



*From Eternity . . .  
to Eternity*

*The Story of God's Love for His People*

*Rev. Alvin Musgrove*

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By:  
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# Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>Page 1</i>
<i>I - The Plan</i> .....	<i>Page 5</i>
<i>II - The Beginning</i> .....	<i>Page 11</i>
<i>III - The Fall</i> .....	<i>Page 27</i>
<i>IV - The Promise</i> .....	<i>Page 37</i>
<i>V - The Fulfillment</i> .....	<i>Page 43</i>
<i>VI - Public Ministry</i> .....	<i>Page 63</i>
<i>VII - Holy Week</i> .....	<i>Page 99</i>
<i>VIII - It Is Finished</i> .....	<i>Page 129</i>
<i>IX - He Is Not Here</i> .....	<i>Page 163</i>
<i>X - Living Proof</i> .....	<i>Page 187</i>
<i>XI - He Will Return</i> .....	<i>Page 201</i>
<i>XII - Until Then</i> .....	<i>Page 221</i>
<i>Concluding Comments</i> .....	<i>Page 233</i>

## INTRODUCTION

I suppose I should begin by explaining somewhat why and how this book came to be. After I retired from the active ministry, the end of September 1997, I filled in for other pastors on vacation, and the like, for several years. In the years 2000 and following, I experienced a number of different health problems, with the result that I did not feel comfortable making commitments to pastors and/or congregations, not knowing whether I would be able to keep that commitment.

However, I did not feel that the Lord was through with me yet, but I couldn't figure out what He might have in store for me. I began to inquire about His intentions more earnestly in prayer. The answer did not come immediately. But in time, after continued prayer, I got the answer I had been requesting. That was over a year ago. (Writing a book, at least for me, is not something that is done quickly.) At first, the thought of writing a book was a little foreign and scary to me. But the Lord kept nudging me in this direction. The Spirit would work on me hardest at the end of day, after I had retired for the evening, but before I went to sleep. Gradually, things began to fall into place - starting with the title. (The subtitle came a little later.)

I started writing down thoughts that would work with the title. And again, many of these thoughts were those that came to me before I went to sleep. As I began putting those thoughts on paper, there were times when the Holy Spirit gave me words and thoughts quicker than I could write them down. Sometimes, when I thought it was time for a break (meals, for example), the Spirit wasn't through, and the words kept coming, and I kept writing. It was at times like this that I would understand and appreciate better the words of St. Peter in his Second Epistle about being "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1:21). [Note: If anyone is wondering, NO, I do not equate my experience with the experiences of the Holy Writers.] When I began writing, I had no idea how many chapters or pages, how long or short this endeavor might be. I just kept writing until I didn't get any more "nudges." (Oh yes, I did get to eat and sleep sufficiently, as well.)

As more and more major thoughts were written down, it was necessary to begin "fleshing them out" with corresponding information and facts. A lot of research followed. The primary source of information was the Bible itself. In addition to this I studied parts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. There were Bible commentaries, theological essays, journals and magazines. Books of Christian doctrine and religious instruction were also consulted. Bible dictionaries,

Hebrew and Greek word dictionaries, and a plain dictionary were also used. To complement all this, I read Bible Study lessons (some prepared by others; some by myself). A little imagination also played a part in some “conversations.” Guiding all this, per my repeated prayerful requests, and out of His grace, was the Holy Spirit.

I have relied very heavily on the words and teachings of God’s Word, the Holy Bible. I know I am safe in presenting this source of information because it is true and correct in all its parts, given to the Holy Writers by divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is absolute truth, and can therefore be trusted explicitly and completely. I make many references to God’s Word in this book. Many, if not most, are listed only according to the passage reference. This is deliberate on my part. My intention is to encourage the reader to dig into Holy Scripture him/herself. There is a source of comfort and reassurance that can be gained by reading God’s Word itself, that cannot be found in any other way. There is nothing greater than experiencing the power of God’s Word in your own life. There is nothing more powerful than God’s Word working in a person’s heart and soul. By reading the various references in God’s Word itself, it is my prayer that the readers will experience that “something special” - with the result that more of those special experiences will be sought on their own.

Finally, this book was written with the average person in mind, not the theologian. Therefore, you will not find large amounts of difficult language, words, or concepts. (If, however, a theologian would be motivated to read these words, I would be honored.) If the Holy Spirit can use these simple offerings to bring a person to Jesus, or a Christian closer to Jesus, I will feel very blessed.

To God, and God alone, be the glory and praise!

(Summer 2004)





*By Rudolf Schäfer*



# FROM ETERNITY... TO ETERNITY

*(The Story of God's love for His people)*

## I - THE PLAN

It all began in Eternity!

Before time began to measure off seconds and minutes and hours; before there was anything material; before any celestial bodies were hung in the sky; before there was light, as we know it, God was at work. He was at work on a Plan that would extend "FROM ETERNITY . . . TO ETERNITY."

Before we talk about this Plan, however, let's talk about the Originator of this Plan - God, the God who has existed from eternity, who is everlasting. God is not some "Force" in nature - although He is almighty. He is not a figment of man's imagination - who could have come up with the concept of an eternal, almighty God? Think of it: eternal! Since God was present at the beginning of time - and did in fact call time into being - He was present before time began; present already in eternity. Since nothing else existed prior to time, God is His own Source. He exists because of Himself, from all eternity. He alone existed in eternity. There was no one else. He alone has no beginning and will have no end. Everything after the beginning of time has been created or brought into existence by God, since He is also the "Almighty" God. Thus its source, its origin, is outside of itself. Only God is His own Source. He is not dependent upon anyone or anything else for His existence. He exists independently of any other source. He exists - whether I, or anyone else, believes He exists or not. His existence is not dependent upon what others may think, say, or believe. [It is interesting to note that the Christian religion - the religion of the Bible - is the only religion to boast of an eternal God; the Creator of everything outside of Himself.]

In time, God revealed Himself to His created beings. First, by speaking directly to some of them (for example, Adam and Eve); then through His written Word, which was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit; most importantly through His Son while on this earth; and then through additional writings after His Son returned to heaven. We call the words He gave us through a number of writers the "Word of

God.” (Also known as “The Holy Scriptures” or “The Holy Bible.” The emphasis is on “Holy” because these words are indeed the Word of the Holy God.) This is where we today learn about God - from His Word; from the Author of all truth. And throughout this book we will be looking at things we learn about God from His Word. For one thing, He is real. He is alive. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - three separate, distinct Persons - in one divine Being or Godhead. Never mind that this concept is incomprehensible to our finite minds. We are talking about God - infinite, limitless, all comprehensive. Our human, limited minds cannot always understand our fellow human beings. Why should we expect to comprehend the eternal, infinite God of all creation?

This God, eternal and triune - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - in His heart of love, resolved to share His boundless blessings with someone. Someone who would be made in His own image; in other words, who would be holy and righteous, who would possess a true knowledge of his Creator and would be perfectly happy in that knowledge; who would appreciate what God was doing for him and would love and serve Him in return.

But whereas God was spirit only, His created beings would have physical bodies - flesh and blood and bones. They would be called “humans.” In addition to their physical bodies, they would also possess a spirit or soul. They would not be spirit beings in the same sense that God is a Spirit Being. They would, however, bear God’s own image in their being.

The image of God that these humans would possess in body and soul would be holiness and righteousness. They would be perfect, sinless, happy, merciful, kind, compassionate. They would enjoy a wonderful existence, in close communion with their Creator. God would prepare a place for His created beings to live. It would not be a home as we think of today. It would be a beautiful place in a perfect Garden. He would make it special, providing everything they could ever need or want.

He would begin by creating a sphere, a planet that would be called “earth.” This would be the place where His Plan would take shape. Never mind that nothing existed from which He could make this planet. His omnipotence, His almighty power, would not let this hinder His Plan. His almighty power was quite capable of calling things into existence from absolutely nothing. So His Plan could continue.

He planned out every detail of what this planet would look like when completed. Being a God of order, His creation would not be chaotic, haphazard, malformed or

mis-formed. It would take shape in an orderly fashion, no parts being added prematurely, or without a purpose. Each part would build on the previous part or parts, all according to His Plan.

While God was delighting in His perfect Plan, He knew in His omniscience that everything would not run smoothly. Not because of His Plan, not because of His work. That would all be perfect. It would not run smoothly in every instance because He did not want to create mindless, robot-type creatures, who would have no choice but to follow His will mechanically. So He would create them with a mind and will of their own. A mind and will, however, that He intended would follow His ways and will. Not because they had no choice, but because they desired to do so out of love and gratitude for their Creator, the One who had brought them into existence and had bestowed upon them His wonderful blessings.

God was determined to give His creatures the opportunity to love Him and obey His Word because they sincerely wanted to do this. He knew this would result in a “fly-in-the-ointment,” but He wanted them to have this opportunity nevertheless. It would also give Him another way to show His great love and compassion for them. Having a free mind and will, He knew that His human creatures would listen to the lies of another of His creatures - one who, along with willing companions, would turn away from God and thereafter do everything he could to destroy God’s perfect creation.

Listening to one of God’s fallen creatures, His human creatures would doubt God’s Word to them, and wind up disobeying God’s perfect Word, which was intended only for their good and welfare. Because they would show this distrust and disobedience, they would fall from God’s favor. God, Who is not only holy and loving but also just, could not simply overlook this disobedience of His created humans. He could not pretend it didn’t happen or didn’t matter. They would need to be punished. God would even warn them ahead of time what that punishment would be: “death.”

Knowing that His human creatures would not heed His warning, but would listen instead to their tempter, God devised another part of His Plan - in Eternity. Loving His children - even more than any human father is capable of loving his own flesh and blood - God worked out a Plan whereby His human creatures could be spared their punishment for disobeying His Word. It was a Plan that could only originate in the loving heart of God. It was a Plan that no human being could have ever even dreamed of. It was unbelievable; too good to be true.

That Plan called for God's own Son to bear the punishment for the disobedience of His human creatures. God would not punish His human creatures for their disobedience to His Word. He would instead exact that punishment from Someone else - His only Son. There was a reason for that. God knew that no one short of His Son could ever pay for all the disobedient acts of His children - which in His foreknowledge, He knew they would commit over time. Remember, the penalty for each one of those transgressions was "death," an impossible task for man to overcome. Because according to God's Plan, man would be able to die only once. How could he ever then be able to pay the debt for all of his accumulated sins?

But God's loving heart would not give up. He was determined to work out a way to save His wayward creatures - no matter what the cost, even the cost of His own Son's life! Unbelievable! Incomprehensible! Mind-staggering! Who could understand such love? What a Plan! What a price to pay! But it was a price that both Father and Son were willing to pay in order to redeem His beloved children. Can your mind grasp such a concept? Think of it! The holy God going to such lengths to keep His disobedient children from being eternally separated from Him and His love. What love! What a God!

Now God was ready to begin putting His Plan into action, a Plan that began in Eternity - and would extend to Eternity.

#### COMMENTS:

The love of God for us, for you, can be seen in various ways as He worked out His Plan in eternity. First, God determined to create someone with whom He could share His great blessings, someone upon whom He could bestow His love. God did not make this determination because He was lonely or bored. In His perfect existence, nothing was lacking or missing. The God of love simply wanted to be able to bless someone and flood him or her with His love. That includes you!

Second, in His foreknowledge, or omniscience, He knew these creatures, despite His love and care and warning, would disobey Him and fall from grace. So He devised a plan that could save His fallen creatures from their own doing. He would provide a Savior - the only One who could pay the price for their transgressions - His own Son. That was for you too!

Do you at times feel alone or unloved in the world? You have no reason to feel that way. Look at what God did for you - already in eternity! A little later, we'll look at

what God did for you (and the whole world) in time. Then feel like one of the most important persons in the world - because in God's sight, you are!



## II - THE BEGINNING

The starting place was to establish time. Before this, there was only eternity - the eternal NOW. There was no past or future - only the present. Outside of God's abode, this would now change. In God's abode, in heaven, only eternity would remain - the absence of time. In God's presence a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. But in God's creation, there would henceforth be past, present, and future. So God established time. At the same moment, God began His work of material creation. "In the beginning," the Bible tells us (Gen. 1:1a). In the beginning of time, at the moment that days and months and years would start being measured, God began putting His Plan into action.

God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1b). The "heavens" refer to the blue expanse beyond the planet to be called earth. We refer to that expanse also as the "sky" or the "firmament." We'll talk more about this a little later, but first we'll give our attention to the primary emphasis of God at this point - the earth. The initial work was to create the "raw materials," if you will, raw materials which were created out of nothing. Raw materials which, according to Scripture, were initially without form and barren (Gen. 1:2a). Now God would begin working on the details, on filling this planet with things necessary for His human creatures and His Plan.

Before we get to the details, however, there are two things that I consider very important. One is that the Bible, which is our source book for information regarding God's Plan, right from the start, takes the existence of God for granted. It accepts the reality of God - a very specific God. He is not a mish-mash of human ideas about "a god." The God of the Bible is the true God, the triune God, the eternal God. Look at how the Bible begins: "In the beginning, God..." (Gen. 1:1a). There is no attempt to try and prove the existence of God, no reasons given why human beings should believe in Him and His existence. Just, "In the beginning, God..." Incidentally, the Hebrew word for God also gives us something to think about. That Hebrew word, "Elohim," is plural. ("El" is the singular form for God.) The fact that this word is in the plural form doesn't prove the tri-uneity of God in itself, but it does say something about the plurality of the persons in the Godhead. Other parts of Holy Scripture bear this out by naming the Three Persons in the Godhead (for example, Matt. 28:19b).

The other point of importance for me is found in the Hebrew word, which is translated "created." I remember one of the professors at the Seminary in St. Louis explaining

to us that this Hebrew word carries the implication of “making out of nothing.” This could explain why this Hebrew verb is never used in the Old Testament except in reference to God. Scripture thus emphasizes the fact that only God is omnipotent, all-powerful. Only God can create things out of nothing. (Cp. Hebr. 11:3) The world did not come into existence as a result of some “Big Bang” - a theory that is claimed by some. It came into existence by God’s almighty Word and Action.

The first detail of God’s Plan to fill the earth with good things was the creation of light - as opposed to darkness, which covered the raw materials of earth at first (Gen. 1:2b). We are understanding more and more the importance of light - for human life, for animal life, for plant life. Not only did God know the importance of light so that He put this at the top of His list for the earth, but He also created that light simply by speaking the word: “And God said.” Immediately, there was light (Gen. 1:3).

God’s Word goes on to tell us that God separated the light from the darkness (Gen. 1:4b). The two cannot exist together. There is either light or there is darkness. God saw that it was good this way. He knew that humans, animals, and plants would need both at different times. So He separated the two. The light He called “day” and the darkness He called “night.” Thus was completed the first day - evening and morning (Gen. 1:5).

On day two, God created an expanse to surround this newly created planet. This was “the heavens” referred to in the general statement of the first verse of Genesis. God had also created water on that first day - part of the raw materials of earth. Now, He separated this water so that part of it was above the expanse, which He called “sky,” while the rest remained below the expanse - on earth; some even inside the earth (Cp. Gen. 7:11b). All of this simply by the word of His mouth: “Let there be.” Evening and morning marked the second day (Gen. 1:6-8).

Building on what He had created up to this point, God now gathered the waters under the sky into one place. The waters He called “sea.” According to God’s powerful Word, dry ground now appeared, which He called “land.” The implication seems to be that originally all of the land mass was joined together. There are those who do hold to this thought. The division into various continents, according to this thinking, came about during the flood. Looking at a flat map of the earth does seem to allow for this possibility, as the various continents could fit together (roughly) as a huge jigsaw puzzle. [Postscript: The underwater earthquake and resulting Tsunami in South Asia on December 26, 2004, is a vivid illustration of the force that the unleashed



power of nature can exert on anything in its path. Read Gen. 7:11-12, 17-20.] Be that as it may, God was now ready for the next step. So God called for the dry ground to bring forth different kinds of vegetation, with seeds necessary for reproduction in due time. And it was so. All of this received God's verdict: "good." And evening and morning were the third day (Gen. 1:9-13).

The fourth day was reserved for the creation of special lights in the sky. God's Word tells us that He created two great lights - one to shine in the day (the sun) and the other to give light at night (the moon). As auxiliaries to the moon, the stars were also set into the night sky. In addition to giving light on earth, these luminaries were to aid in distinguishing seasons and days and years (Gen. 1:14-19). And as man learned later, these lights could aid in establishing location.

Try to comprehend the magnitude of this part of God's creation. Think of the sun, some 93 million miles from the planet earth, giving off its light and heat for thousands of years. It is so bright that the human eye cannot gaze directly into it without the possibility of damage to the eye. So hot, especially during the summer, that the human body can suffer burns, up to third degree, if exposed to its heat for a period of time. Yet it is in no danger of ceasing to do the work God created it to do. So the light and heat that are both necessary for the well-being of plant and animal life alike, as well as for the existence of human life, will continue to provide these necessary elements to God's creation.

Now think for a moment of the stars. Go outside some dark, clear night and look upward. The myriads of stars are innumerable, as countless as the sands on the seashore. This helps us to ponder the vastness of the "heavens" or the "sky" or the "firmament." What's more, we are learning more all the time about how far this expanse extends - far beyond what even the most powerful telescope can see. What is even more amazing, Psalm 147:4 tells us that God knows and calls these stars by name. Think of that for a moment. Think of that if you are ever tempted to wonder if God is aware of you - the crown of His creation - and cares for you. Remember that God created these stars - as well as all of creation - for His human creatures. Yes, look at the stars and think of His power and His knowledge if you ever wonder whether God is able to help you in your troubles. Look at the stars and recall His greatness. Overwhelmed by such a sight and such contemplation, go back inside and read Psalms 147 through 150, psalms of wonder and praise.

God brought plant life into being on the third day. Now He was ready to begin creating animal life. He instructed the waters to be filled with living creatures. And

so it was. They were filled with all kinds of marine life - from microscopic organisms to the largest of the sea creatures. At the same time, God ordered the birds into existence, to fly in the sky above the earth. And every kind of winged creature appeared, from the tiniest to the mightiest. God saw that this was good, and blessed them with the ability to reproduce - both the water animals and the flying animals - each according to its own kind. And evening and morning concluded the fifth day (Gen. 1:20-23).

God was now nearing the end of His creative work. But He was not finished just yet. Some very important details still needed to be completed. And that happened on day six. He had created water animals and flying animals on the previous day. Now He would bring into existence land animals. He called forth all the creatures that would live on land - the animals that could be domesticated; the animals that would remain wild; snakes and serpents of all kinds; insects that were to be helpful to mankind, but would after the Fall also be pests and nuisances; animals that man could eat; animals that would eat man, though this too would be a consequence of the Fall (Gen. 1:24-25).

It was now time for God to bring forth the crown of His creation - His human creatures. So God said, "Let us make man." Before going any farther, I want to call attention to the use of the plural pronouns: "us...our...our." (Gen. 1:26a) As with the use of the plural form for God - mentioned earlier - this does not in itself prove that God is Three Persons in One Godhead. But, again, it does show the plurality of the Godhead, and other references, especially in the New Testament, name Three Persons in the Godhead - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19b, for example. Also cp. II Cor. 13:14).

As God was now approaching the next step in His Plan, He focused on the crown of His creation - man; the one for whom all His previous acts of creation were designed. Whereas with the previous parts of His creative work He merely spoke the word and it was done (Ps. 33:6, 8-9), now God took special "pains" as it were. The Bible tells us that God formed man out of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). And here is another important difference. God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life - God's own life - and man became a living being. The fish, the birds, and the land animals also have the breath of life, but man was the only creature honored to have the breath of God's own life infused into him. Another very important difference between the creation of man and animals is that man was made in the image of God (which we have explained in Chapter I). So man is, indeed, the crown of all God's creation. Remember this the next time you think you are unimportant!

It is interesting to see the name that God gave to His newest creation: “Adam” (Gen. 2:20b). It is interesting because the Hebrew word for man is “Adam.” The first “man” (Hebrew: Adam) was named Adam. It is also interesting because the Hebrew word for “ground” sounds much like the Hebrew word for man: “Adamah.” So Adam was created out of the Adamah. Man was made out of ground, dust. And to dust shall he return in time (Gen. 3:19b). Solomon tells us regarding the death of a person that the “dust” returns to the ground from which it came (Eccl. 12:7a). Thus it is no coincidence that a portion of the committal service at the graveside intones: “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

God made man from the most basic element of His creation: dirt. And yet He bestowed upon man the greatest blessing of creation - His own image; His own life-giving breath, which distinguishes man from the rest of the living creatures that God brought into being. Another point of interest here, I believe, is this: God took a lifeless lump of earth, formed that earth into a most wonderful creature, and breathed into that dirt His own life-giving breath - thus giving man the gift of immortality, something none of His other earthly creatures were given. It was God’s intention for man to live forever with Him. Following the Fall, however, man forfeited the immortality of his body and was made subject to death. The soul of man retained its gift of immortality, as we see in Ecclesiastes 12:7b.

Before creating man, God planted a garden in Eden (Gen. 2:8). The exact location of where this garden existed is not known today. Some believe it was near the conjunction of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers - two of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2, in connection with Eden. If this is correct, Eden could well have been located in what is now southern Iraq.

Eden was known as Paradise (Rev. 2:7b), the Paradise home that God prepared for the crown of His creation. God placed the man (Adam) in this garden to work the ground (Adamah) and care for the garden (Gen. 2:15). In this garden, God had placed all kinds of trees - trees that were good for food. Adam could eat the fruit from all these trees - with one exception. He was not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was the first prohibition God gave to man. He was serious about this charge. So He warned Adam that if he ate of this forbidden fruit, he would die (Gen. 2:16-17).

It was not that the fruit of this tree was poisonous. It was not that Adam (and Eve) would fall dead the moment they took a bite of this fruit. God did not want His human creatures to know evil. He had created them good, perfect. He wanted them

to remain that way. But if they ignored God's command regarding this tree, they would learn evil - the opposite of good and what God wanted His children to be. If they disobeyed God, their perfect image of God would be ruined and the agent of death would infect their bodies. Thus the warning about this fruit.

After God placed Adam in the Garden, He had all the birds and land animals, both male and female, pass before Adam to be named by him. So Adam named them (Gen. 2:19-20a). One thing became obvious through all this. That was, there was no suitable mate for Adam (Gen. 2:20b). There were both male and female among the other species. But Adam, a male, was alone. An oversight on God's part? No! God wanted Adam - the only living creature with reasoning abilities - to be aware of this fact. He wanted Adam to know that he was "incomplete" without a mate of his own.

Previously, God had said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Gen. 2:18) Have you ever stopped to think that this was the first time God said something was "not good"? Had He goofed? Had He made a mistake? No, there was nothing wrong with God's act of creation. As stated in the previous paragraph, God had a reason for this. Adam was not complete without a mate to complement him, and God wanted Adam to be aware of this. So now God was going to complete His great work of creation.

God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. Then God took one of the man's ribs and made a woman, a female, from his rib (Gen. 2:21-22). Upon awaking, Adam beheld the woman that God had made from his rib. Adam's immediate response was that she was "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen.2:23a). This is why he also said that she would be called "woman" because she was taken out of "man." (Gen. 2:23b) A note of interest here - another Hebrew word for "man" is very similar to the Hebrew word for "woman." This Hebrew word is "ish," while the word for "woman" is "ishah." Thus "ishah" (woman) was taken out of "ish" (man). This was not by accident or coincidence. (You'll notice that even the English words for man and woman are similar.)

St. Paul calls attention to another interesting thing regarding the relationship between man and woman in I Corinthians 11:12. He calls attention to a fact that we all know, but perhaps do not think of very often. The first woman came from man. After that, every man has come from woman.

It was easily noticeable to Adam that the woman was different from him, but Adam also recognized her as a helper suitable for him. Not only was she a beautiful woman

- a perfect “10,” if you will - but her body was made to complement his. This difference would be necessary for the man and the woman to carry out God’s charge to “be fruitful and multiply.” [This in itself is an unmistakable argument that God’s intention for marriage was that it be a relationship between a male and a female. They were made to be compatible with each other, to complement each other. There was no other way for the human race to reproduce naturally.] As with the fish, birds, and land animals, God created man and woman with the ability to reproduce. Very appropriately, Adam named his wife, Eve, which means “living” in Hebrew, because she would become the mother of all the living. (Gen. 3:20)

The creation of Adam and Eve was a miracle. Their ability to reproduce was no less a miracle. From microscopic beginnings of sperm and egg, through the division of those cells, to the first cry of an infant leaving the relative safety of the womb - the only word to adequately describe this process is miraculous. Every parent - the mother in particular - was given the wonderful distinction of being able to work with God Himself in giving birth to a new living being. How sin has warped human thinking on the part of some to believe that this developing infant can be terminated at will because of selfish determinations!

When God brought Eve to Adam, and he recognized her to be a mate suitable for him, he accepted her as such. This then became the first marriage - the union of one man and one woman unto one flesh (Gen. 2:24). Thus the first estate God instituted was marriage. God never intended anything other than that this was to be a life-long union - again, of one man and one woman. It was sin, later, that deceived some people into believing they could twist and change God’s original intention regarding marriage. Homosexual “marriages” or “civil unions” - even homosexual, gay, and lesbian relationships - were never among God’s plans for this high and holy estate of marriage, or for any relationships between men and women. (Cp. Rom 1:18-27)

On this sixth day of time, God concluded His work of creation. On this day, He looked over all that He had made and saw that it was very good - a description not only of this sixth day, but all six days (Gen. 1:31). At this time yet, God’s creation was still perfect. A condition that was soon to change, however.

Where does evolution fit into this picture? It doesn’t! Yes, I know there are those who believe that the world did not come into existence by God’s almighty word and power in a span of six 24-hour days. There are those who scoff and ask if God is almighty, why didn’t He do all this in an instant. He could have. But He chose not to. He wanted to do this according to His Plan - in an orderly progression, each new

part building on previous parts of His creative work. Thus the work of creation was the result of God's deliberate knowledge, forethought, and planning. Nothing was left to chance or happen-stance.

There are others who say that this story of the Genesis creation was made up by someone to give the simple-minded a reason to believe in God. They maintain that the world evolved over millions of years. And perhaps each "day of creation" represents a million or more years. If that indeed is what happened, according to the schedule of "days" given in Genesis 1, consider the plight of plants which "evolved" on the "third day" of a millennium of evolution - how did they survive until the sun and moon evolved a "million" years later?

No, God created the world exactly as He had Moses record it in Genesis 1 and 2, in six 24-hour days of "evening and morning." [The Hebrew word for "day" is "Yom." This is the word that is used consistently in the Old Testament for "day." It is this word that is also used in Genesis 1 and 2 for "day."] Further, the plants, animals, and humans were created to reproduce according to their own kind - and not to evolve into different kinds. A different type of the same kind would be possible, e.g., different types of dogs - but the offspring of dogs would still be dogs. They would not and could not "evolve" into a different kind of animal.

To those who say that science cannot substantiate this creation account; that it's more involved than that; that anyone who believes this is naive - my answer is this: I'd rather be a simple believer in the One who tells us this in His Word; the One who was there when it all happened; Who caused all this to happen, than be an "educated" doubter of God's Word; one who speculates on what happened centuries before (Cp. I Cor. 1:20, 25).

You may have noticed above that I said God created the world in six 24-hour days. That was not a mistake or a misprint. God did create the world in six 24-hour days. But yes, there was another day that is included in the creation account (Gen. 2:2-3). It was also a 24-hour day - just like all the days since then, with one exception (Joshua 10:12-14).

God completed His work of creation; completing the heavens and the earth in all their vastness in six days. At the end of the sixth day, God looked at all He had made and pronounced it "very good." So on the seventh day, He rested. Not because He was tired or fatigued. He rested from or ceased the work He had been doing -

because it was now all finished - according to His Plan. He had followed a progression, an order, because He is a God of order. Now, He was through.

God blessed this seventh day - which was later to become the Sabbath, or day of rest. God did this for a purpose too. He was indicating thereby that man, too, was not to work endlessly. He too is to take time to rest, to refresh, to recuperate, to re-create.

#### COMMENTS:

\*\*\* As we look back at God's work of creation, various things capture our attention. For one, God was very precise in His work. Everything was planned. Nothing was overlooked. Nothing left to chance. Everything proceeded according to His Plan - a Plan formulated in Eternity. This Plan focused on bringing into existence the crown of His creation - man. Man is the object of all of His planning and His work. It was for man that God did all of the other work of creation, so that man might have a wonderful existence on this special planet, which God created to be man's home, so that man might live here in close communion with his Creator - forever.

That's why man's creation was different from all the rest of creation. Man was "special." He was made in a special way. Man was created by nothing less than the divine counsel and wisdom of God (Gen. 1:26), and formed by the very finger of God (Gen. 2:7). Adam's wife was made in a special way as well (Gen. 2:21-22). God's human creatures alone were given the ability to reason, to think. His human creatures alone were given both a body and a soul. (Matt. 10:28) His human creatures alone were created in the "image of God." Blessed above all of God's earthly creation.

But look at how sin has confused man's thinking on this. Do we any longer consider it a great honor to be God's special creation? Look at the accolades and honor that are bestowed on humans whom we think are important - political figures, movie stars, sports figures, and the like. We will go all out to honor them, to try to be in their presence - when what they are or represent is strictly man-made. Their glory - and ours - should rather be in the fact that we are creatures of God. The prince and the pauper; the rich and the poor; the famous and the not-so-famous - all have a similar standing before God - we were brought into existence by Him. Therefore, whoever you are, let this be your greatest honor: I am a human being - and that is the work of God alone.

\*\*\* To help us somewhat understand the size of God's creation, let's look at our own solar system - the sun and the 9 planets that revolve around it. We will list some numbers for the sun and its planets and then "shrink" them in size to numbers that we can more readily comprehend. Since there is no way to obtain exact figures on any of these objects (the closest we can come is with our own planet Earth), all of these numbers are approximate. We will start with the sun and then progress to the planets in their relation to the sun. The Sun has an approximate diameter of 864,000 miles. The planet closest to the sun is Mercury. It is the smallest of the planets, with an approximate diameter of 3,000 miles. It is "only" 36 million miles from the sun. The next closest is Venus, with a diameter of 7,600 miles (6th in size of the planets). It is some 67 million miles from the sun. The third closest planet to the sun is our own planet Earth. It is 5th in order of size, with a diameter of 7,918 miles. It revolves around the sun at a mean distance of 92,900,000 miles.

