darkness.

Jesus puts it in the form of a question, as something to happen in the future: "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies?" Such may have been the expectation of the people of Capernaum. They knew the verses in Isaiah from which Matthew had quoted: "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan," and they applied them to themselves. But when the light dawned, they did not see it; they continued in their expectation. In this they became a symbol of Israel at large, which (at least in part) continues to wait for the coming of their Messiah. The Lord makes it clear that they will be disappointed in this hope. Some believe that at the time of Christ's return Israel as a whole, whether forced or automatically, will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. This verse, however, clarifies that there cannot be any acknowledgment without confession and repentance.

The judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is much better known than that of Tyre and Sidon. Yet, from the viewpoint of importance in world history, it must have occupied a greater place than we know. The fact that Bible reports the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in greater detail is due to the fact that there was one righteous person, Lot, living in Sodom. For God, one righteous person carries more weight than a thousand wicked.

It is against this background that the Lord gives the moving invitation of vv.25-27. Luke adds to this that Jesus was, at this point, "full of joy through the Holy Spirit."⁴ Yet, the warning to Korazin,

1. See Isa. 23 and Ezek. 26.

2. Mark 2:1

3. Mat. 4:15-16

Bethsaida and Capernaum must have affected the Lord deeply. This joy, following immediately upon His heaviness of heart, is therefore even more remarkable. It is good to be moved with the fate of this world. But if we lose the joy of the Lord in the process, it means that the devil has won. Here, Jesus shows that He is victorious. He gives again proof of the fact that, as a human being, He was able to perfectly evaluate every situation in which He found Himself. In the midst of the confused reactions of His contemporaries, He gives the simplest formula that governs the spiritual welfare of mankind. In this plain reduction, He rejoices. Truth is always simple. "Rejoice in the Lord always!"

To be filled with joy through the Holy Spirit is different from the joy a person experiences as a reaction to certain favorable circumstances. Human joy is always temporary because circumstances that govern it change. The joy of the Holy Spirit is not based on circumstances but on facts, facts of salvation. The Bible always establishes a relationship between joy and certain landmarks in the history of salvation. At the birth of Christ, the angel said to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid. 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."¹ And in *The Parable of the Lost Coin*, Jesus says: "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."² To the disciples, He said: "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."³ And when the gentiles in Antioch accepted the Gospel, we read: "The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."⁴ That joy is not linked to changing circumstances but to definite acts of God. The joy of the Holy Spirit comes from the fact that God reveals certain essential facts about the kingdom to simple people.

Jesus pronounces here a prayer of thanksgiving. This means that a blessing has been given. This is the other side of the coin. On the reverse there was the reproach to the cities that did not want to repent, but on this side we see that all this is part of God's planned strategy. He purposely kept hidden what people did not want to know. This may be hard for us to grasp. We learned already that the people of Galilee were held responsible for their refusal to believe. Here we enter the territory of God's decree, which to us is a mystery. But Jesus, who knows what is inside the mystery, who is in a position to evaluate correctly the truth and wisdom of God's acts, rejoices in the Holy Spirit and thanks the Father. We must pay close attention to Jesus' reaction as we ponder these things.

Jesus' introductory words are important for what follows. He addresses God as "Father, Lord of heaven and earth." There is in these words both close personal intimacy as well as a recognition of God's absolute authority. Every person who discovers something of the marvel of God's wisdom will experience the same relationship with God as Jesus demonstrates here. There exists a basis of shared life, of fellowship, expressed in "Father," and there is surrender which is necessary to understand something of the eternal God and His acts.

The topic here is the Person of Jesus Himself. It is about knowing the Son and the Father. That is what God has hidden from the wise and learned and revealed to little children. The wise people in Galilee did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, although they saw the extraordinary miracles He performed as proof of His claim.

Jesus came to earth as a human being. That is how He presented Himself to the people. He consciously kept His supernatural origin hidden. He told the demons who shouted loudly that He was the Son of God to be silent. In performing His miracles He emphasized faith. He forbade His disciples to make Him known. But as the question came up and Peter confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus makes it clear that this was not revealed to him by man, but by His Father in heaven.⁵ That is the

4. Luke 10:21

1. Luke 2:10,11

2. Luke 15:10

3. John 16:24

4. Acts 13:52

topic of the verses here. It is in a way to our disadvantage as post-New Testament people, that we did not get to know our Lord first as a man. We must think back through the Christian dogma of Christ's divinity to His manhood. That means we go in the opposite direction. It also makes Him to most of us such a distant Person. We relate to Him, not as a fellowman, but as God. Our relationship tends to have more of the fear of the Lord than of intimacy.

The context of these verses show that "the wise and learned" do not escape the Lord's irony. "The wise" are here those who are wise in their own eyes and "the learned" are those with a high IQ. Objectively, this is not wisdom. It is naturalism that excludes supernatural influences. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.¹ There is no wisdom that is not connected to the source of wisdom. Autonomous wisdom is foolishness. Everyone, even the atheist, must admit that it makes a difference in our human philosophy of life whether we believe that God exists or not. And who can prove the non-existence of God? And how can one build a philosophy of life on an assumption that cannot be proven? One can use the same argument for the existence of God. But the facts of creation, of the existing order, of life, personality, as well as the testimony of a Christian life testify more to God's existence than to His non-existence. No one has ever found any satisfactory answers to the most elementary questions of life apart from God. The Apostle Paul writes: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."²

So these verses are about that what calls itself wisdom, but is not. That is why "the wise and learned" have no access to the source of wisdom. That revelation falls, in the words of Jesus, to "little children." Little children put our life experiences to shame.

The question as to what Jesus intends to say here has occupied Bible scholars throughout the ages. Does "little children" refer to lack of experience, to openness, smallness? It probably does not refer to humility, because children are not humble by nature. We can safely say, however, that a basic characteristic of children is that they have parents. The natural instinct of a child will make it turn to his or her mother first and then to the father. If either of them is lacking in a child's life, the child experiences severe problems in growing up. Trust is a natural feature for a child. A child does not have to learn to trust mother or father. Distrust does not occur until the child has had disappointing experiences. This kind of trust is probably what our Lord is talking about here. It ought to be natural for us to trust God as our Father and it ought to be innate to entrust ourselves to Him. Mistrust of God is unnatural. Yet that is the feature that characterizes the life of most people.

A healthy spiritual life will always consist in transferring elements on a natural level to a spiritual level. To eat, grow, ask, love, trust are the components of a life that is built on the Lord. Without the exercise of those normal functions on a spiritual level, God cannot reveal to us who He is. When two people love one another, they can only give themselves to one another if they are themselves. Love does not wear masks, neither on a human level nor in a relationship with God. If we show to God who we are, God will do the same to us. That is what revelation is all about.

Jesus describes His relationship with the Father with the words: "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (v.27). In John's Gospel Jesus elaborates on this relationship, saying: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the

5. See Matt. 16:15-17.

1. Prov. 1:7

2. I Cor. 1:20,21

Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.”¹ And: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”² The relationship between the Father and the Son is, first of all, characterized by a complete trust of one another, to the point that the Father has committed all things to the Son. That this is not exaggeration is clear from Jesus’ later words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”³ Interestingly, the same idea returns where we would not expect it, as we read in John’s Gospel: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...”⁴ This was Jesus’ assurance as He was on the lowest level of His humiliation. Such words ought to lift us up from the most miserable conditions in which we can find ourselves. We usually draw the wrong conclusions in our daily experiences. We tend to ask ourselves, if God has this power why then ...? Jesus never asked “why?” except for the moment when He carried our sins on the cross. For Him God’s promises were the clearest answer through which situations became circumstances that were subject to God’s power in all details. This is what Jesus said, after having been rejected by the cities in Galilee.

This mutual confidence between the Father and the Son rests upon reciprocal knowledge of one another. There is, therefore, logic in the sequence “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” It reveals what kind of knowledge Jesus had in mind. God’s knowledge is complete. There is nothing the Omniscient does not know. The Father knows the Son and so does God know us too. In this same exhaustive manner does the Son know the Father and He wants to share this knowledge with us. This must, initially, be done on a limited scale, but ultimately we will know as we are known. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁵ Paul says this in the context of love. We will receive this total revelation through the intermediation of Jesus Christ. The desire to know Him ought to be the all-consuming passion of our life. “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁶ We saw the two trees in Paradise, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. Here it becomes obvious that there cannot be any knowledge apart from the life of God.

Having said these things, Jesus gives an extraordinary invitation. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who mentions this. The difference between these words and the preceding ones is that in the previous verses Jesus addressed the crowd; here He speaks to the individual. The fact that He reproached the cities their unbelief means that His first efforts were meant to reach the masses. Because conversion is a private matter and only few people come to the Lord, we often mistakenly think Jesus wanted to keep the church small. Jesus’ reproach proves the contrary. Yet, even if the focus is the whole world, it is always a matter of personal coming.

Jesus presents Himself as the One in the center. He draws a line from all who are weary and burdened in all the world to Himself. That is the great perspective. When we study the life of Christ as it is described in the Gospels, we see that He was victorious in all circumstances. This in itself is a great encouragement for us who have trouble to keep our heads above the water in things spiritual. We are so preoccupied with our own spiritual battle that we hardly ever look beyond the boundaries of our own life. As far as we are concerned, we believe that, if we gain the victory over a problem, we have reached our goal. Jesus did not only conquer for Himself, but for us also. That is why He stands here in the center as the only conqueror ever and He calls us all to come to Him to share in His victory. The condition for coming is to feel

1. John 5:19-23

2. John 14:9

3. Matt. 28:18

4. John 13:3

5. I Cor. 13:12

6. John 17:3

weary and be burdened. Jesus calls everyone who fails in life. Corrie ten Boom once said: “In the world you succeed by passing your tests, for the Lord you must fail them.”

The people of Galilee thought that they could navigate on the own steam. That is the reason they did not come to faith by the miracles Jesus performed. Jesus’ words are not addressed to the wise and learned, people who would rather have bitten off their tongue than to confess that they failed in life. It was for “little children” who knew they needed the help of a reliable, loving hand.

The expression “I will give you rest” is the translation of the single Greek word *anapano*, meaning: “to repose.” We find the same word used in the verse: “Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they *will rest* from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’”¹ The rest Jesus provides makes us stop in our track. The implication is not that we take a deep breath in the presence of the Lord and then run on. The Lord brings us to a full stop for the purpose of not going any further. To come to Jesus means to stop all self-propelled activity. It is the wonderful discovery everybody makes when they come to the Lord: “I don’t have to do this anymore.” Jesus’ words make it clear where the problem with us lies. We find ourselves unable to stop. We are driven and haunted to exhaustion. This can only be stopped if we come to Jesus. As Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the waves: “Quiet! Be still!”² so does He cause the storm in our heart to die down. He creates peace within.

Instead of this unrest and in complete contrast to it, comes the yoke of Christ. The first thing we note in connection with this yoke is that it is not put upon us; we are invited to take it. There is no question of compulsion. We follow the Lord because we want to. That is the great difference between this yoke and all other yokes. In all other instances carrying a yoke speaks of forced labor. Here it is voluntary service. Outwardly there is no difference, but inwardly the two are worlds apart.

Then Jesus says: “Learn from me.” What does this mean in connection with the yoke? First of all, this is an invitation to follow His example. As the Apostle Peter writes: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”³ We must take up our yoke as He took up His. His gentleness and humility of heart becomes our model. But there is a deeper meaning to Jesus’ words. Learning from Jesus does not merely consist in looking at an object lesson, but it amounts to an inner transfer of Jesus’ character upon ours. Otherwise the words of v.30 would mean that Jesus was able to bear His own yoke so victoriously because it was so light. The facts of Jesus’ life certainly do not bear this out. Our mentor is the Holy Spirit who grafts the life of Christ upon the trunk of our own life.

The fact that Jesus mentions gentleness and humility of heart in connection with the bearing of His yoke suggests that it is our harshness and pride that make our life so hard to bear. Gentleness and humility simplify and lighten life’s loads. If we learn that much from Christ, we have already learned a lot. “You will find rest for your souls” is identical to “I will give you rest.” The Greek word is *anapauso*, “I will [make] you rest.” Finding rest is not merely no more running, but entering into restoration and refreshing. It refers to the experience of resting. We smell the green pastures and taste the quiet waters of the twenty-third psalm. It is the deep satisfaction of the infant that has drunk its fill of the one hundred thirty-first psalm. It is the awareness of answering to the most elementary intentions of God with our life. We will know: “I was made for this.” We may have a similar experience on a physical and emotional level in marriage. But the spiritual goes much deeper.

This is not the rest of non-activity. Jesus says: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Finding rest consists in wearing His yoke. The relaxation comes from making the effort. God did not create us for sinning. Sin goes against our very nature. That is why we feel like being hunted. Functioning in fellowship with Jesus Christ makes us breath with ease.

1. Rev. 14:13

2. See Mark 4:39.

3. I Peter 2:21

The reason Christ's yoke feels light is because He carries the other end of it. This yoke is made for two. And since His humility is greater than ours, He stoops lower and carries the heavier part of the yoke.

II. The Rejection of Christ by the Pharisees 12

A. Picking heads of grain on the Sabbath 12:1-8

1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.

2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"

4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread — which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

5 Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?

6 I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.

7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

The accusation against Jesus was in particular that He did not keep the Sabbath. That is what made Him unacceptable to the Pharisees and leaders of the people. "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."¹ In this story it appears that Jesus' "bad example" had also influenced His disciples.

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 as 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."

1. John 9:16

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 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."¹ 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.

The intensity with which Jesus lived His life on earth can make us dizzy. How sloppy and carelessly do we vegetate compared with Him. The way we live is a watered-down version of what God intended human life to be. Our life is sinful, His is holy. The difference between a life lived as a sacrament and a sinful breaking of the Sabbath, which means breaking all of the law, is in the presence of the Lord. If the priest had performed their task outside the temple, the curse of the law would have caught up with them. It is only the protection of being "in Christ" that, not only keep us out of reach of the punishment of the law, but that elevates our life to the level of serving God. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."² "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."³ We dwell in the house of the Lord forever.⁴

The words "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" are a paraphrase of Hosea: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."⁵

To observe a ritual as a duty that cannot be avoided is as far from true religion as is idolatry. Every act we perform in which Jesus Christ is not at the center is not done in the Spirit of Christ. The Pharisees were correct in stating that picking heads of grain on the Sabbath meant breaking the law, but yet, they did not know the truth. Jesus twice reproaches them their ignorance; first with "haven't you read," and secondly in "if you had known." The reproach implies that this knowledge was within their grasp. But they had not opened their heart for what their head knew. The essence of the law is love of God and love of neighbor. The Pharisees' greatest sin lay in the fact that they had excluded neighborly love from their relationship with God. As the Apostle Paul puts it: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."⁶

Interestingly, Jesus calls His disciples "innocent." As we saw, this does not mean that they were not guilty of breaking the law. Obviously, this refers to the innocence of those who have received pardon. Receiving forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ does not mean that we are innocent because we have not sinned.

1. John 13:3-5

2. Rom. 14:7,8

3. I Co. 10:31

4. Ps. 23:6

5. Hos. 6:6

6. Rom. 13:8-10

It means that we are covered by grace. God has not called us to judge one another. That was the sin with which the Pharisees broke the law.

Jesus concludes this incident with the majestic statement: "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." Mark's Gospel extends Jesus' field of authority with: "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."¹ He also adds the words "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."² "Man" here is primarily Jesus Himself. The Sabbath existed for Him. This defines the meaning of the Sabbath. What Jesus is saying here is that everything that is done or not done on the Sabbath is subject to Him and has Him as its goal. What we do or not do, we do because of Him. Without Jesus the Sabbath would have no meaning. The Sabbath rest is not our form of relaxation, it means resting in Him. "For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."³

Mark's word "even" is a loaded word. It makes the Sabbath part of Jesus' "all authority," as He said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."⁴ That is why the Apostles would later say: "He is Lord of all."⁵

It is not stated here in so many words, but the conclusion to be drawn is that the meaning of the Sabbath is spiritual. Ever since sin entered the world we all do the works of sin. Everything we do is polluted by sin. "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."⁶ The only deliverance of this uninterrupted chain of sinful activities is death. That is the reason God closed the door to the tree of life for Adam and Eve after they fell, because if they had eaten of that fruit they would have lived forever with their sinful nature. There is a sense in which death is a redeemer. Originally, the Sabbath was the day on which God rested. For sinful man it became a symbol of death. That is why Jesus was in the grave on the Sabbath. Our rest, our ceasing to perform sinful acts is closely related to Jesus lying in the grave. For anyone else, lying lifeless in a grave means defeat. With the declaration "the Son of Man is Lord (even) of the Sabbath" Jesus proclaims His resurrection. This restores the Sabbath to its place of honor.

B. A healing on the Sabbath 12:9-14

9 Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue,

10 and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

11 He said to them, "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?"

12 How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

13 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.

14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

According to Luke's Gospel, this even happened "on another Sabbath."⁷ Matthew describes the place where this healing occurred as "their synagogue," as if there existed already a fundamental separation between Jesus and the Jewish believers.

1. Mark 2:28

2. Mark 2:27

3. Heb. 4:10

4. Matt. 28:18

5. Acts 10:36

6. Isa. 64:6

7. Luke 6:6

The fact that the Lord of glory visited this house of prayer ought to have been a summit experience of fellowship with God. The elements of an ideal encounter between God and man were there. There was a place set apart for prayer. There was reading of Scripture and worship. God Himself was there. The people who came, came apparently to meet Him. Jesus was there to teach, but nobody paid attention. The fault was not Jesus'. Mark states: "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."¹ That attitude closed their hearts for any blessing they could have received. Jesus had earlier warned people against a judgmental attitude. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."² Jesus says that God will use the measuring stick we use for others on our own life. God has the right to judge. Our judgment is part of God's image in us. The sin of criticism means a distortion of that image. This is connected to our tendency to distrust God.

The focus is upon a man with a shriveled hand. Matthew does not give us any other detail, but Luke, the physician, shows his medical expertise by stating that it was the man's right hand.³ It is clear that this is a person in need. The fact that part of his body does no longer function makes him handicapped. There is, however, no trace of pity or compassion from the side of the other visitors of the synagogue. The only interest they have in the man is that he is the object of a legal problem. It is a cruel kind of curiosity that makes them murderers in their heart because of their lack of love. They want to use him as a pawn to bring Jesus to justice and eventually to kill Him. The plot fits together with diabolic logic.

There seems to be a contradiction in the way Matthew tells the story and the other two synoptics record it. Matthew states: "Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'" But in Mark and Luke Jesus is the one who asks the question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"⁴ We assume that the Pharisees asked the question, as Matthew reports and that Jesus answered with the question we find in the other two Gospels. Sometimes giving an answer by repeating the question is an effective way to make a person realize that he knows the answer himself. Some of our questions are the answer.

The Pharisees asked the question to set a trap for Jesus. Jesus calls the man with the shriveled hand and puts him in the middle. How difficult it must have been for that man to stand up and become the center of attention. It put his need in focus in front of everyone. It is even more difficult if one becomes the object of a judicial controversy. The man may have preferred to leave the synagogue. By putting this man in the middle, Jesus emphasizes the fact that His question was not an academic one. It was with this man standing there that Jesus repeats the question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" The Pharisees knew the Sabbath command in detail. Jesus asks them if it was the intent of the lawgiver to punish such a person as this by a law that would make him a breaker of the law that required the Sabbath to be made holy.

Then Matthew records Jesus' little parable which the other evangelists omit. The parable shows that the people present find ways to circumvent the Sabbath law when it pertains to their own needs. "If my sheep falls in a pit on the Sabbath, I will pull it out." The Pharisees and masters of the law had given strict rules regarding the rescue of animals on the Sabbath. If the animal had broken a bone in falling in the pit, it was allowed to pull it out. But if it appeared to be unharmed, it was supposed to be kept in the pit till the end of the Sabbath. Most of the owners would use the following tactic: They would stand at the edge of the pit and sigh, saying: "He probably has a broken bone." When they pulled it out they would emit another sigh of relief when the animal appeared to be unharmed. Once the sheep had been pulled out the law did not require it to be thrown back in!

1. Mark 3:2

2. Mat. 7:1,2

3. Luke 6:6

4. See Mark 3:4 and Luke 6:9.

With this parable Jesus reproaches them that they do not give evidence of the same slyness when it pertains to a fellowman. He who values his animal more than his fellowmen has denied the image of God in his neighbor and in doing so, denies God's image in himself. Jesus heightens the contrast by singling out the owner of one sheep as if this is all he has. God looks at a person in need as if he or she is all He has. If God saves me it is because to Him I am of the utmost importance. My need is so unique to Him that He cannot but come and deliver.

Having told this parable, Jesus must have said what Mark reports: "Stand up in front of everyone. Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"¹ This throws the question back at the Pharisees, but not in the form they had asked it. Jesus puts the question with an alternative. The Pharisees were only interested in the legal aspect of the matter: "Is it lawful?" Jesus shows that it is a matter of choice. It is a choice between good and evil, between life and death. The question is on which side of this line of separation do we stand? What is the point of arguing about legal points of the law when you are siding with the devil? That is where the Pharisees were. They wanted to catch Jesus because He performed a good deed on the Sabbath, but on that same Sabbath they plotted to kill Him. Mark records: "But they remained silent."²

Spurgeon, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, writes: "Our Lord's argument was overwhelming. One form of human kindness being proved to be right, the whole class of beneficent actions is admitted, and "*it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.*" One wonders that anybody ever thought otherwise. But zeal for externals, and hatred of spiritual religion, when united, create a narrow bigotry as cruel as it is ridiculous. Our Lord has set us free from the Rabbinical yoke, and we find rest unto our souls in a true spiritual Sabbath. ... They best keep the Sabbath who on the seventh day, and always, rest from their own works, as God did from his; but how can a man rest until he knows the finished work of God in Christ Jesus?"

The Pharisees refused to answer Jesus, not because they did not have an answer but because they knew it. Answering Jesus would have amounted to a confession of sin. We all recognize truth when we are confronted with it.

Mark is the most expressive in describing Jesus' reaction to the stubbornness of the Pharisees. We read: "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."³ Jesus' double and conflicting emotions are an indication of how deeply the problem is rooted and how profoundly He understood and mastered the situation. The different reaction to different circumstances is the clearest proof of Jesus' perfect holiness of character. Jesus is distressed about the hardness of heart of the bystanders. He does not merely heal the man's shriveled hand out of pity for him while disregarding the need of the others. There is a perfect balance of emotions, however conflicting they may seem. Jesus is deeply disturbed about people who resist the love of God. He loved the Pharisees! And at the same time He knew what they planned to do with Him. He knew they were out to catch Him and that they planned murder. Yet, He loved them.

But here also is equilibrium. Love and anger are opposites. They cannot live together in the same place. Jesus' anger is justified, because what happens constitutes sin. There is a tremendous tension in this moment, not only here but any time a sinful person encounters a holy God. It is this tension between holiness and love that would ultimately lead to the solution of the cross.

Jesus is angry and deeply distressed. We are wrong when we think that anger is always sin. It is easier for us to sin when we are angry because we tend to lose control over our emotions. But that does not mean that anger in itself is always sinful. God's anger toward all unrighteousness is as a wild and raging river, the current of which is as constant as His love. We see that Jesus became angry several times while living on earth. He threw the moneychangers out of the temple. He called the Pharisees "a brood of vipers." Here He heals a man with a withered hand while being angry. If we lack the ability to become indignant

1. Mark 3:3,4

2. Mark 3:4

3. Mark 3:5

about human and demonic meanness and injustice, we have not had a clear vision of God's holiness and perfection.

The fact that Jesus becomes angry proves that man is responsible for his own hardness of heart. We cannot use divine predestination as an excuse for our sin.

Jesus healed the man by ordering him "Stretch out your hand." That was exactly what the man had been unable to do. We can stretch out our hands because our members obey the commands of our brain. This man was unable to do so, which means that he missed something that gave him human dignity. The image of God in him had been damaged. This all is restored by Jesus' Word of creation. The image of God is recreated in this man. He is again able to do what he must do. He is what God wants him to be. This is the normal effect the Word of God has upon a human life.

What is the Pharisees' reaction to this? The very fact that this man was healed before their very eyes proves Jesus to be right. But we are not easily convinced even if we see that the other person is right and we are wrong. Our will has a safety device upon our conviction that causes us to be unconvinced if we do not want to be convinced. Luke states: "they were furious."¹ The Greek reads literally: "They lost their mind." *The New Living Translation* renders this: "the enemies of Jesus were wild with rage." They were so angry that, according to Mark, they temporarily forgot their feud with the Herodians and plotted Jesus' demise together with their enemies.² Evidently, the command to keep the Sabbath holy weighed heavier with them than the command "You shall not murder."

C. The healing of a blind mute demon possessed man 12:15-37

15 Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, 16 warning them not to tell who he was.

17 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

18 "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

19 He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.

20 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.

21 In his name the nations will put their hope."

22 Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.

23 All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.

26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?

27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.

28 But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 "Or again, how can anyone 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.

30 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

1. Luke 6:11

2. See Mark 3:6.

31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

33 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.

34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.

37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

After this incident Jesus left Capernaum and went, according to Mark, to the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret.¹ Matthew only mentions Jesus' leaving of the city. Matthew does not go into detail concerning the many healings that occurred. He merely states that He healed all their sick. But he places what Jesus does here in the right light by indicating the prophetic background of Jesus' ministry of healing. In vv.18-21 he gives us an almost literally quotation of Isaiah's prophecy. We read in Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."²

With this quotation from Isaiah, Matthew penetrates to the core of the matter. He omits, however one line from Isaiah's prophecy: "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

The first lines in Isaiah describe the Father's emotions regarding His Son, who is called here "My servant." This puts the emphasis on Jesus' work. It is the task of the Lord Jesus, the labor He performs for His Father. The use of the word "servant" indicates the complete surrender by the Son to the Father. The Greek word is not *doulos*, but *pais*, which refers to "a boy," who was "often beaten with impunity." It is actually a step below *doulos*, "slave." In this Son-Father-relationship we are reminded of the Hebrew slave, who had the right to be free but chose to serve his master out of love.³ Jesus' obedience to the Father was out of love. This love was mutual. As Jesus says in John's Gospel: "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does."⁴ This verse is full of tenderness and affection. Jesus Christ was clearly able to completely satisfy the eternal and perfect God. On the other hand, the Father demonstrates a Spirit of strength and stability. From the Father's side there is a well-determined act of the will by which He has chosen the Son. This is obvious in the Incarnation. We cannot understand this without the Incarnation. It was the man Jesus Christ whom the Father had chosen. This was not a choice among the Three Persons of the Trinity. The fact that the Father chose a human being has its effect upon all of humanity.

It is amazing to realize that Matthew also omits the words "whom I uphold." It seems that Matthew wants to emphasize the fact that Jesus never used His own divine power while living on earth as a human being, but lived a life of perfect dependence upon the Father. Apparently, Isaiah uttered his prophecy from the viewpoint of the Father and Matthew from the side of the Son.

1. Mark 3:7

2. Isa. 42:1-4

3. See Ex. 21:2-6.

4. John 5:20

The most amazing part of all is the context in which Matthew places this quotation. At this point Jesus had not contact with “the nations.” He was in the process of healing the sick and delivering the demon possessed, members of His own people. This indicates that the prophecy had a much wider relevance than that moment alone. It pertains to the whole scope of Jesus’ ministry, well beyond the borders of life on earth. Twice the “nations” are mentioned in this prophecy. Those are the pagan nations of the world. The Greek word *ethnos* refers to non-Jewish people, by implication, pagan. We find the same word used in the verse: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the *Gentiles*.”¹ Jesus’ eye was on them while He was healing the sick in Galilee.

The focus is the gentiles, the proclamation of justice to them; which means hope for them. Who among those thousands who were milling around Jesus would have thought for one moment of God’s eternal plan that Israel would be a kingdom of priests? But this was what Jesus had in mind. This was one of those moments where Jesus drew a straight line from His position on earth to God’s perfect plan of salvation. He may even have quoted Isaiah’s words Himself. We see elsewhere that our Lord, with one or two words, puts the situation in which He finds Himself in the right perspective by drawing a line from time to eternity. As Francis Schaefer puts it, a finite reference point (man in time and space) has only meaning if there is a relationship with an infinite reference point (God in eternity). Jesus always made this connection. The difference between happy and unhappy people is not in prosperity and adversity, but in seeing the connection between circumstances and the will of God. That is the reason the Apostle Paul called himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”² In doing so he gained the victory over his circumstances. This is a general principle. Unfortunately, we rarely understand this truth until we are in adverse situations. The principle is valid, however, in all circumstances.

In order to understand the content of “justice” we must see it in connection with Isaiah’s statement: “In his law the islands will put their hope.” Matthew reads this: “In his name the nations will put their hope.” Matthew obviously deviates here from Isaiah’s text. He purposely departs from Isaiah’s words in order to interpret prophecy in the light of Jesus’ ministry. There is always an element of judgment in justice. Revelation of God’s law brings conviction of sin. But instruction of the law through Jesus Christ brings hope in His Name. The whole gamut of redemption and renewal of life, also for people, who did not know the law and did not belong to the Jewish nation, is included in these words. These few words form the basis upon which the Apostle Paul could build his *Epistle to the Romans*.

This is the first instance in the New Testament in which the Name of Jesus is mentioned and the meaning of the Name is given in terms of forgiveness, redemption and protection. Judgment for the gentiles consists in the fact that they did know the will of God but did not obey it. They did not walk in the light they possessed. Yet, there was a ray of hope of redemption that was kept alive among them from generation to generation. On the mission field of Papua, where we worked this hope was realized when the tribes people accepted the Gospel.

The core of Matthew’s message in this passage is v.19 – “He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.” The fact that this text is quoted in this context is significant. This is the heart of the message in this chapter. Jesus based His prohibition to the demons and to those who had been healed to mention His Name, on Isaiah’s prophecy: “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.” It was not merely politeness or modesty that made the Lord take this attitude; it was obedience to the prophetic word.

What a difference there is between Jesus and the shouting of the demons! God does not try to convince us by shouting us down. The mere volume of His voice convicts no one. It is when we begin to understand that God is perfect and that the smallest flaw in Him would ruin the whole image, that we comprehend that God is always right. If God could be wrong, He would no longer be God, because He sustains “all things by his powerful word.”³ If that power would weaken, all of creation would collapse. The

1. Matt. 4:15

2. Phil. V.1

very fact that the universe exists and that we are still breathing proves that God is perfect. So there is no place for shouting or crying out. The essence of a Christian witness is a quiet and simple demonstration of the facts of salvation. As later on Jesus rises from the dead, He proves His resurrection simply and in the most convincing way by being there. On a smaller scale, but in principle in the same manner, is our personal testimony nothing else but a manifestation of the resurrection life of the Lord in and through us.

V.20 shows the care, tenderness and love of the Lord toward those who had a vision of glory but who have been crushed by the pressures of life. Human life is depicted in two images: a reed and a burning lamp. The reed speaks of growth and the wick of light. A reed is not as imposing as an oak tree and a burning wick is not the most impressive light source. We do not usually evaluate reeds and wicks very highly. The value of the testimony is so elementary and everyday-like that we pass it without paying much attention. In using these images of the lowest and meanest the Bible shows us the depth of God's love for that which is weak and small. It is about the frustrated growth of the little man about a smoking fire that gives off more smoke than light. It is over such people that our Lord bows down to restore the image of God to its original brightness. Isaiah adds here, what Matthew omits, that "he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth." This suggests that there will be a point, when His task has been fulfilled, when our Lord would falter and be discouraged. This happened when He died on the cross. Our weakness is healed in His weakness.

This pertains, first of all, to individuals. But it also shows that it was God's desire to restore the testimony of Israel as a nation. That was the first step of the Lord's work on earth. He wanted to make the people God had chosen to be what they ought to be: a testimony in this world of God's greatness and love that would draw all the nations of the world to Him. That was the vision Jesus had when He healed the sick and cast out demons. The Gospels make clear, however, that Israel willfully rejected this calling. They not only did not care about the gentiles, they didn't care a less about their testimony either. They killed Him who wanted to heal them.

A huge crowd followed Jesus. Mark describes from where they all came: "from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon."¹ It is difficult to believe that this all happened the same day. This is probably a description of what happened during the days following the incident in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Matthew does not report Jesus' precautions. Mark tells us: "Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him."² This is the more amazing because elsewhere we read that Jesus, simply by the power of His personality, kept a crowd that intended to kill Him at a distance.³ Why does Jesus need a boat as an emergency exit when He can walk on water? Evidently, the urgency was not in the fact that Jesus had no other ways of escape. If He intended to prevent sensational reactions, a supernatural getaway would not serve the purpose. Jesus performed miracles for other but we read nowhere that He performed miracles for Himself in order to impress the crowd.

Matthew reports that Jesus performs a miracle which raises the question among the people that He could be the promised Messiah. This causes a heated discussion with the Pharisees who accuse Him of being in league with the enemy. A person who was blind and mute is brought to Jesus. Jesus treats this as a case of demon possession. This proves to be true, because when the demon is cast out, the man can see and talk. No further details are given, apart from the fact that this makes a deep impression upon the people. The Pharisees understand that if the masses believe that Jesus is the Messiah, they would have to reevaluate their own stand. This would mean a change of attitude, which would involve confession and conversion. That is the reason for their counterattack.

3. Heb. 1:3

1. Mark 3:8

2. Mark 3:9,10

3. Luke 4:29,30

There is no reason to believe that the Pharisees were honestly thinking that Jesus was demon possessed and that Satan worked through Him. They may not have realized the seriousness of their accusation. Jesus' reproach: "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (v.37), suggests that they just said what was on the tip of their tongue.

The most amazing part here is perhaps that Jesus reacts so seriously upon this accusation that is hardly spoken out loud. He sets out by proving on logical grounds that it would be impossible for Satan to break down his own work. Secondly, He makes clear that what they accuse Jesus of would, at the same time, imply their own disciples. They are involved in the same kind of exorcism as He is. Finally, He depicts with some brief strokes how demons are actually cast out. The main warning is issued in v.30: "'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.'" There are only two sides to the matter. What side are you on? This is followed by one of the most serious warning in all of Scripture, addressed to those who say they are on the Lord's side, but who refuse to submit to Him. They try to preserve themselves by playing out God against Satan. With this sharp analysis of the situation Jesus knocks the bottom out of this Pharisaic campaign against Him. We get the impression that, after this stern warning, the Pharisees take a step back. Jesus tells them: "By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (v.37).

There is in Satan's kingdom no room for discord. There is complete unity of purpose. This explains the power of demonic opposition. Both with God and Satan there is no compromise possible. It is total warfare. The slightest motion on the side of the demons to give in to God, not because of His superior strength, but because of moral persuasion, would make Satan's empire collapse. This logic is fixed. The collapse of Satan's kingdom would have immediate and far-reaching consequences in this world. It could never happen without being noticed. In the same way as it would make the whole universe collapse if God would no longer be there, so Satan's demise would have universal consequences. The fact that the kingdom of darkness still exists proves the unity of demonic power.

It could be that the Pharisees were planning to bring in a formal accusation of witchcraft against Jesus, and to execute Him on that basis. They would appeal to the law of Moses that said: "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God."¹ But Matthew's text does not elaborate on this.

Jesus then draws the logical conclusion that if the casting out of demons is not the work of the powers of darkness, it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, which means that the Kingdom of God has come. And that was what Jesus' miracles were meant to prove.

John the Baptist and Jesus Himself had preached the coming of the kingdom ever since the beginning of their ministry. Although there may be some inconsistency between this statement and the prayer: "Your kingdom come"² there is a chronological explanation for this, although this is not too simple to explain. We cannot say that the Kingdom had not come yet when Jesus taught His disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer. We must distinguish between the principle of the coming of the Kingdom and the manifestations of the Kingdom as they are demonstrated in Jesus' miracles. These manifestations of the Kingdom were like the coming of spring at the wrong season of the year. The actual spring season will arrive at the appointed time of God's year. There have been revivals in the church throughout the centuries that were like spring in the time of winter. Those who understood this in Jesus' day must have rejoiced in seeing this tree flower in the midst of a forest of dead trees.

1. Deut. 18:9-13

2. Matt. 6:10

Jesus proceeds to demonstrate how He is able to cast out demons. He does this by using a short parable of someone who enters the house of a strong man, overpowering the inhabitant and robbing him of his possessions. This picture describes what would happen when He died on the cross. *The Heidelberg Catechism* describes this as Jesus' descent into hell. This is prophesied in the Psalms in the words: "When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious — that you, O Lord God, might dwell there,"¹ which the Apostle Paul quotes in Ephesians.² When Jesus entered the prison of death He overpowered the jailor and took his keys.³ It is on the basis of this victory that Jesus cast out demons. At this time in His life, this was an act of faith, since the actual overpowering of the enemy had not yet taken place. Jesus took, so to speak, a loan on the full price He would pay later. That is what faith is all about; it is a reaching out to what is to come. For us, faith is also a reaching back to what has been done. The effectiveness of Jesus' ministry proves that He was right in doing so.

In this struggle to overpower the strong man there are no undecided bystanders. "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." We must not only clearly decide on whose side we are, but we must also understand that, unless we engage actively with the Lord and His Kingdom, we work against Him. There is no such thing as a passive relationship with the Lord. That is one positive result of Satan's work of destruction. As soon as we surrender to Jesus' Lordship, we begin to understand that we are part of an active organism of which we have become a living member.

Jesus then turns to those who mentioned the name Beelzebub in connection with the exorcism that had been going on. He calls the accusation "blasphemy against the Spirit." Jesus makes a distinction between blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and all other sin. There is forgiveness for every sin, except this one. Amazingly, Jesus does not say: "every sin and blasphemy *can* be forgiven men," but "every sin and blasphemy *will* be forgiven men." Here again, Jesus reaches forward toward His death on the cross. With this, the Father did not only open the door of forgiveness, but He virtually put His signature under the contract of forgiveness of all sin. As the author of Hebrew put it: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."⁴ This is a fact that is not influenced by our experience of forgiveness or deliverance. As far as God is concerned, all sins have been forgiven, even the sins of unbelievers. When people go to hell it is not because they have not been pardoned, but because they refused to accept forgiveness. A Dutch poet wrote a poem about a man who refused the Roman Catholic "last rites," saying: "Don't take away my last possession! My sins will go with me in my grave."

This is the second time in this chapter that Jesus reaches out in perfect faith to what is ahead in His future death and resurrection. The first time was in connection with the binding of the devil and now in the forgiveness of our sin. We must remember that, at this point His death on the cross had not yet occurred. This helps us to open our eyes to the greatness of our Lord, who saw through time, who demonstrated insight in what is essential and who displayed faith, that although it was expressed in human words to human beings, surpasses our mere human understanding. The fact that we find ourselves on the other side of the cross and the grave ought not to diminish our awe and worship; it only ought to make it greater.

This part of Jesus' words pertains to the juridical side of forgiveness. There is of course an experimental side to it. It may be true that God's covenant includes the sins of unbelievers, but in practice this has no effect if a person does not live as being forgiven. It is impossible to come to a personal application and experience of forgiveness without the intervention of the Holy Spirit. He convicts of sin.⁵ Every time the Gospel is being preached, God's Spirit whispers in the heart of the one who hears the Word:

1. Ps. 68:18
2. See Eph. 4:8,9.
3. Rev. 1:18
4. Heb. 1:3
5. John 16:8-11

“This is meant for you!” Whenever a person reacts to this by turning from his evil way and accepts forgiveness, new life begins.

There are various ways in which we can close our heart to the voice of the Spirit. Jesus mentions one of those ways here. This is the worst way in which we can refuse God’s offer. In doing so we burn the bridge that leads to the other side. If we call the voice of the Holy Spirit the voice of Satan, how then can we receive forgiveness of sin? We must emphasize the fact that Jesus issues this warning because the Pharisees accused Him of being possessed by Beelzebub. They saw what the Holy Spirit did. They must have known that it was the Holy Spirit who did it, but they refused to acknowledge this because they understood the consequences this would have upon their own lives. They ought to have opened themselves to the Holy Spirit, confess their sins and repent. But because they wanted to preserve their life they said: “this is the devil.”

Jesus then makes a distinction between the Holy Spirit who is in Him and His own humanity. That may seem to be using a double standard, but it is not. Jesus was a complete human being and as such He was subject to normal human relations. Jesus did not draw away from this by appealing to the Holy Spirit who has taken control of His life. He was in every respect the same kind of human being as we are, except for sin. His human dignity was assaulted and damaged in the same way as ours. He was being slandered and despised. He would be tortured, rejected and killed. God does not hold this against humanity; that sin against His Son has been forgiven us. But if we knowingly and intentionally abuse the Holy Spirit in whose image we are created, we sin against our own human nature. Every person recognizes God when he sees Him. There is in us something that reacts to truth. To go against this is unnatural.

In the following verses 32-37 Jesus particularly emphasizes the sins of the tongue. This was already included in the previous “every sin and blasphemy.” The fact that Jesus singles it out does not mean that it stands apart from all other sin. Jesus highlights the relationship between the tongue and the heart. Our mouth utters what is rooted in our heart. Speech is a fruit. That means that there is a root, a growing process and ripening. The process is the same with the good tree as with the bad. As the first Psalms reads: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”¹

The words “make a tree good” refers, first of all to the Lord’s judgment about it. Jesus invites us to take the whole of His life into account. We cannot say that He was a good person and, at the same time reject His teaching and His works. Jesus statement about Himself is that He is perfect. If we decide to take only part of Him seriously, we do in fact reject Him totally. If God would be wrong in any small detail, He would no longer be perfect, which means He would no longer be God. The same is true for the Son. The root, the tree and the fruit are perfect. This is what we believe, what we confess, what we worship.

Having said this, Jesus turns to the Pharisees, using the sharpest language possible. “You brood of vipers!” It was John the Baptist who coined these words.² Jesus uses the expression twice in the Gospel of Matthew.³ We are reminded of the oldest prophecy in the Bible where God, addressing the snake, says: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”⁴ This reference is primarily to demons and Jesus. But Jesus uses the words “brood of vipers” here for humans, who make an outward show of piety but who inwardly resist God to the bitter end. There is here a definite link between the power of darkness and the flesh. Inner resistance to

1. Ps. 1:1-3

2. See Matt. 3:7.

3. See Matt. 23:33.

4. Gen. 3:15

the will of God and desire to preserve one's life to the very end opens the doors of the human heart to the direct influence of the Evil One.

Jesus puts the knife to the problem of our speech and He cuts to the core. There is a direct link between our tongue, our heart and hell.¹ Our words are not the fruit of a few wrong tendencies within us, they are the spills of that of which our heart is full to the brim. One dirty word covers a multitude of dirty thoughts. The only way our speech will become clean is when our heart is cleansed.

When Jesus speaks of "the good man" He refers primarily to the Perfect Man, Jesus Christ Himself. This also includes all who allow themselves intentionally to be cleansed by His blood. Life in fellowship with God will become for us a treasure, a good thing out of the good stored up in us. There is, however, also an evil treasure, which evokes thirst for possessions and which will put a curse upon life. The person who has this "treasure" within believes to have a precious possession and does not realize that he harbors his own perdition.

"Careless words" are words without content. We will be held accountable for the fact that the words we speak are devoid of meaning. The first Word that is recorded in the history of the universe is the creative Word of God: "Let there be light."² In the same way as our character will be judged in comparing it to God's character, so will our speech be compared to the Word of God. David sang: "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."³ In comparison with this speaking all human talk is empty and meaningless.

Behind this judgment is the thought that God intended human speech to have meaning. When Adam gave names to the animals, his word had creative qualities. We read: "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name."⁴

The words of Christ are words of eternal life, words that had power of healing, renewal and atonement. The Apostle Paul says: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."⁵ Nothing demonstrates so clearly our fallen sinful condition as our speech.

We see on the one hand the Word God spoke and on the other hand the blasphemy of the Antichrist of whom we read: "The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months."⁶ Between those two extremes we find ourselves with our daily babble and gossip, for which God calls us to account. It is important that "the word of Christ dwell in us richly."

D. A miraculous sign 12:38-50

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

39 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."

1. See James 3:6.

2. Gen. 1:3

3. Ps. 33:9

4. Gen. 2:19

5. Col. 3:16,17; 4:6

6. Rev. 13:5

40 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.

41 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

42 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

43 "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

44 Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.

45 Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

46 While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him.

47 Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

48 He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.

50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

The Pharisees respond to Jesus' accusation that they blasphemed the Holy Spirit with a request for a miracle. This makes us assume that their charge that Jesus used the power of Beelzebub to cast out demons was not voiced out loud. They probably thought that the best strategy of response would be to challenge Jesus by asking Him to perform a miracle. The implication is that they would believe in Him if He could prove Himself to them. We find a similar situation after Jesus had performed the miracle of feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fishes and the people said: "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"¹ Jesus replies by saying that He Himself was the greatest miracle that God would perform in this world.

The background of their request was the healing of the demon-possessed man who was blind and mute. Some had reacted to this by saying "Could this be the Son of David?" others by suggesting that Satan was behind this. Luke says: "Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven."²

Jesus promises His contemporaries the sign of Jonah. What is the sign of Jonah? Those words are more complicated than they appear. The sign of Jonah seems to be that Jonah was swallowed up by a big fish and spewed back up three days later. The problem, however, is that this event was mostly a sign for Jonah himself, not for others. It was God's way of bringing Jonah back from his disobedience. Jonah had deliberately fled from the call God had given to him. That is the first implication of the words: "the sign of Jonah." "The sign of Jonah" is given to the generation of Jesus' day because they, as a nation, had fled from the call of God. The Pharisees had knowingly walked away from the place God had prepared for Israel.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says: "For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation."³ Those words throw an interesting light on the content of Jonah's preaching in Nineveh. Jesus' words suggest that Jonah must have told the people of Nineveh what had happened to him on the way. They saw Jonah's experience as a sign of God, which made them take their repentance seriously. A preacher's experience ought always to be part of his message. God wants our trials to be beneficial for others. This does not only mean that we must share the experience of our salvation and deliverance with others, but that the collective salvation of His children must be a testimony to a pagan world.

1. John 6:30

2. Luke 11:16

3. Luke 11:30

The Lord preaches here a missionary message. The purpose of the sign of Jonah was the conversion of Nineveh. It is God's plan that the rejection of Israel, as symbolized in Jonah being thrown into the sea, and their being kept subject to the wrath of God, as symbolized in Jonah's being in the belly of the fish, would lead to the conversion of the world. If it is true, as some Christians believe, that Israel will take up again the task of world evangelization after the rapture of the church, then the sign of Jonah would be complete.

The great surprise of this passage is in Jesus' interpretation of Jonah's experience in applying it to Himself. It throws a clear light upon the substitute character of His death and resurrection. Jesus' being swallowed up by death was not meant to punish Him for His disobedience but for ours. He died to bring us back from our running away from the Lord and our heading for "Tarshish,"¹ away from the presence of the Lord and from our responsibility to evangelize a dying world.

Jesus' death and resurrection is a miraculous sign in more than one sense. It means not only that our sins are forgiven and that the power of sin is broken within us and its basis taken away; it also means that the great commission to take the Gospel in the whole world is being fulfilled through us. God sees us in Christ as forgiven, sanctified and sent. In Him we have become children, sons and apostles. Because He became this for us, we became it also.

It would have been impossible for the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to understand Jesus' words or sound the depth of them. To them Jesus' answer must have sounded like a cop-out, a refusal to perform a miracle. They could not have suspected how positively loaded these words were. In His answer Jesus secured the continuation of Israel as a nation as well as the role she would play in the future.

Yet, at the Day of Judgment the men of Nineveh would stand up and condemn them. God's rule of judgment will become a rod of punishment if we do not hold to it as a rule. Those who refused to accept the fulfillment, which is in Christ, will be held personally responsible for their failure.

If we assume that Jesus' words about the Day of Judgment are not meant figuratively, we find some very revealing information in them about how we will be judged. Judgment about the Pharisees and teachers of the law will be given to the men of Nineveh. The Apostle Paul says: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?"² God will justify Himself in this manner by giving the verdict over fellowmen to a jury of people who have had the experience of forgiveness of their sins. It cannot be more honest than that! One person will be compared to another, because the principle of sin and forgiveness, of conversion and renewal remains the same throughout the ages.

Every generation has the tendency to look down upon previous generation Enlightenment and progressiveness do not count in the spiritual realm. The fact that uncircumcised gentiles would judge a generation of sophisticated teachers of the law would be very embarrassing. This amounts to having a primitive Stone Age native from the jungle pronounce a verdict over a civilized westerner. Does God not make any distinction among races and civilizations? Evidently not on a moral level. The implication is clear. The criterion is whether one reacts to the preaching of the Word of God with repentance or not. In comparison with the light the people of Israel possessed, the men of Nineveh lived in the dark. A short missionary campaign by Jonah, who did not give evidence of any personal missionary zeal, was sufficient for these spiritually underdeveloped people to make them turn around. Here is a nation that had been saturated throughout the ages with God's revelation of Himself, who heard the Gospel from the mouth of the Lord Himself, who sealed the message with the sacrifice of His own life, who remained as unmoved as a stone. The men of Nineveh will stand up and condemn them. It is possible for a person to be so religious that he or she never comes to a place of surrender to the Lord.

"One greater than Jonah is here." The general meaning of Jesus' words is to demonstrate the similarity between Jonah and Himself. He compares Jonah's experience of being swallowed up by the fish to His own death and burial. Jonah's preaching is like Jesus' preaching. But the differences are greater than

1. Jonah 1:3

2. I Cor. 6:2

the similarities. This is expressed powerfully in the word “greater.” Jonah was in the belly of the fish because of his own disobedience. He was an unwilling prophet. We can hardly credit the conversion of the men of Nineveh to Jonah. Our Lord gave Himself without any reservations, out of love for a lost humanity. Jonah was a sinner, a member of our fallen race. Our Lord is a perfect man, a lamb without blemish, the head of a new generation of people pleasing to God. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”¹ To say that Jesus is greater than Jonah is an understatement.

The second illustration Jesus uses is the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba who came to see King Solomon.² Jonah was sent out, the Queen of Sheba was drawn in. Both are important aspects of the Kingdom of Heaven. “The queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the Lord.”³ The fact that her majesty was drawn by such rumors proves that she had a longing for God’s revelation. That is what she found. When she heard Solomon’s words and saw the organization of his kingdom, she concluded that God loved Israel.⁴ Later in Solomon’s history corruption entered, but there was obviously an important period in the king’s life in which God could reveal something about Himself.

The queen’s state visit must have been very unusual in that period of world history. It took courage for a king or queen to leave the boundaries of his or her own nation and move outside the protection of the national deity (!). And for an absolute monarch to go to another monarch in order to study the organization of his kingdom, implied acknowledgment of her own inability and shortcoming. In this case the woman showed more moral courage than the man.

In the case of the men of Nineveh there was the negative aspect of their sinful lives of which they repented. In the visit of the Queen of the South there is the positive aspect: the building up of a kingdom for which she felt inadequate. Both aspects are being fulfilled in the Person of Christ. He is sufficient if we turn from our sin and if we stretch out our empty hands to Him. On the day of judgment, the men of Nineveh will ask: “Why did you not repent?” and the Queen of Sheba will ask us: “What did you achieve in your life?” We do well to realize that we need the Lord for both parts. There will be many shamed faces when people see their lifework go up in smoke and when they realize that there was no gold, silver or precious stones to keep the building erect.⁵

One greater than Solomon is here. Not only was Jesus greater than Solomon because He did not sin like Solomon did when he allowed himself to be seduced by his foreign wives to worship idols,⁶ but Solomon’s wisdom was borrowed. Jesus is wisdom Himself, not merely the channel by which it comes. Solomon himself calls Him “wisdom” in Proverbs.⁷

In the beginning of this section, Jesus called the generation of His day: “a wicked and adulterous generation.” That must have been an unusual characterization for that time. “Wicked” contains a reference to the strong demonic activity in those days. This is clear from the name given to the area “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.”⁸ Evidently, the place was full with hundreds of demon-possessed people who had become the prey of the devil. We see in the following verses that Jesus task consisted in the cleaning of the house.

Jesus’ breaking up of satanic strongholds, His delivering people from demon possession, and the presence of the Holy Spirit ought to have created an ideal atmosphere for real conversion and fellowship

1. Heb. 1:3

2. See I Kings 10:1-13; II Chron. 9:1-12.

3. I Kings 10:1

4. I Kings 10:9

5. See I Cor. 3:12-15.

6. I Kings 11:4-8

7. Prov. 8:22-31; I Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3

8. Matt. 4:15

with God. The fact that no mass-movement of conversion occurred at that time, made the responsibility of Israel's leaders in Jesus' day the greater. If that generation had only been "wicked," there would have been hope. Jesus characterizes it also "adulterous." That word has an Old Testament ring to it. The Old Testament prophets would use it to indicate that, like a man or woman who had become unfaithful in a marriage relationship, so Israel had become unfaithful to God by serving idols. This is exemplified in the most dramatic way in Hosea. In Jesus' day, however, idol worship was no longer an issue. The Babylonian captivity had cleansed Israel's spiritual life of all traces of idol worship. But Jesus makes clear that Israel's idolatrous mentality has not changed. The negatives aspects may have disappeared, but the positive had not replaced it. There was no longer any overt idolatry, but there was no genuine love for God either. A marriage without love is not a marriage in the full sense of the word. Where there is no love, the heart will reach for something else. The Pharisees had made an idol of their pure doctrine and the uniqueness of Israel's status in the world. Like Jeroboam of old, they had broken with God's revelation of Himself. For this Jesus uses the word "adulterous." Jesus had earlier made clear that the root of the sinful act is in the desire of the heart. He said: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."¹ If we inwardly play with the thought of adultery, we are not different in principle from those who physically commit the act. The only guarantee against unfaithfulness, in whatever form it may be, is in positive love. This is true both on a spiritual and a moral level. If we do not love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength,² we are adulterers in principle. It is possible for us to remain loyal to God and at the same time flirt with something else. We want to be "manly," "not over spiritual," "levelheaded," "socially compatible," and we often do not realize that such an attitude may be a cover up for a lack of complete surrender to God. There ought to be between God and us a relationship that is as open, intimate, complete and inseparable as a marriage.

In vv.43-25 Jesus gives a picture of the condition of Israel as it was at that time. We can only understand this if we look at the whole of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. We saw earlier that Jesus decided to move to Capernaum in obedience to Isaiah's prophecy.³ Isaiah had said about that area: "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan — The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."⁴ When Jesus entered the synagogue of Capernaum for the first time, we read that a demon began to scream.⁵ Both Matthew and Mark report that Jesus cast out many demons.⁶ Jesus was correct in saying that He had swept the house clean and put it in order. But the house remained empty.

This teaches us some important lessons about spiritual powers. Spirits seek a home. We must not underestimate the importance of the fact that God created man in His image and likeness. The Spirit of the eternal God imprints the seal of His being upon the human being He lives in. Maybe this is one of the main points of controversy between God and Satan. Because God, as Creator, has a right upon man, the Holy Spirit can take possession of a human body when there is an act of loving surrender. In the battle for the universe, Satan opposes God on that point also. Nowhere, we read that angels, spirits who serve God, take possession of the bodies of humans. Only evil spirits will try to do that.

The main difference between people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and those who are demon-possessed is in the way the possession takes place. The Spirit of God comes upon our invitation; a demon is an intruder who overwhelms a person. Filling with the Holy Spirit constitutes a constructive building up of

1. Matt. 5:27,28

2. Deut. 6:5

3. See Matt. 4:12-16.

4. Isa. 9:1,2

5. Mark 1:25,26

6. Matt. 8:16; Mark 3:10,11

our humanity. Demon possession is a demolition of our personality. Evidently, part of the curse of devils is that, because of their break with God, they cannot find rest. To compensate for this they seek their abode in a human body. Demons make a caricature of the image of God in man. For most people, the remains of God's image, as it demonstrates itself in our personality, however damaged it may be after the fall, still amounts to a protection against a complete demonic takeover. Jesus teaches us in this image that only the fullness of the Holy Spirit provides complete protection against demonic attacks.

What Jesus says here pertains both to individuals and groups of people. Here the group is addressed. Jesus' words do not mean that those who had been possessed will be possessed again, or that the number of demon-possessed people will increase. That could be possible, but that does not seem to be the point of the story here. The point is that the initial spiritual deafness and blindness of the masses was a direct result of demonic activity. The fact that Jesus went around casting out demons and performing a major spring cleaning, opened the possibility to hear and see again. They may have been unable to hear and see before. The fact, however, that the people are called "wicked and adulterous" indicates that they refused to avail themselves of this opportunity. There was no evidence of love for God which would lead to conversion. As a result of this, the Lord would take the next step, which is switching to parables. The people heard without understanding and they saw without observing. In the next chapter, Jesus says: "In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"¹ The increase in hardness of heart is the result of the sevenfold return of the demons. Jesus does not merely describe here the events to come; the words are meant to be an earnest warning. The warning means that the process is not unavoidable. The point of no return has not yet been reached. If the people could not have changed the course of events, the warning would have been redundant.

Mark's Gospel throws an interesting light upon the story Matthew relates in the last five verses of chapter 12. We read: "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'"² Neither Matthew nor Luke provide us with this background information. But it is obviously important for us to understand Jesus' more or less cool reaction to the visit of His relatives. At this point Mary must have begun to doubt her Son's mental health. If we look at what the Bible says elsewhere about Mary, this comes to us as disappointing. During the time of Jesus' birth and previous to that, Mary showed a deep spiritual insight and a wonderful attitude of surrender to God. Humanly speaking, Mary must have been an enormous support for Jesus in His growing up as a child. That support falls away in this incident. Satan must have worked overtime at this point and there is no reason to assume that Jesus would have been indifferent to this deterioration of natural human bonds of affection. From Mary's viewpoint, we can understand how difficult it must have been for her to keep up with the enigma of Jesus' public ministry. No one but Jesus Himself would be able to understand what was happening. The principle of Jesus' life, His giving Himself in service to others was contrary to all a mother instinct and mother love represents. It was one thing for Mary to surrender herself totally to the Lord; it was something else to sacrifice her Son also. That is not the way mothers are made.

So Jesus faces a new crisis. Evidently, He understood why His mother and brother had come. There must have been the pain in His heart of not being understood by His own mother, the person who was closest to Him on a human level. On the other side was the will of God, His Father, for the work He had come to accomplish. As all crises, this one also must be dealt with and overcome.

For many of us the experience of tension between family relationship and the work of the Kingdom are not foreign. Jesus says here clearly "no" to His mother. His answer is not an absolute break with the family, but a reminder of the priorities that must rule life. Bonds of family must not always have priority. For each of us the love of God ought to be the highest priority of life. This must be our first love. Family relations will only function in a healthy way if love of God is practiced first. That is the reason spiritual

1. Matt. 13:14

2. Mark 3:20,21

relationships often become stronger bonds than natural blood relations. That seems to be implied in Jesus' question: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" That question was rhetorical in the sense that Jesus knew the answer. The point of the question was to make us understand what constitutes genuine family relations. Is a woman a mother, only because she gave birth to a child? Are men brothers, merely because they share the same parents? In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky asks the question "Does the fact that this man had a sexual relation with a girl by means of which a boy was born, make him into a father?" If we give "no" as an answer, we eliminate the responsibility of our human relations. If we say "yes" we assume that any physical bond with another person automatically fulfills the obligations that come with it. It seems almost impossible to answer the question correctly. Jesus did not ask the question to get an answer but to challenge us. Jesus' question contains a worldwide reproach as well as a challenge and a consolation.

The comfort is in the fact that Jesus considers those who do the will of God to be His brother, sister and mother. This immediately includes His natural mother in the extended family. She had said to the angel: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."¹ This brought her into this eternal relationship to God that cannot be made undone. Jesus affirmed this elsewhere, when He answered the woman who praised His mother, with: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."² The effect of our obedience of the Word of God is an indissoluble bond with the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is my brother! And in this family tie with Him there is a similar relationship to others who have the same bond with Him. The brothers of my brothers are my brothers also. These words of Jesus are not a negative denunciation of natural family relations; they elevate human beings to the highest level. In the incarnation God's full plan with man, created in His image and likeness, is reactivated. Jesus' incarnation was, in itself, not a humiliation. Sin is a humiliation. For human beings who are humiliated by sin, the fact that the Son of God became a human being is the greatest honor that can befall a creature. There is a world of meaning in the fact that a woman, any woman in this world, can be a mother of Jesus.

III. The Consequences of the Rejection 13:1-53

The Parables:

Parables are as old as man. They have a strong similarity to fables, such as the Greek fables of Aesop, or the fables of the Frenchman La Fontaine. Fables usually borrow their subject from the animal world for the purpose of teaching a moral lesson to man. Parables are usually not confined to the animal world, but the intent of conveying truth in story form is the same. Some of the parables in the New Testament explicitly or implicitly state the lessons they are meant to teach. But one of the unusual features of some of the parables in the Synoptic Gospels is that they are presented as stories that are complete in themselves. The lesson they convey is sometimes told separately, as in the case where Jesus explains to the disciples only the parables He told in public, and sometimes the lesson is omitted completely. This feature sets the parables apart from any other form of moral teaching.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes about the Parables in the New Testament: "The one and only *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* contains a lengthy section at the end of Matthew chapter 13, of which we copy the following: "As parables occupy so distinguished a place in the Old and New Testaments, especially in the latter, and as the most important information relative to the nature of God, the economy of heaven, the state of separate spirits, the punishment of the wicked, the beatification of the godly, and the doctrines of salvation, is conveyed to mankind in parables, it becomes a matter of the utmost

1. Luke 1:38

2. Luke 11:28

importance fully to understand their nature and their use. The word parable we have from the Greek, *parabolee* ... which comes either from *para* ... near, and *balloo* ... I cast or put, or *paraballein* ... to compare, properly, different things together, so as to discover their relations and similarity; in order to which, the things to be compared are placed or put together, or near to each other, that, by a close inspection of both, the relations and likenesses may be the more accurately ascertained.

Parable and proverb are called in Hebrew *mashal* ... from *maashal* ... to govern or rule, either because the parabolic and proverbial mode of instruction was of general use, and had a sort of universal precedence, which we know was the case among the Hebrews; or because a parable or proverb was the chief or principal illustrative point in the discourse. ...

The method of conveying instruction by parables or moral fictions, sometimes in the form of similitude, allegories, fables, or apologues, was very common, and in high esteem, among all ancient nations: but the Asiatics used it most frequently, and brought it to a higher degree of perfection than any other people on the earth. The despotic and tyrannical nature of their government led them often to make use of this method. Reproof and censure, which it might not on many occasions be expedient or safe to deliver in explicit language, and which might exasperate, when too plainly spoken, rather than correct, could be conveyed with delicacy and success under the disguise of parable. ...

Having traced the word parable through its different meanings in the sacred writings, it may be now necessary to inquire for what purpose our blessed Lord used that mode of speech so frequently: as many have supposed from his own words, Matt 13:11-13, that he addressed the people in parables merely that they might not understand. To you, said he, addressing his disciples, it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given: therefore I speak to them in parables, etc. Now, to do justice to this passage, we must observe, that by mysteries, here, we are to understand, not only things concerning the scheme of salvation which had not been as yet fully revealed, but also the prophetic declarations concerning the future state of the Christian church, as they are signified by the different parables mentioned in the succeeding parts of the chapter. It was not given to THEM to know the purport and design of these things. 'They,' said our Lord, 'are gross of heart:' they are earthly and sensual, and do not improve the light they have received; so that, when many of them might have been preachers of this truth to others, they are found destitute of salvation themselves, notwithstanding the means of it were all within their power: but, said he, 'to you it is given:' because I have appointed you, not only to be the first preachers of the Gospel to sinners, but also the persons who shall transmit accounts of all these things to posterity. The knowledge of these mysteries, in the first instance, could be given only to a few; but when these faithfully wrote and published what they had heard and seen unto the world, then the science of salvation being fully revealed, was addressed to all.

From Matt 13:17 of the same chapter we learn that many prophets and righteous men had desired to see and hear these things, but had not had that privilege: to them it was not given: not because God designed to exclude them from salvation, but because He who knew all things knew either that they were not proper persons, or that that was not the proper time; for the choice of the persons by whom, and the choice of the time in which it is most proper to reveal divine things, must ever rest with the all-wise God.

But it is not intimated that our Lord spoke to the Jews in parables that they might not understand: the very reverse, I think, is plainly intended. It was to lead them, by a familiar and appropriate mode of instruction, into the knowledge of God and the interests of their souls. I speak to them, said he, in parables, i.e. natural representations of spiritual truths, that they might be allured to inquire, and to find out the spirit which was hidden under the letter. Because, said he, seeing the miracles which I have performed, they see not, i.e. the end for which I have performed them; and hearing my doctrines, they hear not, so as to profit by what is spoken; neither do they understand, ... they do not lay their hearts to it, so as to constrict it with that deep attention which such momentous truths require. But that they might not continue in their ignorance, and die in their sins, he adds parable to parable, to make the whole science of salvation as plain and intelligible as possible. Is not this obviously our Lord's meaning? Who that is not most miserably warped and begloomed by some Jewish exclusive system of salvation, can suppose that the wise, the holy, the

benevolent Christ, would employ his time in speaking enigmatically to the people, on purpose that they might not understand what was spoken? Could the God of truth and sincerity act thus? If he had designed that they should continue in darkness, he might have saved his time and labor, and not spoken at all, which would have as effectually answered the same purpose, namely, that of leaving them in destructive ignorance, as his speaking in such a way as should render his meaning incomprehensible.

On the whole I conclude, that the grand object of parabolic writing is not to conceal the truth, but to convey information to the hearts of the hearers in the most concise, appropriate impressive, and effectual manner.”

In spite of Clarke’s eloquent exposition as to the purpose of the parables, we hold to the opinion that the initial purpose of the use of parables, especially in Matthew chapter 13, is for the people *not* to understand, thus perhaps arousing their curiosity and luring them into a mode of investigation that might lead to a full understanding of the truth. At one point Clarke moves into that direction, but I do not believe that the doctor touches the real issue of Matthew’s explanation, that is, that in the use of the parables in this chapter, Christ took a step back from speaking openly to veiling the truth for those who were not ready to accept it.

The parables in Matthew chapter 13 form a unique collection of stories, mainly because of the way they are clustered together. Matthew brings into his writing of the Gospel the habit he had formed as a tax collector, that is of tabulating his material. It should not amaze us, therefore, that we find in Matthew’s Gospel the most complete declaration of the purpose of Jesus’ mode of teaching, quoting in full the words of Isaiah.¹ Thus far, Jesus had used parables as a means of illustrating the truth. That is the truth was stated and the illustration served to drive the point home in the hearer’s mind. That is not the way parables are used in Matthew chapter 13. Here, the use of parables represents a change of Jesus’ mode of teaching. These parables do not serve as an illustration of a truth stated, because no truth is being stated. Jesus’ performance can be compared to a preacher who uses an illustration but has no sermon to illustrate. Imagine a preacher who addresses his congregation as follows: “This morning, I turned on my computer to check my e-mail. I found out that some hacker had wiped out my whole program. Amen.” We would understand the stunned reaction of the flock. Yet, this is apparently what Jesus does in His use of the parables in Matthew’s thirteenth chapter. He no longer preaches a clear sermon.