Seventh in size is Mars, with a diameter of 4,200 miles and is located 141 million miles from the sun. The largest planet is Jupiter. It is 87,000 miles in diameter and 483 million miles from the sun. Second in size is Saturn, with a diameter of 72,000 miles. Its distance from the sun is 886 million miles. Uranus is 4th in size, with a diameter between 31,000 and 32,000 miles, and is situated 1 billion, 800 million miles from the sun. Third largest is the planet Neptune, with a diameter of 33,000 miles. Its distance from the sun is 2 billion, 793 million miles. Last, and almost least, is Pluto, with an estimated diameter of 4,000 miles. It is 8th in size of the 9 planets. It is the most remote planet in the solar system, being 3 billion, 680 million miles from the sun.

We can read those numbers, but I, for one, have difficulty trying to comprehend such astronomical figures. My mind needs something that I can better understand. So let's "shrink" these figures and relate them to some things with which we are more familiar. We will do that, using a football field as a basic comparison item. The length of a football field - from 1 goal line to the other - is 100 yards, 300 feet. For our purposes here, one yard is going to equal 1 million miles. One million miles - that's a trip to the moon and back twice. It represents more than 40 trips around our planet Earth. One other thing to note before we begin our "shrinking" comparisons, and that is that there are 1760 yards in a mile.

We begin with the Sun itself. We will place it on the goal line at one end of the football field. Even with this "shrinking" process, the sun will have to be represented by a very large beach ball - one that could hold 1 million "reduced" earths. From the sun, we go to the 36-yard line (36 million miles from the sun) and there place a



regular size marble to represent Mercury (the smallest of the planets). Venus is the next planet in our Solar System. We place it on the 67-yard line. [Note: For our purposes here, we do not go to the 50-yard line and then reverse the numbers. We'll count the yards from the original goal line through the entire 100 yards - and then some.] Venus will be represented by a ping-pong ball. Another ping-pong ball will be placed just short of the 93-yard line. This ping-pong ball represents our own planet Earth. [Can you begin to see the size of our Solar System? We still have 6 planets to go - and have almost run out of football field - with each yard representing one million miles!]

The next planet in relation to the Sun is Mars, seventh in size of the planets. It is represented by a large marble (a "shooter" marble, if you will). This "planet" is not even on the football field. This "marble" is placed 41 yards past the field - 141 yards (141 million miles) from the Sun. Next is Jupiter (the largest of the planets). It is represented by a grapefruit - and is located 383 yards (almost 4 football field lengths) past the field - or, 483 yards (483 million miles) from the Sun (somewhere in the outer limits of - or beyond - the parking lot). The second largest planet is Saturn - represented by a small grapefruit - and is located 786 yards (almost 8 football field lengths) past the field. Uranus comes next, fourth in size among the planets. It is represented by a tangerine, over a mile away from the Sun. (Remember, there are 1760 yards in a mile.) Neptune, third largest in size, is represented by an orange - over one and one-half miles from the Sun. The planet farthest from the Sun is Pluto, eighth in size. It is represented by a large marble more than 2 miles from the Sun.

This is just our Solar System. Beyond that is Outer Space. All of this is beyond our human comprehension. The Psalmist David expresses it well in Psalm 19:1. As we try to comprehend God's work of creation, the "heavens" indeed declare the glory of God and the "skies" proclaim the work of His hands. As we try to contemplate the size of God's creation, we have to echo the question of David in Psalm 8:3-4, and then marvel with David as he exclaims his words of praise in Psalm 8:5-9. All of this our God called into being - just by the word of His mouth; merely saying the word - and it was so! The size of our Solar System, not to mention Outer Space, certainly can tell us something about the power and might of our God! Yes, our God - my God!

As I personally contemplate all this, my mind goes back to the 93-yard line of our reduced-scale Solar System. There we find a ping-pong ball representing our planet Earth. You and I, and billions of our fellow human beings, call this "ping-pong ball" home. In fact, God created this "ping-pong ball" first. After the introductory statement

in Genesis 1:1, God explains in the following verses how the earth took shape. The vast expanse beyond the earth was created on the 2nd day (Gen. 1:6-8), but the other planets, the sun and moon, and the myriad of stars were not created until the 4th day (Gen. 1:14-19). God created all of this in preparation for the crown of His creation - mankind, whom He brought into existence on the 6th day (Gen. 1:26-31).

Then my thoughts go to God's human creation - and that includes me. I think of this beautiful earth that God created for us. Remember seeing pictures of it taken from space by some of the astronauts? I think of the awe-inspiring world that God made for us. Remember going outside on a clear, dark night and seeing the countless stars "twinkling" in the vast sky above? I think of all the other blessings God bestows upon us daily - such as, house, home, food, shelter, family, friends. How difficult and lonely life would be without these. I think of the wonderful promises that God has given to us. Promises like Psalm 50:15, Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 8:28, among others. And how do we sinful human beings frequently repay Him? By our griping and complaining; by our feelings of self-pity and our questions of "Why me, Lord?"; by our anger and indifference; by our deliberate transgressions of His holy Law; by our arrogance and an "I know better" attitude! Can you picture this scenario? Here we "microscopic" creatures, on this "ping-pong ball" hung out in space (and kept there by a loving God), dare to raise our rebellious little hands toward heaven, shake our fists, and tell God how He ought to be doing things better; how many mistakes He's making - especially in my life! [When we begin thinking like this, it's a very humbling experience to read the words God addressed to Job when he was undergoing his trials. Read Job 38:1 - 41:34. Then read Job's reply in 42:1-3.]

And in spite of our rebellious nature, God still loved us (me and you, too) enough that He sent His own Son to this little "ping-pong ball" planet, down on the 93-yard line of our football field, to become one of us; to live the perfect life for us; to carry our sins and transgressions and rebellions to the Cross and there suffer and die for each and every one of them. And still to this day, He provides all we need to support our bodies and lives. He does that for me - in spite of my sinful behavior. Oh, God, please forgive! Forgive my every transgression - my ingratitude; my arrogance; my thinking that I could do a much better job with my life than You; my lack of trust; my complaining; my indifference to Your Word and Your Will; my always wanting to do things "my way." And thank You, Lord. Thank You for Your unending and never failing love. Thank You for loving me and forgiving me - in spite of me. Thank You for Your blessings, which are renewed to me every morning. Thank You for

bringing me into existence and making me one of Your children. Thank You for my Savior, Jesus Christ.

\*\*\* We have said that human beings are the crown of God's creation. And that is true! Every human being is a special work of God, extremely blessed. And yet there are those who do not see it that way. They don't recognize their uniqueness. They find fault with themselves; are negative about their bodies; put themselves down - as if they were a nobody; someone without talents or abilities; with no personal worth; having nothing to contribute to society. But is that really true? Indeed not! You are a very special creation of the Almighty, All-knowing God. In fact, you are unique. Before we talk about your uniqueness, however, let's look at some things that make you one of God's special creations.

You have eyes; you can see. God has placed a hundred million receptors in your eyes which enable you to see color, a flower, a bird, a snowflake, a cloud, a star, a rainbow, your family - and the look of love. You have ears; you can hear. God placed 24,000 filters in each of your ears so you can hear music, others talking, birds singing, children playing and laughing - and the words, "I love you." You have a tongue; you can speak. God gave that ability to none of His other creatures - only the crown of His creation. You can comfort people, encourage people, teach people, praise people, tell people about Jesus, sing - and say "I love you." Your tongue is also covered with a number of taste buds, which enables you to distinguish different tastes. You have a nose; you can smell - a rose, a delicious meal, the freshness of the air after a rain. Your nose also enables you to inhale the oxygen so necessary for life. You are not still or stationary; you can move. You can run and play and dance and work. Why? Because God has given you 500 muscles, 200 bones, and 7 miles of nerve fiber - all synchronized to work in harmony with your wishes.

God has given you a heart, a most remarkable muscle. It beats within your chest, hour after hour, year after year, awake or asleep - beating 36 million times each year, pumping more than 600,000 gallons of blood through miles and miles of veins, arteries, and capillaries each year. And consider your blood itself. You have approximately 5 quarts of blood coursing through your body. Within your blood are 22 trillion blood cells - and within each cell are millions of molecules. Each second, 2 million of your blood cells die, only to be replaced by 2 million new cells. This is a process that has continued since your birth, to keep your blood clean, pure, and healthy. And think of the skin, which encases your body. It is a marvelous creation in itself. In time, wood will rot and deteriorate; steel will tarnish and rust; some metals will wear away, but not your skin. It constantly renews itself, replacing old cells with

new ones. And have you thought about your lungs? Your lungs work day in and day out to move life-giving oxygen through 600 million “filters” to rid your body of poisonous wastes and provide clean oxygen to your body. Then there is your brain. It is one of the most complex structures in existence. Weighing approximately 3 pounds, it contains 13 billion nerve cells which enable you to think, reason, file away memories, recall those memories, anticipate, react, and plan, among other things. Working with your brain, there are 4 million pain sensors, 500,000 touch sensors, and more than 200,000 temperature sensors throughout your body. Humans are a special work of God!

Now, to you specifically! You are unique! Never, in all the millions and billions of human beings - past, present, or future - has there ever been or ever will be anyone exactly like you. There is only one you. From the millions of sperm your father implanted in your mother, only one survived, united with a single egg from your mother, and began a new life - YOU! Those 2 cells - each containing 23 chromosomes, and within each chromosome hundreds of genes - had the potential of creating billions of human beings, each different from the other. But God worked in those microscopic beginnings to bring YOU into existence. YOU! One of a kind! Never to be duplicated. Your fingerprints, your DNA, also mark you as unique, one of a kind. And God is responsible for this. God wanted no one but you to be you! God knew you from eternity. He worked in time - through your parents - to bring into existence the exact person He had in mind in eternity. So don't ever sell yourself short. You are a somebody. You are valuable, priceless. So valuable, in fact, that God would have sent His Son to suffer and die for you - even if you had been the only sinner on earth! Think of that! You are indeed a special work of God. You are you - and no one else can ever make that claim!

\*\*\* A few additional thoughts on the idea of creation versus evolution. Evolution requires millions and billions of years to satisfy the theories put forth by those who do not accept the Biblical account of creation. Some of these individuals say that millions and billions of years took place between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis, chapter 1. Others say that each “day” of creation amounted to millions or billions of years, as the various parts of the world slowly evolved. One thing that neither of these theories can explain, however, is the origin of that first “matter” or “material” from which all else is supposed to have evolved! Every theory of evolution has to start with something material, some “matter,” but they can't explain where that matter comes from; what its origin is. So the only plausible explanation for the origin of the world, for me anyway, is God's account of creation.

Another thing, not only do the various theories of evolution do injustice to God's inerrant Word, but they call for things to happen that is contrary to what nature itself shows us. Evolution calls for primary matter to progress, evolve, improve, and get better in time. Nature shows us that things left to themselves will deteriorate over time rather than improve. Another thing evolutionists forget is that God created a mature world. He created trees and plants - not seeds (Gen. 1:11-12); adult animals (Gen. 1:24-25); mountains (Gen. 7:19-20) and obviously, also plains and valleys. He created stone (Gen. 11:3b); silver and gold and gems (Gen.2: 11b-12; 13:2); and placed the various minerals (coal, iron, oil, etc.) in the earth. And man! God did not create a baby - but an adult. If scientists could have subjected Adam to some kind of "dating" process on Day 7, they would have concluded that he was probably between 20 and 30 years old - when, in reality, he was one day old.

How do we account for canyons (such as the Grand Canyon), mountains of all heights, deep gorges and ravines, various strata levels, fossils of fish in what is now dry land, fossils of large animals that once roamed the earth but are now extinct? We have already mentioned the existence of mountains in the previous paragraph, but changes in the mountains, as well as other things mentioned above, could well have an explanation in the changes brought about by the Flood (Gen. 7:17-24). It is impossible for man today to determine what cataclysmic effects and upheavals were caused by the pressure of millions of tons of water bearing down upon the earth during the Flood. We do know what dramatic impact such things as regional floods, hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes have on the earth today. [Postscript: Consider again the effects of the South Asia Tsunami on December 26, 2004 - where islands moved from their original location - some up to 100 feet - and water depths changed radically. Changes like that are supposed to take millions of years to occur, according to evolutionists. And yet, all this took place in a matter of moments.] And none of these can begin to compare with the impact of the Flood recorded in Genesis 7. To me, the account of creation and the flood pose no contradictions with what scientists find today. The "problems" listed at the beginning of this paragraph can easily be answered with God creating a mature world - one that came into existence in six 24-hour days, with everything in it in place - and the changes caused by the Flood. Besides, there should be no argument between Creation and science, since God is the Author of both!



*"Law and Gospel in the Garden" by Rudolf Schäfer*

### III – THE FALL

Everything was going well in the Garden at first. Adam and Eve were enjoying the beautiful garden God had planted for them. There was perfect peace and harmony between man and nature. Adam and Eve were tending to the garden according to God's directives. There were beautiful flowers; fragrances which we cannot even begin to imagine; fruit to tantalize and satisfy every taste bud; no problems even with the largest of beasts. It was indeed as God had pronounced at the conclusion of His creative work: "very good."

But one day this all changed. One day in the Garden, possibly rather close to the tree in the middle of the garden - the tree of the "Knowledge of Good and Evil;" the tree that was put "off-limits" by God for Adam and Eve - a serpent came to Eve and asked her a question. A question that appeared harmless enough at first, but a question that would have everlasting consequences.

Before we get carried away with further questions, such as, could snakes talk at one time, let's look at this particular serpent. There was nothing about this serpent that would automatically trigger an alarm for Eve. It was probably just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill type snake - except for one indistinguishable thing, which we'll touch on shortly. Even the fact that this serpent spoke to Eve, didn't cause her any concern or alarm. Remember, they were in God's perfect Garden - a Paradise on earth. What could possibly go wrong here? But something did go wrong - horribly wrong. For this was no ordinary serpent.

In two places in the Book of Revelation (12:9 and 20:2), this particular serpent is identified as Satan, or the devil. Whether Satan assumed the form of a serpent or had inhabited the body of a serpent makes little difference. The outcome was the same. However, it does appear from the curse pronounced on the serpent (Gen. 3:14), that the latter had happened. But more about this serpent (Satan). St. Matthew, chapter 12, verse 24 - which refers to Satan as "Beelzebub" - calls him the "prince of demons," or the chief of the evil angels.

Here we're getting into a subject that we haven't touched on in the previous pages: Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, demons, evil angels. What are they? Who are they? Where did they come from? To answer those questions, we need to back up and fill in some more details. First of all, let's start by saying the angels are creatures of God, too. They were created on one of the first six days - although the exact day is not revealed. Thus, they are not eternal - like God.

Originally, all of the angels were created holy. We know that from God's own pronouncement on the sixth day that everything He had created was "good." Unlike man, however, the angels are "spirit beings" only. On those six days of creation, God brought into being creatures that had "bodies" only (animals); some that were created with "spirits" only (angels); while man was created with both "body and soul" or spirit (Matt. 10:28). We focus now on those creatures with spirits only - the angels.

What do we know about the angels? Why did God create them? II Kings 19:35 and Daniel 7:10 tell us that the angels possess great power (though they are not omnipotent, or almighty, like God) and are of great number. Incidentally, the Bible references listed in the last sentence speak of the "good angels" as they came to be known. More on that later. The purpose of the angels, according to Psalm 103:20-21, is to praise God, do His bidding, obey His word, and follow His will. This was the way God intended it - according to His Plan.

But something happened sometime between the seventh day of time and the day of Eve's temptation. For reasons that God has chosen not to reveal to us in His holy Word, some of the angels rebelled against God. Some see in the manner of Satan's temptation of Eve a possible reason for this rebellion against God. Satan assured Eve that she would not die if she ate of the forbidden fruit. Instead, she would be "like God" (Gen. 3:4-5). That's the reason, according to Satan, that God forbade them to eat the fruit of this particular tree. He didn't want them to become like Him.

Could this have been the motive for Satan and his followers to rebel? Were they not satisfied with the position God gave them? Did they want more - and wind up losing it all? This temptation to want more than God intends for us to have is still an effective temptation to this day. How often haven't we - to a greater or lesser degree - decided to do things we knew were wrong in order to obtain more than God intends for us to have at a particular time? This is not to say that we shouldn't ever try to better ourselves, but only and always in accordance with God's will for us.

When did Satan and his followers rebel? As mentioned above, that information is not revealed to us by God. But we know it had to have occurred sometime after the seventh day - when everything was still perfect - and the time that Satan approached Eve.

Whether that was days, weeks, months, or longer is unknown. So we conclude that the timing is not important for us to know. Whereas the fact and the consequences are very important - eternally important.



What happened to Satan and his followers after they rebelled? God answers that question for us in II Peter 2:4 and Jude 1:6. They were cast out of heaven, their original home, and condemned to an eternity of hell. Even though Satan and his evil angels are free to roam the earth now, continuing their assaults against God's people, their eternal fate is nevertheless sealed. Their only outlook for eternity is irrevocable separation from God and all that is good. In the meantime, until the Day of Judgment arrives, Satan and his allies continue to hate God and try to destroy even more of His creation. Their special targets are the people of God. They are untiring in their efforts to draw people away from God and into their own clutches. That's the reason for St. Paul's words to the Ephesians in the sixth chapter of his letter to them (verses 10-18). Also compare St. Peter's words in I Peter 5:8.

But thank God, we also have angels on our side - angels who remained faithful to God when so many left God's side. These angels continue to praise God, do His bidding, obey His Word, and follow His will. Part of God's bidding is for His loyal angels to watch over and protect His children (Psalm 91:11-12, Hebrews 1:14). Here is another example of God's great love for us. He created this myriad of powerful beings to carry out His commands - commands that have His children in mind.

Like the evil angels, the good angels are also free to roam the earth. Unlike the evil angels, the good angels love God and serve both Him and mankind. Like the evil angels, the good angels will remain throughout eternity. Unlike the evil angels, the good angels are sealed in their blissful state and will live with God and His saints in heaven forever (St. Matthew 18:10b - note the word "always").

With this background on the subject of angels, let's return to the encounter between Satan and Eve. As was mentioned earlier, Satan began with a question that seemed harmless enough at first. But with that question, he began planting seeds of doubt, seeds of doubt about the truthfulness of God's word to them. In response to Satan's question, Eve admitted that God did say they could eat from any tree in the garden - except the tree in the middle of the garden. Then she added something that God had not said. She exaggerated His command to include not even "touching" that tree - upon penalty of death (Gen.3:1-3).

Satan knew he had her now. For Eve fell prey to the temptation of going beyond the truth to impress someone. She wanted to impress this serpent with her knowledge of what God had said - even to the point of emphasizing the seriousness of His command - by adding something that God had not said. Have we ever yielded to the temptation of trying to impress someone - for whatever reason - by exaggerating the truth?

Someone has said that a very effective way to lie to someone is to include enough truth in whatever you say that the person will be put off guard and not recognize the untruth.

But Satan was not caught off guard. He did recognize the untruth and he reveled in it. Now he was ready to press his case further. While Eve was basking in her attempt to impress Satan with the seriousness of God's command, he very calmly - and perhaps rather softly - came back with the assurance that she would not die if she ate of the forbidden fruit. He then "explained" God's reason for the prohibition. God was simply "bluffing" them. Instead of dying, He knew that fruit would make them like God - which He wanted to preserve only for Himself (Gen. 3:4-5).

This untruth seemed plausible to Eve, so she began looking at this fruit with a different glint in her eye. After examining the fruit and seeing that it looked "good enough to eat," she took a bite. True to Satan's words, nothing happened, so she offered the fruit to Adam - and he ate (Gen. 3:6). Whether Adam had been present during the conversation between Eve and the serpent - or whether he just happened up right before Eve offered him some of the forbidden fruit - makes little difference. The act had been committed - an act that changed history completely; an act that God foresaw in Eternity and the consequences of which He had already made plans to counteract (I Peter 1:2). This act of Adam and Eve would forever after be referred to as "The Fall."

As was stated previously, the act of eating this forbidden fruit did not result in instant death for Adam and Eve. In this sense, Satan was partially correct in what he told Eve. But he deliberately failed to tell her that the seriousness of eating the forbidden fruit was really their disobedience to God's command - which would instill in their being the factor of death. The agent of death began working in Adam and Eve from this moment on (just as the agent of death works in us from the moment of conception until it results in our last breath on this earth), a consequence coming not from the fruit itself, but from disobedience to God's command. God had warned them about the penalty of disobedience. From this moment on, they would become increasingly aware of it.

Almost immediately, they realized that something was different. Not only did they begin to look upon life in a completely new way. They also realized that they were naked. It's not that they hadn't noticed this before. They could see that. But until now, it didn't bother them. Now they experienced shame for the first time. They felt exposed before each other and before God. So in a state of embarrassment and

shame, they fashioned coverings for themselves out of fig leaves. But those fig leaves could not cover their sin and guilt. They had disobeyed God. Now they no longer felt comfortable in His divine, sinless presence. So they tried to hide themselves from God. (Does this stir up any familiar feelings when we transgress God's Law - thinking we can "hide" from God; hoping that God won't "find out;" hoping that somehow this didn't catch His attention, or that He would overlook it?)

We don't know how long the Lord let Adam and Eve "stew" in their feelings of guilt and shame. But I'm sure they became aware of the fact that sooner or later they would have to face God. They were not looking forward to that. Then it happened. They heard the Lord God walking in the garden "in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8a). Their reaction? Much like ours when we are about to be confronted by God (in His Word; through one of His servants; by a fellow believer) - we try to hide (at least figuratively speaking) by denial or by making excuses. This is exactly what Adam and Eve did (Gen. 3:8b).

They tried to hide among the trees in the garden. They didn't stop to think that God could see through the trees and knew right where they were. (Even as we often forget that God not only sees exactly what we are doing when we disobey His word, but also sees right through our excuses.) In answer to God's call to him, Adam responded with a lame excuse: I hid because I was naked (Gen. 3:10). As if God - who had created both Adam and Eve - was not aware of this! It hadn't bothered them or God before. Why now? Although God knew the answer, He challenged them with two quick, soul-piercing questions (Gen. 3:11).

How did they know they were naked - did someone tell them? Then the question that went right to the heart: did you eat of the forbidden fruit? The excuses and rationalizations began. Adam indirectly tried to blame God. He tried to excuse his actions by accusing the woman whom God had given him. When God turned to her with a question, Eve followed Adam's example and blamed the serpent for deceiving her (Gen. 3:12-13).

Was either of these excuses valid? You know the answer to that already. But look a little closer at these excuses. In blaming the woman, Adam was failing to take responsibility for his own act. He was also indirectly blaming God: "the woman You gave me." Did he really think that God would give him a mate whom He had predisposed to deceive Adam? Eve's excuse was no better. While trying to blame the serpent, she was actually admitting to listening to the words of the snake rather than the divine words of warning that God had given them concerning this tree. She

chose to believe the serpent rather than God. (If we would examine the excuses we offer for our waywardness, are they any better than those of Adam and Eve? We know the answer to that too.)

Now God addressed the serpent (Satan). Adam and Eve knew what their punishment would be for eating the forbidden fruit - death. Before that would occur, however, additional consequences would be added. But God speaks first to the serpent. Because he was involved in this, because he was the instrument Satan used to tempt Eve, he would be cursed above all of the other animals. (Most people still have an aversion to snakes.) He would also have to crawl on his belly for the rest of time (Gen. 3:14). Some ask if this implies that snakes once had legs and feet and could walk before this. Scripture doesn't answer that question, so neither can we. It could simply mean that the "slithering" would have a despised effect henceforth.

To the woman, God said she would experience pain in delivery and childbirth (Gen. 3:16), a rather painful reminder for every mother at the time of childbirth that this pain is a consequence of sin. The last part of verse 16 is a very important part of God's statement to the woman - a part which is often overlooked or disregarded. But this is the basis for Paul's reasoning that the office of pastor be denied to women (I Tim 2:11-15), as well as his words to the wife concerning submitting to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24). The consequences for Adam is that he would no longer have an easy time in life - as he did in the Garden prior to this (Gen. 3:17-19). Because Adam did not exert his headship of the family, but instead yielded to his wife's encouragement (to disobey God), from now on, a livelihood would be possible only through painful toil and by the sweat of his brow. The various hardships and troubles in making a living will continue until he returns to the ground from whence he came. This would all be a continual reminder of his frailty and mortality that was not in God's original Plan for man.

Notice that only the serpent received a curse. Adam and Eve did not receive a curse from God - although the ground was cursed because of Adam's disobedience when he, too, ate of the forbidden fruit. [Actually, Adam and Eve had called down a curse upon themselves through their disobedient act (Gen. 2:16-17).] The fact that Adam and Eve did not receive a direct curse from God - even though their lives would be much more difficult and full of trouble from now on - shows God's care and concern for His fallen creatures. Adam and Eve had disobeyed God's command. They deserved to be cursed by God for their sin. God would have been entirely within His justice to condemn Adam and Eve into everlasting damnation that very moment - as He had done with the rebellious angels when they sinned. But His love for the crown of

His creation would not permit this. He had another Plan for them, a Plan that He devised in Eternity - and would soon reveal. [Why were the angels not included in God's Plan of redemption? That is another unanswered question in God's Word. Some speculate that it may have been because the angels sinned on their own - without temptation - whereas Adam and Eve were tempted. But that, too, is mere speculation and cannot be taught as fact.]

Before we proceed to that part of God's Plan, let's look at a couple ways in which God showed His love and concern for Adam and Eve in their immediate future. Since the fig leaves that they had fashioned for themselves as clothing would not last very long, God fashioned more suitable and more durable clothing for them from animal skins (Gen. 3:21). The animals had been "dressed" by nature. The water animals had scales or tough skin; the birds had feathers; the land animals had fur, hair, or hide. But man was not so equipped - because God intended for His human creatures to live in the beautiful garden He had planted for them in Eden. Remember, this was a perfect environment - no weather extremes - and in sinless perfection, there was no guilt or shame, so clothing was not necessary. Sin brought an abrupt halt to all that. So God provided a temporary covering for them.

There was one more thing God needed to do now. Not only did the garden have the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" growing in it, there was also the "tree of life" close by (Gen. 2:9). God knew that if Adam and Eve took some of the fruit of the "tree of life" and ate it, they would live forever. That was what God had intended for His human creatures, but not under these circumstances.

If they ate of this fruit now, they would live forever in their sinful state. So after telling them they would die (return to the dust), but giving them the promise of a Savior, God expelled them from the Garden. Not to further punish, but in loving care and concern for their welfare. To insure their protection from a fate worse than death, God placed cherubim at the entrance to the garden to prevent them from returning to the garden and perhaps be tempted once again - this time to eat of the "tree of life," so they could "live forever" (Gen. 3:22-24). That was not to be. Only through the Promised Messiah would man again have access to the tree of life (Rev. 2:7, 22:14).

#### COMMENTS:

This is one of the saddest moments in human history. The crown of God's creation, first doubting Him and then disobeying Him. And as if that wasn't enough, they

tried to hide from their gracious God and offered lame excuses for their actions - even to the point of indirectly blaming God Himself. They realized too late that God was very serious about His command not to eat of the forbidden fruit. In that act of disobedience, they fell from their state of original grace and changed their lives forever. Adam and Eve were no longer sinless, perfect, bearing the image of God in their beings.

They were now sinful, imperfect, natural enemies of God (Rom 8:7). Their entire natures were corrupt. One very important consequence of this is that they would not be able to pass along the image of God to their descendants. They would only be able to pass along what they now possessed - a sinful nature (Gen. 5:3). They could not pass along something they themselves no longer had - a sinless, holy, perfect nature. As the parents of the entire human race, they plunged mankind into a state of sin (Rom. 5:12). Now their descendants would be born with original sin; i.e., they would be born sinful (Psalm 51:5, John 3:6a).

As we look at newborns, it's tempting to wonder how they can be declared sinful. But they are! We are not saying that they have committed any actual sin - though I doubt that the Holy Spirit inspires their temper tantrums - but we are saying they are born with a sinful nature. This too is a consequence of the Fall of Adam and Eve, of their act of doubting God's word, and disobedience to that word in eating of the forbidden fruit. That is why children must be brought into God's Kingdom as soon as possible.

Yes, sin is serious - any and every sin. There is no such thing as a "little" or "unimportant" sin. Every sin - whether it's something as "little" (in man's eyes) as taking a pencil without permission or as "big" as murder - is the same in the sight of God. What makes every sin serious is the fact that it is committed against God. Every transgression of His holy Law is a "slap" in God's face. And because it is committed against Him, each and every sin deserves death - temporal death, as well as eternal death in hell. That's why God came up with a Plan - in Eternity - to make it possible for His beloved children to escape the punishment they rightfully deserve.

We'll look at that Plan in more detail in the next chapter. But before leaving this chapter, remember the lies and deceit of Satan. Remember that he and his allies are roaming the earth, trying to deceive God's people and pull them away from God's loving care. Remember what St. Peter says in I Pet. 5:8. Be aware of Satan's presence in the world. Be on guard against his temptations. Remember how deceptive he is. Remember how he deceived Eve - and years later, St. Peter himself. And when we

fall - and we will - remember that God sees right through our lame excuses. Remember that there is only one way that we can have access to the “tree of life.” That is to have our sins covered by the precious blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:18-20). God’s promise of that Savior (Gen. 3:15) is our next focus.



*“And He will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’”  
(Isaiah 9:6) by Rudolf Schäfer*



## IV - THE PROMISE

God's original Plan for His human creatures was spoiled when our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God's Word to them and ate of the forbidden fruit. They now had nothing better to look forward to than an existence of misery on earth and an eternity of greater misery in hell. But God's love for His human creatures had in no way wavered or waned. That's why, already in Eternity, He had worked out a Plan for their salvation.

God now began to reveal that Plan to His human creatures. To see how this played out, we go once again to the Garden of Eden immediately after the Fall. God spoke first to the serpent - telling him the curse that was placed upon him (Gen. 3:14). These words were addressed to the serpent as a serpent. Now He spoke to Satan who had used the serpent as his instrument to deceive Adam and Eve.

The words He spoke are those familiar words of Genesis 3:15 - the very first Gospel promise given to His human creatures, even though they were addressed to Satan. God speaks of the enmity - the ill will, hostility, antagonism, hatred - which would henceforth exist between him (Satan) and the woman. [The woman is mentioned here rather than the man, I believe, because she was to become the mother of all succeeding generations (Gen. 3:20) - including her "Great Offspring." However, it could also have been because it was the woman Satan had enticed with his deceiving words, and it would be through her Offspring that rescue from this sin would be made possible.]

This enmity would continue to exist down through the years. The reference to "his seed" does not imply that Satan would father additional evil angels. As angels, they do not reproduce. This is simply a reference to the demons who would be hating and fighting against the "woman's Seed" when He was born. The woman's Seed, of course, is referring to Jesus, the Messiah, whom God promised to send as the Savior of the world. As mentioned above, this is the very first Gospel promise in Holy Scripture and why it is closely linked to the Christmas story.

But there is more to this promise. Not only will the Seed of the woman be born and fight against all the forces and demons of hell, God promises that this Seed of the woman will prevail in the battle between Himself and Satan. God uses an example that is quite appropriate in this situation. He speaks of "striking a heel" and "crushing a head." You can envision a man walking along, coming upon a poisonous snake. With no weapon to defend himself, but not wanting to simply walk away from the

snake that could inflict harm to someone else, he takes the drastic measure of trying to kill the snake by crushing its head with his foot. He succeeds in killing the snake, but in the process is struck in the heel by the deadly fangs of the snake.

Since a serpent was involved in the temptation, this comparison is quite appropriate. Applying this to Christ's struggle with Satan on the cross, Jesus did succeed in crushing the serpent's (Satan's) head when He suffered and died for the sins of the world. Satan's power over God's children was "crushed." True, Satan did get in a fatal "strike" upon Jesus - when the consequences of the sin that Satan instigated brought about Jesus' death. Holy Scripture does assure us, however, that Jesus willingly placed Himself into this situation where He gave up His life so that He could save the world from sin, death, and the devil. The fact that Jesus rose victoriously on Easter morn proves that He did accomplish that part of God's Plan - a Plan that originated in Eternity, was carried out in time, and would remain throughout Eternity.

God did not, however, issue this single Promise of a Redeemer, a Rescuer from the deadly effects of sin. He reminded His people again and again - throughout the entire Old Testament period - that a Savior, a Messiah, would be coming in due time. He let His people know that not only would the Messiah be coming, but He also revealed some circumstances regarding His coming. For example, in the Book of Genesis, God says that He (the Messiah) would come from the seed of Abraham (12:3, 18:18); of Isaac (17:19); of Jacob (28:14, also Numbers 24:17); of the tribe of Judah (49:10).

In the Book of Isaiah, God reveals that the Messiah would be born of a virgin (7:14). [Can you imagine the reaction this prophecy received? I can well imagine that some people might have thought that Isaiah must have been out in the hot sun too long when he wrote those words!] Prophecies by Isaiah that were more apt to be received in a positive way were that the Messiah would sit on the throne of David (9:7. Also see II Sam. 7:8-13 and Ps. 132:11). He would come from the stump of Jesse (11:1, 10). Further, this Savior would be coming to the Daughter of Zion, the Old Testament believers (62:11).

The prophet Jeremiah refers to Him as the Righteous Branch of David (23:5). Micah identifies the place of His birth as Bethlehem (5:2). And in the last Book of the Old Testament, Malachi, we are told that He would come suddenly (3:1). Were these prophecies always understood in the way that God intended them to be interpreted? Unfortunately, not! There is one notable exception, however. We have good reason to feel that Eve believed that God would send a Messiah. She made a mistake, however,

in thinking that her firstborn, Cain, was the one God meant in His first promise of a Savior. The reason we tend to believe this comes from her own words at the birth of Cain. While a number of translations render Genesis 4:1 in different ways, the Hebrew can be translated, "I have gotten a man, the Lord." In fact, at least one modern translation renders this verse very closely to those words. And the time-honored King James Version translates this verse very similar to the Hebrew, but adds the word "from" between "man" and "the Lord;" a word that is not found in the original Hebrew.

Who can imagine the disappointment and hurt of Eve when the son she believed to be the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah (Savior) in later years killed his own brother, Abel (Gen. 4:8)? Was her faith shaken when this happened? Possibly. But not to the point where she lost her trust in the Lord. For when she later gave birth to another son, Seth, she praised God for giving her another son in place of Abel (Gen. 4:25).

There were many other prophecies throughout the period of the Old Testament as well, prophecies that were, by and large, misunderstood by many. These were prophecies that spoke about the deliverance of Israel; about a King coming; about God setting up a Kingdom which would never be destroyed; about a Messiah who would bring good news to the poor and proclaim freedom for the captives; about Judah being saved and Israel living in safety; about removing the disgrace of His people; about bringing justice to the nations; about ruling in the midst of their enemies; about the Lord crushing kings, crushing the rulers of the whole earth. (Cf Ps. 69:35, 110:2, 5, 6; Isa. 25:8, 42:1, 61:1; Jer. 23:6; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 9:9, among others.)

The reason these prophecies were misunderstood by many is that they were desiring an earthly Messiah who would set up an earthly kingdom. One who would deliver them from their earthly oppressors; One who would restore Israel to its glory days during the reigns of David and Solomon. So when they read the prophecies regarding the coming Messiah, they interpreted these prophecies to fit their preconceived notions about earthly power and splendor and glory.

However, these prophecies regarding the coming Messiah were speaking about a spiritual kingdom. The Messiah would be coming to fulfill God's Plan for His people; God's Plan to rescue His human creation from the far greater evil of sin and Satan. This would be done - not by establishing an earthly kingdom, but by conquering sin and Satan through the holy life and innocent suffering and death of God's own

Son for the sins of the entire world. The Kingdom He would establish would be a Kingdom of grace and love and forgiveness. This is the Kingdom that would remain forever. Consequently, the people who were looking for a Messiah to deliver them from their earthly bondage completely misunderstood these prophecies and when the Messiah did come, many did not accept Him as the Messiah they wanted. They clearly did not understand what kind of Messiah had been promised.

God had tried to prepare His people for the kind of Messiah He had promised. But these prophecies were ignored by many. You see, these prophecies spoke of a Suffering Servant - not the Triumphant King they were hoping for. These prophecies spoke of the Messiah being scorned, forsaken, despised, rejected. (Little did they know that it would be their own descendants who would treat the Messiah in this way.) There were prophecies that described the torments of crucifixion - a thousand years before it took place, long before crucifixion as a means of execution was even known. There are prophecies that foretold some of the words spoken from and around the cross; actions that took place beneath the cross, prophecies that even gave the reason why His suffering and death was necessary (Ps. 22:1-18, 69:7,8, 17-21; Isa. 53). But these prophecies did not fit their mind-sets, so they were ignored.

And yet, God's Plan for the spiritual rescue of His people - foretold by His many prophets throughout the Old Testament period - was carried out. The Messiah and earthly kingdom many in Israel were looking for was not to be. It was superseded by a Messiah and a Kingdom of much higher purpose.

But when would this Messiah arrive? And how would they recognize Him? In answer to the first question, the last prophecy regarding the coming Messiah was given by the last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi, who said that He would come suddenly (3:1). That was between 300 and 400 years before He actually appeared. The second question isn't really pertinent since they were looking for a Messiah to fit their own ideas. So many in Israel would not recognize His coming at all.

#### COMMENTS:

Just when things couldn't have seemed darker (following the Fall), God rose to the rescue of His human creatures. No, it was not an immediate rescue - at least in the fulfillment stage. But it was an immediate promise for rescue; a promise that was repeated over and over again through the years. And those who lived and died long

before that promise was fulfilled - but who believed in that coming Messiah, were saved.

The cross remains the “central” point in history. Those who lived before the Messiah came, but believed that He would come and save them from their sins, were in fact saved. They looked forward to the cross and were saved - just as those of us who live “after” the cross are saved by looking backwards to the cross and accepting the suffering and death of Jesus as having been done for us. Old Testament believers and New Testament believers alike are saved by the same means - Jesus, God’s Son, suffering and dying on the cross for our (my) sins. Whether God’s children look “forward” (Old Testament) or “backwards” (New Testament) - all are saved by the redemptive act of God’s Son. All according to His Plan.

I can’t help but marvel at the faith of those Old Testament believers. We have an advantage by living in the age of fulfillment. We can read of those prophecies being fulfilled. They had nothing but those prophecies to cling to. But we need to remember that those prophecies are also God’s all-powerful Word - the Word through which the Holy Spirit worked faith in the hearts of those Old Testament believers. Even when those prophecies spoke of things that went completely contrary to human wisdom (e.g., the Messiah being born of a virgin), God’s Spirit enabled those believers to accept those words as true - which indeed they are.

Can their faith, which accepted things so “unbelievable,” help us, inspire us, in our faith? You bet it can. For the same Spirit who inspired their faith can now use their faith as examples for our faith to follow today. How? By continuing to work through the Word of God to create and maintain faith in the hearts of God’s children today; the same kind of faith that will follow God’s Word unquestioningly.



*"The Birth of the Savior" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## V - THE FULFILLMENT

It was now time for the prophecies to be fulfilled. What time was that? The right time! St. Paul later wrote to the Galatian congregation and told them that at just the right time in history, God kept His promise and sent the Messiah (4:4). What made this the right time? Not any one thing - other than this was the time God incorporated into His Plan. But there were other factors that helped get the message out. For one thing, there was for the most part a common language at that time. Also, there was a decent road system that enabled transportation from one city or country to another to be undertaken more easily. And of course, God's people were anxious for the coming of the Messiah, even though many were looking for a Messiah unlike the One who came.

So on a calm night in Bethlehem, a marvelous miracle took place. God's Son was born of the virgin Mary. In palatial surroundings? No! Not even in a nice home. There was not even room in the inn for the Son of God. His birth took place in a stable - a lowly, smelly stable - witnessed by no one but his stepfather, Joseph, and some of the stable animals. Here, an act greater than creation took place - while the world around was totally oblivious to it. But there was a reason for this location too.

Before we go any further, let's see why Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem just at this time. They had been living in Nazareth before this. Nazareth was located roughly 70 miles north of Bethlehem. But the prophecy had been given that the Messiah would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Mary was now nearing the end of her pregnancy. How would it play out that this prophecy would be fulfilled according to the words of Micah? Remember, with God all things are possible. God is not without means to bring to pass what He has promised. At just the right time - and this was included in God's Plan all along - He moved the Emperor Augustus to issue a decree that all the world under Roman rule would be required to register for a census. And even more to the point, this registration was to be done in the city or town of their ancestral home (Luke 2:1, 3).

Since Joseph was of the line of David, he and wife, Mary, began what for them - and especially Mary - would be a long, tedious, and anxious trip to Bethlehem. The reason this was a rather difficult trip is that Mary would be delivering her Son any day. With their humble means, the mode of transportation for Mary and Joseph was probably a single donkey. This meant that for approximately 70 miles, Mary and her Baby would be jostled and bounced on the back of the donkey. (Quite different from

the normal means of transportation to a hospital today for most women nearing delivery.)

If it hadn't been for the Emperor's edict that all citizens had to register in their home town, I would imagine that it might have been tempting for Mary and Joseph to remain in Nazareth until after the birth of her Son. But that would not have been according to the Plan. So Mary and Joseph made the trip even under those difficult conditions. Whether Mary and Joseph were familiar with the prophecy of Micah and how this might affect them, we do not know. At any rate, the requirement of the census insured their being in Bethlehem in time for her Son to be born there.

We've mentioned that Mary and Joseph made the trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth. But what do we know about their lives in Nazareth? Not a whole lot, but enough. Mary and Joseph were betrothed (engaged) to each other according to Jewish tradition of that day. They were both righteous people, looking forward to the arrival of the Promised Messiah. For one thing, the angel Gabriel told Mary that she had found favor with God (Luke 1:30). And Joseph, after the angel appeared to him in a dream, willingly followed the angel's instructions - even to the implied instruction not to have sexual union with Mary until after her Son would be born (Matthew 1:18-25).

Going back into their lives even before this, let's look at the surprise each one of them had - a surprise that shook them to the core and completely changed their lives forever. Mary's surprise came first. St. Luke 1:26-38 records that surprise. On a rather normal, quiet day, Mary's world turned upside-down. With no warning, an angel, Gabriel by name, suddenly appeared to Mary. In a state of shock and dismay, she heard the angel greet her and inform her that she is highly favored. Recognizing the fright in Mary's eyes, the angel reassures her and continues with his message.

Mary could hardly believe her ears. The angel told her that she was going to conceive and have a Child, a Son. The angel gave her the name of this Child - Jesus - and that He would rule over the house of Jacob forever. Trying to absorb all this, Mary asked how this could happen, since she was a virgin. The angel had the answer. The Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Then he explains that the Child to be born of her would be called the Son of God.

To give Mary some more assurance, the angel explains that her relative, Elizabeth - far beyond the age of child-bearing - is going to have a child too. And even now, she is in her sixth month. The angel concludes his message by reminding Mary that



nothing is impossible with God. Mary's response is one that tells us a lot about her faith and trust in God - and His servant's message to her. She humbly submits to the Lord's will and declares herself to be His servant.

After the angel left, can you imagine some of the thoughts that went through Mary's mind? "Was that really an angel? Was I just imagining this? Is what he said really going to happen? And when? How soon? Will I be able to do this? And what am I going to tell Joseph? Probably nothing right now. Would he believe me if I did? Why, I can hardly believe it myself. It seems so unreal. Maybe I should visit Elizabeth. After what the angel told me about her situation, she could probably understand what I'm going to be facing better than anyone else. Hopefully, she can somehow help me in my situation."

Mary did go and visit Elizabeth. When she arrived, she heard some more startling news. Upon greeting her relative, Elizabeth responded - possibly with hands on her stomach - calling Mary blessed among women, and declaring that the Child in Mary's womb is also blessed. Not knowing before that Mary was with child, how could she have known this - except by special revelation? Elizabeth expressed surprise that the mother of her Lord would visit her. Then she explains that as soon as she heard the sound of Mary's voice, her baby leaped for joy in her womb. It was at this time that Mary spoke the words which have come to be known as "The Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55). After remaining with Elizabeth about three months - near the time for Elizabeth to deliver and about the time Mary herself would begin "showing," Mary returned to Nazareth (Luke 1:56).

As she approached the time when she knew she would have to tell Joseph something, I can imagine that a variety of thoughts were still racing around in Mary's mind. Thoughts like being glad she went to visit Elizabeth, for there were some comforting things she learned from her. She saw that God was certainly working in wonderful ways - Elizabeth having a baby in her old age. And now she was positive that she was with child in a miraculous way. But at the same time, a lot of questions were still going round and round in her mind.

The perpetual puzzle was still there. What was she going to tell Joseph? Her thoughts could have gone along these lines: "I probably won't have to tell him that I'm going to have a baby. He'll be able to see that. But what will he think? What will he say? Will he talk to me; let me try to explain? And if he does, will he believe me? Or will he think I'm just making up a story to cover up an affair?" Indeed, some difficult days for Mary. On the one hand, she was proud to be God's servant and give birth to His

Son. On the other hand, there were troubling thoughts about what Joseph would think, say, and do.

But Mary wasn't the only one to have some soul-wrenching moments. Puzzling thoughts were tumbling over each other in Joseph's mind as well. Try to put yourself in his place and envision some of his thoughts! "I remember the day Mary told me she was going to visit her relative, Elizabeth. It seemed so sudden. She hadn't mentioned it before. I couldn't quite figure it out. But if that was what she wanted to do, it was all right with me. Just so she wouldn't be away too long. We have our wedding to plan. But I wasn't prepared for what I saw when she returned.

"It was obvious that she was going to have a baby. What had happened? Who? Why? When? Is that why she left town to visit Elizabeth? How could she do this to me? We're engaged to be married. What should I do now? I know she told me about an angel appearing to her and telling her she was going to have a baby - a son - and that he would be called the Son of God. She even said that the baby's name was to be 'Jesus.' I want to believe her - but this whole thing is so unbelievable. Things like that just don't happen.

"I probably have to decide on one of three choices. One, I can quietly marry her and pretend that nothing is amiss. But could I ever trust her again? Two, I can expose her to the religious authorities and let them determine her punishment. But I love her too much for that. Or three, I can break our engagement quietly and spare both of us some public embarrassment." After deciding on his third option, something else happened that he wasn't prepared for. While he was sleeping one night, an angel appeared to him in a dream. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. She hadn't been unfaithful. The angel explained that the Child in her womb was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel further told him the same as what the angel Gabriel had told Mary - that her Child would be a son and that His name is to be "Jesus." He even explained the reason for that name - this Child would save people from their sins (Matt. 1:19-21). [The name "Jesus" in Greek means: "the saving one" or "He who saves."]

Joseph's thoughts now possibly went something like this: "Well, that changed everything for me. Now I know that Mary's unbelievable story is true. God is indeed working here. I know now that I have to go back to my first option: marry her quickly. But I can't pretend that nothing has happened because a miracle is in the making. Mary is going to give birth to Jesus, the Promised Messiah, the Son of God. Now we need to go ahead with the wedding plans." For almost six months, everything

went along pretty smoothly. But then, they got another bit of news that turned their world upside down again. It was the news about the census that Caesar Augustus ordered (Luke 2:1-3). It couldn't have come at a worse time - according to their thinking at the time. Mary's delivery date was close. But they didn't have a choice. They had to go to Bethlehem and register for the census.

So it came about that this unpretentious and trusting couple from Nazareth were in Bethlehem at this time in order for God's Word, Holy Scripture, to be fulfilled - all according to God's Plan. As Mary gazed down at her newborn Son, some of the following thoughts could have been occupying her mind. "For a while, I didn't know if I would make it to Bethlehem before my Baby came. It was really an uncomfortable journey. And then, when we got here, there was no room, I couldn't believe it. What were we going to do? I knew that we had to find some place quickly, because I could tell that the baby would be coming soon. I just thank God that the inn-keeper agreed to let us stay here in this stable. The delivery wasn't easy under these circumstances, but God was with me - and now, here is my Son, Baby Jesus."

Other things were happening, however, about which Mary and Joseph would soon learn. For outside the little town of Bethlehem - out on the open fields - a group of shepherds were keeping watch over their flock (Luke 2:8). They were not aware of it as yet, but they, too, would be experiencing a surprise - very shortly. All of a sudden, an angel appeared to them from the heavens. A light so brilliant that they had to shade their eyes served as a backdrop for the angel. St. Luke describes them as being terrified (2:9). That is probably an understatement. Put yourself in their situation. We would probably say that we were "scared to death."

But as usual when an angel appeared to a human or group of humans, his first words to them were words of reassurance: "Don't be afraid." Then came those beautiful words of Good News. Good News that would bring joy to many people. The angel told them that this very day, a Savior had been born: "Christ the Lord." Not in some distant city, but nearby. In fact, right over there in the city of David (Bethlehem). Anticipating the shepherds' desire to see this newborn Savior, the angel told them how they would know it was the Christ-Child.

Don't look in some fancy home or hotel. Rather, look for a Baby wrapped in cloths (swaddling clothes), with a manger for His crib. Before the shepherds had time to comprehend what the angel had told them, a large number of angels also appeared, singing their praises to God above (Luke 2:10-14). Just as suddenly as the angels appeared, they were gone. So was the brilliant light. No light could now be seen

under the stars, except for the distant lights of Bethlehem and their own campfire. But what an impression this sudden and hasty appearance had on the shepherds. Imagine their conversation after a few moments to regain their thoughts.

*“Can you believe what we just experienced? I wonder what the meaning of all this is!”*

*“I don’t know, but were the rest of you as frightened as I was when that bright light suddenly appeared?”*

*“I was! It was as bright as the sun. And that angel was just as bright as the light. But what a message he brought – a Savior has been born!”*

*“Yes, but what does that mean? Is this newborn baby the Messiah? Is He going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

*“How can HE do that – He’s just a baby?”*

*“I think there’s more to it than that. Remember, the angel said that this Good News was to be for ALL people – not just for the Jews.”*

*“And that choir of angels! I’ve never heard anything so beautiful. Remember their words: ‘Glory to God in the highest?’”*

*“I don’t know exactly what this all means, but I’m sure we have witnessed something spectacular tonight. Who knows what this will mean for the world – for generations to come?”*

*“What are we doing just sitting here talking about it? The angel told us where to find this Baby. Let’s go into Bethlehem and see this thing the angel told us about. The sheep are bedded down for the night. They’ll be alright until we get back.”*

With no more encouragement needed, the shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem. In a short while, they found this Baby who was indeed lying in a manger (Luke 2:16). Standing watch over the newborn were His mother, Mary, and her husband, Joseph. Awed silence soon erupted into questions tumbling from the mouths of these blessed shepherds. After their questions had been patiently answered by Mary and Joseph, the shepherds returned to their flocks. But on the way, they could not resist telling everyone who would listen about this newborn Savior of the world (Luke 2:17).

What the Scriptures reveal next is easy for us to believe, namely, that those who heard the shepherds' story were indeed amazed (Luke 2:18). After all, these were only poor shepherders. What would they know about a Savior, or the Promised Messiah? And their story about a bright light and some angels appearing to them – that's ridiculous! So these citizens settled back into their unconcerned world.

But shepherds, you, the common people of the day, were chosen by God to be the first humans to hear the wonderful news that a Savior has been born. You have witnessed a history-changing event tonight, an event that will have meaning for the entire world for time eternal. You have seen God's Son in the flesh - come to earth to be the Savior from sin for all mankind. Indeed, a spectacular event! A miraculous event! A love-filled and love-motivated event! God has shown His deep love for all mankind in the Gift He gave to the world this night - all according to His Plan.

The shepherds, however, were not the only ones to know about the birth of the Savior. Satan, too, was well aware of this event. It was a time that he had been dreading since that day in the Garden of Eden, when God told him that the woman's Seed would crush his head. Ever since that day, Satan was, I'm sure, trying to think of some way to reverse that curse. Now that the woman's Seed had been born, he knew that his fiercest battle was not far away. He immediately set about to try and change things. Let's see how he took advantage of an unexpected opportunity. St. Matthew, chapter 2, fills in some details.

Some time after Jesus was born - in fact, while King Herod was sitting on the throne - a group of individuals came from an Eastern country. Little is known about this group. The number in their company, the land of their origin, and what caused them to make this trip is for the most part a matter of speculation. The popular Christmas song, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," is misleading in a number of ways. Whether there were three or thirteen, we do not know. The number three is probably derived from the number of gifts they presented to the Newborn King: gold, incense, and myrrh. We have reason to doubt that any of them were kings. And they probably weren't from the Orient, or Far East. It is more likely that they came from the Middle East, or Persian Gulf area. The King James Version of the Bible calls them "Wise Men," while modern translations identify them as "Magi." Magi were originally a religious class among the Persians. They were devoted to astrology, divination, and the interpretation of dreams.

In time, this interest in astrology, divination, and the interpretation of dreams spread (Daniel 2:1-2, 5:7). By the first century A.D., the term "Magi" was also given to

fortune tellers and followers of religious cults throughout the Mediterranean world. It is my personal opinion that this group of Magi came from the Babylonian area. (A point of interest: The ancient city of Babylon, now lying in ruins, but the former capital city of Babylonia, was situated approximately 50 miles south of modern-day Baghdad, capital city of Iraq.) But whatever their homeland, the Magi had followed a star - a special star; an unusual star - which they had first observed in their land of origin (Matt. 2:2).

They recognized this star as somehow being associated with the birth of a newborn King of the Jews. But how would they know about this - hundreds of miles away from Judea? I believe history can help us on this. Remember reading about many of the Jewish people being taken as captives to Babylon in the latter part of the 7th century B.C. and the early part of the 6th century B.C? This was when Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon (Dan. 1:1-2). [Actually, there were three different deportations - one in 605 B.C.; the second in 597 B.C.; and the third in 586 B.C.] Among the captives were individuals familiar to us from Scripture. Daniel was one of them. And do you remember Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah? You probably would if I would list them by the names they were given in Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan. 1:6-7).

These four were among the Israelites chosen to enter the king's service (Daniel 1). By remaining true to their God - the God of Israel - and not only testifying to their faith, but also demonstrating it, these men made quite an impression on Nebuchadnezzar, and later, Cyrus and Darius when Babylon was overthrown by the Persians (Dan. 5:30-31; 6:28). There was the special diet (Daniel 1), Daniel interpreting dreams of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2 & 4), the experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), Daniel's warning to King Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5), and Daniel in the lions' den, at the time of King Darius (Daniel 6), among other incidents. These events greatly impressed the various kings mentioned above, so that not only did Daniel receive much respect from them, but his faith and belief in the true God was recognized and respected as well (Dan. 6:25-27).

Because of this, the Israelites' God and the Israelite religion were well known in and around Babylon - both before and after its fall to Persia. After the overthrow of Babylon by the Persians, the enslaved Israelites were liberated and allowed to return to the land of Israel - just as God had promised His people (Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10, Ezekiel 11:17). Three main groups of Jewish people returned to Jerusalem and Judea in or about 538 B.C. (with Zerubbabel), 458 B.C. (with Ezra), and 445

B.C. (with Nehemiah). However, there were some of the Jewish people who had adapted to their new homeland and remained in Babylonia after the others had returned. [A point of interest: It was the period between the first and second groups returning to Jerusalem that Esther lived and ruled as queen in Persia, which was now in control of Babylonia. Persia at one time comprised about one million square miles. Its boundaries covered much of the same area as present day Iran.]

But enough for the history lesson. My point in all this is that there is sufficient reason to believe that the people in the land of Babylonia were familiar with the concept of the God the Jewish exiles worshipped and perhaps also had some knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. And the Jews remaining in Babylonia would probably have continued to practice their religion. Since Magi were astrologers, among other things, they could easily have been aware of and interested in the passage in the Jewish Bible that talked about a star coming out of Jacob and a scepter rising out of Israel (Num 24:17a). Two verses later it states that a ruler will come out of Jacob (Numbers 24:19a). Putting all these things together, the Magi could easily have associated the unusual star they saw in the heavens with this Scripture and interpreted it to be the fulfillment of that prophecy. So they started their journey to the land of Jacob (Judea).

The timing of their visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in relation to the birth of Jesus, is a bit unclear. Some believe it happened shortly after the birth of Jesus - as is implied in many Christmas programs and pageants, with the Magi arriving and worshipping the Christ-Child in the manger, shortly after the shepherds' visit. Others believe this visit could have been as much as a year after His birth. For various reasons, I am among those opting for a later visit. We know that Mary and Joseph left very quickly for Egypt after the Magi had departed (Matthew 2:13-14). So several things had to have happened prior to this time. 1) The circumcision of Jesus on the 8th day (Luke 2:21). 2) The presentation of Jesus in the Temple following Mary's 40 days of purification (Exodus 13:2, 12; Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:22-24). 3) While Mary delivered in a stable (where the shepherds visited), Matthew tells us that when the Magi arrived in Bethlehem, they found the Holy Family in a "house" (Matthew 2:11). Not wanting to make the tedious journey back to Nazareth with a newborn, it is not unthinkable that Joseph started doing odd jobs with his carpentry ability, so they could rent a house until the Child was old enough to travel.

There is one other factor, which I believe, argues for a later date for the visit of the Magi. But I'll touch on that after we go back and check on the Magi a little more - bringing us up to the time this other factor enters the picture. The Magi had a long, exhausting trip. When they arrived at Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1), they probably thought

their trip was completed. They would soon find out otherwise. As they came into Jerusalem, could this have been part of their conversation?

*“Am I ever glad that this trip is behind us. I was beginning to wonder how wise it was to do this. But finally, we’re here.”*

*“Yes, thanks to that star we saw in our home land and kept going ahead of us all the way here. That was such an unusual phenomenon.”*

*“But evidently something expected. The Sacred Writings of the Jews who remained in our country after they were released from captivity speak of a star that would come out of Jacob and a Scepter that would rise out of Israel.”*

*“Yes, and they believed this to mean that a King would be born; a King who would restore the once mighty kingdom to Israel.”*

*“They believed this so sincerely that I just had to make this trip and find out if this unusual star was indeed announcing the birth of that King.”*

Believing that a new king would be born in a palace - or at least in the capital city - the Magi started inquiring in Jerusalem about this newborn King of the Jews. It wasn't long before King Herod heard about this and became greatly disturbed (Matthew 2:1-3). Having no idea what this was all about, but since something was mentioned about a new King of the Jews, Herod immediately called together the religious leaders and scholars to see if they knew anything about this rumor - and where this newborn King was to be born (Matt. 2:4). They quoted the prophecy of Micah (5:2) and told the King that His birth place was to be Bethlehem in Judea (Matt. 2:5-6).

Having sent the religious leaders and scholars away, Herod entered into some deep thought: “What’s all this nonsense about a new king being born? Why wasn’t I informed of this? Is this another threat to my kingdom? How can I find out more about this new king? Who is He? Where is He? Maybe those Magi from the East can help me. I know what I’ll do. I’ll pretend to be interested in finding this new king so I can ‘pay my respects.’ Then I’ll send them on their way and ask them to bring back information about what they have found. Then I’ll know where to find



this 'king' and I can eliminate any possibility of him becoming a threat to me or my kingdom at any time in the future.”

Having summoned the Magi to a private meeting with himself, Herod questioned them about the exact time they had seen the star (Matt. 2:7). Getting as much information from them as he could, he sent them on their way to Bethlehem - instructing them to return after they had found the infant and tell him where he could find him, so that he could go and 'worship' Him also (Matt. 2:8). As the Magi continued their journey, these thoughts could have been exchanged among them.