The change in Jesus’ method should be seen in the light of the events recorded in the previous chapter. The reaction of the Pharisees to a miracle of healing Jesus had performed was: “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”² Jesus had called them: “A wicked and adulterous generation.”³ He compared them to an empty house from which the demons had been evicted but that remained unoccupied.⁴

In all known cases, victory over Satan means the deliverance of a person and the leading on to a path of faith. The casting out of demons often results in a spiritual revival. When, in the nineteenth century in Möttlingen, Germany, pastor Blumhardt cast out a demon from a possessed girl, hundreds of people came to confess their sins. It was the beginning of a spiritual springtime. No country ever experienced a spiritual cleansing as Galilee in Jesus’ days. Outward hindrances for coming to faith had been reduced to nil. Yet, the people saw without seeing and heard without understanding. Jesus holds them personally responsible for this lack of response. A basis of faith is needed for the understanding of “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.” Undoubtedly, this is what Jesus meant when He said: “Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” Without the openness of heart created by an act of believing surrender, no understanding is possible. Intimacy requires

1. See Isa. 6:9, 10

2. 12:24

3. 12:39

4. 12:43-45

mutual desire. If this desire is lacking with one of the partners, there is no basis for intimacy. We must understand that God's hiding of the secrets is not done arbitrarily; it is based on man's refusal.

Verse 13 clearly states Jesus' reason for His use of parables: "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'" The NIV omits the word "because" which is found in the Greek text. The Greek word *hoti* explains the reason or the cause. Jesus concludes that the people have eyes and ears but they do not use them and consequently they are unable to understand truth in its uncovered form. They are as someone who is in an advanced state of undernourishment and to whom it could be fatal to all of a sudden eat a full meal.

This relates clearly to Isaiah's prophecy, in which God uses sarcasm to express His deep sorrow over the fact of Israel's hardness of heart. We understand Isaiah's words: " '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"¹ to mean, "Go ahead! Keep on hearing without understanding..." We base this interpretation on the last line that reads: "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." With Adam Clarke, we come to the conclusion that on the basis of what we know of the character of God, God cannot be held responsible for the hardness of the human heart. If in Scripture there is mention of God's intervention by which a human heart is hardened, it is never in the sense of making hard something that was originally soft. God can continue and make irreversible what man started. It is true that God said to Moses: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," and "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials,"² but Pharaoh's heart had never been anything but hard to begin with. In using parables to people who will not listen, Jesus simply builds upon an existing situation.

The question arises of course: Why? Can God force people to hear and understand? Can a person be forced to be converted? In the light of what we know about God's dealing with man as being created in His image and likeness, the answer should be: No! The way in which God created us implies that the only possible relationship between God and man is one of honor and love, and this must be reciprocal. As we ought to love and honor God, so He loves and honors us. Even in the condition man brought himself by sinning, this principle of relationship with God has not changed. Even in the process of disgrace and punishment, the decorum is maintained. When an army officer is court-martialed, he has the right to be judged by a panel of army officers. God does not rob man of his right to repent and be converted. Isaiah's words: "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" imply that healing is the inevitable consequence of conversion. There is an unbreakable law of cause and effect that kicks in immediately when a human being turns toward God.

Don Richardson, the author of *Peace Child*, suggested once in a sermon that the purpose of the parables in Matthew 13 was a diminishing of light, which would result in a diminishing of responsibility for man. Man, after all, will be judged according to the light he possesses. God may cover this light for those who refuse to accept it so that they will not be condemned to their maximum punishment. Richardson used the intriguing term: "a conspiracy of mercy." However difficult and complicated the problem seems to us, we should never forget that we are facing the answer of a perfect God to man who refuses to be converted. The complications are on man's side, not on God's.

In all this, we should not overlook the importance of Jesus' words to His disciples: "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."³ The Lord Jesus Christ was fully conscious of the fact that He was the fulfillment of all that God wanted to do with His creation. We should allow those glorious words to penetrate our souls. The disciples who heard

1. Isa. 6:9,10

2. Ex. 7:3; 10:1

3. Matt. 13:16,17

them were probably more preoccupied with their failure to understand the parables than with the blessedness of their eyes and their ears.

These words were Jesus' answer to their question: "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" The whole longing of the Old Testament is captured in the words: "I tell you the truth,¹ many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." We are astounded to hear such words coming from a human mouth. These are the words of someone who has looked out over the centuries and who has tasted the spirit of every age.

Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would later repeat those words: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."² Peter's statement reveals something of the mystery behind it. It was the Spirit of Christ who inspired the prophets, who created the longing within them, and who, at the same time, kept the reality of salvation hidden from them: the death and resurrection of the Lord. Now, this same Lord reveals it to His disciples and to us. We need this comparison with the Old Testament in order to correctly appreciate what we see and hear. It is good to read the Old Testament with an eye that is open for what the people of that dispensation missed. We seldom realize how intensely blessed we are. It is so easy to get used to our riches.

Matthew states the most compelling reason for the use of these parables in vv. 34 and 35. We read: "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.' " In His use of the parables, Jesus simply obeyed the prophetic charge given in the Book of Psalms.³ In Asaph's psalm, the poet never comes to the point of completely fulfilling his promise to reveal "things from of old." He never comes any further than the drawing of the line of history from Israel's exodus from Egypt and the wilderness journey to the times of King David. He never really reveals the "hidden things." What Asaph gives us is an open-ended prophecy.

As often in His ministry, Jesus allows Himself here to be led by the prophetic Word of the Old Testament. Matthew points out for us that Jesus moved to Capernaum on the basis of an Old Testament prophecy: "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali- to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: '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.' "⁴ Jesus' ministry of healing was also inspired by the prophetic Word of Isaiah: "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.' "⁵ So here, the switch to the use of parables was not merely the result of Jesus' personal conclusions but an act of obedience to a charge laid down for Him in the Old Testament Scriptures.

In being obedient to this charge, Jesus establishes a link between Israel's history and the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven. He reveals thus that the Kingdom of Heaven is God's mystery that had been hidden from the foundation of the world. The whole of Israel's history of salvation had been a preparation

1. "I tell you the truth" is the translation of the word "Amen."

2. I Peter 1:10-12

3. See Ps. 78:2

4. Matt. 4:13-16

5. Matt. 8:16-17

for it, and it acquired a significance that far surpasses the migration of a mass of people from one place to another.

These verses, 34 and 35, also are the counterweight to the problem posed in vv. 10-17. The point is not the hiding of the truth from those who are unwilling to seek it, but the revelation of God's eternal plan that had been "hidden since the creation of the world." We could say that the fact that these secrets are mentioned here for the first time forms a message in code. The message is there but for those who do not have the key, it remains merely a story. Coding the message was necessary at this stage because an open discussion would play into the hand of the enemy. Once the Holy Spirit had made His dwelling in the human heart the fortress would be invincible. At this stage, a complete understanding of the truth would hand a key to the devil with which he could hinder God's plan.

We see how, in the first four parables, the Lord emphasizes the role of the enemy. This reinforces our conviction about the necessity of coding the message. It must be clear that God would not give away His deepest secrets to people who are not clearly on His side. That fact places the use of parables in a new light. It is obvious that openness to the Lord and the surrender of ourselves to His lordship are absolute conditions for the understanding of the mysteries that are dealt with in these parables. We should also not forget that, even if we have taken our stand at the Lord's side, the message is still given in coded form. Even with the accompanying explanation, no complete understanding is possible without the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is the topic of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, and partly also of the Colossian Epistle.

It becomes clear that the topic is the church of Jesus Christ as the organ of God's wisdom, as is the person of Christ. This involves a whole complex of factors that cannot be expressed in one sentence. We can, therefore, expect that these parables will not explain everything completely, although it is amazing to see how much more is said in them that appears on the surface.

In the seven the Lord approaches the mysteries of the Kingdom first from an earthly perspective, from below, as seen by the human eye. In the next three parables the heavenly perspective is emphasized; we are shown what the Kingdom looks like in God's eye.

1. The Parable of the Sower 13:3-9; 18-23

3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "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.

8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop-a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

9 He who has ears, let him hear."

...

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

According to Mark's Gospel, this simple story is the key to the understanding of all the parables. We read: "Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'"¹

The story is about a farmer who sows seed on his field, and because of the methods he uses, some of the seed falls where it cannot grow and yield a crop. Some people have drawn the incorrect implication from this story that only one fourth of all who hear the Word of God will be saved. This, of course, is not the point in the story where we ought to connect. A farmer, who throws three-fourth of the seed where it cannot grow, doesn't know his job. This cannot be the lesson to be drawn from this parable, especially since, in the next parable, Jesus identifies Himself with the sower. The point of the story is not the amount of seed that yields or doesn't yield a crop but the conditions that hinder the growth or that advance it. Since Jesus pays most of His attention to the obstacles to growth in the story, that must be the most important point. The parable contains a strong warning to those who hear the Word of God.

Hearing in itself is not enough. Even growth is not the ultimate goal, but bearing fruit in faith is. The first and foremost lesson is clearly the fact that the condition of the heart can either hinder or advance growth. The Lord wants us to search our hearts to see what hindrances there could be. This is the meaning of "He who has ears, let him hear."

In depicting the first category of people, "the seed sown along the path," the Lord had undoubtedly the Pharisees and doctors of the law of His day in mind. They had insinuated that the miracles of healing Jesus performed were the result of the pact with the devil our Lord had made. The Word of God left no impression upon them. The Evil One took care that no trace of what was heard would remain in their hearts. In Luke's Gospel the words "it was trampled on"² are added, indicating that it was "a trodden path." Traditionalism and hardening of heart often go together. Where there is fellowship with God there is spontaneity and the tendency to choose original ways. It is amazing how easily the human mind gets used to hearing things to the point where it no longer hears. I remember as a kid vacationing at my aunt's whose house was close to a railway track. The first night, I woke up every time a train passed. After a few nights, I slept through all the noise. Thus the heart hardens itself to the Word when it initially refuses to obey it.

But the Word has tremendous germinating power. It is even able to sprout and break through hardness. This is the reason the devil makes it a point to remove it as soon as it lands. The "danger" is always present that the Word would generate faith if it were allowed to remain. Luke adds: "The devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."³

Of the second category, the Lord says that the seed "sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow." The fact that there was an impenetrable layer of rock one inch below the surface accounted for a more than normal humidity of the soil. The seed would, of course, not germinate in one or two hours. We should therefore interpret the words "when the sun came up, the plants were scorched" not in the sense of a daily phenomenon but rather as the coming of a dry spell. When the rainy season passed the young plants had no chance to stay alive because the roots that wanted to draw moisture in deeper ground hit rock bottom.

We should not spiritualize this image too much, but there is an obvious lesson to be drawn from the layer of rock that is hidden under a surface of fertile soil. There is a hardening of the human heart that is not visible on the surface. Jesus describes that kind of person as "he lasts only a short time." An appropriate word to describe that character is "fickle." We call some people superficial. But we often fail to see that superficiality, a refusal to penetrate into greater depths, is a form of hardness of heart. It is easy to recognize in the ones sown along the path a hardness that flees the reality of God's presence and hides in traditionalism. Superficiality is also a form of flight. It is not merely the way a person is made. This parable suggests that it is brought about by an inner building up of sinful resistance which isolates the innermost of

1. Mark 4:13
2. Luke 8:5
3. Luke 8:12

the soul to the point that the Word of God is unable to penetrate it. It is not the way God made the person. Every human being made in God's image and likeness is able to digest deep inner emotions. A superficial person has allowed himself to become what he is. He is responsible for the wall of inner resistance and rebellion he builds up as a defense against God.

In using the word "superficial" we actually approach the problem in a way that is too positive. We look at the thin layer of good dirt. It would be more honest and beneficial to point to the rocky layer beneath it. The remedy against superficiality is a deep inner brokenness. It is better to suffer that pain than to allow the Word of God to wither in the heat of persecution.

We should also be aware of the deceiving aspect of superficiality. A superficial person appears as a pleasant character. He reacts spontaneously and with joy to the preaching of the Gospel. The relatively high humidity of the thin upper layer is deceiving. Jesus says about that person: "He has no root." The Word of God finds nothing to hold on to in his heart. In Mark's Gospel the KJV adds the word "likewise"¹ (which is not in the Greek) to indicate that it is the same kind of hardness as is in the first example.

The third type stands clearly apart from the two preceding ones. Here the soil is not the hindrance; it is the same composition as that on which the seed produces a harvest. Sin does not appear here in the form of hardness of heart but as a temptation to which one yields. We could qualify the people that are represented here as "Christians" who do not bear any fruit. They vegetate without flourishing. In most cases the process in their lives is slow. The NIV states in Luke's Gospel: "as they go on their way."² The Greek uses the word *poreuomai*, which is a form of "to travel." *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* observes: "The English Revised Version (1885) is much better: 'they that have heard, and as they go on their way are choked.'" It seems like a slow, almost unperceivable process. It is only by looking back over the years that one comes to the conclusion that, after an initial good beginning, there has been no spiritual growth.

The first factor Jesus mentions is "the worries of this life." This stands for anxiety that we will not be able to make it; we will not have enough to live on or to clothe ourselves. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, the Lord delegates that kind of anxiety to the pagan mind. We read: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."³ A Christian should never be anxious about his sustenance. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes us: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"⁴ Very few people realize that anxiety is the first factor that makes spiritual life sterile.

The second factor is "the deceitfulness of wealth." Mark adds to this: "and the desires for other things,"⁵ and Luke: "and pleasures."⁶ What started out as anxiety to camouflage a lack of faith in God's providence grows into a desire for riches and power. Being rich is in itself no obstacle for fellowship with God, but seeking riches is. Abraham was a very wealthy man but this never influenced his fellowship with God. Unfortunately, Abraham is one of the few Bible characters of whom this can be said. God gave riches to Solomon, but he was unable to stand up under that weight. Jesus says that wealth deceives us. It promises us things it cannot give. As the fruit Eve ate could not make her wise, although she attributed that quality to the tree, so riches can never satisfy our spiritual needs. A human being becomes only fully human through fellowship with God, not by adding to his possessions.

1. Mark 4:16

2. Luke 8:14

3. Matt. 6:31,32

4. Heb. 13:5,6

5. Mark 4:19

6. Luke 8:14

The root of the problem is the desires within us. The kernel of the Word of God is sown in a place where other seeds sleep in the earth. Unless, by a conscious act of the will we pull up the thistles and throw them away, that which can really satisfy us will become sterile. Trying to compromise will be our undoing. The problem is that, if we choose one hundred percent for a materialistic way of life, the fact that God created us keeps alive in us a latent hunger for His Word. For this reason, a person who is a complete materialist is never consistent. It is only possible to lead a balanced life if we choose for God without any reservations. The point is not that we would become ascetic. The problem is not that we feed our material needs with material things. The conflict occurs because we want to satisfy our spiritual needs with material things. If money serves no longer to provide us with food, clothing, and a roof over our heads but functions to purchase security, prestige, and power, the thorns begin to grow.

It is amazing to see that the Lord does not spend more time on the last category. After all, the purpose of the sower is to harvest; all other parts are deviations of the plan. We should bear in mind that fertility is always the result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. At the moment the Lord spoke these words, the Spirit had not yet been poured out in human hearts and, consequently, there were no people who could bear this kind of fruit at that time. The fruit of the good soil only came into being after the death and resurrection of our Lord. The words of the Lord, therefore, have a strong prophetic overtone. This pertains probably not only to the part of the good soil but also to the other aspects of the parable. I do not believe we can divide church history into periods of superficiality and periods of materialism, but it is clear that at the time Jesus spoke this parable, only “the seed sown along the path” had a relevant meaning. Persecution because of the Gospel did not occur before Jesus’ crucifixion. The choking of the Word through materialism only occurs when a condition of indulgence appears after the first planting of the church.

The short treatment the Lord gives of this part of the story is also consistent with the coding of the message. By keeping secret the actual process of bearing fruit, the enemy is not given a chance to arm himself against the plan of God and to sabotage it effectively. The fact that, according to the prophetic Word, there would be “a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” must have brought him to despair.

Later in His ministry, the Lord lifts up a tip of the veil when He says: “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”¹ He said this, speaking of His death on the cross, at which time He “poured out his life unto death,”² and gave “His life as a ransom for many.”³ The total surrender of Himself is the key for all bearing of fruit. Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated this in unsurpassable fashion in His own body. Our bearing fruit rests upon our identification with Him in His death and resurrection. The Evil One will never be able to understand that a human being could surrender himself to God out of love. He always suspects that there are ulterior motives. The possibility that one can discover that God’s love is better than life⁴ is beyond his imagination.

Jesus does not state either what constitutes the fruit in this parable. According to the quotation from John’s Gospel it stands for multiplication. One grain of wheat produces one hundred grains; one Christian gives birth to one hundred. In this parable is it not primarily man who multiplies spiritually but the Word sown in the human heart that produces fruit. Referring to Paul’s statement about the fruit of the Spirit, we can interpret it as being: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”⁵

1. John 12:24

2. Isa. 53:12

3. Matt. 20:28

4. See Ps. 63:3

5. Gal. 5:22,23

The comparison is striking. Soil in itself seems to possess little that could profit the building up of the human body, but the grain of wheat finds enough nutrition and humidity in it to cause its death and resurrection. The human heart seems to be the least suitable vehicle for God's revelation of His life, His attributes, and His glory. Yet, this is exactly what happens when the Word of God is sown in our hearts. As it turns out, we are the perfect means for receiving, feeding, and bringing to fruition the Word of God. What is sown is the Word of the Kingdom, that is God's rule in the human heart. The key to our bearing fruit is hearing and understanding of this Word.

There remains the question why the Lord says that this parable contains the key to all the other parables. We read in Mark's Gospel that Jesus said to His disciples: "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"¹ Understanding the lesson of this story is necessary for grasping all that follows. Evidently, the principles evinced in this parable apply to the others also. The central theme is the message of the Kingdom of Heaven. The ultimate goal of the coming of the Lord Jesus is that all rebellion against God would be brought to subjection under His authority. David says in the Book of Psalms: "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" ² And the apostle Paul explains: "The end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."³ This subjection to the absolute rule of God means the victory of life over death. The manner in which this victory is achieved is by planting the seed of life in the human heart. The Word of God overcomes death first of all in the heart of man. This makes man the means by which victory is won. After all it was through man that the rebellion started in this world.

The parable demonstrates the various tactics the devil uses to sabotage: removing life through traditionalism, hardening of the human heart, and temptation. But ultimately the bearing of fruit cannot be obstructed. Life even grows in the midst of death, particularly in death! There is nothing Satan can do against it. Death, his ultimate weapon, is turned against him.

Matthew and Mark mention the fruit as "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown," and "thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." Luke only mentions "a hundred times more than was sown."⁴ This reminds us of the difference in value in two other parables in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew's Parable of the Talents, the amounts differ; in Luke's Parable of the Minas every servant receives the same amount.⁵ There is, on the one hand, an absolute standard that differentiates between the capability of one man and another; on the other hand there is a relative norm that indicates when a person reaches perfection within the framework of his ability. When God compares humans with humans, He concludes that some produce thirty, some sixty, and some one hundred. But when He judges us individually, we are all perfect in Christ, which is a yield of one hundred.

In his *Commentary on The Gospel of Matthew*, G. Campbell Morgan builds a novel interpretation on the expression "This is he which received seed by the way side."⁶ He concludes that the seed in this parable is not the Word of God but man who is sown in the age in which he lives. Some do not bear fruit and have no positive influence upon their generation in regards to the Kingdom of Heaven; others bear fruit and advance the Kingdom. This, rather extreme, interpretation seems to have insufficient ground in this story. It

1. Mark 4:13

2. Psalm 110:1

3. I Cor. 15:24-28

4. Cf. Matt. 13:8; Mark 4:8, and Luke 8:8

5. Cf. Matt. 25:14-30 with Luke 19:12-27

6. KJV. The NIV reads: "This is the seed sown along the path."

is also directly opposed to the explanation given in Mark's and Luke's Gospels. Mark states specifically: "The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown."¹ And Luke states: "The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear..."² It seems farfetched to say that Jesus would have given two completely different explanations to the same story and that at the same time! It is true that Matthew is more explicit in his account of the meaning of the parable than the two other Evangelists. He probably gives us a more complete version of Jesus' words. Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the expression He used was probably idiomatic. Translated into Greek in which the Gospels are written this may sound strange and inaccurate to us. The contradiction appears when we understand Mark and Luke to identify the seed with the Word and Matthew with man. Matthew does not say, "This is the man who is sown along the path" but "This is the seed sown along the path." The image does not only stand for the person but for the ground and the seeds together.

The deepest lesson we may draw from this is that the Lord does not see man apart from the Word. The matter that makes up a human being and the Word of God together form one organic unit. A human being is only completely human when the Word of God has come to him. The person according to God's heart is the one who bears fruit, who reacts with all his being to the Word of God. In the parable, infertility is caused by factors outside the seed. If the seed is identical to the person, the person could not be held responsible for his own infertility. And the intent of the parable is obviously to emphasize man's responsibility.

Both Mark and Luke insert some words of Jesus which, in Matthew's Gospel are found in the Sermon on the Mount.³ There is an interesting correlation between the message of this parable and the testimony of the shining lamp that can be hidden under a bowl or in a jar. But this is not the place to elaborate on this.

2. The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat 13:24-30, 36-43

*24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.
25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.
26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.
27 "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'
28 "'An enemy did this,' he replied.
"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'
29 "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.
30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'
36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."
37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.
38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,
39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.
40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.*

1. Mark 4:14,15

2. Luke 8:11,12

3. Cf. Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16 with Matt. 5:15,16

41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

This Parable is only found in Matthew's Gospel. There is a striking resemblance between this story and the preceding ones, that is the Parable of the Sower and Mark's short parable of how the kernel of wheat grows.¹ The three are like a trilogy with the same theme of seed that is sown in a field. But each presents a different aspect of the truth. In the first parable, the Word of the Kingdom of God is sown in the heart of man. In the second parable, found in Mark, the theme is the miracle of growth of the Word. The keyword there is "by itself," indicating the limitation of man's understanding. In this third parable, the seed that is sown is the person in whose heart the Word was sown.

That is the starting point of the story. It begins with a human heart that has received the seed and yields fruit and then the image changes, making the seed a human being who is sown by God on the field of this world. This kind of switching of meaning of the same image is not uncommon in the Bible. Jesus uses the same pattern in His conversation with the Samaritan woman. He says: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."² Eternal life is compared with well water, but the thirsty who drinks becomes himself a fountain.

It seems an oversimplification to divide all of humanity into two parts. In his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn sounds more realistic when he says that the dividing line between good and evil runs through the heart of every human being. Solzhenitsyn is, of course, right. But it is also true that we can distinguish between one person and another on the basis of the foundation upon which his life and relationship with God is built. All evil, ultimately, originates with Satan and there are traces of Satan in every child of God. Some people, however, have given the key of their life in the hand of God; with others the devil holds it. For those who are on their way to heaven, it is an absolute necessity to understand this fundamental difference. It is essential for our security and for the joy of our faith. For those that are lost, it is also salutary to know the truth. Very few people have consciously surrendered their lives to Satan. Most people think they are serving themselves. The devil rather keeps these people caught in that lie. Those who serve God know they do; those who serve the devil are seldom aware of the fact. Jesus draws the line in this parable to reveal this truth.

This parable is about God's plan with the world. Man only plays a role in this plan inasmuch as he bears fruit for God. It is good for us to see ourselves reduced to this fundamental truth. Our personal needs and aspirations and the importance we attach to them, the honor we believe should be given to us, and the significance we attribute to our personality tend to blur the judgment of our own life. It is not so that God only looks upon man as a number, as part of an army, as cannon fodder. In this parable, the importance of man is judged in terms of his germinating power and his ability to be fruitful. There are, in that image, no factors that devalue the worth of our humanness. Yet, the overriding principle in the whole story is the rule of the Kingdom. Our humanity is subjected to that, or rather it is from this that it owes its existence, its value, and its "raison d'être."

Hidden in this parable is also the principle of the grain of wheat that falls in the ground and dies to bear fruit. As Jesus says in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."³ In those words, Jesus sums up the importance of His own life. He says about Himself: "I am a grain of wheat that dies in order to

1. Mark 4:26-29

2. John 4:13,14

3. John 12:24,25

bear fruit.” It is not enough to see ourselves at the place where God has put us; reality only sets in when we come to the point of totally agreeing with God’s plan for our life. Insight into God’s plan that does not produce praise does not lead us anywhere. God’s plan with this world is that human beings fully develop to the point that His reign is completely established in their lives. In his book *The Power of Prayer*, E. M. Bounds states: “Man is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men.”

In this parable, the Lord also stresses the legitimacy of His acting. The story is about the owner of the field, who sows his own field. What the enemy does is illegal. The coming of the Kingdom of God is normal and legal, and good, and logical. What the devil does in this world is wrong, dishonest, and senseless. His rule is a fake. This throws a new light on the prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”¹

The enemy sows weeds among the wheat. The weeds are of a kind that is difficult to distinguish from the wheat when it grows. There is a kind of weed that is called “cockle,” which resembles wheat but produces no kernel. Almost all of Satan’s activities can be characterized as imitation. What he does resembles the real thing but it is empty ersatz. There is never anything creative in what he does. The difference is in the fruit. Only by continuously comparing the product with the original can we be sure what the real thing is and what is a fake. Every living thing derives its meaning from the love of God. That which exists outside the love of God is empty, “black corn,” weed.

This parable does not provide us with an explanation for the mystery of evil in this world. The only thing the owner of the field says is: “While you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”² We may, of course, not conclude from this that God lets the evil and the good grow up together because He cannot differentiate between those who are His and those who aren’t. If this story does not do justice to God’s omniscience, it is because we are dealing with a parable. We can, however, discern in this story some of the love and concern of the Father for each of His children. He is ready to do all it takes so that not one stalk that can produce fruit would be pulled up. He is even willing to let evil be in order to give to each of us the full measure we need.

Another aspect that receives emphasis in this parable is the apparent lack of difference between the children of the Kingdom and the children of the Evil One. Even the angels are unable to differentiate before the harvest time has come. The devil makes good counterfeits. The Lord warns us elsewhere in the Gospels: “By their fruit you will recognize them.”³

The parable also emphasizes how abnormal sin is in this world. For us who are born and raised in an atmosphere of sin, it is impossible to imagine what a world without sin would look like. We seldom look upon sin as an abnormality and, even more, that man’s fall in sin and its consequences are merely an intermezzo in the history of the universe. When the harvest time comes, it will be the end of “everything that causes sin and all who do evil.”

This parable depicts the harvest in greater detail than do the other two parables. The Son of Man is the central person in the Day of Judgment. Our Lord states in John’s Gospel: “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,” and “he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”⁴ Evidently, the Incarnation is of decisive importance in the role Jesus will play on the Day of Judgment. He has the right to judge mankind because He became man. Paul also states this in his address to the men of Athens: “[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”⁵ And from what Paul writes

1. Matt. 6:10
2. Matt. 13:29,30
3. Matt. 7:20
4. John 5:22, 27
5. Acts 17:31

to the Corinthians, we gather that those who belong to Christ will share this responsibility. We read: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?”¹ On that day, the angels will also play an important part, though less important than man.

How little do we think about that fact that, one day, this world will come to an end. The Day of Judgment occupied an important place in our Lord’s thinking. It is quite possible that most people who are alive today will no longer be alive when that day arrives. Everyone will go through his own Judgment Day. The Day of Judgment may be far from our mind; there is no warrantee that any of us will be alive tomorrow. Yet, most people go through life as if life will never end. For those who live with the Lord, that day will not be a Day of Judgment, the end of all, but the beginning, the harvest.

The Lord concludes the explanation of this parable with a brief but very vivid picture of the eternal destiny of the lost and of the redeemed. No one ever preached so much about hell as Jesus did. Yet generally speaking, the Bible does not give us a clear picture of hell and what it is like. This is the reason so much popular theology about hell has developed over the ages.

Hell is, undoubtedly, not the place where Satan reigns supremely. According to the Book of Revelation, Satan himself will be thrown into hell and suffer.² It is almost certain that we should not interpret “fire” as a literal and physical phenomenon. The “fiery furnace” is a picture that fits into the parable. What happens to the weeds is an image of what will await the person who has served the devil in this life. The parable merely states that they are thrown away.

In a world polluted by sin in which we all live, where awareness of God is so easily suppressed, the possibility of being thrown away by God often fails to make a deep impression upon us. But in eternity, all vagueness will disappear and reality will come to a head. Existence will be determined by being forsaken by God or having fellowship with God. The suffering of hell will primarily consist in the realization that life could have been a full, conscious fulfillment of our being human in the image of God, and it is not. C. S. Lewis correctly stated that hell is the place where man’s image of God in man will become less and less, and heaven the place where the image of God will be perfected in the redeemed. In some of the dead, the image of God will also decompose. This does not mean that there will be no conscious life, but what is conscious life when one is forsaken by God? The weeping and gnashing of teeth suggest a form of emotional life, but certainly not in its highest form.

Over against this is the description of the righteous who have reached their destination. The Lord does this with a paraphrase of a verse from the book of Daniel, where we read: “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”³ The difference between Jesus’ words and Daniel’s suggests a difference in distance. It seems that Daniel sees the morning sky as a shining brightness, just before the sun rises. Jesus sees the sun at its zenith. It is still too early on the clock of eternity to be able to predict what will happen. But Jesus sees it close enough to know what is about to occur. He does not see the heavenly events from afar as Daniel did. He came from the place where it happens.

Both verses also correspond with the personal experience of the child of God. We read in Proverbs: “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”⁴

3. The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast in the Dough 13:31-33

1. I Cor. 6:2

2. See Rev. 20:10

3. Daniel 12:3

4. Prov. 4:18

31 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.

32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

33 He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

These two short parables form the conclusion of this part of the series of parables. We read in v.36 that, at this point, Jesus "left the crowd and went into the house."

According to G. Campbell Morgan, Jesus presents the Kingdom in these first four parables as seen from the viewpoint of this world and in the following three, beginning with vs. 44, from God's perspective.

Both parables are simple as far as the acts performed in them. A man plants a mustard seed which grows into a tree; a woman makes dough to bake bread. A casual look into some commentaries on these verses, however, will demonstrate that the problems begin with the interpretation. Some commentators see in both parables a lesson that explains the enormous growth of the Kingdom of Heaven; others interpret them as an image of the working of evil in the Kingdom which causes it to grow beyond what God intended it to be. The two kinds of interpretation are diametrically opposed. It seems impossible to reconcile them. In the preceding parables in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus emphasized the evil influences that threaten the Kingdom. In the Parable of the Sower, we see the trodden path, the hardening of heart caused by superficiality. And there are the temptations of the worry of the poor and the greed of the rich. In the Parables of the Weeds, the Kingdom is undermined by counterfeit. It would, therefore, be logical to suppose that, in these short parables also, there would be a lesson that is similar to the preceding ones. Those who interpret these parables with the suggestion that the Lord wants to illustrate how well the Kingdom is doing with the stories of a miraculous growth of a seed and the workings of yeast, lose sight of the context in which Matthew places these stories.

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 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."¹ As suggested above, the context of Matthew chapter 13 seems to suggest that this parable deals with the influence of evil.

If the picture of the bird is less convincing, the meaning of yeast seems to be abundantly clear. Yeast, in Jesus' days was spoiled dough. In several instances in the Bible, it is used as an image of sin. The Passover was followed by the weeklong celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. At the inauguration of the feast, God said to Moses: "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is an alien or native-born. Eat nothing made with yeast. Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread."² The Apostle Paul spiritualizes it in an even more convincing way when he writes to the Corinthians: "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been

1. Matt. 17:20

2. Ex. 12:17-20

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.”¹ And yeast was generally excluded from the offerings brought to the Lord. We read in Leviticus: “Every grain offering you bring to the LORD must be made without yeast, for you are not to burn any yeast or honey in an offering made to the LORD by fire.” The only exception was the offering brought at Pentecost, at which occasion yeast could be used. We read: “From wherever you live, bring two loaves made of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour, baked with yeast, as a wave offering of firstfruits to the LORD.”²

Although yeast represents corrupted substance, it serves an important purpose. It makes bread light and tasty. The disgusting feature of yeast is naturalized in the fire when the bread is baked. This may be the most important lesson in these two parables. Evil does not corrupt the Kingdom of Heaven. In the growth of the Kingdom, evil even plays an important role and fulfills a function for good. These parables provide us with no explanation of the existence of evil but they indicate how God can use that which is bad for the building up of life, and how God can even turn a curse around and make it into a blessing. We find this truth illustrated all through the Bible. Every child of God experiences some of this in his or her personal life. Persecution, sorrow, and even death tend to strengthen our fellowship with God. “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God.”³ These parables indicate that this principle is working all through the history of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The devil believes he can thwart the coming of the Kingdom. He purposely sows weeds among the wheat. But the woman does not randomly mix yeast in her dough for the purpose of spoiling it. It is ultimately God who determines what role evil will play in the coming of the Kingdom. The important feature in the story about the mustard seed is probably that the growth is so unexpected. That parable emphasizes the amazement from the side of man. The story of the yeast underlines the fact that the amount of yeast is consciously and carefully measured.

The one thing we may regret in connection with these parables is that our Lord did not leave us any explanation as to the meaning of them. We could apply Peter’s words here that there are “some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”⁴

4. The Parable of the Treasure in the Field 13:44

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

5. The Parable of the Merchant and the Pearl 13:45,46

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.

46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The following three parables in this chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, together with the concluding remark in vs. 52 may have their theme in common with the first four parables in the same chapter, but as far as their approach to the truth is concerned, they stand apart. In these stories, we cast a glance at the Kingdom of Heaven from above, from God’s perspective. There are no references to the influence of evil in the

1. I Cor. 5:7,8

2. Lev. 23:17

3. Rom. 8:28 (NKJV)

4. II Peter 3:16

Parables of the Treasure in the Field and of the Merchant and the Pearl. God looks upon the Kingdom as a prized possession.

We do well at this point to pause and ask ourselves what it is that makes the Kingdom of Heaven so valuable. The answer is found in the second parable, the one about the weeds among the wheat. The Kingdom of Heaven consists of people who have surrendered their lives to the lordship of God. God considers those human beings as His prized possession.

The way in which the Lord tells the story of the treasure is very vivid. There is a world of emotion in the words “found it,” “hid it again,” “his joy,” and “sold all he had.” These expressions form together a reliable evaluation of the treasure. God stakes His all on this!

The question remains why God attaches so much value to people who want to be His. God Himself is the ultimate determiner of value. His image in us makes us precious to Him. In his (unpublished) manuscript,¹ *The Seven Thunders of Truth*, Don Richardson explains that only that which conforms to God’s holiness is acceptable to God. What God accepts He loves, and what He loves has value. In general terms we can say that love, even if it is only the human reflection of God’s love, makes life meaningful and valuable. Ultimately God has Himself in mind in His efforts to take possession of the treasure.

God’s seeking of Himself is not egoism, because He is the only eternal One who has value and meaning, the measure and source of all. That which makes human self-seeking into egoism is that it is an imitation of God’s noblest endeavor. Egoism is based on the original sin of rivalry with God. God is the only one who has the right of self-preservation. Our self-preservation is nothing but rebellion against God. That is what makes egoism sin.

God has expressed Himself in and communicated Himself to His creation, particularly in man whom He saves from sin, cleanses, sanctifies, and glorifies. God says: “Man has value. I rejoice when I see him. I give all I have to get Him back. He is more valuable than everything else together.”

Next to God’s evaluation of the treasure, the price God pays receives full emphasis in this parable. “[He] went and sold all he had.” Jesus says this about the Father and about Himself. It is impossible for us to understand and appreciate what our Lord gave up when He was born on earth. I doubt if any human being who has ever tasted the bliss of heaven would be willing to return to this sin-drenched earth as the weak person he was. That would be infinitely worse than sending back someone who had tasted liberty to a Nazi concentration camp in World War Two. Yet, He, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”² This is what makes the life of our Lord Jesus Christ so different from ours. We are thrown into this life without any previous consultation. We don’t know from where we came or where we are going. He came because He consciously emptied Himself of all He had. His was a well-calculated act of the will. He considered us more valuable than Himself. Yet, we owe our value to Him!

Then the last words of these stories catch our eye: “He bought it.” These words give to our salvation all the security and completeness that is needed. John records: “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”³ And the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”⁴ The apostle Paul assures us: “You were bought at a price.”⁵

The next Parable opens with the word “once again.” The Greek word is *palin*, which, according to Strongs, conveys “the idea of oscillatory repetition.” Yet, this story is not a mere repetition of the Parable of the Treasure in the Field. In the treasure story the emphasis is on the element of surprise. The man who

1. I believe it was never published

2. Phil. 2:6,7

3. John 19:30

4. Heb. 1:3

5. I Cor. 6:20

found the treasure was not a treasure hunter. He found the treasure accidentally at a place where one would not expect to find treasures. The merchant of pearls, however, was purposely looking for a pearl. He knew where to look. His find was no surprise in itself. The surprise was the quality of the pearl. That seems to be the lesson of this wonderful story. Jesus demonstrates that He is looking for perfection and He stakes His all on that. In that story, the Lord is the expert, the connoisseur. In the Kingdom of Heaven, which in this parable is clearly the church of Jesus Christ in her ultimate perfect form, the bride in her bridal gown, “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish,”¹ our Lord has found that which is unequalled in the entire universe.

When we look at this revelation of ourselves, we cannot but feel shame and embarrassment because of a sense of failure. We believe that God must have made a mistake. This cannot be our picture that is drawn here. But as the expert sees the final product in the uncut diamond, so sees our Lord what is, as yet, hidden to our eyes. He knows why He sells all He has. He knows what its worth is. It would be sinful not to do it. The merchant of pearls does not hesitate one moment. For him there is no exuberant joy, or hasty selling of all. His is a levelheaded, business-like decision. We may conclude from this that both elements are present in God’s attitude toward us: the emotional reaction, the businesslike, almost legal consideration.

Sometimes these parables are interpreted differently, as if the buyers in the stories represent not God but man. I am convinced that what is said above is what our Lord intended it to mean. He is the one who sold everything. Yet, we can also say that, if we want to find full satisfaction in our fellowship with the Lord, we have to stake our all on it. In our case, however, most of what we possess, if not all of it, is hardly worth possessing at all.

6. The Parable of the Fishnet 13:47-50

47 "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish.

48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.

49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous

50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this parable also, the perspective on the Kingdom is from above. This parable seems to fit better in the series of the mustard seed and the yeast. There is in this story a greater emphasis on evil, on that which is worthless: more on what is bad than what is good. The bad stuff seems to be unavoidable in the catch. “The bad” is probably also fish but of a kind that either is not fit for consumption or is too small.

The main stress in this story is on the future, when the net is pulled up on shore. This brings this parable in line with the parable of the weeds, in which everything is left until the time of the harvest. The pulling up of the net, when the world comes to its last day, is identical to the harvest. That makes this parable a worthy conclusion of the series, because it draws our gaze to the future to the goal to be reached. We still live in the days when the net is in the water, but the time will come when it is pulled ashore.

We should not look too closely at the details of this story. The image of the Kingdom is limited to the net, or maybe to the net and the sea. What counts is the catch. As in the story of the weeds, it is stated that there will be a separation of the evil from the good. We read: “First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn” (Vs. 30). This looks like the rapture in reverse. Our Lord probably did not intend to give us a chronological order of events but rather He wanted to indicate that the righteous are the rightful occupants in this world.

1. Eph 5:27

The Lord emphasizes again the fate of the lost. There is in this story not even any mention of the bliss of the saved, which we find in the parable of the weeds. We may conclude from this omission that the Lord intended this story to be a warning to those who did not want to repent. In our day, such an approach to evangelism would be highly unusual. This is probably due to the fact that we do not take seriously enough the being thrown into the fiery furnace and the gnashing of teeth; so we don't use those arguments. The fact that Jesus did it should give us food for thought.

7. The "Parable" of the Teacher of the Law 13:51,52

51"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied.

52He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

We put the word "Parable" in quotation marks because there is a question as to whether we are dealing with a parable in this story.

Jesus concludes His teaching with the question, "Have you understood all these things?" The disciples' reply is: "Yes." If this answer is genuine and not based on some misunderstanding of facts, we have reason to be jealous of those disciples. Even the most brilliant of Bible expositors has to admit that behind these, apparently simple stories, lies a complex world of laws of the Kingdom of Heaven. The truth, however, is that however complex these laws may be, the Lord has expressed them for us in a series of simple everyday life images. Our problem may be that we understand so little of everyday life!

This last story stands apart from the other ones in that it deals with the relationship of the disciples to the Kingdom. In a sense it is the counterpart of the previous parable. There the angels are drawing the balance of the catch; here human beings are taking inventory of their possessions.

Jesus speaks about a "teacher of the law." A thorough knowledge of the Word of God is necessary in order to know what we possess. The things of God have been given in the hands of man. We are rich; so rich that it is impossible for us to make a complete inventory of our possessions. There are some things we know, which are called "old treasures." For a Jew who knew the Old Testament there were points of contact with the Kingdom of Heaven. But there are also "new treasures," new elements in the Kingdom which "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived [which] God has prepared for those who love him."¹

In his commentary on *The Gospel of Matthew*, G. Campbell Morgan draws the conclusion that, from that time on, the disciples who understood the parables, took the place of the teachers of the law and had to begin teaching these truths. In order to come to such a conclusion, however, we have to read Jesus' words in reverse. Because Jesus says: "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." It rather seems that the Lord's intention was to emphasize the continuity between the Old Testament and the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. But those who only hold on to the Old Covenant and go no farther, those who are teachers of the law but not disciples, will not be able to understand the essence of the Kingdom.

Bringing treasures out of the storeroom is more than making an inventory. Those who become part of the Kingdom are "servants of Christ [who are] entrusted with the secret things of God."² It is their responsibility to share those secrets with others.

1. I Cor. 2:9

2. I Cor. 4:1

IV. Jesus' Second Period of Ministry in Galilee 13:53-14:12

1. Rejection in Nazareth 13:53-58

53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there.

54 Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked.

55 "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?"

56 Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"

57 And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

58 And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Luke's Gospel gives us the most detailed description of Jesus' return to His hometown, Nazareth.¹ It is difficult to establish the right chronology of events by following Matthew's schedule. As we saw earlier, Matthew organizes his material categorically. Without the complimenting information in John's Gospel, we would get the impression from Luke that Jesus went to Galilee immediately after the temptation in the desert of Judah. According to John, Jesus first made debut in Jerusalem and departed from there to Cana.² There was evidently a longer journey through some of the Galilean cities before Jesus arrived in His hometown where He had spent most of His youth.

Jesus would have been less than human if He had not eagerly anticipated this return. He would not have been a real child if He had not imagined Himself sitting on the rabbi's chair, preaching. So in a sense, this return was a fulfillment of a dream.

But His former neighbors only know Him as the carpenter's son, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. They reacted to His preaching by saying: "Who does He think He is!" Matthew does not report the fact, as Luke does, that they tried to kill Jesus.³

2. The death of John the Baptist 14:1-12

14:1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus,

2 and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,

4 for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."

5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.

6 On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much

7 that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked.

8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted

10 and had John beheaded in the prison.

11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

12 John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

1. See Luke 4:14-30.

2. See John 2:1

3. Luke 4:28-30

The word of the death of John the Baptist affected Jesus to the point where He tried to get away from the crowd and find some solitude, as we see in v.13 of this chapter. It is, however, difficult to determine exactly at what point in Jesus' ministry John was decapitated. The chronology is obscured by the fact that both Matthew and Mark place the rumors about Jesus' popularity at the beginning of their report. Both evangelists give the impression of looking back in order to remind the reader how John came to his end. Yet, the death of John the Baptist must have come about the time of the feeding of the five thousand. This means that it is not so much a matter of backtracking as of looking ahead.

At this time the people began to ask the question who Jesus actually was. Some time after John the Baptist's death, the disciples voice the people's opinion that Jesus might actually be John the Baptist returned to life. At Jesus' question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" we read that they said: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."¹ These rumors also reached the ears of King Herod. Matthew and Mark give the impression that Herod may have believed this himself, but Luke corrects this, indicating that Herod was more levelheaded than that. We read: "Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, 'I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?' And he tried to see him."² Matthew and Mark may have received their information from Herod's courtiers, to whom Herod may have made the impression that he believed the rumors for the purpose of getting more information out of them. Herod's grandfather used this ruse successfully at an earlier stage.³

There are some striking features in the story about John's death. The first is the double-faced, not to say triple-faced attitude, of Herod. He lived with his brother's wife. He put John in prison because John had openly condemned his immoral act. He does not dare to kill John, in spite of Herodias' insistence. Evidently, he believed that to kill John the Baptist would be politically unwise, but also his conscience would not allow him to do it. The way Herod dealt with his conscience is interesting. He was a complicated man. Mark writes: "Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 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."⁴ He knew that what he did was wrong. He had no plans to change his behavior. Yet, he let John appear before him from time to time to torment his own conscience. This must have given him a sense of enjoyment. He may have thought that this kept his life in balance. His self-inflicted punishment compensated for the enjoyment of living with Herodias. In limiting his self-chastising to interviews with John, he could enjoy Herodias whenever he wanted. Enjoyment tortured by a bad conscience is no enjoyment. But if a bad conscience is allowed to expose itself occasionally, it does not interfere with other phases in life. Some people take this attitude toward religion. To go to church from time to time may serve a purpose.

Herod's distress in v.4 fits the same category. He felt himself under obligation to keep his word to the daughter of Herodias, because of his oath. It was, of course, regrettable that this would cost the life of a righteous man, but Herod did not want himself to be known as a man who did not keep his word. He did not want to be called a liar; then rather a murderer! There are other examples in the Bible of people who considered the sin of breaking a promise greater than any other sin. We read about Jephthah⁵ and King Saul.⁶ Jesus shows that sin does not begin at the breaking of an oath but at the making of one.⁷ And the

1. Matt. 16:13,14

2. Luke 9:7-9

3. See Matt. 2:7,8.

4. Mark 6:19,20

5. Judg. 11:30-40

6. I Sam. 14:24-30, 38-45

Apostle James repeats the same in his epistle.¹ The Bible's judgment over King Herod is sharp and absolute. He is portrayed as being a weakling. Jesus calls him "that fox."²

It is clear that Herodias was even less scrupulous than Herod. She wanted John the Baptist' head. She was unwilling to give up Herod and she kept this goal in mind, regardless of the obstacles. She feared that John's testimony would have too great an influence upon Herod's conscience. That fear may not have been unrealistic, which is why John had to be removed. So far Herod had protected John against this murderous desire. There may have been scenes of quarrels between the two lovers about this.

In the light of God's omnipotence, the fact that John the Baptist had become a toy in this intrigue evokes some serious questions. Matthew also adds: "Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet." Herod's protection of John was like that of a fox protecting the farmer's chickens. This protection had nothing to do with love, but with calculating self-preservation.

Yet, however many factors played a role in John's circumstances, we must assume that John's life was in the hand of God, not in the hand of Herod. The problem is that God, who had sent John as the herald for His Son, does not seem to do anything when His interference is needed. We saw earlier that John struggled with this.³ It seems here that the enemy has won the victory. Satan made sure that God's ambassador would be deeply humiliated. We can hardly imagine a more vulgar scene than to lose one's life as a stake in a gamble and a party of drunks. John barely fared any better than Jesus Himself! One Old Testament incident provides a good illustration of this kind of shame. We read: "In the course of time, Nahash king of the Ammonites died, and his son succeeded him as king. David thought, 'I will show kindness to Hanun son of Nahash, because his father showed kindness to me.' So David sent a delegation to express his sympathy to Hanun concerning his father. When David's men came to Hanun in the land of the Ammonites to express sympathy to him, the Ammonite nobles said to Hanun, 'Do you think David is honoring your father by sending men to you to express sympathy? Haven't his men come to you to explore and spy out the country and overthrow it?' So Hanun seized David's men, shaved them, cut off their garments in the middle at the buttocks, and sent them away. When someone came and told David about the men, he sent messengers to meet them, for they were greatly humiliated. The king said, 'Stay at Jericho till your beards have grown, and then come back.'"⁴ That is the way Satan mocks God's envoys.

The Apostle Paul says about the Lord's apostles: "It seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world."⁵ If this sounds nonsensical, it is because it is. If we cannot picture ourselves as being at the center of controversy between God and Satan then all troubles and hardships make no sense. At the day of reckoning, the way God's representatives have been treated will certainly be brought to attention. Of course, the fact that John's real life only began when he was decapitated, places all in a different light. Satan's insults open for us the door to God's glory.

This does not solve the riddle of God's permission of evil in this world. The ever recurring question is whether there is no other way. Could God not have done any better? We hold to the truth that God is

7. Matt. 5:33-37

1. James 5:12

2. Luke 13:32

3. See Matt. 11:1-15.

4. I Chron. 19:1-5

5. I Cor. 4:9-13

perfect and, consequently, all He does is flawless. What we see is contrary to our expectation that God ought to be the God of the happy endings. The life of John the Baptist seems to disprove this. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ contradicts this, unless we see that His resurrection from the dead is a happy ending. God is rather the God of the happy beginnings. There will be many tears that must be wiped off our faces, but that is what God promises to do.

John's disciples came to claim his body and give him an honorable burial and they came to tell Jesus what happened. Matthew tells us how Jesus reacted to this news. Evidently, it hit Him hard and He sought a place where He could digest the news and where He could be alone with the Father. According to Mark, the incident coincided with the return of Jesus' disciples from their evangelistic campaign.¹ Jesus' effort to withdraw was also prevented by a mass show of a crowd of people, which forced Jesus to keep on moving. There would be no time for solitude and reflection.

3. The miraculous feeding of the multitude 14:13-21

13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

16 Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

17 "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

18 "Bring them here to me," he said.

19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. 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 the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

As Jesus is ready to step in the boat and cross the lake with His disciples, a multitude of over ten thousand shows up. And they arrive on the other side before Jesus and the disciples. We could see in this one of Satan's efforts to hinder the Lord's work. If he does not succeed to discourage by too little fruit, he tries too much. It is wonderful to see how the Lord reacts to this new condition. There is nothing wrong in going to retreats or taking a vacation. But we must not be longing for rest at the time God wants us to work. Jesus' fatigue and His mourning the death of John disappear the moment He sees the people with their need. We read: "He had compassion on them and healed their sick." As was the case after His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus caught the vision of the fields ripe for harvest. He fed Himself with the joy of obeying the will of the Father who had sent Him.²

The amazing feature of this scene is the remote area in which this took place. As with the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus does not go to the masses, they come to Him. Ralph Waldo Emerson is credited with saying: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap, than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." As with the ministry of John the Baptist, people come in overwhelming numbers to the place where their spiritual hunger can be satisfied.

1. See Mark 6:29,30.

2. John 4:31-36

There must have been a festive atmosphere with all the sick being healed and the greatest preaching this world has ever heard. At the time it ought to have ended it only began. Instead of being driven home by hunger, the crowd is served a banquet of bread and fish. This was no occasion for words only. The meal was not characterized by a great variety of food but by simplicity and abundance. It is as if the Lord wanted to accentuate the basic value of eating. This is about staying alive, about being able to go on, about survival because there is food. It is not a matter of living to eat but of eating to live.

There is also the element of the surprise to find food where one could not expect to find it. And the feeling of being satisfied played an important role in it. The miracle of multiplication highlights the wonder of the elements that are being multiplied. As a person who is starving to death is best qualified to value a piece of bread, so our Lord demonstrates the intrinsic value of bread and fish.

These people who followed Jesus did not show much precaution in that they had made no provision for their extended journey. Among the ten thousand people or more, there was only one person who had five loaves of bread and two fishes. Most people in the crowd were not even aware of the fact that they were first seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and they were totally amazed to discover that “all these things” were given to them as well. The laws of the Kingdom are always at work in the presence of the King, whether we are aware of that or not.

Going back to Jesus’ initial reaction at seeing the crowd, we read that He “had compassion on them and healed their sick.” Mark adds to this: “because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”¹ The expression originates with Moses, who prayed for Joshua, saying: “May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”² The prophet Micaiah used the same words, predicting the death of King Ahab: “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, ‘These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.’”³ Every time the expression is used it is in connection with a leader of Israel. Ezekiel says some important things about the subject, pointing to the Person of the Messiah.⁴

Israel had been a theocracy. It was, therefore, not strictly necessary that Moses be replaced after his death. It was not that a successor of Moses was needed because God was incapably of reigning directly over Israel, but because Israel was not ready. The comparison with sheep goes much deeper than meets the eye. God created man as man. A person who is aware of his intrinsic human dignity is one who knows that he bears the image of God. Such a person is ready to accept God’s rule over his life. He who behaves like a sheep will be treated like a sheep. It is this fact that a human being, as an individual, cannot orient himself upon God, that evokes Jesus’ compassion. That fact put even the death of John the Baptist in the shadow.

The harm caused by Satan went well beyond the beheading of God’s herald. At the death of John it becomes clear that it concerns an injustice done to a man sent by God. The fact that here are more than ten thousand people who have lost the image of God in their lives is even worse. The fact that this is not even recognized as an injustice makes it the more serious.

We must see Jesus’ teaching at this point against that background. Jesus’ teaching is meant to restore to people “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”⁵ It is on this basis that Jesus performs miracles of healing and supplies the necessary nourishment.

There is also in Jesus’ instructions to the disciples an element of tutoring. Matthew reports Jesus as saying: “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” John’s Gospel indicates that it was

1. Mark 6:34

2. Num. 27:16,17

3. I Kings 22:17

4. See Ezek. 34.

5. Col. 3:10; Eph 4:24

particularly Philip who was put to the test in this.¹ We can image how Jesus' command drove the disciples to despair. It is when all is desperate, when all roads for retreat are closed off, that Jesus performs His miracle. We do not read how the miracle actually was done. It seems that Jesus began by dividing the bread and fish among the twelve disciples. That means that each disciple must have stood there with a piece of bread and a piece of fish in his hand. The more than ten thousand people were seated in groups of fifty or a hundred. That means that there must have been between one hundred fifty to two hundred groups. Every disciple must have been responsible for ten to fifteen groups, that is between one thousand to fifteen hundred each. Let us say that each disciple divided his little piece of bread and fish into ten pieces, which were given to one person in each group. That person continued the division until everyone had been fed. That seems to be the most logical and least time consuming way in which the miracle could have taken place.

Then we wonder why Jesus ordered that the leftover pieces be picked up. The meal was finished. Was this done to take an inventory? It indicated the sheer magnitude of the miracle, the abundance of it. After more than ten thousand people have eaten of the five loaves, there are twelve baskets full left over! According to John's Gospel this was done so that nothing would be wasted.² This is a strange paradox. The miracle produces an overabundance which could not be thrown away. The enormous quantity must be carefully counted. We are not told what happened to these leftovers. It is possible that the food was sold and the money was put in the disciples' cashbox. The pieces would not have been gathered and counted to be thrown away. The people had eaten their fill. It could also be that every person received some food to take home. That would have been a good way to send the people away. It is not a mean task to dismiss a crowd of that size.

It seems that the enormity of the miracle only penetrated the people's mind when the baskets were filled with the leftovers. That brings them to the conclusion that Jesus is "the Prophet who is to come into the world."³ That is a reference to Moses' prophecy.⁴ John states at this point that Jesus knew the people intended to come and make him king by force.⁵ The counter measures Jesus took were very effective. First He forces the disciples to get into the boat and row back to Capernaum. Matthew says that Jesus made them get into the boat. This was a demonstration of His great spiritual authority. There was a binding of the invisible strong man, after which all forms of resistance melt away and disobeying the command was inconceivable.

4. Walking on water 14:22-36

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

24 but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25 During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

1. John 6:5,6

2. John 6:12

3. John 6:14

4. Deut. 18:15,18

5. John 6:15

29 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

34 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret.

35 And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him

36 and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

Finally, Jesus finds the time alone with the Father, which He had sought ever since He received word about the death of John the Baptist. One of the mysteries of life is the fact that, at this time, a storm breaks out over the lake and the disciples are in danger of drowning.

Once the disciples are gone, Jesus sends the crowd of more than ten thousand home. The fact that this seems to go smoothly without any trouble may be an indication of the part the disciples would have played in exciting the crowd to crown Jesus as king. When everybody has left, Jesus finally finds the time and solitude He had longed for.

Matthew emphasizes the fact that Jesus was alone on the mountainside and that He prayed. We can only guess how the Lord unburdened Himself by rolling the emotional load upon the Father and how He received love that rejuvenated Him. To be alone with God is one of the most difficult things to accomplish in life. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote a poem in which he uses Jesus' prayer on the mountain as an example. He expresses his frustration that he cannot find the kind of mountain he can climb alone, where the world does not follow him. We may be jealous of Jesus' loneliness and oneness with the Father, and we may not know what actually happened between the two of them during those hours, but it is even a blessing to stand and look at the scene from afar. Jesus came with questions that cried for an answer. There was the death of John the Baptist, the threat to His own life by Herod, and the result of the evangelistic campaign the disciples carried out. I suppose that as soon as Jesus went into His closet and closed the door, the place was immediately filled with the presence of the Father. The man Jesus knelt down or stretched out on the ground in joyous adoration of the glory of God. Maybe He quoted a Psalm, like Psalm 131 – "My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore." Thus Jesus' question melted away, because no questions remain in the presence of God. The answer is in His presence. If God is absent, there are no answers; if God is present, there are no questions.

We read that Jesus did not go to the disciples until "the fourth watch," which is between 3 and 6 AM. This means that He spent almost the whole night in prayer. Thinking how much sleep I need for myself, this makes me jealous, not only of Jesus' prayer life, but also of His excellent physical condition. Yet, Jesus' night watch was not a supernatural matter. Some people can skip a night of sleep without serious consequences. Albert Schweitzer said that, in the prime of his life, he sometimes worked all night and was fit enough the next morning for another day of work.

The disciples, in the meantime, experience serious difficulties. The lake is rough and stormy and although they left at dusk, they had not reached the other shore at 3 o'clock in the morning. The distance from Bethsaida to Capernaum was only a few miles. According to John's Gospel the disciples had rowed "three or three and a half miles."¹ Evidently, they were rowing against the wind and were pushed away from the shore they tried to reach. Mark adds that Jesus "saw the disciples straining at the oars."²

1. John 6:19

2. Mark 6:48

In this crisis situation, the disciples must have thought that the presence of the Lord would have made all the difference. It was obvious that Jesus forced them into making this journey. Jesus would be able to see their trouble from the mountain where He stayed behind. It is also clear that the Lord was in no hurry to come to their aid. As we observed earlier in connection with the storm on this lake when Jesus was present in the boat and had fallen asleep, there was a demonic element in this disturbance of the ecological balance. We could say that Jesus had to choose between being forced to be crowned king and letting the disciples face this storm. He must have considered that the storm was the smaller danger. We can draw a parallel between this struggle and the struggle Israel had with the Amalekites in the desert.¹ In this case the real Moses lifted up His hands to heaven and assures the victory.

Then the Lord walked toward them over the water! It makes us dizzy to think that everything Jesus did as a human being, He did by faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit. How in the world is it possible for a human being to perform such a miracle, simply by having faith in God? This miracle was directly related to God's power of creation, in which God, by speaking to the atoms and molecules, makes them obey His will. We may not be able to imagine this possibility, mainly because it involves things that go way beyond our human understanding. What is also so mind-boggling to us is that this power demonstrates itself through a human being, someone like we are. Earlier, the masses Jesus had fed wanted to make Him king, being manipulated by demonic powers. After His prayer on the mountain, the heavenly kingdom reveals itself in Jesus. The temptations in Paradise and in the desert are repeated here and the fruits of victory become evident. I do not know if every person who is in fellowship with God, even after having experienced a total deliverance from sin, will ever be able to do what Jesus did here. Not every good chess player becomes world champion either.

We ought not to be too amazed at the reaction of the disciples on seeing Jesus. Whether they were superstitious by nature or not makes no difference. For a rational person who does not believe in spirits, it is much worse to see one than for a person for whom paranormal phenomena are part of his belief. Jesus does not reproach the disciples for this nervous outburst of emotions. He is obviously aware of the fact that His appearance in this manner is something that is well beyond their ability to comprehend. His words are encouraging and kind. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Our trials and temptations never go beyond the boundaries of what we can humanly take. And if it seems that they are going too far the Lord will immediately reveal His presence to us.

Matthew is the only evangelist who describes Peter's daring challenge. Peter's experience opens new perspectives for us. When Peter sees Jesus walking on water, he says in his heart, I can do that, too. It is the human aspect of the miracle, rather than the supernatural, that appeals to Peter. Peter does not stop at the fact that what Jesus does is impossible. What he sees is that a human being is walking on water. In general, we do not react positively to something that goes against our human nature. If our human nature ponders the possibility of swimming, or flying, or landing on the moon, it is because of God's original intent for mankind. If there is something in us that reacts to what we see, it is because that something is in principle already within us. What follows justifies this supposition.

Jesus does not reproach Peter for his arrogance of wanting to do what isn't his to do, but He reprimands him for his unbelief when he fails. Jesus' command: "Come," opens the door for what follows. Peter did get out of the boat and he did walk on water. He was obviously so much influenced by the Lord's presence, that he felt himself able to do this. The power needed to conquer the law of gravity was released in Peter because of the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. But Peter's faith also played a role in this. For a while he fixed his eyes upon Jesus and he walked on water.

The reason Peter began to sink is not what we would think when reading this story superficially. It is not that Peter did not know what he was doing when he began to walk and that, all of a sudden, he became aware of it. He was not afraid of the water, but of the wind and the waves. The enemy succeeded to distract

1. Ex. 17:8-16

for just one moment. It was unreasonable fear that made him sink. Fear and faith are incompatible. And when faith in the Lord falls away, the other follows automatically.

What happened to Peter shows how paradoxical a human being is. When faith pulls him down he shouts: "Lord, save me!" That is what the Lord does. Doubt is always negative; it does not base itself upon the promises of God. Jesus had said: "Come." That command contained the power to come. As soon as Peter lost sight of this, he moved outside the field of power and he began to sink. It was not a question whether God existed or not, or whether the Lord could help, because as soon as things go wrong, Peter turns to Christ.

What this story emphasizes is the place of faith and doubt in the practical carrying out of our task. I believe in God and yet in the everyday exercise of my task there is little evidence of clinging to God's promises. The Lord's reproach to Peter is also a reproach to me.

It seems unreasonable that the Lord rebukes Peter for not being able to walk on water, doesn't it? We would have expected that Jesus would have lectured Peter that he, a mere mortal, tried to do what only God's Son can do. The implication of the fact that walking on water is an act of faith is that the Lord Himself did this by faith. It was the man Jesus who walked on water. When Peter stepped out of the boat, he appeared to have understood something of God's intention with human beings. The wind and the waves made Peter believe that he had reached too high. That is what Jesus reproaches him. As if God's plan for man can be thwarted by wind and waves! The devil succeeds too often in blurring our vision of God by his propaganda. That which we have seen by faith, even if it were only in a flash, we ought never to lose sight of.

Mark adds to this story that when Jesus walked toward the boat, "He was about to pass by them."¹ This sounds contradictory, considering the fact that Jesus went to them because they were having trouble reaching the other side. Why would the Lord not help them if He had come to do so? A closer look reveals, however, that Jesus was consistent in putting the disciples to the test. First, He waited till it was "the fourth watch of the night" and then He acted as if He was passing by without offering to help. God wants to know how much confidence we have in Him and in His willingness and ability to help. His testing serves the purpose of freeing us from our ingrained suspicion toward Him. If God had ulterior motives and evil intents, if He would abandon His standard of perfect holiness, honesty, righteousness and love, the whole universe would collapse. The very fact that the atoms of creation still hold together is guarantee enough that God is still faithful to His own standards.

Mark's short observation shows more than anything else the purpose of the testing. This is best illustrated in Moses' words to the people of Israel in the desert: "Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."² God allowed His people to be hungry! Not because He could not feed them, but because there were certain lessons to be learned that could not be learned in any other way. As in the Book of Job, God uses Satan's attacks upon us as study material for the building up of our spiritual character.

When Jesus climbs on board, there is an immediate change in circumstances. The wind dies down and, according to John's Gospel, "immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading."³ Stanley Jones, in one of his devotionals, comments on this passage by contrasting the hopelessness of human toil with the evident "normalness" of Jesus' victory. When the Lord is there, the goal is reached, because He is the goal.

1. Mark 6:48

2. Deut. 8:1-3

3. John 6:21

There is also an interesting difference between the way Matthew reports the end of this incident and Mark's ending. Matthew closes with the disciples' confession: "Truly you are the Son of God." Mark states: "They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened."¹ This is less controversial than it seems. In calling Jesus "the Son of God," the disciples actually denied that what Jesus did by walking on water was part of God's original plan for man. They were saying that what Jesus did was not an act of faith by a human being, but a demonstration of His divine nature, thus excluding themselves from the possibility of reaching such level of trust in the Father. They said: "Only God can do such things"; that is not part of man's options. This shows that they had completely missed the point of Jesus' performing His miracles by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. The hardness of their heart would not allow that possibility. As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes about Mark's comments: "The Evangelist seems hardly to find language strong enough to express their astonishment." Excessive amazement may sometimes be a sign of unbelief. True trust in God is not too amazed when He demonstrates His omnipotence.

There is also, of course, the possibility that the disciples began by being amazed and ended by making their confession, because their confession was at the same time a true confession. After all, who would be able to reach the level of faith that allows one to walk on the water except the perfect, sinless man, the Anointed One, the Son of God? It is possible to confess with our mouth what our heart cannot understand. Of all the twelve disciples in that boat, only Peter understood, however partial and faulty his understanding may have been, that God intended much more for man than man could ever dream. Nothing will separate us from God more than the drawing of an absolute line between Him and us. The glory of the Gospel is that we can no longer distinguish between what is natural and supernatural. Ever since the Word became flesh we can no longer be sure where the line is to be drawn.

Upon arrival at Gennesaret the people recognized Jesus, who had fed them to satisfaction on the other side of the lake. John gives an extended report of the following conversation, which the other Evangelists omit.²

5. Clean and unclean – ritually and morally 15:1-20

- 1 *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked,*
- 2 *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"*
- 3 *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition.*
- 4 *For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'*
- 5 *But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,'*
- 6 *he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*
- 7 *You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:*
- 8 *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*
- 9 *They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."*
- 10 *Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand.*
- 11 *What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"*
- 12 *Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"*
- 13 *He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.*

1. Mark 6:51,52

2. John 6:22-59

14 *Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

15 *Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."*

16 *"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them.*

17 *"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?"*

18 *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'*

19 *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*

20 *These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"*

We begin with the assumption that this conversation took place in Capernaum, the same place where John reported Jesus' discourse about being the bread of life. It is also possible that the confrontation took place following a sermon Jesus preached in the synagogue. The Pharisees seem to have planned a counter attack. Matthew states that the group came all the way from Jerusalem. We do not know what the intent of the opposition was; they probably planned to set a trap for Jesus, which would give them grounds for accusations of heresy. They did not have to look far, because they found immediate opportunity for an attack on the basis of the disciples' disregard of the ritual cleansing that was to precede eating a meal. Mark explains: "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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."¹

Matthew gives the impression that the whole group of disciples failed to observe the ritual, but Mark seems to indicate that there were only some, probably meaning that other did follow the customs. We do not learn whose "bad example" the disciples followed, but the ensuing conversation suggests that Jesus may have been the main culprit. The reason why the disciples were attacked, or rather why Jesus was attacked, was because of the disciples' behavior, not because of what Jesus did Himself, seems to be that the disciples were caught in the act. Evidently, the Pharisees and teachers of the law had not seen Jesus doing these things.

We must remember that this section does not deal with the question of hygiene. This is about a ritual. This does not mean that we ought to allow our children to come to the dinner table without first washing their hands. They cannot use this text as a pretext. We do not know how much the people in Jesus' day knew about the importance of hygiene, but that is beside the point here.

There was in the Old Testament a definite place for ritual cleansing. The laver, or bronze basin, that stood at the entrance of the tabernacle formed an integral part of the worship service. An important part of the washing was ritual. The outward ritual supposedly expressed the need for inward purity. It was at this point of application that the Pharisees and teachers of the law deviated from the spirit of the law. Outward purity became for them the essence. They did not understand that there were two parts to the process of cleansing: the shedding of blood and the pouring out of water. This symbolized purification on two levels: earthly and heavenly; before God and before man.

In the New Testament, the water and the blood become part of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle John writes: "For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement."² In the tradition the Pharisees and teachers of the law practiced, the element of purification were kept separate. The water had become a unit by itself. It is against this that Jesus protests, because all the blood that was shed in the Old Testament typifies the shedding of His own blood, which He would do on the cross. Here, the blood does not testify with the water, but against the water. Whenever man severs his relationship with God's revelation, everything that ought to form an organic unity falls apart.

From what follows we learn that those who turn away from God also turn against God. The traditions of man are not only detached from God's command, they oppose God's command except in name.

1. Mark 7:3,4

2. I John 5:7

Matthew places Jesus' quotation from Isaiah¹ at the end of His counterattack; Mark places it at the beginning.² The Apostle Paul also quotes Isaiah's text in connection with Jesus' death on the cross. Both Jesus and Paul understood the meaning of this prophecy through the same Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that Isaiah foretold His death.

Isaiah's text reads literally: "The Lord says: '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.'" Jesus' quotation is not literal: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." The big difference is in the words "in vain."

To begin with, Jesus says that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the acts of the people of His day. This reminds us of the similar words our Lord used during His sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth.³ But there they were words of comfort and healing in the face of the people's reaction to Him. Here, it appears as if these words are words of rejection and punishment, but the message conveyed turns out to be the greatest blessing the world has ever known.

The marvel in God's act, about which Isaiah speaks, is the foolishness of the cross Paul refers to in his Epistle to the Corinthians.⁴ The conditions in Jesus' day were similar to those in the days of Jeroboam I. At that time the people kept up the outward appearance of piety, but they broke with God's revelation of Himself. Revelation is the heart of God. God reveals the innermost secrets of His own heart to those who seek and love Him. When man shuts the door to the heart of God by leaving God's revelation of Himself, he shuts at the same time the door to his own heart for God. That is why Isaiah says: "Their hearts are far from me."

The theme of Isaiah's text is the people's honoring of God. That is the central theme of the whole universe. That is what creation is all about. Man is created for the glory of God. Not only is our very existence proof of God's greatness and glory, but the fact that we have the ability to come with our own free will and surrender to God, bowing down before Him, is the greatest honor that can be given to God. If the maker of a machine receives the honor that is due to him, how much greater is the glory to be given to Him who created the human will and personality. By loving God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength,⁵ we place the highest of values on the highest possible level. Man's greatest good is his personality. The most valuable and reasonable thing a person can do is to surrender his personality to God to do with it as He likes. That is at the core of serving God.

What the people do in this chapter is performing acts that constitute a ritual of surrender, without being acts of surrender. Imagine a transfer of power from one king to another or one president to another, in which there is a solemn ceremony, but the leaving head of state refuses to sign the actual document of transfer. Imagine such a solemn ceremony repeated on a daily basis. That, which would have been meaningful and impressive if there had been a signing of documents, becomes complete nonsense in the absence of the latter. Similarly, man's honoring of God is in vain when man breaks with God's revelation and makes his own rules.

In vv. 8-13 Jesus continues by giving examples of the worthlessness of their serving God. It is not by accident that Jesus chooses the commandment in which serving God and serving one another intersect. Whoever draws back from intimacy with God also isolates himself from his fellowmen. On the other hand, one cannot love God and not love his neighbor at the same time. The Pharisees and masters of the law give the impression of giving priority to the more important of the commandments at the cost of the lesser

1. Isa. 29:13

2. Mark 7:6

3. Luke 4:21

4. I Cor. 1:18,19

5. Deut. 6:5

important, which seemed to be commendable. But Jesus considers that in doing so they “break the command” and make it powerless. In God’s command, the honor of God and the honor of the neighbor are kept in perfect balance. Whoever honors man more than God, or honors God at the cost of his neighbor, disturbs that balance and is consequently a transgressor.

The word “honor” in this context has a more profound and practical meaning than we usually attach to it. Jesus’ interpretation of “honor” is not merely spiritual but it expresses itself in acts of material assistance. Jesus treats the spiritual content and the practical one as one inseparable unit. “Honor” in this context means giving a person what is due to him in the widest sense of the word. The Lord also implies that parents have a right to expect help from their children when the parents weaken and the children grow stronger in life. Although Jesus does not say this in so many words, one could conclude that withholding help amounts to cursing one’s parents, which carried capital punishment.¹ The word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword² for those who surrender themselves to it. But those who close their hearts to it have the awful power to make it powerless.

Jesus’ answer consists of two parts. In the first He launches a counterattack at the Pharisees which denies them the right to judge others. They accused the disciples of breaking the tradition of the elders, but they disobey the law themselves. The second part of the answer refutes the content of their accusation that suggests that a person can become unclean by what he eats.

The question is whether Jesus disregarded the law by declaring all foods “clean.”³ The distinction between clean and unclean animals does not originate with the Law of Moses; it existed already before the flood.⁴ But God did not impose a law upon Noah regarding the eating of clean or unclean animals. We read in Genesis that God said to Noah: “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”⁵ Leviticus 11 is the classic chapter that deals with the subject of clean and unclean animals. Presumably, that law had a double intent. There was a distinction for the sake of hygiene. While trekking through the desert and also upon entering Canaan, Israel was threatened by all kinds of diseases. Avoiding physical contact with unclean animals was a kind of protection against infection. It is possible that a better practice of hygiene in Jesus’ day made those precautions redundant. The second part of the distinction made between clean and unclean animals was to give an object lesson in the difference between holy and unholy.

Throughout the ages people had drawn the wrong conclusion that eating or not eating certain animals would make a person unclean or holy. The lesson to be taught, however, never went beyond the fact that there was a difference between one creature and another as far as being pure or impure, holy or not holy. As with everything concerning the law, it was not meant to be a means to reach the goal, but the setting of a goal to be reached. The law was like a mirror that reflected what was unclean, not the soap and water needed to do the cleansing. The problem of the Jews was that they did not distinguish between the mirror and the soap. The whole ritual of distinction between clean and unclean animals applied not to animals but to people. As the Apostle Paul says: “Is it about oxen that God is concerned?”⁶ The whole foreshadowed the day at which people would become clean because of the blood of Jesus Christ, as opposed to that which remained unclean because it stayed outside fellowship with God.

Look at Jesus’ authority when He declares all things clean! He reaches out to His death on the cross and He says that the new day has already come. This shows the majesty of the Son of God as compared to the fiddling of humans with their traditions. Jesus speaks here the same royal Word Adam spoke as he gave

1. Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9

2. Heb. 4:12

3. Mark 7:19

4. Gen 7:2,3

5. Gen. 9:3

6. I Cor. 9:9

names to the animals.¹ The declaration that made all food clean is an “executive order.” This is not an arbitrary decision. It is the first introductory step toward the real cleansing, the cleansing of the human heart. As the real blood was being shed which brought about genuine cleansing, the symbolic cleansing that the law prescribed was no longer needed. As long as man considers sin to be something that only exists outside the human heart, he will never acknowledge the rebelliousness of his heart, let alone come to an act of surrender.

“What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’” Matthew gives a list of seven sins that qualify as evil thoughts: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. Mark extends this to twelve evil thoughts: “sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”²

Jesus’ “choice” of sins may amaze us. We understand Him to say that these sins have their origin in the human heart. Man is not brought down because of circumstances but by the condition of his own heart and will. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, man’s guilt begins when he sees and covets, which is before he commits the sinful act. We could say that man is impure because of the source of sin in his heart. But Jesus says emphatically about man that “what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’” We could read this as meaning that these things make a person ritually unclean, meaning not fitted for fellowship with God. We learn from what God said to Cain how sin develops in human life: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”³

Sin begins in our thought life. According to the warning God gave Cain, there is a possibility of mastering sin before it germinates. In that story there is also a connection between lifting up a sacrifice, doing what is right and victory over sin. “Doing what is right” does not necessarily mean performing the right kind of acts, but the bringing of the right kind of sacrifice. Commenting on the same subject, James says: “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”⁴

Temptation begins with desire. Desire focuses on a certain thing. The connection of these two works like a conception in which the thought develops into the act. The act brings about punishment, which is death. We conclude from this that God punishes the act, not the thought. All law on earth, God’s law included, limits itself to acts. If, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasizes the heart of man, that does not change God’s law. God may count our acts, but He wants us to watch our thoughts.

Such double standard is not unusual. For instance, Jesus calls us friends,⁵ but we consider ourselves to be His slaves.⁶ God compares us and our conduct with our neighbors’; we measure ourselves with the standards of God’s character. So it is with the human heart. God holds us responsible for what we do; we are responsible to discipline our thoughts, our sentiments and our will. As the Proverbs says: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”⁷

In the list the Lord mentions sins, which we immediately understand, are hatched in a sinful heart. There are, however, other ones that are not immediately clear. Mark uses the word “folly,”⁸ which is the translation of the Greek word *aphrosune*, meaning “senselessness.” Paul uses the word a few times in

1. Gen. 2:19,20

2. Mark 7:20-23

3. Gen. 4:7

4. James 1:14,15

5. John 15:15

6. Rom. 6:18

7. Prov. 4:23

8. Mark 7:22

Second Corinthians, in the phrases: “I hope you will put up with a little of my *foolishness*,” and “What anyone else dares to boast about — I am speaking as *a fool* — I also dare to boast about.”¹ We would not consider calling Paul sinful in doing so. Jesus demonstrates that being “senseless” is the fruit of a broken relationship with God, which is what Paul’s use of the word also suggests. On the other hand, a pure heart will produce intelligence and insight. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”²

There is a relationship between the bringing of a sacrifice and purity of heart. By putting our trust in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, we allow the glory of the Lord to enter our life. “Christ in you, the hope of glory”³ is what makes our heart a source of purity that makes our body and life acceptable to God.

Matthew records Jesus’ brief conversation with the disciples about the Pharisees’ reaction to His words. The disciples tell the Lord how shocked the Pharisees were upon hearing that Jesus declared all food to be pure. That attacked the foundation of all they stood for. The power of their movement was their strict observance of the law and traditions in order to guarantee one hundred percent ritual purity.

As often, Jesus’ answer goes well beyond the immediate circumstances. The brief parable reminds us of the parable of the tares among wheat.⁴ But in that parable every tare is not pulled up, but left till harvest time. The Lord does not say when the plants the Father did not plant will be pulled up by the roots. As human beings we are unable to distinguish between one plant and another, because we cannot see what happens at the Day of Judgment. Asaph, who wrote Psalm 73, did not see the difference between the just and the unjust until he “entered the sanctuary of God.”⁵ Jesus’ advice: “Leave them; they are blind guides” is similar to that of the lord of the harvest who said: “Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”⁶

Jesus’ words to His disciples: “Leave them; they are blind guides” constitutes a worse judgment than what He said earlier to the Pharisees and masters of the law. It speaks about God letting go of those who do not want to be held by Him. The Apostle Paul describes a similar process in Romans, when speaking about the human race, he says: “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”⁷ God pulled back His hand that restrained them so that corruption could finish them off.

From Jesus’ short parable we understand that there are plants that God planted and others that are not. Jesus says this in the context of religious activity. This is not about gentiles who do not know the truth, but about Pharisees who proclaim to keep the law. They are the pious plants that do not have their root in God. This draws a line of separation between one individual and another. But there is also a line that runs through the heart of every person. The Apostle Paul makes the distinction between “the spirit” and “the flesh.” In his *First Corinthian Epistle*, he writes: “Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow

1. II Cor. 11:1,21

2. Prov. 1:7

3. Col. 1:27

4. Matt. 13:24-30

5. Ps. 73:15-20

6. Matt. 13:30

7. Rom. 1:24,26,28

Apollos, are you not mere men?"¹ This human tendency to divide into groups, one better and more spiritual than the other, Paul identifies with the Greek word *sarkikos*, "carnal." If we do not consider ourselves to be crucified with Christ, then all our religious activity comes from our carnal nature, and we are like plants that will be rooted up.

6. Jesus' visit to Tyre 5:21-28

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

27 "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

28 Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

We do not read that Jesus actually visited Tyre and Sidon. Matthew tells us that He "withdrew to the region" and Mark says that He "went to the vicinity of Tyre."² As far as we know this was the only time Jesus went outside the borders of Israel. Nothing is said about the reason for this trip abroad. Mark seems to suggest that Jesus felt the need for rest, because we read that He "did not want anyone to know it." Mark also adds the moving words: "yet he could not keep his presence secret." This reminds us of Jesus' own words: "A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."³

There is a law that establishes a direct link between the presence of the Spirit of the Lord, the great Comforter, and human need. The two are always drawn to each other with irresistible force.

A woman, whose daughter was demon-possessed, heard about Jesus. She saw Him and began to call Him from afar. But Jesus does not answer. When the woman does not cease to call, the disciples become irritated and suggest to Jesus that He chase her away. Jesus answers by saying that helping this woman lies outside the area of ministry the Father had given to Him. He was sent to "only to the lost sheep of Israel." Mark mentions that Jesus entered a house, but all this probably happened while Jesus was still outside.

Jesus' initial attitude seems to us to be callous, as if He really did not care about the need of this poor woman, because she belonged not to God's chosen people. Earlier in Matthew we read that, when Jesus sent out the disciples, He gave them the instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."⁴ But Jesus Himself made exceptions to this rule. He went through Samaria and brought salvation to the people there.⁵ And in Acts He says to His disciples: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁶ Jesus' limitation of task to Israel was, evidently, for the purpose of testimony and it was temporal. In choosing Israel, God

1. I Cor. 3:1-4

2. Mark 7:24

3. Matt. 5:14,15

4. Matt. 10:5,6

5. John 4

6. Acts 1:8

had the salvation of the whole world in mind. When Jesus limited Himself to Israel, it was for the purpose of bringing them back to life and making them again a kingdom of priests.

The touching feature in this story is that the faith of this woman, who was a Gentile, was sufficient to break through the set order.

The woman calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David." She demonstrates with that that she believes Jesus to be the Messiah. In the mouth of this non-Jewish woman, these words acquire a special meaning. Matthew calls her "a Canaanite woman," Mark states that she was "a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia."¹ She belonged to the Greek civilization of that day. She knew enough of the Jewish faith to be aware of the Messianic hope of the people and she had sufficient spiritual insight to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. When she calls Jesus she pleads her case on the right grounds. We do not read whether she was actually a Jewish proselyte. She probably did not consider herself to be, because then Jesus would not have put her to the test the way He did. We cannot see Jesus' attitude differently than as a way to test this woman's faith. Jesus' silence here is totally different from His silence before King Herod or Pilate.² That silence was an advanced state of judgment. Here it is meant to draw out the woman's faith.

Some Bible scholars believe that the disciples words "send her away" imply that the Lord would heal her daughter from a distance. To this Jesus then answers that such healing would be "illegal." That would mean that Jesus would heal her daughter in order to get rid of the cries of the mother.

When the woman answers Jesus' parable about giving the children's bread to the dogs by saying: "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," she creates the special circumstances that allow the Lord to go beyond the limitations the Father had set to His scope of ministry. God's help is always based on judicial grounds. God never hears our pleas simply for sentimental reasons. His love and justice are always in the right balance. But faith breaks through the set order of things. This woman's faith sets into motion another law which supersedes the existing ones. That is what faith can do. It makes the miracle legal, because it is based upon a law that surpasses the other ones.

The woman shows her faith in humbling herself; or rather in recognizing who she is, which is the essence of humility. She was one of the dogs that eats the crumbs under the table. Her faith in God made her quick-witted. She reacts immediately to Jesus' words by admitting that she is less than the people to whom God had given His revelation. The law that saved her daughter's life is the fact that God raises up people who humble themselves. Mark reports that Jesus answers her "For such a reply..."³ Matthew states: "Woman, you have great faith!"

This incident lays the foundation for all the preaching of the Gospel to the gentiles as we see it begin in Acts. Mark may have given us Jesus' answer to the woman more completely as: "First let the children eat all they want."⁴ The matter was not that Samaritans and gentiles were to be excluded permanently from the Kingdom of Heaven. "David's fallen tent" had to be restored before the gentiles could be reached. As Amos prophesied: "'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,' declares the Lord, who will do these things."⁵ It was a matter of priority. As the Apostle Paul says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."⁶ Here we see the first drops fall of the rain that would fall on the whole earth. It began with the conversion of Cornelius and his family who were filled

1. Mark 7:26

2. See Matt. 27:14; Luke 23:9.

3. Mark 7:29

4. Mark 7:27

5. Amos 9:11,12

6. Rom. 1:16

with the Holy Spirit.¹ Even earlier with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, we find the same blueprint in Paul's preaching of the Gospel in Antioch.²

7. The second miraculous feeding of the multitude 15:29-39

29 Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

30 Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.

31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

33 His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

34 "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

35 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground.

36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people.

37 They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

38 The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children.

39 After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

There is, of course, a great similarity between this passage and the one described earlier,³ where Jesus fed 5000 men in the same manner. Some Bible scholars believe that we are looking at one incident which is reported twice, although with some variations. It seems extremely strange, however, that both Matthew and Mark would be so confused as to, not only, write the same story twice, but also mention the same two stories next to each other. In a later chapter, Matthew writes that Jesus says: "'Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?' 'Twelve,' they replied. 'And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?' They answered, 'Seven.'"⁴ Also, the details in both stories are quite different. At the first feeding there were five loaves, here there are seven. In the first the number of fishes mentioned is two, here we read only "a few small fish."

In both cases, the place where the feeding occurred was approximately the same. They both probably occurred somewhere at the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee. The greatest difference is in the number of people present. The first group, consisting of 5000 men, had followed Jesus from the western shore of the lake. The second group of 4000 men had followed Him from Decapolis. They were not all full-blooded Jews, like the people from Galilee. That is what makes this event such a great feast. Here the Lord performs the same kind of miracle He performed for the Jews. If we look at the similarities between the two stories in this light, it makes it even more impressive. The Lord feeds here "manna" to those who had no right to it, who had never tasted it before. They had no precedent for such an event in their history, but their

1. See Acts 10.

2. Acts 13:46

3. See Matt. 14.

4. See Matt. 6:9,10; Mark 8:19,20.

human reaction may have been that Jesus' miracle would be the solution for man's struggle to exist. For the first time in world history the curse that drove man out of paradise was lifted. "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."¹ Eating by the sweat of one's brow and returning to dust are closely related to each other. Jesus' provision of food also pointed in the direction of a solution for death as man's final destiny. Jesus has the authority to multiply bread and lift the curse, because in His own death and resurrection He reversed the law that says that we are dust and must return to dust.

In as much as Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of the harvest to come, so also is provision of food at the moment not a constant donation of free food; it is a token that states that the curse has been lifted. At present we are still subject to the bonds of death, although we will arrive at the point of resurrection from the dead. We also still have to make a living with the sweat of our brow, while at the same time having the promise that it is "in vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves."²

As in the first miraculous feeding, the emphasis is upon the festive character of the meal. People who were tired and hungry were being fed to satisfaction. We note that these people had been with Jesus for three days. This means that all their reserves were depleted. They had nothing left to eat and Jesus pitied them. It is under these dire conditions that the Lord looks up to the Father in faith and asks Him to do what is humanly impossible.

As in the first case, the Lord begins with what is at hand: seven loaves of bread and some fish. Comparing the two stories, we would think that since in the first instance Jesus fed 5000 men with 5 loaves with some fish and there were 12 baskets with leftovers, and here there is more bread with fewer people, the leftovers were fewer, this miracle is less great than the previous one. Such consideration is, of course, nonsense. The figures may be less but the manifestation of supernatural power is as great in the one instance as in the other. The Bible does not apologize for the fewer leftovers!

In this incident also, the legal basis for the miracle was the fact that there were people who first sought the kingdom of heaven. They did not think of food. According to the law of the kingdom, if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be given to us as well.³ We see here that the system works.

Furthermore, there is not much new to say about this story. The number of men is given as 4000, which means that there will have been at least 8000 people attending if we count women and children. Jesus must have had less trouble sending these people away than the first time at the feeding of the 5000. There was no tendency to make Him king here. The difference may have been that the majority was not Jewish. We read that Jesus went into the boat with His disciples to go to Magadan.

8. The sign of Jonah 16:1-4

1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

2 He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'

3 and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

4 A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.

1. Gen. 3:19

2. Ps. 127:2

3. Matt. 6:33

History repeats itself here. Arriving at the western shore of the lake, Jesus enters into a dispute with some Pharisees and Sadducees. Their request for a sign from heaven suggests that they wanted to test Jesus' credibility. But their petition was not an honest one. They wanted to draw Jesus out to find a reason to attack Him.

The sign of Jonah, which Jesus mentions here, was an expression the Lord had used earlier.¹ In that first instance, Jesus used Jonah's story to highlight the reaction of the men of Nineveh to Jonah's preaching. Here, people do not respond to the preaching of the Gospel because they are blind to their own condition and to the condition of the world around them.

The implication of the parable about the weather is that, if people would have understood the time in which they lived, they would also have recognized the person of Jesus for who He was.

Jesus Himself must have gone through some form of identity crisis, which made Him discover that He was the Christ, about whom it was written in the scroll, as we read in the Psalms: "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.'"² The written Word of God played an important part in young Jesus' life which helped Him to understand who He was and what God's will was for His life. His comprehension that He was the Christ about whom it was written in the scroll was closely connected to His understanding of the time in which He was born. Together with Simeon, Anna and His Mother Mary, He may have been the only one who knew who He was. Jesus' reproach implies that a person is guilty of sin if he does not understand the time in which he lives.

Francis Schaefer, in his book *The God who is There*, states that a certain exhibition of paintings in New York in 1910 ought to have opened the eyes of the church to the danger that threatened the world at that time. But the church does not visit exhibitions of pictures. Blessed is the man who knows who he is and where he is going! Apart from the Bible there are no answers to such questions. If the church does not know the time in which she lives, people will have to get answers to their questions from painters, poets, composers and philosophers.

When the Pharisees ask Jesus for a miracle, they must have had something sensational in mind. In His answer, Jesus seems to assume that they really wanted to know what time it was on the world clock. He says to them, "How come that you do not know this yourselves?" If people can acquire knowledge about meteorology, they also ought to be able to acquire this about prophecy. Our weather satellite is the Bible and our meteorologist is the Holy Spirit. We must not think primarily of some people who, out of a thirst of sensation, speculate about the coming of the Antichrist, or who see in the European "Common Market" the restoration of the old Roman Empire, or who see the Roman Catholic Church, together with the World Council of Churches as the great prostitute, Babylon, etc. There ought to be some people who have a clear insight into the spirit of the present age, into the meaning of certain currents of thought, and into God's plan for this world. In order to acquire this discernment, one must understand the meaning of biblical history. Most of us live too closely to the occurrences of our day to be able to see the correct perspective. Sometimes certain events seem to be to us too horrible because we are too close to them. We are often alarmed by details, while failing to grasp the essence. We must understand that what people do in this age is based upon the philosophy of life in previous centuries.

But Jesus' words go deeper than that particular moment. When He mentions the sign of Jonah, He actually says: "I am the sign of the times." Reaching back to human nature which has not changed throughout the ages of separation from God, He knew that the people would put Him to death. In His rejection by His own people, He would become the sign of the times for all ages, both in His death and resurrection. Jesus' answer, therefore, is not "a clincher," as if He didn't want to answer the question. He

1. See Matt. 12:38-42.

2. Ps. 40:6-8

answered their question in a way that was much deeper than those who asked it could have anticipated. But since their motives for asking the question were not pure, they did not recognize the answer for what it was.

This incident makes us realize that Jesus always takes our questions seriously and always answers them. To the Pharisees and Sadducees He says that He would die for them and be raised again. If their attitude toward Him had been different, they would have been blessed by His answer.

9. The yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees 16:5-12

5 When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread.

6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

7 They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."

8 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?"

9 Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?

10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?

11 How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

12 Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Having left behind the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus is alone with His disciples. The following conversation took place during a crossing of the lake. The rather abrupt departure and the fact that Jesus begins to mention "the yeast" of the Pharisees and Sadducees, seems to indicate that the previous conversation and the tone of it had irked the Lord. From it Jesus had concluded that the mentality of the leaders of the people was a slow-working but powerfully penetrating form of poison. Mark also includes King Herod in this category.¹ What was there in the doctrine of these people that made it poison? It could not be doctrinal impurity, because that could not have put the Sadducees and Herod on the same line with the Pharisees. There was little that could be reproached the Pharisees as far as their confession was concerned. The poison was not in what these people confessed to be but in the way they lived their everyday life. Our Lord combines here the whole gamut of Pharisee orthodoxy, Sadducee liberalism and Herodian opportunism and calls it poison. That is what they all had in common.

The Pharisees took the law of God, the expression of God's perfect will, and instead of surrendering to that in obedience, they manipulated that law into a cover for their self-preservation. It was a well-camouflaged way of self-preservation, because outwardly it looked deceptively like obedience. The Sadducees were different from the Pharisees in as much as they were more honest in their philosophy of life. They did not believe in any supernatural form of revelation and, consequently, they lived their earthbound lives as well as they could. Herod's only principle of life was survival on the highest possible plane. He was willing to sacrifice his people and his country and all that was sacred in exchange for his own life and for power.

The Lord Jesus had come to serve and to give His life. How deeply this human obstinacy toward God must have wounded our Lord. Jesus' attitude and His preaching must have hit those three factions rather hard, also, otherwise they would not have reacted so sharply toward Jesus. Now, in spite of their outward differences, they form a united front against this Man who threatens their very existence. Their yeast, the poison, is their self-preservation before God.

1. Mark 8:15

Jesus warns His disciples against this poison in the strongest possible terms. Jesus' warning indicates that a Christian is not immune to this poison. We may believe in Christ while yet our old carnal resistance against Him keeps on popping up. Luther is credited with the saying: "We believe we have drowned the animal, but the beast can swim." The greatest deception is when we believe that the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is imputed to us is the result of our own efforts. Inwardly we are hopelessly incorrigible.

That truth is revealed in the disparity between what Jesus was thinking at that moment and that which occupied the minds of the disciples. They had forgotten to bring bread. According to Mark, they had one loaf of bread with them,¹ which was probably the equivalent of one sandwich for 13 people. In the business of the moment they had simply forgotten.

I do not believe that there is any merit in being careless. We are not animals that cannot think of future needs. The disciples may have had some self-reproach, or maybe, reproach for one another. They worried that they would be hungry and they felt guilty of not thinking of that earlier. The result is that their hearts were only focused on their own condition to the point where the words of the Lord simply did not penetrate. The words they caught were interpreted in the light of their own condition. They heard the word "yeast" and immediately they concluded that Jesus reproached them for not having brought bread.

In order to clearly interpret the Word of God, we must be free of worry about the future and free of guilt feelings about the past. Worry is an indicator of a lack of faith in God and of intimacy with Him. And guilt feelings about the past reveal a lack of faith in God's forgiveness, as if our sins have not been atoned for. Jesus reproaches them for their unbelief because they demonstrate that they learned nothing from their past experiences.

According to Mark, Jesus reproached them that they did not use the ears and eyes God has given them. This sounds like a paraphrase of Isaiah's words.² Even if they lacked the faith to multiply the bread they had, they had witnessed twice that their Lord had enough faith to do that. And He was there with them.

It is striking to see how Jesus reacts so strongly to a lack of faith. Unbelief is the only human weakness towards which He demonstrates a complete lack of understanding or compassion. In paraphrasing Isaiah's words, Jesus draws a line to the time where He had to clothe the truth in the form of parables. In being worried, the disciples came close to the place where they would no longer be able to understand truth plainly. That is the danger Jesus saw and that is the reason He reacted so sharply.

According to Matthew, Jesus uses words as "understand" and "remember" as being essential for having faith in God. These words are important because they give us the key to faith that will move mountains. It is only if we see beyond our circumstances and see God and understand what His intention is with the circumstances in which we find ourselves, that we begin to believe He can and will do that which seems impossible or unlikely. "Remember" stands for calling up precedents. The disciples had their twelve and seven baskets, which could have given them confidence that what God did in the past, He would do again in the present. If we do not react in that manner to our circumstances, Jesus says that our hearts become hardened. We must remember our baskets full of leftovers, in order to have faith for today.

10. Peter's confession 16:13-20

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

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

15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

1. Mark 8:14

2. Isa. 6:9,10

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

18 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.

19 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."

20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

This event takes place in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. According to Luke's Gospel, the conversation took place after Jesus had spent time alone in prayer.¹

The first matter that requires an answer here is why Jesus asked the question. The first answer would be: "Because He wanted to know the answer." We may assume that for Jesus Himself, His messianic call had been a matter of faith in the testimony of the Bible. The Father confirmed this with signs and wonders. Now Jesus asked Himself the question whether His faith also evoked faith among the masses. He asked, therefore, the question to those who would have heard more about the rumors that were going around about Him. This is not the equivalent of the taking of a public opinion poll.

People's interpretation of Jesus performance covers the whole gamut of superstition to biblical faith and superficial faith that "heard something but does not know the rights of it." We heard earlier about King Herod's supposition that Jesus could be John the Baptist risen from the dead.² The thought that Jesus would be Elijah is based upon Malachi's prophecy. Malachi had prophesied: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."³ Those who proposed that possibility were at least looking in the right direction, but they had not yet found the key to the secrets of the Old Testament. Only Jesus Himself had decoded the Old Testament message. The people who thought that Jesus would be the reincarnation of Jeremiah or one of the other prophets used the Scriptures for human speculations.

Another reason Jesus asked the question must have been to evoke a crisis among the disciples that would bring Peter to his confession. It is very difficult for us to put ourselves in the shoes of those who lived with Jesus and fellowshiped with Him as with any other human being. In the same way as we lose the image of a stranger once we marry the person, it is difficult for us to look at Jesus as a mere human, in the way the people of His time saw Him. That problem makes us lose much of the vividness of the story. This was different for the disciples. They were with Jesus on a daily basis. They ate together, they slept under the same roof, and they talked with Him. We may be sure that our Lord used humor in His conversation and there must have been lots of laughter. The disciples may have gotten used to Jesus' perfection. So the Lord wanted to know how much they understood about Him.

When Jesus asked the disciples' opinion about who He was, Peter gives the answer. We often see that Peter speaks in behalf of the others, but that does not seem to be the case here. The fact that Jesus gives an answer that is for Peter alone indicates that Peter must have spoken for himself.

Peter must have understood three things in order to come to this confession. He must have had insight into the prophetic message of the Old Testament. He must have made, in principle, the same discovery Jesus had made: "...it is written about me in the scroll."⁴ Also, he must have understood something about the character of God, calling Jesus "the Son of the living God." Peter saw God not only as One who exists, but as the God who lives. He said this, not in the sense we sometimes speak about someone

1. Luke 9:18

2. Matt. 14:1,2

3. Mal. 4:5

4. Ps. 40:7

who is very sick, but still alive, but as more living than all of mankind put together. Finally, Peter must have seen the connection between the prophetic promise and the fulfillment in his Lord and the glory of God reflected in Jesus of Nazareth. And, as Jesus says: "Blessed is he who sees this."

A closer look at the text reveals that Jesus does not call Himself in this context, the Son of God, but the Son of Man. Jesus must have used the expression on purpose. The title is borrowed from Daniel. We read in Daniel: "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."¹

The name has a very profound meaning. It points to Jesus' birth as man. As the descendant of David, Jesus was a creature. Connected to this is the glory of an eternal kingship. The fact that Jesus could call Himself "Son of Man" without causing a stir reveals how little people then and now understood or understand of themselves and of God's intention when He created human beings.

In putting the question before the disciples the way He did, Jesus almost put the words in their mouths. Fallen man, however, can do little else but stare at the mud. That makes Peter's confession such a breakthrough. Peter understood that there was only one possible explanation for Jesus' character, His prayer life and fellowship with the Father, His faith, His power to perform miracles, and the simplicity of His eternal wisdom. The explanation was that Jesus is the Word of God become flesh.

Jesus' answer to Peter is one of the most impressive parts in the whole Bible. It consists of three parts. It opens with a beatitude, followed by an announcement and ending with a prophecy regarding final victory. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah." We could add these words to the nine beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. It would not be part of the conditions for blessedness, or the fruit of blessedness, at least not in a direct way. This beatitude stands on its own. The fact that God had addressed Peter personally and revealed His secret to him means, according to Jesus, that Peter became a partaker in the fullness of God. For that is the meaning of the word "blessed." Jesus also touches upon the mystery of God's revelation. There are things a human being can never understand by mere human means. We can admire God's creation and enjoy life and beauty without ever finding God. All the things we see are nothing more than fascinating fragments that do not fit together until we see them in the light of God and in connection with Him. As the author of Proverbs states: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint."² We see in Israel's history how the northern kingdom sank into the mud of idolatry when Jeroboam severed the link with God's revelation in Jerusalem. When God reveals Himself to a person, that person comes to life. Someone who does not hear the voice of God and does not see the traces of God in this life is spiritually dead.

Jesus honors Peter in this announcement "Blessed are you, Simon." This sounds strange to us. We are so used to humiliation and reproach because of the sin factor in us and around us, that we blink our eyes when the Father honors us because we follow His Son. The fact that the Lord of glory would get up from His throne and honor us is something that far surpasses our human understanding. Can we imagine that the devil would ever do such a thing? God honors every creature that bears His image.

If Jesus addresses Peter in this way, He does it on the human level. Jesus declares Peter blessed by using the name with which he was born: "Simon son of Jonah." This is a conversation of two human beings. That fact throws a new light on this exchange. One person declares the other one blessed. Jesus makes full use of the power God gave man at creation. As the Psalmist sang: "You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet."³ Jesus reaches both backward and forward as, by faith, He elevates Peter into knighthood. Having said this, the Lord addresses Peter on a different level, the level of the new creation. "And I tell you that you are Peter" has the force of the creative Word of the same strength

1. Dan. 7:13,14

2. Prov. 29:18

3. Ps. 8:6

as “Let there be light.” Here begins the fulfillment of the prophecy, voiced in John’s Gospel when he said: “He called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came.”¹ God’s Word never leaves us untouched. It is impossible to receive a revelation of God and not experience a transformation of life. Peter had begun to identify Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answers this with an identification of Peter in his relationship to God. Identity is the highest form of existence and it is always expressed in connection with God. We are what we are because He is what He is. The better we understand this, the more we will be ourselves. So Jesus honors Peter here in a twofold way: first as a creature and then as a new creature by the Holy Spirit.

Great things happen with a human being when the Word of God comes to him. Simon receives a new name in the same manner that Jacob did.²

The problem in v.18 is the play-on-words in the Greek text. Jesus calls Simon by the name Peter, *Petros*, meaning “a piece of a large rock.” In the same breath, he speaks of *petra*, the feminine form of *Petros*, meaning “a mass of rock,” as used for a foundation on which He can build His church. *Petros* is not the same as *petra*. Peter is a stone, although of considerable size, but he is not necessarily the same as the whole rock formation. The difference is not in the material of which both are formed but in the size and the connection with the whole. We can see *Petros* as part of *petra*, as a part of the whole body. In a way Jesus included all the disciples when He addressed Peter alone. Martin Luther said that every child of God who pronounces Peter’s confession becomes a Peter. Only the Holy Spirit can make so many *Petros* into one *petra*. The Roman Catholic Church interprets this to mean that the Lord built His church on Peter. Calvinists state that *petra* stands for Peter’s confession. I believe that the Lord builds His church not on confessions but on people who confess Him.

How impressive are Christ’s words: “On this rock I will build my church!” The gates of Hades shook when He said this. God builds for Himself a living house out of living stones on a living foundation, so that He can dwell there. We think back to the building of Solomon’s temple. The stones Solomon used for the construction were prepared somewhere else. We read: “At the king’s command they removed from the quarry large blocks of quality stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple. The craftsmen of Solomon and Hiram and the men of Gebal cut and prepared the timber and stone for the building of the temple. In building the temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built.”³

The Apostle Paul states: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”⁴ And Peter adds: “As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”⁵ The church the Lord builds is a fellowship of people who are prepared by God in such a way that they fit together. To allow oneself to be used as a living stone means to surrender oneself to God, for Him to do what He wants to do to achieve His goal.

Not every stone is a prominent stone that is visible on the outside. Surrender to God means accepting the possibility of being placed somewhere in the building where no one notices the stone. What complicates God’s building is our urge to self-expression and the fact that we do not want to fit into someone else’s mold. Love and jealousy cannot coexist, and the growth of the body means building up one another in love. Imagine a group of people who decide to form one unit and love one another. The possibility of God revealing Himself in such a fellowship would be endless. The Lord compares such a condition with a

1. John 10:35

2. Gen. 32:28, see also Rev. 2:17.

3. I Kings 5:17,18; 6:7

4. Eph. 4:16

5. I Peter 2:4,5

rock. We tend to use more fragile images for that condition. Jesus says that the material of which the church is being built is indestructible. Hell cannot do anything to destroy it. This is not a matter of church planting in the sense we use the word. It is not the gathering of a group of people who listen to a sermon and choose elders. There are churches that in no way resemble the body of Christ. The fact that God takes people who are totally different from one another and melts them into a unity of love that cannot be destroyed is a sheer miracle. The key to the secret is that a person comes to the point where he chooses to love God unconditionally and in all circumstances.

The critical question in *The Book of Job*, “Does Job fear God for nothing?”¹ is repeated in the life of every child of God. The devil is powerless if a person gives proof of the fact that he loves God “for nothing.” That is when the grain of wheat produces fruit. That is what our Lord meant when He said He would build His church. God draws people into unconditional surrender to Himself and then melt them together into the fellowship of the saints.

In the phrase “On this rock I will build my church,” the stress is on “I.” This is, first of all, grammatically true, not only here, but also in the opening words “I tell you.” In the building of the church Jesus is the architect and the contractor of the building. All pastors, evangelists and missionaries can say: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”² Not our labor or human effort makes the church what it ought to be; the Lord does. All who are called to church planting may find their rest in Jesus’ promise: “I will build my church.”

The Old Testament saints Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zachariah are shadows of this New Testament reality. The Lord builds a house for Himself, consisting of those who confess Him and love Him, who are ready to give Him their all, body and soul. As long as there are people like that, God will dwell on this planet. If such people are no longer here, the Lord will have no place to live. With these words, Jesus links Himself to the Father who will provide the building blocks.

The church is stronger than hell. *The New International Version* reads: “the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” *The King James Version* states: “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” *The Living Bible*: “all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it.” In biblical times the city gates were the places where the people held court, the place where plans were made. No demonic plan against the church would succeed. No devilish strategy against the church would prevail. We think again of *The Book of Job*. All Satan’s ruses and might were let loose upon Job. But in the end God was vindicated in that it became clear that Job did love God apart from all circumstances. We often are defeated because our concept of the gates of hell is so far off the mark. We have no trouble recognizing the powers of death and Satan in the storms of life that hit us. We see them when the Sabeans and the Chaldeans rob us of our possessions,³ when fate takes the life of our children. But we fail to see them in the cruel torture of loveless relations, such as Job’s “friends” demonstrated. Those, however, were the strongest means the devil used to pounce upon Job.

Both on the individual level, as in our relationships with one another it seems that defeat against the enemy of our souls is inevitable. But the Lord says that it is the devil who loses. Jesus undoubtedly thought here about His own suffering and death. Later in this chapter, He even mentions the cross. It seemed as if Jesus’ death was the greatest victory for Satan. But it turned out that the weight of his “spoil” was so great that when he tried to haul it in it broke his back. So master so servant! Jesus’ words here are a shout of victory. We must remember that Jesus uttered these words as a human being who was subject to all bombardment at Satan’s disposition.

In the nineteenth century an event took place in a small village in the Black Forest area in Germany. A pastor by the name of Blumhardt was confronted with a demon possessed girl, named Gottliebina Dietus. The persistent prayer of Blumhardt and some of his elders brought about the deliverance of this girl. When the demon left the girl’s body, he shouted “Jesus is victor!”

1. Job 1:9

2. Ps. 127:1

3. Job 1:15

Throughout the ages v.19 has caused as much controversy as v.18. On the basis of this verse Peter is represented in popular tradition as the saint who holds the keys to the gate of heaven, as if he is the one who decides who may enter and who may not. First of all, we must remember that if Peter is part of the *petra* on which the church is built, the authority of the church cannot be in the hands of Peter alone. The key is given to all upon whom the Lord can build.

In giving this promise, Jesus also reaches forward in faith to His own victory over the devil and death. He refers here to his resurrection in which He took away from the devil the keys of death and Hades. Jesus would later say to John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."¹ This is the key Jesus promises to the church. This is a promise for the future when Christ makes us kings and priests. At present the church cannot use this key. The Apostle Paul states as much when he 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!"² It seems as if the Lord takes great risks in making such a promise. Who can imagine such absolute authority without getting a swollen head? We must also realize that it would be impossible to exercise such authority and go against the will of God. A total surrender and complete agreement with God's will is the only possible base for the exercise of this authority. In all of this it will be impossible for us to remain as we were before. To agree with the will of God and to experience fellowship with Him will make us want to cast our crown before Him who sits on the throne and who has the appearance of jasper and carnelian.³ The better we get to know God, the more impossible it will seem to us that He would entrust such authority to people as we are, and the more natural it will seem that He does that anyhow! Without God we are so much less than we believe ourselves to be; with God we are so much more than we can ever imagine!

God's plan for man, whom He created in His image and likeness, has always been for him to rule. Adam was called by God to "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."⁴ Even the coming of sin has not erased this mandate. David saw himself as small under God's immense starry sky, and he questioned why God would even bother about him. But he concludes with amazement: "Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority—the flocks and the herds and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents."⁵

Thus far the Lord Jesus Christ is the only human being in whom this prophecy has been completely fulfilled. He demonstrates the reality of this position in which God placed Him as Man by giving the keys to the gate of heaven to human beings. That is an evolution from reigning over the animal world to receiving authority in heaven. The question will naturally arise as to how effective this authority in the heavenly realms can be on earth. We can hardly assume that this mandate only becomes effective when we get to heaven, because binding or loosing things on earth would then be meaningless. And the Lord gives this key to the church on earth. The Lord speaks about the gates of hell in connection with His building of the church on earth. And the Apostle Paul affirms that the only struggle the church faces is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁶

1. Rev. 1:18

2. I Cor. 6:2,3

3. Rev. 4:3

4. Gen. 1:26

5. Ps. 8:5-8 (*New Living Translation*).

6. Eph. 6:12

It is about those powers that the Lord says that we have received power to bind them while we are on earth. What we say to demons here on earth will have its effect upon conditions in heaven. The binding of demons will at the same time mean the loosing of people who had been bound by demons. As an example, we have Jesus' words when He healed on the Sabbath a woman who could not straighten her back. He said: "Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"¹

People have misunderstood these verses, because they believed that the binding pertained to human beings instead of demons. That would make it sound as if the Lord made us decide who would go to heaven and who would not. The gates of heaven are wide open and the Lord orders us to save who can be saved. That is the reason we have been given this authority to bind demons and loosen people. There is nothing negative in delegating this power to us. It pertains to positive salvation of human beings and forgiveness of their sins. Included in this mandate is the authority to forgive the sins of our fellowmen. Jesus repeated this when He said to His disciples: "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."²

The exercise of this authority is closely connected to the presence of the Holy Spirit. It can only be done under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is all perfectly safe, as long as we understand that the criteria used are objective values that are outside us. The passion of every child of God ought to be to save souls. But we cannot force anyone to be saved. Obviously, there is no forgiveness for demons.

This incident ends with an express prohibition to reveal the secret of Jesus' identity as the Christ to other people. That gag order was only temporal. Peter immediately broke the injunction on the day of Pentecost. He proclaimed in a loud voice: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."³ In some cases Jesus gave away the secret prematurely, as in His conversation with the Samaritan woman. We read: "The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I who speak to you am he.'"⁴ And at another time, when Jesus met with Jews who were skeptical to Him, we read: "The Jews gathered around him, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me.'"⁵ The point is that, although Jesus did not specifically say who He was, the people could have drawn their own conclusions from the miracles He performed. Generally speaking, the fact was kept hidden. He had forbidden demons to make Him known,⁶ and here the injunction is extended to His disciples. He wants to be known to the people as a human being, "the Son of Man," not as "the Son of God."

We may wonder: "Why is this so?" In some case the confession "You are the Son of God" can be a basis for unbelief. As in the case when Jesus walked on the water and the disciples made this confession, they made know that what Jesus did was not something every human being was supposed to do. Jesus did this, they believed, because He was God, not because He was a man who had faith enough to do the impossible. Thus they excluded themselves from that kind of miracles. Peter was the exception among them, although not a successful one. Jesus lived His life as a human being to show us what life can be for someone who has fellowship with the Father and who is filled with the Holy Spirit. This gag order, therefore, was meant to draw people's attention to what is important, to what God intends man to be. If we begin to understand, by what Jesus did in His life on earth, what God's plan is for the human beings He created in His

1. Luke 13:16,17

2. John 20:21-23

3. Acts 2:36

4. John 4:25,26

5. John 10:24-25

6. Mark 1:23-25

image, it will mean the end of Satan's propaganda that wants us to believe that to be human means to be weak. It remains true that the person who lives in such fellowship with the Father that He can perform the miracles Jesus performed can be no other than the Son of God, the Christ. That is what God reveals to those who love Him.

It seems strange that at an earlier occasion the disciples made the profession "Truly you are the Son of God,"¹ and that here Jesus draws them out by asking the question who they think He is. Evidently, Jesus wanted to reach a specific goal. Their previous confession shows that they knew it. In the very beginning when Jesus first gathered His disciples, Andrew led his brother Simon to Jesus with the words, "We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ)."² Jesus did not only want the disciples to know that He was the Christ, but He wanted them to be aware of what that knowledge meant to them. The fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, means that a church will be built against which the powers of hell will be powerless. That is the information that must not be published prematurely. For the same reasons Jesus had hidden the truths about the Kingdom of Heaven in a series of parables to which the devil was unable to find the key until it was too late for him.

11. First announcement of suffering and Peter's rebuke 16:21-28

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

28 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."

Immediately after the previously recorded conversation, the Lord begins to reveal to the disciples the plans for the building of the church. The foundation upon which the church will be built is His suffering, death and resurrection. What follows shows how little the disciples understood the Lord, in spite of their confession, and how little they knew their own hearts. How could they think for one moment that God would use them as living stones in the condition in which they were! How little they understood about the meaning of atonement, in spite of the fact that John the Baptist had introduced Jesus to them as "The Lamb of God."

As a wise psychologist, Jesus begins to prepare His disciples for the coming events. We cannot imagine what it must have meant for Jesus Himself to live day by day with this knowledge of His own future. This was not a thought of what might happen to Him; it was as certain for Him as the written Word itself. That which God in His mercy keeps hidden from us about the way we will die was for Jesus an integral part of His call as Man.

1. Matt. 14:33

2. John 1:41

Peter's reaction to Jesus' announcement of His suffering and death seems to be the most noble and compassionate that could be imagined under the circumstances. Peter took Jesus aside and rebukes Him severely. He believed he had discovered a grave fault in the Lord and he took it upon himself to correct that. He appears sensitive in not wanting to do this in front of the others. We could hardly find fault with Peter, could we? He was completely convinced that he was right. His motives were pure because they were inspired by his love for the Lord. In modern terms Peter's conduct was in accordance with his social concern. Peter's sin, however, was that he leaned on his own understanding and did not trust in the Lord with all his heart.¹ There was in Peter's reproach to Jesus the human inclination to avoid hardship. We pity ourselves and others because of the adversities we encounter in life. But the Bible teaches that we ought to welcome trouble. This goes completely against the grain of our human nature. I have always had trouble with James' admonition: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."² Our life is geared to ease and happiness, not to trouble and hardship. Both our body and our soul rebel against pain.

Jesus' reaction to Peter's admonition astonishes us. We would have expected that the Lord would try to convince Peter in a friendly way that he was wrong. But Jesus does not address Peter at all. He assessed the situation with chilling keenness. He understood that the enemy disguised himself cleverly in order to speak to Jesus by means of an act of apparent human compassion.

This incident indicates that Jesus was not immune to this kind of temptation. Satan was able to attack Him in His human reactions to pain and death. Even as after His baptism, His being the Son of Man had to be tested, so here His willingness to be faithful to death had to be put to the test. As it turns out there was no shadow of discord in His soul, no trace of self pity. The enemy is immediately defeated at this point. This incident shows how great and wonderful this Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is. He is literally adorable!

We can see what happened. Peter had taken Jesus aside. Jesus stood with His back toward the other disciples when Peter began to speak with Him. Jesus turns around abruptly and stands with His back toward Peter, facing the other disciples. In Mark's Gospel we read: "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.'"³ Thus Jesus actively turns His back toward the temptation. He shows no sympathy with Peter's good intentions. The text does state: "He rebuked Peter." It is difficult to draw a line between what the devil does and what Peter does. Peter was responsible for what he said. He sinned. We may note various extenuating circumstances, but Jesus' verdict comes unflinchingly, like a flash of lightning. Satan inspired Peter to say what he said, but he also found enough ground in Peter to do so. Peter was filled with very human thoughts and feelings of self-preservation. When Peter rebuked Jesus, he projected these thoughts and feelings upon Christ. What he said was: "I reject this suffering for myself and also for You." The sad part of this story is that it happened immediately following his sublime confession. It is at moments like these that our defenses are down. But we have to keep in mind that the devil always finds a place to put his foot in people who "do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Our only protection in similar situations is being filled with the Holy Spirit.

There is a sense in which this incident is a repeat of the story of Job. Job's friends came to comfort him. But their comfort turned out to be the sharpest weapon Satan could use against Job. It almost brought about Job's fall from grace. We must be care to only "comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."⁴ Because Peter spoke about things he did not understand, he became a stumbling block for Jesus, which could have caused His fall, if He had not been the perfect Son of God.

1. See Prov. 3:5.

2. James 1:2,3

3. Mark 8:33

4. II Cor. 1:4

It is in this context that Jesus repeats what He had said earlier: “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”¹ This example is put here more clearly and personally. The Lord just proclaimed that He must suffer and die; now He states that what would happen to Him would be a pattern for all who want to follow Him.

According to *Vincent’s Word Studies*, there is a progression of detail in Jesus’ announcements of His suffering. In the first announcement Jesus speaks in general terms about His suffering and death. In the second He adds the detail of betrayal.² The third time, He speaks more clearly about the flogging and the crucifixion.³ In the section before us Jesus draws a line of comparison between His life and death and ours. The similarity is obviously not in the physical death, because in that case only a few people in the entire world, those who died by crucifixion, could qualify as followers of Christ. Jesus wants us to adopt the same attitude toward the will of the Father as He, without any trace of desire for self-preservation.

The comparison goes deeper than the context may suggest. Although it is true that we probably will not die in the same manner as Jesus died, Jesus tells us that we must follow Him bearing the cross on our shoulders. We may not physically die by crucifixion, but we must go through the experience spiritually. The key to understanding Jesus’ death is in the realization that He experienced it all for us, in our stead. As the Apostle Paul puts it: “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”⁴ God has identified us with the death of Christ. What He did for us will begin to become effective in us if we identify ourselves with Him in His death and resurrection. The testimony of my life ought to be: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”⁵ That is not an arrogant declaration about the degree of holiness I believe I have achieved, but it is simply a statement of fact of what God has done. It is the Holy Spirit’s responsibility that our practical purity will eventually be equal to God’s holiness.

In vv.25-28 the Lord gives three reasons that ought to move us to identify with the Lord in His death. In v.25 He states the law of cause and effect which applies to the life of every human being: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” V.26 is an appeal to our reason: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” Vv.27 and 28 allow us to cast a glance in the future and show us the eternal reward which will already begin to pay its dividend in this life: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.”

The law that applies equally to all life is that we must all die, sooner or later. Even those who resist death will face death one day. Those who hold on to life to the bitter end will have nothing left to hold on to when it is taken away. But whoever lets go of life in order to hold on to the Lord finds a new life that is incomparably more wonderful than the one that was let go of. It makes more sense to die now, while we still are in good mental and physical health than to wait till our body fails and our spirit is being snuffed out.

The second argument is a call to realism. “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” This is one of the greatest questions ever asked in all of world history. Finney said, correctly, that sin makes a person insane. He no longer sees reality. In one of the stories in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a witch says to people she wants to keep under her spell: “There is no sun, there is no Narnia.” What gain is there in having the most delicious food, if the stomach is removed from the body? As the stomach is more than the food, so the soul is more than material possessions. All we possess we have on

1. Matt. 10:38,39

2. Matt. 20:17-19

3. Matt. 20:17-19

4. II Cor. 5:15

5. Gal. 2:20

loan, and our soul is not our own. That, too, is on loan and we have to give it back. It is our responsibility before God to keep our soul pure. Jesus says in Luke's Gospel: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."¹

"Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Animists believe that the value of a human soul can be expressed in the "soul stuff" of animals or of lifeless objects. But if we understand who the living God is, we also understand that the human soul is worth more than all other living creatures. We can only understand this if we realize that our value is determined by the image of God in us. Greed and efforts to gain riches and influence in the world points to a lack of insight that we are partakers of the divine nature. A person who enriches himself debases himself. Most of the time, our gathering of riches is a compensation for a sense of inferiority.

Vv.27 and 28 speak of the reward. Speaking about His coming in glory, Jesus must have had Daniel's vision in mind, which states: "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."² When Jesus comes in His Father's glory, those who have given themselves to Jesus and His kingdom will receive infinitely more than they ever gave up. God Himself will be their reward. The little word "for" that opens v.27 gives it a great depth of meaning. It speaks of self denial, of taking up your cross and following the Lord, because He is coming back in glory. Without the Lord's return our lives would be completely void of meaning and even ridiculous.

Some Bible scholars have misinterpreted v.28, believing that it refers to Jesus' return in glory. Albert Schweitzer blunted stated that Jesus was wrong in saying this. I believe, however, that the coming of the Son of Man in His kingdom in v.28 does not refer to the same event as His coming in the Father's glory in the previous verse. Jesus speaks here about the events that commenced at His resurrection from the dead and culminated in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

These last words, beginning with v.24, are addressed to the people standing around. Luke adds the words: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."³

G. Campbell Morgan, in *The Gospel according to Matthew*, writes about this section⁴ saying that it "indicates a new beginning in the mission of the King. There is "first, unveiling His cross to His own disciples; secondly, authoritatively and officially casting off the Hebrew nation; thirdly, giving His disciples the program of the coming economy; and finally, passing to His passion and triumph." "There is, Morgan states, "a sense in which everything that follows is mirrored in this scene." "Antagonism is revealed. The contrast is made plain in the words, 'the things of God,' and 'the things of men.' The things of God [mean] He *must* go to Jerusalem." Morgan continues: "If we repeat the 'must' before each of these declarations, we notice that there is a value in the 'must' which may be interpreted along the line of human experience and passion and that there is a value in the 'must' which defies any such interpretation." "He must suffer and be killed, because that was the natural outcome of all that He had been saying and doing." "These men would not have made Him suffer and would not have killed Him if He would have accommodated the standards of His teaching to their ideals." Morgan continues about the resurrection: "He must be raised. It was the language of One who knew that He held in His own hands the issue of all the way through which he was going." "That 'must' was older than the circumstances. That 'must' came thundering in music out of eternity." "The force propelling Him was not merely the force of human devotion to an ideal, it was the force

1. Luke 12:15

2. Dan. 7:13,14

3. Luke 9:26

4. I am only quoting fragments of Morgan's statements.

of His own ageless life, the divine and eternal counsels of God were operating in Him and through Him and driving Him along the pathway.”

12. The transfiguration 17:1-13

1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified.

7 But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."

8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

10 The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

11 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things.

12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."

13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Of the three Gospels that report this incident, Luke gives the shortest version with the most details that are unique. Those details are indispensable for the understanding of this glorious event. Luke's date is less precise than Matthew's. He states that it happened "about eight days" after the previous conversation.¹ Matthew states that it was "after six days." There is no contradiction in this variation. Luke also tells us that Jesus was praying when the transfiguration took place. It is important to observe that this unique heavenly incident happened while Jesus was performing such a typical human exercise as prayer. The beginning of the experience is similar to what happened to Moses on Mount Sinai.² It is clear, however, that what happened on Sinai was only a shadow of what occurred here.

This was the first time Jesus took three of His disciples aside to share with Him in His intimate fellowship with the Father. Jesus, evidently, knew what would happen to Him and He prepared Himself and them. He chose Peter, James and John and took them out of the hurry of life to a place of solitude on a high mountain. We are not told what hour of the day it was, but Luke's remark that "Peter and his companions were very sleepy"³ suggests that it may have been toward evening.

That was one of the rare moments at which heaven opened above Jesus. Jesus lived on earth as all other human beings, walking in the dark, with faith as the only lamp of hope. Here, however, hope became reality. The reality, which is invisible most of the time, became visible. As the Apostle Paul said: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."⁴

1. Luke 9:28

2. Ex. 19:20; 33:12-23; 34:4-9

3. Luke 9:32

4. II Cor. 4:18

It was at the crucial moment in time that the disciples fell asleep! They would do the same in Gethsemane a few months later. It is tragic to miss what God does in this world because we are asleep. Jesus was the only one awake and praying. How overwhelming this experience was, in spite of sleepiness, is evident from Peter's later description in his second epistle. We read: "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."¹ For Peter this was the highlight he had in his remembrance of the Lord.

It remains true that walking by faith must be the essence of our spiritual life. But how wonderful to experience even one fleeting moment in which we see reality for what it is. To be with Jesus on top of the mountain! We are always in search of glory in life. King Solomon had an unquenchable thirst for gold. The palace of King Louis XIV in Versailles speaks of this longing. Even the tinsels on our Christmas trees, however faked they may be, speak of our intense yearning of splendor. Yet, we are surrounded by beauty. Jesus says that the lilies are clothed more beautifully than Solomon ever was.

We all know, however, that the flower fades and that the Christmas tree ornaments are empty and that even the gold of Solomon and of Versailles is not able to satisfy our longing. Gold is only a shadow of the real thing.

Jesus' transfiguration is proof of the fact that God intends to share His glory with us. At that moment Jesus did not demonstrate His own glory as the eternal Son of God, but, as Peter put it, it was the glory of God the Father with which He was clothed. It is obvious that God's glory is meant for us. The Apostle Paul says: "No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began."² And the author of Hebrews states: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering."³ That makes this transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ so wonderful for the disciples as well as for us. We understand very little of God's plan to share His glory with us. If this were not meant for us, it would not have occurred in Jesus' life either.

What actually happens? As Luke states, Jesus was praying. Matthew describes how "He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." The difficulty, as always, is that it is impossible to find the right expressions to describe what heavenly glory is like. Our planet is full of images that foreshadow heaven, but the reality is so much more glorious than the picture. As Ezekiel and John prove to us, everyone who has seen God's glory knows that it is indescribable. When the Apostle Paul was caught up to paradise, he writes that "he heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell."⁴

In describing Jesus' transfiguration, Matthew uses the Greek word *metamorphoo*, from which the word "metamorphosis" is derived. It means that the transfiguration that happened outwardly to Jesus was the result of the glory of His inward being. For a short moment His inner splendor shone through His outward appearance. This seems to contradict what we said earlier, that this glory was not Jesus' own glory but the glory of the Father which He received as a human being. But this metamorphosis is no contradiction. Whatever the source of His glory, Jesus demonstrated in His perfect human nature the perfect image of God. When the Apostle John sees Jesus later as the resurrected One, he states: "His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."⁵ We learn from Daniel that this glory will be for all who love the Lord. We read: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like

1. II Peter 1:17,18

2. I Cor. 2:7

3. Heb. 2:10

4. II Cor. 12:4

5. Rev. 1:16

the stars for ever and ever.”¹ That is God’s goal for all who wear His image. Jesus is the source of light and the others are “like the stars.”

Mark makes the interesting observation about Jesus’ garments: “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”² If any launderer could bleach clothing in heavenly light, he could also spin gold from straw.

The disciples then see Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. We can ask how they knew these two were Moses and Elijah. The simplest solution is probably that Jesus told them afterward. The Bible gives little explanation as to why these two people appeared. We can see that the work of Moses and Elijah was in a way accomplished in Jesus. Moses’ ministry had been to lead the people out of Egypt and give them the law. Elijah had burned himself out in an effort to turn the nation of Israel back to God. It is in that connection that he was mentioned again later that same day. These two men were two witnesses and consultants in a top conference about the most important topic in world history: Jesus’ suffering and dying in Jerusalem. Luke is the only evangelist who tells us: “They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”³ One wonders where Satan was at this moment. Was he able to eavesdrop, or was this glory too much for him?

One wonders why this conference of the “Big Three” was necessary in enemy territory. It must have been clear to the devil that his situation was more than critical. His archenemy, Jesus, was having a conference with Moses and Elijah and he was unable to prevent this. The only way to rid himself of this Jesus would be to kill Him. But that turns out to be God’s plan also. Evidently, God has the whole situation in hand.

There is also a definite breakthrough from a human point of view. The paradigm of the spiritual life of a human being is blind faith. “We live by faith, not by sight.”⁴ Jesus’ experience on this mountain proves to us that blind faith does not mean that reality is a dark chaos that is impossible for us to know. Blind faith is our only option because we are blind, not because reality is hidden in darkness. The darkness is with us, not with God. In spite of our blindness, God, in His goodness, lets some beams of light shine upon our life so that we can see.

Jesus’ experience on the mountain was also meant for the disciples. It was for them that the voice came from the cloud. Peter clung to this scene till the end of his life.

We miss, however, the most important part, if we do not see that Jesus needed this experience Himself. Like Daniel, this happened to Him as He was praying. We read about Daniel that the angel was sent to him since he had set his mind to gain understanding and to humble himself before God.⁵ The angel had been sent that same day. We could say that Jesus prayed with the same frame of mind as Daniel. One week earlier He had begun to inform His disciples about the fact that He must suffer, die and be raised. From that point on Jesus’ whole ministry was governed by this. We may assume that this was also the topic of His prayer. The concept of His suffering and dying must have been a growing awareness for Him. He knew the principle because He understood the message of the Old Testament. But as a human being He must have had many questions which the Bible did not answer. That was why He was in prayer on the mountain. Here comes the answer. It was not given to Him by an angel. Angels are not privy to the mystery of atonement for sin. This is where man comes in. In the order of creation man ranks above the angels, and God ordained for man to give the devil his fatal blow. That fact constitutes one of the most moving features of this event. Two of the Old Testament’s most important people come to answer Jesus’ questions, to bless Him and to encourage Him on the long road to Golgotha.

1. Dan. 12:3

2. Mark 9:3

3. Luke 9:31

4. II Cor. 5:7

5. Daniel 10:12

This transfiguration is related to the deepest agony we can imagine: the suffering and death of our Lord. In speaking about His “departure,” Luke uses the Greek word *exodus*. The author of Hebrews uses the same word in the verse: “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the *exodus* of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.”¹ For the Israelites the *exodus* meant deliverance from slavery; for the Paschal lamb it meant death, the same kind of death the godless people of Egypt suffered.

We can only marvel and be still in the face of this paradox of glory and suffering. There is, of course, a sequence from suffering to glory. Jesus is “the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”² The marvel of Christ’s suffering is that He suffered in glory. Inwardly He was never affected by the hell of sin and filth in which He was immersed. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”³ It was under this superhuman pressure that the diamond of His glory was crystallized. God forges under pressure the elements of which glory is made, for us as well as for His Son.

Back to Peter. He wanted to erect three shelters so that Jesus, Moses and Elijah could stay. Both Mark and Luke agree that Peter did not know what he was saying.⁴ Yet, Peter’s reaction was less nonsensical than one would think. He wanted to hang on to the moment of glory. Is that ridiculous? God predestined man to glory. The problem at that moment was that man had to be redeemed first, and the price had not been paid yet.

“Lord, it is good for us to be here,” seems a poor choice of words. It sounds as if Peter believed that their presence at Jesus’ transfiguration was a coincidence. Here also, Peter said more than he knew and he did not know what he said. It was good for them to be there, better than they knew, but not because God needed their help. The disciples needed this vision of glory and they needed to hear the Father’s voice from the cloud.

God speaks to Jesus for our benefit. He has only one thing to say: “Listen to Him!” Jesus Christ is our only hope for salvation in this world.

The presence of the Father in the cloud caused the disciples to fear. They may not have been able to put it into so many words, but they realized that they were in the presence of the Creator of the universe and that they stood on holy ground. They were comforted by the fact that, immediately afterward they saw the familiar figure of the man Jesus. That fact has great and deep significance for us also. In this life we have to do with a human being in whom we can put our trust. That is what it means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He entered glory, but we know Him because He is like we are. God knows that man, as he is at present, although he is destined to glory, is as unable to dwell in glory as he can live in fire. That is the reason the Word became flesh.

Jesus then forbids the disciples specifically to tell others about the incident until after His resurrection. Somehow this fits completely into the patterns of Jesus’ thinking and acting. If before this, He forbade them to make know to others that He is the Christ, how much more ought His temporary glorification be kept secret, and certainly His “*exodus*.”

We do not know how much the disciples were able to catch of the conversation that Jesus had with Moses and Elijah. They either heard something then, or Jesus told them later what the topic under discussion had been; otherwise we would never have heard about it.

Mark gives a more detailed account about the end of this event. Jesus’ mention of the resurrection set the disciples mind in motion. They tried to find out from one another what that meant. As poor mortals

1. Heb. 11:22

2. Heb. 12:2

3. I Peter 2:22,23

4. Mark 9:6; Luke 9:28

they did not understand that man can rise from the dead. They didn't even understand the word. Mark states: "They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant."¹ One ignoramus asks another and no one asks the Lord, who is the only one who knows!

Jesus had already used the word approximately one week earlier. But at that time, they had not paid attention. One of the effect this transfiguration had upon them was that they began to listen.

It is not clear whether the disciples understood that the resurrection of the Lord meant that the Kingdom had come, or that they believed that the glory they had just witnessed constituted the fulfillment of Jesus' words of the week before. They believed they understood the chronology, the sequence in which the events had to take place. That was why they believed that Elijah had to come first. They based this on Malachi's prophecy: "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."² They had just seen Elijah, but they did not see his appearance as a fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. In His answer to the disciples' question, Jesus also bases Himself on Scripture, but more directly and not referring to the teachers of the law as the disciples did. Amazingly, Jesus does not even mention His transfiguration as a basis for His suffering, although the topic had been discussed at that time. He appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures. The written word of the Old Testament was the only instruction Jesus needed to know that He would leave this world as the Lamb of God.