*“Well, we’re not at our destination yet. I thought our long trip was over.”*

*“We evidently have a few miles to go yet. Didn’t they say that Bethlehem is about 7 miles from Jerusalem?”*

*“I think that’s what someone said. I was paying more attention to the King. Didn’t it seem strange that the King would have no knowledge of this newborn King?”*

*“Yes, he seemed to be taken completely by surprise. And remember how he questioned us about the exact time that the star appeared? I wonder if he is really interested in finding that new King to honor him - or does he have something else in mind?”*

*“I’m sure I don’t know. But look, the star we saw in the East. It’s in the heavens again. And it’s going ahead of us again. Let’s follow it. Maybe we’re getting close now.”*

Sure enough, the star did lead them right to the house where Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus were now living (Matt. 2:9-10). At long last they were able to offer the gifts they had brought such a long distance for this newborn King: gold, incense, and myrrh (Matt. 2:11). While it was in God’s Plan for the Magi to visit and worship the Christ-Child, it was not in His Plan for them to return to Herod and reveal where this Child could be found. So the Lord used a dream to warn the Magi not to go back to Herod. Thus, they returned to their homeland by a different route (Matt. 2:12).

[COMMENTS:

(While I normally place the comments section at the end of a chapter, since the visit of the Magi carries an importance of its own, I'm including a special section of the significance of their visit here.)

We can only explain the Magi's interest in that particular star and their determination in making an extended journey to a far-away land to the power and grace of God. The power of God in creating an interest in this star; the grace of God in bringing them to Bethlehem to worship this newborn King of the Jews - their Lord and Savior too. Since these were the first non-Jewish people, to our knowledge, to worship the Christ, this is referred to as the "Gentile Christmas." While the visit of the Magi, also known as the Epiphany, is sometimes glossed over after the wonderful celebration of Christmas, we who are non-Jewish by birth (Gentiles) should take special pride in this event and thank God for including us in His Plan of salvation too.]

Returning to Herod: when he realized that the Magi were not going to return as he had instructed, he panicked and sent his soldiers to kill the young males, from two years of age and under, in Bethlehem and its surrounding area (Matt. 2:16). His thinking, inspired by Satan, was to get rid of any threat to his kingdom that this "newborn king of the Jews" might pose later on. Of course, he was playing right into the hand of Satan, who was also trying to get rid of the Christ-Child before He had any chance to "crush his head" as prophesied in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15). As for the slaughter of the innocent babies, we can only imagine some of the conversations going on among the citizens of Bethlehem.

*"Have you heard what Herod's soldiers have done? Is it really true?"*

*"I'm afraid it is. What was Herod thinking?"*

*"Who knows with him? Oh, it's so terrible. It's such a tragedy!"*

*"Those poor parents! I feel so sorry for them. Those soldiers had no mercy whatsoever on their babies."*

*"Why can't Herod just leave us alone? How could those babies have ever given him any trouble?"*

*"The way I hear it, he was looking for one baby in particular. But since he didn't know which one exactly, he had his soldiers kill all of*

*the baby boys to make sure he got the right one.”*

*“Who is this Child they were looking for anyway? Is he some kind of royalty?”*

*“Why else would Herod be looking for him if he didn’t think he was some kind of threat?”*

*“I wonder if they found Him - whoever He is? Oh, if only the Messiah would come!”*

To this comment we can only answer: He has come, my friends. But like so many of your fellow countrymen, you will not accept Him as the Messiah sent from God. You are looking for an earthly Messiah - not a Messiah sent from heaven. Your Savior has come - but you will not receive Him (John 1:11). If only you would have known! If only you would have believed the promises of God! God promised our first parents, Adam and Eve, a Savior right after they disobeyed Him and ate of the forbidden fruit. He renewed that promise again and again through the years - until now, on what will come to be known as Christmas, He sent His own Son - in the form of a baby - to be the Savior of the world. And already at His birth, Satan began his futile effort to destroy that Baby - using King Herod as one of his evil instruments.

King Herod himself died not long after - probably never realizing that his soldiers had failed in their attempt to take the life of this “newborn King” (Matt. 2:19-20). Also, never realizing that he had nothing to fear from this Child - in regards to his earthly kingdom. For this Child had come to establish a different kind of kingdom - a spiritual kingdom, not an earthly kingdom patterned after the kingdoms of David and Solomon.

Before we review how God saved His Son from Herod’s plan to kill Him, I want to cover a point that I had mentioned several pages ago. I had mentioned that there was another factor that caused me to lean toward a later rather than sooner visit by the Magi. By “later date,” I mean as much as a year after Jesus was born. Herod had questioned the Magi carefully about the exact time they saw the star for the first time. When it became evident to Herod that the Magi were not going to return to him with the information concerning the Child’s whereabouts, his paranoia took over and he immediately ordered his soldiers to kill all the male infants, 2 years and younger in Bethlehem and vicinity - “according to the time he had learned from the Magi.” If the time since the Magi first saw the star was about a year or close to a year,

Herod's irrational mind could have decided upon two years as an age factor - just doubling the time indicated by the Magi - so he would be fairly certain that his death order would include this Child he perceived as a threat to his kingdom. Since we have no definite knowledge on this, however, this can only be regarded as speculation. But in my mind, it does appear as something plausible.

Herod's purpose was to eliminate a perceived threat to himself and his kingdom. But it wasn't only Herod who was concerned about this Child. So was Satan. He knew that the woman's Seed - promised in the Garden of Eden - had now arrived and would begin His work to "crush" his (Satan's) head. Satan was not willing to accept that without a fight. When he saw Herod's reaction to the news of a "newborn King of the Jews," he immediately went to work on Herod and "inspired" him to take the action he did. Satan was hoping that Herod could assist him in getting rid of this "threat" - also to Satan.

But God had other plans for His Son, plans that included the salvation of even Herod's soul. Indeed, Jesus did pay also for Herod's sins on Calvary's cross, but Herod's hatred for this Child would not allow room for his Savior in his heart. Knowing from Eternity that this action by Herod (and Satan) would indeed take place, God now put another part of His Plan into action.

After the Magi had left Bethlehem, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby Jesus because of the threat by Herod. Without hesitation, Joseph followed the angel's word and left for Egypt in the middle of the night (Matt. 2:13-14). The Gospel of Matthew (2:15) tells us that the Holy Family remained in Egypt until after the death of Herod, at which time an angel - again appearing in a dream - told Joseph to take his family back to the land of Israel (Matt. 2:19-20). Thus was fulfilled a prophecy by Hosea the prophet (11:1) that God would call His Son out of Egypt. This event was foreshadowed by God calling His people out of Egypt at the time of Moses, thousands of years before (Ex. 3:10).

The length of time the Holy Family stayed in Egypt is not revealed to us. But it probably wasn't very long since Herod did not live long after the slaughter of the infants. (It is quite likely that Mary and Joseph used some of the gold from the Magi to pay their expenses while in Egypt.) When Mary and Joseph returned to the land of Israel, they found out that Archelaus, Herod's son, was now ruling in Judea. Not knowing if Archelaus had thoughts similar to those of his father, they were afraid to return to Bethlehem. Once again a dream gave Joseph instructions, so he took his

family back to their former hometown of Nazareth (Matt. 2:21-23a). After their return to Nazareth, Scripture is silent about the Holy Family until St. Luke tells us about their trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. Already then, it was obvious that this young lad knew what His purpose in life was on this planet (Luke 2:41-50).

Before we proceed to later events in Jesus' life, I want to go back to the time of Jesus' presentation in the Temple at Jerusalem. The reason for this presentation was covered earlier. Now I want to elaborate a little about an event that took place in the Temple. Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem 40 days after His birth for His presentation to the Lord and for the purification ritual for Mary - according to the instructions from God's Word, listed previously.

While they were at the Temple, an elderly man named Simeon approached them, took the Child Jesus in his arms, and spoke the words which have now become known as the "Nunc Dimittis" (Luke 2:29-32). While Mary and Joseph were wondering what this all meant, Simeon spoke to Mary about her Child. He told her basically that her Child would be a controversial figure during His life. Some would agree with His purpose and teachings, many would not. There would be those who would go down in spiritual destruction because they would not believe His message. Others would be saved because they would believe. He concluded by telling Mary that a sword would pierce her soul. This was obviously a figurative, but very real, statement (Luke 2:33-35). Mary probably did not understand the meaning of this statement until she stood beneath the Cross of her Son some 33 years later. (You who are mothers - and fathers, too, to an extent - will understand the meaning of that last sentence very well.)

#### COMMENTS:

The four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - relate the fulfillment of God's promises from the Garden of Eden throughout the Old Testament. The main purpose of these four sacred writers was to bring the Gospel - the Good News - of God's love to His people. Each writer had his own specific audience and purpose. For example, Matthew, writing to a primarily Jewish audience, quoted more of the Old Testament prophecies than the other Evangelists. "Fulfilled" is a word that occurs a number of times in Matthew's Gospel to indicate that the Messianic promises were fulfilled in Mary's Son, Jesus. His purpose was to try and get his Jewish readers to see in Jesus the fulfillment of God's prophecies regarding the Promised Messiah. Mark seems to have written to predominately Gentile readers. But Mark's purpose,

too, was to show that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He referred to His mighty works of compassion and assistance to show His love and divinity.

St. Luke writes to a man named Theophilus (1:3), but his words are useful for strengthening the faith of all believers. He shows Jesus as the Friend of sinners when he includes the Parables of Jesus concerning “The Good Samaritan” (10:30-37); “The Lost Sheep” (15:4-7); “The Prodigal Son” (15:11-32); “The Pharisee and the Publican” (18:10-14); as well as the accounts of Zacchaeus (19:2-10) and the penitent thief (23:39-43). Also, Luke, being a physician, reveals some insights that have significance for us that the other Evangelists do not include. Luke is the one who gives us the beautiful Christmas story (Luke 2). John’s Gospel is unlike the other three Gospels. John is the one who includes the great “I am” declarations of Jesus. (Remember, this is how God identified Himself to Moses in the Burning Bush, Exodus 3:14.) Among others, John records Jesus stating that He is the “Messiah” (4:25-26); the “Bread of Life” (6:35); the “Light of the world” (8:12); the “Good Shepherd” (10:11); the “Resurrection and the Life” (11:25); “The Way and the Truth and the Life” (14:6); and the “True Vine” (15:1, 5). His overall purpose is evangelistic in nature. The writings of all four Evangelists combine to continue God’s Plan to reveal to the world that His Son is the Promised Messiah - the Savior of the world - promised already in the Garden of Eden. Closely connected with this revelation is the greatness of God’s love for His human creatures and the tremendous price that was necessary to reclaim His fallen creatures as His own.

While Luke is the one who gives us the Christmas story, it is Matthew who makes a point of the virgin birth (Matthew 1:18-25). In fact, his first Old Testament quote is from the prophet Isaiah (7:14), who prophesied the virgin birth approximately 700 years before it actually happened. Though the virgin birth is given only a limited amount of space in the entire Bible, the necessity of this fact cannot be overemphasized. God had created Adam and Eve - our first parents - holy, without sin. God intended for them to live holy lives in accordance with His commands. Doing so would have assured constant and perfect companionship with God forever.

But that’s where Satan entered the picture. Listening to the words of their Tempter rather than their Creator, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit. Not only did Adam and Eve fall from God’s grace, but as the parents of all human kind, this act thrust all succeeding generations into the same condition. But remember, God had worked out a Plan for this too, since in His foreknowledge He knew this would happen. He would have been completely justified in giving up on

His human creatures - but He didn't. He couldn't. He loved them too much. So He put this part of His plan into action.

His Plan called for Someone to take man's place and obey His Law perfectly, live in perfect harmony with God's Laws, and offer the perfect payment for the sins of all mankind. This Someone had to be a true human being, of the seed of the woman. God could have created another perfect man, but that individual would not have been one of the human race which God had originally created and which now needed saving. He would not have been "of the seed of the woman". He would have been outside the human race that needed redemption. That Someone had to come from the human race that God created in the beginning of time because they were the ones needing salvation.

That Someone also had to be without sin Himself - or He would have needed a Savior too. But a human born in the natural way would have been born in sin - with a sinful nature - as all other humans have been born and will continue to be born until the end of time. So God's Plan called for that Someone to be born in a natural - yet unnatural - manner. God would suspend the natural order of things in this one instance, so that His Plan could be accomplished. This Someone would have a human mother, thus being a "seed of the woman," but not a human father. The conception of this Someone would have to be truly miraculous. He would be conceived in the womb of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). No human sperm would be involved. Through this miraculous conception process, the embryo in the virgin's womb would be preserved from original sin.

By the woman remaining a virgin until after the birth of this Child would give assurance that there was no interference in this Child being born sinless and with a holy nature. No legitimate question could be raised as to whether this Child was the Son of God or not. This is not to say that the mother of this Child was also sinless. There are those who teach that this Child's mother would also have to be born sinless, having been conceived immaculately herself, and remain sinless throughout her life. We will dispute that momentarily. The miracle of an Immaculate (holy, perfect) Conception took place only in the instance of this Child Himself. This Child would therefore be a special Child - none other than God's own Son.

When the time arrived for God's Son to enter the world as "one of us," God chose a young virgin from Nazareth, named Mary. She was betrothed (engaged) to a man named Joseph. The events that brought them together as husband and wife - earlier than expected - were covered earlier in this chapter. It was in the womb of this young

virgin that God the Holy Spirit worked the miracle of an Immaculate Conception. And it is the Evangelist Matthew who records that Mary and Joseph had no intimate relations until after the birth of her Child (Matthew 1:25), for reasons mentioned above.

The teaching that Mary was conceived immaculately and lived a life without sin is totally without Scriptural support. The argument is made that in order for Jesus to be born without sin, His mother would also have to be without sin. Following that logic, however, we would have to trace Mary's mother and maternal grandmothers all the way back to Eve. For if it was necessary for Mary to have been without sin in order for Jesus to be conceived immaculately, Mary's mother would have had to be conceived in the same manner, and on back to Eve. But even if we go back to Eve, we have a problem. Even though she was created holy she disobeyed God's command and became a sinner. Scripture is very clear on this. No, there was only one Immaculate Conception - and that was the Son of God in the womb of the virgin Mary.

The teaching that Mary lived without sin during her life is contradicted by Mary herself. In her song, which has come to be known as the "Magnificat", she speaks of her Savior (Luke 1:47). If she was without sin, why would she need a Savior? We either have to acknowledge that Mary was sinful; in need of a Savior - or that God's Word is incorrect! The latter of these options is not acceptable!

Another teaching about Mary also has no Scriptural support. That is the teaching that Mary was a perpetual virgin, that Mary and Joseph never had any sexual relations. But Matthew 1:25 is very clear in stating that they had no intimate union until after her Son was born. The implication is that following the birth of Jesus, normal relations took place. In fact, statements in several New Testament books, at the least, imply that other children were born to Mary. Luke, for example, in giving us the account of Jesus' birth, tells us that Mary gave birth to her "first-born, a Son." Remember, Luke was a physician. He lived well into the first century A.D. He would have had knowledge of Mary's family. If this would have been her only Child, why would a doctor have written "her first-born"? Why not "her only Child"? In addition, Matthew 13:54-56 and Galatians 1:19 both refer to siblings of Jesus. Believing otherwise would again be calling the truthfulness of God's Word into question.

Before going on to the next chapter, I want to mention another very significant - but sometimes overlooked - event: the stable birth. Yes, we know the fact. It is included in all the Christmas plays and pageants. It has a sentimental significance. But it is so much more than that. God could have arranged for His Son to be born in a palace -



amid a lot of pomp and circumstance; to be admired by the mighty and influential. Jesus could have lived among the elite of society. But in that case, would the ordinary, common person not wonder at times: “What about me?”

The stable birth is a statement aimed directly at us - the run-of-the-mill, everyday people of life. The stable birth tells us that God is concerned about us too. I say “too,” because God is concerned also about the mighty, the elite, the powerful, the famous, the wealthy of the world. He sent His Son to suffer and die for ALL. But if Jesus would have been born in a palace - surrounded by dignitaries all His life - the common person would have felt like he didn’t fit in. But since all of us - rich and poor; famous and unknown - have to empty ourselves of ourselves in order to make room for Jesus in our hearts and lives, the stable birth brings us all down to the same level.

So Jesus was born - not in a palace; not even in the capital city. He was born in a little town of humble standing. And in that little town of Bethlehem, his mother gave birth to Him in the humble surroundings of a stable. His first visitors were not the dignitaries of the city, but shepherds, the common, ordinary citizens of the day; the “blue collar” workers of the first century. Thus God declared in actions - as well as words - that His Son came for ALL. Not even the “lowest” of society; not even the “worst” of sinners; not even the “least” intelligent of mankind is omitted from God’s love. And conversely, not even the “wealthiest” of the wealthy; not even the “most influential” of society; not even the most “outstanding” of citizens can be saved without humbling themselves before God (by the power of His Holy Spirit) and accepting Jesus Christ as their one and only Lord and Savior. The stable birth - it speaks to all of us.

The exact month and day of this stable birth is not known. But does it really matter? The Savior was born! That’s what matters! We celebrate that wonderful event on December 25 - the day known as CHRIST-mas. As we celebrate each new Christmas, remember the significance of Christ’s birth. Indeed, as the angel told the shepherds: This is Good News for ALL people - a Savior has been born; your Savior; my Savior; the Savior of the world. Each Christmas, let us remember that this is the time of mankind’s greatest honor - the Son of God became man; He who is Eternal, placed Himself into time; He whom angels adore and worship, took upon Himself human flesh and blood - for no less a purpose than to be our Savior!



*"The Baptism of Jesus" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## VI - PUBLIC MINISTRY

Scripture is silent on the life of Jesus from the time His parents returned with Him from Egypt to Nazareth until the Holy Family went to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years of age. In Jewish tradition, this was the age when a young boy was considered a man - and thus subject to the requirements of the Law. This is where the term “bar mitzvah” comes from, literally, “son of the commandment.” Scripture is likewise silent about His life after the incident in the Temple until His baptism. St. Luke does include two short, but powerful, exceptions to this. In a general way, in 2:40 and 2:52 - the first after the Family’s return to Nazareth following the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and the second after their return to Nazareth from the Temple when Jesus was 12 - Luke states in very similar words that Jesus grew physically and intellectually, as well as in favor with God and man.

On another note, while Joseph is mentioned a number of times in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke, there is no active reference to him after the Holy Family’s trip to the Temple when Jesus was 12. There is no mention of his presence at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion or His appearances after His resurrection. And since Jesus commended His mother to the care of His disciple, John, while hanging on the cross (John 19:25-27) - an event recorded only in John’s Gospel - it is quite possible that Joseph had died sometime after Jesus reached the age of 12 and before He reached full manhood. This is nowhere verified in Scripture, however, so it must remain a matter of speculation. Another possible support to this theory, however, is found in the early stages of Jesus’ public ministry. In John 2:12, following the wedding at Cana, we are told that Jesus went to Capernaum with His mother and brothers and disciples. The absence of any reference to Joseph could indicate that he was no longer living.

The Public Ministry of Jesus began with His baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22). His age is listed by Luke (3:23a) as being about 30. John the Baptist had been baptizing for a while, but I can safely say that this was his most important - and most memorable - baptism of all. Immediately after Jesus was baptized and stepped out on the banks of the river, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended upon Him in the form of a dove. That was followed by the majestic voice of the Father from heaven, declaring Jesus to be His Son, whom He loved and with whom He was pleased. John the Baptist later referred to this incident in declaring his certainty that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (John 1:32-34).

A couple of thoughts are worth noting about this occurrence following Jesus' baptism. The first is that we have here a manifestation of the Triune God: the Father spoke from heaven; the Son was physically present beside the Jordan River; and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. The second thought is that we also have a public proclamation of the Father's love for His Son. We can only imagine how much this meant to Jesus - for He and His Father both knew that Jesus was now entering upon the most difficult part of His mission to earth. This was the beginning of His ministry that would conclude with His death on the cross. How comforting and reassuring and strengthening it must have been to Jesus to hear His Father attest His love for Him on this very important occasion.

What son does not treasure his father's words of reassurance and confidence in the work the son is doing? As God, Jesus knew this without question. As Man, confronted with the same temptations and questions as His human brothers and sisters, He needed this reassurance - as do we all. And this couldn't have come at a more appropriate time. For the very next thing that happened in Jesus' life (ministry) was His temptation by the chief of the evil angels - Satan himself (Matt. 4:1-11). Three specific temptations are recorded, though there were possibly others as well. The first two questioned whether Jesus really was the Son of God or not. That's why the words of the Father from heaven were so reassuring to Jesus.

How did Satan try to trip up Jesus? Remember, Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights (Matt. 4:2). Jesus, as true Man, was hungry. Satan, aware of our human weaknesses, knows exactly what temptation to throw at us - and when. Knowing that Jesus was tired and hungry, he meant to tempt Him with what he thought would be a sure-fire thing. He challenged Jesus to turn some stones into bread (to satisfy His hunger) and thereby prove that He was the Son of God. A simple suggestion. Something that Jesus was certainly able to do. It would have satisfied His hunger. But it would also have been yielding to Satan's temptation. Jesus didn't have to prove to Satan that He was God's Son. He knew that. The Father knew that. And Satan knew that (or he wouldn't have been trying to divert Jesus from His Father-assigned mission). There was no point in playing games with Satan. So Jesus rejected Satan's temptation with a quote from God's Word (Deut. 8:3b). There was something more important at stake here than satisfying one's hunger. That was obeying God's Word - a point that Adam and Eve failed to remember in the Garden of Eden.

Satan was not discouraged, however. He tried another approach. He took Jesus to the highest pinnacle of the Temple and there again questioned His divinity. He said that

if Jesus was indeed the Son of God, He could prove that by jumping off that pinnacle to the ground below. He even quoted, out of context, the promise of God in Psalm 91:11-12 about angelic protection. Two problems with this approach: 1) Jesus, being true God, would have no need of angelic protection if He had so chosen to follow Satan's suggestion. 2) Satan omitted the two verses prior to his quote, which makes the promise contingent upon making the Most High your dwelling (v. 9), i.e., following the will of the heavenly Father. The more important consideration here is yielding to a temptation of Satan. Again, Jesus had no need to prove His divinity to Satan. But He did have a need to complete His divinely assigned task of overcoming sin, Satan, and death. So Jesus again countered with a more appropriate portion of Scripture from Deuteronomy 6:16, which speaks of not testing the Lord God.

After being rebuffed twice by God's Word, Satan became more desperate. This time he took Jesus to a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. He then very audaciously told Jesus that he would give Him all these things if Jesus would only bow down and worship him. Satan knew that Jesus had come to earth to establish a kingdom (a spiritual kingdom, however - a point that Satan either did not understand or just ignored). He was saying, in effect, that Jesus could avoid all that lay ahead of Him (the "bruising of His heel," Gen. 3:15), and still receive a kingdom if only He would acknowledge Satan as "god!" [Remember, this could have been the reason Satan rebelled against God in the first place - he wanted more than God intended him to be; he wanted to be god himself.]

Once again, Satan had miscalculated. Jesus was not interested in obtaining an earthly kingdom under these circumstances. After all, He already owned all the kingdoms of the world (Ps. 24:1). They were not Satan's to be offering to anyone in the first place. The kingdom that Jesus was interested in establishing was a spiritual kingdom; an eternal kingdom; a kingdom of grace and love and forgiveness; a kingdom of which Satan had no comprehension or understanding. Satan had now had his chance. He had offered his best - which was by no means good enough. This time Jesus put an end to his (Satan's) attempts to get Jesus to abandon His mission. In no uncertain terms, Jesus now told him to depart from Him. And once again, Jesus put the cap on it by quoting Scripture - another passage from Deuteronomy (6:13) - stating that the only One worthy of worship is the Lord God Himself.

Were these events just played out for the benefit of mankind? Was this just something to make Jesus look good in our eyes? Yes - and no! Yes, in a glorious sense! No, in a vain sense! The beneficial things coming out of these temptations for us are that Jesus showed us how to resist and overcome temptations - recognizing Satan behind

each temptation and overcoming him with the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17). There is no greater weapon against temptation than: “It is written” - a lesson we often forget. Furthermore, the temptations of Jesus also assure us that Jesus understands what we are going through in time of temptation (Hebr. 4:15), for these were real temptations for Jesus. This was no game; no sham; no show.

Jesus was truly hungry after 40 days of fasting. As true Man, He would have appreciated something to eat at that time. As Man, Jesus - like all of us - would have enjoyed being the center of attention as He “floated” down from the Temple pinnacle to land on the ground below with no injuries. What acclaim this would have brought Him. As Man, the riches and fame of this world did appeal to Him. But as both God and Man, it was more important to follow the will of his Father rather than enjoy momentary satisfaction. So with God’s Word as His weapon, He resisted these temptations and remained fully committed to carrying out the task His Father had given Him - the task of providing a way of salvation for all of God’s human creatures. Just as His original Plan had called for - a Plan originating in Eternity; a Plan that was to be carried out in Time; a Plan that would see ultimate fruition in Eternity.

Shortly after His victorious encounter with Satan, Jesus set about what we normally think of as His Public Ministry. He began assembling His circle of disciples (Matt. 4:18-22, John 1:35-51). Over the next weeks and months, Jesus added to His band of disciples (Matt. 10:1-4) until the number reached 12. These men were chosen by Jesus for a dual purpose: 1) They were to assist Him in His ministry while on earth. And 2) they were to take up His teaching and preaching ministry and carry it on after He returned to heaven. [Note: the word “disciple” has a two-fold meaning. In the strict sense, it refers to the Twelve that Jesus chose to follow Him during His earthly ministry. In the broad sense, it refers to all those who believe in Jesus as their Savior and follow His ways - both then and now.]

The Public Ministry of Jesus went well at first. The people were impressed with His Parables and His Miracles. His teaching had an impact on the crowds. After finishing what we now refer to as “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7), the people were impressed and amazed, for they said He spoke with authority. It was not like the words of their teachers (Matt. 7:28-29). During the first year of his Public Ministry, after His encounter with Satan in the wilderness, He traveled up from Judea to Galilee. When I say He traveled, I mean, of course, on foot. There were no public conveyances for travel in those days, so all of His travel was on foot. The only time that I can remember Scripture ever referring to Jesus not walking to a destination

was on Palm Sunday, when He entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey - and there was a prophetic reason for that. (There were also several times when Jesus traveled in the boat of friends, but as for land travel, it was done almost exclusively on foot.)

One of His first stops in Galilee was at Cana, where He performed His first miracle - changing water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1-11). One of the purposes of this, and later miracles, was to give Jesus “credibility,” if you will, so the people would more easily listen to and accept His teachings. His miracles showed the people that He was much more than the average “teacher.” They “validated” His ministry (Cp. Isa. 35:5-6 with Luke 7:21-23). The miracles of Jesus, to which we will devote more attention later, certainly had a positive effect on Jesus’ disciples as well (John 2:11b). This is not to take away from the personal benefits experienced by those closely involved with the miracles, such as, the bride and groom at the wedding in Cana, the sick, maimed, blind, etc. For those who always opposed Jesus, however, His miracles were just another source of irritation (John 5:16).

Following the wedding celebration, Jesus, His mother and brothers, and disciples then went from Cana to Capernaum (John 2:12). When the Passover drew near, Jesus, presumably accompanied by His disciples, went up to Jerusalem. Upon entering the Temple, He saw men selling animals and exchanging money. Righteous anger possessed Him as He drove them from the Temple, denouncing them for making His Father’s house a public market place (John 2:14-16). We should note that there was a space in the outer courts of the Temple where pilgrims coming from a distance could purchase animals for sacrifice. Over time, the animal sellers and money changers felt they needed more room, so they gradually spread out from their designated area to other areas of the Temple. The noise of the animals, the bargaining for animals, and the arguing over money exchange all combined to make the situation anything but conducive for worshippers coming to the Temple to pray or meditate. This is what aroused in Jesus a righteous anger and moved Him to action. [This was His first cleansing of the Temple. A second cleansing came on Monday of Holy Week (Matt. 21:12-13), when He again drove out the animal sellers and money changers.]

It was on this visit to Jerusalem that a Pharisee, Nicodemus by name, came to Jesus one night to inquire more into Jesus’ teachings (John 3:1-21). The result of that visit was that Nicodemus became a believer in Jesus, albeit secretly. It was Nicodemus who later tried to tactfully intercede for Jesus when the Pharisees were condemning Him (John 7:50-51). It was also Nicodemus who, along with Joseph of Arimathea, buried the body of Jesus after His death on the cross (John 19:38-40). One other

thing of note about the visit of Nicodemus with Jesus, it was during this discussion that Jesus spoke those very familiar and reassuring words which can now be recognized simply by noting the reference where they are found in Scripture: John 3:16.

Shortly after this, Jesus and His disciples began making their way back to Galilee. Passing through Samaria, Jesus stopped and rested at Jacob's well, near the town of Sychar (John 4:4-6). While His disciples went into town to buy food, a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. A request by Jesus for a drink of water drew the woman into a conversation with Jesus, which led her to believe that Jesus was the Messiah (John 4:7-26). As a result of her testimony to her fellow Samaritans in Sychar - and Jesus' own words to them during a two day stay in Sychar - many more came to believe that Jesus was the promised Savior of the world (John 4:39-42).

Back in Galilee, Jesus stopped at Cana, where He had performed His first miracle - turning water into wine. While there, a nobleman from Capernaum (a town approximately 20 miles northeast of Cana, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee) came to Jesus and asked Him to come to Capernaum and heal his son who was near death. Jesus knew it would not be necessary for Him to go to Capernaum to heal this man's son. He told the nobleman to return home and assured him that his son would live. Upon returning home, the nobleman found out that his son was all right and that his fever had left him at the exact time that Jesus told him his son would live. Needless to say, the nobleman and his entire household became believers. John notes that this was the second miracle that Jesus performed (John 4:46-54).

For a little over a year Jesus enjoyed a period of popularity with the average citizen. This was not, however, true with those who objected to Jesus and His teachings and who were already doing what they could to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. But by and large, most people embraced Jesus and His teachings enthusiastically. Among the events taking place during this time period were the healing of a paralytic in Capernaum (Luke 5:18-25), a visit to Jerusalem for a Feast of the Jews, where He healed a cripple at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9a), a return to Galilee where He raised a widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-15), finalized the men chosen to be Apostles (Luke 6:12-16 - the word "apostle" comes from two Greek words which mean to "send out" or "send forth"), had His feet anointed by a sinful woman at a meal hosted by Simon, a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50), which caused some uncharitable thoughts by Simon and gave Jesus an opportunity to teach a lesson on love (this is not to be confused with another meal, hosted by another Simon - the leper -and another anointing of Jesus' feet - John 12:1-3 and Mark 14:3), stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee, much to the relief and amazement of the disciples (Matt. 8:23-27), and



raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Matt. 9:23-26). This is by no means all that Jesus did during His primarily Galilean ministry, but it does represent some of the activities more familiar to us.

During the latter part of His Public Ministry, Jesus met with more and more opposition from the leaders of the Jewish people. However, this in no way prevented Him from continuing His ministry of preaching, teaching, and performing miracles. He frightened and amazed His disciples in still another storm - this time by walking on the water before entering the boat and stilling the storm (Matt. 14:22-33). Just prior to this event, He had heard that John the Baptist had been put to death by Herod the tetrarch. Seeking some private time with His disciples, they went by boat to a solitary place. However, the crowds who were always following Jesus learned of His destination and went there by foot - arriving even before Jesus and His disciples did. Having compassion on them, although exhausted, He healed their sick. As evening approached, it became apparent that they didn't have food, so Jesus performed the miracle of feeding 5000 plus, with a young lad's lunch of 5 small loaves of bread and 2 small fish (Matt. 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, & John 6:1-13).

In his account of the feeding of the 5000, John includes some information that the other Evangelists do not. In verses 14 and 15 of his 6th chapter, John not only relates the crowd's reaction to Jesus' miracle, he also tells us that Jesus knew about their intentions. These people, influenced by Satan and their own sinful nature, began thinking what a wonderful thing it would be if they could get Jesus to be a "Bread King" - one who could make life easy for them, provide them with everything they needed. They wouldn't have to worry any more about working to provide for themselves and their families. Jesus could take care of that for them with His miracles. The teachings of Jesus, in this same context, about the "Bread of Life," did not interest them. Following a very natural desire, they were interested only in what Jesus could provide for them in an earthly way. But Jesus, following His divine desire to give these people something far more lasting than earthly provisions, would have nothing to do with becoming a mere "Bread King." This is one of the reasons why some people, as they realized little by little that Jesus wasn't interested in being nothing more than a "miracle worker" for them, began turning away from Him (John 6:60-69). [Note: The disciples referred to here are "disciples" in the broad sense.]

In Matthew chapter 15, Jesus repeated the miracle of feeding a large number of people with a small amount of food - this time feeding 4000 plus, with 7 loaves of bread and a few small fish (Matt. 15:29-38). These were different people in a different location, so Jesus was not "adding fuel to the fire" for the people who wanted to make

Him a “Bread King” by force. As we today think back to these two miracles in particular, do we ever wonder why we get so uptight and anxious about our earthly welfare and being? Do we not believe in and trust the same God who took care of those people so long ago? Is His power and ability lessened in any way today? Another thought along these lines - could St. Peter, who witnessed both of these miraculous feedings, have possibly had this in mind when he wrote the words of I Peter 5:7? There were other miracles during the last year of His Public Ministry as well. These miracles included healing the Syrophenician’s daughter (Mark 7:25-30), making whole a deaf-mute (Mark 7:32-37), restoring sight to a blind man (Mark 8:22-25), casting out an evil spirit from a young lad (Mark 9:17-27), among others.

Before returning to Judea for the last time, Jesus took 3 of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, with Him into a high mountain (possibly Mt. Hermon in northern Galilee). Here these disciples experienced something they would never forget. That experience was the transfiguration of Jesus before their very eyes (Matt. 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36). Even though none of these three wrote directly about what they saw and experienced (although it is believed that Mark relied heavily on information given to him by St. Peter), the three Evangelists who do record this event were able to describe it in great detail, based on what Peter, James, and John related to them (Note: It goes without saying that all of what the Evangelists wrote about this experience was guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.) They speak of Jesus’ face as shining like the sun, His clothes becoming as white as light (“dazzling white”, Mark states, while Luke writes, “as bright as a flash of lightning”).

Their amazement heightened when, all of a sudden, Moses and Elijah appeared in person, “in glorious splendor,” speaking to Jesus about the events which were soon to take place, namely, Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. It is interesting, but completely logical (as are all of God’s actions), that Moses and Elijah would appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. For these two men represented the Law and the Prophets. All they spoke and prophesied - hundreds of years prior to this - was now about to come together and be fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What a comforting and reassuring conversation this must have been for Jesus as He talked with these two patriarchs about the Plan of God - a Plan that began in Eternity, was now in the process of being fulfilled, and would reach fruition in Eternity.

There was still a greater experience awaiting Peter, James, and John. We will touch on that in a moment. But first, I want to add a few comments about Moses and

Elijah. Moses, you remember, was denied access to the Promised Land because he disobeyed the Word of the Lord in the Desert of Zin (Numbers 20:1-12). Before his death, however, the Lord did allow him to see the Promised Land from atop Mt. Nebo (Deuteronomy 32:48-52). It was there, after seeing the Promised Land from a distance, that Moses died - and was buried by God Himself (Deut. 34:1-6). Years later, Jude, the writer of a one chapter book in the New Testament, gives us information on what took place on Mt. Nebo sometime after the death and burial of Moses (1:9). Incidentally, Jude identifies himself (v. 1) as a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James. This was not James, the brother of John, but probably James, the half-brother of Jesus - which would make Jude a half-brother of Jesus as well.

The reason I'm mentioning the words of Jude is that the bodily appearance of Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration validates the belief that sometime after his death and burial on Mt. Nebo, and before his appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration, God dispatched the archangel Michael to retrieve the body of Moses and bring it to heaven to be reunited with his soul. Based on these two "mountain-top" experiences (Nebo and Hermon), it is our belief that Moses is one of only three human beings who are residing in heaven according to both body and soul. The other two are Enoch (not to be confused with the Enoch of Gen. 4:17), who walked with God and then "was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:21-24) and Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11). Thus two of the three human beings in heaven, according to both body and soul (to the best of our knowledge), appeared with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration. [NOTE: An interesting fact about Enoch is that he is listed in Scripture as being the father of Methuselah, whom Scripture reveals to have lived longer than any other human being - 969 years (Gen. 5:27).]

Now to the experience greater than those already experienced by Peter, James, and John on the Mt. of Transfiguration. In all three accounts of this "mountain-top experience," the appearance of a bright cloud which enveloped them is recorded. And from that bright cloud came the voice of God the Father proclaiming, "This is My Son, Whom I love. Listen to Him." In virtually the same words the Father had spoken from heaven at the time of Jesus' Baptism, now, approximately 3 years later, the Father again attests His love for His Son, Jesus. Thus, at the beginning, and now near the end of Jesus' Public Ministry, the Father gives encouragement and support to the work His Son is doing for all mankind. It is interesting to note that the three Evangelists who record the Father's words at the Baptism of Jesus, are the same three who record His words on the Mt. of Transfiguration.

The reaction of Peter, James, and John to this entire experience? The reaction of

James and John - other than a general reference to being frightened - is not noted. All three of the Evangelists, on the other hand, record Peter's reaction. Even though he was frightened like the other two, Peter was wanting this mountain-top experience to somehow continue. He suggested to Jesus that 3 shelters be built right there on the mountain top. He was not thinking of himself and his two fellow disciples. He was wanting the shelters to be built for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. While we can understand Peter's enthusiasm, we can also understand why two of the holy writers stated that he didn't know what he was saying (Mark 9:6, Luke 9:33).

Moses and Elijah, having tasted the glories of heaven, would not have been interested in remaining on earth after their visit with Jesus was completed. Jesus, knowing how important the work that lay ahead of Him was, knew that He had to return to the "valley" and complete that work. And I'm sure that in due time, Peter himself agreed with the comments of Mark and Luke. In fact, in later years, Peter thought back to this experience and referred to it in his Second Epistle (2 Peter 1:16-18). He described that experience in most glowing terms. You can almost feel his excitement, even after a number of years, as he recalls being an eyewitness of Jesus' majesty and hearing the Voice from heaven. Through that experience - and others - he came to understand more fully how important the work of Jesus was for all mankind - and devoted the rest of his life to proclaiming that truth. Regarding John, in addition to the other examples of Christ's glory which he was able to witness, I feel that he had the Mt. of Transfiguration experience in mind when he wrote the words of John 1:14.

The transfiguration of Jesus took place in what is referred to as the "Year of Opposition." Two other periods in Jesus' Public Ministry also have designations. The "Year of Inauguration" (when He was baptized and began His public ministry) - which was a little less than a year, and the "Year of Popularity" - which was a little more than a year. The "Year of Opposition" was also a little more than a year, calendar wise. These three general designations make up the three years of His Public Ministry. The period of "Popularity" does not mean that Jesus was popular with everyone - even as the period of "Opposition" does not mean that Jesus didn't have followers and supporters as well. There were always those who did not approve of Jesus and His work (just as in our day). Some examples of this can be found in Luke 4:16-30 (people of Nazareth); Luke 6:6-11 (the Pharisees); Matthew 13:54-58 (people of Nazareth again); and Luke 9:51-53 (the Samaritans). Conversely, there were those who followed Jesus and listened eagerly to His teachings (many references). Specific instances of people giving positive testimonies about Jesus include: John the Baptist (John 1:29-36), Andrew (John 1:41), Philip (John 1:45), Nathanael (John 1:49),

and Peter (Matthew 16: 13-16).

Two things that Jesus called upon His disciples and followers to do during His Public Ministry are of importance to us. The first took place toward the end of His “Year of Popularity.” Three of the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus sent His 12 disciples, two by two, to go out into the villages to preach and teach, drive out demons, and heal the sick (Matt. 10:1ff, Mark 6:6-13, Luke 9:1-6). Mark reports on their success in his account. The other thing, reported only by Luke (10:1-17), took place approximately a year later, after His transfiguration, toward the end of the “Year of Opposition.” This time Jesus sent out 72 (some Manuscripts have “70”), also two by two, with the same marching orders: heal the sick, preach the Kingdom of God. Luke 10:17 reports the joy and ecstasy of the 72 when they returned and reported to Jesus. The importance of these two actions is probably clear to us, but I will include additional thoughts on this in the Comments section at the end of this chapter.

It was not long after the sending out of the 72 that Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha, who along with Lazarus, their brother, were close friends of Jesus. Their home was always open to Him and it was not uncommon for Him to visit them when He was in or near Bethany, their hometown. St. Luke is the one who records one visit in particular (10:38-42). As Martha was busy preparing a meal for their Guest, Mary was doing nothing - or was she? Luke tells us that Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet - listening to His words. When Martha complained to Jesus about her sister not helping her, He kindly, but firmly, put things in a proper perspective. While we cannot fault Martha for being concerned about furnishing a good meal for Jesus, He reminded her that there was something more important than earthly food. Mary had chosen that more important thing - feeding her soul on the words of Jesus - and Jesus was not going to chide her for that. This, of course, is a lesson that we would do well to keep in mind yet today. (Concerning earthly versus spiritual food, see what Jesus has to say in Matt. 4:4 and John 4:31-34.)

I want to go back now and insert an important event. This event took place after Jesus fed the 4000 (Matt. 15:29ff) but before His transfiguration (Matt. 17:1ff). Following the feeding of the 4000, Jesus and His disciples traveled north again to the area of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13). It was here that Jesus asked His disciples a question. It had to do with what people were saying about Him. Upon hearing the question, the disciples might have thought that Jesus was simply curious. The disciples had heard various things about the people’s opinions of Jesus, so it was no problem for them to answer (Matt. 16:14). It seems that while some people recognized Jesus

to be some important Personage, they couldn't quite accept the fact that He was the Son of God. So they thought He might be John the Baptist (returned to life); Elijah (for after all, the prophet Malachi had prophesied that the prophet Elijah would be sent by God before the great and dreadful day of the Lord - Malachi 4:5 - which really was figurative language to describe John the Baptist) [Little did three of the disciples know they would soon be seeing Elijah in person]; Jeremiah or another of the Old Testament prophets. It's not that Jesus Himself didn't know what people were saying about Him. He was leading up to something and wanted the disciples to name the wrong opinions about Him for a better contrast with the correct answer.

After the disciples had responded to Jesus' question about what people in general thought of Him, He came back with a very pointed question - directed, this time, to the disciples themselves: "Who do you think I am?" (Matt. 16:15b) This is a question that Jesus does not ask only of His disciples. This is a question that every human being - from Adam to the last person alive on the Day of Judgment - has had or will have to answer. And the answer to that question will determine each individual's residence throughout eternity. By the grace of God, many find the answer to that question to be easily given. Others refuse to answer, or delay answering, or try to ignore the question altogether. But every solitary individual will be called upon to answer that question, sooner or later. Would to God that every human being could and would echo the answer that Simon Peter gave (Matt. 16:16)! In later years, Peter expressed the Lord's desire for everyone to recognize Jesus as the Son of God when he wrote the words of 2 Peter 3:9b. This was, in fact, the purpose of God's Plan - that everyone would have the opportunity of salvation.

The answer of Simon Peter was very clear and forthright. Jesus' response to Peter's answer, on the other hand, has led to a number of misinterpretations and misunderstandings. In acknowledging the truthfulness of Peter's answer, Jesus calls Peter "Blessed." He goes on to say why Peter is blessed. This is because his answer is not something that Peter himself discovered on his own. It was not revealed to him by "flesh and blood" - i.e., through human reason or superior intellect (Matt. 16:17a). This kind of truth can come only by divine revelation (Matt. 16:17b. Compare I Cor. 12:3). No, it was not an instantaneous, "bolt-out-of-the-blue" revelation - as happened to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6). The Holy Spirit began working in Peter's heart when his brother, Andrew, brought Peter to Jesus after he explained, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:40-42). Then, through his official call by Jesus (Matt. 4:18-20) and strengthened through day by day fellowship with Jesus over a three-year period, Peter was able to put into words his conviction that

Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, whose coming was prophesied throughout the Old Testament. The conviction, expressed in words by Simon Peter, we hasten to add, was undoubtedly the conviction of the other disciples as well, since Peter often served as the unofficial spokesman for the group.

[Have you ever thought of this: we today echo, though more elaborately, the confession of Peter in our corporate worship settings, when we publicly confess our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior? The conviction of these confessions, as with Peter, is possible only through the divine revelation which we receive through the message of the Gospel. It is indeed as Martin Luther states in his Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."]

Jesus' response to Peter's confession continues - and this is where the misunderstanding arises. When Andrew first brought his brother, Simon, to Jesus (John 1:41-42), Jesus named him "Cephas" (Aramaic), which in English is "Peter." The Greek word for "Peter" is "Petros," which means "rock." Now, after his "heaven-revealed" confession, Jesus calls him "Peter" (Petros) again, i.e., a "rock-man" (Matt. 16:18a). Jesus follows this up by stating that He will build His Church on "this rock." There are those who believe that Jesus is essentially saying that He will build His Church upon Peter ("Petros," the "rock-man"). However, there are a number of difficulties with this interpretation.

For one, the word Jesus used in reference to Simon is "Petros" - a masculine gender noun. The "rock" upon which He says He will build His Church is "Petra" - a feminine gender noun. (If Simon is the "rock" upon which Jesus would build His Church, I don't know that he would appreciate the gender change.) But there's more! The Greek word "Petros" denotes a smaller rock or boulder; a rock detached from a larger mass of rock. The Greek word "Petra," on the other hand, denotes a mass of rock, a rocky cliff, a rocky peak or ridge, a rock in which a tomb could easily be hewn, a rock which forms a suitable and durable foundation for a building or house. Upon which of the two do you think Jesus would choose to build His Church?

Another point! Jesus, who would soon be suffering and dying for His Church, would certainly not take the risk of building His Church on any foundation of questionable stability. Does Simon Peter always reflect durability and stability? Let's see. Not long after this beautiful confession, revealed to him from heaven itself, Peter argues with Jesus about the necessity of Christ's suffering and death (Matt. 16:21-23). Consider

also Peter's futile attempt to walk on water - even after Jesus' invitation (Matt. 14:22-31). Then, even after the mountain-top experience of the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8), Peter displayed no "rock-man" characteristics in the Garden of Gethsemane when he, along with the others, fell asleep while Jesus was in such deep agony (Matt. 26:36-43) and then deserted Jesus, along with all the disciples, when the mob arrested Jesus (Matt. 26:47-56).

The height of Peter's instability came, however, in my opinion, in the courtyard of the high priest on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Even though Jesus had warned Peter of his impending denial, he very boastfully denied this would happen (Matt. 26:31-35). Which of the two was correct in his comments? Read the answer for yourself in Matthew 26:69-75. Peter, to say the least, did not always show himself to be of "rock-like" stability. Would Christ be interested in building His Church on a foundation - a "Petros" - so unreliable, so vacillating? No! Jesus would - and did - build His Church on the "Petra," the sure foundation, the "Petra" that "Petros" confessed - the fact the Jesus is the Son of the living God, the Messiah promised of old, now come to earth to carry out God's Plan of salvation for the world.

[A SIDENOTE: Before we proceed, after listing some of Peter's weaknesses above, are we justified in pointing the finger at Peter and feeling somewhat self-righteous? You know the feeling - it couldn't happen to me! Peter thought he knew better too (Matt. 26:33, 35a). But how often do we speak up, for example, when someone is using the Lord's name in vain? Have we ever passed up an opportunity to tell someone about Jesus because we were "afraid" of what people might think? Do we remain quiet when we see something at work, in the neighborhood, in the family, at home, among friends that we know is not God-pleasing? We have probably never vocally denied our Lord. But can we say the same thing when it comes to failing to speak up for the Lord when we have the opportunity? I will only speak for myself, but all too frequently I find myself standing right beside Peter in my "denials."

But I can also be encouraged by the way Jesus dealt with Peter after His resurrection. Peter was reinstated as a disciple (apostle) on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee) and was instructed by Jesus to feed His lambs and His sheep (John 21:15-17). Likewise, we know that when we fail our Lord, there is forgiveness waiting for us too. That was the purpose of Jesus' suffering and death on the Cross. That is what God's Plan is all about!]

One final thought regarding Jesus' response to Peter's confession. Since Jesus is building His Church on the "Petra," the "rock" of Peter's confession, the fact that He



is, as Peter confessed, “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16) - He can look into the future and proclaim, “The gates of hell will not overcome it!” (Matt. 16:18b) Try as he might - and he has, he is, and will continue to do so - Satan will never be able to overthrow Christ’s Church. That does not mean he will ever stop trying this side of eternity. In almost every age, the effects of Satan’s battle against the visible (earthly) church can be seen in the many persecutions, scandals, in-fightings, lovelessness, and the like which plague the church. But Jesus is still in control - and He always will be. So even though Satan’s assaults against the church continue to this day - and Scripture warns that it will increase as the end of time nears - we know the outcome of this battle in advance. Jesus predicted it (Matt. 16:18b). The Church - built on the Rock (Petra) - will prevail. Of this we can be certain!

Almost immediately after this interchange with His disciples. Jesus began to prepare them for what lay in the not-too-distant future. He told them what would happen to Him when He went to Jerusalem. Jesus knew that His hour was very near. He knew about the suffering He would have to endure - not only the physical suffering, but also the verbal abuse and emotional suffering. He knew that He would be crucified. But He also knew what would happen on the “third day” (Matt. 16:21b). Jesus knew this all along. But now that the time was drawing near, He wanted to prepare His disciples as much as He could. Peter’s reaction to this information - which we mentioned several paragraphs earlier - was not one that was encouraging for Jesus (See Matt. 16:22-23).

He would repeat this information two more times in the days ahead (Matt. 17:22-23 & Matt. 20:17-19). The third time, as Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Jerusalem for the final time before all this took place, was the most explicit. But note that on each occasion, Jesus left His disciples with the promise of something better coming out of those terrible things - His resurrection on the third day. If we look ahead to the time when Jesus’ words were fulfilled - the time of His suffering, death, and resurrection - do the actions of His disciples foreshadow the actions and attitudes of modern-day disciples? That is, hearing, but not really hearing Jesus’ words? For despite the three warnings of Jesus, when these things did occur, they were filled with shock, disbelief, fear and surprise. (It appears as though Jesus picked disciples who resemble people of our age - people like me and you!)

It was 6 days after Jesus first revealed what would be happening in Jerusalem that He took Peter, James, and John with Him up on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1). We spent some time on the transfiguration earlier and bring it in here

only to show how it fits into the timetable of Jesus' last weeks and months. When they had returned from the mountain, Jesus healed a boy whose body had been invaded by a demon (Matt. 17:14-18). Very shortly after this, Jesus issued His second prediction of His coming suffering and death (Matt. 17:22-23). This time we note that the disciples were filled with grief. Jesus was winding up His work in and around Galilee. Soon He would be on His way to Jerusalem to meet Satan head-on in the battle that was foretold in the Garden of Eden. (Gen. 3:15). Jesus Himself would have His heel stricken - i.e., He would have to suffer and die - but in the process, He would crush Satan's head - i.e., destroy his power. It was during these final days in Galilee that the disciples of Jesus got into a discussion about who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1). To their surprise and embarrassment, Jesus answered their question by using a child as an example (Matt. 18:2-4). [As a sidenote: It seems apparent that the disciples themselves were not of the opinion that Jesus had placed Simon Peter into the position of unquestioned leadership with His words in Matthew 16:18, or they wouldn't have had this concern.]

Jesus continued to teach and preach - many times with parables - as He made His way back to Jerusalem. As He traveled through Samaria, He healed 10 lepers - only one of whom returned to thank Jesus (Luke 17:11-16). Instead of going directly to Jerusalem, Jesus spent some time in the region of Judea on the east side of the Jordan River. It is likely that Jesus stayed in or near Betharbara, a small town not far from the Jordan River. John notes in the 10th chapter of his Gospel that this was the area where John the Baptist had been baptizing in the early days of his ministry (10:40). This could also have been very close to the place in the Jordan where Jesus Himself was baptized. The length of Jesus' stay here cannot be determined definitely, but the success of His brief ministry here is noted by John (10:41-42).

While the Scriptures do not specifically spell this out, this is probably where Jesus was, with His disciples, when He received a message from two of His dear friends, Mary and Martha. The message informed Jesus that His friend, Lazarus, was sick - terminally ill as it turned out. These friends of Jesus lived in Bethany, as we have mentioned before, a distance of only about two miles from Jerusalem. In His omniscience, Jesus knew that Lazarus had died shortly after the messenger had left Bethany (John 11:14). For reasons that fit into God's Plan for His Son, Jesus remained where He was for two additional days. It was then that Jesus told His disciples that they were going back into Judea. The disciples, remembering what had happened the last time they were in Jerusalem just several months prior, tried to dissuade Jesus from returning there.

What had happened then is recorded in John 10:22-39. It was the occasion of the Feast of Dedication. A number of Jews surrounded Jesus and were ready to stone Him because they accused Him of blasphemy, saying that He claimed to be God. Since His “time” had not yet come, the Jews were unsuccessful and Jesus left that area and went back across the Jordan. Now, however, His time was nearing. So despite His disciples protestations, they went back to Bethany. What took place when He arrived is familiar to us. Jesus spoke to Martha those memorable, comforting, oft-repeated words of John 11:25-26. Then Mary was called. It’s interesting to note that both sisters, independently of each other, told Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” (11:21 & 32)

Both sisters believed that Jesus could have prevented the death of their brother. But their belief that Jesus could raise him from the dead is not so strong, if even existent. Nain and Capernaum, where Jesus had returned to life a young man and a young girl, respectively, were farther north and I suppose it is possible that they had not heard of these instances. Or possibly, in their grief, they just didn’t remember. At any rate, the resurrection of their brother - prior to the Day of Resurrection - was not in their current thinking. The same feeling existed in the minds of their friends who were present to comfort the sisters (John 11:37). Even though Jesus knew what He was going to do, we can see the sincere compassion He felt for these sisters. John records His reaction to their grief in the shortest verse in Holy Scripture, “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Though sorrow filled the air now, Jesus changed their grief to gladness with three simple words: “Lazarus, come forth.” (John 11:43) As in Nain and Capernaum, so in Bethany, the power of death had to yield to the greater power of Jesus. (The implications for every deceased child of God on Judgment Day is obvious. And what a day that will be!) It must have been a strange sight for those near the tomb when Lazarus - wrapped in strips of linen, with a separate cloth around his face - came hobbling out of that tomb. It was something that no one, except Jesus, expected. As this miracle gradually soaked in, it had a wonderful result on many of those who witnessed it. “They put their faith in Him.” (John 11:45)

Many of them believed, but not all. We are told in the next verse (v. 46), that some of them went and reported this to the Pharisees. A special meeting of the Sanhedrin was called (John 11:47a). They were fearful that if something wasn’t done quickly to stop Jesus, so many people would believe in Him that they (the Sanhedrin) would lose their power and grip over the people. It was at this special meeting that Caiaphas, the high priest that year, made his prophetic statement (John 11:49-50). He said, in

essence, that it would be better to put Jesus to death rather than let the entire nation perish. The nation would not have perished, of course, but fear will entertain many illogical thoughts.

John explains in 11:51 that Caiaphas did not think of this by himself. He was guided by God to say this to show that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation - and in fact, for the children of God throughout the world (v. 52). From that time on, then, the Jewish leaders were plotting to take Jesus' life. Several paragraphs earlier, at the time of the Feast of Dedication, when a group of Jews took up stones to stone Jesus, He escaped from them because "His hour had not yet come." After remaining on the other side of the Jordan for a while, Jesus knew that now His hour was drawing near, so He went to Bethany and publicly raised Lazarus from the dead.

He knew what effect this would have on the Jewish leaders. But it was now time for the next step in God's Plan to be put into motion. The Jews needed a "catalyst" for their plot, and Jesus was now providing it. Even though the Jewish leaders thought all this was their own thinking and doing, none of this would have been possible without the supervising power and hand of God. God - though not approving their motives - was directing their actions to bring to pass the fulfillment of the prophecy in Genesis 3:15. While the Jewish leaders stewed over their "problem" and tried to figure out a way to arrest Jesus and put Him to death, Jesus once again temporarily removed Himself from their clutches (John 11:54).

Even then, He continued to preach and teach and help people in various ways. It is not always possible to give a day-by-day and place-by-place account of Jesus' whereabouts. But as much as can be determined, this was approximately the time that Jesus blessed the little children (Matt. 19:13-15), and tried to reach out to a rich young man (Matt. 19:16-22). As the Jewish Passover neared, however, Jesus started making His way back to Bethany. On the way, He told His disciples for the third time what was going to happen to Him in Jerusalem (Matt. 20:17-19). Luke reports that even then the disciples still had no understanding of what Jesus was telling them (Luke 18:34). At Jericho He restored sight to blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). [Note: Matthew reports two blind men receiving their sight, 20:29-34.] It was also at Jericho that Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and assured him of salvation (Luke 19:1-10). He probably stayed at the home of Zacchaeus that night (19:5). The next morning He left for Bethany.

Jesus arrived at Bethany later that day - six days before the Passover (John 12:1). Since the Passover was celebrated on a Thursday, this would make Jesus' arrival at

Bethany on the Friday previous. The Jewish Sabbath began at sundown, so the meal that John refers to in 12:2, could not have taken place that same day. The next day - the Sabbath - Jesus spent rather quietly with his friends in Bethany. At sundown that Saturday, the Sabbath was over and normal activities could once again resume. This is when the meal referred to in John 12:2 took place.

Matthew and Mark reveal that this meal was held in the home of Simon the leper (Matt. 26:6 & Mark 14:3). [Could it be that Simon was a leper whom Jesus had healed previously?] This was a meal given in honor of Jesus. Though it was given in the home of Simon the leper, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were also present. Martha is described as serving - a not unfamiliar activity for her (Cp. Luke 10:40). Lazarus was present as one of the guests. And Mary, who was always filled with devotion to and for the Master (Cp. Luke 10:39-42), expressed that devotion on this occasion by pouring very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and then wiping His feet with her hair (John 12:3). This very generous and selfless act did not escape the attention of one disciple - Judas, by name. John identifies him and his greed very specifically in verses 4-6. Jesus, however, came to her defense and commended her for her act (John 12:7-8).

The next paragraph in John's Gospel (verses 9-11) is worthy of a few comments. When the Jews found out that Jesus was in Bethany - and specifically where in Bethany - they began gathering around the home of Simon the leper. Since Jesus had arrived in Bethany some time on Friday afternoon - shortly before the Sabbath began - the news of Jesus' arrival had not spread very rapidly. But Jesus was not the only "celebrity" at this meal. After all, how often do you get to see someone who was raised from the dead (Lazarus) with the One who raised Him (Jesus)? So the crowd came to see Jesus and Lazarus. The chief priests also found out about the meal and the crowd. Since Lazarus was now receiving much attention - and because of him many were believing in Jesus - the Jewish leaders decided that Lazarus needed to be put to death, as well as Jesus (John 12:10-11).

The next day was Sunday - later to become known as Palm Sunday!

#### COMMENTS:

Quite a number of things are included in this chapter. Things of great importance! Accordingly, there will be a number of significant events for our consideration. Chapter V, entitled "Fulfillment," covered the fulfilled prophecies concerning Jesus from the time of His conception and birth, until His visit with Mary and Joseph to the

Temple in Jerusalem, when He was 12 years old. Chapter VI continues to highlight some of the major events in Jesus' life which can be included as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding Him. For all that Jesus said and did - either directly or indirectly - had been prophesied in the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew, more than any of the other Gospels, cites many of these prophecies and fulfillments. One example of this, not noted by the other three Evangelists, is Matthew 12:15-21, where Matthew lists the fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4.