It seems there is contradiction between the statement, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things," and "But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished." Mark adds the words "just as it is written about him."³ The question is, was the coming of Elijah, or of John the Baptist, who is the one intended here, a success or a failure? We must remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is based on voluntary submission. The kingdom does not come automatically. No one is forced into it. John's ministry was an appeal to the people's conscience, a call for repentance. Those who obeyed the call experienced in the coming of the Messiah the beginning of a complete restoration. Those who rejected John's and did everything their evil heart wished, excluded themselves from this restoration of life-giving fellowship with God. According to Mark, Jesus adds that John's rejection was foretold in Scripture. We may have difficulty pinpointing specific verses that contain such prediction, but the Bible as a whole testifies of the human tendency to disregard God's offer of peace.

We may draw the general conclusion from these verses that the events of that moment were not the final act in world history. As the first coming of Jesus in this world is not the only one, so Elijah's coming was a multiple event. We read in Revelation that God's two witnesses, Moses and Elijah, will appear again at the end of time.⁴

13. The healing of a demon-possessed boy 17:14-21

14 When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him.

15 "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water.

16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

17 "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me."

18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

1. Mark 9:10

2. Mal. 4:5,6

3. Mark 9:13

4. See Rev. 11:3-14.

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

A footnote in *The New International Version* states: "Some manuscripts [21] 'But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.'" In most modern translations v.21 is omitted.

It is almost impossible to imagine a greater contrast between the light on the mountain of transfiguration and the darkness of demon possession in the valley below. Luke states that this event took place "the next day."¹ On the Jewish clock, this could be the same day after sunset. It could, however, be that Jesus had spent the night on the mountain with His disciples. Mark gives us the most detailed report of this incident.²

When Jesus and the others arrived at the foot of the mountain, they saw a crowd arguing around the disciples who had been left behind. Mark states that the disciples quarrel with the teachers of the law, evidently about the healing of the demon-possessed boy. The father of the boy had come to see Jesus, but Jesus was not there. When Jesus arrives, the father tells Him: "I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." He had come to see Jesus, but in His absence, he had accepted the disciples' offer to exorcise his boy. The disciples must have felt that they had a reputation to uphold and they tried to heal the boy. The debate with the teachers of the law must have been about their failure. When we begin to argue we are no longer in the Kingdom. As the Apostle Paul states: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."³

The father brings his son's desperate condition to Jesus. The demon tried to make him commit suicide by making him fall in the fire or by drowning. For a father, the suffering of a child is harder to bear than his own suffering. This man must have been desperate. The devil was destroying his boy and he was powerless to do anything. This tragedy is complicated by the fact that the disciples see their efforts to heal the boy fail.

We could ask if the father was justified in his expectations that the disciples could have given the help his son needed. If he would have come to us, we would probably react like the king of Israel, who received a letter from the king of Aram with the request to heal Naaman of his leprosy: "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"⁴ Yet, Jesus, evidently, expected His disciples to be up to the task, because He rebukes them in the sharpest possible terms. If Jesus became angry with His disciples for their lack of faith, how much angrier would He be with us? The main thing Jesus cannot stand is unbelief. Jesus' words come like the crack of a whip to all of us: "How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" This outburst seems uncharacteristic for the Lord. It seems to be contrary to His love for the disciples. Yet, we may not for one moment suppose that the Lord would have been less than perfect in His love for the disciples. His impatience has an educative value. Evidently, we are able to exercise more faith than we believe we can. It is our satisfaction with the substandard kind of faith that pricks the Lord's impatience. This is proof of the fact that Jesus' vision of mankind is fundamentally different from ours. The hindrance of faith is sin. Sinful acts, as well as the whole atmosphere of sin in which we live, form a barrier to faith. We have a tendency to accept this as part of being human. Under the influence of demonic propaganda, we speak about human frailty and human nature in the same breath. It is against this kind of

1. Luke 9:37

2. Mark 9:14-29

3. I Cor. 4:20

4. II Kings 5:7

identification that Jesus cries an angry and clear “no!” We rarely realize that unbelief is sin for which we must ask for forgiveness.

Matthew does not mention Jesus’ conversation with the father of the boy, in which He asks how long the boy has been possessed, and how He answers the father’s cry: “But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” with “If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes.” To which the father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”¹ But in His answer to the disciples’ question regarding why they had been unable to cast the demon out, Jesus illustrates the faith factor by saying: “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.” To move a mountain or a mulberry tree into the sea is, of course, a physical impossibility for human beings. We read nowhere in Scripture that this miracle was performed, even by Jesus. The example is purposely extreme to show how unlimited the horizon of faith is. The miracle that comes closest to this limitlessness, apart from Jesus’ own resurrection, is the standing still of the sun at the order of Joshua.² If God pays attention to the voice of a man and changes the rules of the universe at his request, where then is the end? “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”³

The limitation is found in the word “faith.” The modern tendency is to reverse the issue. We put limitations on “nothing impossible” and make “faith” limitless. “One needs to have faith” does not necessarily mean that we ought to put our trust in God, the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Thus we pack into “faith” everything from Zen Buddhism to biblical faith. “All things” is only limited if our faith is not clearly directed to God alone. Modern psychology admits that a person needs certain values in life to which he can cling in times of crisis. It seems to make little difference what those values are. We know, however, that a drowning person does not receive any help if the rope that is thrown to him is not attached to anything solid. If the person who throws the lifeline is another one who is drowning in the same water, the line offers no help. Such is “faith” that is not attached to “truth.” Only faith that is fixed upon God sets us free. Faith is the focal point of life. If we direct our focus upon God, His light will fall upon us like a sunbeam on a magnifying glass that sets the object aflame. Biblical faith means to realize who the God is with whom we are dealing. It means understanding what God is willing to do for us.

It was this faith that Jesus had in the Father that allowed Him to do what He did. It was that faith that He expected the father of the boy to have and that He reproached the disciples for not having. It often seems to us as if the devil is in control of all circumstances. We are influenced by his propaganda. The first step of faith consists in the recognition that what Satan says is a lie. Reality belongs to the invisible God. As soon as we see our circumstances in the right perspective, we begin to function as God wants human beings to function. Fear paralyzes. Faith sets free.

Matthew does not go into any further detail about what followed the casting out of the demon. He simply states: “Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.” Mark provides the most detailed account, saying: “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.’ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, ‘He’s dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.”⁴

Shortly after the boy’s healing, and when the disciples are alone with the Lord, they bring up the question of their own failure to drive out the demon. We often attribute our failures to our emotional condition. What Jesus’ answer amounts to is that the disciples had underestimated the enemy. Eighty percent

1. Mark 9:22-24

2. Josh. 10:12-14

3. Ps. 8:4

4. Mark 9:25-27

of our failures in spiritual matters can probably be attributed to this lack of recognition. We must come to the place where Satan's intimidations do not affect us anymore, where we have clothed ourselves with the full armor of God.

Prayer must be accompanied by the absolute certainty that God will do what we ask. The exercise of faith is prayer. Prayer requires as much exercise as weightlifting. George Mueller said that people should not begin by praying for things that are too big. Our faith is exercised by beginning to ask for small things, and as our prayers are being heard, our confidence will increase. Jesus' faith was so complete that He could and dared to ask the Father for all things. The example given of the moving of the mountain is not meant to discourage, but to encourage us, so that we will reach for that which is beyond our horizon.

Campbell Morgan in his commentary on Matthew, comments on Jesus' words "O unbelieving and perverse generation." He indicates that Jesus draws a larger circle than around the disciples alone. He places them within the frame of their generation. What they do and believe, or rather, what they are unable to do, is the product of the spirit of the time in which they live. He further suggests that at Jesus' first announcement of His suffering a certain distance was created between Jesus and His disciples, which allowed this powerless unbelief to grow and mature.

14. The second announcement of suffering, the struggle for the top 17:22,23-18:10

22 When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.

23 They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

24 After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

25 "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes — from their own sons or from others?"

26 "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him.

27 "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

2 He called a little child and had him stand among them.

3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

7 "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!

8 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

9 And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

10 "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Some time must have elapsed between this moment and the previous event. Matthew does not give any clear indication of time gone by, but he leaves some space. Mark notes "They left that place and passed

through Galilee.”¹ This trip was not for public ministry. Mark states: “Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.”² Jesus may have avoided the highway, choosing some smaller and less frequented paths. This trip to Galilee had more the character of a retreat than of an evangelistic campaign. It could be that, following the disciples’ failure in connection with the healing of the demon possessed boy, Jesus wanted to show them in a practical way what prayer was all about.

During this time of rest and relaxation, Jesus brings up again the theme of His suffering and death. About one week earlier, He had introduced them to this in a general way while in Caesarea. Here He adds the details of His betrayal and being delivered into the hands of men. Spending time in prayer and quietness, the realization of His exodus takes a more defined form. When Jesus began to speak about His suffering, He hit a wall of complete lack of understanding. Peter had thought that Jesus was wrong. There is some progress in that the disciples now no longer resist the thought. Yet, there is a sense in which their failure to understand deepens. Their numbness reaches another level. They do take the Lord more seriously, but they don’t know why. It scares them. Luke states: “But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.”³ Matthew adds: “And the disciples were filled with grief.”

The disciples’ lack of understanding was, in a way, an act of God’s grace. Jesus knew that a full revelation of the truth would be too much for them to take. The purpose of His words here was, obviously, to equip and harden them, so that they would not be crushed by the events when they happened.

We wonder how Judas felt, hearing this. Jesus’ mention of betrayal constituted a warning to him. It is likely that, at this point, Judas did not know yet that he would betray Jesus. Would his heart have been so hardened already that the seed of Jesus’ words could immediately be picked up by the birds? The devil must have succeeded somehow to quash the effect of Jesus’ words. But Satan was not the only one who was working in Judas’ soul.

During this trip to Capernaum, either before or after Jesus’ announcement of His suffering, the disciples began to argue about who was the most important among them.⁴ But this was not the only time the topic was brought up.

Between this report about the announcement of suffering and the following event, Matthew inserts a few verses about the payment of temple tax. He is the only Evangelist who records this incident. It probably occurred immediately upon arrival in Capernaum. Capernaum was considered to be Jesus’ hometown.⁵ Jesus’ name may have been recorded in the city’s register.

The collector’s question, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” was not meant to be a trap. It was a reasonable question asked by someone who was doing his job. A tax collector at the temple sends a reminder to the Lord to pay His temple taxes!

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary explains: “This was not a tax to be paid to the Roman government; but a tax for the support of the temple. The law, Ex 30:13, obliged every male among the Jews to pay half a shekel yearly, for the support of the temple; and this was continued by them wherever dispersed, till after the time of Vespasian ... who ordered it afterward to be paid into the Roman treasury.” According to the law, each Israelite, twenty years old or more, had to pay half a shekel to the Lord whenever a census was taken. This was called “a ransom for his life.”⁶ But this was not the ransom money the law prescribed. It was a tax levied to people who worshipped in the temple, instituted by human counsel. Yet, Jesus demonstrates here also the respect He had shown for the temple as a young boy, calling it “My Father’s house.”⁷ He also knew

1. Mark 9:30

2. Mark 9:30,31

3. Luke 9:45

4. Luke 9:46

5. See Mark 2:2.

6. Ex. 30:11-16

that the building itself was not the real temple. To the Jews who attacked Him when He cleansed the temple of commercialism, He said: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” At which John adds: “the temple he had spoken of was his body.”¹

In Jesus’ question to Peter, “From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes — from their own sons or from others?” and the following remark that the sons are free, the Lord refers to the payment He would make on the cross for the sins of the world. Of all people, the One who made this payment ought to be exempt from paying for the upkeep of the temple. But Jesus decides to pay “so that we may not offend them.”

There are some interesting details in this story in regard to Peter’s attitude. To the tax collector he answers positively that Jesus does pay His taxes. But when he comes home he seems to have some doubts. He was going to ask Jesus about it. But Matthew states specifically that Jesus spoke first, knowing what the question would be.

One wonders why Jesus would perform a miracle, merely to pay with one single piece of money. We may assume that there would be several of those coins in the bag Judas was carrying as the treasurer. The miracle must have had special significance. As we saw above, there was some question about the legitimacy of the payment. In this kind of contradictory condition God shows His smiling face by providing a single piece of money.

We have all had the experience of being in conditions of doubt. There are problem situations that are the result of our own doing. In her book, *A Green Leaf in a Time of Drought*, Isabel Kuhn makes the statement: “there are no secondary causes with God.” God uses all, even our mistakes and conflicts in order to glorify Himself.

When Jesus sends Peter to the lake, He does this as a prophet. He “stakes everything on one throw.” There was one chance in one hundred million. Yet, He wins the game. God always wins whatever the odds may be.

When Peter goes to the lake and catches the fish, he finds a *stater*, a four-drachma coin, exactly the amount needed to pay for Jesus and himself. What is striking in this story is, what we could call, the virtuosity of the miracle. This “divine coincidence” is very impressive. It shows that, as far as God is concerned there is no such thing as “chance.”

The main lesson of the story seems to be Jesus’ statement: “so that we may not offend them...” Although Jesus had already said that the payment of the temple tax was actually illegal, because as sons of Him who is the Lord of the temple, the disciples were not subject to this taxation, He does not fight the issue.

There is something comical in the fact that the Lord of glory was required to pay the equivalent of one or two quarters for a house built to His honor. That was part of His humiliation. It is not coincidental that Jesus paid for Peter and Himself. In order to maintain His equality with mankind He pays. Because of our oneness with Him, we are exempt. Not only the Son is exempt, we are also.

It seems that all the humiliation of our Lord and of ours is wrapped up in this story. We partake in His suffering because we will partake in His glory. How majestic is this payment!

During this journey to Capernaum, whether before or after Jesus’ announcement of His suffering, the disciples bring up the question of who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It is difficult not to attribute ulterior motives to this question. They had strong personal interests in the matter. Mark observes that the disciples had been arguing about it on the road, and they were embarrassed to talk about it in Jesus’ presence.² The question popped up at regular intervals. Satan makes sure that it recurs with monotonous frequency. The last time we read about it is during the celebration of the Last Supper.³

7. Luke 2:49

1. John 2:19-21

2. Mark 9:33,34

3. See Luke 22:24

What bothered them individually was the thought that one of them would be given a higher rank than to the others. The refusal to submit to human authority can always be traced to refusal to obey the Lord. After all, He is Lord. He is the first and the only one!

The way Matthew presents it, they asked Jesus the question in an impersonal way, as if the thought had not really occurred to them. But both Mark and Luke show us the background of dispute among them. We read in Mark: "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.' He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, '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.'"¹

Matthew does not mention Jesus' remark about becoming a servant, but he does report the object lesson in which Jesus takes a child in His arms and places the child in the middle. He is number one who is willing to occupy the lowest place. Jesus would give an example of this kind of humility in washing the disciples' feet on the eve of His crucifixion.² Everyone who renounces his right to the throne will be placed on the throne by God. The first place is only for those who do not seek it. Only those who humble themselves will be exalted. It is obvious that we can only demonstrate humility if we are humble in heart. We may be able to play a humble role, but it is impossible to keep up the comedy.

As we saw earlier, a child is not necessarily humble. Most children are actually naively proud about things that are of little worth. Every child, however, knows that he or she is dependent upon his or her parents and he or she has the natural tendency to trust those parents. Humility is, in reality, knowing ourselves to be dependent upon God and to trust Him to give us what we need. Pride is the opposite of humility. Pride and humility have nothing to do with abilities, but with the source of our abilities. The humble person knows that he can do nothing apart from God and he also says: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."³ The proud person believes that he is the cause and reason of his own success.

In this context, Jesus does not speak about our relationship with God but with one another. He says that we must welcome the child in His Name. We have no problem identifying with the great in the kingdom. Who would not want to be on the same picture in a newspaper with Billy Graham! Some of the glory of important people reflects on us. We are quite clever and subtle in our judgment over others. We do not take the children into account in the Kingdom of Heaven. Even if we cannot count ourselves among the great in the kingdom, we tend to feel ourselves above those who are younger than we are. We are more experienced than those who stand at the beginning of life. Jesus wants us to recognize and honor the image of God in the child. If we can see in others, whether they be great or small, a person through whom God can demonstrate His glory, we see things in their right perspective. Everything we add or take away distorts the image. That which makes a child the greatest in the kingdom is the fact that Jesus identifies Himself with the child. Everyone who has the Lord on his side is a king, however small and insignificant he may be in himself. We must all learn the lesson of welcoming others in the Name of Jesus. Even if it seems that we have to take a few steps down, we actually welcome Him from whom and through whom and to whom are all things. To whom be the glory forever! Amen."⁴ We will need eternity to understand what this means. Our concept of false values and distorted relations often keeps us from seeing the glory that surrounds us.

Jesus says three things as He places the child before His disciples as an object lesson. First, that we must become like a child in order to enter the kingdom. This involves a complete change. The Greek word used is *strepho*, which means "to turn around" or "to reverse." It stands for "conversion." Secondly, in order to take the first place in the kingdom, we must humble ourselves. The Greek word here is *tapeinoo*, meaning "to depress," or "to bring low." And thirdly, we must receive our fellowman as a child.

1. Mark 9:35-37

2. John 13:1-20

3. Phil. 4:13

4. Rom. 11:36

Concerning the first point, we must come to the place where we cease to consider ourselves as independent, someone who puts his own will above or against the will of God. We must recognize that we are totally dependent upon God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who gives us our very heartbeat and our every breath. We borrow every minute of life from God, and yet we live as if we have our days on earth in our own hands. In certain stages of life a child is physically completely dependent upon his parents, and after that he remains emotionally dependant for a number of years. This becomes particularly clear when things go wrong in life. An orphan or a child from a broken home goes through a deep emotional crisis.

We become children of God when we acknowledge being physically, materially and emotionally dependant upon our heavenly Father; when we cease to fight this concept and ask for forgiveness; when we accept and experience the restoration of our natural relationships. That is what it means to be converted and that makes us enter the kingdom.

The second point concerns the position we occupy as a child of God in the kingdom. The Lord says that we will come far if we consider ourselves to be like a child in an adult world. The principle here is the same as in the first point. The difference is that we usually enter the kingdom as the result of a flash of insight. The fog lifts for a moment, sometimes for several days, enough to enable us to decide to transfer from darkness into light. To consider ourselves to be merely a child takes constant effort to keep the reality in clear view. Once we have entered the gate of the kingdom there lies a long road ahead that leads to life. There will be darkness and fog on that road. This will make us go through the initial experience again and again. We will have to repeat to ourselves that we are completely dependant upon God. Walking on the way means to learn over and over how greatly dependent we are. "These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things."¹ At a later stage Jesus will use the picture of the vine and the branches for His disciples. It would be ridiculous for a branch to want to detach itself from the vine and then credit itself for that sap that flows through it, which produces the fruit. To see one's place in life in the right light is the same as considering one's self to be humble like a child.

When Jesus speaks about receiving a little child in His Name, He does not necessarily speak about a young person. This may be an adult who has taken the stand of being a child in the spiritual sense of the word.

Although seducing anyone to sin against God incurs a terrible punishment, there is a most severe penalty for those who seduce children and make them lose their faith. Child pornography would be an example in case. It is easy for an adult to start a young person on the wrong road. It is about this that the Lord pronounces His severe "woe." The man who drowns in the sea with a millstone around his neck is better off at the day of judgment than he who hinders a child on the way to fellowship with the Lord.

It seems strange that in a world that is covered with a thick crust of sin, the Lord speaks as if one single person would be responsible for temptations. I believe that Jesus draws here a line from one particular incident to eternity. From a divine perspective, God does not look upon sin as a series of unconnected wrongs, but as the result of one act of disobedience. As the Apostle Paul states: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned ..."² In the same way God will look at the Antichrist and his performance as the culmination of all sin. He is "the man" over whom Christ pronounces His "woe."

The Lord actually pronounces a double judgment here. First over the world, the system created by people who love evil more than good. That is the structure of temptation as with the thorns and thistles in the parable of the sower. Those are the things that choke the Word of God in the human heart. Several times Jesus brings all in mankind that refuses to do the will of God under one denominator: the world. That word may have become a cliché for us. But we do well to remember what is originally meant with it. It is the system of natural things that is under the control of the Evil One. This system is manifested and propagated

1. Ps. 104:27,28

2. Rom. 5:12

by people who refuse to be enlightened by the light of God. The world Jesus speaks about here is already under God's judgment, because it does not want to come to Him to receive pardon and renewal.

Jesus' "woe" increases the severity of judgment because people, not only refuse to be saved themselves, but they also draw others away from the light that could have saved them. The depth of this "woe" is terrible to fathom.

Temptation to sin is unavoidable. It is the natural result of the condition of this present world that a person born into this world is led into temptation to sin. For us who are descendants of Adam who have inherited his sinful nature, there is the natural tendency to sin and raise ourselves up in the face of God. Even Jesus who was born into this world without a natural tendency to sin, had to be tempted and learn obedience in what He suffered.

There must be in Jesus' words something deeper than simply natural causes and effects. There is in the words "Such things must come" something of a divine decree that is in the process of being realized. Here we enter difficult terrain. Who can sound the depth of intention of an all-wise God? We are faced with a complex of conflicting and impenetrable conditions for which our human reasoning is not qualified. How can a perfect and holy God allow sin and temptation to occupy a place in His plan for this world? We do understand that God is not the author of sin, or that we, as human beings, could hold Him accountable for the sins of mankind. Jesus' following words "but woe to the man through whom they come" contradict this option. We, as human beings, are responsible for our acts. Yet, God uses temptations that are instigated by the devil in order to achieve His goal for humanity. The classical example is the story of Job. And, as we saw, Jesus learned obedience in being tempted. It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan. The Apostle Peter states: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."¹ And: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."² Although it is true that the worldly system of rebellion against God will culminate in the appearing of "the man of sin," it is also true that sin is infused into the world through the lives of individuals. Every person is responsible for the sinful influence he exercises in his surrounding.

In vv.8 and 9 Jesus uses the same images as in chapter 5:29 and 30 to indicate how alert we ought to be to protect our lives against temptation. In that context the warning is against adultery; here it is about temptation in general. It is clear that the Lord does not mean that we must maim ourselves physically. But God expects us to take drastic measures in order to prevent the cancer of sin from spreading in our lives. We know now that the most important means to conquer sin is the blood of Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus shows us a glimpse of a reality that is invisible to the human eye. "These little ones" are served and surrounded by angels and those angels see the face of the Father in heaven. That fact elevates those little ones, the most insignificant of the human race, to creatures that have eternal value. If we scorn our fellowmen, we have lost sight of the right perspectives. Actually the value of a little child is not determined by the fact that he is surrounded by angels; the angel-watch is there because the child has so much value before God. The author of Hebrews extends the ministry of angels to all "who will inherit salvation."³ And David testifies: "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them."⁴ There are spiritual beings who surround us to protect us against demonic influences.

1. I Peter 1:6,7

2. I Peter 4:12,13

3. Heb. 1:14

4. Ps. 34:7

15. The parable of the lost sheep 18:12-14

12 *"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?"*

13 *And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.*

14 *In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.*

Matthew places this parable in the context of Jesus' words about "these little ones." Luke makes clear that the application is not merely to little ones, but to all of God's children. The story illustrates God's tender compassion for people who are lost. Matthew condenses the parable, leaving out some details Luke provides.¹ In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the story before the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who grumbled because Jesus associated Himself with tax collectors and prostitutes. Evidently, those were included in "the little ones" as Matthew calls them. The way Matthew puts it, the stress is upon the single individual who is lost. Luke places the story against the background of the "righteous persons who do not need to repent."

In the way Jesus tells the story, He appeals to us in our behavior as humans. Matthew says: "What do you think?" Luke: "Does he not leave the ninety-nine ...?"² What He is saying is, that what God does with us is what we all do, even with our animals. On the one hand, this means that the Lord resembles us in what He does. This does not mean that His acts surpass our understanding. But, on the other hand, it means that what we do in the realm of our existence is a reflection of God's character. Our compassion, sympathy and sacrifice mirror God's eternal, incomprehensible love. In this also the person who turns away from God is without excuse. In a society in which truth has lost its central position, these mirror images also become vague. All moral values and acts of kindness can, in one way or another, be connected to the preaching of the Word of God.

The most moving part of the story is the almost childish joy of the shepherd when he finds his sheep. Luke says: "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"³ That joy is the point of comparison between the parable and reality. Luke states in connection with another, similar parable "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."⁴ It may be somewhat simplistic, but we may imagine that the Almighty goes around in heaven and says to the angels: "Did you see that? John was lost and I found him!" Nothing in our spiritual life can ever top that moment. There is nothing about which we can be as glad as about the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life.

Jesus could not have chosen a better picture to teach us what He wants us to learn. Nothing is more lost than a lost sheep. Isaiah states: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."⁵ We read in the parable that the shepherd goes to seek the sheep. How this seeking and finding is being done we are not told in this story. The Bible teaches that, if the sheep depicts lost man, Jesus came into this world as the Lamb of God that was led to the slaughterer. He identified Himself totally with us and our lost condition. He took upon Himself the iniquity of us all and reconciled the break with God in dying for us. Matthew tells us that this happened "on the hills." Luke uses the words "in the open country." The Greek word used is *eremos*, which is usually

1. See Luke 15:4-8.

2. Luke 15:4

3. Luke 15:5,6

4. Luke 15:10

5. Isa. 53:6

rendered “desert.” We find it in the verse “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the *Desert* of Judea.”¹ No word better typifies the demon-possessed condition of our present world.

It is only after this salvation that we find the sheep in the sheep pen, at which the picture of the green pastures and the quiet waters comes alive.²

Luke adds the ironic phrase about “ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”³ This does, of course, not mean that this category of people already went through the process of repentance and salvation and consequently do not have to do this again. It refers to people who mistakenly believe that they are too good for repentance. They do not consider themselves to fall short of the glory of God. They believe that they will not fall short when God will take their measurements with the measuring rod of His absolute holiness and perfection. They are totally blind. And because they have never asked for forgiveness themselves, they cannot rejoice when others who were lost are being found.

Finally, all one hundred sheep belong to the owner. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he brings it back to his fold, not to someone else’s. The meaning of this must be found in God’s covenant with Israel. God does not demonstrate His love arbitrarily. His love is subject to certain specific laws. As love between husband and wife grows within the frame of a marriage relationship, so does God’s love operate within the structure of His promises to Israel. When Jesus told this parable, Israel was the lawful spouse of the Father. Matthew expresses God’s emotions so beautifully in the words “In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”⁴

Since, as New Testament believers, we are not included in this covenant with Israel, we cannot apply this parable directly to ourselves. Through faith we become the bride of the Lamb, not of the Father, but of the Son. Our relationship with the Bridegroom is much more solid than the bond that ever existed between the Father and Israel. Yet, the fact remains that God’s love is unchangeable. When God chose Israel, He had the whole world in mind. The principle of God’s redeeming love is eternal and it goes well beyond the scope of this parable. As the Apostle Peter says: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”⁵ That does not only pertain to the nation of Israel, but to the whole human race. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ...”⁶ The immediate application of this parable is first to Israel, and then to us.

16. Forgiveness and temptation 18:15-35

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

1. Matt. 3:1

2. John 10:1; Ps. 23

3. Luke 15:7

4. Matt. 18:14

5. II Peter 3:9

6. John 3:16

19 *"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

20 *For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

21 *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

22 *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

23 *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.*

24 *As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.*

25 *Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

26 *"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'*

27 *The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

28 *"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.*

29 *"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'*

30 *"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.*

32 *"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.*

33 *Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*

34 *In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

35 *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

We may assume that Jesus spoke these words within the few days between His transfiguration and the journey to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of the Dedication of the temple, which John describes in John 7-10. Matthew gives a detailed version of what Luke gives in condensed form.¹ Luke adds the disciples' interjection: "Increase our faith!"²

The subject is temptation and forgiveness. Jesus tells the stories, not only to illustrate that God forgives sinners, but also to lay the foundation upon which we can mutually help and forgive one another. In this we are one another's shepherds as He is our shepherd. The words "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" must be seen as a practical application of the parable of the lost sheep. This means that the Lord uses us in His search for the lost sheep. If we are unable to solve the problem as an individual, we must form a team of two or more in order to find the solution. As a last resort the whole church must be involved in the search-and-rescue operation.

In this elaboration of the parable, Jesus highlights three aspects. First of all, it is God who seeks. Second, God does the seeking by involving us. Third, the decisive factor in the rescue is whether the lost soul allows itself to be found. The person who abandons God has the doubtful privilege of saying "no!" as he is invited to turn around.

The legal aspect of the matter is stressed in the phrase "so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" This is a quotation from Deuteronomy.³ A broken relationship with God is, just as a divorce, a legal matter. In the same way conversion and regeneration are judicial matters, like a marriage. The law that regulates marriage and divorce is a shadow of the spiritual law that binds us to

1. See Luke 17:1-6.

2. Luke 17:5

3. Deut. 19:15

the Lord. Fellowship with God and forgiveness of sin are not mere emotional issues. The emotional part is actually the least important one. God's seeking of a lost soul is an act of righteousness. "If we confess our sins, *he is faithful and just* and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."¹ The fact that Jesus personally paid our debt is the solid basis of our redemption. Because the matter is judicial, our witness is of great importance.

"Show him his fault" is the translation of the Greek verb *elegcho*, which means "to convict," or "to reprove." Reproving another human being is no matter we can do or leave according to our likes. As God's children we have a legal obligation toward our fellowmen. God said to Ezekiel: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."² We have to interpret Jesus' words about binding and loosing, and also about two or three agreeing about something in prayer, in that context. It is not merely a matter of some people praying together, but of a jury's verdict.

God expects us to go with two or three people to admonish a person who has lost his way, so that the rebuke rises above the level of subjectivity. There is always the danger that we look through our own colored glasses in looking at someone else's life. Bringing two or three others into it diminishes that danger. God is fair in the way He judges us.

It is important to see that the object here is "your brother." This speaks of those who have the same bond with God as we have. In that respect, these verses do not refer to our testimony to unbelievers. But there are natural principles of responsibility that are always valid. When we see someone drown in a river, we must make an effort to save, regardless of natural relationships. In our witnessing toward unbelievers, there may be a time when we must cease to speak and leave the sinner be. We must never stop loving. The Apostle Paul elaborates this point in his first letter to the church in Corinth. We read: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'"³ "With such a man do not even eat" does not necessarily refer to a meal, but to a form of fellowship, which the early church knew as an "agape."

Another text that is related to Jesus' words here is in John's first epistle: "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. If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that."⁴ We see here also that prayer and compassion for a brother are mentioned in the same breath. John's words give the impression that prayer for lost sheep is particularly the prayer according to God's will. The affirmation

1. I John 1:9

2. Ezek. 3:17-21

3. I Cor. 5:9-13

4. I John 5:14-16

“God will give him life” is very strong. A comparison of these Scripture portions brings out the double aspect of “reprove.” Going to the brother to reprove him must be complimented by prayer for the two or three who go.

The emphasis on the positive aspect of this all is striking. The subject is a person who has lost his way. We are to consider him as a pagan if he does not want to listen. But it is obvious that agreeing on earth about anything we ask for in prayer speaks of an intense longing that what is lost will be found.

The binding and loosing, evidently, pertains to demonic powers that are to be bound and human beings who must be loosed. Jesus’ words do not give us the authority to bind people and send them to hell. Like Jesus, we have not come to condemn but to save. There is, on the one hand, the aspect of man’s free will, who can sin if he wants to, and who can say “no” to God. On the other hand, man’s will can be bound by the devil, making him to want only evil. But the power of God can bind the strong man and his possessions can be carried off.¹ That is the essence of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Throughout the ages vv.19 and 20 have been the basis for all prayer meetings, and rightfully so. We must, however, remember the context in which these words were given. It is about people who are lost and must be found. We can say, without hesitation, that God will graciously give us all things if we ask for them in Jesus’ Name. As Paul says: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”² And: “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”³

Strangely enough, v.19 begins with the word “again.” This means that what Jesus says is a repetition of that which precedes. But we do not find these words in the preceding chapters. They do occur in John’s Gospel,⁴ but that is only a few hours before Jesus’ death.

We are given the impression that the two or three who agree in prayer form a kind of quorum that allow the Father to powerfully act upon their request. There is this distinction between heaven and earth that opens up enormous perspectives to us. What we ask for together on earth has the power to move the hand of God in eternal glory. That is the difference between a Christian and an unbeliever. What a non-Christian does is limited to the sphere of this earth. The only supernatural power that is open for him is the devil, that fallen angel, who, in the order of creation ranks below man, even fallen man. He is a defeated foe. But we, Christians, can lay our hand on the throne of God and move heaven and earth with one single prayer. The secret of this power is in the presence of the Lord Himself, in the Person of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus says: “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete,” He emphasizes that prayer in His Name is directed to the Father. In the context of the verses before us, the emphasis is upon fellowship on earth. Both are facets of the same issue. No real prayer is possible without the presence of the Lord. We cannot know that God is there without having fellowship with Him. And fellowship with God is impossible without partnership with one another. We can reverse the order. All prayer in that context, says the Lord will be heard. That is our heritage. We remain free when we surrender to God. We are actually much freer when we submit. The Father will entrust the lost sheep to us if we pray for their salvation.

Peter’s question “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” still fits in the context of temptation. Jesus had spoken about temptations and people who fell prey to them. He had shown how the lost sheep could be found and what role we, as believers, had to play in this. He explained the responsibility we have, the authority and the means of prayer with one another, to bring back the lost sheep into fellowship with the Father. Now we are shown the other side of the coin.

1. Matt. 12:29

2. Rom. 8:32

3. I Cor. 3:21-23

4. John 16:23,24

Thus far the sinner had remained anonymous, not only in the sense that no name was mentioned, but there had been no direct relationship between us and the other, except as fellowman. The sins committed had not been committed to us. Peter had asked himself what his attitude ought to be if he got personally involved. What to do if the other person's sin causes personal damage, or complete ruin? In Luke's Gospel, Jesus introduces the same topic with the words "So watch yourselves."¹ Peter was willing to go pretty far in his willingness to forgive. Forgiving someone who keeps on offending seven times is an achievement. Because of what follows, we rarely give Peter enough credit for his good attitude. Who would forgive someone who keeps on committing the same sin seven times? Such a person will never change, so why bother! We assume that God has not forgiven him, and that relieves us of the obligation to keep on forgiving. The context indicates, however, that God's forgiveness is not conditional upon a person's inner change. The point of the story seems to be that what God does with someone else is not our business.

But as far as I am concerned, God seems to assume that, if I put any limits on my forgiveness of others, no inner change has taken place in me! The law of the Kingdom appears to be that the pardon of my great guilt brings with it forgiveness of others for what they have done to me. The sins of others to me are always much smaller than my guilt before God.

In the parable Jesus tells to illustrate the point, the amount of money involved is enormous. Ten thousand talents amounts to millions of dollars in the world of today. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* equates it to "a sum equal to the annual revenue of the British empire!" It represents a personal debt that is beyond imagination. A few shekels would be a wage of several days for a laborer. One talent was worth about 3,000 shekels. In the parable Jesus tells in Luke's Gospel, the comparison is between 500 shekels and 50.² The amounts there do not represent our real guilt before God; they symbolize the subjective value of our guilt in comparison with someone else's. In our mind the other person is a ten-time greater sinner than we are. The similarity between that parable and the one told here is that our debt toward God is so great that it is impossible for us to pay. In the parable in Luke's Gospel, Jesus emphasizes that an awareness of being forgiven expresses itself in love for God. In the parable before us, the point is that our forgiveness ought to lead to forgiveness of others. All our relationships on earth are a reflection of a heavenly reality.

The lesson to be learned from this parable is that our conduct on earth is an indication of our sense of reality. Luke reveals that the disciples' reaction to Jesus' parable is "Increase our faith!" to which Jesus replied: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."³ There is something moving in this reaction of the disciples. They realized that in the face of the complexity of sin and forgiveness they fall short in their spiritual insight. Receiving God's pardon means that we see God's reality. Peter would say later that a person who does not act upon God's pardon "is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."⁴

The point of the parable is easy enough to understand. The man who owed the king ten thousand talents and whose debt was forgiven was creditor to a man who owed him a hundred denarii, which would be the equivalent of a few dollars. The one who had been forgiven a debt similar to the annual revenue of the British Empire had someone put in prison for owing him some pocket money. The lesson is that unless God's forgiveness changes our heart, it does not do us any good. If we do not forgive as we have been forgiven we are not forgiven at all. We may have been forgiven on paper, but not in practice. This explains Jesus' earlier statement in the Lord's Prayer: "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."⁵ Our shortsightedness that makes us see the speck of sawdust in our brother's eye and

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1. Luke 17:3
 2. Luke 7:36-50
 3. Luke 17:5,6
 4. II Peter 1:9
 5. Matt. 6:15

fail to note the plank in your own eye¹ is an indication of our lack of healing which God's pardon is supposed to produce in us. It qualifies us in God's eye as hypocrites. After all, what does it mean to be forgiven, other than seeing reality as God sees it? Years later, Peter would state in one of his epistles, that the person who is not changed by God's forgiveness of his sins is "nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."²

17. Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem – The cost of discipleship 19:1-12

1 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.

2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'

5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?

6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.

12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

From Matthew's and Mark's record we understand that Jesus did not go straight to Jerusalem, but that He lingered for a while in northern Judea across the Jordan. Luke adds to this that Jesus passed through Samaria.³ But the following conversation about marriage and divorce with some Pharisees still took place in Perea, the area east of Judea on the east side of the Jordan River. It is not clear how the party arrived at this place. It could be that Jesus had traveled through Samaria and crossed the river again. The "another village" Luke mentions,⁴ may have been located in Samaria. If the situation here is the same as John describes in his Gospel,⁵ it would mean that Jesus had first gone to Jerusalem and continued from there to Perea, followed by a large crowd among whom the Lord performed many miracles of healing.

The Pharisees came with a question that Jesus had already answered in the Sermon on the Mount.⁶ The fact that it was a group of Pharisees that asked the question indicates that it was meant to be a trap. The question is not a brilliant one either. It was asked from the viewpoint of the married man. Women had not been emancipated to the point where their role could be discussed. The Old Testament does not leave much

1. See Matt. 7:3-5.

2. II Peter 1:9

3. Luke 9:51; 17:11-19

4. Luke 9:56

5. John 10:40-42

6. Matt. 5:27-32

doubt about the question. The seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery,”¹ leaves very little room for argument. Jesus’ conclusion, which was probably the accepted interpretation of the day, was that adultery meant the virtual end of a marriage relationship.

It is quite possible that “any and every reason” is a euphemism for adultery, but it is more likely that the Pharisees’ intention was to draw Jesus out to say that other grounds for divorce could be found. In Mark’s Gospel we read that Jesus Himself first asked the question “What did Moses command you?”² which He then answered Himself. In answering their question, Jesus goes back to the fundamentals of the order of creation. The reference is to the verse: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”³

The whole mystery of the existence of man and marriage is captured in those words. Man is not only the image of God individually, but the marriage between a man and a woman is an expression of the character of God. Married couples must understand that their sexual relation is not only a strong factor that binds the two together, but that there is a relationship between things spiritual and emotional, of which sex is the physical expression. If this unity between the spiritual and physical aspects is not understood, the thrill of sex will eventually wear off and communication between partners will weaken. There is a sense in which sex is a thermometer in a marriage relationship. Few people, however, realize that what they are doing together is a shadow of the unity of love that exists within the character of the triune God. The two-fold unity in a marriage is an earthly expression of the great and real expression of love in the Trinity. This also is part of the image of God in man. If what we experience as marriage partners on earth is so exiting, fulfilling and satisfying, what must heaven be like! What we experience as play acting here is reality there. Since this gives meaning to our life as individuals, any deviation from the “rules of the game” constitutes sin. When persons commit adultery they cease to demonstrate the image of God in them. That is what makes adultery so fundamentally wrong. Sin is everything in human life that deviates from the glory of God.

This sets the background against which Jesus answers the question of the Pharisees that is supposed to trap Him. But there is another spiritual reality which is represented in a marriage relationship, which did not yet exist in the days of Jesus’ life on earth: the relationship between Christ and the church. The Apostle Paul refers to this in his Epistle to the Ephesians: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”⁴ As New Testament Christians we express a double reality in our marriage.

Jesus begins with a summary of man as the bearer of the image of God in a male-female relationship,⁵ He follows this up with Adam’s first prophecy: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”⁶ The marriage of Adam and Eve was

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1. Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18
 2. Mark 10:3
 3. Gen. 1:27
 4. Eph. 5:22-33
 5. Gen. 1:27

instituted by God, but the marriages of all of Adam's offspring are based upon a royal edict issued by Adam, the father of all mankind. As a man, created in the image of God, Adam used his God-given authority to issue the proclamation to ordain the bond of unity of marriage between two human beings of opposite sex. The fact that Jesus quotes these words is of great importance. This is not a mere quotation. As Adam, the first man of the first creation spoke, so speaks Jesus, the first man of a new creation in view of the new reality of the redeemed church with her Lord. Jesus places the original pattern of the oneness in a marriage in the light of a new reality. He declares anew that man and wife become "one flesh."¹ Adam had done this on the basis of his experience when God presented Eve to him as "one of my bones and flesh of my flesh,"¹ and in the excitement of the moment, he issued his royal decree. Jesus issued His royal decree by reaching forward into the future experience of Pentecost. So, our Lord did much more in this conversation than answering the Pharisees' question. He reached out prophetically to the day on which the Holy Spirit would raise Him from the sleep of death and build His body into the church, destined for eternal glory.

The principle does not change with the change of picture. A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. There is a physical and psychological separation from the parental home. The man is no longer under his parents' authority. He becomes the authority himself. Emotionally he no longer leans upon his mother for expressions of love and affection. Those come to him now from the side of his wife. Being united and becoming one flesh involves more than a few moments of sexual intercourse. It stands for the whole composite of being united psychologically, emotionally, physically and rationally, and is expressed in these words, "What God has joined together, let man not separate." Separation often begins with a lack of understanding that God is the One who did the joining together. He created the differences in the way either sex functions physically, emotionally, and logically, and then He joined them both together. Adam proclaimed the edict and God cosigned it. In separation and divorce we ruin the image we are meant to portray and we have lost our touch with reality.

The certificate of divorce to which the Pharisees refer is mentioned in the Mosaic law. "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."² The law does not specify what "something indecent" stands for. It probably does not refer to the discovery by the husband that the bride he married was not a virgin, because the law demanded capital punishment for fornication. We read: "If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you."³ But it could also be that giving a certificate of divorce was an alternative to the death sentence. It may be that the certificate allowed for measures against lewd behavior.

The Pharisees found in the loopholes of the law an opportunity to set a trap for Jesus. "Any and every reason" sounds like a helpful means to cover the more-or-less vague wording in Deuteronomy 24. What they say is, "if we as men may not determine ourselves what is indecent behavior in a woman, why did Moses allow the giving of a certificate of divorce?"

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6. Gen. 2:24
 1. Gen. 2:23
 2. Deut. 24:1-4
 3. Deut. 22:20,21

Jesus' answer leaves many questions unanswered. We understand that the law is a representation of God's perfect character. But Jesus says that the giving of a certificate of divorce was an accommodation to the sinful character of man. There are other accommodations to human frailty, as in the establishment of cities of refuge.¹ These laws also clarify why man is unacceptable to God, even if he would perfectly obey the law. Sin is a reality of our daily life and it would be dangerous for us to negate this. This does not mean that we ought to allow ourselves to be governed by its presence. But God takes sin seriously enough to accommodate some of His laws to it without compromising His holiness. This does not mean, either, that we must accept the status quo. We can avail ourselves of the strength God gives for victory. We must begin by recognizing the fact that our hearts are hard as a first step toward victory.

Immediately after Adam and Eve fell into sin, God began to take measures of adaptation to the changed circumstances. The provision of animal skins was an adjustment to the consequences of sin. The killing of an animal and death itself are not manifestations of the character of God. But they do, however, reveal God's character in the death of Jesus Christ. Closing the way of return to the tree of life is an adaptation to the change in man's condition as is the fact that God interrupts His Sabbath rest in order to begin the work of restoration and redemption. The difference between these laws and the *Ten Commandments* is that the *Ten Commandments* are an expression of God's eternal character, but the others are temporary adjustments meant to alleviate a condition that is not a lasting one. Divorce is not an expression of the character of God.

With the words "I tell you ..." (the Greek text reads, "But I tell you ...") Jesus not only reinterprets the vague language of Deuteronomy 24, but He issues a declaration, with all the authority as head of the new creation, pertaining to the coming reality of the church. This declaration is God's directive for us. The clause "except for marital unfaithfulness" is the definitive interpretation of Deut. 24:1. It means that adultery or fornication automatically annuls a marriage in God's eyes. The implication is that divorce is permitted in case of infidelity by one of the marriage partners. Jesus had said earlier: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."² And in Luke's Gospel we read: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."³

In this last verse the reason for divorce is not mentioned, but we may assume it to be the same. The emphasis here is rather on the remarriage than on the divorce part. The Lord then looks at the innocent party. We could conclude from this that the one who had not been unfaithful would be free to remarry, once divorce had occurred on the basis of marital unfaithfulness by the other party. In our day, this would apply to either the man or the woman.

There also seems to be the possibility of separation without ending in divorce. That is what Paul deals with in his epistle to the Corinthians.⁴ It appears that in Paul's day a certain form of emancipation of women had already occurred. At the time Jesus spoke these words the woman was the one who was sent away. In the question of the Pharisees in v.3, the Greek verb, rendered "divorce" is *apoluo*, which means "to relieve," or "dismiss." The tone of the debate indicates that the *Ten Commandments* were considered to be the absolute rule of conduct. The Pharisees did not intend to sin against the seventh commandment; they wanted to know how they could get around it. Yet, in the *Ten Commandments*, divorce is put in the same category as murder or theft. As far as that is concerned, we have abandoned the gold standard to our own peril.

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1. Num. 35:9-34
 2. Matt. 5:31,32
 3. Luke 16:18
 4. I Cor. 7:10-16

Vv.8 and 9 are addressed to the Pharisees, but in v.10 the disciples interrupt. We assume that the conversation of vv.11 and 12 took place elsewhere, or at least aside from the crowd. The disciples had concluded from Jesus' answer to the Pharisees that, if a man is linked irrevocably to the woman he marries, it would be better not to marry. This sounds strange, but not as strange as Jesus' answer to them. There seems to be disillusionment at the basis of the disciples' own experience. They think of their transition from the rosy days of being in love to the day-to-day drudgery of married life. Their reaction gives us little ground for optimism. We would expect Jesus to go against their pessimism and argue for the joys of married bliss. Should Jesus not have preached about the ideal marriage relationship that God intended when He created human beings as man and woman? What Jesus answers amounts to "Yes, it is better for a man not to marry!"

What Jesus says here does not denigrate marriage. But He points out that there is another reality that gives deeper fulfillment and satisfaction than marriage. Jesus places marriage in the right light by showing that a marriage relationship is an earthly expression of a heavenly truth. Marriage is the shadow; the relationship in heaven is the real thing. Jesus says that there is an expression of this reality on earth that comes closer to the original than marriage. There is a form of celibacy that is lower than a marriage relationship. But there is also a celibacy that surpasses marriage. Undoubtedly, Jesus considered Himself to be in that category. *The New International Version* uses the words "renounce marriage," stating in a footnote "have made themselves eunuchs." The Greek word used is *eunouchizo*, which literally means "to castrate." The use of that word may sound strange to us in connection with the topic. It gives the impression as if sexual relations would be the sole aspect of married life. We noted already that sexual relations give expression to all human thoughts and emotions. Jesus uses *eunouchizo* for the total abstinence of marriage. We must not consider this to pertain merely to a physical condition. It stands for an ideal that is sealed with a vow to celibacy. Some first-century Christians took Jesus' words literally and had themselves castrated in order to be able to serve the Lord better without being distracted by sexual fantasies. Yet castration proved not to be the kind of protection some hoped for.

Jesus says that there are three kinds of abstinence: Some people are unfit for marriage from birth because of a lack in their physical or emotional makeup. It is difficult to give them credit for what they are. They are not physically or emotionally eunuchs by choice. The ones that were forced to become eunuchs were mutilated against their will. No credit to them either. Courtiers who served in the king's harem belonged to that category. The last category is of those who have acquired a deeper insight in the meaning of marriage and in God's plan for human relations. They understand that some cutting serves as pruning, which produces greater fruit. They accept their celibacy as a gift from God's hand and glorify Him in it. Although I am not in the class, I do respect people who have that relationship with God. This topic has caused a vast amount of discussion and misunderstanding throughout the centuries.

This whole section is dealt with from a male perspective. But the same principles would be valid on the distaff side. The physical difference of the sexes requires a change of wording but the underlying principles are the same.

18. Jesus blesses the children 19:13-15

13 Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.

14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

15 When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

It is not by accident that these verses about children who are brought to Jesus immediately follow the section about marriage and divorce. Whether the two incidents occurred together in actuality can, however, not be certain, but Matthew reports them as belonging together. The aspect of marriage which

results in the birth and raising of children is not mentioned in the previous segment. We could deduct from this that having children is not the exclusive purpose of a marriage relationship. In as much as marriage on earth is an expression of the heavenly reality of the relationship between Christ and the church, the bond between man and wife occupies the first place and the birth of children the second. The fact that the Jews considered it a disgrace when a marriage remained childless does not take away anything from this. It could be that the fact that Jesus never mentioned children in the previous conversation emphasizes the embarrassment.

But here they come in great numbers! We see them being brought by their parents, but some of them may have been drawn irresistibly to Jesus by themselves. Children have a natural need to be loved. There is in the spontaneity, openness and playfulness of a child something that reflects the character of God better than the self-restraint of the adult. Of course children will come to Jesus!

But the disciples put up a barricade. They believed that Jesus ought not to be bothered by little children. They rebuked the parents for trying. Some adult believe that all children always ought to be rebuked and some disciples of Christ always stand in the way of children to come to Christ. Sometimes those who are closest to the Lord form the greatest hindrance for others to reach Him. But the closer we come to Jesus the more transparent our life ought to be.

According to Matthew, the reason for the parents' bringing their children to Jesus was for Him to place His hands on them and pray for them. Mark simply states that they "were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them."¹ We think of the way the Old Testament patriarchs blessed their children. Thus Isaac blessed Jacob and Jacob blessed his sons. God gave such divine authority to fathers to lay upon their children the blessing God had given to them. Jesus often touched people in order to heal them.

But why would these parents wish for Jesus to touch their children? Their actions were more the result of intuition than of divine revelation. All these children had already been dedicated to the Lord at their birth. That was what the law prescribed. But no law required children to be touched by the priest who performed the rite of dedication. Yet, this act of the parents is the fulfillment of all of the biblical laws. Parents and children often know more of God's truth than they realize. They are irresistibly drawn to Jesus and to the light that radiates from Him. "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger."²

The human touch can have a profound effect. God created the sensitivity in our fingertips to establish a special intimacy with our fellowmen. Thus the spiritual and physical are united. The Apostle John writes: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."³

Here, however, it is not our touching of Jesus, but His touching us. The touch also speaks of application, as when the coal of the altar touched Isaiah's lips. We read: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'"⁴ With that touch, the sacrifice that had been brought on the altar was applied to Isaiah's life.

There is a difference in the way the three Gospel writers describe Jesus' reaction to the disciples' negative attitude. Matthew simply states: "Jesus said ..."⁵ Mark states: "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant."⁵ Luke: "But Jesus called the children to him and said ..."⁶ Jesus was obviously angry about the

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1. Mark 10:13
 2. Ps. 8:2
 3. I John 1:1
 4. Isa. 6:6,7
 5. Mark 10:14
 6. Luke 18:16

disciples' attitude. The disciples ought to have encouraged the children to come to Jesus. They had become a barricade instead of a channel.

Somehow we are often amazed at Jesus' sharp reactions. We believe wrongly that anger or sharp reactions always are manifestations of a sinful nature. Jesus never wore a mask. He was the most balanced human being who ever walked this earth. That is why His honest reactions came so easily to the surface. Added to this, Jesus was a Jew and not a sophisticated self-controlled Caucasian. Only sinful people repress their indignation about injustice. A genuinely healthy human being will act and react spontaneously. Spontaneity is proof of the working of the Holy Spirit in us.

As Luke states, Jesus called the children back to Himself. The disciples had made them turn their backs to the Lord. If Jesus interferes it means that those who represented Him have failed. Too many times we only see the back of those who were on their way to Jesus but turned around when they met obstacles in the lives of those who represent the Lord. May the Lord call them back! Even better may my life not be an obstacle for people to come to Him.

From Jesus' words: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them" we conclude that it is natural for children to come to Him. The hurdles are not inside the child. As the child grows up the outside hindrances will impede his coming. Every child is born with a sinful nature, but the outside signals a child receives from parents and other adults are a more serious impediment than what is inside the child's own heart. Children react naturally to a life that is genuinely sanctified. Even the child that is within the adult will be naturally drawn to holiness.

In saying "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" Jesus refers to what He said earlier: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."¹

Mark states that Jesus did more than place His hands on the children. We read: "And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."² The parents' intent had merely been for the children to be able to touch Jesus, but Jesus did much more than allow Himself to be touched. The hug of a father is an act of tender and protecting love that provides the essential elements for a well-balanced life in adulthood. Jesus always does more than we expect Him to do for us.

The placing on of hands speaks of authority in connection with the future. Little children usually evoke tender feelings in us. But Jesus sees more in them than rosy little cherubs. His imposition of hands stands for a sharing of authority and dignity which the Creator included in His image in man. Jesus sees in these children adult human being who are above the angels in the order of creation and who are predestined to rule as kings and to serve as priests. Jesus' laying on of hands has the same content as the Old Testament anointing of the kings, priests and prophets. It symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. Jesus nowhere else imparted the Holy Spirit in such a direct way as here. Even the disciples who were the first recipients of the Spirit at the day of Pentecost did not receive Him by the laying on of hands. We read: "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"³

Jesus' blessing represents the fullness of everything God wants to give us. It is the crown of victory, the fulfillment of God's promises, and the inheritance in heaven. In this simple act, Jesus again reaches out in the future to the moment He will pay for it all with His own body and blood. None of these parents can have understood that this itinerant rabbi had the authority to impart God's riches to mankind, even to little children.

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1. Matt. 18:3-6
 2. Mark 10:16
 3. John 20:22

19. The rich young man 19:16-26

16 Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

18 "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony,

19 honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

24 Again I tell you, 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."

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

26 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

In all of the three Synoptic Gospels this incident follows immediately upon the episode of Jesus and the children. Mark and Luke give exactly the same details of the story; Matthew deviates from them in his report of the young man's question and Jesus' answer. Matthew is the only one who indicates that the person was a *neaniskos*, "a youth" of less than forty (v.20). Luke calls him "a ruler,"¹ indicating his high position in life. And all three Gospel writers emphasize the fact that he was rich.

We get the impression that the young rich ruler was sincere. Mark mentions that he fell on his knees before Jesus.² Mark also mentions that "Jesus looked at him and loved him."³ All this suggests this man's sincerity. His spontaneity and rapid answers give the impression of a sensitive nature. A person can be young, occupying a high position and be sensitive and yet fail to understand God's plan for his life.

In order to understand this man's question we must compare the way the three Gospels report it. Matthew quotes him as saying: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Mark and Luke: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"⁴ We could then reconstruct the question as "Good teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus answers this with: "Why do you call Me good and ask Me about what is good?"

Jesus' answer sounds very strange to us. This is not the way in which we would confront people with the Gospel. I once read a booklet called "Today's Gospel," in which the author criticizes the use of "The Four Spiritual Laws." He uses Jesus' answer to the young man as a basis for discussion. There is always a danger if we try to use one standard method on individuals who differ widely from one another. That danger does not diminish if we exchange one method for another.

If we try to analyze the methods of evangelizing the Lord used in the New Testament, we must conclude that Jesus did not use any specific method. That may be the main lesson to learn from this incident. God created each person as an original and there is no system that fits each one of us. God warns us to beware of methods. In our dealing with one another, He expects us to be driven by love in order to gain understanding of everyone's character and specific problems. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us in the

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1. Luke 18:18
 2. Mark 10:17
 3. Mark 10:21
 4. Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18

application of God's truth upon the lives of lost individuals. Systems only work for lazy shepherds. This does not mean that truth is different for each different individual. There are eternal and unchangeable laws that cannot be broken without causing great havoc. Not everybody commits the same sins. The spirit of the age and environment play an important part in the individual approach.

We gather from Jesus' reaction to the young man's question that his problem lay in the standards he used to compare people and things. He used the word "good" without knowing what it meant. The Greek word used is *agathos*, meaning "good," as in "good and beneficial." Jesus uses the word in connection with fellowship with Him, as in His admonition to Mary's sister: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."¹ In His answer to the young man, Jesus changes the stress from the neutral meaning of "good," to the personal meaning of "good," speaking about God.

What is more difficult for us to comprehend is that in Mark and Luke's account where the young man calls Jesus "good," Jesus rejects the application of the predicate to Himself and points only to the Father as being "good." We cannot really assume that the young man was wrong in calling Jesus "good." The more as Jesus says elsewhere: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?"² He also says about Himself: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."³ The explanation of this may be that Jesus saw in the young man's approach not a confession of Jesus' unique character, but a denial of the reality of sin. The young man may have thought that everything that was not obviously harmful or destructive ought to be called "good." What this young man did is what some school teachers do when the whole class fails a test and the teacher "curves the grades." In changing the grade, he changes the absolute standard of comparison, making it relative. It was such diminishing of the absolute standard that caused the young man to call Jesus "good."

It also qualifies the "good thing" he must do to get eternal life. The only hope for him would be to rediscover that the source and foundation of "good" is the character of God and that the *Ten Commandments* are an expression of God's character. We observe that Jesus uses the character of God and the *Ten Commandments* in the same breath.

Yet, it sounds strange to us that Jesus says: "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." That is not what the New Testament teaches. This contradicts Paul's words: "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."⁴ But Paul also wrote: "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law."⁵ We also read Paul's words in Romans: "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin."⁶ What it amounts to is that it is not the law that is at fault, but our sinful human nature. If, in fact I could, with a pure heart, do what God demands, I would have eternal life.

Jesus refers this young man to the law so that he would understand that which he said he knew already, which was that eternal life was not in him. A superficial realization of what we might need is often the greatest hindrance to obtaining what we need. We must be hungry enough to stretch out for righteousness to receive it. Our longing for eternal life is often nothing more than the longing of an alcoholic for some liquor in order to drown his misery. We are spiritually lazy, and we deceive ourselves into thinking

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1. Luke 10:41,42
 2. John 8:46
 3. John 10:11
 4. Gal. 2:15,16
 5. Gal. 3:21
 6. Rom. 7:14

we want something while the real desire is not there. This may be the point Jesus wants to drive home in the young man's life. What Jesus asks him is: "How badly do you want this?" The worst thing that can happen to us in our search for salvation is that our hunger and thirst will fade away and we cease to be "poor in spirit."

Another problem in the answer Jesus gives in these verses is the emphasis He places on the second table of the *Ten Commandments*. In another incident where the law is brought in in connection with a question about eternal life, Luke reports that Jesus replied: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The man answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."¹ There seems to be more of a balance in that conversation. We also see there a reference to the essence of the law, to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and, love your neighbor as yourself. But, there also, the main emphasis is on the relationship with the neighbor, as it is here. From that interview, we received *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*.

The touchstone of our relationship with God is always in our relationship with our fellowmen. That was the conclusion of the Apostle John, when he wrote: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."²

We could object that the demand is unfair, because God is perfect and our brother is a sinner. God does not sin against us, but our brother does. But the Bible considers the sin we see as an obstacle in relationships to be the catalyst. In His *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus proclaimed that our relationship with God is based upon the forgiveness of our sins and that our relationship with our fellowmen must be on the same basis. We read: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."³ God's relationship with me is of a perfect and pure Being with an imperfect, impure one. The relationship of me and my brother is between to impure, forgiven human beings. We often, mistakenly, believe that we only learn what forgiveness is in God's relationship with us. In Jesus' emphasis upon the second table of *The Ten Commandments* He explains that we come to understand our relationship with God better as we understand the relationship with our fellowmen. What the rich young man needed was forgiveness of his sin. There is no other way to receive eternal life.

In this incident it is Jesus who quotes the commandments. It is interesting to observe that Jesus does not give a literal quotation and also that the three Gospel writers do not give them in the same order. Matthew places the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandment before the fifth. And he paraphrases the tenth with the words of Lev. 19:18. Mark follows Matthew's order but replaces "you shall not steal" with "do not defraud."⁴ Luke follows the same order as Mark with the exception of "do not steal."⁵ The difference in reporting makes us understand that we do not have here a literal transcript of the conversation, but that this is a free rendering.

What follows in the story is difficult for us, modern Christians, to understand. Reading what Jesus says in *The Sermon on the Mount*, about obeying the law as a matter of inner righteousness, not as merely an effort not to be caught in the act, no one among us would dare to say: "All these I have kept." Mark and Luke report the young man as saying: "all these I have kept since I was a boy."⁶

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1. Luke 10:26-28
 2. I John 4:20,21
 3. Matt. 6:14,15
 4. Mark 10:19
 5. Luke 18:20

This young man had been raised an Orthodox Jew, which had given him a framework of moral values. He had strictly adhered to them, but this had not satisfied the emptiness of his soul. His coming to Jesus and asking for eternal life is proof of this. He admits that something is lacking in his life. He probably believed that something should be added, something that would widen the framework. Maybe he expected Jesus to add another commandment. He did not understand that he already possessed all the material he needed in order to build a life. Jesus now shows him how to start building.

At this point Mark adds beauty to the text by stating: “Jesus looked at him and loved him.”¹ The young man’s realization that something was lacking made Jesus’ heart go out to him. Jesus’ reaction was, of course, human affection. God’s love for man He created is not dependent upon the realization of our condition. What Mark describes is a demonstration of warmth on a human level. The eyes light up and the hands caress. For many a person that kind of affection is often sufficient to make the scales tip in favor of taking the step to Christ. This evidence of love is not only the counterweight to but also the background against which Jesus places His seemingly harsh demand. Jesus uses the scalpel in this young man’s life, because He loves him.

What was the problem? Many people believe mistakenly that being rich is a sin in itself. It is not the fact that we possess material wealth, but that we are possessed by what we have that constitutes sin. The young man had come to Jesus with the question “What good thing must I do?” Jesus shows that doing good that does not cost us anything has no value. The man had probably done some good with his money, but he never ate less because of it. Our good deeds must cause inner changes in us and affect us inside.

According to Mark’s Gospel, Jesus said: “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”² We must not conclude from this that there was only one thing missing in this young man’s life and that he passed the test in everything else. What Jesus meant was that, if this young man would draw a consistent line from one point in his life, his whole fragile construction of righteousness would collapse like a house of cards. Outwardly he had kept the commandments to perfection, but inwardly everything turned around himself. The core of the secret is the losing of one’s life in order to save it. The amount of our possessions has nothing to do with this. The Stone Age tribesman in the jungles of Indonesia has just as much greed and avarice as the American billionaire.

The end of the story seems to be misleading. The emphasis is not upon the amount but upon the possessing. It is not the noun but the verb that is important. It is true that the amount may be an indication of greed, but that is beside the point here. The young man never said at any moment of his life: “I have enough!” We must not jump to the conclusion either that one becomes perfect by selling all his possessions. Being perfect means to be raised from the dead and that goal is achieved by dying to self. If our possessions stand in the way, that is the point at which we have to die. Some of us may have to daily sell all we have.

The Bible teaches that God entrusts us with possessions so that we have the means to help others. The Apostle Paul writes: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.”³ Jesus’ words bring this young man back to the right perspective on possessions. The words “you will have treasure in heaven” are a reference to Jesus’ earlier statement in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁴

6. Mark 10:20; Luke 18:21
1. Mark 10:21
2. Mark 10:21
3. Eph. 4:28
4. Matt. 6:19-21

The important thing is that we give back to God what He has given us and only utilize what He allows us to use. In this case, the young man was told to sell everything. That was the personal order he received. This is not a general rule. We are all commanded to store up treasures in heaven, but that does not mean that we must sell everything on earth.

For the young man this was the test to see if he really wanted to be delivered from himself. It is only the first step on the road to eternal life; it was not eternal life itself. He had the chance to show if he was willing to die. The most essential part of Jesus' advice was not "go" and "sell," but "come" and "follow." The first part was merely a negative preparation. The ultimate goal is fellowship with God, an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, which results in bearing fruit in life.¹

It is interesting to see that Jesus does not make a distinction between receiving eternal life and bearing fruit. Coming to Him and following Him are one and the same. The division some Christians make can cause a lot of damage, because they separate what God made as one. Salvation consists in the obedience of faith.

The story ends in a minor key. As far as we know, this young man missed his chance. We read that "he went away sad, because he had great wealth." Mark adds that, when he heard Jesus' words, "the man's face fell."² His face showed his reaction. It was obvious what went on inside him. But as was observed above, the end of the story is misleading. The amount of his possessions had nothing to do with it. The young man may have mumbled something along that line as he left and used it as an excuse.

Why do we cling to our possessions? Egoism is a form of insecurity. That is why the author of Hebrews admonishes: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"³

On the other hand, material possessions are part of our royal dignity. As far as that is concerned, the rich man is right. That is, he would be right if he were not a sinner and if he did not live in a sinful world. If we give up our possession, we make a confession of our beggarliness as a result of our separation from our Creator. The restoration of our relationship with God will bring about a restoration of our right to ownership. But for many of us that lies farther in the future than we like.

Mark is most specific in the epilogue of the story. He mentions that "Jesus looked around" as He addressed both the young man and the disciples.⁴ Luke states that Jesus particularly looked at the young man, when He said: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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."⁵ This implies that the young man did not depart immediately. He must have heard what Jesus said to him and to the disciples. What Jesus says here indicates that greed forms a hindrance to entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

"The eye of a needle" is probably a Jewish proverbial expression. *Vincent's Word Studies* states about the expression: "Compare the Jewish proverb, that a man did not even in his dreams see an elephant pass through the eye of a needle. The reason why the camel was substituted for the elephant was because the proverb was from the Babylonian Talmud, and in Babylon the elephant was common, while in Palestine it was unknown. The Koran has the same figure: 'The impious shall find the gates of heaven shut; nor shall he enter there till a camel shall pass through the eye of a needle.' Chart, in his history of the animals of scripture, cites a Talmudic passage: 'A needle's eye is not too narrow for two friends, nor is the world wide enough for two enemies.' The allusion is not to be explained by reference to a narrow gate called a needle's eye."