\*\*\* **BAPTISM:** We made comment at the beginning of this chapter that Jesus began His public ministry with His baptism by John the Baptist. Jesus did not need to be baptized as though He was by nature sinful and unclean. He was not sinful, nor was He spiritually unclean. He was (and is) the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God. John the Baptist even hesitated to baptize Jesus (Matt. 3:14). Why, then, did Jesus press the issue? The reason Jesus gave John: "to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). Jesus willingly submitted to the baptism which God had called John to perform. As a true human being, Jesus thus placed Himself under the command of God. That the Father approved of this act is shown in His own words, spoken from heaven, after Jesus was baptized (Matt. 3:17). The Spirit's descent upon Jesus at this time (Matt. 3:16) was a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1, as well.

We see other reasons for Jesus' baptism. It was the official beginning of His public ministry. While Jesus Himself had no need to be baptized, by submitting to John's baptism, Jesus placed Himself alongside mankind, for whom He came as Substitute. He was thus setting an example for God's fallen creatures to submit to baptism to receive the blessings therein. It is interesting to note that Jesus began His public ministry by being baptized - and completed His earthly ministry by commanding His servants to baptize, all nations, in the name of the Triune God (Matt. 28:19).

Is baptism then a part of God's Plan for the world? The above-mentioned command of Jesus shows that it is. Why is baptism, a simple application of water in conjunction with the spoken words Jesus indicated, so important, so necessary? There are a number of places in Holy Scripture that reveal the natural, sinful condition of mankind since the Fall (Gen. 3:1-6). Though man was created holy, in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), that image was lost when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and followed instead the invitation of Satan to eat of the forbidden fruit. Thereafter, children were born - not in the image of the holy God, but in the sinful image of their parents (Gen. 5:3, Psalm 51:5, John 3:6a). [You may want to go back to Chapter III, where this matter was first discussed.]

Since human beings no longer have the image of God, they are born outside of God's Kingdom, outside His grace. To be brought back into His Kingdom and His grace, which is an impossibility for man himself (Psalm 49:7-8), a divine intervention was necessary. God provided for that in His Plan for the world. As we will describe in more detail in a future chapter, God sent His Son, the Promised Messiah (Jesus), to suffer and die for the sins of every human being. Through His innocent suffering and death, Jesus paid the price necessary to redeem mankind (John 1:29, I Peter 1:18-19). He thereby purchased forgiveness for every sin committed, or to be committed. This we call Objective Justification. Now justification, forgiveness, salvation is available for all. But there is another step necessary. The Objective Justification must now become Subjective. In other words, that reservoir (if you will) of forgiveness must be "piped down" to the individual sinner. It must become "subjective."

This is where Baptism comes into the picture. Baptism is the Means (actually, one of the Means) of bringing that accomplished salvation to the individual. Hence, we call Baptism a Means of Grace - a means, a way, an avenue, by which forgiveness and salvation is channeled, comes, to the individual. [The Gospel and the Sacrament of Holy Communion are also Means of Grace. We will touch on Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, in the next chapter - and the Gospel as a Means of Grace in a later chapter.] There are varying views about the manner or mode of baptism. I will not explore or comment on those views. I will, however, point out that the Greek word which is translated "baptize" has the simple meaning of "applying water." "Applying water" can be done by washing, pouring, sprinkling, or immersing. Accordingly, we should neither restrict nor reject any proper manner or mode of baptism. For, after all, this is God's institution - not man's. Thus, a baptism with the application of water; along with the spoken word of God spelled out by Jesus in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), is a valid baptism and therefore needs never be repeated - for God's acts are neither imperfect nor incomplete.

God wants His children - and in this sense, all human beings are His children since He is the Creator of all things - to be brought into His Kingdom of Grace through the Means He has provided for us, so that all might receive forgiveness and be saved. But while this is God's desire (Ezek. 33:11a, I Tim.2:4, II Peter 3:9b), He will not force anyone into His Kingdom. Or to put it another way, there will be no one in heaven who does not want to be there.

While we speak of Baptism as a Means of Grace, we do not want to give the impression that God is limited to working through means of some sort. God can and

has worked very directly in accomplishing His will (Acts 9:1-6). But for His own undisclosed reasons, God normally chooses to work through means: The water in Baptism; the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper; and the words of the Gospel.

So the Baptism of Jesus gives us a wonderful example of God's will for His people. Further, the Baptism which Jesus commanded His Church to perform - and hopefully which every reader has experienced - is a tremendous blessing which our Lord has given to us. For as the water is applied "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," a true miracle happens. In that simple, but powerful act, the person being baptized is received into communion or fellowship with the Triune God. (This is why we also baptize our infants.) We become children of God (Titus 3:5). The Image of God is renewed in us, though it will not be perfect - as it was originally in the Garden of Eden - until we leave this sinful world and reside with our great God and Savior in heaven.

In this blessed Sacrament (a Sacrament is something that God does in and for us), a combination of simple water and His powerful Word, we become children of God. God is pleased to promise us: "I will be your God," with the resulting blessing: "You will be My child." This is a promise that God never withdraws. Oh, there may be times, God forbid, when an individual withdraws from God, ignores His promise, wishes to have nothing more to do with God. But God's love for that individual will never be withdrawn. I heard an illustration once, possibly at the Seminary, that has helped me to understand what takes place in this situation. In Baptism, it is as if God places His umbrella of promise over us. He promises to always be our God. In those unfortunate instances when a child of God, motivated by Satan and his/her own sinful flesh, withdraws from God's promise - it doesn't mean that God's love or promise is removed. So later, if by the grace and power of God, that individual comes to his/her spiritual senses, there is no need to be rebaptized. God's promise is still there - with all of its blessed assurance. Such an individual can come back under that umbrella of God's promise once again through simple repentance, acknowledging or admitting his/her sin of drifting away from God, and seeking forgiveness from a gracious and loving God (I John 1:9). [Look at some of the wonderful promises God gives to us concerning confession and its accompanying blessing of forgiveness: Psalm 32:5; Psalm 103:8-13, 17; Isaiah 1:18; Isaiah 55:6-7. And these are just a few of His wonderful promises.]

Baptism is not - as some believe and teach - merely a symbolic act to indicate what has already taken place in a person. Not at all! Baptism is a Sacrament - an act of God; something that God does, not us. St. Paul, in Titus 3:5, calls Baptism a "washing



of regeneration” - a magnificent work of God the Holy Spirit whereby He gives us a “rebirth,” a new birth. We are born again. In our physical birth, we were given human or physical life. In Baptism, we are given spiritual life. We are “regenerated;” we begin anew - this time spiritually. And as explained above, since this is an act and work of God, it need never be repeated. God never withdraws the promise He made to us in Baptism. To feel that you must be baptized again - for any reason - is a denial of God’s power and grace.

Our Baptism should be one of our most treasured spiritual blessings. It is our assurance that God is our God (my God) and we are truly His people (I am His child). It should be one of the mainstays in our lives. No matter what sin and Satan might throw at us, we know that we are God’s own. We know that His promises will always be right there with us. His power, His love, and His forgiveness will always surround us. Consider these gracious promises of God, given through the Apostle Paul: Romans 8:28, 31-32, 38-39. We can therefore start each new day with the assurance that, through our Baptism, God is our God and we are His people - and He will never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:6, Joshua 1:5). Jesus made it so through His Baptism, His suffering, death, and resurrection.

\*\*\* **TEMPTATIONS.** The temptations of Jesus also have significance for us. We know that we have been and will be tempted by Satan. That’s a given! But what can we learn from the temptations of Jesus that may help us when future temptations come knocking at our door? If only they were as obvious as a “knock at the door.” Satan is much too smart for that. He would much rather catch us off-guard; when we’re least expecting his approach. He doesn’t come marching up with a sign alerting us to what he has in mind. He knows, probably from previous attempts with us, what our weak spots are. No, he is not omniscient, knowing all things. That is an attribute possessed only by God Himself. But in his scheming, Satan is good at figuring out what would be appealing to us - and when.

That is why we have to remain alert and on guard at all times (I Peter 5:8). We have to become very adept at recognizing Satan and his tactics. That is not a task we can take for granted. For one time he will use one approach to divert our attention away from God and His will for our lives. The next time he will use something else. Just in case you think it was easy for Jesus to recognize Satan’s temptations because Satan was right there, but it’s not so easy for us - think about this! Jesus did recognize Satan, but his temptations were not all that easy for Jesus either. Remember, He was (and is) true Man. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, Jesus really was hungry after fasting for over a month in the wilderness. It was tempting to provide something

for Himself to eat by turning stones into bread - which He could have easily done. But there was something much more important to consider than satisfying His human hunger. He had God's will to keep in mind. He did - and He successfully warded off the temptations of Satan by using the power of God's Word.

Similarly for us! Our temptations are real, but as appealing as they may be, we should be able to recognize them for what they are. How? Think about the situation presenting itself to us. Is it something that will ultimately bring glory to God - or is it something that appeals only to my sinful self? Looking at it from this perspective, it should be easier for us to recognize Satan if he is behind whatever is confronting us at the moment. Sound like an oversimplification? I don't intend it that way. For Satan is a very clever individual and he can disguise his temptations at times so that they trip up the most alert and sincere child of God. So anything that we see as being against God's Word and/or will, is something masterminded by Satan - and something we should avoid.

That's why we need to remember the temptations of Jesus and His strategy for resisting them. He fought back with the only sure source of power to overcome Satan: "It is written." We need to remember the same thing. There is no greater weapon against Satan than "thus saith the Lord." Arm yourself with the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17). Remember the encouragement God gives through St. James (4:7). Satan cannot go on indefinitely against the power of God's Word. Oh, we know from the temptations of Jesus that Satan will not always back away immediately. But ultimately, he is no match for God's Word - and a Christian wielding God's Word - and will have to retreat.

Because Satan does not give up easily - and will return time and again - there will be times when we can come close to discouragement. We may wonder if Jesus really understands what we're going through - or even cares. At such times, take your Bible in hand and read Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15-16. At other times we may feel that we just can't go on any longer. The situation (temptation) is just too great. Then God would remind you of His promise in I Corinthians 10:13. And there will even be those times when the temptation kind of wiggles its way into your heart. You might think: what difference does it make anyway? No one will ever find out! Especially at such times, remember this: no matter what earthly "rewards" may be offered - it's not worth it. No matter how appealing the temptation, the satisfaction is only momentary - no matter what Satan might imply. Nothing is worth exchanging for God's love and approval. Nothing! As for the thought that no one will ever find out - even though no other human being may know, God knows! He always knows!

Will we always remember this? No! There will be times - despite our sincerest intentions and best efforts - when we will fall "flat on our faces." We may even feel like Paul at times when he wrote I Timothy 1:15b. Then, listen to this: Jesus resisted Satan's temptations so that He could carry out His Father's will and make forgiveness and strength possible for us when we fail! Don't ever forget that! Forgiveness is there! God knows when we fall - and He will be there with the precious gift His Son purchased and won for us on Calvary's cross: forgiveness! Don't ever forget that either! Just don't try to hide your failure. Don't pretend you didn't break God's Law. Acknowledge your guilt - to God, if to no one else. Throw yourself on the mercy of God. Confess your faith and trust in Him. Ask for His forgiveness. Then experience that life-refreshing gift that God offers (Ps. 32:3-5, I John 1:8-9). Also, ask God for wisdom and strength to recognize and resist future temptations.

One last thing about temptation. Temptation is NOT sin. Temptation is the means by which the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh try to get us to sin. Temptation can lead to sin - but only if we yield to it, go along with it. Evil forces can tempt - but they cannot force us to sin. Sin is something we do all by ourselves. The Lord will not accept the excuse, "The devil made me do it," as one comedian of some years ago used to say, to get a laugh out of his audience. Remember, the Lord did not accept this excuse from Eve in the Garden either (Gen. 3:13). The truth is, the devil may have tempted us - but he cannot force us to sin. The sin is ours and ours alone. There is a saying, attributed to Martin Luther, I believe, that goes something like this: "I can't keep the birds from flying over my head, but I can keep them from making a nest in my hair." In other words, I can't keep temptations from coming, but I don't have to give in to them.

\*\*\* **POPULARITY.** The next portion of Jesus' Public Ministry that I want to touch on is that period in His life that is referred to as His Year of Popularity. I believe there are lessons that can be drawn from this time in His life that have significance for us to this day. Who of us doesn't like to be popular, to be liked? And there is nothing wrong with that in itself. We like for people to like us. A problem can arise, however, in the way we respond to other people's attitude toward us. If we can retain people's good will toward us - and be faithful to God's will for us at the same time - well and good. But if we think we have to begin compromising on what we know God would want us to do in order to retain our friends' good favor - well, that's where trouble begins. This never happened in the life of Jesus. He is our perfect Example and Teacher here too. First and foremost in His mind and intentions was the will of His Father. No favoritism or popularity this world could offer was worth

going contrary to that. That is why, in time, His popularity began to change into opposition, which ultimately led Him to the cross.

We could list a number of examples in a Christian's life where a decision would have to be made concerning popularity or God's will. These could include instances of personal relationships, family situations, business dealings - even examples in church life. It comes down to a decision between "me and God." Who is most important in my life? This is actually a matter of the First Commandment, isn't it? Here, too, Satan knows how to present his case in a very alluring style. He has what seems to be an unending supply of excuses. But the bottom line is still this: Who is most important in my life? There will be times when God's will demands a decision that is not always going to receive accolades from our "friends." But how important is popularity to me? More important than my God and Savior?

Having been an active Christian minister for almost four decades, I can understand why this could be a real problem for some ministers, too. Ministers are as human as anyone. They like to be liked by their parishioners. And again, there is nothing wrong with that in itself. But if remaining popular becomes an overriding factor in one's ministry, that can be a real problem. There are always those individuals in any congregation who "know better," who want things to go their way. And by playing up to the minister - especially if he should be lacking confidence in himself to start with - they feel they have a better chance of getting their way. And the minister - wanting to be popular - is not as resistant to their ploys as he should be.

Maybe it comes in regards to the music of the congregation. Maybe it's the form of worship. Maybe some individuals don't want sermons that are solidly based on God's Word. Maybe they just want to be entertained by each Sunday's "message." Maybe it's the organizational set-up in the church. These desires are sometimes made known - either directly or indirectly. Depending on the particular minister, he could stand firm against such selfish individuals - or he could be swayed to go along with such "requests" in order to remain "popular." In time, the latter alternative could degenerate into a ministry for self - not salvation. Before he knows it, he will be scratching "itching ears" (2 Tim 4:3-4) instead of preaching powerful, Scripture-oriented sermons. And it's not that St. Paul doesn't warn us against such things. Such self-motivating ministry can result in unimaginable damage to people's souls in a very short period of time. Damage that takes much longer to cure than it took to cause.

I would simply ask every Christian minister to consider this: Where am I going in my ministry? Whom am I really serving? What is my purpose in the pulpit - to

preach and teach God's Word in its truth and purity, or to use the pulpit as a stage for entertainment (while the souls of men are dying)? Do I cater to people's "felt needs" or do I minister to their "real needs," their spiritual needs? Do I hesitate to call "sin" sin - or do I preach the Law in all its power and authority, and then follow that up with the Gospel message? Immortal souls are in your spiritual care! Accept the charge God gives to you as a steward of the mysteries of grace - and be a faithful steward or undershepherd.

I would further ask every Christian parishioner to consider this: Am I doing everything God wants me to do to encourage my pastor in a faithful pursuit of God's will - not mine? Do I encourage him to preach Christ-centered sermons? Do I pray for him - and let him know it? Do I let him know my gratitude when he faithfully follows God's will - especially in difficult times? And when it appears that he might be falling short in some area, do I privately share with him my concern, as well as my willingness to listen to him - and then work with him for the benefit of God's Kingdom? Remember, you have as much responsibility for your congregation as anyone does. So if your pastor preaches false doctrine - or no doctrine, the Lord will not accept an excuse patterned after the one Adam used in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:12), "Lord, it was the pastor you gave me."

\*\*\* **OPPOSITION.** Just as popularity can be the downfall of a Christian not totally focused on God's will, so can opposition. Jesus experienced both - and remained faithful to His Father's will throughout. Following His Father's Plan (will) was more important to Jesus than anything else. So in the year of Popularity - though not everyone thought favorably of Him - He did not digress from the work His Father had given Him to do. And in the year of Opposition - though not everyone was opposed to Him - He did not let the criticism detract Him from His divinely appointed task.

Again, most everyone likes to be liked. [Here I'm thinking again primarily of Christian clergy.] When there are those who disagree with you, argue with you, outright oppose you - it can hurt. At such times, review your stand. Are you solidly based on the truth of God's Word? Is it your desire to follow God's Word and Will to the best of your ability? If so, then don't change your stand! You might, however, want to examine your mode of operation; the way you go about trying to get things done. It is one thing to try to get people to do something because it is God's Will. It can be quite another thing to insist on something because you want it - with the accompanying directions on exactly how it is to be done. If something needs changing in this area of your ministry, be humble enough - and strong enough - to change your style so that

God's Kingdom not be hindered.

If, on the other hand, the opposition is not aimed at you personally, but on your stand - or lack thereof - regarding God's Word and Will, then serious consideration should be given to reevaluating your stand. If you are not found on solid Scriptural footing, a change to more solid ground needs to take place. If, however, you are standing solidly on the truths of God's holy Word, don't change a thing. If you are humbly, lovingly following the path and plan of God, then know that no matter who or how many oppose you, you can count on God being beside you, supporting you, blessing you. Under no circumstance should you compromise your strong Scriptural stand merely to gain the favor of those who criticize you. In fact, this is good policy for all of God's children. We always need to stand firmly on God's will for us.

At the same time, be prepared, if necessary, to suffer the earthly consequences that those opposed to God's Word and Will may impose upon you. That has happened to Christians in the past, is happening in our day, and - according to Scripture - will continue in an increasing manner for as long as time exists. In fact, we can be assured that if we follow God's Plan for our lives, there will be opposition (John 15:18-21, II Tim. 3:12). We can't always expect to be popular with some when we put God first in our lives. Sadly, this can even occur in some relationships that are near and dear to us (Matt. 10:34-37).

Jesus knew what it was like to experience opposition. Read about some of this in John 6:60-66. (The word "disciples" here is used in the general sense, in contrast to "the twelve.") Even one of the twelve would eventually oppose Him to the point of betraying Him (John 6:70-71). But Jesus looked beyond all this. He saw the benefit of following His Father's will. That's why the writer to the Hebrews states what he does in Hebrews 12:2. As Jesus had one thing in mind while on earth (viz., the Father's will), so we should use Jesus as our Example in setting our hearts and minds on what is truly important in life (Matt. 5:16, 6:33, 28:19-20a; Hebr. 12:3). The eternal reward waiting for those who are faithful to the end cannot be compared with any temporal happiness that might be received from compromising a strong stand on God's Word just to receive the favor of people (Matt. 5:10-12, 16:24-27, Luke 6:22-23, Rom 8:18, I Peter 4:12-16).

\*\*\* **MIRACLES.** All four of the Gospels relate miracles of Jesus. Some of these are found in more than one Gospel, others are found in one Gospel alone. Only one miracle is found in all four Gospels - the feeding of the 5000 (Matt. 14:15-21, Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, and John 6:5-13). One list shows a total of thirty-

five recorded miracles. (How many others Jesus performed, we do not know.) We have not included all of these miracles in this chapter. We have mentioned a few, when they were appropriate for the material being discussed. The purpose of Jesus' miracles is multiple. We had mentioned earlier that one of the purposes was to give "credibility" to Jesus' words; to validate His ministry. But there are other purposes as well. Each of these miracles show us the almighty power of Jesus of Nazareth in one way or another. This testifies to the fact that Jesus is the Promised Messiah, the Almighty Son of God.

In addition to that, each individual affected by a miracle would have his/her own personal feelings about the purpose. For example, ask Jairus what it meant to him to have his daughter raised from the dead; or the mother of the young man of Nain; or Mary and Martha. Ask the wedding couple in Cana what it meant to them when Jesus performed His first miracle there. Or those individuals who received sight or hearing or limbs that could be used again. We could go through the entire list and ask similar questions of those involved in or affected by a particular miracle.

The meaning for us? Since these miracles involved many different areas of life, the lesson that we can draw from the miracles of Jesus is that in every circumstance and situation of life, Jesus has control over it. Whether it's healing or food or nature or death itself, Jesus is in control. No matter what our problems are - real or perceived - Jesus can help. But it is always according to His timetable and in His manner (II Cor. 12:7-9). Some of the individuals He healed, for example, had endured their particular ailment for some time. But at just the "right time," Jesus came to their aid. Then there were other believers - not mentioned in the Bible - whom Jesus allowed to be freed from their earthly ailments by letting them be removed from this earth to their home in heaven. The same is true in our case. Jesus knows our situation just as He did with those He helped through His earthly miracles. And at just the right time, Jesus will take care of us - whatever the problem might be, and in just the right way for us. So do not give up. When the time is right, just like at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-10), Jesus will act in our behalf and for our benefit (Ps. 50:15).

**\*\*\* PARABLES.** One thing that we didn't touch on in this chapter about the Public Ministry of Jesus is His Parables. But they were such an important part of His teaching that I want to include them here. Someone has described a parable as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus told some 40 such stories that are recorded in one or more of the Gospels. Some of the parables are recorded in more than one Gospel, others in only one Gospel. Matthew and Luke record many more parables than does Mark. (As with the miracles of Jesus, whether there were more

parables, which are not recorded, we do not know.) It is interesting to note that John is the only Evangelist (Gospel writer) who does not include at least one of Jesus' parables. John did, however, record many of Jesus' teaching situations.

The purpose of His parables was always to teach, to instruct, to help people understand what He was wanting to get across to them. Look at His parables and see how easy it often is to understand the point of His lesson. Think about the Lost Sheep, the Good Samaritan, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son. These are some of the easier ones to understand. There are some, however, that are not as easy to comprehend. And sometimes Jesus deliberately spoke in "less than easy to understand" parables. Even the disciples had trouble understanding His parables at times. The parable included in Matthew 13:1-23 is one such example. (This parable is also recorded in Mark 4:1-20 and Luke 8:4-15.) When the disciples questioned Jesus later about this parable (Matt. 13:10, Mark 4:10 and Luke 8:9), He explained the reason for the vagueness. Matthew 13:11-16 gives the best of the recorded answers. But before you begin questioning whether God really wants all people to be saved, look especially at verse 15. The initial action comes from the hardened hearts. The withholding of the truth is a consequence to their actions. Jesus is not to be blamed. The people with calloused hearts have brought this down upon themselves. That is the reason for some parables not being understood without explanation. The disciples inquired about the meaning, however, and Jesus gave them a fuller explanation.

Generally, anyone with an open mind can grasp the lesson Jesus is teaching in His parables. Unfortunately, there are some who try to draw out more meaning than Jesus intended to convey. So we have to be careful to try and determine the main point of Jesus' parables and let it go at that. [I have, for example, heard some try to explain the parable of "The Workers in the Vineyard" (Matt. 20:1-16) by applying it to fairness - or the lack thereof - in workers' pay scales.] But whether through parables - or just "plain teaching" (John's Gospel includes many of these instances) - Jesus was always concerned about getting His message to the people. He was always reaching out to people. Sometimes individually (e.g., Nicodemus - John 3; the Samaritan woman - John 4; the rich young ruler - Luke 18; Zacchaeus - Luke 19), sometimes collectively (e.g., in the synagogue - Luke 4; along the roads - Luke 8; in the towns - Matt. 11; even on a mountain side - Matt. 5, 6, 7). He was especially interested in the children (Matt. 19:13-15). Whoever, wherever, whenever - He wanted the people to know about God, His will for them, His tremendous love for them. So He taught them about His Father (John 17:6, 26), salvation (John 3), repentance (Matt. 4:17, Luke 24:45-47), prayer (Matt. 6 and Luke 11), as well as His "Second Coming" (Matt. 24:3-31, Luke 17:20-36). He wanted people to know



about God's Plan - a Plan that began in Eternity, was being carried out in time, and would find final fruition in Eternity.

\*\*\* **"I AM" STATEMENTS.** While John is the only Evangelist who does not include any parables of Jesus, he is the only one who does include 7 "self-descriptions" given by Jesus. In chapter 6, verse 35, Jesus says "I AM the Bread of Life." In chapter 8, verse 12, and chapter 9, verse 5, Jesus' words are "I AM the Light of the World." Verses 7 and 9 of chapter 10 record the words of Jesus, "I AM the Gate" (the King James Version translates "Door") for the sheep. In this same chapter, verses 11 and 14, we read these words of Jesus, "I AM the Good Shepherd." The statement of Jesus to Martha shortly before He raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead, is one of the best known and most loved "I AM" statements by Jesus. For there He tells Martha, "I AM the Resurrection and the Life." (John 11:25) As He instructs His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed (Maundy Thursday), Jesus assures them that He is the only way to heaven as He tells them "I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life." (John 14:6) His final "self-description" was uttered in that same Upper Room as the previous statement, when He tells His disciples, "I AM the True Vine." (John 15:1,5)

What makes these "I AM" statements so significant is that they remind us of the words spoken from the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. Remember when Moses was standing before that "talking" bush (Ex. 3:1-2 - the "angel of the Lord" who was doing the talking is most often associated with the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God), stuttering and stammering with lame excuses for not wanting to confront Pharaoh, the "Voice" identified Himself as the "I AM" God (v. 14). The Hebrew word for this is "Eh-yeh." Moses was to tell the Israelites, whom he knew would question why he was to serve as their spokesman before Pharaoh, that "I AM" ("Eh-yeh") had sent him. But since Moses was not the "I AM" God, God continued in the next verse (3:15) and told Moses to say, "Jah-weh" sent him. "Jah-weh" is the third person form of "Eh-yeh." In other words, Moses was to tell the Israelites that "He Is" sent me. The same person is meant. But since only God can say "Eh-yeh" ("I AM"), Moses was to identify the God Who sent him as "Jah-weh" ("He Is").

While "Jah-weh" (translated "Lord" by most, if not all, translators) became the proper name for the God of Israel - the name which distinguished the true God from all other gods - the first person form of that word, "Eh-yeh," reveals to us the kind of God He is. The true God is the "I Am" God; the eternally existent God; the perpetually present God! There is no past or future with Him. He is instead the eternally present God: "I AM." That's why the writer to the Hebrews could say of Jesus: "He is the

same yesterday and today and forever.” (13:8) The true God - with Jesus being the Second Person of that Trinity - is the God who always has been, always is, and always will be.

During His Public Ministry, when Jesus described Himself as “I AM” (The Bread of Life, the Light of the World, etc.), He was appropriating this name for Himself. He was telling His listeners, “I am the Son of God; I am the Promised Messiah.” This was another reason why so many came to oppose Jesus. He was making Himself equal with God in these statements. They considered this to be blasphemy. When, in John 8, Jesus was defending His person and His testimony before the Jews, He made the statement, “Before Abraham was born, I AM.” (v. 58) Here again is the “I AM” phrase! The Jews could not accept the thought that Jesus existed before Abraham was born - and yet that is what Jesus just stated. They became so incensed at this statement that they picked up stones to stone Him. But since it was not yet “His time,” they were prevented from throwing a single stone. (Which is another proof that He really was/is the Son of God.)

One last thought on these “I AM” statements by Jesus. If He had been an impostor, a fake; if He was not truly Who He claimed to be - do you think the Father would have spoken of Him the way He did at His Baptism (Matt. 3:17) and at His Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5b)? Not to mention allowing His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday!

\*\*\* **PETER’S CONFESSON.** As we mentioned in the main body of this chapter, Peter made a bold, a tremendous, confession of faith about Jesus. With no uncertainty whatsoever, he stated that this Man before him, this Jesus of Nazareth, was indeed the “Christ.” (The Hebrew counter term is “The Messiah.”) He is the One whom the prophets said would come to save God’s people - and now indeed was here. Peter stated that Jesus was no less, no other, than the Son of the living (hence, only true) God. Though Peter did not live up to his name, “Petros,” on different occasions (as was pointed out earlier), the firm conviction of his confession carried him through many difficult times later on. The early chapters of the Book of Acts reveal some of those tedious times. Peter’s conviction that Jesus was the true Son of God enabled him to be a faithful witness for Jesus throughout his life.

How is Peter’s Confession significant for us? In this way: do I have that same conviction about Jesus? Am I so convinced that He is my Lord and Savior that not only will I confess Him before others (Matt. 10:32), but will remain true to that confession no matter what might happen (Acts 4:18-20)? [This is what many of us

have promised on the day of our confirmation!] That may not always be an easy thing to do (Matt. 24:6-11). But look at the promise from Jesus for all who stand firm in their faith - everlasting life (Matt. 24:13; 25:34). Check out the encouragement Peter himself gives to us in I Peter 1:13-16, 18-19. In fact, read both of the Epistles he has written. Here is a man who knew what he was talking about. Could you think of a more appropriate conclusion to his letters than the one he uses (II Peter 3:18)? The Holy Spirit couldn't!

\*\*\* **SENDING OUT 12 AND 72.** About two years into His public ministry, toward the end of His "Year of Popularity," Jesus sent His 12 disciples out into the towns and villages of Galilee to teach and preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He sent them with His own power and authority. Mark 6:12-13 reports their success. About a year later, toward the end of His "Year of Opposition," Jesus sent out 72 others (Luke 10:1ff.).

These messengers went to towns and villages where Jesus Himself would later follow (part of His Judean ministry). They went with the same mission as the 12 had earlier. Though Luke (the only Evangelist who records this sending) does not specifically spell it out, we know these 72 went with the same power and authority as the 12. How do we know? Luke 10:17 answers that question for us.

These two instances were not isolated instances. In fact, they were precursors for many to follow. The Book of Acts is full of examples of Jesus' disciples going from one town to another to bring the message of the Kingdom to the people. But these two "sendings" have an even farther reaching effect. The words of Jesus to His Apostles before He returned to heaven after His resurrection (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8) were meant not only for them - but for His entire Church. Today, you and I are the "disciples, followers" of Jesus. His commission, His charge, to go out now - not just to Galilee or Judea, but to the entire world - is placed on our shoulders. But Jesus - like with the 12 and the 72 - does not send us out on our own. Just as He sent out the Apostles and disciples in His day with His own authority and power, so He sends out His disciples and followers today.

The charge, the commission, He gave to His disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, and again in Acts 1:8, embodies His on-going charge to His Church on earth. "Go, make disciples." "You will be My witnesses." That charge is just as much in force today as it was when Jesus first uttered those words. But note one very important fact. He does not charge His disciples to "go" and "witness" without first assuring them of His power and assistance. In the Matthew reference, notice how Jesus

prefaces His commission! He informs His disciples that “all authority” - not only in heaven, but also on earth - is His. Only then does He say, “Therefore, go!” He follows His charge with another promise - the promise of His eternal presence with them.

In the Acts reference, Jesus promised them power from above - the power of the Holy Spirit. Ten days later, that promise was fulfilled - on Pentecost Sunday. The result? Peter and the other Apostles - inspired and empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit - preached with such conviction and power that thousands were touched in their hearts and about 3000 were baptized that very day. Do you think this power happened in a vacuum? It didn't! After Jesus' ascension, Luke (the writer of the Book of Acts) tells us that these men joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14). On the day of Pentecost, before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place, they were all together in one place (Acts 2:1). Luke 24:53 and Acts 2:46 give us a clue as to where that was: somewhere close to the Temple. They were praying and worshipping God.

Does any or all of this have any application for us today? You bet it does! For that same promise of Christ's power; the same promise of power from the Holy Spirit is ours today! No, the Holy Spirit does not come to us in the visible forms of tongues of fire and the ability to speak in foreign languages without training. But His power is the same; the promise is the same. How do we receive this power? Not in a vacuum! This power came to the Apostles after much prayer and study. Do you want to be a witness to your Lord and Savior? Do you want to feel inspired as you talk to others about their Savior? Do you want the right words to be on the tip of your tongue even as you speak? Then learn from the Apostles. Spend time - alone or with others - in serious Bible study and prayer. Claim the promise for yourself! The Spirit will not let you down!

**\*\*\* RAISING OF LAZARUS.** The eleventh chapter of St. John's Gospel brings us one of the most comforting and reassuring stories in all of Scripture. Who of us hasn't experienced the loss of a loved one; stood beside the open grave of a family member; wept at the grave side of one near and dear to us; had to say good-bye for a final time to one who has died in the Lord? But was that really good-bye? For friends or relatives who die in the Lord, is it not more of a “till we meet again”? Oh, yes, the hurt remains! The tears flow! The sorrow at times seems unbearable. But wait! Read again the words Jesus addressed to Martha on the occasion of her brother's death (John 11:25-26).

This is one of the “I AM” statements of Jesus. So these are not words of just a friend. These are words of the Almighty and Eternal Son of God. Words that are true! Words that are filled with power! Power to raise the dead; to put life back into a lifeless body. (Recall also the young man of Nain and the daughter of Jairus.) Jesus assures Martha - and us - that those who die in the Lord (“who believes in Me”) will live again even after death. (He’s talking about the body here.) He goes on to assure that those who believe in Him will never die. (He’s talking about the soul now.) The soul of a believer - upon separation from the body (the event we call “death”) - does not die. It is taken immediately into the heavenly realms of God - to be reunited with the body on Judgment Day. At that time, the believer will live, according to body and soul, in the eternal habitations of God forevermore. So for the believers, it truly is not “good-bye,” but “until we meet again” - in heaven. Oh, thank God for this blessed assurance! (You may also want to read Job 19:25-27, John 5:21, 24-29a, and I Thess. 4:13-18.) Why is this assurance possible? Because of what Jesus predicted on at least three different occasions to His disciples.

**\*\*\* JESUS’ PREDICTIONS.** The Gospel of Matthew records three instances when Jesus told His disciples - in summary form - why He had come to earth (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23a; 20:17-19). Each time He became a little more explicit. He tells them about His upcoming betrayal, shame, suffering, and death by crucifixion. Each time He also spoke of the amazing conclusion to these events - His resurrection. These three instances show us that Jesus knew exactly what was in store for Him in Jerusalem. Shame and suffering that cannot be adequately described in words! Then death on a cross! He knew this ahead of time! Yet He went anyway. Nothing could deter Him. Why? Because of you and me! Jesus faced this all for us! Hebrews 12:2 is a powerful passage. It tells us that Jesus did this for the “joy” of saving God’s fallen creatures. It was all part of the Plan!



*"The Offering of the Scapegoat" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## VII - HOLY WEEK

*(Sunday)*

That Sunday, the 10th day of the Jewish month, Nisan, began as a normal first day of a Jewish work week. It was destined not to remain routine. For this was the day that Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This was such an important event that all four Evangelists include it in their respective Gospel account (Matt. 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:28-44, John 12:12-19). This day marked the beginning of the most important week in all history. And it was not without Scriptural connection. A number of things taking place this day fit perfectly into God's divine plan and the commands He had given His children. Thus the events of this day didn't "just happen." They happened in fulfillment and testimony of God's eternal Plan - revealed bit by bit through the centuries.

The previous evening was spent in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper (Matt. 26:6, John 12:1-3). Simon had given a meal in honor of Jesus. Whether Jesus and His disciples spent the night in Simon's home, in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, or elsewhere, we do not know. But Sunday morning found Jesus and His disciples starting out for Jerusalem. Remember that Bethany was a small village about 2 miles east of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. (This mount derived its name from the fact that its slopes were covered with olive groves.) Leaving Bethany, their path took them to Bethphage (Hebrew for "house of figs"), which was a small community on the western slope of the Mount of Olives - directly across the Kidron valley from Jerusalem.

As they approached Bethphage, Jesus sent two of His disciples on ahead with instructions to bring back a donkey and her colt. He told them where to find these animals - and what to tell anyone who might question them about their intentions (Matt. 21:2-3). He even explained to His disciples that this colt had never been ridden before (Mark 11:2). The fact that Matthew refers to a donkey and her colt, whereas Mark and Luke refer only to the colt, is of no significance. Mark and Luke merely refer only to the animal upon which Jesus would ride, while Matthew speaks also of the colt's mother. From our vantage point in history, one wonders if the fact that the disciples found all of this exactly the way Jesus had instructed them - the donkey and colt, the questions, the acceptance of their answer - caused them to wonder how their Master knew all this? Whatever their reaction, this certainly showed the Lord's omniscience - and His omnipotence - in that the men gave the disciples no trouble when they took the animal.

I made reference above to the fact that Jesus described the colt as one upon which no one had ever ridden. This was more than coincidental. In the Old Testament, one of the things God commanded was that only the very best should be dedicated to Him and His use. For example, animals designated for sacrifice were to be without blemish or defect. Even more, they were not to have been used for any other purpose (Num 19:2, Deut. 21:3). Even the cart and the team of oxen that carried the Ark of the Covenant back to Israel, after the Philistines had captured it, were to be “new” (cart) and the oxen were never to have been “yoked” (I Sam 6:7). Thus anything which was to be set apart for God’s use was never to have been used for any other purpose. Jesus followed this practice by riding upon a colt which had never been ridden before. (The calmness of this untrained colt also attests to the omnipotence of Jesus.) An event later this week would also follow this expectation when Jesus was laid in a tomb, in which no one had yet been laid (Luke 23:53). Both of these instances give evidence to the minute detail of God’s plan of salvation for the world.

When the disciples returned with the animals, they put some of their garments on the colt, after which Jesus took His position astride the back of the colt. There was symbolism in this act of Jesus. As I had pointed out in a previous chapter, this was the only time that Jesus traveled somewhere on land and did not walk. Why did He now choose to ride? Because He was entering the Holy City as a King. Not as an earthly king, on a mighty steed, with a lot of pomp and circumstance. But as a King nevertheless. The King of which Zechariah had written several hundred years before (Zech. 9:9).

Jesus entered the Holy City “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” He was a King with a different kind of mission. He came not to exercise harsh rule over His people. He came not even to free His people from the ruthless rule of Rome. He came to exercise love and forgiveness over His people. He came to free them from the sinister rule of sin and Satan. He came as the long awaited Messiah - in fulfillment of Holy Scripture. Matthew and John both make reference to the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled by this act (Matt. 21:4-5, John 12:14b-15). Knowing exactly what was going to happen later this week, Jesus went forward to fulfill all prophecy and “bring salvation” to His people. He went forward - not as a soon-to-be-defeated weakling, but as a Man in charge of His own destiny.

This Sunday ushered in the week when the Passover was observed. Historically and religiously, the Passover was the most important of the annual feasts for the Jewish nation. It was closely connected with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began the day after the Passover and lasted 7 days (Ex. 12:12-18, Lev. 23:5-8). This



combined feast was one of the three feasts which the Mosaic Law required all adult male Jews to attend. The other two were the “Feast of Weeks” and the “Feast of Tabernacles” (Deut. 16:16). Being a “required attendance” festival, the city of Jerusalem would be overrun with pilgrims, spilling out beyond the city walls into pilgrim encampments. Many of these would be located on and around the Mount of Olives because of its close proximity to the Temple - along the route Jesus and His disciples were following.

As the crowds saw this lone figure on a donkey colt, surrounded by a small group of His followers, they not only recognized this Man to be Jesus of Nazareth, but also realized the Biblical significance of this event as well (Zech. 9:9). By and large, these pilgrims would have come from Galilee, where Jesus had carried out much of His ministry. Since the raising of Lazarus was still a much talked about topic, this news added to the excitement of the occasion. It wasn't long before Jesus' little entourage became a large procession. Matthew elaborates on the crowd's reaction in chapter 21, verses 8-9. He tells about the crowd spreading their cloaks on the road - a spontaneous “rolling out the red carpet” for this divine dignitary. Others, Matthew continues, cut branches from the trees and spread them along the road - a makeshift carpet for the lowly donkey carrying so great a Rider. (John reveals that the branches which were cut were palm branches - John 12:13. Could this scene have been in John's mind years later when he wrote the words of Revelation 7:9b?)

There were others who quickly joined in this jubilant procession. John tells us that pilgrims already in the city heard about Jesus and the crowd as they approached the city from the East. They too took palm branches and went out to meet the procession (John 12:12-13). These two groups now merge into one and with united voice begin chanting the praises of Jesus. These chants and songs are drawn from Psalm 118:25-26, which combine a prayer to God for deliverance and praise to the Messiah who comes in the name of the Lord, granting that deliverance. These chants, therefore, are nothing less than a recognition of Jesus as the long awaited Messiah and a prayer for their long-desired deliverance.

We turn to Luke now for another side to this event (19:37-40). Wherever Jesus was in these latter days of His physical existence on earth, there were also Pharisees. Not to sing His praises - but to criticize and find fault and look for an opportunity to get rid of Him. Thus, there were Pharisees mingling with this crowd of Palm Sunday. They heard the songs and chants of the crowd. They understood the implications of those shouts. But they were not ready to join in with the crowd or even acknowledge the truthfulness of their words. They could not bring themselves to agree with these

shouts hailing Jesus as the Son of God, the Promised Messiah (or Deliverer). In fact, they disagreed with this sentiment and greatly objected to it. Some of them, close enough to Jesus to say something to Him, asked Him to put an end to the shouts of the crowd - which they considered blasphemy. However, in a very stern voice, Jesus told these Pharisees that even if the crowd would become silent, the stones would take up their chant. By sternly dismissing the demand of these Pharisees, Jesus accepted the praise of these people and acknowledged Himself to be the long-awaited Savior of mankind.

Luke immediately follows this interchange with one of the most heart-rending passages in Holy Scripture. He records the words and action of Jesus as He drew closer to Jerusalem on the descent from the Mount of Olives. With a clear view of the Holy City, with His heart breaking, He wept over the city (19:41), and lamented the words which Luke records in 19:42-44. The Pharisees were among those for whom Jesus lamented. But these words extend far beyond the Pharisees. While He was receiving great praise and adulation from the people today (Palm Sunday), He knew, in His omniscience, what awaited Him 5 days hence. He knew how the religious leaders would openly and verbally reject Him on that Black Friday. He knew how they would call down a curse upon themselves and their children as He stood before Pilate (Matt. 27:25). He knew that this curse would begin to be fulfilled about 40 years later when the heartless Roman general, Titus, would besiege the city and destroy it, so that not one stone would be left on another (Luke 19:43-44). He could "see" the accompanying slaughter of men, women, and children - people for whom He would give His life in just 5 days. And He wept!

The procession continued on its way down the Mount of Olives towards the Temple. This path that Jesus followed was not mere convenience or coincidence. It has prophetic significance. For this was the path along which the scapegoat was led on the Day of Atonement. (The Day of Atonement - "Yom Kippur" - occurs on the 10th day of Tishri, the 7th month in the Jewish sacred calendar, and falls somewhere in the months of September or October in our calendar.) Leviticus 16 records the Lord's instructions for His people on this very solemn occasion. These instructions were given while the Children of Israel were on their 40 year trek through the wilderness - going from Egypt to the Promised Land. These instructions centered around atonement procedures for the people's sins.

Basically, two male goats were to be chosen from the Israelite community. Lots were to be cast for the two goats - one lot was designated for the Lord; the other becoming the scapegoat. The goat chosen for the Lord was to be sacrificed as a sin offering.

The other goat was to be used as a symbol of atonement for the people's sins by sending it out into the desert as a scapegoat. Prior to sending it out into the desert, however, the High Priest was to lay both of his hands on the head of the scapegoat and confess over it all the sins and rebellion of the Israelites - thus symbolically transferring their sins to the scapegoat. The scapegoat would then be led out into the desert and released, never to return, indicating the removal of the sins of God's people from their presence.

This "lasting ordinance" began while the Children of Israel were in the wilderness - worshipping God from their temporary tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting. Later, after they had settled in the Promised Land and the Temple was built in Jerusalem, this practice continued there. Since the Temple was built above the Kidron Valley on the Temple mount (Mt. Zion), the scapegoat was led out of the Temple, through the Eastern Gate of the city, across the Kidron Valley, over the Mount of Olives, into the wilderness of Judea - the same path which Jesus was now taking in reverse. Thus the Savior of mankind, the "scapegoat" upon Whom the Lord laid the iniquity of us all, followed the path of the scapegoats of Israel over the years - but as mentioned, in reverse order - to atone for the sins of the world. It is easy to see, from our perspective in time, that the Day of Atonement ceremonies were instituted by God to point forward to the sacrifice of His Son - the final "scapegoat" - for the sins of the world.

The prophet Ezekiel also foresaw, in prophetic vision, this day and speaks of "the glory of the God of Israel coming from the East... The glory of the Lord entered the Temple through the gate facing East" (Ezek. 43:2a, 4). As with all of His actions, nothing is done by mere chance by the Lord. Knowing from Eternity what would be happening on this 10th day of Nisan, the Lord gave instructions to His people accordingly throughout the Old Testament era. Now, Jesus was fulfilling these prophecies exactly. There should have been no question in the minds of anyone that Jesus was truly the Promised Messiah. But many refused to acknowledge this Scriptural truth.

This 10th day of Nisan, now known as the day of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (or Palm Sunday), has other significance as well. For it was on this day, according to God's own instructions, that the Passover Lamb was to be selected and set apart for the Passover sacrifice on the 14th day of Nisan (Ex. 12:2-4). It was on this day (Nisan 10), centuries later, that "The" Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God, entered Jerusalem to become the sacrificial Lamb who would take away the sins of the world. The blood of this Lamb, sacrificed on the cross, smeared on the "door posts" of our hearts, is what causes the "angel of death" to "pass over" God's children

(us) in the face of the Father's judgment on sin. For it is the blood of the Lamb of God which has atoned for our sins and rescued us from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Another "foreshadow" of this event can be found in Genesis 22:1-14. This is where God told Abraham to take his son - and specific reference is made to Isaac being his "only son" - to the region of Mount Moriah and there to sacrifice him. Without questioning the Lord's "incomprehensible" directive, Abraham began following the Lord's instructions - even to the point of raising the knife to plunge into Isaac's heart. At that moment, the angel of the Lord intervened and prevented Abraham from actually sacrificing his son. (The writer to the Hebrews speaks about the significance of this event in Hebrews 11:17-19.) Abraham had demonstrated that he would withhold nothing - not even his only son - from the Lord. The Lord instead provided a ram, caught in the bushes, as a substitute for Isaac. Centuries later, the Lamb of God, the Only Son of the Father, became the Substitute for all mankind on this same mount. (Mt. Moriah is identified in II Chronicles 3:1 as the mountain where Solomon built the Temple of God. Thus Mt. Moriah and Mt. Zion are one and the same.)

The next point I want to include could just as easily be covered in the material regarding Good Friday, but I will explain it now and possibly make reference to it later. That point is the contrast in emotions of the people on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. How can you explain the contrast between the joyful enthusiasm of the people at the time of Christ's entry into Jerusalem with the harsh and hateful comments of the crowd standing outside the palace of Pilate just 5 days later? A couple explanations can be offered. One, these people were much like the majority of their countrymen. They had misinterpreted the prophecies regarding the Messiah. Some of this could have been the result of their own burning desire to be freed from Roman rule. They were looking for an earthly deliverer, one who would defeat their enemies and restore Israel to its prominence and glory as in the days of David and Solomon.

When Jesus was entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, they recognized many of the "signs" that would accompany the appearance of the Promised Messiah. They hopefully believed that Jesus was now ready to make His appearance known and begin the earthly deliverance of Israel. So they rejoiced and sang the Psalms of prophecy - welcoming their conquering Hero. Jesus, however, at no time gave any indication of being an earthly Messiah. At times previously, when the crowds were disappointed in His hesitancy and reluctance to become the "leader" of their dreams, they turned

away from Him (John 6:66). Likewise, on Good Friday, when they saw their “Hope” arrested, despised, ridiculed, offering no resistance at all to His “enemies,” they turned against Him once again and this time demanded His death.

Another possible explanation is that we see the reactions of two different crowds. The Palm Sunday multitudes were more likely pilgrims from areas outside Jerusalem, many perhaps from Galilee, staying in the pilgrim camps set up on the eastern side of Jerusalem. This would account for their presence along the road leading into Jerusalem rather than being in Jerusalem itself, had they been residents of Jerusalem. These pilgrims would tend to be more supportive of this Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean, who carried out much of His public ministry in their area. The Good Friday crowds in the courtyard of Pilate, on the other hand, could have easily been permanent residents of Jerusalem, over whom the High Priest and his followers would have more influence (Mark 15:11). Whichever, if either - or a combination - of these two explanations might be true, the result was the same. Acceptance on Sunday; rejection on Friday.

The Evangelist John reports a comment that is significant in this regard (John 12:19). The Pharisees, one of the religious parties opposed to Jesus, saw what was happening on Palm Sunday; they recognized the Scriptural implications of what they saw - and they expressed their frustration. It appeared to them that the “whole world” was going after Jesus. (Could this be another statement influenced by the Holy Spirit, but unknown to the Pharisees - a statement that foresaw the spread of the faith throughout the world?) At the time this statement was made, however, these Pharisees were only concerned about their own well-being.

The Pharisees alone are singled out by John. However, they are representatives of a larger group which was in grim agreement in their opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees made up one segment of that larger group. That group was the Sanhedrin, or Ruling Council of the Jews. In addition to the Pharisees, there were also the chief priests - with the High Priest as their head, and also the leader of the Sanhedrin - and the elders, or tribal heads. This body, the Sanhedrin, was in charge of the Jewish civil jurisdiction. They were not an autonomous group, however. They ruled at Rome’s pleasure. This is why they became concerned about the popularity of Jesus. They feared that if too many people began following Jesus, they would begin looking to Him as their leader. They further feared that Rome might feel they could no longer control the people and would take away their position of power (John 11:48). With all the excitement and clamor of the Palm Sunday crowd, the already edgy Sanhedrin became more uneasy and agitated - and more determined to get rid of Jesus in any

way necessary.

The Evangelist Mark is the one who tells us about the next actions of Jesus (11:11). The trip in from Bethany (approximately 2 miles); the fetching of the donkey colt; the procession through the crowd of pilgrims; the interchange with the Pharisees (Luke 19:39-40); His heart-wrenching prophecy over Jerusalem - all of this took time. Then there was the return trip to Bethany to consider. All in all, as Mark relates, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, He went to the Temple. What He saw there was not surprising, but nevertheless disheartening. As He looked around, the money changers and animal traders did not escape His attention. But His judgment on them would wait until the next day. After looking around at everything in the Temple, Jesus and His disciples returned to Bethany. Since no specific location is noted, it is quite probable that Jesus spent each evening of Holy Week - at least until Thursday evening - in the home of His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Palm Sunday! Beginning routinely. Changing dramatically with each passing hour. Revealing prophecy being fulfilled. Seeing symbolical actions taking place. Every detail of this day - from Jesus' ride on a donkey colt to His procession along the route of the scapegoats to His entrance into the Temple through the East Gate - all were intended to point to Jesus as the Promised Messiah. And this was just the beginning of the most crucial week in the history of mankind. A week planned from Eternity. A week that would have implications throughout Eternity.

*(Monday)*

The next morning found Jesus and His disciples on their way back to the Holy City. St. Mark notes that Jesus was hungry (11:12). He saw a fig tree in the distance and approached it, expecting to eat some of its fruit. However, despite the fig tree being in full leaf, there was no fruit on its branches. Being in the spring of the year, the only surprising thing about this event would seem to be the harsh judgment of Jesus upon this tree. Mark even comments that this was not the season for figs (11:13b), so why did Jesus curse the tree? Further research might provide us with the answer.

There were actually three different kinds of fig trees in Judea. One of these bears its fruit late in the season and frequently retains its fruit all winter. The same is true for its leaves. So while, as Mark points out, it was too early in the season for the normal fig trees to bear fruit, this evidently was one of the late-bearing trees and Jesus had every right to expect fruit on a tree in full leaf. But for whatever reason, there were no figs on this particular tree. It showed promise. It appeared normal and healthy. But

there was no fruit. It deceived those who looked to it for fruit. Thus the judgment from Jesus - the only instance of judgment pronounced by Jesus as recorded by the holy writers.

Neither Matthew nor Mark, who report this event, draws any conclusions from this occurrence. But coming the day after Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), possibly very close to this very location, this could have been some kind of an object lesson. As Jesus looked over Jerusalem the day before, the city would seem to offer promise. It appeared normal and healthy. The magnificent Temple in all its glory stood out above all else. But like with the fig tree, Jesus could see no fruit. Tradition and national pride left no room for faith - and the fruits of faith. So Jesus' pronouncement of judgment upon the fig tree foreshadowed the judgment that would later befall Jerusalem itself.

The next day, as Jesus and His disciples passed this way again, they saw the fig tree completely withered. As the disciples made comment about it, Jesus responded only with words about faith - and what faith can perform. Faith - the ingredient that was missing in Jerusalem (Mark 11:20-25). [A Side-note: Matthew's account of this event (21:18-22) seems to place this judgment on the third day of Holy Week - Tuesday - with the consequence and the disciples' questions all happening at the same time. However, as is noted in the foot notes on this section in the Concordia Self-Study Bible, Matthew sometimes takes a number of instances and simply compresses them into one. Mark's account is more careful to give day-by-day details.]

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem this day (Monday) under much different circumstances than the day before. Gone were the crowds and the palm branches and the shouts of "Hosanna." But the ever-present money changers and animal sellers, especially during religious festivals, were still practicing their trade. As He had done early in His public ministry (John 2:13-16), so once again, Jesus was filled with righteous indignation and began overturning the tables of the money changers and the benches of the sellers of doves. As He did so, He repeated words similar to those He stated at the first cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15-17).

The reaction of the money changers and sellers of animals? Apparently, none - at least not openly. But they - and the chief priests and scribes, under whose approval they operated - were now even more determined not just to get rid of Jesus in general, but very specifically to kill Him (Mark 11:18a). They were fearful of doing anything publicly, however, because the general public, at this time at least, was very supportive of Jesus and greatly approved His actions against those who were making

the “House of Prayer” a “den of thieves.”

There were other reactions though. Matthew tells us that the blind and the lame came to Him in the Temple - and He healed them (21:14). Matthew also reports that children were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21:15). Who these children were is not revealed. Some believe it could have been young males who had reached the age of their “bar mitzvah” and had accompanied their families to the Passover observance. What they shouted is revealed. They were repeating some of the chants which they heard the adults singing the day before. Chants which acknowledge Jesus as the Promised Messiah and Savior of the world.

Other verbal reactions - negative reactions - are reported by Matthew as well. The chief priests and scribes, though not daring to take any action against Jesus, came to Jesus and pretended to be horrified about the chants of the children in the Temple. (They were concerned about the chants of praise by the children in the Temple - but not about the shouts of the money changers and animal sellers.) Jesus’ only reply to them was to quote Psalm 8:2. He quotes only the first part of this Psalm verse, but these “educated” religious leaders were certainly familiar with the last part which explains why God ordained praise from children and infants. It didn’t take much thought to realize that Jesus was identifying these self-righteous religious leaders as the “enemies of God,” to which David refers. That, of course, didn’t soothe their bitter feelings against Jesus in any way.

Following this interchange, Jesus once again leaves the Holy City and returns to Bethany for the night. Thus another day has elapsed in this very critical and important week in history.

*(Tuesday)*

Tuesday was another busy and emotional day for the Lord. It turned out to be the final day of His public ministry. Though frustrated by the Jews’ continual opposition, He nevertheless kept reaching out to them and warning them to the very end. As He had done on Sunday and Monday, this day found Jesus in the Temple once again. He didn’t spend much time in the Temple itself on Sunday. He spent a little more time there on Monday. Now, on Tuesday, His last day in the Temple before He offered up the supreme sacrifice for the sins of the world, He spent a lot of time in His Father’s house. We’ll summarize some of the things that happened on this day.

He had hardly gotten inside the Temple courts before a delegation from the Sanhedrin



approached Him with a question. Mark reports this in his Gospel, 11:27-33. They got right to the point. They challenged Jesus' authority to do "these things." Even though "these things" were not identified, it was obvious as to what they referred. It included the cleansing of the Temple the day before - as well as accepting the Messianic acclaim and praise on both Sunday and Monday. They were probably hoping that Jesus would give them an answer, something to the effect that He received this authority from the Father Himself. This would give them the opportunity to accuse Him of blasphemy - saying that He and the Father were "so close."

It was not difficult for Jesus to see through this scheme designed to trap Him. He cleverly turns the tables on them by asking them a question in turn. He promises to answer their question if they will answer His. The question: "John's baptism - was it from heaven or from men?" Their jaws must have dropped. And as they gave further consideration to this question, their jaws probably opened even wider. They realized the predicament they were in (Mark 11:31-32). So they tried to wiggle out of this dilemma with the lie, "We don't know." They knew, but there was no way they were going to admit it publicly. Jesus' response to them then was a rather tart, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." (Mark 11:33b) However, Jesus did in effect answer their question, but in a way they couldn't - or wouldn't - accept. By referring to John's baptism, He was calling attention to the man who identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Thus Jesus was saying that His authority did indeed come from heaven.

Jesus leaves these dumbfounded schemers and goes on to teach the people who were willing to listen to Him. A series of parables follows. Matthew records three: "The Parable of the Two Sons" (21:28-32); "The Parable of the Tenants" (21:33-44. Mark and Luke also record this Parable - Mark 12:1-11, Luke 20:9-18); and "The Parable of the Wedding Banquet" (22:1-14). The chief priests and the Pharisees could not deny that these strongly worded parables were aimed at them. In fact, Matthew reports their reaction in 21:45-46. Jesus continued to reach out to the people and warn them of the consequences of not repenting. Some of His audience responded positively, I'm sure, but the same cannot be said of these chief priests and Pharisees who were only concerned about getting rid of Jesus because He saw through their real intentions and self-righteousness.

Instead of being touched by Jesus' words, His enemies became even more determined in their efforts to do away with this Man Who caused them so much trouble and embarrassment. It now fell to other Pharisees, along with some of the Herodians, to try and trap Jesus in His words (Matt. 22:15-16a). If they could discredit Him in

the eyes of the government, they could sit back and let the government do their “dirty work” for them (Luke 20:20). They confronted Jesus with a question they felt certain would trip Him up - no matter what answer He gave. It concerned the matter of tribute to Caesar. Matthew (22:15-21), Mark (12:13-17), and Luke (20:20-25) all record this incident. Once again His enemies totally underestimated their target. Jesus answered in such a way that not only could they find no fault with His answer, but they themselves were left speechless (Luke 20:26).

With His answer, Jesus also summarizes the Christian’s guide regarding responsibility to both God and government. According to God’s plan, we are subject to both God and the government. But there should be no confusion between or admixture of the two. We are clearly to render unto the government what is due to government. Romans 13:1-7 spells out our obligation to the government. But Peter and the other apostles make it clear in Acts 5:29 where our greater responsibility lies - with God, Who is the ultimate and absolute authority. Even the government needs to yield to this greater authority! (Would to God that all governments and their leaders would recognize and submit to the higher authority of God!)

Though failing time after time in their efforts to discredit Jesus or come up with something “solid” to use against Him, His enemies try a couple more times. The Sadducees, who didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead in the first place, try to involve Jesus in a debate about the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27, and Luke 20:27-38). Luke records the outcome of this encounter (20:39-40). After the Sadducees failed, the Pharisees try again (Matt. 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31). For whatever reason, they wanted Jesus to identify the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus answers by not only summarizing the first and greatest commandment, but the second as well. Mark tells us that after this, no one dared ask Him any more questions (12:34b).