1. See John 15:1-8.
2. Mark 10:22
3. Heb. 13:5,6
4. Mark 10:23
5. Luke 18:24,25

The dismay of the disciples is amazing, but genuine. Here is a group of men who had given up everything for the Lord, and yet, they are surprised to hear how much it could cost to follow Jesus. We get the impression that they hardly realized how much it had cost them. The spiritual aspect, more than the material one, is what made such a deep impression upon them. They saw that, in spite of the fact that they had given up their fishing nets and gear or their tollbooths, egoism was still very much an issue in their lives. It was the discovery that they could not enter the kingdom in such a condition that caused the alarm. When Jesus answers that this is impossible for man, but possible for God, He does not mean that God will overlook their egoism, but that God has ways of delivering a person from self that surpass human understanding. How it is possible for God to bring a rebel to the point where he casts his glory and crown before the throne of God, as Jesus did when He died on the cross, is something that is not dreamt of in our human philosophy. This is the glory of God's omnipotence that the light He sows in our heart, slowly but surely grows out to where it expels all darkness, so that at the time of resurrection no trace of it will be left. That God can do something like this without impairing human will and personality is overwhelmingly beautiful.

20. The wages of discipleship 19:27-30

27 Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, 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.

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Matthew's version of this exchange is the most complete of all the synoptic Gospels. He is the only one who mentions the "twelve thrones." Peter is here again the spokesman for the disciples. After the rich young man leaves, it penetrates to the disciples how much they have left behind to follow Jesus. They had given up much without realizing it. They had never missed the things they did not have anymore. Peter was probably a married man at this point. He may have had children. He had left his fishing boat and gear behind after a deep emotional crisis.¹ His soul had been filled with what he received so that what was left behind had been forgotten. That is how Christ's disciples often react. They are so full of the glory of fellowship with the Lord that nothing else counts. Yet, this is not the case with everyone. It was not so for the rich young man. To answer the question "why" we must look at the role the devil plays in this. In Jesus' *Parable of the Sower*, we only see him once openly.² He also had, however, something to do with the condition of the soil, although people are held responsible for the condition of their own heart.

Peter's question is not inspired by greed. If he had been wondering how much he would get out of it, he would have asked the question earlier at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, before he left his boat and nets behind. The question is asked out of curiosity. Peter begins to understand that his following Jesus had farther reaching consequences than he originally knew. After all, he had only been an unimportant fisherman. Now he realized that this was not really so. For God, there are no "little people." It may have been a good thing that he did not know this before. If we begin to follow the Lord we often do so blindly, without knowing who we are and where we are going. It is only after we engage with the Lord that we experience that "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."³ The

1. See Luke 5:8.

2. Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

3. Prov. 4:18

purpose of Jesus' suffering and death was to lead many sons to glory. At this point Peter was still unable to sound the full depth of this.

Jesus speaks about two groups of people: the twelve disciples and "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields" for His sake. The twelve apostles were obviously in a class by themselves. Because of their human contact with Christ, their relationship with Him in eternity would be different from the others.

What the Lord says to them here is momentous. It concerns the business of heaven, not things on earth. Jesus must have spoken these words in ecstasy. A hush fell upon those who heard Him. This was one of the moments in which Jesus drew a line from a position in time and space to the throne of God. These words were not spoken to look at one specific event in the light of eternity, but to show the disciples the end of the road on which they were traveling. God does not let us walk in the dark, as some people say. There are clear signs of direction which light up the way. We may not all end up sitting on one of the twelve thrones, but Christ "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father."¹ We have been given the right to sit with Him on His throne,² and we will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. So what is the difference?

Jesus calls the time when this happens "the renewal of all things." The Greek word used is *paliggenesia*, which literally means "regeneration." The term here does not refer to the new birth of an individual by the working of the Holy Spirit, but to the rebirth of all of creation. This is what the Apostle Paul writes about, saying: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."³ This will happen when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne. With these few words, Jesus reveals clearly the meaning of the kingdom of Israel. This is the original of which the Israel on earth with her successive kings ought to have been the mirror image. The topic is the principle of the theocracy as it exists in its purest form in heaven and on earth in the images of human rulers and monarchs. In the framework of God's revelation of Himself and of the delegating of His authority to human beings, the apostles will occupy an important place. It is difficult to determine whether there is a large gap between the power of the apostles and of those reigning with Christ on a lower level. There may not be much difference in eternity. There will certainly not be any rivalry of jealousy in heaven.

It is obvious from the fact that Judas was included in the company that promise of power of the kingdom is not automatic. It seems certain that Judas never occupied the position that was meant for him. We do not know either if Matthias, who took Judas' place,⁴ occupied Judas' place on the throne in heaven. It could be that there is an empty seat in heaven, which, as the scars in Jesus' body, will be an eternal reminder of the damage sin wrought. If this is the way it will be, God's glory will only be greater because of it.

The second part of the royal decree pertains to compensation for those who enter the kingdom. It indicates, as was suggested earlier in Jesus' exchange with the rich young man, that entering the kingdom and receiving eternal life is not free of charge. It is costly in all facets of human life. "Houses" stands for security. We all need a roof over our heads. Although Jesus Himself did not have that guarantee. He had said earlier: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."⁵ Following Jesus entails a loss of material security. To be kept safe in the Lord's dwelling and hidden in the

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1. Rev. 1:6
 2. Rev. 3:21
 3. Rom. 8:19-22
 4. Acts 1:26
 5. Matt. 8:20

shelter of His tabernacle¹ means that we lose whatever earthly security we had. This does not mean that we would not be allowed to have a house, but it must not be our safekeeping in life.

“Brothers, sisters, father, mother or children” we leave because we follow the Lord and this constitute the bonds of natural affection that we leave and in which God placed us. They are the environment in which we grow up. Among them we learn to receive and give love. It is the milieu in which we feel accepted. They are God’s building blocks for creating a spiritual fellowship with Himself. Family life foreshadows eternity. God wants us to understand the meaning while enjoying it to the full. But we must also learn in what direction this points so that we will not collapse when part or all of it is taken away.

“Fields” refer to our sustenance. That is where we get our daily food, our source of income because of the work we produce. They are part of God’s grace; He opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing.² These verses are the logical conclusion of the demand Jesus had earlier formulated as: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”³

It is remarkable how casually Jesus speaks about these matters. These are the matters that, for most people, are vital issues in life. It sounds as if all of our precious relationships are thrown on the same heap as our material possessions. In a way, this is true. For those who give their lives to the Lord, all of this belongs together. Jesus tells His disciples what He had told the rich young man: “You receive eternal life when you die to yourself.” The key is in giving up our own life in order to receive it back from the hands of the Father. Elsewhere, Jesus used the image of a kernel of wheat that dies in order to produce fruit.⁴ He said that in connection with His own death and resurrection. It is important to note that Jesus voluntarily committed His spirit in the hands of the Father when He died on the cross. We read in Luke’s Gospel: “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.”⁵ If His spirit had been taken from Him by force, He would not have received it back in the resurrection. A person only receives eternal life by voluntarily giving his life into God’s hand. That is why Jesus uses the word “regeneration” both in connection with our personal experience as well as with the global event of the second coming. The personal and the cosmic belong together.

The phrase with which this chapter ends has become a proverb in many languages: “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” It is also one of the most misunderstood sayings of the Lord. *The New Living Translation* renders it: “Many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.” Some modern versions render the verse: “Many who are standing up front will be served last.”⁶ *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* explains this: “The Jews, who have been the first and most distinguished people of God, will in general reject the Gospel of my grace, and be consequently rejected by me. The Gentiles, who have had no name among the living, shall be brought to the knowledge of the truth, and become the first, the chief, and most exalted people of God. That this prediction of our Lord has been literally fulfilled, the present state of the Christian and Jewish churches sufficiently proves. To illustrate this fully, and to demonstrate that the Jews and Gentiles were now put on an equal footing by the Gospel, our Lord speaks the following parable, which has been unhappily divided from its connection by making it the beginning of a new chapter.”

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1. See Ps. 27:5.
 2. Ps. 145:16
 3. Matt. 10:37-39
 4. John 12:24
 5. Luke 23:46
 6. A Dutch language version of *The Good News Bible*.

As Adam Clarke suggests, we must look for the meaning in the section that follows. In the previous verses Jesus spoke about the giving up of things and relationships in this life and the recompense giving in the life to come. There are people who die to self early in life and yet that are not at the front rank when the prices are given out. Matthew is the only evangelist who goes deeper into the meaning by giving us *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard*.

21. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard 20:1-16

1 *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.*

2 *He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

3 *"About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.*

4 *He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'*

5 *So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.*

6 *About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'*

7 *"'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'*

8 *"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'*

9 *"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.*

10 *So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.*

11 *When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.*

12 *'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'*

13 *"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?'*

14 *Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.*

15 *Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'*

16 *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

This new section begins with “for” and ends with “so.” The story is well-known. The owner of a vineyard hires laborers, some of whom work for twelve hours, others for nine, others six or three, and some only one hour. They all receive the same wages of one denarius. From *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the denarius: “A Roman silver coin, 25 of which went to the aureus, the standard gold coin of the empire in the time of Augustus, which was equal in value to about one guinea or \$5.25 ... Hence, the value of the denarius would be about 20 cents and this was the ordinary wage of a soldier and a day laborer.” With the shifting value of money and wages it is difficult to give a correct evaluation of the amount. *The Living Bible* values it at \$.20. *The New Living Translation* calls it “the normal daily wage,” which seems to be a safe way to handle the problem.

The dispute between the owner and the laborers is fueled by jealousy. There is no breach of contract, because the owner had promised to those he hired first to pay them one denarius, which they received. They became resentful because those who were hired last received comparatively more than could be expected in connection with the amount of labor they produced.

The first thing we observe in this parable is the setting. The scene plays in a vineyard. It is harvest time. The point of the parable is clear. We think of Jesus' earlier statement to His disciples: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest

field.”¹ There is in this parable a plentiful harvest and the workers are few. That which we sacrifice for the Lord, (see the previous chapter), is what would be a hindrance to the work of harvesting. God does not demand some senseless kind of ascetism, but a practical selection that makes us give up things that play no role in the accomplishment and that would keep us from reaching the goal.

The Apostle Paul refers to this when he compares his service for the Lord with the running of a race. We read: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”² The goal is the price in comparison to what we give up which has little or no value.

The point of this parable is that the laborers who worked twelve hours are proud of their hunger, sweat and fatigue. This makes them jealous of the others who only worked one hour. If they had known that this would happen they would have waited till the eleventh hour! What the owner of the vineyard pays the latecomers is an insult to their pride. The danger for us is that we give up all we have for the Lord and that we are proud of our spirit of sacrifice. That mentality is proof of the fact that our carnal nature is alive and well. It is the deceitfulness of our heart the keeps us from giving up what we ought to have given up. This parable is Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question: “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”³ Jesus assures Peter that he will be rewarded. But that is not the issue. The question is not “what?” but “when?” and “first, or last?”

22. The third prediction of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection 20:17-19

*17 Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them,
18 "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death
19 and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

This third announcement takes place shortly before Jesus arrived at Jerusalem. Jesus had already predicted this twice.⁴ The first time Jesus mentioned the subject was in Caesarea Philippi. The second time was when He traversed Galilee and this third time just before reaching Jerusalem. Luke emphasizes Jesus’ determination, saying: “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”⁵ The interruptions on the way did not change the predetermined course Jesus had set. The disciples who followed Jesus at a certain distance did not understand the reason for this determination, but they were deeply disturbed. They did not comprehend what was happening and could not see the reason for it, but emotionally they are affected by it. Mark describes the situation as follows: “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.”⁶ The disciples sensed that this was the last round in the struggle between light and darkness. The bell rang and the opponents were in the ring.

1. Matt. 9:37,38
2. I Cor. 9:24-27
3. Matt. 19:27
4. See Matt. 16:21; 17:22,23.
5. Luke 9:51
6. Mark 10:32

Luke mentions that Jesus referred to the Old Testament prophets as the source of His information about what was going to happen. Before, during and after His suffering, Jesus appealed continuously to the Old Testament Scriptures, as the fulfillment of what He experienced in His own body.¹ Jesus' whole life as a human being on earth is a demonstration of the fact that man lives "on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."² From His personal study of the Old Testament Scriptures Jesus knew what would happen to Him. It was on the basis of this revelation that He let Himself be baptized as an indication that He accepted His role as the Messiah with all the consequences of that call. But, even as His acceptance by faith in His baptism immediately broke through the natural limitations of His humanity in that the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and the Father spoke, so He received a supernatural confirmation in the transfiguration on the mountain.³ Luke mentions this in connection with the appearance of Moses and Elijah at that event: "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."⁴

By appealing to the Old Testament prophecies, Jesus wanted to lay the foundation of faith in the disciples that would help them to work through the shock of the crucifixion. The fact that the disciples vacillated and eventually collapsed seemed unavoidable. It was part of Satan's effort to sift them as wheat.⁵ If they could have seen the connection between the prophetic word and the events of the cross, it would have kept them from despair. The disciples' problem was that they thought they understood and what Jesus tried to explain to them here for the third time did not fit into their philosophy.

Our problem in understanding the way Jesus approached the Scriptures and applied them to Himself is that He did not do this in a mechanical way, but dynamically and creatively. He did with the Word of Scripture what we cannot do. Not because we cannot apply the Bible to ourselves, or because Jesus' attitude toward the written Word would not be the only correct one for every human being to adopt toward the Word of God, but because sin keeps us from seeing the key and using it correctly. Jesus' creativity was the direct result of His being filled with the Holy Spirit. We hardly get beyond the point of manipulating some Scripture verses. The average human being is rarely able to use the Word of God as a weapon of the Holy Spirit.

One of the fundamental principles in Jesus' understanding as a human being of the written Word was His comprehension of history. Man's fall into sin, the flood of Noah, the consecration of Abraham and his offspring and Israel's failure were no freaky events of fate. In His knowing of the Father, He could understand the significance and the purpose of it all. He was able to accept and act accordingly. If we understand how the Scriptures of the Old Testament applied to Jesus and how, in our communion with Him, they apply to us, then we take the first step on the road of a personal application of the Word of God upon our lives. For us the key to the secret lies in Him, who unlocked the mystery of the Word for us.

What strikes us as strange is that Jesus shows very little understanding for our lack of comprehension as well as for our lack of faith: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"⁶ And: "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?"⁷

This third announcement of His suffering and death is the most detailed. The fact that Jesus repeated the announcement three times ought to have been sufficient to keep the disciples from despair.

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1. See Matt 26:24,31,54,56; Luke 22:37; 24:25-27; John 19:28,36; 20:9.
 2. Deut. 8:3
 3. Matt. 17:1-6
 4. Luke 9:31
 5. Luke 22:31
 6. Luke 24:25
 7. Luke 9:41

They ought to have understood that Jesus' suffering and death was no tragic coincidence. It ought to have prepared them also for the resurrection. After all, Jesus did not only announce His death, but also His resurrection. The disciples were not expected to understand the why of the coming events, but they could have been prepared by faith to expect what was going to happen. Jesus did not even try to explain the reason for what would happen to Him. That does not mean that He would not have understood Himself why the Father required it. His insight in the Scriptures must have given Him a clear picture. And the only explanation given at this point was a reference to the written Word. It was only after the coming of the Holy Spirit that the apostles understood the connection between the facts of salvation and the forgiveness of sin. Luke gives the most extensive coverage of the disciples' lack of understanding. We read: "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about."¹ Our prejudice makes us deaf to what God has to say to us. We are often so full of our own ideas, plans and imaginations, that the Word of God bounces off on our hearts. That is not only the case with unbelievers, but also with those who have given up everything to follow Jesus. It is imperative that we are watchful to have an unprejudiced heart that is open to the Word of God. It will make the difference between hope and despair, between defeat and victory.

23. The request of James and John 20:20-28

20 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

21 "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

22 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered.

23 Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

24 When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

25 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—

28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This incident shows how deep the chasm that separates Jesus from His disciples is. Mark describes the same occurrence, but in his version James and John ask the question themselves.² In Matthew's account it is actually the mother who approaches Jesus in behalf of her sons. But here it is also obvious that the initiative comes from the two brothers. They sent their mother to do the asking. Their reasons for doing so were probably rather complex. One of them must have been a sense of embarrassment deep down in the men's hearts. They could not bring themselves to verbalize their aspirations. They could not honestly see themselves in the position they hoped to occupy. But, in spite of that, this was what they wanted. There was the realization that God had destined them for the throne in His Kingdom. Jesus' words: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom"³ had left an impression on them. But

1. Luke 18:34

2. Mark 10:35

3. Luke 12:32

there was also the hesitation, the feeling of unworthiness, which kept them from claiming what was rightfully theirs. Their embarrassment was indication of their inner rift.

Behind the request was not only the desire to receive what God wanted to give, but also the less innocent aspiration to rule over the other ten apostles. They were rightfully ashamed of their jealousy. The whole incident reeks of jealousy, more than of a desire to rule.

It seems, though, that the mother is more than the spokesperson. The way in which she brings her sons to Jesus and kneels suggests that her own motherly ambitions had some influence upon her sons. She may not have had sole responsibility for the plan, but she was a part of it. It may have been her idea that she would be the one who would put the question before the Lord. She may have felt disdain for the male attitude of indecision on the part of her sons, and she may have thought that women are better in putting such questions before another male person.

Jesus gives her His ear, but He sees through the ploy. That is why He directs His answer, not to the mother, but to the sons. That gives Mark the liberty to put it as if it was the men asking the question.

As usual, Jesus' answer penetrates to the core of the matter. The two men had no idea what their request entailed. They did not understand that the establishment of the kingdom was about the salvation of the world and bringing about the purification of the sin of mankind. All they had was a vague notion of the glory that would be there and of which they wanted to have a share. We rarely understand our own requests! That pertains to our prayers, also. We do not understand how important it is that our prayers are in accordance with the will of God, and that in asking, we must demonstrate faith and surrender to the will of God.

I remember a sermon by a fellow student at the Brussels' Bible Institute about Jacob's attempt to make a deal with God, saying: "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God."¹ Our reaction would have been that one cannot bargain with God, and we would expect God to turn down prayers like Jacob's. The miracle was that God did what Jacob asked. The inconceivable miracle in which God stoops and hears the request of two jealous brothers and an ambitious mother is repeated here.

Jesus' answer consists in two parts. Jesus explains that there is a price to be paid and that He does not have the right to grant the request of dividing up the seats of honor in the kingdom. Several times Jesus compared the suffering He would go through with a cup to be drunk. "He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'"² and "Jesus commanded Peter, 'Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?'"³ "The cup" stands here for the whole of the Lord's agony and inconceivably deep suffering in taking upon Himself my sin and the sins of the whole world. It is the cup of the wrath of God which He drank in behalf of us all. It is unimaginable for us that Jesus could foresee this and yet go through with it. In answering "We can," the men showed a completely misplaced self-confidence. They had no clue as to what "the cup" was all about. Yet, they must have seen a connection between Jesus' announcement of His suffering and death and this cup. But if they failed to understand what Jesus had been saying earlier; they did not comprehend what He was saying here either. If even Jesus could only accomplish the task because of His being filled with the Holy Spirit, where would these two disciples find the power? Jesus had said earlier: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."⁴ But here are two men

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1. Gen. 28:20,21
 2. Matt. 26:27,28
 3. John 18:11
 4. John 5:19

who believe they can solve the problem of sin with the physical strength of their biceps and the moral power of their own sinful souls. Sin makes us blind.

Mark renders Jesus' question as "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"¹ It is not clear whether there is a difference between the drinking of the cup and being baptized with the baptism. The latter may stand for the spiritual aspect of Christ's suffering.

Even if James and John believed they could face death with the physical strength they possessed, how about their resurrection?

A complete surprise in Jesus' answer is the phrase: "You will indeed drink from my cup."² This implies, first of all, that these two young men would be identified with Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, because He did this in their behalf and in their stead. From a judicial point of view they would suffer, die and be raised with Him. But physically also, they would experience some of the consequences of Jesus' suffering and death. James would be killed by the sword because of his faith in Christ.³ John would die in exile. But at that moment it was impossible to imagine how these two "sons of thunder" would lay down their lives for their Lord. It was their ambition to occupy a place of honor in the kingdom, and God took their request seriously! They got their seat in the only way it can be obtained, by giving their life. One has to be careful what one prays for.

But Jesus does not promise them the reward at this moment. He speaks to them as a man who is Himself subject to the will of the Father and the laws of the kingdom, to whom, just as to them, the Father had not yet revealed these things.

The reaction of the other disciples is interesting. They are furious with the two. The other disciples considered the efforts of the two to occupy this favored position as a sign that they felt superior to the others. Who did they think they were? Did they consider themselves a cut above the others? The other ten may have been enraged because they had not thought of it themselves. This jealous competitive spirit among the twelve must have been a constant heartache for Jesus. Each one had his own dream of grandeur which created a constant spirit of conflict. Those who withdraw from God's authority find it hard to bow to any other authority. Yet, every man wants to rule over the other.

Matthew states: "Jesus called them together." This may mean more than a mere coming together in a physical sense. They had to come together spiritually as well as physically. The Greek text reads literally: "But Jesus called them [unto Him]." The words "unto Him" are not in the original. Yet, we are reminded of Jesus' earlier call: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."⁴ That makes Jesus' call applicable to each of us.

Jesus' call for us to come to Him, first of all, invites us to follow His example. Jesus shows what it means to become "great." Without the infilling by the Holy Spirit we will never amount to anything. Jesus outlines the difference between "being great" in the world and "being great" in the kingdom. There may be similarity between the two because all human authority is ultimately derived from God's omnipotence. God permits human beings to exercise authority. Jesus said to Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."⁵ Without submission to God's authority, human authority becomes an ersatz, a parody of the divine. Our display of authority is ridiculous in God's eye. David sang: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."⁶

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1. Mark 10:38
 2. Mark 10:39
 3. Acts 12:2
 4. Matt. 11:28
 5. John 19:11

The only reasonable thing we can do as human beings is to recognize that our break with God denies us the right to exercise authority. By giving our mandate back to God, we confess that we lost our entitlement and that we are virtually powerless. We do not even have a say about our own life, which is tantamount to being dead. The law of the kingdom, which is our constitution, is the law of the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit. Jesus Himself gives us the unique example of this. In giving up His own life, He opened the gates of the kingdom for us. All His actions were determined by His approaching death.

Being a servant and a slave is the result of the spiritual attitude that has accepted the death of the body and of the will. The servant has died to his pride and the slave to his freedom. Death is the only solution for the sinful nature that is still within us. The tragedy of today's church, and probably of the church throughout the ages, is that so few people take the death of their own ambitions seriously. Only the Holy Spirit can make this real for us. Not many people ask for God's grace to accept their death. We look at death as a price that must be paid and, consequently, we fail to understand that the attitude of accepting death is a victory, that which Winston Churchill, speaking about the London Blitz, called *Their Finest Hour*. Jesus not only gained the victory by means of His death, His death was the victory. The devil was never so completely defeated as in Jesus' death and in the way He died. The highlight of Abraham's life was his sacrifice of Isaac; for Jacob, when he conceded and asked the angel for grace at Peniel; for Esther, when she was willing to give her life for her people; for Daniel, when he was thrown into the lions' den, and for his three friends, when they were thrown in the fiery oven. For all of them this was *Their Finest Hour*.

In some cases this may mean physical death; in every case it means surrender of what we have and are. That surrender must be complete, without hope of recovery. Like the burnt offering that had to remain on the fire the whole night as the fire was kept burning,¹ there is no hope that any of it will survive.

That kind of finality was what John and James would face before they occupied their seats of glory on high. There would be nothing left of their aspirations. When they gave up all hope, they received what they wanted. When we agree to occupy the lowest place where we will remain unnoticed and unknown, the Lord will be able to honor us in a way that will surpass our wildest dreams. Most of the living stones in the Lord's building are inside the wall, where they uphold the building without being seen.

The Lord could have read to them Ezekiel chapter thirty-four. James and John tried to get what they could. What they wanted was their reward. They were shepherds that shepherded themselves. But the Good Shepherd, the real David, stood in front of them. He showed them the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy by indicating that being a leader and exercising authority, that is being a shepherd, is being done at the cost of one's life. He proved to be the Good Shepherd by giving His life. This is the difference between the rulers of nations and the great ones in the kingdom of heaven. The first do it for the money; the others for the sheep, whatever the price.

24. The healing of the blind men at Jericho 20:29-34

29 As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.

30 Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

31 The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

32 Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

33 "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."

34 Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

6. Ps. 2:1-4

1. Lev. 6:9

Matthew is the only evangelist who states that there were two blind men. Mark and Luke only tell the story of one. We assume that one of the two blind men was the one Mark identified as Bartimaeus.¹ The incident occurred as Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho. Jesus was surrounded by a large crowd. Luke mentions that Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside begging.² Evidently, the two blind men were sitting there together. We could say that they worked together, belonging to the same union. Their attention was drawn by the noise of a large crowd. Blind people usually have a keen sense of hearing. At the question about the occasion, they heard that Jesus of Nazareth was going by.

When the blind men cried “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us,” it may have sounded as if they asked Jesus to give them alms. That may have been the reason the crowd told them to be quiet. They heard only that they were asking for money. But the opposition of the crowd increased their intensity. Luke reports about one of them, “but he shouted all the more.”³ The difference between asking for alms and this cry was that these two men recognized the Messiah in Jesus. They shared this insight with the other blind man, whose healing Matthew reported earlier.⁴ It is amazing that these blind people demonstrated more insight than those who had sight. The title “Son of David” expresses the Old Testament expectation of salvation. It does not necessarily imply recognition that Jesus was a descendent of David in the physical sense of the word. The New Testament does not indicate that the fact that both Joseph and Mary were from the line of David was a generally known fact.

Jesus recognizes the blind men’s faith in their call. He hears in their cry more than a plea for money. The blind men’s calling Him “Son of David” was a confession of faith, that Jesus had come to take our sins and our sicknesses upon Himself. In the noises of the masses, Jesus recognizes the single voice of those who come to Him for help. Jesus gives orders to bring the two to Him. Luke states: “Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him.”⁵ It is interesting to note that Jesus uses middlemen to pass His word on to others. This may be one of the first samples of evangelism in the New Testament. Mark adds that the crowd become creative and adds: “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”⁶

That would be a good motto for evangelism: “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you!” There is hope for people who live in darkness. “On your feet” means energy that is available to go after that hope. Getting up is the fruit of faith. “He is calling you” because He yearns more for our healing than we do ourselves.

A feature that Mark highlights is that Bartimaeus discarded his cloak. He must have felt that the cloak was a hindrance for him to go to Jesus. This is implicit proof of the fact that he believed that Jesus would heal him. I have never seen a blind person dropping something that he needed. Blind people tend to put everything in its place so that they can find it later. This blind man believed that he could see well enough to find his coat later.

As in the other instance in which Jesus healed a blind man, He puts these two men to the test, saying: “What do you want me to do for you?” Faith in specifics is important. God’s only hindrance is our unbelief. We do not know how faith influences God’s omnipotence and the balance of power in the heavenly places. But there are some people who enter into such a relationship with God that they influence that balance. Daniel’s prayer was the means God used to bring the exiles back to Canaan.⁷ It was Daniel’s prayer

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1. Mark 10:46
 2. Luke 18:35-43
 3. Luke 18:39
 4. Matt. 9:27-31
 5. Luke 18:40
 6. Mark 10:49

that defeated the Prince of Persia.¹ The prayer of the German pastor Blumhardt was the means of a revival in the little Bavarian village of Möttlingen, that lasted several decades in the nineteenth century. George Mueller's prayers in Bristol had a similar effect upon the matters of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Faith in the power of God would not occupy such an important place if it were not one of the principal laws of creation. The essence of faith is difficult to define. It is not a sixth sense as something that completes our five senses. Faith helps us to find answers and solutions to problems that go beyond the world in which our five senses function. The problem is that our faith often only shows us some flashes of this world beyond. This is just enough to make us understand that there is a world beyond what we can see, hear or feel. Faith is not just a button we push to make the thing work. We do well if we come to understand that faith provides us with access to a world in which everything is governed by a logic deeper than our own. Because we only try and stumble, we often get the impression that this is not so.

Bartimaeus and his friend could not be healed without something happening in the heavenly places. Bartimaeus and friend had to have faith to be able to touch that reality beyond at the right spot so that healing could take place. We could say that Jesus took their finger and helped them to touch the right button so that their healing could be attributed to their own faith. It is in Jesus Christ that our faith gains access to this heavenly reality in which miracles occur. Jesus is the place of entrance. He is the heavenly reality and our reality.

Jesus' question was not only meant to stimulate faith but also to give these men a sense of reality. It seems only logical to us that what these blind men wanted was to be able to see. The amazing thing, however, is that what seems obvious to outsiders is not always so for the person involved. God respects us to the point where He wants us to define our problems for Him. He even honors us when He heals us. In the process of our healing there is often more time involved in the preparatory phase than in the actual healing. That is the time in which we realize that our faith is not enough. That may bring us to a confession of our lack of faith. Such honesty lays the foundation upon which God can build faith in us. The problem is never whether God is able, but if we are ready.

So here also, Jesus leaves the honor to Bartimaeus and friend instead of claiming the praise for Himself. Matthew does not mention this, but Mark reports Jesus' words: "your faith has healed you."² Such words can be rather disquieting to us in the light of Jesus performing His miracles. Yet, we cannot assume that Jesus would attach a value that was out of proportion to the faith of the person to be healed. As Jesus put it here, these men claimed the power of God for healing by means of their own faith, as if Jesus' power had little or nothing to do with it. We tend to believe that Jesus is too humble in all of this. But it was, of course, Jesus who did it, because His question was "What do you want me to do for you?" When it turns out that these two men have faith to be healed, that is what Jesus did for them.

25. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem 21:1-11

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.

3 If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.

7. Dan. 9

1. Dan. 12:12,13

2. Mark 10:52

7 They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.

8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

One of the most remarkable features of this story is that Jesus knew the relative importance of this event, and yet, He prepared every detail very carefully. There is no other instance in which Jesus takes such precise measures for the purpose of literally fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. This intent is probably the key to understanding the meaning of the event.

Jesus did not plan to enter Jerusalem for His ascension to the throne, but He wanted to make clear to Israel that He was the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy.

In order to fulfill the prophecy, Jesus had to borrow a donkey. We do not learn how Jesus knew about the donkey and the foal. His instructions to the disciples must have been based upon a revelation He had received from the Father. It may have been an act of faith on His part. He knew the prophecy and He understood that the time for its fulfillment had come and so, by faith, He prophesied that the disciples would find the animals. The fact that they did find the donkey and her young proves that He had chosen the right road. It is also quite possible that Jesus had seen the animals in passing.

Matthew quotes Zechariah's prophecy even before the disciples return with the animals. This may mean that Jesus said these words Himself.

There are some significant differences between the original and the quotation. The original reads: "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."¹ In Matthew we read: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" It is as if Matthew wanted to indicate that the time for Zachariah's call to "shout" had not yet come. That suggests that Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was only a partial fulfillment of this prophecy. It was actually more a time for weeping, as Luke describes: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes.'"² In Zachariah's prophecy God had prepared the scene for shouts of joy, but the inhabitants of Jerusalem were not ready for this. God's peace was hidden for them. They should have fallen to the ground with tears of repentance when Jesus entered the city. That would have caused the angels in heaven to rejoice. But now Jesus weeps while the crowd is shouting. Woe to them that laugh when God weeps!

Matthew does not mention the righteousness and salvation of Zachariah's prophecy. That part of the quotation is purposely omitted. Jesus' entry here is not a celebration of victory. He had not come to take up the crown but the cross. His entry is the triumph of humility; He comes riding a donkey. Mark and Luke both report that Jesus sat on the colt.³ Matthew states that Jesus sat "on them," which is difficult to visualize. Without the previous remark that no one had ever ridden the colt it would be hard to determine what actually happened. Evidently, the donkey walked in front and the colt followed. The donkey was a beast of burden. This adds to the picture that will become reality when within a few days Jesus Himself would take upon Him the load of the sin of the world.

1. Zech. 9:9

2. Luke 19:41,42

3. Mark 11:7; Luke 19:35

Reality is so much different from what we believe it to be. It is as if God turns all of our human values upside down and mocks them. The King of the universe comes to Jerusalem, humbly riding a donkey in order to perform the greatest act of heroism ever performed in paying the price of human sin. Roman generals looked much more impressive when they returned victoriously from the battlefield. Was there ever a greater victory won than on Golgotha? God mocks our concepts of victory, our displays of power and glory. He ridicules our parade horses by riding a donkey. But “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”¹

All three Gospel writers mention Jesus’ prediction that the owner of the animals would protest when the disciples untied the donkey. But only Mark and Luke report the conversation that took place. We are not told why the answer “the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away” is accepted as sufficient. The fact that Jesus had to borrow the animals was in itself proof of His humiliation. The Creator of heaven and earth certainly had a right to the animals He created. He is the actual owner and whatever we possess we have on loan from Him. This incident also shows the love and respect our Lord has for the people He created. He does not requisition; He asks.

All of a sudden there is a spontaneous change in the disciples’ attitude. As if touched by a magic wand, they begin to display a contagious enthusiasm. They put their cloaks on the colt on which Jesus will ride and on the road. Luke is the only one who gives the reason for this spontaneous outburst: “the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.”²

It appears that the mother donkey led the way and that the colt followed its mother with Jesus riding on it. Jesus rides in all humility on a beast of burden and the disciples proclaim that He had performed powerful miracles such as the world had never seen. In principle this is not different from the scene John describes in Revelation, where we read: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”³ The form in which He came was different, but the content is the same.

We may assume that the disciples’ and the crowd’s joy and enthusiasm was genuine. The fact that Jesus’ triumphal entry in Jerusalem was different from what they had expected does not mean that they had misjudged Jesus. What they did not understand was who they were themselves, what their actual condition was and who the enemy was. They did not realize that there was a great obstacle between God and them that had to be removed. The ransom price had not yet been paid. In that sense their enthusiasm was premature, although not misplaced. If their joy had been mixed with tears, they would have come closer to God’s reality.

The shouts of victory that burst out are a quotation from the psalms: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.”⁴ The three Gospel writers give different versions of what the crowd is shouting. Matthew renders it: “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest!”⁵ In Mark we read: “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in

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1. I Cor. 1:25
 2. Luke 19:37
 3. Rev. 19:11-16
 4. Ps. 118:26
 5. Matt. 21:9

the highest!”¹ And Luke states: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”² It may be that people were shouting different things and each evangelist reports part of what is shouted. The complete text shows an amazing insight into the truth about the person of our Lord. The vision of blind Bartimaeus is here communicated to the whole crowd. Jesus is being recognized as the son of David. He is the one God promised to David, the one who would build the house of the Lord. God had promised David: “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”³ He is the shepherd God would place over His flock, as promised to Ezekiel: “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.”⁴

The use of the word “blessed” indicates that these people knew more about themselves than they were aware of. As the author of Hebrews says: “Without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.”⁵ Here we see how earthbound creatures take the heavenly blessing and put it on Him to whom it belongs. That is the kind of authority man possessed before he fell into sin. God’s blessing is being handled by sinful hands. The influence of heaven is so strong at this moment that human beings all of a sudden understand what they are meant to be. For one moment Satan’s spell is broken.

This becomes obvious in the following argument with some of the Pharisees that were standing on the roadside. Matthew does not mention the incident, but Luke reports that they said to Jesus: “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” To which Jesus replied: “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”⁶ With this reply Jesus indicates that “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”⁷ If conscious creation would keep silent, the atoms of the elements of creation would begin to stir. This does not necessarily mean that the stones would be given a voice and shout words. It might be as what David expressed in one of his psalms: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”⁸

The thought that everything that is created demonstrates the glory of God merely by its existence comes up again later in the temple in Jesus’ quotation from the psalms. The indignant priests in the temple and the teachers of the law say to Jesus: “Do you hear what these children are saying?” To which Jesus replied: “Yes, have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?”⁹ What Jesus says in this is that He is the Lord of creation. As the Word of God He is the source and means of everything that exists, as well as the reason for its existence. Without Him there would be no disciples, branches, donkeys, Pharisees or stones. As the Son of Man, He is Lord of creation. Not only in the sense in

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1. Mark 11:9-10
 2. Luke 19:38
 3. II Sam. 7:12-16
 4. Ezek. 34:23
 5. Heb. 7:7
 6. Luke 19:39,40
 7. Rom. 8:19
 8. Ps. 19:1-4a
 9. Ps. 8:2

which Adam's task was in his to oversee and administer creation, but in His task of bringing a fallen creation back under the Father's authority. Therefore, it is logical, when the Lord Jesus Christ comes to what belongs to Him, everything and everyone bows down before Him and honors Him.

But those who knew most of God's revelation, were farthest removed from Him. The lowest part of creation would be ahead of us in doing what God created it for. When stones come to life and begin to shout, living people will turn into stone. As far as that is concerned, the devil would love to see this happen. But man's unwillingness to give glory to God only increases the glory of the revelation of His glory. We see this illustrated in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart which became the means by which God was glorified in the exodus of Israel from Egypt.¹ For man it is a no-win situation.

26. The cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree 21:12-22

12 Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

13 "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"

14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.

15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.

16 "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"

17 And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

18 Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry.

Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.

21 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done.

22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

We would get the impression from Matthew's account that Jesus immediately cleansed the temple from all commercial activities that were carried on at the moment He entered Jerusalem. But Mark reports that the event took place the next day. We read: "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."² Jesus must have entered Jerusalem later in the afternoon after the hour on which the evening sacrifice had been made. The sale of sacrificial animals would then already have ceased and the merchants would have departed. Jesus would then only have looked around and left the city to spend the night at Bethany, probably at the house of Lazarus. The cleansing of the temple would then have taken place the next morning, and the incident with the fig tree occurred as Jesus was on His way to the temple.

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

1. Rom. 9:17

2. Mark 11:11

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."¹

The Adam Clarke's Commentary believes that the phrase "For the time of figs was not yet" actually means: "For it was not the season of gathering figs yet." The commentary states: "This I am fully persuaded is the true sense of this passage, *ou gar een kairos sukoon*. For a proof that kairos here signifies the time of gathering the figs, see the Septuagint in Ps 1:3. He bringeth forth his fruit, *en kairoo auton*, in his season; i.e. in the time in which fruit should be ripe, and fit for gathering. See also Mark 12:2: -And at the season, *too kairoo* the time of gathering the fruits of the vineyard. Matt 21:34: -When the time of the fruit drew near; *ho kairos toon karpoon*, the time in which the fruits were to be gathered, for it was then that the Lord of the vineyard sent his servants to receive the fruits; i.e. so much of them as the holder of the vineyard was to pay to the owner by way of rent; for in those times rent was paid in kind."

The Pulpit Commentary offers the following explanation: "Other trees would all be bare at this early season, but the fig trees would be putting forth their broad green leaves. It is possible that this tree, standing by itself as it would seem, was more forward than the other fig trees around. It was seen "from afar," and therefore it must have had the full benefit of the sun. Our Lord says (St. ... Luke 21:29), 'Behold the fig tree, and all the trees: when they now shoot forth, ye see it, and know of your own selves that the summer is now nigh.' He puts the fig tree first, as being of its own nature the most forward to put forth its buds. But then it is peculiar to the fig tree that its fruit begins to appear before its leaves. It is, therefore, a natural supposition that on this tree, with its leaves fully developed, there might be found at least some ripened fruit. Our Lord, therefore, approaches the tree in his hunger, with the expectation of finding fruit. But as he draws near to it, and realizes the fact that the tree, though full of leaf, is absolutely fruitless, he forgets his natural hunger in the thought of the spiritual figure which this tree began to present to his mind. The accident of his hunger as a man, brought him into contact with a great parable of spiritual things, presented to him as God; and as he approached this fig tree full of leaf, but destitute of fruit, there stood before him the striking but awful image of the Jewish nation, having indeed the leaves of a great profession, but yielding no fruit. The leaves of this fig tree deceived the passer-by, who, from seeing them, would naturally expect the fruit. And so the fig tree was cursed, not for being barren, but for being false. When our Lord, being hungry, sought figs on the fig tree, he signified that he hungered after something which he did not find. The Jews were this unprofitable fig tree, full of the leaves of profession, but fruitless. Our Lord never did anything without reason; and, therefore, when he seemed to do anything without reason, he was setting forth in a figure some great reality. Nothing but his Divine yearning after the Jewish people, his spiritual hunger for their salvation, can explain this typical action with regard to the fig tree, and indeed the whole mystery of his life and death."

1. Mark 11:13

Evidently, there was a time of the year when a fig tree could have green figs that were edible and that must have been what Jesus expected to find. If the Lord believed that the stones would be ready even if the people were not, He could also expect a fig tree to bear fruit. This not being the case, there was another power at work here that was not the power of the Creator. It was the power of destruction and evil. What or who that power was, needs no explanation.

Our problem is that we often fail to see the unity of all of creation. When man fell into sin by yielding to the enemy's temptation, all of creation fell with him. Thorns and thistles took over the land, animals became wild and the serpent was cursed. Yet, apart from man and the snake nothing else in creation could be held personally responsible. God did not revoke Adam's mandate but it became a burden to him instead of a joy. Now, the Lord of creation comes and reclaims what was His to begin with, but the adversary holds it back. It seems as if the enemy is victorious here, but we are closer to the truth if we see in this incident an unmasking of the enemy. It was not Satan who had created the life-giving sap that made the tree grow and bear fruit. Whatever he touches withers and dies. That fact is exposed here. In cursing the tree Jesus gives to Satan what he had touched, and the tree dries up instantly. This unmasking is a victory. What happens here is a foretaste of what Jesus would do on the cross. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."¹

An immense struggle found place in the heavenly realm. Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem occurs against the background of demonic opposition that resists the Lord foot by foot. As in the earlier instance where Jesus healed the demon possessed boy, the disciples had been unable to exorcise. There was here also a mountain that had to be moved.² Zechariah's prophecy is again being fulfilled: "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!'"³ The mountain was moved and the capstone was put in place. Jesus does this, not in the power of His heavenly majesty, but with the faith in the Father He had as a mortal human being with all His limitations.

That which we see happen here as one event, occurred in reality in two consecutive days. After cursing the fig tree, Jesus enters Jerusalem and cleanses the temple of merchants and merchandize. In John's Gospel we find a similar cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.⁴ This must mean that the same event happened twice and at different times. Weeds have a tendency to grow back at the place where they have been pulled up. We ought rather to be amazed that there were only two instances of cleansing of the temple. Human greed is eradicated overnight. It can only be healed in the breaking down of the temple and its rebuilding in three days!

The place of cleansing was probably the same as in John's Gospel. The merchants exhibited their ware, not in the Jewish section of the temple, but in the "court of the gentiles." This was an act of discrimination, which shows how little they understood of God's call to be a kingdom of priests to the rest of the world.

By their greed and pursuit of gain the Jews made it virtually impossible for the gentiles to encounter the living God in Jerusalem. It is particularly against this that Jesus reacts so strongly, combining quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah. In Isaiah we read: "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."⁵ And Jeremiah said: "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den

1. Col. 2:15
2. See Matt. 17:20.
3. Zech. 4:7
4. John 2:13-22

of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.”¹ From the first quotation we see Jesus’ missionary vision, and in the second one He referred to the destruction of the temple, which fact He mentioned several times in His last days on earth.

Then comes the moment in Jesus’ life which is probably the highest peak this side of the cross. The Lord of glory enters the temple. Like the temple rebuilt under Zerubbabel, this edifice was also an empty shell. The Ark of the Covenant had never been restored to its place after the Babylonian captivity. The glory of the Lord had never filled this house of the Lord as it did when Solomon dedicated the first temple.² 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.”³ 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.”⁴ It is also the day on which Jesus would say: “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.”⁵

Now Jesus stands in the middle of the temple court and the lame and blind come to him to be healed. People received healing at the place where the Lord of heaven and earth stood to reveal Himself. The blind saw what was hidden to those with healthy eyes and the lame walked the way people with healthy legs refused to tread. Isaiah’s glorious prophecy was being fulfilled: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”⁶ If at this moment Israel would have repented in sackcloth and ashes and turned to her Lord, God’s year of jubilee would have begun. But Jesus had to die first, and it is useless to speculate about what could have happened.

27. Jesus’ authority questioned 21:23-27

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

24 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

25 John’s baptism — where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'"

26 But if we say, 'From men'-we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

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5. Isa. 56:6,7
 1. Jer. 7:11
 2. II Kings 8:11
 3. Hag. 2:7-9
 4. Ps. 118:24
 5. Matt 23:37
 6. Isa. 35:5,6

Several things happened within the time span of the last few days of Jesus' life on earth, among which are the heated discussions between Jesus and the masters of the law, some parables and prophecies regarding the Second Coming, as well as the resurrection of Lazarus. The latter probably preceded Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem.

The chief priests and elders come to Jesus while He is teaching, asking Him for His permit. The question reveals some irritation. They evidently expected that Jesus would be unable to give a proper answer, which would allow them to make Him shut up.

The Greek word *exousia* means more than merely "authority." It has the connotation of power in the widest sense of the word. But the priests and elders probably did not ask the question in Greek. We see in the question a recognition that Jesus did not teach and perform miracles in His own power. They may have thought that Jesus would appeal to the Father for His authority, as He had done before,¹ in which case they could accuse Him of blasphemy.

Their question was not an honest attempt to get information. These men knew where Jesus' power came from and they knew the consequences if they would openly acknowledge this. They had earlier suggested that Jesus was in liaison with the devil.

The question also reveals hurt pride. Jesus had not had any formal education and yet He surpassed the most brilliant theologian of His time with his insight, intelligence and interpretation of Scripture. That was a bitter pill to swallow for these men who had had to study for years. There are several instances in the Bible that prove that wisdom and knowledge are not always related to years of study. We think of Amos, who said to one of the priests of his time: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"² Like Amos, Jesus was only "a country boy."

In the question "By what authority are you doing these things?" we must look for the meaning of "these things" in the context. The first of these was, of course, the cleansing of the temple. That would have been the point that bothered them most. They also had in mind the healings Jesus performed afterward, as well as the raising from the dead of Lazarus. But they may have placed the miracles in another category than the temple cleansing. If they had questioned Jesus' power and authority in connection with the raising of Lazarus, they would have made themselves ridiculous. When they ask the question, they do as if they see no relationship between the miracles and the cleansing. This does not mean that they were naïf. What happened here is similar to what happened at Pharaoh's court in Egypt, when Moses and Aaron performed their miracles. We read: "The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said."³ The only way the priests and elders could ask this question was by intentionally ignoring the facts. That is why Jesus was not wrong when He did not answer their question.

As before, Jesus counters this attack with His own attack and takes the initiative. It is risky for a finite human being to attack an omniscient God. The question regarding the origin of John's baptism establishes the relationship between John's and Jesus' ministry. If the doctors of the law would have given a positive answer to the question, Jesus would have been able to refer to John's statements about Him as the Messiah. This is what He did in an earlier situation where we read: "You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved."⁴ John witnessed to the truth. It appears the truth was no concern to these leaders of the people. Evidently, the modern tendency of making truth relative, as being a synthesis of thesis and antithesis, is not that modern at all. The philosophical basis may not be so evident, but the practical results are very obvious. Although it is

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1. See John 5:17-29.
 2. Amos 7:14,15
 3. Ex. 8:19
 4. John 5:33,34

impossible, even in philosophy, to build without a foundation, it is being done regularly. Pilate's question "What is truth?"¹ was not a question, but a statement.

The priests and elders were not concerned about the fact regarding John the Baptist and Jesus. They wanted to manipulate the facts to reinforce their obstinacy. That is what Jesus wanted to expose with His question.

It is also significant to observe that Jesus highlights baptism as the important feature of John the Baptist's ministry. John's preaching centered on man's decision to repent, which is demonstrated in baptism. His goal was to make people turn around from their sins and turn them toward God in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. There must have been some Pharisees among those who John baptized. We conclude this from Matthew's earlier statement: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'"² It may be that most of them had retracted their commitment made earlier. But for the Pharisees John's baptism was not something that had not affected them at all. Jesus could hold them responsible for that.

Jesus' question here, in response to the one the priests and elders asked, is in principle the same as His silence during the interrogation by the Sanhedrin.³ God's silence is just as important as His speaking. God will not reveal His secrets to us unless we meet His conditions of honesty, and of sincere seeking of truth. He will only take us into His confidence if we show ourselves reliable. That is how Enoch, Noah and Abraham became "a friend of God." That is why God addressed Daniel as "you who are highly esteemed."⁴ But about these priests and elders can be said what is stated in John's Gospel: "Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."⁵

It is a terrible thing that people can speak with the living God and say "We don't know." God held them responsible for this answer, but this ignorance was a lie. They would have been honest if they had said: "We know it, but we do not want to tell." But they lied and Jesus did not.

28. The Two Son 21:28-32

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

29 "'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers who includes this parable in his account. In a way, this story is connected to the preceding discussion on authority. The opening words "What do you think?" are an appeal to the ability and authority of the priests and elders to judge for themselves. Jesus addressed

1. John 18:38
2. Matt. 3:7
3. See Matt. 26:63.
4. Dan. 10:11
5. John 2:24,25

them in their dignity as men created in the image of God. In spite of the fact that they were plotting His murder, He reaches out to them in a loving and compassionate way. The time for grace and repentance was not yet over.

The parable is one of the shortest and simplest Jesus used in His teaching. A father has two sons, whom he sends to work in his vineyard. The first replies that he will, but he doesn't, and the second refuses initially but ends up doing it anyhow. There is a similarity between this parable and the one about the prodigal son. But in this story only a sketchy outline is given.

Jesus' audience agrees that obedience is evinced in deeds and not in words alone. With both boys their words contradicts their acts. The point Jesus makes is, of course, not that it does not matter what we say as long as we do it. Separation between word and deed is the essence of the lie. It is something the devil has introduced into this world. Satan did not create the word, God did. Or rather the Word is an essential part of God's being.¹ The enemy has, however, succeeded in bringing about, in us humans, a separation between God and the word. The answer both boys give their father testifies to this fact; they are both separated from God and His Word; they are both liars. The subsequent obedience of the second son cancels the effect of the lie, but it does not annul the lie itself. Both boys rebelled against their father. The first son camouflages his disobedience with terms that express surrender and obedience; the second boy speaks out but regrets it later. Separation from God always results in emptying words of their meaning.

Jesus demonstrates the practical results of saying "no." The "yes-boy" represents the pious, law keeping Pharisee, and the "no-boy" stands for the immoral and greedy prostitute and tax collector. Piety, which ought to have been the fruit of righteousness, becomes the biggest obstacle for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the person whose sin has been atoned and who has repented, the gap between word and deed will be closed. Those who are hearers and doers of the Word of God will experience the oneness that is in God.

Jesus applies the parable directly to the answer the priests and elders had given Him in the previous section. He knew why they evaded the answer. They knew very well that the baptism of John was from heaven, but they refused to obey. Part of their disobedience was because of the consequences; it would have forced them to cheapen themselves by keeping "low company" with prostitutes and tax collectors. The Gospel tends to put us together with strange bedfellows.

In His application of the parable, Jesus brings out that saying "no" to God can be expressed in disobedient, wayward living, but also by saying "yes" with the mouth only. We are much more consistent in adhering to our real principles than is taken for granted. Our conduct can always be traced back to the core of our inner convictions. The confusion is often in the fact that we don't realize what the core is. Rebellion can be open or pious and hidden, but rebellion is rebellion. A pious cover does not change the character.

Jesus actually puts the priests and elder in the same category with the prostitutes and tax collectors. The difference is that the latter refused initially, but ended up repenting. The former kept on refusing. Jesus tried to make these pious people jealous by putting the prostitutes and tax collector before them as an example. Jesus also emphasized that there could be no doubt about the heavenly origin of John's baptism. He did not defend His cleansing of the temple or apologize for it. He attacked His accusers. John's baptism and the cleansing of the temple belong to the same category. There is also a relationship between the cleansing of the human heart through confession of sin, conversion and the cleansing of the temple. The temple was symbolic of God's revelation of Himself on earth. As Jesus indicated earlier in connection with another cleansing of the temple, the actual revelation of God is in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ.² We become members of that resurrected body through regeneration, of which the baptism of John was an indicator.

1. John 1:1-5

2. John 2:19-21

29. The wicked tenants 21:33-46

33 *"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.*

34 *When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

35 *"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.*

36 *Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.*

37 *Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.*

38 *"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.'*

39 *So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

40 *"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

41 *"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."*

42 *Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"*

43 *"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.*

44 *He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."*

45 *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.*

According to Luke, Jesus told this parable to a larger audience than He had told the previous one.¹ The former was particularly addressed to the leaders of the people; this one is for all. He tells in detailed fashion how the landowner goes about planting the vineyard and perfecting it. The owner has his vineyard at heart; it is his; he made it himself.

The question is what this vineyard stands for. It does not represent all of creation, at least not initially. It is the mandate that God had particularly entrusted to the people of Israel, which, after the rejection of the Son, would be given to the Gentiles. In v.43, Jesus identifies it as "the kingdom of God." It represents God's revelation of Himself to mankind. Israel had been given the task of being the guardian of God's righteousness. God's intention had been that Israel would not keep this treasure to itself but that, by becoming a kingdom of priests, it would demonstrate this riches for the benefit of the whole world. Israel failed completely in the carrying out of this task, both as far as the keeping of the mandate and the testimony of God's righteousness. It used the fruits of the vineyard for its own consumption.

This parable serves a double purpose. Jesus makes an appeal to the heart and mind of His hearers. It is difficult for us to understand how the Creator feels toward His creation. This story tells it all. We can understand how someone who made a vineyard and rented it out would feel when he was disappointed in the tenants. We see at the end of the story how indignant the hearers are about the outcome; just as indignant as God would be about the misuse of His creation. We may not be able to sound the depth of God's feelings, but we cannot say that we don't understand them at all. As bearers of the image of God, we have the same kind of emotions God has.

Particularly touching is the way the Lord expresses the feelings of the owner at the sending of his son. Matthew merely states: "Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said." Mark goes further by stating: "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They

1. Luke 20:9

will respect my son.”¹ Similarly, Luke states: “Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’”²

In his book *Peace Child*, Don Richardson, tells the story of how a cannibal tribe in Papua came to understand the Gospel. They had a practice of ending a tribal war by exchanging a child between the warring tribes. This child was called “Peace Child.” Richardson asked them what would happen if one of the tribes killed that child. With great indignation, they answered that this would be a great crime. That is what happened to the Son in this parable.

One problem in recognizing God’s emotions in the process is that we rarely take an honest look at our own emotions. Denial of what we feel may close the door to understanding God’s love for us.

The emphasis in this parable is not on collecting the rent but on the attitude of the tenants toward those who represented the owner. In the Old Testament, the two books of I and II Kings describe the attitude of the kings of Israel and Judah toward the prophets of their time. The books of I and II Chronicles analyze the rulers’ attitude toward the priests of God. As far as God was concerned, the latter was more important than the former. The political ambitions of Israel’s monarchs was the least of His concern. In this parable the tenants’ attitude toward the slaves as well as to the son is being emphasized.

Jesus appeals then to the audience with the question: “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” It was up to the jury to decide.

The issue is not God’s creation but God’s revelation of Himself. Mankind has taken possession of God’s creation as if it owned it, as if it made it itself. I once read a poem in which God said: “Give me back my flowers and trees, my birds and fish ...” More importantly, God had entrusted His revelation to the nation of Israel and it handled that as if it owned it, as if it could break it and ruin it if it felt like it. There is in fact a connection between creation and revelation, because the land spews out its inhabitants if they tread God’s revelation under foot.

The servant or slaves of the owner are the Old Testament prophets. It was through them that God had sent His message to the tenants to remind them of their responsibility. *The Epistle of Hebrews* opens with the statement: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”³ The message of the Old Testament prophets and of the Son can be stated as being that God is the Lord of creation and the Lord of the revelation of righteousness. He has leased both creation and kingdom to mankind. He could reasonably expect that both would produce fruit and that mankind would recognize that the fruit was His. God places the theologians and the ecologists on the same level. Both have the same task, though in different domains. Both have failed miserably!

The parable also contains a warning to the chief priests and elders because of what they planned to do with “the Son.” In the same way, as Jesus had warned His disciples and Judas three times with the announcement of His suffering and death, so does He warn the leaders of the people here. The fact that the Scriptures that say it must happen in this way must be fulfilled⁴ does not diminish the responsibility of those who killed Jesus. It is difficult for us to understand how these things fit together in God’s decree. But it is obvious from this parable that Jesus’ death was not an unavoidable fate and that the priests and elders were not helpless pawns.

The jury holds the perpetrators responsible and their verdict is “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.” (v.41). They declare that God would be righteous if He destroyed Israel and gave the mandate it has in this world to others. Luke adds to this: “May this never be!”⁵ It is not clear who gives that comment.

1. Mark 12:6
2. Luke 20:13
3. Heb. 1:1,2
4. See Matt. 26:54.

Jesus responds to this with a quotation from Psalm 118. It is amazing to see how many times this psalm is being quoted in the few days between Jesus' triumphal entrée in Jerusalem and His death. It began with Jesus' prayer at Lazarus' tomb, when He said: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."¹ That was a breakthrough of life through death. That started "Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: 'The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!'"² As Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, the people of the city took over the cry: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you."³ It was the realization that "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,"⁴ that made Jesus pause on the slope of the Mount of Olives to weep over Jerusalem, saying: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace ..."⁵ All of this belongs to this paradoxical mixture of joy and sorrow that would "open for [Him] the gates of righteousness."⁶ There is no greater joy, nor a greater pain.

How it must have pierced the hearts of these doctors of the law, when Jesus introduced His quotation with the words "Have you never read in the Scriptures..." The Old Testament which had been the thesis of their doctoral dissertation was a closed book for them. How different was Jesus' approach to the written Word! For Him it was the Word of God by which man lives. As Moses said: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."⁷ On the basis of what the Scriptures said about Him, Jesus knew Himself to be the cornerstone and the capstone.⁸ The priests and elders could have avoided their fatal mistake if they had applied the Scriptures to themselves. They considered themselves to be the builders. They turned out to be the builders who rejected the capstone! Yet, they thought they would never make this mistake. If they had allowed themselves to be guided by the Word of God instead of leaning on their own understanding, this would not have happened.

The amazing part of the quotation from Psalm 118 is the line "the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." "Marvelous" is the translation of the Greek word *thaumastos*, "something to be wondered at." In the testimony of the man who was born blind, the word acquires an ironic connotation: "The man answered, 'Now that is *remarkable!* You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.'"⁹ Because man despises God's wisdom, God mocks our wisdom. Jesus' rejection and humiliation is actually not His but ours. It is a demonstration of His greatness and our baseness.

The rejection of the stone would result in the crushing of the builders. It is proof of the fact that the builders not only misjudged the quality of the stone, but also that they did not understand what they were building and who they were building for. The image is borrowed from the construction of Solomon's temple. We read: "In building the temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built."¹⁰ Every stone used for the

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5. Luke 20:16
 1. John 11:41
 2. Ps. 118:15,16
 3. Ps. 118:26
 4. Ps 118:24
 5. Luke 19:42
 6. Ps. 118:19
 7. Deut. 8:3
 8. Zech. 4:7
 9. John 9:30
 10. I Kings 6:7

building was cut and chiseled at the rock quarry. It was custom-made for the place it was meant to occupy in the wall. We could say that the builders had made a mistake, because the stone did not fit at the place for which it had been made. These priests and elders did not accept Jesus' statement that He was the cornerstone. The place they assigned to Him was not the place of the Messiah but of an itinerant rabbi. When Jesus did not fit that place, they decided that there was no place for Him. So they rejected Him. But by His resurrection from the dead He became the foundation, the capstone and the cornerstone.

This is not the first time Zechariah's prophecy comes into focus. He had said: "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!'"¹ The events of the last days of Jesus' life on earth stand in the light of the prophecies of Psalm 118 and Zechariah 4. He is the alpha and the omega, the cornerstone and the capstone. To those who deny Him His rightful place, He becomes a stumbling block a rock that makes them fall. As Peter states: "As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message — which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."² Our priesthood depends upon our recognition of Jesus as "the living Stone." Isaiah also said: "So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.'"³

The immediate result of the rejection of Jesus as the cornerstone was that the kingdom was taken away from Israel to whom it had been entrusted as guardian and given to someone else. The kingdom had been Israel's "reason d'être." God had chosen the nation to know His will and to obey it and thus to be the guardian of righteousness and a testimony to the world. All this was in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel's rejection of Jesus made them fall from their status with God, and their task to witness and guard is henceforth given to the church, which is the body of Christ, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles who confess Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

The parable still has significance for us. For us, rejecting Jesus, in the way Israel's leaders did by condemning Him to death on the cross, is no longer possible. But there are other ways in which we can demonstrate that we lack insight into God's theocracy. We do not own the kingdom and God's revelation of Himself; they have only been given to us as a mandate.

The Pharisees and chief priests did not misunderstand the meaning of the parable. They made immediate plans to arrest Jesus and murder Him. The only thing that kept them from doing this at that time was the presence of the crowd. It was not their fear of God but their fear of public opinion that kept them from acting immediately. The people believed Jesus to be a prophet. The illiterate crowd believed that God spoke through this man. The leaders of the nation did not care whether God was in Jesus or not. That was not what kept them from murder. Jesus was not arrested then and there for political, not for religious reasons. The real reason was that the hour at which God had determined to light the fire on the altar had not yet come.

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1. Zech. 4:7
 2. I Peter 2:4-10
 3. Isa. 28:16

30. The royal wedding banquet 22:1-14

1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying:

2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

4 "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

5 "But they paid no attention and went off — one to his field, another to his business.

6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.

7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

8 "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.

9 Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'

10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes.

12 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.

13 "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

14 "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

This parable is the last in the series of parables Jesus told in connection with the rejection of the kingdom by the leaders of the people. The first one was the story of the two sons, which emphasized that the rejection meant disobedience to God's command. The second parable of the tenants depicted the rejection as the breaking of a contract. The present parable shows it as the refusal of an invitation.

This story resembles the one Luke reports, in which the guests present different kinds of reasons for not coming. There the guests are more articulate in their refusal. The point of the story is the same in both parables, but it is obvious that they are not identical. In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the story at an earlier stage of His ministry. Jesus may have been in Galilee at that point. This parable is told in Jerusalem a few days before Jesus' death.

We see in the sequence of the three stories a clear line of progress. In each of the stories Jesus appeals progressively to a higher level of motivation. In the first parable the people are addressed as persons with a free will, but there is the demand of obedience. The second parable emphasizes the obligation one human being has toward another who is on the same level. Both parties put their signature to the contract. One is not intrinsically more important than the other. In the third parable the king honors his guests by inviting them to the wedding banquet of his son. The refusal of such an invitation constitutes an insult of the grossest kind. The three stories put together give a complete picture of what the rejection of the kingdom means on three different levels. All three refusals are acts of the will. They are inseparable. The refusal in the first story contains the features of the breaking of the contract and the insult of the third.

The Greek text of v.1 reads literally: "And Jesus answered again and spoke by parables, and said unto them ..." The Greek word used is *apokrinomai*, which is a Hebraism, meaning "to begin to speak." Jesus' speaking here is not in answer to a question, but it is a response to the chief priests' and elders' plot to seize and kill Jesus. It is to counter the plan to murder that Jesus issues the invitation of the Father. The contrast between the theme of the story and the tumultuous background against which it is presented lends it a dramatic character. As far as form and presentation is concerned this story strongly resembles the preceding one. In both stories servants are sent out to convey messages. The servants represent the Old Testament prophets who brought the Word of God to the people. The content of their message, as is clear

from the three parables in this series, is a call to obedience, a reminder of responsibility and an invitation to share in the joy. As in the story which reminded the people of their responsibility the refusal by the guests demonstrates their opposition: “They refused to come” (v.1). Further down we read: “They paid no attention and went off” (v.5). The missing out on the joy is connected to disobedience and lack of responsibility!

The king’s invitation here resembles the invitation given by Lady Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs.¹ Jesus’ choice of words suggests that He may have planned it that way. In this parable Jesus does not elaborate on the different reasons for refusing the invitation. But as in Luke’s version of the parallel parable,² the reasons given are all pretexts. The guests were too busy with their own interests to have time for God’s. There is no realization of the fact that it was God’s interests that brought them into this world and provided the basis for their existence. The person who is totally preoccupied with his own business is actually working for the devil. Only those who first seek the kingdom of God really promote their own interests. These people did not understand that they lived in this world by the will of God. The excuses given are proof of the fact that these people did not know who they were, because they did not know who God is.

As the king issues a second appeal, people ought to have stopped in their track and reconsidered. The message given to them says in so many words “Do you realize what you are doing to Me? How would you feel if I did such a thing to you?” The different reactions to the second invitation seem to be incompatible, but they are in reality the same. Some paid no attention and went off — one to his field, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. Both reactions are two sides of the same coin. Indifference and murder may not rate the same on the scale of judgment, but one leads to the other. The Apostle John rates hatred as murder: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”³ From indifference to hate is only a small step. The building materials of indifference are from the same quarry of death as murder. But God does not punish indifferent people the same as murderers.

The theme of the murder of God’s prophets comes up several times during the last days of Jesus’ life on earth. We see it in the parable of the tenants and more extensively in Jesus’ discourse about the teachers of the law and Pharisees.⁴ We can understand why Jesus, as a human being, was so preoccupied with the thought, since there was a plot to murder Him.

The invitation to those who were at the street corners “both good and bad,” elaborates on what the Lord said in the previous parable: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”⁵ Jesus speaks here concisely about the mystery of the church, which the Apostle Paul would develop later in greater detail.

There is always a danger to read our preconceived ideas into a parable. But there is something about the “street corner” that catches our attention. It speaks of people who had gotten up in the morning and were on their way to do what they had planned for the day. They had, to borrow Isaiah’s words, gone astray, all of them had turned to their own way,⁶ without really knowing what they were doing. They were on their way to hell when their paths crossed the servants of the king with the message that they could be saved. “Both good and bad” got the message. Their goodness or evil provided no hindrance to their response to the invitation. We will see later on what disqualified those who had been invited originally and what made the others worthy.

There is a great surprise in this story which we cannot miss. This is the more amazing if we consider the circumstances under which Jesus told this parable. In the midst of a crowd that plans to kill

1. See Prov. 9.
2. Luke 14:15-24
3. I John 3:15
4. Matt. 24:29-38
5. Matt. 21:43
6. Isa. 53:6

Him, Jesus is able to thoroughly rejoice in the thought that those who respond to the invitation will be saved. Our Lord was always able to rise above the evil of the moment and speak from a position of victory.

It seems that the last part of the parable, vv. 11-14, is out of context. The subject of all three parables was that the kingdom would be taken away from Israel and given to the Gentiles. But even in the parable of the two sons, we find the theme of personal obedience.

The “wedding clothes” in v.11 represent personal righteousness. It was evidently the custom of the day that the lord of the feast would give wedding clothes to his guests as they entered the hall. If one the guests is seen without these wedding clothes, it does not mean that no wedding clothes had been offered to him, but that he refused to accept them. *Barnes’ Notes* explains: “In ancient times, kings and princes were accustomed to making presents of changes of raiment to their friends and favorites, to refuse to receive which was an expression of highest contempt, Gen 45:22; 2 Kings 10:22; Est. 6:8; 8:15. It was, of course, expected that such garments would be worn when they came into the presence of the benefactor.” This man believed that his own clothes were good enough for the occasion.

The essence of the kingdom is God’s righteousness. The prerequisite for administering the secrets of the kingdom is to give up one’s own righteousness and accept the righteousness which God gives us in Jesus Christ.

The fact that this man not only refused the wedding clothes, but entered the hall of the feast in spite of that, makes him into a spy, an instrument of the enemy. He is like the weeds in the field in another parable.¹ His kind of rebellion is worse than the refusal of the others. His punishment will be the same as of the servant who hid his talent in the ground.² Both were thrown into “the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This outer darkness is the other extreme of the inner light. It represents the farthest removal from fellowship with God. The “weeping and gnashing of teeth” stand for the lowest form of emotions on the basis of self-condemnation and reproach.

The closing words of this parable, “For many are invited, but few are chosen” are among the most difficult to interpret in all of Scripture. One thinks of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and Paul’s words in *Romans*: “And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”³ It seems, however, that “being chosen” in this parable does not mean the same as the predestination Paul speaks about. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Applying the parable generally, Origen ... says, ‘If anyone will observe the populous congregations, and inquire how many there are who live a better kind of life, and are being transformed in the renewing of their mind; and how many who are careless in their conversation and conformed to this world, he will perceive the use of this voice of our Savior’s, ‘Many are called, but few chosen;’ and in another place it has been said, ‘Many will seek to enter in, and shall not be able’ (... Luke 13:24); and, ‘Strive earnestly to enter in by the narrow gate; for few there be that find it’ (... Matthew 7:13, 14).”

We do not get the impression that Jesus speaks here about God’s eternal plan that is not related to any act of man. This man was not rejected because of God’s resolution made before this man was born, but because he had rejected the grace and pardon that was offered to him. Paul speaks clearly about people like this, saying: “What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the ‘stumbling stone.’ As it is written: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’”⁴ We cannot assume that this man’s refusal was based upon anything but his own will. If predestination, in the doctrinal sense of the word, preceded this man’s

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1. Matt. 13:24-30
 2. Matt. 25:14-30
 3. Rom. 8:30
 4. Rom. 9:30-33

refusal, he would be nothing but a pawn in a chess game. We must remember that the invitation precedes the choosing. "Many are invited, but few are chosen."

The real question is "chosen for what?" As far as we can see everyone who wore wedding clothes was admitted to the feast of the king. They may have been few in number. We may interpret this to mean that all of Israel had been called by God to be the guardians of God's righteousness, but only a few had come to the place where God could entrust them with His righteousness. That makes predestination something that goes beyond personal salvation to personal responsibility. We could see the word "few" not as a representation of a small number, but as a word that prompts us to reach farther.

The question comes up in *Luke's Gospel*, where we read: "Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."¹

And the Apostle Paul throws a different light on predestination by saying: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."² It seems that the Bible makes little difference between the beginning of the race and the giving of the prize.

31. God's right and Caesar's right 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.

16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.

17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius,

20 and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

After the parables, the Gospel writers report a series of efforts by Jesus' enemies to catch Him by asking trick questions. The plot is revealed in which, at three different occasions questions are put before Jesus in the hope that He will give an answer that would incriminate Him. The first question is a political one regarding payment of taxes. This is followed with a question by the Sadducees about the resurrection. The episode closes with a question by Jesus to His adversaries. In Luke's Gospel the people are called spies,

1. Luke 13:23-30

2. I Cor. 9:24-27

who disguise themselves as pious people. Matthew reveals that the Pharisees worked together with the Herodians to bring Jesus down. According to Marc, at an earlier stage those two groups of irreconcilable enemies had conspired together to devise plans to eliminate Jesus.¹ Luke states: “They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.”²

The subject of the trick question was a very sensitive issue in the mind of Jesus’ contemporaries. The Pharisees must have thought that Jesus would be unable to answer the question without antagonizing both the Jews and the Romans. Even if Jesus had tried to evade the issue, He would have made Himself unpopular.

So the question was not put for the purpose of receiving information. Sometimes questions can be asked legitimately for purposes other than receiving information or collecting data. Some questions are meant to stimulate thinking, or in answer to another question. Jesus used some of those methods Himself. But trick questions are the lowest form of questioning by which the questioner can debase himself. It constitutes a misuse of language for purposes other than the purpose for which God created language. In asking this question the Pharisees and Herodians incriminated themselves and called upon themselves a heavier judgment. Those who embodied the lie wanted to catch Him who is the truth by using a means that was meant to reveal truth and not lie. They lost before they started! Jesus demonstrates here again a virtuosity in the use of language that is uncanny.

The spies begin by paying Jesus a compliment. They said: “We know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.” What they say is true, but it becomes a lie because they don’t mean what they say. Paying of compliments is a permissible way to honor others and to express appreciation. But the purpose of these people was to distract Jesus by flattery in order to inflate His ego so that His defenses would be down when they attacked. The content of their words was completely opposite to their intent. What they say about Jesus was one hundred percent true, but they did not believe their own words. Their hope was that Jesus would be susceptible to flattery and that He would attach value to what others thought about Him. In an indirect manner, probably without realizing this themselves, they assumed that Jesus’ fellowship with the Father was not perfect. That is where these spies went most wrong. It is when we fail to seek the honor that comes from God that we begin by seeking the approval of our fellowmen.

The question pertains to the political and religious tensions of that day. Their question was not whether paying taxes in general was legitimate. What the question amounted to was whether the Roman government had a right to demand payment of taxes. Was this the will of God to which they had to submit, or was the Roman occupation of Israel contrary to God’s will, and should they put themselves on God’s side and oppose it. The irony of the situation is that the Pharisees and Herodians had joined together to ask the question. The two groups were diametrically opposed to each other at this point. The Pharisees considered themselves to be on God’s side in their opposition to the Roman invader. The Herodians were on the side of Herod, seeking a form of political collaboration with the Romans for reasons of material advantage. The only reason the two irreconcilable factions came together was for the purpose of getting rid of Jesus. Their common hatred was the uniting factor. Evidently, their principles were much less important to them than they pretended them to be. The real issue, however, was not God or Rome, but God or self. Otherwise they would not have felt so threatened to the point where they were willing to set aside their differences.

It is obvious that Jesus could never have given an answer that satisfied both parties. Their apparent agreement was in fact their weakest point and their inconsistency. Only a person on God’s side can be consistent; all consistency apart from God leads to the devil. That is why Jesus could attack them at the core of their inconsistent show of agreement. Matthew states that Jesus saw through their evil intent. Mark says: “Jesus knew their hypocrisy.”³ And Luke: “He saw through their duplicity.”⁴ Jesus knew that the question

1. Marc 3:6
2. Luke 20:20

was a trap. He knew that even those who thought to believe in Him had ulterior motives. John even reports: “Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.”¹ Jesus, as a human being, had the prophetic gift to see, with more than psychological insight, through those with whom He spoke. He knew that He could not trust those who had not surrendered themselves and had become the captives of the Holy Spirit. If that is the case with those who come with good intent, how much more with those with evil objectives!

Jesus calls them hypocrites. David described that kind of person in one of his psalms: “You love every harmful word, O you deceitful tongue! Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin: He will snatch you up and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living. The righteous will see and fear; they will laugh at him, saying, ‘Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!’”² David’s psalm was a prophecy about what Jesus would go through on earth. Jesus must have found much comfort and encouragement in the psalms David wrote while he fled from Saul.

The way in which Jesus breaks the trap is amazing. He does it, first of all, by showing that He sees through the snare. The snake in the grass is exposed. That is part of the victory. The other part is in the exposing of the inconsistency of these people. After all, they were using the emperor’s money. If they were so strongly opposed to the Roman occupancy as something that obstructed the theocracy, they ought not to use Roman coins either. But they were not willing to go hungry for the principles they believed in. Not only the Herodians used Roman coins, the pious Pharisees did as well. They all compromised. In trying to trick Jesus, they actually asked His opinion about their own behavior.

They act as if they expect Jesus to say: “Don’t pay!” It was not as if they never paid their state taxes and as if they were waiting for Jesus to say whether they were right or not. For temple taxes there were coins in use other than the Roman ones. That was the reason for money changers to be in the temple court. So there was a spiritual coin and a profane coin. But the difference in spiritual and profane is not between one kind of coin and another; it is between egoism and generosity.

In Jesus’ answer He does not elaborate upon this difference. The Lord enlarges the perspectives when He says to give to Caesar that which has Caesar’s portrait and give to God that which bears His image. That carries an application well beyond the effigy on the coin. Using the double standard of the coin, Jesus makes a pronouncement that draws an eternal line between that which is God’s and that which is not His. The difference is the same as what we read in Genesis about the creation of Adam and the birth of Adam’s offspring: “This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.”³ In between the two lies man’s fall into sin.

Jesus does much more than give an answer to a trick question. He indicates that there is a gap between God and Caesar because of man’s rebellion. The Roman Empire represented everything that was opposed to the Kingdom of God. The fact that Jesus did nothing to liberate Israel from Roman occupation does not mean that He favored the Roman Empire. It is not outward freedom of political conditions, but inward freedom from sin and peace with God that liberates man. Only if we give to God what belongs to Him, will we be free from the power of Caesar. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the

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3. Mark 12:15
 4. Luke 20:23
 1. John 2:23-25
 2. Ps. 52:4-7
 3. Gen. 5:1-3

rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”¹ It is not Caesar but the power behind Caesar that is against us.

What does the effigy of Caesar on the coin represent? If the image of God represents the character of God as manifested in this world, particularly in the creation of man, his character and achievements, then the image of Caesar stands for everything that is not God’s. That includes all the consequences of the fall: suffering, sickness and death. It is the inner corruption of the individual as a result of personal disobedience. Every plant that the heavenly Father has not planted and that obstructs the coming of the Kingdom will be pulled up by the roots.²

We would have expected that Jesus would claim everything for the Father, telling the people not to give anything to Caesar. But the principle of the New Testament consists in mocking the devil and letting him keep what he takes and thus conquering him.

There is in Jesus’ answer a suggestion that that which is Caesar’s is unacceptable to God. We cannot give to God what is not His. Yet, “Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”³ The real issue in the struggle that is going on in the world is that this creation, which belongs to God, will again be given back to Him. The way in which this will be accomplished is, first of all, in our consciously giving to God what is His and by exercising faith that ultimately all that Caesar claims for himself will be put at Jesus’ feet. Our role in this is to “take up [our] positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give [us].”⁴

As far as concerning the difficult question about what our attitude should be toward a government that treads under foot all fundamental human rights, Jesus also gives an answer. The Bible does not preach a theology of political freedom. The biblical balance consists in, on the one hand, submit “to the governing authorities,”⁵ “honor the king,”⁶ and on the other hand, to obey God rather than man.⁷ There is obedience on both sides, but in case of conflict obedience to God has priority.

Some of the depth of Jesus’ answer must have penetrated, because we read: “When they heard this, they were amazed.” They realized that Jesus not only succeeded in avoiding the trap, but that He answered their question in a much deeper way than they had asked it. Jesus took them more literally than they intended to be taken.

32. The question about the resurrection 22:23-33

23 That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.

24 "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him.

25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother.

26 The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh.

27 Finally, the woman died.

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1. Eph. 6: 12
 2. Matt. 15:13
 3. I Chron. 29:14
 4. II Chron. 20:17
 5. Rom. 13:1-7
 6. I Peter 2:13-17
 7. Acts 4:19

28 Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

29 Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.

30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

31 But about the resurrection of the dead — have you not read what God said to you,

32 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."

33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

These verses deal with the second trick question in the series that were put to Jesus by different parties. Matthew and Mark agree literally on the text, but Luke elaborates more, though his message is the same. The ones that ask the question are the Sadducees. That fact alone makes it very transparent that the question is a deception. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the Sadducees: "The most prominent doctrine of the Sadducees was the denial of the immortality of the soul and of the resurrection of the body. The Pharisees believed that Moses had delivered these doctrines to the elders, and that they had in turn handed them on to their successors. The Sadducees rejected all these traditions. From Acts (Acts 23:8) we learn that they believed in neither 'angel or spirit.' As appearances of angels are mentioned in the Law, it is difficult to harmonize their reverence for the Law with this denial. They may have regarded these angelophanies as theophanies. Josephus distinctly asserts ... that the Sadducees believe that the soul dies with the body. They deny, he says, divine providence ... Their theology might be called 'religion within the limits of mere sensation.'"

The Sadducees' intent was probably more to make Jesus seem ridiculous than to catch Him. Yet, in their illustration they give the impression that they state a historic event and that they do not ask a hypothetical question. By saying "Now there were seven brothers among us" they seem to refer to more than a hypothetical issue. The Scripture portion they refer to is known as the "levirate marriage," stipulated by Moses 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 his brother's family line.' That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled."¹

It is difficult for us in our day and age to comprehend the cultural setting that gave ground to this kind of ordinance. We would consider this kind of practice immoral, particularly if the next brother were already married. We would put a question mark behind the whole story, but not from the perspective of the resurrection. In modern society the perpetuation of the family name as one of the basic principles of marriage has lost its meaning. For us the question of the continuation of the human race would be the more prevalent reason for having children, but that is not the point in this story. The idea that this would have something to do with immortality is also found in various primitive cultures in this world.

The fact that Jesus emphasizes that facet of marriage, the passing on of life to the next generation, does not mean that this is all that marriage is about. Luke's version seems to say that immortality is the main reason for the discontinuation of marriage relationships in heaven.² We tend to look upon marriage more as a means of satisfaction of our emotional and sexual desires. That may be one of the main reasons so many

1. Deut. 25:5-10

marriages shipwreck in modern times. Satisfaction of desires is a byproduct and not the foundation upon which true marriages are built. If the Bible were taken as the foundation, it would certainly restore the right balance of many marriages. Marriages are supposed to express the character of God; that is the main reason for their institution. This portion of Scripture emphasizes that the reason is not only to express God's love relationship with His creation, but also that He is the source of all life. Procreation and raising of children may not be the sole reason for marriage, but it is one of the important ones.

It is imperative to see this section in the context of the Old Testament picture of eternity. The hope of resurrection was only a vague notion and the expression of it was found in earthly images of longevity and the continuation of one's life in the sons that were born. To scale the wall of death by leaving a son on the other side was seen as a greater reality for the Old Testament Jew than the resurrection of the body at the end of time. In that sense marriage is an image of eternity.

Another aspect of marriage for the believing Jew, an aspect that has logically disappeared from the screen of our life, is that the children in a marriage form a link in the chain of the coming of the Messiah. That aspect faded as the line along which the Savior would come became clearer. That there would be a relationship between the coming of the Messiah and resurrection from the dead, which would make marriage unneeded, could, of course, not be foreseen. It is important to understand that the sexual aspect of a marriage, that which is meant to bring forth children, falls away in the resurrection. But the love, unity and intimacy as in a marriage relationship will remain throughout eternity. The difference is that that which is limited to two people on earth will become in eternity the bond that binds all of humanity.

In as much as the sexual facet of marriage is not carried over in eternity, the question regarding who of the seven brothers could claim the woman as his wife has become irrelevant. There will be no procreation in eternity; there the measure of humanity will be full. We don't know how many angels God created. The fact that God is called "the Lord of hosts" suggests that there are many. If Jesus could have had more than twelve legions of angels at His disposal,¹ it would not have depleted the heavenly courts. The author of Hebrews tells us that we have "come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly."² This makes it strange for us to imagine that man in the resurrection is compared to the angels.

The Sadducees did not believe in the existence of angels or in the resurrection. But the Lord puts the fact before their eyes in a way that must have been painful and embarrassing to them.

In eternity one of the differences between man and angel will be the fact that man is the product of a slow development in time and space and the existence of angels is static. Angels are today what they have always been since the day of their creation. The creation of angels was invariable; the creation of man is dynamic. God did not make all the angels out of one single one, as He created the human race. As the Apostle Paul said: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."³ The difference is to be found in the creation of time. Time and development are synonymous. We, who are creatures of time, cannot imagine a timeless eternity. In eternity, our becoming like God and like the angels does not necessarily mean that the difference between the sexes, male and female, will be eliminated.

One of the most important lessons of this section is undoubtedly the fact that Jesus exposes the error of the Sadducean doctrine and philosophy of life. "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." Although the Sadducees belonged to the category of liberal theologians, they considered themselves to be students of the Scriptures on the same level as the Pharisees. Jesus' words must have been particularly shocking to them. Jesus does not reproach them because they have not studied the Scriptures, but because they have not acquired insight. It is the combination of knowledge of the written

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2. Luke 20:36
 1. Matt. 26:53
 2. Heb. 12:22
 3. Acts 17:26

Word and the power of the Holy Spirit that provides the key to understanding. The power of God is not something one can read or learn; it must be experienced. The experience is connected to receiving forgiveness of sins, surrender of life and obedience to the will of God. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Bible will remain a closed book. We have to understand something about the character of God before we can interpret what the Bible teaches. That is the reason Jesus could give an interpretation of a verse that these people thought they understood, an interpretation that they had never been able to come up with by themselves.

The Old Testament gives very few clues as to the resurrection. If one only studies the Old Testament, one acquires little light on the subject. Yet, Isaiah prophesied: “But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.”¹ And we have Job’s statement: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”² But those statements could be considered to be figurative. The Pharisees and Sadducees had only the Old Testament to go by.

The question posed by the Sadducees about the Levirate marriage only served their purpose to demonstrate how “ridiculous” the doctrine of the resurrection of the body was. Jesus breaks through the hermeneutical barrier by showing that Bible interpretation must always be done in reference to the character of God. Every interpretation of the written Word that throws blame on the Person of God and that does not specifically seek the glory of the Father is wrong. That makes it so important for the interpreter to know the Father through forgiveness of sins and through an act of personal surrender.

When God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush,³ Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had already been dead for about four hundred years, and yet, God linked His Name to them. God said to Moses: “Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.’”⁴ God did not say “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The present tense of the verse forms the vital part of Jesus’ interpretation. Jesus emphasizes the personal character of God’s relationship with these men by the repetition: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” But the most glorious part of His answer is in the fact that the Name of God is the guarantee of their life. To the living God death is non-existent, and for all those who are in relationship with Him, death is the defeated foe. The way Jesus reveals this truth here suggests that death is an insult to God. That is how we experience death. We are created for life, not for death. The only way we can live is when God connects His Name to ours. In as much as God calls Himself “the God of John Schultz, John Schultz will live eternally!

This, obviously, does not mean that the child of God does not go through physical death. For the believer death is not the end of all things, it is an “intermezzo.” It is a phase of time which God allows but which does not control Him. As God became man in Jesus Christ, He entered time and subjected Himself to mortality, but in His resurrection He went out of time into eternity. Time and mortality go together, even as resurrection and eternity. Luke adds to the words “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” “for to him all are alive.”⁵ That is not a subjective statement as a human way of expressing that as long as they are being remembered, they are not really dead. Abraham is not alive in God’s mind because God has a keen memory. God is the objective measure of life. It means that, as far as God is concerned, the resurrection has

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1. Isa. 26:19
 2. Job 19:25-27
 3. Ex. 3 and 4
 4. Ex. 3:16
 5. Luke 20:38

already occurred. This is difficult for us to understand, because we can only look at things from our perspective of time and space.

Jesus' statement is not only a helpful assurance at the time of our own death; it also helps us to live by faith in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."¹

Jesus did much more than merely answer a question. Without the resurrection, His own life would have been meaningless. And without His resurrection there would be no resurrection at all.

Jesus' answer meets with the approval of the Pharisees and the admiration of the crowd. This admiration is the same as the approbation people demonstrated at the beginning of Jesus' teaching career. Mark stated then: "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.'"² At this point the teaching is no longer new but the authority is the same. The fact, however, that Jesus victoriously put the Sadducees in their place does not move the Pharisees to give up their plan to destroy Him.

33. The greatest commandment 22:34-40

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The question does not seem to be a trick. It is Matthew's statement that "the Pharisees got together" that indicates that there is more behind the question than an innocent quest for truth. It was only after mutual consultation among the Pharisees that the question was put before the Lord. The fact that Jesus had effectively silenced the Sadducees made the Pharisees more cautious. The Sadducees had tried to catch Jesus by using Scripture, indicating that resurrection from the dead would be nonsense. The Pharisees' question could be seen as a preparation for a further attack. They protect themselves by asking an open question without revealing what they think of the answer. If Jesus would give an answer that would not measure up to the most rigorous scriptural standards, they would be able to destroy and break up the basics of His teaching.

Jesus answers their question with a reply that one from their own group had given earlier: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself."³ This summary of the law is not original. It may have formulated the official position of the Pharisees and Sadducees. If that is the case, the Lord simply confirms this confession. Jesus never objected to the confession of faith of the Pharisees. He would later say to the crowd: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."⁴

It was their double standard, one for others and one for themselves, that brought them under God's judgment. It was more a matter that they identified with Jesus' doctrine in their upholding the standard of the

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1. Rom. 4:17
 2. Mark 1:27
 3. Luke 10:27
 4. Matt. 23:2,3

law, rather than that Jesus identified with them. In His answer, Jesus holds up the mirror to them. In Mark's version of the incident, we note that Jesus convinced the person who asked the question on quite a different level than He did in the two preceding test questions. Mark states: "Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'"¹ In regard to the questions about paying taxes and the resurrection, Jesus had checkmated the questioners in a phenomenal way, using reason and logic. The answer Jesus gives here begins a work of conviction in the heart of him who asked that resembles the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our present dispensation.

For Jesus, these words were not mere words; He embodied the commandments. He was the only human being on earth who ever totally obeyed this command. As Jesus answered the questioner, a strong current of love must have flown toward the man from which he could not possibly distance himself.

There is some contradiction in the fact that love for God comes to us in the form of a command. Love presupposes freedom of choice and absence of compulsion. Such was the original condition in which man was created and lived in paradise. Adam and Eve lived between the two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Their choice would have consequences that reached into eternity. To take and eat the fruit from the tree of life would have been the equivalent of a declaration of love to the Creator. There was no commandment that ordered them to do this. They had freedom of choice. The prohibition to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge was a necessary warning against the negative consequences of that choice. It did not restrict their freedom to choose life. The principle has not changed, but man's position has. Adam exchanged love and freedom of choice for being lost. Even as a choice for life would mean a restriction of freedom, so being lost means a total absence of freedom to choose. That is why love for God is no longer an option but a command that must be obeyed for us to stay alive.

What the Lord says with this quotation is that all of the law and the messages of the prophets can be summed up in the word "love." The law, being an expression of the character of God, expresses God's love. In all commands and prohibitions, God intends to show His love for us for the purpose of evoking a response of love in us. This not an exigency or a fickle, erratic and merciless God who demands to be loved, but a natural expectation of a loving Father toward His children. Since we have been created in His image, we have the capacity to respond to God's love. To love God, our neighbor and ultimately ourselves is not an impossible demand. There is in Jesus' words the reality of God's love. The Apostle John states: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."²

The immediate importance of Jesus' statement is in our response to it. If we obey God's commandments we obey His love. Obedience without love is no real obedience; it has no value. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."³ Our obedience must not only be based upon love, but love and obedience are one in the same way as faith and righteousness are one. "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

In emphasizing that love equals obedience, Jesus proclaims His death. "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."⁴

In His approach to the problem, Jesus does not take sin in the world into account. He speaks from the viewpoint of victory over sin. The paradigm of our relationship with God has not changed because of sin. Sin has influenced the practical application, but not the principle. The fact that love has become a command indicates that man has lost his place in the original relationship. That is why, in Mark's version, the man who

1. Mark 12:28
2. I John 4:8
3. Rom. 13:8-10
4. I John 3:16

asked the question replies: "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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."¹ It was the need for atonement in his relationship with God that was prevalent in the man's mind. Jesus reaches out in faith to the accomplishment of His work on the cross, which would put an end to the rituals of burnt offerings and sacrifices. So this is also an announcement of His death. It is obvious that the man who asked the question cannot have understood this. But his spiritual intuition may have shown him that Jesus spoke of a greater reality than the one in which he lived. That is why, according to Mark's Gospel, Jesus could say to him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."²

We can imagine the deadly and tense silence that followed this conversation. That which began as a trick question, a question made up by some to make the other fall, ended into a discussion through which two human spirits met each other. Jesus demolished the snare on a level where honor and love dominate. This does not only mean that He was not caught in the snare Himself, but also that He broke the one in which the others were caught. This Pharisee experienced what the psalmist expressed as: "We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped."³ No wonder that there were no more questions. No one dared to open his mouth anymore.

Jesus ended His answer about the law with the words "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." This means two things: Firstly, that everything God said through Moses and the prophets was motivated by His love. This places some prophecies of judgment and warning in a light that we would not expect. Yet, if we consider that Jesus Christ is the meaning and the message of the Old Testament, it makes sense. Secondly, it shows that our love of God is the key to our obedience. "This is love for God: to obey his commands."⁴ The Holy Spirit testifies to this in the heart of everyone who has fellowship with the Father. The message of the whole Bible can be expressed in only one word: "Love." That is mutual love.

34. The Christ, David's Son and Lord 22:41-46

41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,

42 "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied.

43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

44 "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' "

45 If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

46 No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

In this section that closes the argumentations it is Jesus who asks the question, to which the audience fails to give an answer. Mark reminds us of the fact that Jesus was still teaching in the temple courts.⁵

The question presupposes that a son cannot rise above his father, so that the son would receive greater honor than his father. We find this principle in Jacob's question to Joseph in response to Joseph's dream in which the sun, the moon and the stars bowed down to Joseph's star. We read: "When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, 'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?'"⁶ In the Jewish

1. Mark 12:32,33
2. Mark 12:34
3. Ps. 124:7
4. I John 5:3
5. Mark 12:35

culture of that time such a thing was inconceivable. That this did happen in Joseph's case was due to God's supernatural intervention by which a whole nation was saved from extinction.

Jesus' audience must have understood immediately that Jesus pointed to Himself in this question. He never kept His claim of being the Messiah hidden. When the Pharisees answered Jesus' question with the statement that the Messiah would be the son of David, they did not merely speak of his physical descent, but they also implied that David would remain above the Messiah, as a father is above his son. In a way they put the expectation above the fulfillment. The idea that Abraham would rejoice in the day of Christ,¹ and that Jesus would be more than Solomon or the temple,² would be unimaginable for them. They never imagined that such a truth could be hidden in the Scriptures. The powerful thesis of The Epistle to the Hebrews is that the Son, as a man, is greater than the angels, than Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Abraham.

Jesus simply says to these teachers of the law: "David calls Me 'Lord!'" They were unable to refute this. They were dumbfounded. They were right in believing that on a level of human dignity a father has priority over a son. That would have remained true if sin had not turned all relationships upside-down. When a man honors his father and mother, he actually honors the image of God. In Jesus, the original has priority over the image, as that which comes from heaven has priority over that which comes from the earth.

It is important to observe that Jesus quotes the whole first verse of Psalm 110 – "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" In doing this, He not only proves that He is David's Lord, but also what the implication is. He is Lord because God invited Him to sit at His right hand. As the Son of God this had been His place in eternity. In eternity He did not need to be invited. As the Father gives Him this place, as Pharaoh did to Joseph, He gave this invitation to Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

It is not only a matter of priority of heaven over earth, but a difference on earth between that which is enslaved by sin and that which has overcome sin. The "enemies" are those who have rebelled against God's authority. On top of the list is Satan and his demons and secondly there is fallen mankind. Jesus had told the Jews earlier that, with all their piety, they had taken the side of the devil. He said: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."³ This quotation from Psalm 110 is one of the most severe warnings Jesus ever gave to the people of His time.

They said to accept the Word of God. It is by this Word that they are being defeated. Amos' prophecy is being fulfilled here: "The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers."⁴ No one dared to oppose or contradict the roaring of the Lion anymore. This is what the Father is doing; He is the One who puts the enemies under Jesus' feet. God does not only give to His Son the place of highest honor which a human being can occupy in the whole universe, but He also wins the victory for Him, as part of what the author of Hebrews calls "the eternal covenant."⁵

We do not read here how this subjection of the enemies will take place. We always think of victory over enemies in terms of a demonstration of superior power and violence. In reality it turns out to be a demonstration of truth. In His death on the cross, Jesus gained the victory by exposing the true condition of the enemy and his works. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."⁶ Because sin had done

6. Gen. 37:10

1. John 8:56

2. Matt. 12:6,42

3. John 8:44

4. Amos 1:2

5. Heb. 13:20

its enormously destructive work inwardly, the victory must also begin on the inside. Jesus is Lord because He humbled Himself to the deepest depth. He receives the highest place because He went through the deepest point. David never went this way, but the Holy Spirit made him predict the events without explaining the meaning to him.

35. Jesus' discourse to the masters of the law and the Pharisees 23:1-39

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;

6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;

7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.

9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.

10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ.

11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.'

17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.'

19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

21 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.

22 And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.

28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

6. Col. 2:15

29 *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.*

30 *And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'*

31 *So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.*

32 *Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!*

33 *"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"*

34 *Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.*

35 *And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.*

36 *I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.*

37 *"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.*

38 *Look, your house is left to you desolate.*

39 *For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

What Matthew presents here as one discourse may very well be a compilation of several addresses to the Pharisees and teachers of the law given at different times. We saw earlier that this Gospel writer had a tendency to bring together material under the same heading, as a tax collector would do with his bookkeeping. So we find, for instance, some of the things Jesus says here in Luke's Gospel in a different setting.¹

The discourse can be divided into three sections:

1. Jesus warns the disciples and the crowd against the attitude of the teachers of the law and Pharisees vv.1-12.
 2. A seven- (or eight) fold "woe" to the Pharisees vv. 13-36.
 3. A warning to the city of Jerusalem vv. 37-39.
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1. Jesus warns the disciples and the crowd against the attitude of the teachers of the law and Pharisees vv.1-12.

In His opening words, the Lord says that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees are sitting in Moses' seat. The insinuation is that they did this without being called to do so. They had voted themselves into that position. Interestingly, Jesus mentions the Pharisees apart from the teachers of the law. There must have been Pharisees among the teachers of the law, also, together with other groups, but they are not mentioned separately. The emphasis is on those who pretend to adhere faithfully to the truth as God revealed it to Moses. They have the pretense of obeying the law.

Jesus does not deny them their position. When our Lord judges here, He does not judge as the Son of God, as He will do at the day of judgment at the end of time. Jesus' words here are a warning given by one human being to another. The motivation is love, the intent grace and forgiveness.

In this first warning, which is addressed to the disciples and the public at large, the subject is the incongruity between the words and acts of these leaders. Jesus appeals to the spiritual insight of the people. The Word of God does not permit us to follow the example of others without asking any questions. God will also hold us accountable as to our following of others. We are personally responsible for the way we travel, even if others have traveled that road before us. Obviously, the guilt of those who give the bad example is

1. Cf. Matt. 23:25,26 with Luke 11:39-41.

greater than of those who follow. God expects us to discern the difference between what Moses taught and what the Pharisees did.

The other side of the coin in this warning is to avoid the tendency to reject Moses on the basis of what we see the people do who confess to uphold Moses. It is easy to use the misconduct of another as an excuse for our own rebellion. It is bad to be deceived by the bad example of someone else; it is worse to deceive ourselves! We often fail to realize that, throughout the ages, this had been the struggle of younger generations.

One of the problems in this chapter is that the Lord seems to deviate from the rule He made Himself by pronouncing a public judgment about others. At least that seems to be the case. But if we take the words literally: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you,”¹ we see that Jesus does not deviate from the rule, but that He puts Himself under its judgment. By taking up the measuring stick, Jesus prepares for the judgment that will come over Him as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. This does not mean that Jesus could be blamed for things He did or did not do. He said elsewhere: “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?”² In His sharp attack upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus actually opens the door to the greatest grace we can imagine. Because He would take all our sins upon Himself and suffer for them in His own body, He had the legal right to pronounce this verdict over His fellowmen.

The fact that some do not live up to the rule does not make absolute values valueless, but it damages the testimony. Life and doctrine ought to form one organic unity. But many people use the disobedience of others as an excuse to reject the doctrine. God’s absolutes are not dependent upon our obedience. When we reject the doctrine because some people do not practice what they preach, we throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Here Jesus states emphatically that the attitude of the Pharisees does not relieve the Israelites of their obligation to follow the law of Moses. Jesus appeals to the people’s spiritual discernment. If a person concludes that someone else does not practice what he preaches, he shows that he understands the norm and knows the difference between good and bad.

In these introductory remarks, Jesus reproaches the Pharisees for two things: They impose heavy burdens upon their fellowmen without touching them themselves, and they do everything for the purpose of being seen by men, not to obtain God’s approval.

The first accusation seems to contradict Jesus’ statement that the people ought to obey what the Pharisees and doctors of the law tell them to do. The question is what makes these loads so heavy and what burdens is Jesus talking about. Does Jesus refer to the original precepts God gave to Moses or to the subsequent maze of prescription given in the Talmud? Jesus seems to speak about the detailed elaborations of the basic principles that were given by Moses. This means that He refers to the ingenious little additions to the laws the interpreters of the law had added in explaining the Torah. What makes obedience to the law so heavy is the lack of fellowship with God. It was this lack of fellowship that formed the breeding ground for those little sub-laws and additions. The Apostle John writes: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”³

What made the law into “heavy loads” the teachers of the law and the Pharisees imposed upon the people was not that they restricted human liberty and forced the people to do what they did not want to do, but that they separated obedience to the law from the love of God. Every commandment becomes a burden when love is left out. Objectively, the command given in Paradise not to eat of the tree of knowledge was not an impossible burden. It was not the heaviness of the command, but the lack of love for God that made

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1. Matt. 7:1,2
 2. John 8:46
 3. I John 5:3,4

Adam and Eve fall. It was not the efforts to analyze the law of Moses and divide it into endless little prescriptions that constituted the heavy loads. The futility of the effort is due to the lack of love, but it is not the reason for the heaviness of the burden. We are reminded of Jesus' earlier words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."¹

The verdict pronounced over the teachers of the law and the Pharisees was not because they wanted to be perfect, but because they were sly and tried to avoid obeying the law on points of technicality.

The second reproach, that they do everything to be noticed by men, is closely related to the first. It is because of a lack of sense of reality that people try to get the approval of men rather than of God. That point is referred to several times in Scripture. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven," and "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full," and "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."² In John's Gospel, we read: "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?"³ The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."⁴ And the author of Hebrews advises: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"⁵ It is due to the power of the lie in our lives that we lose the sense of God's presence. This forces us to use our energy to seek the approval of the people around us.

This need of the Pharisees to be seen by men was not the reason for their failure, it was the symptom. We tend to accuse them of being proud. But actually, their public performances, and their need for human approval were like the fig leaf Adam and Eve used to cover their nakedness.

"Phylacteries" is the literal translation of the Greek word *fulakterion*. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* describes the phylactery: "The phylactery was a leather box, cube-shaped, closed with an attached flap and bound to the person by a leather band. There were two kinds: (1) one to be bound to the inner side of the left arm, and near the elbow, so that with the bending of the arm it would rest over the heart, the knot fastening it to the arm being in the form of the Hebrew letter yodh (y), and the end of the string, or band, finally wound around the middle finger of the hand, 'a sign upon thy hand' (Deut 6:8). This box had one compartment containing one or all of the four passages given above. The writer in his youth found one of these in a comparatively remote locality, evidently lost by a Jewish peddler, which contained only the 2nd text (Ex 13:11-16) in unpointed Hebrew. (2) Another was to be bound in the center of the forehead, 'between thine eyes' (Deut 6:8), the knot of the band being in the form of the Hebrew letter daleth (d), with the Hebrew letter shin (sh) upon each end of the box, which was divided into four compartments with one of the four passages in each. These two Hebrew letters, with the yodh (y) of the arm-phylactery (see (1) above), formed the divine name shadday, 'Almighty.' Quite elaborate ceremonial accompanied the 'laying' on of the phylacteries, that of the arm being bound on first, and that of the head next, quotations from Scripture or

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1. Matt. 11:28-30
 2. Matt. 6:1,5,16
 3. John 5:44
 4. Gal. 1:10
 5. Heb. 13:5,6

Talmud being repeated at each stage of the binding. They were to be worn by every male over 13 years old at the time of morning prayer, except on Sabbaths and festal days, such days being in themselves sufficient reminders of ‘the commandment, the statutes, and the ordinances’ of Yahweh (Deut 6:1).”

The wearing of these phylacteries was not only a reminder of the commandments, but also a confession of the weakness of human nature, which has a tendency to evil. By making their phylacteries larger than those of others, they, unwittingly, testified to the fact that their tendency to sin was greater.

The tassels, which the Pharisees made a size longer than those of others, contained a purple thread, which pointed to the suffering of the Messiah, whom they had been criticizing. The fact that the phylacteries and the tassels were pointers to Christ who would shed His blood for them, gave Jesus the right to judge. Christ is our phylactery and our tassel!

The enlargements of the phylacteries and tassel, which were meant to keep mankind from boasting, became the expression of man’s inflated ego. In the same way, the Pharisees and teachers of the law misused their spiritual and social position for their own benefit. Ezekiel’s prophecy to the shepherds of Israel is a fitting condemnation of these people: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.”¹

The principle of good leadership is the willingness to give one’s life. Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”² If a leader is willing to sacrifice himself, the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues, being greeted in the marketplaces and the title will follow automatically. He, who seeks the honors without being willing to pay the price, is a thief and a murderer.

I do not believe that Jesus’ warning against being called, “rabbi,” “father,” or “teacher” means that the use of titles in general is wrong. But there is a danger in seeking to be called by any of the above. Given the fact that few people on earth are willing to lead by putting up their life as “surety,” the warning is very appropriate. No one sealed leadership with the sacrifice of life so perfectly as Jesus did. Every statement He made and every act He performed were always backed up by the ultimate sacrifice He would bring. In that sense we “have one Teacher, the Christ.” All other leadership or teaching can only be a shadow of Christ’s.

The secret of leadership is in service. Jesus taught this to His disciples at various occasions. Some examples are found in the following verses: “Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”³ “Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’”⁴ And “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God

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1. Ezek. 34:2-4
 2. John 10:11
 3. Matt 20:25-28
 4. Luke 22:24-27

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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.' For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'¹

In each of the above examples, Jesus draws a line from the moment at which He spoke of His death to His the instant of His death. The humbling He speaks about is what the Apostle Paul states as: "being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!"² Jesus example shows us that it is our duty to humble ourselves. Our elevation, that is our leadership, is God's business. We use much of our energy on the wrong side of the matter!

2. A seven- (or eight) fold "woe" to the Pharisees vv. 13-36.

Whether Jesus pronounced a seven-fold or an eight-fold "woe," depends on the inclusion or exclusion of v.14. *The New International Version* has a footnote, which reads: "Some manuscripts to. [14] Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely." The phrase seems to interrupt the logical flow of thought of vv.13 and 15. Isaiah pronounces a six-fold "woe" upon the people of Israel,³ which Jesus seems to follow. Isaiah complements this with one "woe" upon himself,⁴ which Jesus, as the perfect Son of God, could not do.

The first and the third "woe" go together. Both contain a general accusation, stating that the attitudes and the practices of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees form a stumbling block for others to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their acts speak louder than their words. One preaches better with his life than with his lips. When God chose Israel, He intended her to draw closer to Him in an intimate relationship, so that her change and renewal of life would be a testimony to others, by which they would be drawn to God. The deep and warm colors of the entrance to the tabernacle were a symbolic expression of this intent.⁵ "You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces" speaks of the effect the testimony of the Pharisees had upon the people, which did not forbid people to enter but caused them to have a negative attitude toward their preaching.

In v.15 the Lord mocks the missionary zeal of the Pharisees. They "travel over land and sea to win a single convert." This does not mean that Jesus did not value the soul of one individual. There is also a missionary zeal that is driven by healthy motives, that travels over land and sea to win a single convert. What Jesus intimates here is that their zeal is a compensation for the lack of content of their message. It stands in sharp contrast to the relaxed way in which Jesus preached His own message, which caused thousands to follow Him.

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1. John 13:1-17
 2. Phil. 2:8
 3. Isa. 5:8-24
 4. Isa. 6:5
 5. See Ex. 27:16-18.

We must be careful with our zeal. “The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.”¹ Jesus was never lazy. But the blessing on His work was not the result of His zeal; it was the fruit of His surrender to the Father. There are situations in which our obedience will make us persevere even if we see no fruit. But if we fail to bear fruit because of disobedience, we are in trouble. It is important to put ourselves constantly to the test at this point.

The convert of the Pharisees is made into “a son of hell.” It is not clear whether this means that the person was on his way to hell and ends up there, or whether there is direct demonic influence entering his life. Jesus may have seen a connection between the attitude of the Pharisees and the occult. That would indeed explain the resistance to the Gospel and the unusual hardness of heart of these people. Elsewhere, Jesus said: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”² We do not read that the Pharisees were openly involved in occult practices. But Satan is most effective in areas in which he remains well disguised. The fact that, in Jesus’ day Palestine abounded with demon-possessed people may be related to the dead traditionalism of the Pharisees that governed the spiritual life of the nation.

The words “you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” are supported by what Jesus said earlier about the behavior of evil spirits: “When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”³ The answer is simply found in adding two and two together.

As mentioned above, *The New International Version* puts v.14 in a footnote, stating: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely.” This is the only “woe” that refers to the Pharisees’ social behavior. In Luke’s Gospel, the writer observes that the Pharisees “loved money.”⁴ That is here, also, at the center of Jesus’ reproach. Devouring widows’ houses means that the Pharisees exploited defenseless women. It could also mean that some Pharisees administered widows’ money to their own advantage, or that these women were financially dependent upon them. They practiced social injustice of the worst kind. In one way or another they managed to give their system a legal and spiritual tinge by pronouncing long prayers in the process.

Jesus’ words reveal the disgust and anger our Lord sensed. He does not pronounce a verdict upon them; the time to do this had not yet come. But He does refer to the day of judgment, at which they will receive a heavier punishment than other sinners, because they sinned knowingly under the guise of practicing holiness. Woe to those who try to manipulate God’s character to their own advantage.

Vv. 16-22 contain a series of examples of the shrewd way the Pharisees tried to sidestep the law of God, in relation to the keeping of a vow made to God by oath. In our day, the oath does not have the same value as it did to the Old Testament Israelite. To them the oath was binding to the point that it could not be broken even if it were a matter of life and death. We see examples of this in the Old Testament that seem strange to us, even when it pertains to people, about whom it could not be said that they lived a life that was morally irreproachable. A classic illustration is Jephthah’s oath that cost his daughter’s life.⁵ The oath Saul made almost cost his son Jonathan his life. And Saul was ready to kill his son in order to confirm his silly

1. Prov. 10:22
2. John 8:44
3. Matt. 12:43-45
4. Luke 16:14
5. Judg. 11:30-40

vow.¹ We understand from Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple that it would take divine, supernatural intervention to save someone from the catastrophic consequences of his oath.² Even a sinful rascal like King Herod believed that it would be a lesser sin to murder John the Baptist than to cancel his oath.³ This is the reason Jesus reacted so sharply against this evasion of the law of God. He says that the making of vows by oath that are not intended to be kept have their origin in hell. We all could say "amen" to this.

Put against this background, the efforts of the Pharisees to evade the consequences of breaking a vow appear much worse than we would have thought initially. Behind these efforts to slip through the mazes of the law on the basis of a technicality, lies the tendency of "analytical decomposition." If we dissect a human body and analyze the various body parts to determine their function, it is silly to assume that, after every member has been disposed of, what is left is the human spirit. Analysis kills. There is only life in an organism. The doctors of the law tried to determine, to the fraction of an inch, what determined the value of the temple. In order to do this they used only human values. They assumed that the temple had value for God because humans had covered it with gold, or that the worth of the altar was determined by the kind of animal that was sacrificed on it. In doing this, they actually practiced idolatry. They acted as if God depended on the works of their hands. In doing so they revealed, unwittingly, the secrets of their godless philosophy.

Jesus looked at the temple and all that is in it as one whole unit. In their exaggerated zeal for the honor of the Name of the Lord, which caused them never to pronounce that Name, they had not only banned the Name but also the Person. As far as they were concerned the temple was an empty shell. Although the Ark of the Covenant was no longer in the inner sanctuary, and though the cloud that represented the Shekinah was no longer there, Jesus considered the temple to be the place of God's residence on earth. Not only did Jesus treat the temple as one organism, He also saw the representation of God's glory on earth as one with the heavenly reality it represented. As long as God sits on the throne in heaven, He inhabits everything that represents this glorious reality.

We wonder who the Pharisees tried to fool. According to human reasoning, how would God react to the kind of vow and oath that is the topic of the discussion here? In view of the fact that all of this concerns "holy matters," the question is ridiculous. This kind of doubt affects the foundation of all foundations on which truth is founded. It pertains to the relationship between God and mankind. Let us put it this way. I make a vow in the Name of God and God accepts that. Then I stand before the throne of God and I say: "I didn't mean what I said. Consider it to be a joke!" "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁴

Jesus explained earlier that God expects us to keep our word. He said in *The Sermon on the Mount*: "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."⁵

Beginning with v.23 Jesus attacks the generosity of the Doctors of the Law and the Pharisees in connection with the law as a whole. They demonstrate a preference for tiny details to the detriment of the whole picture. They look at the tree but don't see the forest. Giving a tenth of mint, dill and cummin suggests that they may literally have counted the little seeds. One does not plant whole fields of these kinds of spices. These are individual plants that are grown one or two per family. Jesus does not say that they are

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1. I Sam. 14:24,25
 2. I Kings 8:21,22
 3. Matt. 14:9
 4. Heb. 10:31
 5. Matt. 5:33-37

wrong in tithing their spices, but that this becomes ridiculous if it is done at the price of justice, mercy and faithfulness. God expects us to keep the important lines in view when we serve Him and not to lose ourselves in endless details that make us neglect the ultimate goal. As “the more important matters of the law” Jesus mentions “justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

Jesus’ verdict here does not pertain primarily to punishment for sins committed, but to neglect of responsibility for actions. There was with those people no thought of the fact that God would hold them accountable. Their temple was empty and, consequently, they did what they wanted.

Next to “justice,” Jesus mentions “mercy” as a major point in the service of God. The Greek word used is *eleos*, which means “compassion,” the ability to be moved by the suffering of others. The first time the word is used in the New Testament is in: “Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: “I desire *mercy*, not sacrifice.’” For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”¹ Jesus quoted Hosea’s words: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”² It is not only our relationship with God that needs healing; we also must be reconciled with our fellowmen. Our experience of forgiveness and cleansing of sin must result in a flowing through us of God’s love to others. If this is not so, it means that God’s love has not yet transformed our heart. We make a mockery of God if we tithe into ridiculous detail and yet let our fellowmen rot in their lost condition.

“Faithfulness” is the stabilizing factor that lifts our service for God above the level of the emotional and impulsive and gives it determination in doing our duty. The picture Jesus uses as illustration is very striking: “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” It shows the lack of seeing things in their right perspective and proportion. It indicates absence of logic and brings out the inconsistency of the attitude of the doctors of the law and the Pharisees.

“You clean the outside of the cup and dish” is a reference to the complicated ritual of dipping and rinsing of dishes before daily use. Mark’s Gospel describes it: “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.”³ This was not what the law prescribed; it was a human formula, supposedly based on the Law of Moses, which, as with the giving of tithes, the Pharisees had worked out in meticulous detail. Jesus sees in their eating and drinking more than the use of food for the body; He describes the whole of their mentality as “greed and self-indulgence.”

Jesus had earlier laid the connection between the errors of the Pharisees and ceremonial pollution by eating certain kinds of food, as well as the rites of purification they observed.⁴ At that time He stated that pollution evolves from the sinful nature of man, not from what comes outside.

The Pharisees polluted their dishes and cups themselves by using them. As with the way they determined which part of the temple was important and which was not, so they used in this matter their own standards of purity. They had no idea of their own inner impurity, which made them pollute everything they touched. Their hygiene had nothing to do with microbes but only with ritual cleanness. Before Jesus “declared all foods ‘clean,’”⁵ on the basis of His own sacrifice, the Jews were under obligation to abstain from certain kinds of food. But since the person who is in Christ has become clean inwardly, the distinction between that which is ritually clean or unclean has ceased to exist. The Apostle Paul affirms this in writing to Titus and Timothy: “To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe,

1. Matt. 9:12

2. Hos. 6:6

3. Mark 7:3,4

4. See Matt. 15:10-20.

5. Mark 7:19

nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.”¹ And: “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”² The same Word that transferred us from darkness to light also draws all that God has created into the realm of God’s holiness. The person who is sanctified by God takes an active part in this by consecrating what he eats and drinks to God. It is the Word of God and the words of our prayers that work together to bring back to God what the devil had stolen.

“Greed and self-indulgence” are heavy words. The Greek words used are *harpage*, “extortion,” and *akrasia*, “excess.” A person who has not surrendered to God, who remains in his rebellion, commits robbery every time he eats and drinks. Such a person belongs to Satan, while “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”³ He takes what is not his. In the same way does the child of God take what is rightfully his, because God has given it to him. As the Apostle Paul puts it: “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”⁴

“Self-indulgence” pertains to quantity. That is the point at which the distinction between believers and unbelievers dims. God expects that those to whom He gives good things will not bite off more than they can chew. The person who takes more than he needs pollutes himself and becomes like one who takes what is not his. The cleaning of the inside of the cup, therefore, can be seen as an act of surrender and conversion. Self-indulgence means inability to see one’s proper limitations. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It means that we learn to know ourselves and our needs and that we do not go beyond the limits of our means. It is part of our being created in the image of God that allows us to discover our potentials and limitations and to act in accordance with what we understand the will of God for us to be.

Vv.27 and 28 are probably the best known of this whole chapter. The picture is striking: tombs whitewashed and looking beautiful on the outside, but inside full of dead bones and everything unclean. The outside is brilliant white, but on the inside is stinking putrefaction. It is typical for man to only see what meets the eye. That was what God reproached Samuel. We read that God said to Samuel about David’s older brother: “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”⁵

Interestingly, Jesus says that the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and of the Pharisees is on the inside. This means that they pulled the wool over their own eyes. Deep inside they believed themselves to be pious and faithful persons. Hypocrisy constitutes, in fact, a refusal to know oneself. That was the tragedy of Jacob’s life up to the moment that God set him free at Peniel. Our inner attitude to ourselves determines our attitude toward others. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Polonius says to his son Laertes: “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” Hypocrisy is a matter of the heart.

The Greek word, rendered “wickedness” in v.28 is *akatharsia*, “impurity.” We find it in the verse: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and *debauchery*.”⁶ The Lord accuses them of the sin which they seemed desperate to avoid. *The New Living Translation* renders the verse: “Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.” The key to keeping the law is obedience and the basis of obedience is love. Any other effort made to obey the law is doomed to shipwreck.

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1. Titus 1:15
 2. I Tim. 4:4,5
 3. Ps. 24:1
 4. I Cor. 3:21-23
 5. I Sam. 16:7
 6. Gal. 5:19

Jesus' accusation must have pierced their souls. The accusation in this chapter may have been the main reason for them to get rid of Him. Jesus' words ignited their lust for murder. The reason Jesus accuses them of breaking the law is that they never gave up their rebellion against God by an act of personal surrender. The person who breaks the law will end up holding the law in contempt, holding in contempt the will of God and hating His Person. That was the result of their efforts to break down the law of God into those ridiculous worthless details. They despised God in order to assert themselves.

In vv.29-36 Jesus ends this speech with an accusation of murder of the prophets of which the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were guilty by association. At first glance it seems that Jesus' accusation lacks foundation. The fact that they are the sons of murderers does not make them automatically partners in crime. But God sees the entire human race as one. The Apostle Paul elaborates this principle in his Epistle to the Romans.¹ There exists collective guilt in which we all share, unless we distance ourselves from it by an act of personal confession. Daniel and Ezra did this in their prayers in which they identified themselves with the collective guilt of their people.² The Pharisees did not do this. Their words "we would not have taken part ..." do not constitute the confession of a broken heart, but the proud boast of people who believe themselves to be better than their ancestors. What Jesus says is not a trumped-up charge; He knew the murderous plans of these people. History proved Him right in this.

There must have remained some gravesites of some of the Old Testament prophets in Jesus' day, but the Bible does not say anything about this. Consequently we do not know who the dead prophets were and extra-biblical sources are silent about the subject. The statement: "Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!" throws more light on the principle of accumulative collective guilt. God used the same kind of language with Abraham, when He said: "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."³ When we sin we are filling a historical measure of collective guilt. The irony in this is that while we are filling up the measure we criticize the sins of the previous generation. Sinful creatures we are, we seldom recognize what binds us to our ancestors and their sins.

The measure is actually more a measure of God's grace than of punishment for sin. It shows God's patience with human sin. He waits with His punishment in the hope that we will turn to Him and confess. There is, therefore, in Jesus' words more compassion than condemnation. Jesus' statement constitutes a warning. It is the same compassion that made God say 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."⁴ Jesus had repeated Isaiah's prophecy to the disciples in connection with the parables He told.⁵ Another explanation than that of deep pain in Jesus' words is unacceptable here.

There is also a clear demonstration of anger, but not of revenge in the human sense of the word. Jesus' motivation for giving this warning here is compassion and a holding out of pardon. Jesus warns them because of their plans to murder Him. He puts their conspiracy against Him in a historic perspective, hoping that they will see the pattern of evil in it. They knew what happened to their fathers when they murdered the prophets of old. This should make clear to them what they could expect as punishment for their crime. But that was not all. Jesus warns them that they are the generation that would fill up the measure of iniquity. That would mean that they would face the full blast of God's wrath. Jesus says: "Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son

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1. Rom. 5:12ff.
 2. Dan. 9:3-19; Ezr. 9:3-15
 3. Gen. 15:16
 4. Isa. 6:9,10
 5. See Matt. 13:13-15.

of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” In doing so Jesus includes Himself in the list of those who had been and would be as martyrs, crucified, scourged, and persecuted.

As far as we are concerned, Jesus’ death was unique. But Jesus saw Himself in a long line of martyrs who paid for their righteousness with their life. This is an ultimate proof of our Lord’s humility. He counted Himself as One who was martyred for His faith. The Lord closes *The Book of Martyrs* with Zechariah, whom King Joash ordered to be killed in the courtyard of the Lord’s temple.¹ From a historical viewpoint that is not the last chapter of the book. The incident represents a climax, because the crime was committed in the courtyard of the temple, indicating how deeply Israel had fallen away from God to the point where they did not hesitate to kill God’s servant in His very presence.

There were, undoubtedly, other prophets who fell victim, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, although their end is not recorded in the Bible. Jesus calls Zechariah the son of Berekiah. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “It is likely that our Lord refers to the murder of Zechariah, mentioned 2 Chron 24:20, who said to the people, Why transgress ye the commandments of God, so that ye cannot prosper? Because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath forsaken you. And they conspired against him and stoned him-at the commandment of the king, in the court of the house of the Lord.” *Barnes’ Notes* adds: “It is not certainly known who this was. Some have thought that it was the Zecharias whose death is recorded in 2 Chron 24:20-21. He is there called the son of Jehoiada; but it is known that it was common among the Jews to have two names, as Matthew is called Levi; Lebbeus, Thaddeus; and Simon, Cephas. Others have thought that Jesus referred to Zecharias the prophet, who might have been massacred by the Jews, though no account of his death is recorded. It might have been known by tradition.”

As the Lord puts it here, He holds the teachers of the law and the Pharisees personally responsible for the murder of Abel and Zechariah! We read: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, *whom you murdered* between the temple and the altar.” God sees this generation as an accomplice in those murders. No doubt, there is a connection here between these historic events and the plot to assassinate Jesus. Their rejection of the Lord of glory also made them an accessory to the shedding of all righteous blood on earth from the beginning of world history.

The fact that Jesus calls them “snakes” and “brood of vipers” indicates that Jesus possessed proof of their condition that was not available to other human beings. There was a strong demonic influence that played a role in all of this. These people allowed themselves to be used by Satan, probably thinking that they were serving only themselves. As far as the Pharisees and teachers of the law was concerned it was not a matter of being demon possessed. Jesus could easily have handled that, as He did in other cases. These people gave their full and willing cooperation to the enemy of God. God’s principle of respecting human personality put restrictions on His omnipotence. No one can be set free without his or her consent. Jesus knew the devils’ tactics. He also knew where all this would lead them; hell was waiting for them. Although Jesus’ words are primarily directed at the demons within, they are also a warning to the humans to leave the sinking ship before it is too late.

The concluding verses of this chapter, vv.37-39, are a cry from the heart of God. This is at the same time poetry of the highest grade. That does not mean that Jesus takes a lyrical flight from reality. These words are a perfect expression of a harsh reality. They contain the essence of Jeremiah’s lamentations after the fall of Jerusalem. For Jeremiah it was a reflection upon what had already taken place. For Jesus it was looking ahead to what was about to happen. It is an expression of the deepest sorrow, of God’s eternal love and compassion. It was the most serious warning ever issued. Nowhere does Jesus spread out His arms so wide as here and a few days later on the cross.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” the city God had chosen to reveal His Name on earth. The place that had been holy ground would become the place where the greatest crime ever committed would be executed. The addition “you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you” indicates that the murder of prophets was

1. II Chron. 24:20-22

not limited to some lone incident. Jerusalem had been in the habit of rejecting God's servants. This was the title the city had acquired for herself.

We would have expected that Jesus would pronounce an immediate sentence upon the city. There was not hope that the Son would be treated differently from the prophets that had gone before. Jesus had already indicated this in His parable about the tenants of the vineyard.¹ In *Luke's Gospel* we find the added words: "Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"²

The picture of the hen gathering her chicks under her wings is completely opposite to what we would expect. God wants to express in the natural instinct of motherly love what He feels in terms of care, cherishing and protection. The psalmist sings: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart."³ In *Luke's Gospel* Jesus' emotions are described in greater detail. Luke reports: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes.'"⁴

If our Lord demonstrates such deep longings for those conceited murderers, how much more will He embrace those who flee to Him with broken hearts and lives! His eternal love, compassion and warmth radiate from these words.

The picture also speaks of Jerusalem's immaturity. The Lord calls them "chicks." But in their own eyes, the rejection of the Lord was an act of mature independence. Yet, what they did to the Lord of glory was the dumbest and most self-destructive thing they could do. What Jesus offers them is good and perfect; He wanted to heal their brokenness and give them again the human dignity God imparted to Adam and Eve. But now their house is left to them desolate. Jesus had cast out the devil and swept the house clean, but it remained unoccupied. The demon had returned with seven other spirits more wicked than itself and their final condition is worse than the first.⁵

Yet, Jesus' last words here are a promise, not a condemnation. The reference is not to what had already happened on Palm Sunday, but to His return in glory. There will be a day when Israel recognizes her Lord and receives Him. Zechariah prophesied: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives."⁶ And the Apostle John echoes this more universally: "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. So shall it be! Amen."⁷

The judgment of Jerusalem is not final and for all times. Our Lord will return to Jerusalem and Jerusalem will receive Him. Satan had made the "Hosanna" of Palm Sunday into a doggerel. He poked fun at "the day the Lord has made."⁸ When the real Day of the Lord dawns there will be no more ridicule.

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1. Matt. 21:33-39
 2. Luke 13:33
 3. Ps. 91:1,4
 4. Luke 19:41,42
 5. Matt. 12:43-45
 6. Zech. 12:10-14
 7. Rev. 1:7
 8. Ps. 118:24

Jesus' words show not only that a remnant of Israel will be saved, but also how this will happen. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this in Romans.¹ The deliverance of Jerusalem will become a fact when her inhabitants will shout: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you."²

Jesus' last words put this whole chapter in its right perspective. They elevate His bitter words above the level of a hateful accusation born from frustration. Jesus knew where He was at this point in time when He launched this criticism of His contemporaries. He drew a line from time and place to eternity.

1. Rom. 11:25-27
2. Ps. 118:26

Part Five: The Predictions of the King's Second Coming 24:1—25:46

1. Discourse about the last days 24:1-51

(i) Introduction 24:1,2

1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.

2 "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

After raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus remained a few days in Bethany and went from there back to Jerusalem. His return to Jerusalem turned into a magnificent demonstration of public support as He fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy: "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,"¹ and the Psalmist jubilant exclamation: "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."² Other recent events include the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree, as symbolic of the rejection of the second rejection of the Messiah by the leaders of the people. This rejection follows the first about which we read earlier in Matthew's Gospel.³ It is not clear, however, if the first rejection occurred in Judea, Jerusalem or elsewhere.

The Greek text of v.1 is more dramatic than our English translation conveys: "And Jesus went out from the temple and departed and His disciples came to Him." There is finality in these words that is not found in our text. They are the fulfillment of the closing words in the previous chapter: "Look, your house is left to you desolate."⁴ It reminds us of Ezekiel's vision in which he saw the glory of the Lord leave the temple and move to the east of the city to the Mount of Olives.⁵ This is what Jesus did here, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy. As the glory of the Lord leaves, the body is given to decomposition. From now on the temple is nothing but a building of stone, an empty cocoon.

Mark and Luke give Jesus' words as an answer to the excited remarks of the disciples about the beauty of the temple. Mark states: "As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!' 'Do you see all these great buildings?' replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.'"⁶ And Luke: "Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, 'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.'"⁷

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1. Zech. 9:9
 2. Ps. 118:24-26
 3. See Matt. 12.
 4. Matt. 23:38
 5. Ezek. 10:4,18,19; 11:22,23
 6. Mark 13:1,2
 7. Luke 21:5,6

The Greek in Matthew states more penetratingly: "Do you not see these things?" Jesus makes an effort to have the disciples understand the importance of the moment. The disciples are completely taken up by the imposing beauty of the buildings, not realizing that the temple was already dead.

The question began at the moment Jesus and the disciples left the temple, but the ensuing conversation took place as they arrived at the Mount of Olives. Actually, the disciples ask a two-fold question, which Jesus only answers partially. They draw Jesus' attention to the magnificence of the buildings, and they had understood enough of Jesus' parting words to realize that there would be a connection between the destruction of the temple and the Second Coming. As far as the time of that event is concerned Jesus replies: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."¹ This answer is a clear proof that when the Second Person of the Trinity came to earth and became man, He left behind His divine absolutes and lived on earth within the same limited framework of limitations and possibilities as all of mankind.

We can divide Matthew's record of Jesus' speech into eight separate sections, including the introduction.

- Vv. 3-14 give a general description of the events that will lead to the end times.
- Vv. 15-28 describe the "Great Tribulation."
- Vv. 29-31 describe the cosmic events that will accompany the Second Coming.
- Vv. 32-35 contain a warning to recognize the signs of the time.
- Vv. 36-42 compare the end times to the time of the flood of Noah.
- Vv. 43-44 illustrate the topic with two parables.
- Vv. 45-51 speak of the servant waiting for his master's return.

(ii) A general description of the events that will lead to the end times 24:3-14

3 As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you.

5 For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.

6 You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

8 All these are the beginning of birth pains.

9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.

10 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,

13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

14 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.

Jesus begins His discourse with a description of what He calls "the beginning of birth pains." These exists in wars and rumors of wars, the manifestation of false Christs, catastrophes of nature, famines and earthquakes. Most of those have occurred frequently in the last several centuries. The greatest danger for a Christian is that he will be seduced in abandoning his hope of the return of Christ in exchange for a false doctrine. The main stress in these verses is upon that danger. There is, ultimately, only one thing that

1. Matt. 24:36

endangers the life of a child of God, which is abandoning fellowship with the Father. Wars, famines and earthquakes cannot cause us any permanent damage. But if we forsake the spiritual basis of our life, we are swept away with the current.

The phrase “the beginning of birth pains” shows a positive approach to the catastrophic events. Describing His upcoming suffering and death, Jesus used the image of a woman giving birth. He said to His disciples: “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.”¹ Birth pains are only experiences accompanying a birth. The expectation of bringing a child into the world is what helps a mother through her pain. Jesus admonishes us not to lose sight of the birth while going through the pain. It is dangerous to only look at the suffering. We can only take up the cross if we anticipate the joy that is set before us.²

Most of the factors Jesus speaks about as indicative of this period in history are manmade with the exception of famines and earthquakes. We could say that the law of cause and effect is activated when the land vomits up its inhabitants, when they become unfaithful to their origin. There would be no birth pains if sin had not entered this world. When man fell into sin, God said to Eve: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.”³ We conclude from this that all births would have been painless if Adam and Eve had remained obedient to God’s Word. The coming of the Kingdom is in itself not the result of man’s sin, but the birth pains are. If there had been no sin in the world the Kingdom would have come painlessly, as in C. S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*.

Although Jesus initially spoke these words to His disciples, they are meant for us also. During the reign of the Roman emperors, these prophetic words were, at least partly, fulfilled in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. But Jesus explained that, even He did not know the time of fulfillment of His own prophecy. That is one of the reasons why He could only present a rough sketch of events. He did not know how much His disciples would personally experience. Because of this, we conclude that this prophecy is also meant “for those who will believe in [Him] through their message.”⁴

Yet, the gist of these verses is not primarily a prediction of events that would take place. As with Jesus’ announcement of His suffering and death, the main goal was the psychological and spiritual preparation of the disciples. The accompanying events will be opposite to the natural expectations of man in regard to the Second Coming. What unexpected things happen to us could easily make us lose our balance. That is what often causes the fall of young believers. After the first rush of joy over their newly found happiness, they hit a brick wall of unexpected opposition. God does not take us out of the world as soon as we are saved. But He promises to protect us against the Evil One. This protection is not one of being touched by a magical wand that makes us immune against all attacks. It begins as an organic process that follows the same kind of law that makes our body build up immunity to certain germs. In the same way our spirit can build up immunity against the attacks the devil will launch upon our life.

Other than with the announcements of Jesus’ upcoming suffering and death, which failed to prepare the disciples for the events, the warnings here seem to have had some lasting effect. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was, of course, an important factor in this. When the Apostles were flogged after Pentecost, they “left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”⁵ That is a clear example of what the Lord wanted to achieve in His followers.

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1. John 16:21
 2. Heb. 12:2
 3. Gen. 3:16
 4. John 17:20
 5. Acts 5:40,41

What Jesus appears to do here is take the immediate circumstances as a basis for what will happen in the future. The future events are the result of the present, but they will go well beyond what could be expected. We see Jesus following the same principle in His earlier discourse with the disciples when they are sent out to evangelize.¹ What Jesus says can be applied to the Gospel witness worldwide throughout the centuries. In this way, Jesus demonstrates that there are no isolated incidents, but that all events, including the destruction of the temple, are part of the great line of history that leads to the end of time. This is the principle of fulfillment of prophecy, which is like a pebble thrown into the water and which causes the ripples to continue to the shore. The initial fulfillments lead to the final fulfillment.

Jesus mentions four characteristics of the first episode. There are the events that happen as “the beginning of birth pains.” These will be followed by “great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now — and never to be equaled again.” Then follows a description of the peoples’ mentality during this period, characterized by an increase of wickedness, which will make the love of most grow cold. In vv.15-28 Jesus elaborates more about the subject of the time of distress, the great tribulation.

The theme of the great tribulation recurs frequently in Scripture. Here Jesus uses the same words that Mark and Luke use in connection with the evangelistic campaign by the apostles, mentioned above.² The emphasis is on the witness to be given. Christians will be hated and persecuted because of their testimony. The culmination of persecution will be that all the peoples will hear the Gospel worldwide. Here also we see the ripple effect played out on the surface of the pond of history. The Apostles would bear witness before the Sanhedrin.³ Persecution would reach its peak in the murder of Stephen.⁴ As a result of the ensuing persecution, the Gospel will reach Antioch,⁵ from which Paul, Barnabas and Silas took it into Europe. The Apostle Paul clearly understood the purpose of his imprisonment and availed himself of the opportunity to give his testimony before Agrippa, Felix, Festus, and the imperial court in Rome.⁶ Yet all these events are pre-fulfillments of the climactic discrimination which will occur during the period which will be called “The Great Tribulation.”

V.14 has been the life-theme of Dr. A. B. Simpson, the founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance. It became the impetus of a movement that endeavors to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The verse contains one of the clearest time indicators regarding the Second Coming of Christ. It defines the priorities that determine the moment of His coming. Evidently, in God’s eyes the preaching of the Gospel to all is more important than the moment at which the last enemy will be defeated.

It looks from a human point of view as if the Lord is flexible in determining a specific time. The Apostle Peter seems to confirm this in his statement: “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”⁷ It is difficult for us to understand how such flexibility can coexist with God’s eternal counsel. The seemingly irreconcilable element is probably in our inexact definition of time.

No one knows how close to the end we are, or whether at some point in history we were closer to it than we are now. However strange this may sound to us, Jesus says that the fulfillment of this crucial event in world history is closely linked to the preaching of the Gospel, which depends, at least partly, on our human initiative. That is the reason I believe in the possibility that at one point in history we were closer to

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1. See Matt. 10.
 2. Mark 13:9-14; Luke 21:12-19
 3. Acts 4 and 5
 4. Acts 6,7
 5. Acts 8:1-3
 6. Acts 24,25,26; Phil.1:12-14
 7. II Peter 3:8,9

the Second Coming than we are now. The explosion of evangelistic activities under Charles Studd, Hudson Taylor and A.B. Simpson has drawn the moment closer and the effects of their efforts are still lingering.

There are several factors that complicate the problem. The generation that heard the message did not automatically produce a second generation of believers. New life in Christ is not hereditary. Also, countries that used to be bulwarks of Christian faith have become secularized. Another complicating problem is that in some parts of the world the increase of world population has been greater and more rapid than the growth of the church. Some people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa, have a greater chance to hear the Gospel than some in communist China or North Korea. Those are enormous problems to which none of us has an answer.

It is true that Jesus does not say that all nations have to accept the Gospel, but it must be preached all over the world. He calls it “this gospel of the kingdom.” That expression elevates the message above all boundaries of Jewish national interests, which is a point some Bible scholars want to cling to.

The Kingdom of God is the answer to the problems of all nations. The result of the preaching of this Gospel will be very effective, as we see from the scene the Apostle John depicts for us in heaven, where the throne of God is surrounded by “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.”¹

Having said this, the Lord leaves the subject of events that will occur in the immediate future to project a vision of the far distant future. In the same way as events described in the Old Testament foreshadowed prophetically the reality of Jesus’ coming into this world, so the coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple would be a pointer to the final tribulation that would precede Jesus’ physical return to earth. The ultimate reality is the Parousia, the presence of the Lord. All other periods or events, preceding and intervening, are mere shadows of this reality.

We must note the Lord’s observation that increase of wickedness will result in a growing coldness of people’s love. We tend to separate obedience to the law from expressions of love. Jesus emphasizes that obedience and love are closely related. Where the one diminishes, the other will also disappear. And it is love that gives value to obedience.² The way Jesus presents this makes us understand that obedience also stimulates love, which means that love grows cold when disobedience prevails. Love will only be fed by obedience to God’s will. We do not have a source of love within ourselves. We can only experience and produce love if we have fellowship with God. We must not be discouraged if we do not find love within ourselves, but we also have no excuse for a lack of love. There is an abundance for all who want to obey.

(iii). The Great Tribulation 24:15-28

15 "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel — let the reader understand—

16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

17 Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house.

18 Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak.

19 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!

20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.

21 For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now — and never to be equaled again.

22 If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.

23 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it.

1. Rev. 7:9

2. John 14:15, 21,24; I John 5:2-4

24 *For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect — if that were possible.*

25 *See, I have told you ahead of time.*

26 *"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.*

27 *For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*

28 *Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.*

In view of the fact that Jesus stated in v.14 “and then the end will come,” we assume that this section goes back to the period of persecution mentioned in v.9. These verses also refer to the fulfillment of a prophecy that begins with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and ends with the manifestation of the Antichrist.

The text evokes a series of questions that are hard to answer. The reference to “the abomination that causes desolation” is a quotation from the Book of Daniel. We read there: “His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.”¹ Daniel’s prophecy was initially fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the altar in the temple of Jerusalem by sacrificing pig’s blood on it.

Jesus, evidently, includes in the phrase the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple by Titus. The advice to those who are in Judea to flee to the mountains must, undoubtedly, be seen in that context. It seems that these words are limited to a small geographic area, which makes them difficult to apply to the coming of the Antichrist with its worldwide applications. What our Lord seems to do here is draw lines of analogy. Luke gives us his non-Jewish version of Jesus’ words by stating: “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.”² That points more to the fulfillment of prophecy in AD 70, than to the ultimate manifestation of the Antichrist. In another context, where Jesus is asked about the coming of the kingdom of God, Luke uses the same expression that Matthew reports in Jesus’ talk to the disciples, adding: “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!”³

Comparing the two separate statements helps to throw a clearer light on Jesus’ discourse here. The story of Lot emphasizes man’s tendency to lose the vision of God’s call by getting hooked to material possessions and sinful human relationships. To flee or not to flee becomes a thermometer of watchfulness, as Jesus observes later on in this chapter.

There is a note of deep compassion in the words: “How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!” *The New International Version’s* “How dreadful” is the rendering of the Greek exclamation *ouai*, “woe.” The “woe” here is not the judgment that was pronounced earlier over the cities of Galilee, when Jesus cried: “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!”⁴ It is rather an expression of compassion and sadness that such a fate must befall those that are so vulnerable. As in the story of Jonah,⁵ the Lord is particularly concerned about the fate of little children. Here again we hit upon the great mystery of divine intervention or the lack of it, as in the story of the massacre of the infants in

1. Dan. 11:31
2. Luke 21:20
3. Luke 17:28-32
4. Matt. 11:21
5. Jonah 4:11

Bethlehem.¹ The only conclusion left us is that God, for reasons beyond our understanding, could not afford to save these infants. This is what man did to man and it breaks God's heart.

Yet, Jesus encourages His disciples here to pray that their flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath and that those days will be cut short. Evidently, the fact of persecution cannot be changed. But a change of circumstances is an option. Unless we think here about the flight on the Sabbath and the winter in the context of Christians fleeing the besieged Jerusalem, we get caught in conflicting interpretations. There will probably not be any Sabbath celebration during the reign of the Antichrist.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary has an interesting comment on these verses. We read: "Our Lord had ordered his followers to make their escape from Jerusalem when they should see it encompassed with armies; but how could this be done? - God took care to provide amply for this. In the twelfth year of Nero, Cestius Gallus, the president of Syria, came against Jerusalem with a powerful army. He might, says Josephus, *War* ... have assaulted and taken the city, and thereby put an end to the war; but without any just reason, and contrary to the expectation of all, he raised the siege and departed. Josephus remarks, that after Cestius Gallus had raised the siege, 'many of the principal Jewish people ... forsook the city, as men do a sinking ship.' Vespasian was deputed in the room of Cestius Gallus, who, having subdued all the country, prepared to besiege Jerusalem, and invested it on every side. But the news of Nero's death, and soon after that of Galba, and the disturbances that followed, and the civil wars between Otho and Vitellius, held Vespasian and his son Titus in suspense. Thus the city was not actually besieged in form till after Vespasian was confirmed in the empire, and Titus was appointed to command the forces in Judea. It was in those incidental delays that the Christians, and indeed several others, provided for their own safety, by flight. In Luke 19:43, our Lord says of Jerusalem, Thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side. Accordingly, Titus, having made several assaults without success, resolved to surround the city with a wall, which was, with incredible speed, completed in three days! The wall was thirty-nine furlongs in length, and was strengthened with thirteen forts at proper distances, so that all hope of safety was cut off; none could make his escape from the city, and no provisions could be brought into it."

About the flight on the Sabbath, Clarke observes: "[Neither on the Sabbath-day] That you may not raise the indignation of the Jews by traveling on that day, and so suffer that death out of the city which you had endeavored to escape from within. Besides, on the Sabbath-days the Jews not only kept within doors, but the gates of all the cities and towns in every place were kept shut and barred; so that if their flight should be on a Sabbath, they could not expect admission into any place of security in the land."

But Jesus does not only speak here about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple by Titus. Those events were a mere shadow of another reality. Titus may have erected his banner in the temple courts, the actual "abomination that causes desolation" is the revelation of the person who the Apostle Paul calls "the man of lawlessness." "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."² John, in Revelation, calls him "a beast coming out of the sea."³ However terrible the conditions may have been during and after the siege of Jerusalem, it was not a "great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now — and never to be equaled again." Not only did Hitler succeed in surpassing any distress that ever happened in the world before by applying his "final solution to the Jewish problem," in which six million Jews were exterminated, but John's prophecies about the great tribulation in Revelation⁴ were written after the fall of Jerusalem.

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1. Matt. 2:16-18
 2. See II Thess. 2:3-12.
 3. Rev. 13:1
 4. Rev. 7:4; 13:8

Here also, Jesus establishes a clear connection between the great distress and His return in glory. That did not happen at the fall of Jerusalem either. According to Zechariah's prophecies, the ultimate fall of Jerusalem must still occur.¹ Whether these prophecies pertain to a city surrounded by walls of stone is not known.

It is true that Titus' siege of Jerusalem could have lasted much longer than it did, which would have exterminated most of the Jewish people. But God intended to keep a remnant and He used division and desertion to fulfill His plan. It could be that a similar pattern will occur at the end of times in the final scene of world history of which the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a shadow.

Jesus repeats the warning against the temptation by false Christs. It will be the tendency of those who are waiting for the coming of the Lord to grasp every ray of hope. That is understandable and Satan will manipulate those expectations by which he can establish a foothold in the lives of many.

Jesus makes clear, however, that His Second Coming cannot be misunderstood. The comparison to lightning flashing from east to west means probably that His coming will be observed worldwide. It may also refer to the speed with which Jesus will return. It will be the speed of light. We see the lightning before we hear the thunderclap. Jesus will come unannounced and unexpected.

Jesus does not mention the rapture in connection with His coming. There is no reference to what the Apostle Paul describes in his Epistle to the Thessalonians: "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.² That does not mean that this event will not take place in the events Jesus mentions here, but there is no suggestion of the time when it will occur or where it fits in.

Luke places the reference to the vultures in connection with those who are being taken and those who are left behind.³ That seems clearer than the context in which Matthew places it.

(iv). The cosmic events that will accompany the Second Coming 24:29-31

29 "Immediately after the distress of those days "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.

31 And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

This section also raises questions that are difficult to answer. "Immediately after the distress of those days ..." leaves little space for the millennium the Apostle John mentions in Revelation.⁴ This makes the chronology of events less clearly defined. What is clear is that the Lord speaks here about the last phase of world history. There is little more we can expect on earth after the collapse of the whole universe. One solution would be to see "the distress of those days" in the period in which "Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth to gather them for battle."⁵

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1. Zech. 12:1-9; 14:1-7
 2. I Thess. 4:15-18
 3. See Luke 17:33-37.
 4. Rev. 20:1-6

Such speculations have no practical importance for us, which means that the matter of chronology is not something that we should try to unravel immediately, either. It is more interesting to observe the collapse of our solar system, which seems to be connected to the ultimate fall of Satan. We know that at present the Son of God sustains “all things by his powerful word.”¹ But originally Lucifer had been given the mandate over the part of the universe in which we live now and his fall into sin has disturbed the balance in such a way that everything will eventually collapse when he does. All this is part of God’s eternal plan. In Tolkien’s book *Lord of the Rings*, Sauron’s power, image of the devil, disintegrated when “the ring” was thrown into “the crack of doom.” At the end Satan will drag the whole universe with him in his final fall from power.

It is possible that this disintegration of the universe was Satan’s intent from the very beginning. At that moment he may have believed that he had achieved his goal with God’s creation. But that will be the moment at which the Son of Man is coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. These are events of such enormous proportions that we cannot imagine what they will be like.

The Old Testament prophecies consistently revealed the connection between the Day of the Lord and the signs that appear in the heavens. Isaiah prophesied: “See, the day of the Lord is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger — to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. 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. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.”² And: “In that day the Lord will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders, gloriously.”³ Ezekiel describes the same phenomena in connection with the punishment of Pharaoh. We read: “When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land, declares the Sovereign Lord.”⁴ And Joel’s famous prophecy, which Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost: “I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”⁵ John, in Revelation, describes the same scene: “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.”⁶

While this disintegration is going on “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky.” No further details are provided at this point. We may assume, however, that this universal upheaval and the fall of Satan will coincide with the revelation of the Lord.

I am reminded of a book by Emmanuel Veliskovsky, *Worlds in Collision*, in which the author connects some interstellar phenomena with the events that accompanied the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. He believes that the entrance into our solar system of the planet Venus as a comet accounts for the

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5. Rev. 20:7-10
 1. Heb. 1:3
 2. Isa. 13:9,10,13
 3. Isa. 24:21-23
 4. Ezek. 32:7-8
 5. Joel 2:30-31
 6. Rev. 6:12-14

miracles during Israel's passage through the Red Sea, and later Joshua's answered prayer for the sun to stand still. The coming of Christ could have a similar effect upon an even larger scale. In spite of the cosmic breakdown, it will not be the total end of our planet. There are too many indications that world history will continue after Christ's return to believe that this is the absolute end.

In describing His Second Coming, the Lord uses images of Daniel's vision. We read there: "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."¹

Regarding the mourning Jesus speaks about, John in Revelation mentions particularly those who had crucified Jesus: "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."² The mourning is caused by the recognition of the Jews, and in them the world population, that rejected and crucified the only Man who could have saved them. As all seemed to be lost materially, socially, morally and spiritually, the saving presence of Jesus' glory will appear.

Earlier Jesus had used the image of the lesson from the harvest in connection with the parables. We read there: "The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels."³ The Israelites heard the loud trumpet call when they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. We read: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up."⁴

It is difficult to imagine the details of the harvest of "the elect." This is not a gathering up of grain or objects. This involves living beings. It is an inviting and conducting of those who are destined to glory and royal dignity. Jesus' description of the death of the beggar in the story of the rich man and Lazarus may be a good picture: "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side."⁵

We suppose that "from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" are synonyms, unless the harvest would include those who have already died, but that sounds too fantastic. Again we observe that Jesus' words leave no place for the rapture of the church. Yet, it is clear from Paul's description that there will be a meeting with the Lord in the air. We read: "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words."⁶ We may assume that the purpose of Jesus' words is not to give a complete and chronological description of coming events. Jesus appeals to our watchfulness, not to our curiosity. Some study of Bible prophecy seems to be geared merely to satisfying people's curiosity, while the aspect of watchfulness, which is perseverance in

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1. Dan. 7:13,14
 2. Rev. 1:7
 3. Matt. 13:39
 4. Ex. 19:16-20
 5. Luke 16:22
 6. I Thess. 4:15-18

fellowship with God, is being neglected. Prophecy is not a hobby we can enjoy as a pastime. It is holy business that must be carried out under the guidance and supervision of the Holy Spirit.

(v). A warning to recognize the signs of the time 24:32-35

32 "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.

33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.

34 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

In Luke's Gospel, at another occasion, Jesus chided the people for not understanding the importance of the days in which they lived. He used the same comparison with events in nature, saying: When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"¹

People in Jesus' day did not have the same calendar we use now. We don't know how flexible their figuring of seasons was. But as a person can determine the time of day by looking at the sun, so could the Israelites know when it was going to be summer. Their observations were based upon previous experiences. So it is with the understanding of the signs of the time and the spiritual gift of discernment based upon the experience of fellowship with God. Jesus rebuked His generation, not because they did not discern at all, but because they had no fellowship with God, which was the cause of their lack of spiritual discernment.

If people can construe a system upon which they can predict events of nature, they have no excuse for their spiritual ignorance. That is why Jesus calls them "hypocrites." In Luke's Gospel the context was the time at which the Messiah appeared on earth. In Matthew's Gospel it is regarding the end times. Those who had fellowship with God then recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Those who know God now, ought to know what time it is on the clock of the world.

The fact that the state of Israel has been reborn and that Jerusalem is again a Jewish city must be important pointers. Those are events that clear the way to the world's last day. Yet, we have difficulty imagining that Jesus could return any time.

As we mentioned earlier, everything that happens on earth is an expression of a reality that exists in heaven. The destruction that occurs on our planet is a shadow of the actual struggle that takes place on the higher level of the heavenly places. We experience this on earth as the ultimate reality, unless by faith we can detect its heavenly cause. This does not make what happens on earth unreal. Our experiences, reactions and emotions are real. In as much as we go through the shadows of heavenly things, we experience the things themselves. That is why Jesus could say: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."² Abraham saw this day when he received the promise of Isaac and as he sacrificed his son on Mount Moriah. The Israelites who brought their sacrificial animal to the entrance of the tabernacle in the desert did not experience a lesser fellowship with God than the modern person who approaches the throne of grace by the blood of Christ.

The Apostle John throws an interesting light on the generation that will not pass away by what he writes in his epistle: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."³ In connection with "pass away" we usually only think of a "space-time" event. But in this context

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1. Luke 12:54-56
 2. John 8:56
 3. I John 2:17

it may mean the difference between perishable and imperishable. Because of their rejection of the Word, this generation will be defeated by “the Word.” In a wider sense it means that, because creation, which owes its existence and meaning to the Word, rejects this Word, it will perish by the Word that created it. But for those who obey, it means that they live forever.

(vi). Comparison of the end times to the time of the flood of Noah 24:36-42

36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;

39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

40 Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.

41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

The purpose of v.36 is to awaken in us a sense of extreme watchfulness. The date of the last day will be hidden for all of creation, and the Son Himself. The Father determined the hour, which is kept secret from all others. As far as that is concerned, nothing can be calculated beforehand.

The words “nor the Son” sound strange to us. They prove that the Son did not partake of the Father’s omniscience while on earth. It is clear that Jesus did not speak here as the Second Person of the Trinity, but as a created human being. He is the Word become flesh, Who emptied Himself, not only of His divine glory, but of all His divine attributes. As a human being on earth, He was not God omniscient. After His resurrection, however, as Jesus spoke again with His disciples about the same subject, did He not say that He didn’t know? He answered the disciples’ question with: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”¹ We may conclude from this that all His divine attributes were returned to Him at His resurrection.

But the gist of these verses is not a treatise of Jesus’ attributes; it is an urgent call for watchfulness. Yet, the unexpectedness of the day is relative, as in the comparison with the days of Noah. The fact that the end was coming was not hidden from Noah, and God kept him quite well informed about what he had to do in preparation. The coming flood was no surprise for Noah and his family. Those who stayed outside the ark were taken by surprise. It was not that they had not heard, but they had not believed what they heard. Amos says: “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”² We must, therefore, pay attention to the prophetic word as well as remain in fellowship with God, so that He can reveal His plan to us. That is the meaning of the warning here. The point of comparison is in the attitude of the people before the flood and of those who live before the Second Coming.

There is nothing wrong with the things Jesus mentions: “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.” Those are legitimate and normal activities God ordained for the continuation of the human race. What is wrong is that man has detached these activities from fellowship with God. This makes people believe that they will continue forever. As far as we can remember that is the way it has been, so it must be that they will continue to be. Even if one believes that the human race will exist forever on earth, everybody knows that individual existence on earth is not eternal. Man’s failure consists in the fact that he does not see a relationship between his personal acts and the Person of God. That is what makes everything he does

1. Acts 1:7

2. Amos 3:7

meaningless. That is what causes him to perish. Failure to see the total picture of life's meaning, makes him also blind for the signs of the time.

For people who live in areas of the world where there are no specific seasons, such as the tropics, the image of the budding of the fig tree does not make sense. In the same way the person who does not give priority to God in his life will have no idea about his origin or destination; he will be unable to see a line of meaning in what is happening in this world. The end will come as a complete surprise. Understanding or not understanding draws a line of separation between one person and another.

Luke's Gospel draws the picture a little more systematically than Matthew, adding a separation in a marriage relationship and in social life.¹ It is not clear whether the picture Jesus draws is what Paul speaks about when he speaks of those who have already died before Jesus' return and those who will still be alive at that day.²

What these verses clarify, however, is what watchfulness is all about. It means keeping your eye fixed on the converging of the lines of life leading to the Person of God. Luke adds another of Jesus' illustrations to the days of Noah that emphasize the importance of watchfulness. We read: "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."³ In the latter case it was not merely a lack of sense of reality, but one of getting completely involved in all kinds of sinful, unnatural and inhuman practices.

One cannot live in a vacuum. If our lives are not fixed in God, we will seek compensation somewhere else. It could be that life in the days of Noah did not differ much from life in Sodom in the days of Lot. The destruction of Sodom brings to light how terrible corruption had become. But the difference between the testimony of Noah and Lot was immense. Noah had a strong testimony because of his fellowship with God. The fact that the people of his day ignored him is no reflection on his faith. The fact that Lot's sons-in-law believed Lot was joking,⁴ shows that Lot had not taken the will of God for his own life seriously. Lot's life had been a compromise. The difference between Lot and his wife was that she was even more attached to material possessions than he was. Mrs. Lot may have influenced her husband to a great extent and made him become a respectable citizen of Sodom, which watered down his testimony to the point where no one took Lot's faith in God seriously. A wife can have a strong influence upon her husband's testimony, either for better or for worse. Jesus' warning not to go down from the roof or return from the field to retrieve some possession is illustrated in what Lot's wife did in looking back to Sodom. What happened to her shows how dangerous it is to be bound by love for earthly possessions.

What Jesus says about fleeing from judgment cannot be meant as a literal flight on the Day of Judgment. That day is probably not even a day on earth; our flight represents a mentality of not being bound to things that have no eternal value. Our flight is toward Christ. Those who flee to Him have already passed from death into life.⁵

It is in this context that Luke quotes Jesus' words: "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."⁶ The phrase is found five times in the synoptic Gospels, occurring at three different occasions. Jesus said this as He sent out the apostles.⁷ The context is the severing of family ties. We find them also in connection with the first announcement of Jesus' suffering.⁸ The third time is in

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1. Luke 17:34-36
 2. I Thess. 4:13-18
 3. Luke 17:28-30
 4. Gen. 19:14
 5. John 5:24
 6. Luke 17:33
 7. Matt. 10:39

connection with the event we are studying here in Luke's Gospel and referred to above. Our Lord demands absolute surrender, so that He becomes the priority in all facets of our life. We seldom realize how deeply our souls are entwined with our possessions. Family ties and a warm nest are also important factors for stability in life. The deepest roots are probably in our desire for self-preservation and in our fear of death. The only ultimate security is found if we have given up all our certainties in exchange for the rock, Jesus Christ.

Keeping watch, therefore, consists in a conscious and continuous surrender to the Lord of all human relationships, all our possessions and our whole body. Falling asleep means losing sight of this ultimate goal. The routine of everyday living can dim our spiritual awareness. The thought that today will be the same as yesterday can draw us away from the thought that life on earth is a pilgrimage; we are traveling toward a certain destination. A journey without destination is a curse as in the legend of "The flying Dutchman." The return of the Lord marks our destination; in it we reach our goal. Our life will only be meaningful if we live looking for that day. The Second Coming is the coming of *the Lord*. His title presupposes surrender and obedience.

(vii). The thief in the night 24:43,44

43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Paul's admonition about the Second Coming,¹ as well as Peter's,² are both based upon this parable. The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. The thought that a burglar could be trying to enter the house had never entered the mind of the owner. He thought he had everything under control; he was unaware of danger and he had fallen asleep. A better comment on this than Paul's does not exist. He writes: "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled." Being caught by a thief is only possible if our life belongs to darkness. Those who do not live in darkness, that is those who have fellowship with God and with other Christians, are ready to face the thief.

Keeping watch means to be children of the light. In Romans the Apostle Paul explains the image in greater detail, saying: "And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."³ When we live in fellowship with God, we are not only protected against enemy attacks by the light but the light in us is aggressive. It opens up the hidden corners of darkness. Augustine was converted when he heard a neighbor sing Romans 13:12.

In this parable, Jesus reverses the values, although not as completely as in *The Parable of the Crooked Manager*.⁴ In the Second Coming, the Lord does not come as a thief but as the owner. Only those

8. Matt. 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24
1. I Thess. 5:1-11
2. II Peter 3:10
3. Rom. 13:11-14
4. Luke 16:1-9

who have helped themselves to what does not rightfully belong to them will see Him as a thief. Being watchful means having a sense of reality. It means seeing relationships in their right perspective.

(viii.) The faithful and wise servant 24:45-51

45 *"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?"*

46 *It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.*

47 *I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.*

48 *But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,'*

49 *and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards.*

50 *The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.*

51 *He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In this story the lines run parallel to reality. The topic is dealt with in greater detail in *The Parable of the Talents* in the next chapter. The person to whom God has entrusted His Word is frequently compared in Scripture to a servant who has been put in a position of responsibility by his master. The Apostle Paul also refers to this saying: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."¹ As God's children we are the stewards of His riches.

In this story being watchful means to be aware of who one is and what one is supposed to do. The servant lives in the expectation of his master's return. This does not mean that he sits with his nose pressed on the windowpane. We demonstrate our watchfulness not merely in constantly talking about the Second Coming, but in being what we are supposed to be, and in doing what God wants us to do.

Falling asleep means losing sight of the fundamental relationship with God with all its disastrous consequences. This parable does not only address Christian workers. "To give them their food at the proper time" is a description of all human relationships. Our relationship with our fellowmen is governed by our relationship with God. If we neglect the latter, our life in society will lose its impact.

The fact that the master's return takes the wicked servant by surprise means that he had written of his master's coming. Jesus calls those people hypocrites. The wicked servant was not ignorant, he wittingly committed his crimes. His punishment will be that which he himself had done to others.

The place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is the same as the one mentioned in *The Parable of the Weeds in the Field*.² This place is mentioned seven times in the Gospels, six times by Matthew and once by Luke.³ According to the description given in these verses, the place is meant for the children of the Kingdom who have no faith, for those who imitate Christianity and who are as weeds among the wheat, and for those who refuse to be clothed with the clothing of righteousness God provides, for the servant who does not expect his master's return, for the servant who hid his talent and for those who never accepted Jesus' doctrine.

1. I Cor. 4:1-5

2. Matt. 13:42,50

3. Matt. 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luk 13:28

(ix) The Parable of the ten virgins 25:1-13

1 *"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.*

2 *Five of them were foolish and five were wise.*

3 *The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them.*

4 *The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.*

5 *The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.*

6 *"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"*

7 *"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps.*

8 *The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'*

9 *"'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'*

10 *"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.*

11 *"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'"*

12 *"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'*

13 *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

We find this parable only in Matthew's Gospel. The story is often taken out of context with the previous chapter, which leads to a wrong interpretation.

The narrative is about a group of young girls who plan to participate in a wedding. The story is set in the culture of that time and we need to do some research in order to put it in the correct context.

Edersheim, in his book *Jesus, the Messiah*, states that the ten girls with their lamps were supposed to form the accompaniment of the bridesmaids. Ten persons were required to be present at a wedding ceremony. The story presupposes that the groom came from outside the city, or maybe even outside the country. It was, therefore, difficult to calculate the time of his arrival. The normal sequence would be that the bridegroom goes to the house of the bride to get her and bring her to the house of her parents, or wherever the wedding ceremony is supposed to take place. That trip would be a solemn procession in which the bridesmaids accompany the groom with their lamps. The girls would wait for the arrival of the groom at the house of the bride. It would be difficult to assume that, under the uncertain circumstances, they would have sat down somewhere on the roadside. There is nothing abnormal in the fact that they all fall asleep while waiting. Their lamps are small bowls with oil and a wick. During the pageant the lamps would be put on poles in order to add light to the festivity. It could be that the foolish virgins assumed that providing oil was the groom's responsibility. They had brought the lamps with them but no extra oil. Not only did they have no reserve, but their lamps were virtually empty. The wise virgins had come with full lamps. After all, they knew that they were responsible for providing the light. When at midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom!" all the girls lit their lamps. Those lamps that had sufficient oil lit up clearly, the others in which the wick was not saturated with oil flickered a little and died.

It would have made no sense to take oil from the burning lamps and pour it in the empty ones. Even if that can be done in a story, in reality that is impossible. It may be possible to share responsibility with others, but not our sense of responsibility.

Oil is often seen as an image of the Holy Spirit. That may be a legitimate interpretation, but it could push the exegesis of this parable beyond its intended boundaries. Jesus tells this story to illustrate the practical consequences of watchfulness. The wise bridesmaids had taken precautions which allowed them to wait and even to sleep without the risk of being taken by surprise by unexpected developments.

We find such levelheaded evaluation of a situation, which allows God to make His will known in one's life in David, who made arrangements for the safety of his parents, so he could afford to wait and see.

We read: "From there David went to Mizpah in Moab and said to the king of Moab, 'Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?'"¹

As the bridegroom came, the five girls were not ready and at their post to be able to follow him and participate in the pageant. But in spite of that they thought that could participate in the celebration. They were like people who want God to do for them what they were not willing to do for Him.

G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary on Matthew, makes an intriguing comment on the three parables in Matthew 24 and 25. He stresses the similarity between the three stories. 1) In all three the Lord is absent. 2) In all three the theme is a relationship with the absent Lord. In the first case it is authority that qualifies the relationship. In the second it is the expectation of the Lord's return. And in the third it is commerce. 3) In all three parables the persons are only responsible to the Lord who is absent.

These are the differences: The setting in the first parable is a family, in the second it is a community, and in the third, personal responsibility in business affairs. Campbell Morgan correctly observes that the parable of the virgins is about one's personal attitude toward the hope of Christ's return. Although elsewhere in the New Testament the church is represented as the bride of Christ, it would be forcing the issue to read that image into this parable. Then we would have to find another explanation for the two groups of virgins and their representation. The wise girls are those who acted in accordance with their hope. In the words of the Apostle John: "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."²

We may also draw a parallel between this story and the words of John the Baptist, who called himself "the friend of the bridegroom" and said: "He must become greater; I must become less."³ Those words describe the essence of being watchful; they are also the fruit of it.

The foolish girls were more interested in the role they would play in the pageant than in the fact that a young couple was getting married. They wanted to look good. They were not there to make the bride and groom look better. If that had been the desire of their heart, they would have remembered the oil. It is often in the little things of life that we show whether we love the Lord or not.

The most tragic part of this story is the bridegroom's answer to the foolish girls: "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." The Greek word translated "I tell you the truth" is "Amen!" The Apostle Paul explains what this means: "The man who loves God is known by God."⁴ This proves that the girls' real problem was a lack of love. What the bridegroom says does not mean that there are things or persons the Almighty, Omniscient God would not know. God's attitude towards those who do not love Him is as toward a person He doesn't know. The alternative is in Jesus' words: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."⁵

(x) The Parable of the Talents 25:14-30

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.

15 To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

16 The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more.

17 So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.

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1. I Sam. 22:3
 2. I John 3:3
 3. John 3:30
 4. I Cor. 8:3
 5. John 12:26

18 *But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.*

19 *"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.*

20 *The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'*

21 *"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'*

22 *"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'*

23 *"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'*

24 *"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.*

25 *So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'*

26 *"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?*

27 *Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.*

28 *"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.*

29 *For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*

30 *And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

The similarity between this story and Luke's Parable of the Minas¹ is obvious. But that does not mean that we have two different versions of the same story. It is more likely that the Lord told two stories, similar in content, but given at different locations and times and differing in the application of the details. Luke's story is placed in Jericho shortly after the conversion of Zacchaeus. In Matthew's Gospel it is in connection with prophecies about the Second Coming. The difference in the amount of money entrusted to the servants is also significant. In Luke's story the servants all receive the same amount of money, ten minas; in this parable the amounts entrusted differ according to the ability of each servant. In Luke's parable the rewards differ, in Matthew's they are alike. The master's penalty of the lazy servant in Matthew's story is utter rejection; in Luke's only the money given is taken away. The differences between the two parables are more significant than the similarity.

We could say that the division of the talents is like the gifts of the Holy Spirit as given to individual believers, whereas the giving of the minas would be like the place God assigns to individuals as members of the body. It is possible for a person to have more than one spiritual gift, but one cannot be a hand and an eye at the same time. We run into problems, however, when we look at the reward or rejection. The servant in Luke's parable merely loses his minas; the one in Matthew's is thrown outside "into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." If we believe that what we are is more important than what we do, the conclusion of both stories makes no sense. But then, what is the difference between losing one's place in the body of Christ and being lost eternally? If we are separated from the source of light, we move into darkness. It is like what we read about Judas' betrayal of Jesus: "As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night."²

We may be wrong when we look at both stories and make applications that affect the individual. It is possible to interpret this parable in the same manner as the one about the tenants in the vineyard. It was

1. Luke 19:11-27

2. John 13:30

not just an individual Jew who hid his talent in the ground, it was Israel as a nation. We could look at all three parables in the same light. This does not mean that the church has nothing to learn from this story or that there is no individual application.

(xi) Judgment of the Son of Man 25:31-46

31 *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.*

32 *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

33 *He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

34 *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

35 *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,*

36 *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.'*

37 *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*

38 *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?*

39 *When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

40 *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

41 *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

42 *For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,*

43 *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

44 *"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

45 *"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

46 *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

Although some symbolic language is used in these verses, this section is not a parable. This pertains to the historic moment of the Second Coming, which John, in *Revelation*,¹ describes as the revelation of the great white throne, in front of which all the dead will face judgment according to their works. Those who were condemned gave evidence of the fact that their names had not been written in the book of life. In other words, these people had never had any spiritual life. In these verses we find two categories: those who have lived and those who had never come alive.

To be alive or not to be alive demonstrates itself in a display of love for the person of Jesus Christ. This is expressed in showing compassion toward the least. Thus Jesus equates living with acting and He identifies Himself with the lowest of mankind. That is what connects judgment to death. Those who had believed in Him and surrendered their lives to Him would not be judged at all. They had passed from death into life. Only the dead are judged and that in the most literal sense possible. These are not only people who have died physically, but who have never made the transition from death into life. As the Apostle John

1. Rev. 20:11-15

writes: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”¹ That is the topic of this discourse.

It is interesting to observe that those who are blessed by the Father were not aware of the fact that their acts of love were actually done to the Lord. Their motivation for helping the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner was not to buy their way into heaven. It was their natural reaction upon seeing the suffering of their fellowmen. What Jesus is saying here to them is “I am that fellowman.” The Bible does not draw a line of separation between loving God and loving your neighbor. That love is an essential part of being watchful. Egoism lulls us asleep. What Jesus is saying here is the same as in the parables about the servant in his household, the virgins who await the bridegroom and the servants who trade with their talent. The keyword in those stories is “watch,” meaning “keep love alive.”

There are in Jesus’ words several suggestions concerning the motivation for watchfulness. There is in genuine watchfulness with no trace of hope of reward. This is emphasized in the stress placed upon the fact that the acts of love, which were performed for the least of the Lord’s brothers. Those are the people who are unable to publicize what is done to them; they are unable to pay back their benefactors. Those are the ones Jesus uses as an example and as an evaluation of the quality of acts of love.

We find in Ezekiel a judgment God pronounces upon the leaders of Israel that show much similarity to what Jesus says.² Jesus may have taken Ezekiel’s prophecy as a model for His words here. In the passage in Ezekiel, both the leaders, as well as those being led, are subject to judgment. In Jesus’ statement the subject is not the shepherds but the sheep and their relationship to one another. In the same way as leadership rests on the principle of willingness to give one’s life for those being led, so must the fellowship of those who are led be based upon a love that is willing to give one’s life for the other. Jesus is our example in this, as the Apostle John wrote: “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.”³ The criterion in these verses is whether we try to keep our life, which means that we will lose it, or to lose it in order to win it in eternity.

The ignorance of both categories is expressed in that they do not recognize Christ in their fellowmen. God kept the significance of what they did hidden from them. They are being tested without being aware of it. The understanding of the mystery of human relations is only revealed in the love of Christ. One of the reasons life around us is marked by pain and suffering is so that we would demonstrate love. Those who only love themselves are bent upon keeping their lives free from the misery that surrounds them. It is only if we flee toward God in order to cope with misery that we are kept safe. That is also the way to obtain forgiveness.

For some the test turns into a trap. The test reveals the foundation upon which each life is built. It was never God’s intention that human beings would be lost eternally. The kingdom had been prepared from the creation of the world. But those who are lost enter new territory that God never intended for them to enter. Hell is created for those eternal, spiritual beings, like Satan and his demons, who betrayed their origin and rebelled against God.

It is important to realize the unity of Matthew 24 and 25. In both chapters Jesus speaks about watchfulness. We are told to be alert about temptation. It is easy to be satisfied with things that do not measure up to God’s standards. Love can grow cold and zeal for mission and evangelism can be killed by materialism. We can become blind to the signs of the age. We can grow dull in the routine of daily life. That is what Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 24:1-42.

The following parables are an illustration of the preceding one. Jesus did not intend to give a detailed survey of things to come, but within the framework of a rough prophetic sketch, He calls upon His disciples to watch and be alert. The topic of the parables is not what is going to happen but how to react to

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1. I John 3:14
 2. See Ezek. 34:17-22.
 3. I John 3:16

future events. The Apostle John puts it this way: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”¹

In the last parable Jesus divides mankind into two sections: the “sheep” and the “goats.” The biblical definition of a sheep is someone who has gone astray. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”² The difference between the sheep and the goats is not between good and bad people, but between those who confess their sins and those who are proud and cling to their sins. The goat symbolizes proud rebellion. The difference is not between the righteous and the unrighteous, but between people who are made right with God and those who die in their sins. Whether the scene Jesus depicts here pertains to the final judgment before God’s great white throne when the books are opened, or during the Millennium is not clear. We will have to wait and see.

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- 1.
 - 2.

I John 3:3

Isa. 53:6

Part Six: The Passion of the King 26:1—27:66

(i) Preparation of the Passover 26:1-19

1 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,
2 "As you know, the Passover is two days away — and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."
3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas,
4 and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him.
5 "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people."
6 While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper,
7 a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.
8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked.
9 "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor."
10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.
11 The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.
12 When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.
13 I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."
14 Then one of the Twelve — the one called Judas Iscariot — went to the chief priests
15 and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins.
16 From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.
17 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"
18 He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'"
19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

It is impossible to study this passage and not enter into the discussion about the problem surrounding the Passover celebration and Jesus' institution of the last supper. Matthew introduces this chapter as beginning two days before the actual Passover. It has been supposed that the last meal Jesus ate with His disciples was in fact the Passover meal. The fact that the disciples asked Jesus about the place where they would eat the Passover "on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread," ought to settle the matter, if it weren't for John's observation that at the palace of the Roman governor, "the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover."¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "Various harmonizations of these passages have been suggested, the most ingenious, probably, being a theory that when the Passover fell on Friday night, the Pharisees ate the meal on Thursday and the Sadducees on Friday, and that Jesus followed the custom of the Pharisees."

From Matthew's text it is obvious that the meal Jesus ate with His disciples was the Passover. Although the chapter begins two days before, we read: "On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?'"² First of all, the "two days" may have been a much shorter period of time than we would

1. John 18:28
2. Matt. 26:17

understand it to be. The Jewish day began at sundown, six o'clock in the evening. From 5:58 PM to 6:01 PM would be counted as two days! In the same way would Jesus' being in the grave for three days and three nights be no longer than perhaps twenty-four hours plus a few minutes.

In the Hebrew text stipulating the details of the Passover celebration, it reads that the lamb must be killed *beeyn haa`arbaayim*. This can be translated "in the evening" as well as "between the evenings." To the Western mind, which is used to pinpointing time up to the solar second, this makes no sense. But in a culture where people go by the sun instead of by the clock, that is an indication close enough to be observed.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states about the problem: "Interpreters are not agreed on the chronological connections of this event. In view of John 12:1, 'six days before the Passover,' either Matthew (and Mark) or John has followed topical rather than chronological order. Because neither Mark nor Matthew actually dates the event more precisely than 'now when Jesus was in Bethany,' it seems best to follow the clear chronology in John 12:1. Thus Matthew, having described the conspiracy, now reverts to an earlier event to show the circumstances that prompted Judas to the actual betrayal. Parallels are Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8."

The Pulpit Commentary, looking into the problem, states: "The supposed discrepancy between the narrative of the synoptics and that of St. John has exercised the minds of commentators from the earliest times unto the present, and enormous ingenuity has been expended in endeavoring to harmonize what are regarded as conflicting statements. The two chief difficulties are these: According to the synoptists, as generally understood, our Lord and his apostles ate the Passover, *i.e.* the Paschal lamb, when he instituted the Holy Communion; according to St. John, the death of Christ took place before the Passover was celebrated. Hence arise the questions — Was the last Supper the regular Paschal meal? Was Christ crucified on the 14th of Nisan or on the 15th? In the time of our Lord, the festival commenced on the evening of the 14th of Nisan, originally the day of preparation, but now considered part of the feast. 'Between the evenings' of this day — *i.e.* from the time of the sun's decline to its setting — the lambs were killed in the temple courts. The 15th, commencing on the evening of the 14th, and lasting till the evening of the 15th, was the great day of the feast. All the accounts agree in stating that our Lord was crucified on Friday, the day before the sabbath, but the day of the month is not so clearly defined. The year seems to be settled as A.U.C. 783, A.D. 30, the sixteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius. In this year, astronomers tell us, the 14th of Nisan (equivalent to April 7) fell on a Friday; and as for typical reasons at least we should expect that Christ would die at the hour when the Paschal lamb was slain, we at once see the fitness of this date and day, if they can be safely maintained. It is incredible that the events immediately preceding and accompanying the execution of Christ should have occurred on the actual feast day; it is also incredible that, as some critics suppose, the Pharisees altered the legal day in order that they might be free to accomplish their wicked design. These considerations lead us unhesitatingly to adopt the account given by St. John (himself an eyewitness, and certain to have noted and remembered the exact date of this stupendous event), and to assume that Christ was crucified on the 14th of Nisan, dying at the hour when the lambs were legally slain. The notes of time afforded by St. John are found in ... John 13:1, 29; 18:28; 19:14, 31. Attention to these passages will show that, according to the Fourth Gospel, the Passover had not been eaten when our Lord was crucified, and that in that year the Passover coincided with the sabbath. To meet the difficulty of the synoptists' assertion, that Jesus ate the Passover at the last Supper, two suggestions are put forth. It is said that he anticipated the legal time by some few hours, being greater than the Law, as he had often shown himself greater than the sabbath. If this were so, how was the lamb procured? The Paschal victims were not legally slain till the afternoon of the next day, the 14th; how could the twelve have obtained one of these on the 13th? This question is met by the assertion that the lambs (estimated at some 200,000) could not have been sacrificed in the time appointed, and that a large proportion of the animals were killed and eaten both before and after the strictly legal time. There is no evidence whatever to support this notion, nor can we imagine that Christ, who came to fulfill the Law, would have connived at such a manifest infringement of its provisions. Another solution is that the meal of which he partook with his disciples was a solemn supper in anticipation of the Feast of the Passover, but without the lamb. He himself was the true Passover, the Lamb of God, and in instituting at that

time the Holy Eucharist, he gave himself as the spiritual food of his followers. This new festival superseded the Jewish solemnity, and it is possible that, in oral tradition, the two were confused and were counted as occurring together. This solution seems more probable than the former, and would doubtless be confirmed if we were better acquainted with many details well known in the apostolic ages, now unhappily obscured. Some of the difficulties will, we hope, be seen to be reconcilable, as we proceed in our Exposition. How the perplexity concerning the enormous number of lambs required for the teeming population gathered together was met, we know not. Doubtless time and circumstances had modified the rigorous adherence to the prescribed ritual, and possibly many householders (all being in this matter priests unto God, ... Exodus 19:6 and ... Revelation 1:6) slew and prepared their Passover at their own houses or outside the sacred precincts on the legal day and hour. But there is no tradition of any unauthorized alteration of these points in the ordained ceremonial, and we cannot doubt that the Lord would not by his own practice endorse such laxity."

Commenting on Mark's version of events, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "From Matthew's fuller account (Matt 26) we learn that our Lord announced this to the Twelve as follows, being the first announcement to them of the precise time: 'And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings' - referring to the contents of Matt 24 and Matt 25, which He delivered to His disciples; His public ministry being now closed: from His prophetic office He is now passing into His priestly office, although all along Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses - 'He said unto His disciples, Ye know that after two days is [the feast of] the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.' The first and the last steps of his final sufferings are brought together in this brief announcement of all that was to take place. The Passover [to *pascha* = *hapecach*] was the first and the chief of the three great annual festivals, commemorative of the redemption of God's people from Egypt, through the sprinkling of the blood of a lamb divinely appointed to be slain for that end; the destroying angel, 'when he saw the blood, passing over' the Israelite houses, on which that blood was seen, when he came to destroy all the first-born in the land of Egypt (Ex 12) - bright typical foreshadowing of the great Sacrifice, and the Redemption effected thereby."

The way Matthew introduces this chapter indicates that the sacrifice of the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world was God's initiative. Jesus' statement here constitutes the last announcement of His suffering and death. He had tried to prepare His disciples before, by telling them that He would be killed and would be raised from the dead on the third day. But the predictions were so totally opposed to the expectations of what the Messiah would be and do, that no one, not even His most intimate disciples, would take them seriously. They all thought this could not happen.

On the other side of the fence, the enemy sets his plans in motion to fulfill Jesus' prophecy. But Jesus' enemies did not intend Him to be God's ultimate sacrifice for the atonement of the sins of the world. Their only purpose was to rid themselves of a rabbi who had become a threat to the existing conditions that allowed them to live and rule according to their own wishes.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: "Here Christ first foretells that his death will occur at Passover time. This prediction ran counter to the plans of the plotters, however. Fearful of the crowds in Jerusalem, many of whom were Galilean supporters of Jesus, they agreed not to make any move during the feast. They may well have expected to delay action for a full week. But Jesus fixed the time of his death in advance, contrary to their scheming, and overruled so that he would die as the true Passover."

Matthew now launches into the story of Jesus' anointing, which John also describes with the addition that it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who performed the act. But John places the incident before Jesus' triumphant entrance in Jerusalem.

A significant difference between the Synoptic record on the one hand, and John's on the other is that Matthew and Mark mention that the myrrh was poured over Jesus' head, and John mentions the feet. This, of course, is no contradiction. Mary, obviously, anointed both Jesus' head and feet. The difference is a difference in emphasis the three Gospel writers place on Jesus' ministry. Matthew pictures Jesus as King; he therefore mentions the head. Mary's act means Jesus' crowning as King. Mark, who depicts Jesus as the perfect servant, sees in the anointed the reward for His labor. Jesus' head is lifted up. To John, who

emphasizes Jesus' divinity, the anointing of the feet is a form of worship that can only be given to God. The different perspectives the Gospels give to us correspond also to Mary's motivation in performing this double anointing. She must have asked herself the question David asked: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"¹ She took her most precious possession, that of which she was proud, that which was her treasure, and she offered that to the Lord. In Mark's eyes, it was not so much a payment to Jesus (after all, how much can one pay for the resurrection of a brother) but a token of deep appreciation for what Jesus had done for her and the family. John pictures Mary who bows down over Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. She had received forgiveness from her God and she bows down in worship and surrender before the throne of the universe.

Matthew and Mark inform us that the nard was in an alabaster jar. The container itself was an expensive item. We would have expected that Mary would merely have taken off the cork instead of breaking the neck of the bottle. The scholars do not agree on what happened exactly. *Barnes' Notes* observes about the breaking of the bottle: "This may mean no more than that she broke the 'seal' of the box, so that it could be poured out. Boxes of perfumes are often sealed or made fast with wax, to prevent the perfume from escaping. It was not likely that she would break the box itself when it was unnecessary, and when the unguent, being liquid, would have been wasted; nor from a broken box or vial could she easily have 'poured it' on his head." John does not even mention this detail. He tells us that a quantity of one pound was used, obviously much more than what was needed for a normal anointing.

One of the beautiful details in John's story is the mention that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." This is the second time Jesus is anointed by a woman; the first time, by a woman who had received forgiveness for her sins, the second time by a woman who had received her brother back from the dead. The first human being who sinned was a woman. Two women anointed the Anointed One. Mary's anointing of Jesus signifies the actual setting apart of the Passover Lamb. The sweet fragrance of this act fills not only the house of Simon, but also the House of the Lord, the heavens itself. The Father in heaven smelled the fragrance and it was a pleasing aroma to Him. If we allow our human imagination to roam, we could say that the Father in heaven smelled the fragrance and said, "Where does this come from?" He looked and found that it came from the house of Simon in Bethany. What happened in that room was more important to Him than anything else on earth.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary believes that the incident is not the same as the one John describes. We read: "Some think that the woman mentioned here was Mary, the sister of Lazarus; others Mary Magdalene; but against the former opinion it is argued that it is not likely, had this been Mary the sister of Lazarus, that Matthew and Mark would have suppressed her name. Besides, say they, we should not confound the repast which is mentioned here, with that mentioned by John, John 12:3. This one was made only two days before the passover, and that one six days before: the one was made at the house of Simon the leper, the other at the house of Lazarus, John 12:1-2. At this, the woman poured the oil on the head of Christ; at the other, Mary anointed Christ's feet with it." Others, however, identify this event with Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet in John's Gospel. *Barnes' Notes* states: "It was unlawful to eat with persons that had the leprosy, and it is more than probable, therefore, that this Simon had been healed-perhaps by our Lord himself. John (John 12:1) says that this was the house where Lazarus was, who had been raised from the dead. Probably Lazarus was a relative of Simon's, and was living with him. Further, he says that they made a supper for Jesus, and that Martha served. He says that this was six days before the Passover. From the order in which Matthew and Mark mention it, it would have been supposed that it was but two days before the Passover, and after the cleansing of the temple; but it is to be observed, 1. that Matthew and Mark often neglect the exact order of the events that they record. 2. that they do not 'affirm' at what time this was. They leave it indefinite, saying that 'while' Jesus was in Bethany he was anointed by Mary. 3. that Matthew introduced it here for the purpose of giving a 'connected' account of the conduct of 'Judas.' 'Judas'

1. Ps. 116:12

complained at the waste of the ointment (John 12:4), and one of the effects of his indignation, it seems, was to betray his Lord.”

Luke mentions in particular that Jesus gave orders for the preparation of the Passover meal to Peter and John.¹ The manner in which Jesus directs His disciples to the house where the feast must be celebrated could be borrowed from a spy novel. Matthew does not give us any details. He refers to “a certain man.” Humanly speaking the encounter with this person could not be pre-arranged in this way. In the same way as Samuel prophesied to Saul what would happen as he left for home after being anointed by the prophet,² so the Lord instructs His disciples. Luke mentions that the man would be carrying a jar, which would make him easy to identify because carrying jars was considered women’s work. The reason for this mysterious way of identifying an address may have been to keep the place a secret from Judas, allowing Jesus to spend His last intimate moments with the disciples over a Passover meal, without the possibility of being disturbed.

Another reason for the supernatural directions to the place was undoubtedly to make the disciples understand that what happened afterwards was not a series of regrettable coincidences, but a carefully prepared plan sanctioned by the Father. As with Saul, who had just been anointed to be king of Israel, but who needed supernatural confirmation of the experience, so here also. These events could have been a ground for hope for the disciples when what appeared to them as disaster would strike in the next several hours.

Jesus makes the disciples say to the man: “My appointed time is near,” indicating that there must have been a previous arrangement for this celebration. From the way this is stated, we get the impression that the person the disciples were supposed to meet was the owner of the house, a man who knew Jesus and who had already been informed about the planned celebration.

In a way this complicates the situation. If Jesus had made previous arrangements, the danger increased that the place where He would be would be known to others. It could be, of course, that the man had previously offered hospitality to Jesus and that Jesus now informed him that He accepted the invitation.

It is important to observe that the room where one of the greatest events in world history was to take place had to be borrowed. We are not told what was involved in the preparation of the celebration. According to the regulations for the feast, given in Exodus, the lamb had to be killed, the unleavened bread had to be prepared with the herbs. If this is what was involved, we can say that Peter and John were the people who killed the last Passover lamb that ever was slain. From this point on the symbolic act ceased to have any meaning.

(ii) The Passover celebration 26:20-35

20 When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve.

21 And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."

22 They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

23 Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."

24 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."

25 Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"

Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you."

1. Luke 22:7

2. I Sam. 10:2-7

28 *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

29 *I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."*

30 *When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

31 *Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'*

32 *But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."*

33 *Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."*

34 *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."*

35 *But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.*

We find the most detailed report of this part of Jesus' suffering in John's Gospel. Although John does not mention that the Lord celebrated what we call "The Lord's Supper," he is the only one who describes the moving incident of the foot washing and who reports in great detail the table conversation and Jesus' words on the way to Gethsemane.

When Matthew opens his description of the events that lead to the celebration, the foot washing must already have taken place. At this point Jesus is reclining with the twelve at the table where the Passover has been prepared and He announces that one of them will betray Him.

There is much in our celebration of the Lord's Supper that deviates from the sacrament Jesus instituted at this last celebration of the Passover. But this is not the place to enter into a discussion about that. The reaction of the disciples to Jesus' statement is most amazing. We would think that each of them would know himself sufficiently to rule out the possibility of betraying the One they loved. Their lack of self-trust is moving. Their fellowship with Jesus over the years had at least installed in them the conviction that their Lord differed from them in that He did not have the same sinful tendencies, the same sinful nature they found in themselves. They understood that, apart from the grace of God, they would be able to commit any criminal act.

Matthew does not record Jesus' words that we find in Luke's Gospel: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."¹ This last celebration was the most emotional ever observed by Jesus or by any other Jew. In this observance the symbolism of the ritual became reality. Jesus was the Lamb that was slain and He identified Himself with the bread without yeast that would be eaten throughout the week following the Passover.

The records about the reaction to Jesus' announcement about the betrayal differ from Gospel to Gospel. In Mark we read: "They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, 'Surely not I?'"² Luke reports: "They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this."³ And in John we read: "His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, 'Ask him which one he means.' Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him."⁴

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1. Luke 22:15
 2. Mark 14:19
 3. Luke 22:23
 4. John 13:22-27

The Pulpit Commentary observes at this point: “It is remarkable that the real character of Judas had never been discovered by the fellow disciples who for three years had mixed with him in closest companionship. Either he was a consummate hypocrite, or the other apostles were too simple-minded, good, and charitable to think evil of any one. Thus his peculations passed unnoticed, and the greed and avarice which wrecked his spiritual life were entirely unsuspected.” Judas’ hypocrisy is abundantly clear in his question: “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Jesus’ answer to him must not have been loud enough for the others to hear. The Greek text reads literally: “*Su eipas.*” “You said it.” The Greek verb *epo* simply means “to speak.” In the aorist form in which it appears, it could be translated: “You are right,” or “As you say,” or “So it is.”

At this point Matthew introduces what has become known as “The Lord’s Supper.” Although the Passover lamb is not mentioned here, it is obvious from the disciples’ question, earlier in the chapter, that this was the meal that was being partaken of. The story begins when the meal is already halfway consumed.

Luke records Jesus’ words at the beginning of the celebration. We read: “When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’”¹ In saying this, Jesus identified Himself with the Passover lamb. As the application of the blood of the lamb at the doorposts of the house protected the Israelites in Egypt from the destruction of the angel of death, so does the blood of Christ protect the believer from the judgment to come. Earlier Jesus had made the statement: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”² Jesus clarified here that in His suffering and death He would be the fulfillment of the Passover ritual.

It is a biblical principle that if one voluntarily dies for someone else the power of the Evil One is broken. In the Passover celebration this voluntary sacrifice was symbolized in the death of the lamb. We see in the story of Esther that the demonic plan for the extermination of the Jewish race collapsed when Esther came to the point where she said: “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”³

The bread Jesus took was the unleavened bread after which the feast following Passover is called. According to the law, this bread had to be eaten from the fourteenth till the twenty-first day of the month.⁴

The Apostle Paul gives a clear explanation of the spiritual significance of this celebration. We read: “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast — as you really are. 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.”⁵

The fact that Jesus did not take a piece of the lamb, but a piece of the bread and said that this was His body, is significant. Rather we would have expected Jesus to identify Himself with the Passover lamb. And that is the identification Paul makes, as we saw above. In taking the bread instead, Jesus changes the emphasis on the meaning of the feast. This is about people who have already partaken of the lamb; they have already been redeemed from the power of darkness. That is a once-for-all experience that lies in the past. Before them lies daily life in which they have to practice “sincerity and truth.” What Jesus is saying in choosing the bread, is that He did not only die for our salvation but, also, for our sanctification. Sanctification is not possible without redemption, but as redemption is a fact of the past, sanctification ought

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1. Luke 22:14-18
 2. John 5:24
 3. Esther 4:16
 4. See Ex. 12:15-20
 5. I Cor. 5:7,8

to receive full emphasis. Jesus envisions that people could be saved but have never progressed in the life of sanctification.

Jesus' act also shows that the changes in our life are based upon a daily application of the atonement Christ accomplished for us. The basis of our sanctification is not in our own character or circumstances, but in what Jesus did for us. We often make the mistake of confusing sanctification with self-analysis and self-improvement. There is nothing healthier than to keep probing ourselves to see what is wrong with us. It is the Holy Spirit's responsibility to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Our task is to stay connected, to remain as a branch in the vine.

The cup of the Lord's Supper represents the same truth as the bread, but it stands for the other side of the matter. Jesus says about it: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." When we drink the cup we identify with the blood. In the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice, a person would identify with the sacrificial animal by placing his hands on the animal's head. To drink the animal's blood was strictly forbidden.¹ We could say that God was the only one who could drink the blood of the sacrifice. The fact that the blood of Christ is offered as a drink, although by substitution, means a fundamental change in law. What this seems to indicate is that God considered the blood of the sacrificial animals in the Old Testament rites to be an imperfect representation of the person who brought the sacrifice, while the blood of Christ represents a perfect identification. We are "bone of His bones and flesh of His flesh." As far as God is concerned, when Christ shed His blood in our behalf, it was our blood that was shed. The author of Hebrews gives a clear description of what the new covenant entails. We read God's description: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them 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. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."² In the new covenant there is a fusion between the will of God and ours. The will of God will be written on the tablets of our heart. It will be our natural desire to do God's will. In the words of Zechariah, the knowledge of salvation comes through the forgiveness of our sins.³

We get to know God better in the darkest and most difficult days of our life. When we drink the cup we accept the forgiveness of our sins. Our drinking of the cup cannot compare with Christ's drinking of it in His suffering and death.⁴ We only drink the image of what was the ultimate reality for Him. In his comment on the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Apostle Paul adds the words which we do not find in any of the Gospel records: "Do this in remembrance of me."⁵ He also writes: "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Paul's words show us what our celebration of the Lord's Supper ought to mean for us.

In the early church the Lord's Supper was probably part of any general meal taken by believers whenever they met together. The Lord's Supper is like the monument of our redemption. It is like the heap of stones the Israelites gathered when they crossed the Jordan River.⁶ It may have been the Lord's intention that all our eating and drinking would be treated as a sacrament.

Matthew does not indicate at what point Judas left the group of disciples. From John's rendering of the event, we assume that he was present for some of the celebration.⁷

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1. See Lev. 3:17; 7:27; 17:10,11; 19:26 etc.
 2. Heb. 8:10-12
 3. Luke 1:77
 4. See John 18:11.
 5. I Cor. 11:23,26
 6. Josh 4:20-24
 7. John 13:21-30

Jesus knew, on the basis of some Old Testament prophecies, that one of His disciples would betray Him. David prophesied about the Messiah when he wrote: “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”¹ Those words also reflect Jesus’ deep disappointment in Judas. It is true that Jesus had no confidence in the trustworthiness of people with a sinful nature. John reports, even at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: “But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.”² But that does not mean that Jesus had not fellowshiped with His disciples. Jesus had shown Judas the same love He had shown to John. He had shared the hardships and joys of the last three-and-a-half years with him, as with all His disciples. Judas was not a stranger but one of the intimate friends.

At the moment where they eat and drink together, Judas plans murder. Sometimes we hear sentimental remarks about Judas, as if he had failed because of some misunderstanding about Jesus’ political role as Messiah, or because of some character flaw. But we must not excuse Judas. He planned murder, which he covered up with a smile, a piece of bread and a kiss. The fact that Judas borrowed features that belonged to the realm of love to cover up that which was born from hate, must have hurt Jesus deeply. Jesus gave Judas several warnings that were meant to make him change and repent of his demonic intentions. The fact that prophecy predicted what would happen does not mean that Jesus was insincere when He issued words of warning to Judas. Jesus’ deep emotions are an indication of His sincerity. His warnings to Judas were also meant to be a preparation for the other disciples for the events that would follow, which would have been impossible for them to understand at that time.

It is senseless to speculate what would have happened if Judas had changed his mind. The words “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”³ do not imply that Judas had no choice and that the fulfillment of Scripture was unavoidable in this manner. The Lord holds Judas personally responsible for what he did. Jesus did not pronounce the words “woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man” as a judge giving a verdict, but as a fellowman issuing a prophetic warning.

The destiny Judas chose for himself was so horrible that it would have been better had he never been born. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis discusses the question, “Would it have been better had God not created?” It would have meant the absence of pain and death. Lewis answers the problem in an indirect way. Judas was an exception. In all other cases it is better to be born! To be is better than not to be!

Campbell Morgan, in his commentary on Matthew, suggests that Jesus’ unmasking of Judas forced the Jews to immediately execute their plans. This compelled them to have Jesus crucified during the feast instead of before, as they had hoped.

At the end of the Passover celebration Jesus and the disciples sang the psalms that were usually sung at this point. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: “Ps. 113-118 were called the ‘Egyp Hallel,’ and were sung at the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles and Dedication. At the Passover, Ps. 113 and 114 ... were sung before the feast, and Ps. 115-118 after drinking the last cup. The song used by Our Lord and the disciples on the night of the betrayal (Matt 26:30), just before the departure for the Mount of Olives, probably included Pss 115-118.” A Dutch theologian observed about Jesus singing these psalms: “The author sings His own psalms.”⁴

The Holy Spirit wrote this poetry especially for this specific Passover celebration. In reading through these psalms, it is striking to observe how many times there is mention of death and salvation from death. Psalm 113 states: “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people.”⁵ In Psalm 114 we read about the exodus from Egypt,

1. Ps. 41:9
2. John 2:24,25
3. Matt. 26:24
4. K. Schilder – *The sufferings of Christ*.

and the crossing of the Jordan in order to take possession of the Promised Land in which the sanctuary will be established. In Psalm 115 we find a reference to the resurrection: “It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore. Praise the Lord.”¹ Psalm 116 speaks about death and deliverance: “For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”² The gratitude and confidence of Psalm 118 is based on the deliverance from anguish, and answer to prayer in giving freedom. “In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free. All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off. I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.”³

In one of His conversations with the Pharisees and doctors of the law, Jesus quoted vv.22 and 23 of Psalm 118, (The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes) applying the words to Himself in His death and resurrection.⁴ The singing of the Hallel was the Father’s gift to the Son for His encouragement.

Singing is also one of the mightiest weapons in the defeat of the enemy. We read in Second Chronicles: “As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.”⁵ Satan hates singing and he will flee when we engage in “making a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

At this point Jesus and the disciples leave the place where the Passover celebration took place and go to the Mount of Olives. While on the road, Jesus quotes 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.’”⁶

The words we find in Luke’s Gospel, were probably also spoken at this point: “And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”⁷ Luke also reports that Jesus asked them, “‘When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.’ The disciples said, ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That is enough,’ he replied.”⁸ The meaning of these difficult words may be that, since the shepherd will no longer be there to watch the flock and protect the individual sheep, the disciples will be subject to enemy attacks and will panic. The warning is meant to put their trust in the Father instead of in themselves.

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5. Ps. 113:7,8
 1. Ps. 115:17,18
 2. Ps. 116:8,9,15
 3. Ps. 118:5,10-14,17,18
 4. Matt. 21:42
 5. II Chron. 20:22
 6. Zech. 13:7
 7. Luke 22:29-31
 8. Luke 22:35-38

How needed this is becomes obvious in the following exchange with Peter. The warning was particularly addressed to Peter, who thought he knew himself enough that he could be trusted. Peter declares that he is willing to die with Christ if it would come to that, which he does not believe it will.

Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial does not mean that Peter had no choice. It was his self-confidence that caused his fall, not Jesus' prophecy. Matthew does not mention Jesus' prayer for Peter, which we find in Luke's Gospel: "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."¹ There are several nuggets of spiritual victory in Jesus' words that can easily escape our attention. It is not true that it was Satan's intention to sift Peter as wheat. Those who sift wheat throw away the chaff and keep the kernel. Satan wanted to throw away the kernel and keep the chaff. But that is not sifting. Jesus uses the expression to indicate that Satan's effort will turn out differently from what he intended. And then the promise of restoration after Peter's tears of repentance, his experience of sins forgiven, would propel him to the position of leadership among the disciples and the church to be born.

(iii) Gethsemane 26:36-56

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.

41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

42 He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.

44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

46 Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

48 Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him."

49 Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

50 Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for. "Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him.

51 With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

52 "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.

53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?

54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

1. Luke 22:31,32

55 At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me.

56 But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Matthew and Mark's report about this scene is almost identical. Luke's is shorter, but it gives some details that are lacking in Matthew. The eleven follow Jesus to Gethsemane but somewhere at the entrance Jesus leaves them behind taking only Peter, John and James with Him. At one point Jesus leaves them, also, and goes a little farther to pray by Himself. Evidently, Jesus was in the habit of coming here and Judas knew about it. Jesus knew that this was the place Judas had chosen to have the arrest made. This was the place where the end began.

It is obvious that Jesus felt a deep need for fellowship with the others. His choice of the three disciples and His plea to them to watch and pray indicates this. Human beings have the gift of helping others in their spiritual and emotional struggles. The love and prayer of these three could have lightened Jesus' burden in this confrontation with Satan. This was one of the most poignant moments in Jesus' life on earth, in which He reached out toward His intimate friends in order to lean on them, but they drew back and left Him alone. The disciples missed their chance; they were too preoccupied with themselves that they failed in this moment of deepest sorrow in the life of the one they loved. To stay awake for one hour should have been no problem for men who were used to spending nights on the water fishing.

Jesus' agony begins here. Luke states that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."¹ Jesus' words, "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak," although spoken to the disciples, probably refer to His own condition, as do the words "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Jesus' spirit was willing to take upon Himself the load of the sin of the world. He had come as the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world.² Now He realizes that His physical body may not be able to bear the strain. We could say that, at this point, Jesus suffered an emotional depression. The anguish was so intense that He was about to lose control over His body. The human body can take a heavy load of spiritual and mental emotions, but it does have its limitations. When Jesus said, "My soul overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," He meant that literally. Satan was present to take full advantage of this. Jesus' words, reported by Luke, "this is your hour — when darkness reigns"³ corroborate this.

As sinful human beings we cannot imagine what sin would mean to a sinless person like Jesus. To have to carry the load of sin of the world must have awakened in Him a physical horror so great that His body and soul totally rebelled against it. The knowledge that the intense physical pain of the crucifixion awaited Him added to the despair. That terrible torture and deep spiritual suffering that He would have to undergo on the cross fell upon Him here. How intense this angst was is clear from Luke's mention that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." And this happened even after "an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him."⁴

The important word in this story is "this cup." What did Jesus mean when He asked the Father to remove "this cup" from Him? It cannot refer to His death on the cross. If that were the case it would invalidate everything Jesus had ever said and done. If Jesus seriously asked to be spared crucifixion and death, He would have asked for annulment of "the eternal covenant." We read in the blessing in Hebrews: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."⁵ The Lamb

1. Luke 22:44
2. John 1:29
3. Luke 22:53
4. Luke 22:43,44

was slain from the creation of the world.¹ Everything Jesus ever did by way of miracles based on His death and resurrection would be worthless and invalid. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”² If Jesus took back these words He would have to apologize to the sellers and money changers in the temple.

An additional problem is that the writer of Hebrews states that Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane was heard. We read: “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. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”³ If “this cup” represents death on the cross, we cannot say that the prayer was heard.

Everything on earth is a shadow of a heavenly reality. What Jesus achieved here in this prayer is crucial for what He would do later in His body. We could say that the most important moment in Jesus’ suffering occurred in Gethsemane, rather than on the cross. It is here that victory is assured. If our Lord would have failed here, because His body would have been unable to carry the load, there would have been no cross and no atoning sacrifice. Although Satan may initially have wanted Jesus to die the Roman way by crucifixion, he must have discovered that what seemed a victory for him could actually be his defeat.

That is why the enemy makes the ultimate effort to eliminate Jesus in this garden, before He could reach the cross. Jesus’ prayer, therefore, was probably concerning death in Gethsemane, not at Golgotha. He understood that His body could collapse under the load as He was praying in Gethsemane, so that He would not be able to carry away the sins of the world on the cross. That, I believe, is the meaning of the cup: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” In other words: “Father do not allow Me to die here in this garden, allow me to finish my task on the cross!”

What makes this prayer the more moving is that He adds: “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” If, at the last moment, the Father would decide that the Son would not be allowed to finish His task of making atonement for the sins of the world, if the door to salvation of mankind would be closed at this point, if that were the will of the Father, Jesus would surrender to that. That is obedience unto death in a way that is totally beyond our grasp. No other human being could ever face the issues Jesus faced. No one ever surrendered to the Father’s will as the Son surrendered. How deeply this prayer must have touched the Father’s heart! This was total obedience. Never was any human being put to the test as Jesus was here, and He passed the ordeal gloriously.

Jesus expresses amazement at the fact that the disciples had fallen asleep. They had had no idea what went on in the garden. Jesus seems to have counted on them for support, but they totally failed Him. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus particularly addressed Peter, who had said to be willing to die with Christ: “Simon ... are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?”⁴ It is as if Jesus says: “You are willing to die for Me, but you are not willing to stay awake!” Jesus interrupted His prayer twice to check on the disciples. When He returned to pray He carried the additional burden of knowing that He was totally alone. We do not learn at which moment the angel appeared to strengthen Jesus, as Luke reports. It seems to have occurred at the beginning of His prayer. If we maintain that the actual battle occurred at Gethsemane, then we conclude that the actual victory was won here, also.

Jesus is now totally prepared to face what is going to happen. Judas was also prepared. He had chosen this place for the execution of his plan to deliver his master into the hands of the enemy. John informs us: “Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his

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5. Heb. 13:20,21
 1. Rev. 13:8
 2. Matt. 20:28
 3. Heb. 5:7,8
 4. Mark 14:37

disciples.”¹ He had been there himself with Jesus, spending time in prayer and fellowship! Judas’ choice of the place was an act of unsentimental calculation. This shows that Judas acted in cold blood. He sealed his betrayal with a kiss. Matthew records Jesus’ words to Judas: “Friend, do what you came for.” Luke adds: “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”²

The kiss would have a dual purpose. It was an indication to the guards as to who the person to be taken was. But Judas could have told them, for instance, “take the second one from the left.” In giving Jesus a kiss, however, Judas also fooled the other disciples as to his real intent. That way Judas protected himself against their wrath. They would not understand what went on until it was too late. The disciples must have considered Judas to be one of them up to the last moment. Jesus was the only one in the whole group who knew.

We would almost pity Judas who has to face Jesus’ question, “Friend, why have you come?” which is the rendering of the Greek in *The New King James Version*. *The New International Version* reads: “Friend, do what you came for,” but a footnote gives the alternate reading: “Friend, why have you come?” In the following panic some disciples must have seen a connection between Jesus’ earlier words: “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me” and what was happening at that moment.

Matthew does not mention the panic among those who had come to arrest Jesus, which John records for us in some detail.³ At this point it becomes clear to the disciples what was happening to their Lord, and one of them draws his sword to defend Jesus in an attempt to prevent the troops from taking Him away. John identifies him as Peter,⁴ but Matthew does not mention a name. Peter probably intended to kill and aimed for one of the heads in front of him. But he missed and merely cut off the person’s ear. Luke mentions that Jesus healed the ear,⁵ but Matthew does not state this. John identifies this man as Malchus,⁶ someone he probably knew because he was familiar with the people in the high priest’s court. Jesus’ healing of Malchus’ ear was the last miracle of healing Jesus performed before His death.

Matthew records most of Jesus’ reaction to the incident with the sword. Armed resistance against the prince of darkness is useless. It takes more than human weapons to defeat the devil. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”⁷ That was the principle Jesus applied to this incident. If Jesus had asked the Father for protection, a minimum of twelve legions of angels would have been at His disposal. According to *Barnes’ Notes*, “a legion was a division of the Roman army amounting to more than 6,000 men.”

Jesus knew exactly what was happening at this moment, because He understood the message of the whole Old Testament concerning Him. After His resurrection He would say to the two who were on their way to Emmaus: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”⁸ The disciples had read the same Bible as Jesus, but they failed to understand what it said. Jesus knew that this was the moment at which David’s prophecy about Him was being fulfilled: “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.’”⁹

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1. John 18:2
 2. Luke 22:48
 3. John 18:3-9
 4. John 18:10
 5. Luke 22:49-51
 6. John 18:10
 7. Zech. 4:6
 8. Luke 24:25,26
 9. Ps. 40:6,7

“All who draw the sword will die by the sword” sounds like an absolute pacifist maxim. We must not interpret this as a law that applies to all circumstances of life on earth. Jesus spoke these words in the particular situation in which He was. It is a man’s duty to defend his family and his country. But in the confrontation between light and darkness it is important to choose the right weapons. If God could have sent more than twelve legions of angels to defend His Son, He could have used the sword also. We see that He did use the sword in other situations, as in the conquest of Canaan. As Joshua fought the Amorites, we read: “As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites. On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a man. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!”¹ Paul corroborates this when he writes to the Thessalonians: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”² We cannot say that the sword will be banned in every confrontation. But at the moment of Jesus’ captivity it would have had an adverse affect.

Jesus’ appeal to the Scriptures raises the question as to whether God would be bound by the authority of the Bible. And the answer is “yes.” This does not mean a restriction of God’s omnipotence, because the authority of the Scriptures is the authority of God Himself. It would not mean freedom for God, if He would not obey His own laws. It is a purely human misconception that climbing higher frees one from the obligation to obey the norms of life. A person who does not submit to the highest standards becomes of slave of the lowest norms. If God would no longer hold to the norms of truth, righteousness and love, He would be unfaithful to Himself, which means that He would no longer be God.

We are reminded of the fact that Jesus spoke as man. To Him the Word of God was the absolute norm to which He had pledged wholehearted obedience.

Having said this to the disciples, Jesus turns toward the mob that came to arrest Him. We learn from Luke that there were chief priests, officers of the temple guard, and elders among the crowd.³ He reproaches them that they tried to carry out their plot to kill Him in secret, telling them that they were fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. That must have hit home to the masters of the law. Jesus had used the same words to the disciples, but there it was meant to strengthen their faith and to keep them from despair. To the priests and masters of the law, Jesus explains that it can be a doubtful honor to be a fulfiller of prophecy.

Their success here is due to the fact that they are in allegiance with the devil. Luke reports Jesus’ words: “But this is your hour — when darkness reigns.”⁴ Jesus’ appeal to Scripture robs them of their victory. God is in charge; not Satan. What the crowd was doing was part of God’s plan. They had little reason to be proud of their clever plan to catch Jesus in secret. At the same time Jesus’ statement is an act of surrender to the will of God. Such obedience always means the defeat of the enemy. When Queen Esther said: “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish,”⁵ Satan’s plan was foiled and the Jews were saved from extinction.

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1. Joshua 10:11-14
 2. II Thess. 1:6-8
 3. Luke 22:52
 4. Luke 22:53
 5. Esther 4:16

Jesus' obedience confirms the truth that what happens on earth is the expression of a heavenly reality. The blood of Jesus that would flow on earth is, what the author of Hebrews calls, "the blood of the eternal covenant." We read: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."¹ All the prophecies of the Old Testament reflect the details of this eternal covenant in heaven.

Jesus' appeal to the Scriptures causes so much fear in the heart of the disciples that they all take to flight. All of Jesus' conscious life had been governed by the written Word of God. "It is written" had been the foundation and principle that controlled all the actions of His daily life. As a twelve-year-old boy He had said to His parents: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"² That is where He lived all of His days on earth. As the events became more and more intense in the last hours of His life on earth, the role of Scripture became even more important. The last few hours of His life were saturated with the written Word. This continued even after His resurrection.

(iv.) Before the high priest and the Sanhedrin 26:57-68

57 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled.

58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.

60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward

61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"

63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy.

66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him 68 and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

According to John's Gospel, Jesus was first led before Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest.³ Annas was the retired high priest. He had served from 6-15 AD and been installed by the Roman governor Quirinius. The next governor, Valerius Gratus, had him discharged. He remained an influential man whose voice carried weight in the Sanhedrin.

Even before Jesus was questioned, the Jewish council had decided what ought to be done with Him. Matthew records that Peter followed the group, but he does not mention John, who was instrumental in

1. Heb. 13:20,21
2. Luke 2:49
3. John 18:12,13

getting Peter inside the high priest's courtyard.¹ So Peter was able to see from a distance what went on inside the hall where Jesus was being interrogated, but he probably could not hear what was being said.

The Sanhedrin tried to maintain an air of legality in the way it handled the case. But since there was no legal case it tried to make a case by bribing some witnesses. One problem appears to be that every testimony had to be corroborated by a second witness, and in every instance the second witness contradicted the first one. Finally there were two who said the same thing, which in modern times would not be a testimony acceptable in court, since it amounted to "hearsay." "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" They wanted Jesus to be condemned because He had been "bragging."

If we compare these testimonies with the ones Queen Jezebel fabricated against Naboth in order to steal his vineyard,² we wonder why Caiaphas had so much trouble. This moment had been prepared for a long time. The council had sent people to Jesus several times to try to catch Him by making Him say things that would incriminate Him, but no one had ever had any success. The last testimony about the destruction of the temple referred to a remark Jesus had made three years earlier at the beginning of His public ministry.³ At that time Jesus had accused the priests that they were destroying the temple by allowing all the commerce to be carried on in the temple court. Now they tried to turn this accusation around and hold Jesus responsible. They twisted Jesus' words, insinuating that Jesus destroyed the temple, while they were the actual destroyers.

More serious is the question as to why this supposed quotation could be constituted as an accusation of blasphemy. They acted as if words spoken against the building were criticism of God.

Jesus remained silent under all this. Jesus' silence was the dramatic climax of this court case. This left Jesus in charge of the situation. He was running the investigation. The board members were the ones being judged. This becomes clear in the following phase, where Jesus reveals Himself as the coming judge. Jesus' silence before Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate constituted God's judgment. God's silence is our condemnation.

It was only after Caiaphas asked Jesus "under oath" whether He was the Messiah, that Jesus answered in the affirmative, adding: "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." These words were an indirect quotation from Daniel's vision. We read: "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."⁴ Daniel saw in his vision the coming of "the Son of Man." The members of the Jewish council were supposed to believe these words. Jesus says here: "I am the Son of Man." The council interprets this as blasphemy. Yet, in His ministry Jesus had backed up these words by the most incredible miracles ever performed on earth. The Sanhedrin made no effort to provide any counterproof to Jesus' claim. It had no grounds for its accusation of blasphemy. Without intending to do so, it declared Daniel's prophecy invalid.

Caiaphas acts as if he is deeply shocked, but inwardly he rejoiced in having found a "legal case" against Jesus. In tearing his clothes, Caiaphas sinned against a direct command in the law of Moses, which states: "The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must not let his hair become unkempt or tear his clothes."⁵

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1. John 18:15,16
 2. See I Kings 21:11-14.
 3. John 2:19
 4. Dan. 7:13,14

The question is raised as to why Jesus' words could be interpreted as blasphemy. The Bible defines blasphemy as using the Name of God in vain. The law stated: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."¹ In Leviticus we read the story of a young man, the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father, who cursed the Name of God and was subsequently executed."² Jesus' identification of Himself with "the Son of Man" Daniel's vision does not fit any of the above. In fact Jesus had consistently called Himself "the Son of Man" throughout His public life.

In his commentary on Matthew, G. Campbell Morgan shows how the Sanhedrin broke the law in the handling of this court case. It was illegal for the members to meet at night. It was illegal to pronounce a verdict on the day of the arrest. There is no need to explain that the use of false witnesses was contrary to the law. And, as we saw, it was forbidden for the high priest to tear his clothes. So the question could be asked "Who were the blasphemers?"

There is in Jesus' answer a Greek word that draws attention. "But I say to all of you..." literally reads: "Nevertheless I say to all of you..." This puts Jesus' statement in contrast with what precedes. The contrast is between Caiaphas' unbelief and the facts. Jesus assures this man, who did not believe anything Jesus said, that he would be a witness in the greatest event that would ever occur in world history. Caiaphas would then find himself among those who would call for the mountains to fall upon them.

It did not take the Sanhedrin long to conclude that Jesus deserved capital punishment. It had already decided this before Jesus was taken in custody. Interestingly, no one, at this point, brought in the accusation that Jesus had broken the Sabbath, which before had been its greatest grievance. That had, in fact, been Jesus' "guilt." But that accusation would have drawn the attention to the miracles He had performed on the Sabbath and that was a point to be avoided.

At this moment the council gives up any pretense of dignity and self-control. These dignified leaders of the people spit in Jesus' face and hit Him, probably from the back, since they taunt Him to "prophecy" who did it. Mark mentions particularly who did what: "Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, 'Prophecy!' And the guards took him and beat him."³ How will these distinguished persons behave when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ? These people were sadists and they were the leaders of the nation. They were also blasphemers. They say to Him who is "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets,"⁴ "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

(v.) Peter's denial 26:69-75

69 Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

70 But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

71 Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

72 He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

73 After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away."

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5. Lev. 21:10
 1. Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11
 2. Lev. 24:10-16
 3. Mark 14:65
 4. Rev. 22:6

74 Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed.

75 Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

While inside the council was questioning Jesus in its illegal midnight meeting, Satan began shooting his darts at Peter. Peter had proclaimed that he was willing to die with Christ. Actually, all the disciples had said this. He had disregarded Jesus' warning that he would not be able to stand the pressure. Peter overestimated himself and he underestimated the enemy. He did not understand that the battle was not against flesh and blood, but that he was facing spiritual powers. He had no armor to defend himself in this confrontation. To face the devil and to think that one can stand up against him is a fatal mistake. The only defense against the powers of darkness is to take our position in Jesus Christ, to take up the spiritual armor and to stand. Peter failed miserably in all of this. The worst that could have happened to Peter would have been that he was arrested and put to death. But that possibility is hypothetical. John's life was not in danger and he was known to be a disciple of Christ. Peter had said he would be willing to die for Jesus, but he did not mean it. We can never face the enemy if we are not willing to give our life for Christ. If Peter were really ready to give his life for his Master, Satan would have had no power over him. As we saw in the story of Esther, the enemy is defeated when we say "If I perish, I perish."¹

Like most of us, Peter did not know himself and he did not know what he would be capable of doing under stress. This was the moment at which Peter was sifted as wheat. That was what God was doing to Peter. The Holy Spirit sifts the chaff from the wheat, but that is not what Satan intends to happen. He wants a soul that is eternally haunted by despair. John tells us that Peter was still outside the courtyard when the girl at the door asked Peter if he was a disciple of Jesus.² This was Peter's first denial. Peter had moved away from the door when another girl accosted him, saying to the people who were standing around: "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." This made Peter very nervous to the point that he swears and denies Christ for the second time. According to Luke, the second incident happened about an hour later.³ Had Peter kept his mouth shut, the third accusation would have been prevented, but Peter's Galilean accent gave him away. The accusation made no sense. Many people from Galilee came to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, but that did not make them all disciples of Christ. According to John, the third accusation was made by "a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off."⁴ This brought Peter to such despair that he began to curse himself. In swearing and cursing Peter drew God into his lie, and he spoke words that would testify against him on the Day of Judgment. Peter's violent outburst has the desired effect that people leave him alone. But it is at this point that Peter hears the rooster crowing. Luke adds the moving feature of Jesus' turning and looking in Peter's direction.⁵ All of a sudden Peter remembers Jesus' words and he wakes up to the reality of his sin. This was the second time Peter heard the crowing of a rooster in his life. And for the second time his house-of-cards collapses. The first time was at the miraculous catch of fish, when Peter fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁶ Peter goes outside brokenhearted and he burst into tears of repentance. It is obvious that Peter's tears saved him. These bitter tears of self-discovery cleansed his soul. He never knew what he would be able to do under stress. He had thought himself to be a spontaneous and honest fellow, but as he opened his mouth what came out was cowardice,

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1. Esther 4:16
 2. John 18:15-17
 3. Luke 22:59
 4. John 18:26
 5. Luke 22:61
 6. Luke 5:8

infidelity, lies and blasphemy. That was enough to cause bitter weeping. His master would have to restore him again as He did the first time. The purpose of being sifted like wheat is that clean kernels of wheat are all that is left behind.

(vi.) Jesus before Pilate 27:1-26

1 Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death.

2 They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

3 When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders.

4 "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. That's your responsibility."

5 So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

6 The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money."

7 So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners.

8 That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

9 Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel,

10 and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

11 Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

12 When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer.

13 Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?"

14 But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge — to the great amazement of the governor.

15 Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd.

16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas.

17 So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

18 For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

19 While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

21 "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.

22 "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!"

23 "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

25 All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

While the Sanhedrin pronounced the death sentence over Jesus, Judas had a change of heart. At the moment of the betrayal he had been demon possessed. John reports that Satan himself took possession of Judas as he accepted the bread of the Passover celebration.¹ We do not know how long this demon possession lasted. Undoubtedly, even during this moment of regret, demons had not left Judas. The word "remorse" is deceptive in this context. The Greek word used here is *metamellomai*, which merely indicates a

change of mind. What Judas experienced was more the beginning of an agony that would torture him throughout eternity. This kind of remorse was just as much demon inspired as the betrayal. Genuine repentance is always triggered by the image of God in man.

True and false remorse have this in common, but genuine remorse longs for rehabilitation of God's image; false remorse does not. Satan manipulated in a sly and clever way the remnants of moral consciousness that were still present in Judas' heart. He showed him just enough of God's image to make him realize how cowardly, devious and base his betrayal had been. But Judas did not see enough of God's image in order to accept the consequences of his act. The fact that he tried to take his own life indicates that he tried to escape justice by committing suicide.

We get the impression that Judas did not reflect too deeply about what he had done. He must have known that the Jewish leaders intended to kill Jesus. But it was not until he saw Jesus being bound and led away that he realized that this was the result of what he had done. At that moment he looked beyond and spoke as if Jesus' blood had already been spilled. He must have seen Jesus' swollen face as a result of the beating He had sustained. The money in his pocket began to burn. The answer the chief priests and the elders give him, "That's your responsibility" is typical for people who live self-centered lives. Yet, the priests ought to have been a bridge between God and man in this world. They give the same answer that Cain, the first murderer on earth gave: "Am I my brother's keeper?"¹ In doing so they identify themselves as the murderers of Him whose blood "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."² They not only hated Jesus, they hated everybody, including Judas. They saw Judas on his way to hell, in the greatest need in which a human soul can find itself, and they say: "We don't care!" "What is that to us?" They make it clear that they hold Judas responsible for his own act, although they paid him for it.

Judas responds by throwing the money on the floor in the temple, probably in the holy place where only the priests were allowed to enter. The priests had to go in and pick up the silver coins. They considered Judas' act a sacrilege, because it was blood money. That meant it could not be put into the offering box. The fact that they were the ones who had paid the money did not register as a sacrilege to them. I picture the scene of the priests crawling on their hands and knees to collect the coins that rolled in the corners as they tried to catch them! It did something to their dignity!

In the meantime Judas tries to kill himself by hanging. We gather from Peter's words at a later date that Judas bungled that also. Peter says that "he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out."³ Judas' suicide shows how cruel the taskmaster was to whom he had sold his soul.

There is a fundamental difference between Judas and Peter. They both began by following Jesus and ended both with remorse. When Peter began his journey with Christ, he was struck by an overwhelming sense of guilt. He had cried out "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁴ But then he left everything and followed the Lord. We know very little of Judas' motives for following Jesus. We learn that, even as a member of the inner circle, he stole money. That is an indication that he was never genuinely broken inwardly. Judas' betrayal of Jesus cannot be compared with Peter's being sifted as wheat. There were no redeeming and sanctifying elements in Judas' heart. There was no basis of faith in Judas, which means that his wrong choices did not drive him to return, as Peter did. He acknowledged that Jesus was innocent, but not that he himself was guilty. His "I have sinned" amounts to "I have made a mistake." His suicide was not a penance, but an escape. Jesus could not pray for Judas as He prayed for Peter. Intercession needs a point of repair.

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1. John 13:27
 1. Gen. 4:9
 2. Heb. 12:24
 3. Acts 1:18
 4. Luke 5:8

The conscience of the priests and elders had sustained no significant damage because of Jesus' murder. They were not ready to sin against the written law. They never considered the possibility of desecrating the temple treasury by putting Judas' blood money back in the box. There was, of course, no law written about the subject. The whole idea of paying someone in order to commit murder was against the law. The law read: "Cursed is the man who kills his neighbor secretly, and "Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person."¹

Their effort to launder the money by buying the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners is not successful either. It becomes known what money had been used to buy the field and the place became known as "the Field of Blood." The priests and elders must have foreseen this because they knew that the field could never be used as a burial plot for Jews. As far as foreigners were concerned it did not matter where the money came from. The leaders demonstrated the same disdain for non-Jews as the cattle sellers in the temple court, which Jesus had cleansed. There is some irony in the fact that the nation of Israel, which God had addressed as "a kingdom of priests," had to make provisions for the nations of the world that came to worship God and died in the process.

In connection with this purchase, Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah, apparently ascribing the statement to Jeremiah: "I told them, 'If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.' So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, '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."² The explanation of this apparent mistake may be that Zechariah's prophecy was in a scroll that contained all the prophets, beginning with Jeremiah. That means that Matthew did not make a mistake, but rather that he indicates in which scroll the quotation could be found. From a historic perspective the books of Jeremiah, Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah belong together.

There may be another reason Matthew purposely mentions Jeremiah. That prophet mentions the purchase of a field.³ In that particular chapter there are several features that are parallel to the conditions Matthew describes here. The amazing effect is that Matthew's quotation puts Zechariah's prophecy in the context of Jeremiah's. Zechariah did not mention a field, only "the potter." Jeremiah speaks about the purchase of a field at a time when no one in besieged Jerusalem considered the possibility of buying or selling real estate. Jeremiah spoke at the time of Israel's lowest point in history. The Babylonians were at the point of taking Jerusalem and ransacking the city.⁴ Jeremiah's purchase of a field at that time became a symbol of hope in time of direst need. It became symbolic of the promise of resurrection from the dead. Matthew's "mistake" has more depth than meets the eye.

In the meantime, Jesus is taken away and handed over to the Roman authorities, so that He could be crucified. We read that they bound Him, which suggests that during the interrogation before the Sanhedrin Jesus was not tied up. Luke reports that Jesus appeared before Pilate twice and that in between He was taken to King Herod.⁵ Matthew and Mark combine the two visits and report them as one. Matthew leaves out a lot of details about Pilate's interrogation of Jesus that can be found in John's Gospel. Upon Pilate's question of whether or not Jesus considers Himself to be king of the Jews, Jesus simply replies in the affirmative. But that is the only answer He gives to any of the other questions regarding the accusations brought to Him by the Jewish council.

According to the description Josephus and Philo give of Pilate, the governor was a bad character, who could be bribed, who committed atrocities and robbery. He had people executed without any due process. He was governor in Judea from 26-36 AD. Jesus could not expect any justice from the Roman

1. Deut. 27:24, 25
2. Zech. 11:12,13
3. See Jer. 32.
4. Jer. 32:24
5. Luke 23:6-12

government. The fact that Jesus' accusers could not even produce any kind of legality in their accusations did not bother Pilate. Time may have been too short to send a bribe to the governor before they appeared before him. They must have believed, however, that they had enough evidence against Pilate to blackmail him, in case he would not acquiesce to their demands.

Matthew does not provide any detail about the accusations against Jesus. According to Luke, the three major charges brought against Him were that He subverted the nation, He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar, and He claimed to be a king.¹ According to Matthew it was particularly the last point Pilate brought up, to which Jesus replied in the affirmative. John's Gospel gives us the complete text of Jesus' answer: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place. You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."² It was this explanation that made Pilate believe that Jesus was merely a religious fanatic who presented no danger to the Roman government.

The choice between Barabbas and Jesus was, to say the least, a strange one. According to the unanimous testimony of the Gospel writers, Barabbas was a criminal. Matthew calls him "a notorious prisoner." When Pilate presents him as an alternative to Jesus, he clearly believed that the popular vote would be for Jesus. Pilate was not so naïve to think that the people would have chosen against their hero. He believed that this would save Jesus' life. According to Mark, it was the people who took the initiative to ask for the release of one prisoner.³ Matthew makes it appear as if it were Pilate's idea. Pilate must have thought that only the leaders of the people wanted to get rid of Jesus but that the population as a whole would be against this.

Matthew is the only one who mentions the interruption of the process by Pilate's wife, who sent him a message, saying that she had a nightmare about Jesus and considered Him to be innocent. She warns her husband against making a mistake by condemning an innocent man. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about her: "Her name, according to ecclesiastical tradition, was Claudia, the addition of Procula being probably a mistake. In the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus (ch. 2) she is said to have been a convert to Judaism. Other accounts affirm that she ultimately became a Christian; and the Greek Church has canonized her, and inserted her in the Menology on October 27. It is probable that she was well acquainted with, and favorably disposed towards, the claims of Christ; and if she had impressed her husband in some degree with her own views, this fact may have influenced him to make some effort to save Jesus. Doubtless she had thought much upon the subject, and talked it over with Pilate; hence her dream was the natural sequence of that with which her mind had been filled in her waking moments, though providentially ordered. It speaks for the accuracy of the evangelist's account, that lately the governors had been allowed to take their wives with them into their official districts, a law previously having forbidden this indulgence." But Pilate paid no attention to his wife's pleading, being more intent upon pleasing the crowd than her.

The interruption gave the chief priests and elders time to mill among the crowd and persuade the mob to shout for Barabbas. In Bach's oratorio on the Passion of Christ according to The Gospel of Matthew, this shout is rendered with one dissonant cord shouted by a double chorus of eight voices. Nothing is more demonically inspired than a mob.

Pilate believed for a moment that he could work the crowd and make them change their mind by having Jesus flogged and then present the bleeding victim to the crowd, as we read in John's Gospel.⁴ But Matthew does not give us those details. The mob demands Jesus' death by crucifixion.

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1. Luke 23:2
 2. John 18:36,37
 3. Mark 15:8
 4. John 19:4,5

Before conceding to their demand, Pilate performs a public ritual to declare his innocence and clear his conscience. The governor had the power to release Jesus. The fact that he gave in to the desires of the mob made him an accomplice and a perverter of justice. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on Pilate's ritual: "This symbolical action would appeal to the Jewish sentiment, as it was a mode of asserting innocence prescribed in the Mosaic Law (... Deuteronomy 21:6; ... Psalm 26:6). Pilate thus publicly, in the sight of all the multitude who might not have been able to hear his words, attested his opinion of the innocence of Christ, and weakly cast the guilt upon the people, as if the administration of justice lay with them and not with him. Such lustrations were not exclusively Jewish, but were practiced both among Greeks and Romans in expiation of guilt." The mob answers Pilate's declaration by shouting hysterically: "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" *The Pulpit Commentary* calls this: "A mad and impious imprecation, the fulfillment of which quickly commenced, and has continued unto this day. The terrible events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, the overthrow of the theocracy, and the eighteen centuries of exile and dispersion, bear witness to the reality of the vengeance thus wantonly invoked. 'As for the head of those that compass me about, let the mischief of their own lips cover them' (... Psalm 140:9)." Having declared himself innocent of the crime committed, Pilate orders Jesus' execution.

(vii) Jesus abused by the soldiers 27:27-31

27 Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.

28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,

29 and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said.

30 They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.

31 After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Both flogging and crucifixion are the most cruel forms of punishment ever conceived by the human mind. In Jesus' flogging the prophecy in one of the psalms was fulfilled: "Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long."¹

After the administration of the officially ordered flogging, Jesus is given over to a bunch of sadists who administer abuse and torture to Him. Quoting Chrysostom, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The devil was then entering in fury into the hearts of all. For indeed they made a pleasure of their insults against him, being a savage and a worthless set."

These Roman soldiers had no idea what they were doing and to whom they were doing it. At some future point they will discover that they had mocked, abused and tortured the Lord of glory. But then they would stand before His judgment seat. As far as they were concerned, they were insulting a defenseless Jew and in Him the Jewish nation, for which they felt only disgust. Jesus was not debased by these actions but the perpetrators were. David's prophetic psalm, which Jesus would quote later as He hung on the cross, refers to this moment of abuse with the words: "Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me."²

Jesus was given a crown of thorns, which pierced His temples and made blood run down His face. Then the brutes mocked Him by faking to honor Him as the king of Jews. *Barnes' Notes* states about the robe the soldiers put on Him: "The 'robe' used was the same kind worn by Roman generals and other

1. Ps. 129:3

2. Ps. 22:12,13

distinguished officers of the Roman army, and also by the Roman governors. It was made so as to be placed on the shoulders, and was bound around the body so as to leave the right arm at liberty. As we cannot suppose that Pilate would array him in a new and splendid robe, we must suppose that this was one which had been worn and cast off as useless, and was now used to array the Son of God as an object of ridicule and scorn.”

There is, however, some sinister symbolism in the crown of thorns Jesus was given to wear. Man, as God intended him to be, was meant to be crowned with glory and luster. “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.”¹ According to The Epistle to the Hebrews, David’s words were a prophecy, specifically about Christ.² Here we see a human being, mutilated by sin. Of this man Jesus is the archetype. He, who knew no sin, became our sin. The result of the fall was that the earth, over which man was called to rule, would produce thorns and thistles. Without knowing what they did, these soldiers, in their cruel game, gave expression to man’s deepest need. The representative of mankind wore a crown of thorns!

Having satisfied their sadistic lusts, they led Jesus away to be crucified.

(viii) The crucifixion 27:32-44

32 As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

33 They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull).

34 There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.

37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

38 Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

39 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads

40 and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

41 In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.

42 "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

44 In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

John’s Gospel states that Jesus was carrying His own cross as He went out to Golgotha.³ The other evangelists mention that a certain Simon of Cyrene was recruited by the Roman soldiers to carry it for Him. Evidently, Jesus started out by carrying His cross but collapsed under the weight as a result of the physical abuse He had sustained in the flogging and other torture. The crossbeam would not have been made of high quality hardwood, but it must have been heavy enough that carrying it on a bleeding back would have made it a crushing weight.

The scene of someone condemned to die carrying his own cross must have been a common one in Israel under Roman occupation. It was common enough that Jesus could use it as an illustration of what it

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1. Ps. 8:5,6
 2. Heb. 2:9
 3. John 19:17

meant to follow Him. He had said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”¹ We can hardly imagine how those radical words must have sounded to fashionable Israelites of that day. Only hardened criminals on their way to be executed carried their crosses. I am reminded of the situation in The Netherlands under Nazi occupation during World War II. To be put in prison by the enemy in those days became a badge of honor for every Dutchman. In carrying His cross, Jesus transformed the cross from a symbol of shame into an icon of glory. He conquered disgrace by collapsing under it. In the same way He conquered death by dying.

This transformation from shame to glory was, first of all, for God, but then also for men. And the first one to benefit from it was Simon of Cyrene. We know nothing of this man, except that he came from Cyrene and Mark tells us that he was “the father of Alexander and Rufus.”² Simon must have had fields outside the city and he may have come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, when he was randomly requisitioned by the Roman soldiers to carry the crossbeam for Jesus. The fact that his two sons are mentioned makes us believe that they may consequently have played a role in the early Christian church. If this is true, their father’s service must have become a precious event for them.

Although all the Gospel writers agree about the main lines in the description of the crucifixion, they all highlight different phases in the details. Matthew mentions that Jesus refused the wine that was given to Him, the dividing up of Jesus’ clothes among the soldiers, the plaque with the accusation that Jesus was **THE KING OF THE JEWS**, and the insult hurled at him by the public. The latter receives the greatest emphasis in his report.

Matthew reports that the potion Jesus was offered to drink consisted of wine mixed with gall. Mark mentions myrrh, which would work as an anesthetic, somewhat dulling the pain of the crucifixion. The drug was probably not meant to ease the suffering of hanging on the cross but more to help the soldiers drive in the nails without the victim struggling too much. Jesus refused the drug and submitted to being nailed to the cross without struggle.

Having crucified Jesus and the two other victims, the soldiers sat down to divide the clothes. John gives a more complete account of this incident.³ We understand from his report that there were four soldiers who were there to carry out the execution and to stand watch. As most Jews, Jesus probably had five pieces of clothing: a head-cloth or turban, sandals, a belt, an undergarment and another piece of cloth on top. John says that the undergarment “was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,” meaning that it was good quality. According to *Vincent Word Studies*, this garment was grey with red stripes. It may seem strange that this piece of clothing was the high quality one, the one that was not visible. It could be seen as symbolic of the fact that the covering of His divine glory was characteristic for His incarnation. What the soldiers did was in fulfillment of David’s prophecy: “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”⁴ To those who were able to grasp this, the fulfillment of most of the prophecy of this psalm in which this quotation occurs must have seemed more than an eerie coincidence. At this point Jesus was probably the only one who fully understood this. The culmination of fulfillment came when Jesus cried: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”-which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In the throwing of the dice the Holy Spirit made clear in the fulfillment of David’s prophecies that Jesus’ crucifixion was not an unforeseen accident, but that which had happened to Jesus fitted into God’s plan that had been prepared before the foundation of the world.

The fact that the soldiers threw dice to decide who would get what part of Jesus’ clothes seems to indicate that Jesus hung totally naked on the cross, adding to the shame of the execution. As one poet wrote:

1. Matt. 16:24,25
2. Mark 15:21
3. John 19:23,24
4. Ps. 22:18

“All rights denied, naked Christ died.” If Jesus could say earlier that the Father would clothe His children more than the lilies of the field, now does the Son of Man not only have no place to lay his head, He has not a piece of clothing to cover His nakedness. Nakedness is related to sin. Adam and Eve experienced shame when they sinned. What they experienced as embarrassment for their physical condition was actually shame for the condition of their soul. God provided them with a cover for their shame. When Jesus carried away the sins of the world, God did not allow any cover for His Son. Jesus carried away our sin and our shame. The author of Hebrews encourages us: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”¹ In the same way as there was no medicated wine for His pain, so there was no cover for His shame.

Matthew also mentions that two criminals were crucified at the same time one on either side of Jesus. Only Luke mentions that one of them turned to Jesus and asked for grace.²

While hanging on the cross Jesus is subjected to a rain of abuse by people who came to watch the execution, by “the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders” and by the robbers, crucified with him. But, as we saw, Luke specifies that it was only one of the two who took part in the ridicule. The phrase “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,” was used in mockery by those who had no idea what they were saying. They repeated the words of the witnesses during the trial, who had declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”³ This was a distortion of what Jesus had actually said earlier in His ministry: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days,”⁴ referring to His death and resurrection. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “These revilers are doing the devil’s work, and are quoting his words (... Matthew 4:6), in thus taunting Jesus. They refer to our Lord’s own statement before Pilate (... Matthew 26:64), thinking it expedient to keep this claim before the people’s mind. He might, indeed, have answered the jibe by coming down from the cross; but then, as Bishop Pearson says, in saving himself he would not have saved us.” This facet of Jesus’ suffering evokes the mockery of the crowd. The sight of this helpless naked victim tickled them to laughter.

The climax of Christ’s suffering was from twelve noon till three o’clock, when an extended eclipse wrapped the whole country in darkness. *Barnes’ Notes* comments here: “This could not have been an eclipse of the sun, for the Passover was celebrated at the time of the full moon, when the moon is opposite to the sun. Luke says (Luke 23:45) that ‘the sun was darkened,’ but it was not by an eclipse. The only cause of this was the interposing power of God-furnishing testimony to the dignity of the sufferer, and causing the elements to sympathize with the pains of his dying Son. It was also especially proper to furnish this testimony when the ‘Sun of righteousness’ was withdrawing his beams for a time, and the Redeemer of men was expiring. A thick darkness, shutting out the light of day, and clothing every object with the gloom of midnight, was the appropriate drapery with which the world should be clad when the Son of God expired. This darkness was noticed by at least one of the pagan writers. Phlegon, a Roman astronomer, speaking of the 14th year of the reign of Tiberius, which is supposed to be that in which our Savior died, says ‘that the greatest eclipse of the sun that was ever known happened then, for the day was so turned into night that the stars appeared.’”

The Pulpit Commentary corroborates this and states: “That it could not be an ordinary eclipse is certain, as the moon was then full, it being the Paschal time, and the darkness thus produced would have lasted but a few minutes. Nor had it any connection with the subsequent earthquake (ver. 51), as some unscientific exegetes have supposed. On such occasions a thickness of the atmosphere has been noticed, but such an occurrence could never have been described in the words used by the synoptists; and, the earthquake

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1. Heb. 12:2
 2. Luke 23:40-43
 3. Matt. 26:61
 4. John 2:19

itself was no ordinary event, and took place in no ordinary manner. We cannot doubt that the darkness was supernatural, conveying a solemn lesson to all who beheld it. When we consider what was being done on Calvary, who it was that was dying there, what was the object of his Passion, what was the infinite and unspeakable effect of the sacrifice there offered, is it wonderful that the Divine Architect controlled Nature to sympathize with her Creator, that as a supernatural effulgence heralded the Savior's birth, a supernatural darkness should shroud his death? We are in the region of the Divine. What we have learned to regard as natural laws (but which really are only our formulary for expressing our experience of past uniformity) were superseded for the time by the interference of the Lawgiver; he used the material to enforce the spiritual being the Lord of both. Whether the darkness extended beyond Judaea unto all that part of the earth which was then illumined by the light of the sun, we cannot tell. Some of the Fathers refer to it as if it was universal."

We could say that it was appropriate for all of nature to be wrapped in darkness when the punishment of man's sin that had dragged all of creation with it in its fall came to its climax.

It was at this point in His suffering that Jesus cried "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" quoting the twenty-second psalm. The actual Hebrew text of Psalm Twenty-two reads: "*Eeliy Eeliy laamaah 'zabtaaniy.*" Jesus used the Aramaic version of the psalm. It is quite possible that during His excruciating pain Jesus quoted the whole psalm to Himself. There are moments at which pain and agony are so intense that the mind is unable to function rationally. At such times the written Word of God can be the only thing left. The fact that in crying out this question of total despair, Jesus quoted Scripture as a means to hold on to the presence of God. This, in a sense, made the question the answer.

Jesus experienced what David prophesied "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow."¹ There are three factors that increased Jesus' suffering at this point. His physical condition was at its worst, the full load of sin was upon Him and there was darkness. Jesus entered into a new phase of crisis. Nature seems to realize what the Lord of creation is doing here. The universe shudders as He who sustains all things by his powerful word bends under the load of sin. As Paul says, "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."² The whole creation experienced severe spasms at the moment when the perfect Man of God carried away the sin of the world. This is the culmination of the fall. As the fall of man had affected nature, so nature affects the consequences of the fall. When in the light our senses are incited by outside stimuli; when in darkness those stimuli fall away and we are thrown back upon ourselves. Jesus suffered in darkness, all alone. For those who are ill, nights are long. This was the longest night for our Lord. Nothing more happened outside. The taunt and mockery have ceased; the murderers are quiet; loneliness is all that is left. It has never been so dark on earth. The pain of the flogging and of the crucifixion became more intense, to the point of being unbearable. At this point Jesus flees to all that is left to Him, the Word of God.

One difficulty is that the Word of God also intensified Jesus' suffering by condemning sin. It is the Word of God that pronounces the curse over Jesus. "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."³ Jesus knew the verse and He must have remembered it at this point. He knew He had come to the point where the curse of God was upon Him. In a way this removed all ground from under Jesus' feet. Yet, the Word of God was not taken away from Him. If, as in the parable, Satan had been able to pick up the seed sewn in Jesus' heart, everything would have been lost. But the enemy had no access to the heart of Him who knew no sin, but who was made sin in our behalf. The Word that was hidden in Jesus' heart is the Word of God, that is creative and life-giving. The potential comfort of the Word remains even if the Word condemns. The fact that the Word remained in Jesus' heart cannot be undone. Jesus arrived here at the outer frontier of all suffering. Physically, mentally and spiritually He stood at the edge of the abyss. Jesus is no longer able to

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1. Ps. 116:3
 2. Rom. 8:22
 3. Deut. 21:23

act creatively in His fellowship with the Father. He could no longer formulate words of prayer. Only the mechanism of memorized Scripture still functioned. Whether Jesus had only memorized Psalm Twenty-two or others as well, we do not know. We do not know, either, what other parts of the psalm Jesus quoted to Himself. It has been suggested that our Lord may have said the whole psalm to Himself while hanging on the cross. It is even possible that Jesus said the words backwards, beginning at the end and ending with the first verse. No better description of Jesus' condition, being forsaken by God, fits the picture.

As a sinless human being, our Lord must always have had a deep consciousness of the presence of the Father. As we, imperfect children of God who are on their way, have experiences of God's presence, how much more the perfect Son! This foundational certainty disappeared all of a sudden. God closed the door on His Son. Jesus not only felt rejected, but like the scapegoat in Leviticus that was chased into the desert carrying the sin of the nation, the Lamb of God that carries away the sin of the world was chased away from the presence of God. The Father throws stones at the Son He loves. And the Son cries out: "Why ... why? Nothing more heartrending ever occurred. All questions all of mankind ever sent up to heaven are compressed in this "why?" It seems that all human suffering that is the result of man's sin is expressed in the question the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"¹ and this is the question Jesus asked of the Father. It passes human understanding how the Second Person of the omniscient Trinity could ask the First Person such a question. In participating in our humanity Jesus partook in our human despair. This was part of the Incarnation.

We could say, however, that the deepest meaning of Jesus' cry was the same as that of Jacob when he wrestled with the angel and asked "begged for his favor."² The essence of Jacob's struggle, according to Hosea, was that he asked for grace and that was the reason he conquered. Jesus hung on the cross, carrying the sins of the world. In uttering this cry of human despair, He basically said: "Father, I am full of sin, forgive Me!" It is still difficult to understand that in this manner victory over sin was won.

It is not clear whether the spectators at the cross actually misunderstood what Jesus was saying or whether they mockingly said: "He's calling Elijah." These people may not have understood that Jesus was using the Hebrew text in the vernacular.

Matthew's remark that someone gave Jesus a drink of vinegar is explained by John's report that Jesus cried "I am thirsty."³ What happened was another fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy: "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst."⁴ All this was part of the mockery that continued.

The Bible also teaches that there is in the heart of God a deep desire of which human thirst is an image. Jesus' request for a drink is, first of all, an indication that the kingdom has come. During the communion celebration, Jesus had said: "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."⁵ That is what John means when he says "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.'"⁶ The eternal gates opened and the Lord of glory was about to enter. His Nazarite vow had come to an end in the finishing of His abstinence. This gives a clear indication where Jesus' work began and where it ended. However important had been Jesus' preaching and however sensational the miracles He performed, those were not the actual reason for His coming into the world. He had come to give His life as a ransom for many.

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1. Gen. 3:9
 2. Gen. 32:22-32; Hos. 12:4
 3. John 19:28
 4. Ps. 69:21
 5. Matt. 26:29
 6. John 19:30

Jesus' death was the fulfillment of the Word of God. All that had been written before would be meaningless without this event. This was God's last Word. This is what God had to say by His Son. As the opening words of Hebrews read: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."¹ Here we are at the climax of world history.

If we realize the greatness of this fact, the mockery of the spectators becomes the more sinister. They not only do not want to quench the thirst of God's Son by giving Him the sponge filled with vinegar, they also want to wait and see if Elijah would show up. They purposely twist Jesus' cry to *Eloi* to make it sound like Elijah. The mention of Elijah is a reference to the prophecy of Malachi, who said: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."² Their mockery is proof of the fact that they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. But we knew this already, otherwise, Jesus would not be hanging on a cross.

(ix) Jesus' death and burial 27:50-66

50 And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.

52 The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53 They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

55 Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs.

56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

57 As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.

58 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.

59 Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

60 and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.

63 "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.'

64 So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

65 "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how."

66 So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Matthew states that Jesus "cried out again in a loud voice," but does not tell us what the words were. John gives us His final triumphant word "It is finished."³ The Greek word is *Tetélestai*, which is the

1. Heb. 1:1,2

2. Mal. 4:5

perfect past of the word *teleo*, meaning “I finish,” “I complete,” “I fulfill,” or “I pay.” This cry is the turning point of creation. Time stands still and turns on its hinges. All of creation, which up to then had moved away from God, is stopped in its fall and begins its way back home. Jesus makes payment in full for the world’s guilt. This is the completion of the work of which Jesus had said earlier: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”¹ The work is finished and the enemy is defeated. The faith of Jesus that had reached forward to this moment when performing the miracles of healing of the sick and raising of the dead is here validated.

The demand of God’s holiness and love is satisfied completely. As the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you,”² so here the reproach of sin is rolled away from all of creation. God’s honor has been restored and obedience has asserted itself.

Nature affirms the victory in a severe earthquake that caused the rocks to split, graves to open and the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy in the temple to be torn in two from top to bottom. Originally, the curtain had kept the Ark of the Covenant from view. God had instructed Moses: “Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the Testimony behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.”³ According to the rabbinic tradition, the curtain was about five inches thick and made of seventy-two braids, each consisting of twenty-four threads. Its length was sixty feet and its width thirty. Surprisingly, it was replaced every two years.⁴ *The Epistle to the Hebrews* gives us the deeper spiritual application of this miraculous phenomenon. We read: “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.”⁵

The tearing of the curtain was symbolic for what happened on the cross. The curtain represented the human body of Christ. We furthermore read in Hebrews: “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...”⁶ What happened to the reality on the cross also happened to the symbol of it in the temple. In this case what happens on earth by way of pictogram is not symbolic of the reality in heaven; both shadow and reality occur on earth. All this is the ultimate result of the incarnation. This is no longer a shadow of the reality, it is the reality. The same thing happens in heaven. We read in Revelation: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.”⁷

In bringing the event John saw in his apocalyptic vision into the picture of what happened on the cross at the moment of Jesus’ death, we understand that the tearing of the curtain began in heaven. This was no act of human vandalism. The veil was torn in two from top to bottom; it started from above. In heaven the Ark of the Covenant became visible; on earth the ark, the symbol of God’s presence was no longer there. But the reality of God’s presence was; Immanuel, God with us, was the One whose body had been torn, opening for us access into the very presence of the Father. The Ark of the Covenant becomes visible, although the ark itself was no longer to be found. The invisible reality of Exodus 25:22 is completely revealed in the dying of

3. John 19:30
1. John 5:17
2. Josh. 5:9
3. Ex. 26:31-33
4. According to *Vincent Word Studies*.
5. Heb. 9:8
6. Heb. 10:19,20
7. Rev. 11:19

Jesus Christ. God's presence, that is His holiness, justice, love and faithfulness is fully exhibited in the death of His Son.

In the Old Testament ritual of Yom Kippur, after the high priest had sprinkled the blood on the cover of the ark, the heavy curtain would close again. The separation between God and man would remain. Here the blood of the New Testament is being sprinkled, the blood of the eternal covenant, which brought about complete reconciliation. The way is open and will remain so throughout eternity. We will never be able to measure the depth of the enormity of this miracle. That which kept us separate from God has been removed.

This also means that that which separates us from one another as human beings, as well as that which separates us from ourselves, has been removed in principle.

The earthquake that accompanied this earth-shattering event was predicted by Haggai when he said: "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. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. 'On that day,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord Almighty."¹

It is this quake caused on earth that brings back the glory of the Lord and dethrones Satan. Speaking about what happened on Mount Sinai, the author of *Hebrews* writes: "At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain."²

Matthew's report about the opening of the graves and resurrection of the people buried in them is one of the most puzzling statements of the New Testament. We would wish that the Scriptures had furnished us with more details, but the report is very short and cryptic. That an earthquake could open the graves is quite plausible. It is the resurrection of the saints and their appearance to many people that beg clarification. Some Bible scholars assume that Matthew reached ahead to events in the future and described what actually would happen on the day of Jesus' resurrection. It appears that some fundamental structural changes took place in Hades at the moment of Jesus' resurrection. We can only guess at what those changes were. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians, states about Jesus' ascension: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."³ The author of *Hebrews* states that by His death, Jesus destroyed Satan who held the power of death.⁴ And in Revelation, Jesus says to John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."⁵ But this does not indicate that at the moment of Jesus' death this total resurrection occurred. The Bible gives us no hint in this direction. Matthew only states that some bodies, buried in the vicinity of Jerusalem, came out of their tombs and appeared to people in the city. The only thing we can say with certainty about Matthew's account here is that it is one of the darkest pages in the Gospels.

What the Gospel writers agree about is the reaction of the people at the cross at the moment of Jesus' death. Matthew records particularly the reaction of the Roman soldiers and their centurion, who

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1. Hag. 2:7-19, 22,23
 2. Heb. 12:26,27
 3. Eph. 4:8
 4. Heb. 2:14
 5. Rev. 1:18

exclaimed: “Surely he was the Son of God!” Ironically, the first “converts” to the Gospel were some Gentiles. Of course, this does not mean that these people understood the whole truth. The impression the Roman soldiers had was probably connected to their mythology. But it must have been a shock to those, who a few hours earlier had given in to their lower lusts and sadism when they mocked Jesus and crowned Him with thorns. Fear of guilt must have hit their hearts. This sense of guilt must have been shared by the spectators who knew Jesus’ claim of being the Messiah. Zechariah’s prophecy about them was being fulfilled: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”¹

Matthew’s mention of the women who witnessed Jesus’ death from a distance serves the purpose of preparing us for the resurrection. The total number is not given, but the names of some are mentioned as “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.” We find two of them at the grave early Sunday morning.

Late in the afternoon, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate to ask for Jesus’ body so it could be buried before the beginning of the Sabbath. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It was the Roman custom to leave criminals hanging on the cross for days, till their bodies were devoured by birds and wild animals; the Jewish Law enacted that when bodies were penally suspended, they should be taken down and buried before night (... Deuteronomy 21:22, 23), that the land might not be defiled. Tomorrow (beginning at sunset), being a specially solemn day, as combining the sabbath and the Passover celebration, the Jews were particularly anxious that the crucified bodies of our Lord and the two robbers should be taken away and put out of sight before the sabbath began.” Matthew does not mention the breaking of the bones of the other two victims of crucifixion, nor the piercing of Jesus’ side.²

This Joseph is called a disciple of Jesus. Luke mentions that he had voted in the Sanhedrin against Jesus’ conviction.³ Joseph’s seat in the Jewish council, as well as his reputation as being wealthy, must have given him easy access to the governor. Having received permission, Joseph prepared Jesus’ body for a hasty funeral and buries Jesus in his own grave, which was a small cave in the vicinity of Golgotha. If the burial site is the place known as Gordon’s Calvary, as some believe, it is the cave right below the Calvary hill in, what is known as “the garden tomb.” John mentions that Nicodemus assisted Joseph in this and that he was the one who bought the spices, “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.”⁴

In spite of the haste with which the spices are brought, they actually came too late. About one whole week earlier Mary of Bethany had understood the importance of the moment and had anointed Jesus in preparation for His burial. Everything was done in a hurry, because Mark and Luke record that Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome went to the grave on Sunday morning with the intent to anoint Jesus’ body.⁵

Commenting on Joseph’s actions, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “We must remember that this act of Joseph and his friends was not only a bold proceeding, but an act of great self-denial. Contact with a corpse caused ceremonial defilement of seven days’ duration, and thus they would be debarred from taking their part in the great Paschal solemnity, with its solemn and joyful observances. But the love of Jesus and the unselfish desire to render him honor enabled them to rise superior to religious prejudices, and willingly to make the required sacrifice.”

The fact that Jesus was entombed in Joseph’s grave was the fulfillment of another Old Testament prophecy. The intent had been to dump Jesus’ body in a hole hastily dug by the Roman soldiers for the

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1. Zech. 12:10
 2. John 19:31-34
 3. Luke 23:50
 4. John 19:39
 5. Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53

purpose of disposing of the bodies of the three crucified. Isaiah prophesied: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.”¹

The two women, mentioned earlier, kept watch at the grave, throughout the evening, probably several hours after sunset, which was the beginning of the Sabbath and the first day of Passover.

The next day, which is the Sabbath, probably after sunset, a delegation of priests, probably Sadducees, and some Pharisees went to Pilate to ask for guards and for sealing of the grave. They appear to be the only ones who took Jesus’ words about His resurrection seriously. The irony of the situation is that the Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the dead and the Sadducees did not. The opposing parties had managed to bridge their differences in order to prevent Jesus’ resurrection. It is difficult to determine whether the Pharisees actually believed that Jesus would rise from the dead. It is certain that the Sadducees did not believe. They may have come up with the idea that the disciples could use Jesus’ words in order to stage a plot of deception. That is why the grave had to be sealed and guarded.

According to Edersheim, in his book about Israel in the days of Jesus, the large stone that closed the grave was held in place by smaller stones and the seal was placed between those little stones and the large one. The leaders of the nation felt more threatened by Jesus in His death than they did during His life! Their fear about what a dead Jesus could do to them must have evoked the ridicule of “the One enthroned in heaven. David wrote: “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”²

There must have been something frightening in Jesus’ own announcement of His resurrection. It meant that He had foretold His own death. It meant that death had not come to Him as an unpleasant surprise. Everything had gone so far according to plan, Jesus’ plan. The strange phenomenon is that those who hated Him paid more attention to what He had said than those who loved Him.

We must think of the similarity between the sealing of Jesus’ tomb and the seal placed on the lions’ den in which Daniel was supposed to find death.³ Human initiative tries to seal stones in an effort to prevent what God had promised to do on the basis of the blood of an eternal covenant.⁴ No power in heaven or hell would have been able to prevent the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ body was laid in the grave Friday evening before six o’clock and before sunrise on Sunday morning He rose from the dead. That was a time span of barely thirty-six hours. The fact that the Jews call this three days and three nights is due to their way of reckoning time. For the Jew the day began at 6 o’clock at night. Even if Jesus were laid to rest at ten minutes to six, it was reckoned, at ten minutes past six, that He had been there two days. Friday 5.59 P.M. till Saturday 6 P.M. was two days. From Saturday 6 P.M. till Sunday morning was the third day. We would say it was one day and two nights.

The important part is that Jesus was in the grave during the Sabbath. This Sabbath contrasts with the one at which God finished His creation and enjoyed in rest the beauty of what He had created. What happened was the culmination of the words Jesus had spoken earlier: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”⁵ The word of restoration that the Father had begun immediately upon the fall into sin by Adam and Eve, Jesus completes, and here is where the old Sabbath finishes and the new one begins.

The Bible does not explain systematically what Jesus did. But it must have been that as His body was laid to rest in the tomb, His spirit descended into the realm of death, into Hades. A Dutch theologian⁶

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1. Isa. 53:9
 2. Ps. 2:4
 3. Dan. 6:18
 4. Heb. 13:20
 5. John 5:17
 6. Dr. A. K. Schilder – *Christ in His suffering*.

describes how Jesus entered the place “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”¹ He says that the fire did not affect Jesus because the worm of corruption was not in Him. We read in Hebrews that up to that moment the devil had the power over death, but in His death Jesus took this power away from him. “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.”² And in Revelation, Jesus says to His bosom friend John: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”³ This victory was won on the greatest of all Sabbaths. The greatest dead of all dead, was laid in the grave the greatest of all Sabbaths, in the greatest of all graves, where, on the greatest of all Sabbaths He took the keys of death and Hades, the kingdom of death from the hands of the guardian in order to rise and live forever. The devil may have thought that he had caught a human soul which he could intimidate and torture throughout eternity. He had never been more wrong. Jesus descended into the prison cell and the cell exploded.

For sinful men the Sabbath had been a form of death. The person who did not keep the Sabbath was put to death by stoning.⁴ It was appropriate that Jesus, the great transgressor of the Sabbath, spent the Sabbath in the grave. But this turned out to be the greatest of all Sabbaths, at which Jesus would wrestle the keys from the hands of Satan. On this greatest of all Sabbaths, Jesus performed the greatest of all His works. No one ever worked so hard on a Sabbath as Jesus on this day, the day of His death. In doing this He made it possible, once for all, to enter into the real rest of God.

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1. Mark 9:48
 2. Heb. 2:14
 3. Rev. 1:18
 4. Ex. 31:15; Num. 15:32-36

Part Seven: The Proof of the King (28:1-20)

I. The Empty Tomb 28:1-15

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.

3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.

4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.

6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

9 Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,

13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'

14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."

15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

It is strange that the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ is not described by any of the Gospel writers. Even Matthew's report about the coming down of an angel does not mention the fact of the resurrection. Mark merely states: "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."¹ The angel comes to roll away the stone, but even he was not an eyewitness. It is obvious that Jesus was not dependent upon an angel who had to roll away the stone for Jesus to get out of the grave. John mentions that the doors were locked when Jesus appeared to His disciples on the evening of that day.² If locked doors did not keep Him out, a tombstone would not hold Him in. When the angel appeared Jesus had already risen from the dead. That majestic event occurred, first of all, in the heavenly places, far from where the human eye could see. That what became visible on earth had already taken place in the spiritual world.

The living Jesus appeared, first of all to the guards, who became like dead men. In the realm of the dead, the devil and his demons had already fled in the same panic that struck the guards. He who had been "led like a lamb to the slaughter,"³ rose as the Lion of Judah with all the power and majesty of God.

1. Mark 16:9

2. John 20:19

3. Isa. 53:7

What the angel did in the rolling away of the stone served the purpose of showing some chosen witnesses in this world that the resurrection had taken place. Matthew only mentions two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, but there was probably a group of three or four, which included Salome and one more. It is likely that Mary Magdalene ran away immediately upon seeing that the stone had been rolled away to report to Peter and John that Jesus' body had been stolen.¹ The other women came closer to the tomb and saw the angel. Luke reports that there were two angels.² It is interesting to see the "confusion" among the Gospel writers in the way they report what happened. This "confusion" accentuates the overwhelming effect and glory of the resurrection. It was all so tremendous that it was difficult to keep the various testimonies straight. Luke reports the angel as saying 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.'"³ The first word the angel spoke was "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus." The guards did not hear such words, but they were not looking for Jesus as the women were.

The angel invites the remaining women to look inside the grave to see the place where Jesus' body had been laid. They must have seen what John describes in greater detail as he entered the grave with Peter. We read: "He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen."⁴ Jesus' body had been partly embalmed before it was wound with burial cloth and when Jesus rose, what was left behind was like an empty cocoon that had the form of His body. The strange sight was powerful proof of the fact that something supernatural had occurred.

Having seen this, the angel sent them to the disciples to tell them that Jesus was risen and that He expected them to come to a reunion in Galilee.

The women left with a mixture of fear and joy. Their joy was caused by the fact of the resurrection; the fear was a leftover of their frayed emotions at the shock of seeing an open grave and an angel. Their panic ceases as Jesus revealed Himself to them.

We are so greatly influenced by our experience with death that it is impossible to imagine what it would be to see somebody whom you had seen dead, fully alive. Not only was the Jesus they saw alive, He is the resurrection and the life embodied. The vanity of life, of which Ecclesiastes speaks, becomes meaningful and purposeful.

Jesus met the women with the greeting which in Greek is given as *chairo*, "be cheerful." This exuberant greeting was very appropriate in connection with this victory of life over death. We find the same word for the first time in the New Testament when the magi are on their way to Bethlehem. "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."⁵ *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "This is not the usual Eastern salutation, 'Peace be unto you!' but one that came with peculiar significance on their lately sorrow-stricken hearts. So he had said to his apostles, 'Your sorrow shall be turned into joy' (... John 16:20), and now he made good his word. This is the only one of Christ's appearances in Jerusalem or its neighbourhood that St. Matthew relates."

The women reacted to Jesus' revelation of Himself to them by falling on the ground, clasping Jesus' feet and worshipping Him. I cannot think of a more appropriate reaction.

While the women were on their way to tell the disciples, the guards reported to the chief priests what had happened to them. The reaction of the priests is interesting. For a Roman soldier to flee from his place of duty was a capital crime. It seems that Pilate had loaned his soldiers to the Sanhedrin without any

1. John 20:1,2
2. Luke 24:2
3. Luke 24:5-7
4. John 20:6,7
5. Matt. 2:10

conditions. This meant that they had to report to the Jewish council and not to Pilate. There is a hasty convocation of the Jewish council, and the story was concocted that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body while the guards were asleep. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on this: "This was as absurd as it was false. On one hand, the terror of the disciples, the smallness of their number (only eleven;) and their almost total want of faith; on the other, the great danger of such a bold enterprise, the number of armed men who guarded the tomb, the authority of Pilate and of the Sanhedrin, must render such an imposture as this utterly devoid of credit." And *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* adds: "The self-contradictory nature of the account they were to circulate (as if sleeping soldiers would know what had happened, or that all would have been sleeping at once, or that Roman soldiers would incriminate themselves in this way) makes its acceptance most incredible. Yet the story was widely disseminated among Jews (no article). Matthew, writing particularly from the Jewish viewpoint, gives the sordid details that explain the tale. The promise of the Sanhedrin to persuade Pilate if he should take action may mean that a bribe would be offered, or that they would assure the governor that the Sanhedrin was satisfied with the soldiers' performance."

II. The Great Commission 28:16-20

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew is the only one who outlines the encounter of the disciples with Jesus in Galilee. He skips the other appearances described by the other evangelists. What the Apostle Paul states about Jesus' appearances: "He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep,"¹ probably refers to the meeting in Galilee.

The point of this meeting was not only to give proof of His resurrection, but also to demonstrate the return of His divine prerogatives. Speaking about the incarnation, Paul writes: "[He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."² The Greek verb used is *ekénoosen*, "to make empty." When the Second Person of the Trinity became a human being, He left His divine attributes behind. He did not cease to be God, but He came to earth and lived intentionally within all the limitations that are imposed upon all human beings. Here Jesus states that His omnipotence is given back to Him by the Father.

This introduces the present dispensation of which David prophesied: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"³ This is the power Jesus exercises at present, in which He claims back everything that had rebelled against the authority of God in the fall of Adam, in order that "God may be all in all."⁴

1. I Cor. 15:5,6

2. Phil. 2:7

3. Ps. 110:1

4. See I Cor. 15:27,28.

Christ took up the mandate God had originally given to Adam at his creation, which Adam had squandered when he gave in to Satan's temptation. What happened here in Galilee was the paradoxical event in which a human being is clothed with all the attributes of God Almighty. No wonder that those who saw Him worshipped.

We have very little understanding of what God intended to do with man He created in His image and likeness. As the Apostle John writes: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."¹ That is the essence of being a child of God. C. S. Lewis writes: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare." It is so difficult for us to grasp that that which is the essence of God's being in His revelation of Himself here is so inseparable from the fact that Jesus was man. This makes us say also: "No wonder some doubted!"

It is this divine glory that forms the starting point of the preaching of the Gospel. This manifestation of Jesus' divinity cannot be separated from the presentation of the message.

In Mark's Gospel we read Jesus' words as: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."² The message is the double miracle that God became man so that man might become God. The Gospel does not only consist in reporting the facts and their meaning, but in the emphatic need for man to respond. In Mark's Gospel we read: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."³ Matthew uses the expression "making disciples."

There are three facets in our response to the Gospel message: faith, baptism and obedience. Through faith we enter into a new relationship with God, which is based on trust that creates new life and assurance of forgiveness of sin. Baptism is the testimony that indicates a break with the past and declares that there is a personal identification with the suffering death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus states emphatically that baptism must be "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." What is important is not the water or the quantity of it, but the fact that a spiritual reality is expressed in material things. When Adam and Eve were tempted, sin only took effect when Eve stretched out her hand, took the fruit and ate it. Even though sin is a spiritual rebellion against God, it is the sinful act in the visible world that causes the havoc. In the same way baptism is the expression of a spiritual reality.

This does not mean that conversion, salvation and renewal would not exist until a person is baptized in water. But there is value in giving a physical form to the inner experience. Baptism is an indication of salvation, not the means of it.

Through baptism a person enters into a special relationship with the Trinity. One participates in a threefold covenant with the Creator, the Savior and the Parakletos. Thick volumes have been written about baptism. It is symbolic for a relationship that is more legal and lasting than a marriage between a man and a woman. It signifies, first of all, that God wants the Gospel to be preached in the whole world. The Greek text reads literally *matheeteúsate pánta tá éthnee*, "teach/make disciples of all nations." Jesus' emphasis upon discipleship speaks of the effect the preaching must have. It means conversion, renewal and obedience as well as church-planting. From the Greek word *matheteuo*, "to teach" the word "disciple" is derived. The English word "disciple" suggests "discipline."

Jesus' words also authorize the birth of the New Testament, which, at that moment had not been written yet. The content of the Gospel is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as obedience to "everything I have commanded you." These are the facts of salvation that transform a person from a lost individual into a redeemed one. Obedience to the Word of Christ makes us into a witness of

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1. I John 3:2
 2. Mark 16:15
 3. Mark 16:16

Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”¹

Obedience to Christ must be learned. It does not come naturally to any of us. The very word “disciple” speaks of the discipline that helps us to control ourselves in order to reach the goal set ahead of us. It is in connection with this that Jesus gives us the promise of His presence as a daily experience.

In the short statement Matthew gives, we see the demonstration of two of Jesus’ divine attributes: His omnipotence and His omnipresence. These attributes are absolutes. But a subjective experience of these is dependent upon our obedience to the great commission to preach the Gospel. “Missionaries” can have a sense of God’s presence that others cannot have. The promise is related to the end of the age or the end of the world. The Greek word *aion* means “age,” but it also, by extension, implies the world. The end of the world refers to the regions beyond as well as to the end of life on this planet. This is not the catastrophe of the end time but the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation.

1. Col. 3:16