After asking His tormentors a question which they cannot answer (Matt. 22:41-46), Jesus proceeds to issue His strongest denunciation of the scribes (teachers of the Law) and the Pharisees. (NOTE: There were scribes among the Pharisees and Pharisees among the scribes. However, those referred to as scribes or teachers of the Law were professional students of the Old Testament and were in a distinct class by themselves.) A series of seven “Woes” follows (Matt. 23:1-36). These seven woes of warning are directed against the hypocrites, as Jesus calls them, who are quick to condemn others, but cannot see their own faults and failings. These “woes” are exclamations - like the “blesseds” in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-11). They are not simply a wish, but a statement of fact. Thus Jesus concludes His Public Ministry

with yet another stern warning to those who are not interested in repentance, but only in following their own self-righteous desires. The very end of Jesus' final discourses in the Temple are found in Matthew 23:37-39, another mournful lament about these rebellious people. His loving heart still aches for His wayward children.

After recording this scathing denunciation by Jesus of the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew reports that Jesus left the Temple (24:1). The other Evangelists, however, include additional events happening before Jesus actually left the Temple. Mark (12:41-44) and Luke (21:1-4) both report on what has come to be known as the story about "the widow's mite." What Jesus witnessed by the offering receptacles allowed Him another opportunity to teach. Calling His disciples to His side, Jesus pointed out the contrast in people's giving. The rich took great pride in throwing large amounts into the boxes. Jesus calls attention to that, but only to contrast their giving with that of a poor widow. In God's eyes, this poor widow put more into the treasury than all the others. For they gave, Jesus said, out of their abundance. The widow gave her all. Obviously, not all of the Israelites had succumbed to the spiritual corruption of the scribes and Pharisees. And as long as this story of "The Widow's Mite" is told, she will be remembered for her humble and trusting love for the Lord.

The Evangelist John records another significant event (12:20-36). A number of Greeks - Gentiles who had accepted the Jewish religion - came to Jerusalem to observe the Passover Festival. No doubt, after everything that had happened in Jerusalem on the first days of this week, the name of Jesus came up in many conversations. Obviously hearing some of these comments, these Greeks approach Philip with a request to see Jesus. The fact that these Gentiles wanted to see Jesus in these late hours of His earthly life, reminds us of other Gentiles - the Magi - who came to see Jesus toward the beginning of His earthly life. So from beginning to end, God wanted it to be made plain that Jesus came into this world to be the Savior of all nations.

John does not reveal whether or not Jesus actually spoke to the Greeks directly. But they were at least probably nearby when Jesus spoke His next recorded words. He indicates that "the hour has come" - the hour for which He left His heavenly home and came to this earth; the hour when His heel would be "bruised," but the serpent's (Satan's) head would be "crushed" (Gen. 3:15). He proceeds to speak further about this "hour." As He contemplates what lies ahead of Him, He confesses that His "heart is troubled." It was as if the weight of the world's sin was already beginning to bear down on Him. Yet He renews His determination to follow the will of His Father in heaven. He would not, at this time, ask His Father to save Him from this

hour. Instead, He reiterates that this was the reason for coming to this point in His life. So He prays aloud, “Father, glorify Your name!”

Immediately, there was a response to His prayer. A voice from heaven - the same voice that spoke at His Baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice of the heavenly Father - assured Jesus that He had glorified His name and would glorify it again. And indeed, God’s name was glorified in His Son’s work and would be glorified again as Jesus gave His life for the redemption of mankind. Jesus spoke again, and in words reminiscent of John 3:14-15, referred to the kind of death He would die - a death whereby He would be lifted up from the earth; a death which involved being suspended between heaven and earth, as if He belonged to neither; a death by crucifixion on a cross.

Near the end of this chapter, John refers once again to the hard-heartedness and stubborn unbelief of the religious leaders of the Jews - and how they kept some believers from openly professing their faith out of fear of reprisal from the Pharisees (John 12:37-43).

The other three Evangelists now take up the story, reporting the final events of this day (Matt. 24:1-51; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-38), with Matthew giving the more detailed account. After a very demanding and heartbreaking day in the Temple, Jesus left with His disciples. Finding a quiet place on the Mount of Olives, Jesus spent some time with His disciples. These were the men who had been with Him for three years - listening to His words; witnessing His miracles; watching the response of the people; experiencing His great love for them and all mankind. These were the men who would now be called upon to take up the work the Lord would call upon them to do, and spread the message of salvation near and far. But even with three years of on-the-job training, they were not totally prepared for what lay ahead of them. So Jesus takes advantage of this time to warn them; to instruct them; to help them understand; to further prepare them.

The disciples “open the door” for Jesus when they called attention to the massive stones with which the Temple and some of its buildings were constructed. He told them initially - as they were leaving the Temple - that all those magnificent stones would one day be thrown down. Now, as they gather on the Mount of Olives and the disciples ask Jesus when this is going to happen, He goes into a description of the “last times.” He basically covers three different phases. He begins with warnings about the end times (Matt. 24:4-14), cautioning them not to be deceived by humans or events. He warns of false prophets, but assures that those who stand firm to the

end will be saved. Then He foretells the terrible destruction that will befall Jerusalem (Matt. 24:15-22). This, we know from later history, took place in 70 A.D. when the Roman legions lay siege to Jerusalem and leveled it. (This part of His answer speaks more directly to the question of the disciples.)

Then Jesus reverts back to warnings and instructions concerning the end times (Matt. 24:23-51). He again cautions about false prophets. He quotes the prophet Isaiah who spoke of things happening in nature immediately before the appearance of the Son of Man, coming on the clouds and sending His angels to gather in the elect. After telling His disciples that no one knows the exact time of His return (even Jesus, in His State of Humiliation, did not at this time know that date - to be explained later), He encourages them to be watchful, alert, anticipating His return.

Two Parables follow this. “The Parable of the Ten Virgins” (Matt. 25:1-13) teaches watchfulness and preparedness for the return of the “Bridegroom.” “The Parable of the Talents” (Matt. 25:14-30) encourages faithful service and good stewardship while awaiting the return of the “Master.” The final lesson Jesus shared with His disciples on this Tuesday of Holy Week dealt with the Judgment itself, the separation of the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). This is where we find those treasured “Inasmuch” (KJV) statements, wherein Jesus identifies Himself with His own on this earth. [NOTE: The works that Jesus refers to in this account are not to be understood as the cause or reason for being saved - or the lack thereof as the cause or reason for not being saved. Scripture makes it very clear that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9). However, since God alone can “see” faith, Jesus here refers to the works which we can see, as a testimony to faith which we cannot see. Likewise, the lack of works indicates a lack of faith.]

Before leaving this place on the Mount of Olives to return to Bethany, Jesus reminds His disciples of something they knew - that the Passover was only two days away - and alerted them again as to what was going to happen to Him at that time - His crucifixion. Remember that He had told them this was going to happen on three previous occasions (Matt. 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19). As we see later, the disciples did not comprehend what Jesus was telling them and were caught completely off guard when it actually happened.

This day - Tuesday of Holy Week - proved to be a very tiring and emotionally draining day. Jesus was now ready to return to Bethany for one final time.

*(Wednesday)*

As much as can be determined, Jesus and His disciples remained in Bethany on the day before the Passover. At least there is no recorded information about any activities on the part of Jesus which can be identified with Wednesday. This is not to say, however, that nothing was taking place in Jerusalem. It even seems that one of Jesus' own disciples made a trip into the city on this day. It was a trip - or at least the purpose of which will be forever remembered in Christian history. It is possible that some of the other disciples might also have ventured into the Holy City on this day - but not for the same purpose that took Judas there.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us of an obviously secret meeting that took place - probably on this Wednesday (Matt. 26:3-5, Mark 14:1-2, Luke 22:1-2). This was a meeting of the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people. The purpose of this meeting was to continue plotting the arrest of Jesus. They began this process shortly after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:47-53). They were afraid that with all the publicity that Jesus was getting, the people would begin following Him as their leader and the Sanhedrin would lose influence over the people. After the reception Jesus received on Sunday and the widespread fame this brought Him, their fears and apprehensions skyrocketed. They were desperate now to do something that would eliminate this threat to their positions of authority and importance. So they held this meeting to try and fine-tune their plans. The only problem at this point was the "Feast" (Passover and Unleavened Bread). With as many pilgrims as were present for this Feast, and as popular as Jesus was with the general population, they were afraid to take any kind of public action against Jesus for fear of a riot - which would really put them in poor standing with the Roman government, who could take away their authority very easily.

Much to their pleasant surprise, the chief priests and officers of the Temple Guard received a visitor. A visitor who agreed to turn Jesus over to them at an appropriate time; a visitor by the name of Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:1-6). [NOTE: Judas Iscariot, son of Simon Iscariot (John 6:71), is believed to be from Kerioth, a town in southern Judea. Thus Judas was the only disciple not from Galilee (Acts 1:11a). "Iscariot" is commonly believed to come from the Hebrew "Ish Kerioth," or "Man of Kerioth." In every listing of the Apostles, Judas is always named last, and is identified by all 4 Evangelists as the betrayer (Matt. 10:4, Mark 3:19, Luke 6:16b, John 6:71).]

Judas has become one of the most controversial and despised men in all history, for the purpose of his visit with the chief priests and officers of the Temple Guard was

to betray his own Master. He was a traitor. Much has been written about Judas - almost entirely negative. There have been some “defenses” offered in his favor. Some feel he may have simply been disappointed that Jesus was not doing more to deliver the people from Roman rule (which would match the national desire for an earthly Messiah). So when it appeared that Jesus wasn’t going to initiate some kind of action, Judas thought he would try to “force His hand.” However, this theory doesn’t agree with Jesus’ description of Judas in John 6:70-71. There He calls Judas a “devil,” thus showing He knew what was in the heart of Judas.

The more logical explanation is that Judas probably took this action out of greed and pride. You will notice that Matthew calls attention to the fact that one of the questions Judas addressed to the chief priests was: “What are you willing to give me. ...?” (Matt. 26:14-15). John also mentions the greed of Judas on the occasion of Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment. This was in the house of Simon the leper on the eve of Palm Sunday (John 12:1-6). Pride - or more likely, a hurt pride - possibly got the best of him after Jesus responded to his comments on the “better” use of that ointment. When Judas complained about this expensive ointment being used for the purpose of anointing Jesus’ feet, Jesus chided Judas and told him to leave Mary alone. Judas tried to make it appear that he was concerned about the poor. John sets the record straight, however (John 12:4-6). Jesus commended Mary for her actions, explaining that she did this - although completely without her knowledge at this time - in anticipation of His burial (Matt. 26:6-13).

Being publicly embarrassed like this could have been the spark that made Judas want to “get even” with Jesus in some way. This could also possibly be the reason for Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:3-9) both inserting this event (Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet) between the meeting of the chief priests and Judas’ later meeting with them, whereas John spells out that Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet took place on the Saturday evening before Palm Sunday (John 12:1-8, 12). Whatever his reason or excuse, it was a dastardly deed. After Judas received the agreed-upon amount of 30 pieces of silver, he watched for an opportunity to betray his Master (Matt. 26:14-16).

If Judas spent that night in Bethany - with Jesus and the rest of the disciples - I wonder how well he slept, knowing what he had done and was further about to do. For a while, at least, his actions didn’t seem to bother him though.

*(Thursday)*

As has been noted before, the Jewish day began at sunset. Thus at sunset on Wednesday in Holy Week, the next day, Thursday, began. This was an important day in the history of the Jewish people. For this was the 14th day of Nisan - the day the Passover lamb, selected 4 days earlier, on the 10th of Nisan, was to be slaughtered in preparation for the Passover Feast. This was done to follow the instructions God gave to Moses and Aaron at the original Passover celebration (Ex. 12:1-20). It was intended to be an annual reminder of their great deliverance from the Egyptian oppression by the Pharaohs. God had not been deaf to the cries of His people for deliverance. But God's action in their behalf was designed to fit into His divine and eternal Plan. So, in time, God raised up Moses and Aaron to intercede for His people with Pharaoh.

Knowing from eternity what Pharaoh's answer would be, God nevertheless gave him and the Egyptians chance after chance to release God's people from bondage. In an increasingly severe series of plagues, God tried to get Pharaoh's attention - to no avail. After each plague, Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Lord even more. (The first 9 plagues are recorded in Ex. 7:14-10:29.) It was now time for the 10th and final plague. God had explained to Moses what the 10th plague would be (Ex. 11:1-7). God then gave Moses and Aaron instructions on how the Israelites were to prepare for their great deliverance (Ex. 12). The month in which they were now living was to become the first month of their year. (According to the Canaanite calendar, it was known as "Abib." The later Babylonian calendar gave it the name "Nisan." Originally, the Jewish people accepted the Canaanite calendar after they moved into the Promised Land. During and following the Babylonian Captivity, the Babylonian calendar was adopted. This time of year - "Abib" or "Nisan" - would roughly correspond to our calendar months of March or April.)

On the 10th day of this month, in preparation for the Passover, the people were to select a lamb, without defect, and take special care of it until the 14th day of the month. At sunset on the 14th, each family was to kill their lamb, being careful to smear the lamb's blood on the sides and tops of their door frames. The meat was then to be roasted over a fire until done. Each family was to quickly eat the lamb, leaving no part of it until morning. All the while they were to be ready for hasty travel, for about midnight (Ex. 11:4), the angel of death would go throughout the land, slaying the firstborn of man and animal in every household whose door frames did not bear the "blood of the lamb." For those homes where the angel of death saw the commanded



blood smeared on the doorposts, he would “pass over” and spare the inhabitants, and animals belonging to the inhabitants. This is obviously a foreshadow of a far greater “passing over” by the angel of eternal death of those who trust in the blood of the Lamb of God for deliverance from sin and eternal death.

The disciples were well aware of the approaching Feast, as well as their Master’s desire and intention to celebrate the Feast. Though they should have known, from previous bits of information from the Master, I doubt that any of them realized this would be their last Passover with Him. Three of the Evangelists (Matt. 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:7-13) record the conversation between Jesus and His disciples regarding the Passover preparations. Jesus sent Peter and John with specific instructions as to where to make ready for the meal. As with Jesus’ instructions the previous Sunday, regarding the donkey and her colt, so here also the disciples found things exactly as Jesus had told them. Details about the slaughtering of the lamb, from whom it was obtained, who roasted it, the exact location of the “upper room,” are not given. This shows that the Biblical emphasis has now shifted from the traditional requirements for the Passover celebration to the Lamb of God who was about to offer the perfect - and final - sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

One change from the original observance of Passover was that the blood of the lambs was no longer smeared on the doorposts of the houses. The selected lambs were brought to the Temple on the afternoon of Nisan 14 between the hours of 2:30 and 5:30. The head of each household, or the person in charge, would slit the throat of the lamb. One of the priests would collect the blood in a container, which in turn would be poured out on the altar. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar indicated that a life was taken, blood was shed. The significance behind this was explained by God to Moses (Lev. 17:11; cp. Hebr. 9:22). Of course, the blood of animals could never - and did never - atone for a single sin. The blood shed by those thousands of animals through the years merely foreshadowed, pointed forward to, the blood that would one day (and now very soon) be shed by the Lamb of God. Only the blood of this sacrifice was able to atone for sin. For this was divine blood; the blood of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. It was this sacrifice that brought to an end the need for repeated sacrifices which were intended to direct the attention of God’s people to the need of forgiveness. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices was about to be offered. (See Hebr. 7:27)

Late that afternoon, Jesus and the rest of His disciples left Bethany and made their way across the Mount of Olives. Jesus of course knew where Peter and John had

made preparations for the Passover meal. So He led His disciples across the Kidron Valley into the city of Jerusalem. The city was filled with pilgrims - all here for the Passover celebration. They started arriving toward the end of the previous week and had now pretty well reached their maximum number. Some estimates range as high as 120,000 pilgrims descending upon the city. In a town with a normal population of 25,000 to 30,000, you can imagine some of the resulting congestion.

As Jesus and His disciples walked through the streets, heading toward the Upper Room, they passed many happy pilgrims also on their way to a particular spot where they too would celebrate this joyous occasion. These joyous people, celebrating the anniversary of their ancestors deliverance from Egyptian bondage, were in marked contrast to the small band of reserved and solemn disciples following their Master. Little did any of them, other than Jesus Himself, know that the sacrifice which the Passover foreshadowed, was about to take place the very next day. Arriving at the designated location, Jesus and His disciples climbed the steps to the Upper Room. Jesus was the only One in the city that night Who comprehended what change this night would initiate; what significance this night would have; what fear and terror lay ahead for the disciples; what suffering would begin for the Lamb of God.

All of the Evangelists record some of the events that took place in that Upper Room, with John including the most information (Matt. 26:20-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-38; John 13:1-17:26). While the Passover meal was made up of several segments, none of the holy writers goes into any detail about the meal itself. References are made to parts of the meal, but only in connection with other events taking place at that time. None of the Evangelists attempt to give a minute-by-minute description of this night's events. In fact, Luke records some things on the basis of their importance rather than in chronological order. It is my belief that at the time in their lives when these men wrote about these events, they were much more concerned about emphasizing the new covenant meal Jesus instituted that night, and the importance of it - as well as His other words and actions.

It is interesting to note that while Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include the institution of the new covenant meal, which we now refer to as the Lord's Supper, John - who writes more about this night than the other three combined - does not even mention it. His concern focuses on Jesus' actions and teachings, but with no intent to de-emphasize the institution of the Lord's Supper. [Perhaps, writing his Gospel some years after the others, he knew that they had given attention to the institution of the Lord's Supper, so he gave his attention to Jesus' actions and teachings. The bottom

line, however, is that John - and the other Evangelists - all wrote what they did by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Tim 3:16a).]

When Jesus and His disciples arrived at the Upper Room, everything was ready. Jesus took His place at the head of the Passover table, as the Head of His little “family” of disciples. Questions have been raised as to whether or not others were present for this meal. The only ones Scripture portrays as being present, however, were Jesus and His disciples. Reclining at the table with His disciples (reclining around a low table was normal practice in those days - cp. John 12:2), Jesus began on a very personal note. He indicated to His disciples His intense longing to eat this meal with them for a final time (Luke 22:14-16). The reference to His impending suffering appears to have escaped their understanding completely. Reflecting back in later years, John offers His inspired interpretation of that moment (John 13:1). Though not obvious to the disciples that night, it was now understood by John that Jesus was showing His love for them right to the very end.

Jesus began the Passover ritual by blessing the first cup of wine and distributing it to His disciples. (Normally three cups of wine were used in the Passover meal at the time of Christ. This was not the cup He used for the institution of the Lord’s Supper. That was the third and final cup of the meal, the “Cup of blessing.”) As He took this first cup of wine, He spoke the traditional words of blessing over it before handing it on to His disciples. (The complete Passover Ritual, as well as a Christian interpretation of it, can be obtained from many Christian book stores.) Passing this cup to His disciples, He again made a subtle reference to what was awaiting Him (Luke 22:17-18). This was a comment full of theological significance, but a comment which again was completely missed by the disciples.

It was at this point, we believe, that Jesus interrupted the Passover Ritual the first time, and did something that completely took the disciples off guard. John reports it in chapter 13, verses 4 & 5. It was customary prior to any banquet or festival meal to provide foot washing for the guests who had traveled over dusty streets or roads coming to the meal (Cp. Luke 7:44). This was a task normally reserved for servants. Whether Peter and John forgot to make provisions for this menial task, or whether none of the disciples wanted to volunteer for this humble practice, or whether they just felt that this would not be necessary for this close group of friends, we do not know. We also do not know if perhaps Jesus took this action after a dispute arose among the disciples about which of them was considered the greatest (Luke 22:24-27). We do know that Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach His disciples a

much-needed lesson in humility. He took off His outer garment, wrapped a towel around His waist, took a basin of water, and began the humble task of washing the feet of His disciples. John reports the conversation that followed in chapter 13, verses 6-17.

While hinting at His imminent betrayal as He washed the disciples' feet (John 13:10b-11), after returning to His place at the head of the table, He becomes more specific (John 13:18-19). Becoming more troubled in spirit as He revealed more and more to His disciples what lay in the immediate future, Jesus now states in plain words that one of those present was going to betray Him (John 13:21). Even knowing that His enemies were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus, I doubt that anyone in that little group - except Judas - really had any idea as to what Jesus was talking about. They could tell from His demeanor and tone of voice, however, that this was a serious statement, and also that Jesus was very troubled about this matter. At this point the disciples did some serious introspection and began asking if it could possibly be them (Mark 14:19). Not wanting to believe it could be themselves, they began looking around at each other, wondering which one it might be (John 13:22).

Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, Peter motioned to John, who was next to Jesus, to ask Him who it was (John 13:23-25). Jesus identifies the betrayer as the one to whom He will give a piece of bread after He had dipped it in the dish. He gave the bread to Judas (John 13:26). It was probably at this time that Judas himself, trying to "fit in" with the other disciples, asked Jesus a similar question. Jesus, desiring Judas to know that He knew what was about to happen, answered in the affirmative (Matt. 26:25). This was not a vindictive answer, a grim threat about possible repercussions to Judas' intended actions. It was another attempt by Jesus to reach out to Judas - letting him know that He was aware of his intentions, but that it was not too late for Judas to change his mind. However, Satan had entered the heart of Judas and had a complete hold on him (John 13:27a). So Jesus told Judas to do quickly what he was going to do. Judas immediately left the Upper Room, knowing that He was not deceiving Jesus in the slightest. (One can't help but wonder what thoughts must have been going through Judas' mind at this time.) The remainder of the disciples did not connect Judas' departure with the betrayal. Since Judas was the treasurer of their little group, they merely thought Jesus had instructed him to go out and make a donation for the poor or some such thing (John 13:27-30).

In his Gospel, John reports that after Judas left, Jesus continued with the extended discourse that he records (John 13:31-17:26). However, at the end of this discourse

- which concludes with the prayer that has come to be known as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" (John 17) - John states that when He had finished praying, Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley (John 18:1). Comparing Matthew's account of this night (26:25-30), it appears that Jesus continued with the Passover Ritual after Judas' departure, which included the institution of the Lord's Supper. If this is the order of events, then the discourse by Jesus which John records would have come at the conclusion of the Passover Ritual. This is the order of events which I prefer to follow.

A second cup of wine was blessed and distributed before the actual meal began. At the beginning of the meal itself, the unleavened bread used in the meal was blessed and distributed to those present. It is at this point that Jesus makes another departure from the traditional ritual. He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to His disciples. However, the words He spoke to the disciples were not the traditional words of the Passover Ritual. Instead, He identified this bread as His Body, and told them to take and eat (Matt. 26:26). We can't even begin to imagine what thoughts were going through the disciples' minds at this time. So much had happened this week. So much had happened this night. So much they didn't understand. What could their Master mean by these words?

[Comments:

These words, "This is My Body," have evoked much discussion in the years since this Last Passover. Many alternative suggestions and explanations have been offered, not to mention rationalizations. But for those who accept the Holy Scriptures as the divinely inspired, infallible Word of God, the meaning is clear. Jesus says, as He distributes the unleavened bread to His disciples, that this bread "is" His body. The Greek verb for "is" ("estin") means simply that. It does not mean "becomes," "represents," or anything other than "is." As someone has put it (and I will capitalize "is" in places for understanding and emphasis), "IS is IS, and always is IS." The Greek noun for "body" ("soma") is the normal, literal word used in the Greek language for "body." Any other explanation or rationalization calls into question the truthfulness of God's Holy Word!

The understanding of these words by the finite human mind is something else. For these words go contrary to all human logic. (I will not, I cannot, try to explain how this wonderful miracle happens. But that is what a miracle is, isn't it - something contrary to nature?) The fact remains, this is what Jesus said, "This is My Body." So

this is just another place where human wisdom and understanding must defer to the wisdom and power of God and accept His words on faith. It is indeed as the angel told the Virgin Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) This is certainly one of the things that can be included in what a popular spiritual hymn states: “We’ll understand it all by and by.”]

Following the blessing and distribution of the unleavened bread, the meal itself was served. A series of prayers and blessings followed. At the conclusion of the meal, a third cup of wine was poured. (The timing of this cup is exactly as Paul describes it in I Corinthians 11:25.) This cup of wine was known as the “cup of blessing” - the cup of which Paul speaks in I Corinthians 10:16. (The New International Version translates “cup of thanksgiving.” However, the King James Version is more in keeping with the Greek word, “eulogias,” or “blessing.”) When it came time for the third cup of wine, Jesus again departs from the traditional ritual and puzzles His disciples once more. Instead of the words the disciples expected, Jesus offers the cup to them with these words, “Drink from it, all of you. This is My Blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matt. 26:27-28) Would the disciples ever be able to sort all this out in their minds and comprehend what Jesus was saying to them?

[Comments:

As with the words, “This is My Body,” so also the words, “This is My Blood,” evoke a lot of discussion and speculation. However, in both cases, the words are clear. “Is” continues to mean “is.” Likewise, the Greek noun for “blood” (“hema”) is the normal, usual, and traditional word used for blood. Once again, it comes down to either accepting God’s Word as true and infallible or trying to substitute explanations from man’s finite, limited thinking and understanding.

This understanding of God’s Word does not imply that we are eating physical flesh and drinking actual blood as we partake of the consecrated bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. (The disciples did not understand the Lord’s words to mean that either.) What these words do imply, however, is that in some mysterious, miraculous, sacramental way, we receive, along with the consecrated bread and wine, the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ - the Body given; the Blood shed for the remission of sins. St. Paul’s words in I Corinthians 10:16 speak of the “koinonia” (the “communion” or “uniting with,” “joining together with,” “fellowship,” “participation in”) between the wine and the Blood of Christ, as well as the bread and the Body of

Christ. On the basis of these words, we believe that we receive four things in the Sacrament: bread and wine (in a natural way); the Body and Blood of Christ (in a miraculous, supernatural, Sacramental way). Paul's account of the Institution of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:23-27) also associates all four elements in the Holy Meal. The understanding of how this is possible continues to be beyond our human comprehension. As stated before, here is another instance of where faith (in God's Word) must rise above reason (man's understanding).

In these two brief departures from the traditional Passover Ritual (the distribution of the unleavened bread and the third cup of wine), Jesus abolishes the centuries-old tradition of the Passover, commanded by God as a reminder of the Jews' deliverance from Egyptian bondage. While the Passover was an annual reminder of this deliverance, it was also a Type or Foreshadow of the greater deliverance of all mankind from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. That greater deliverance would also involve a lamb - this time, the Lamb of God. The old ritual is abolished and is replaced with the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, given and shed for the remission of sins. The numberless sacrifices offered in the past have now been replaced by the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God - the only sacrifice worthy enough to pay the debt of the world's sins. God's Plan for the redemption of His fallen creatures was proceeding exactly as God had intended.]

Knowing the confusion in the hearts and minds of His disciples, it is my belief that this is when Jesus began His extended conversation with His disciples. He tells them about the new command He is giving to them (John 13:34. The Latin word for "command" or "commandment" is "mandatum." This is one of the explanations for the naming of this night (day), "Maundy Thursday.") He issues the first warning to Peter about his upcoming denial (Luke 22:31-34, John 13:36-38). He spends some time comforting His disciples, encouraging their trust in Him rather than being troubled (John 14:1). He speaks His second-last "I AM" statement (John 14:6) and promises them the gift of the Spirit (John 14:16, 26). He assures them of the close relationship they can have with Him and the Father as He utters the last of His great "I AM" statements (John 15:1, 5). He again encourages love toward one another (John 15:12-13), while warning about the hatred they would experience from the world (John 15:18-16:4).

His discourse to them contained repeated references to the "Counselor" (Holy Spirit) and what He would do when He comes (John 16:5-11). He warns of impending grief for the disciples (John 16:17-20), while promising that their grief would turn

to joy (John 16:21-33). Nearing the end of His discourse, Jesus begins what has come to be known as His great “High Priestly Prayer.” He prays for Himself that He may bring glory to His Father through the work He is about to complete (John 17:1-5). He prays for the Eleven disciples as He is about to leave them (John 17:6-19). And finally He prays for all believers (John 17:20-26). Though acutely aware of the pain and agony facing Him in the hours ahead, His tender, loving heart is still concerned about the glory of His Father, the well-being of His disciples around Him that night, as well as His disciples (believers) throughout the coming ages. (That latter category includes you and me. Think of it: we were in Christ’s mind, heart, and prayers the night in which He was betrayed; the night before He offered the Supreme Sacrifice for the sins of the world - mine and yours included. Does that say anything to you about the love the Lord has for YOU?)

When He completed His prayer, John tells us that Jesus left the Upper Room with His disciples and went with them to an olive grove (or garden) across the Kidron Valley (John 18:1). The other Evangelists tell us basically the same thing, naming the place as the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30, Mark 14:26, Luke 22:39). Matthew and Mark further pinpoint their destination as “Gethsemane” (Matt. 26:36, Mark 14:32), a garden or orchard on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives.

#### COMMENTS:

\*\*\* **Palm Sunday.** This day of Christ’s Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem ushered in Holy Week. It has received the name “Palm” Sunday from the fact that many of the pilgrims along the route of Jesus’ humble procession cut palm branches to lay in the road ahead of Jesus and the donkey colt upon which He rode. While we rejoice in the praise and adoration which Jesus received from the crowd that day, we cannot forget what lay ahead of Him later in the week. Jesus did not forget. Jesus knew exactly what was waiting for Him. Yet He set His face resolutely to go forward with the work His Father had entrusted to Him. Jesus knew! But the disciples were without a clue. The Apostle John - including himself with the group - verifies this in chapter 12, verse 16, of his Gospel. It was only after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that the disciples come to understand the significance of the events of Palm Sunday.

Jesus fulfilled different prophecies on this day - as has been explained in the main body of this chapter. All of this to show once again that Jesus was (is) the Promised Messiah; the Savior of the world. The next time you sing some of the joyous Palm



Sunday hymns, remember the purpose for Jesus entering Jerusalem - to fulfill prophecy; to move toward the completion of His purpose in coming to earth. Also remember that it was *for* you and me (and *because* of you and me) that He willingly laid down His life before this week was over.

\*\*\* **Maundy Thursday.** The main reason the Christian Church remembers and observes Maundy Thursday is that Jesus instituted His Holy Supper on this day. In the main body of this chapter, I described how Jesus changed the Passover celebration to bring into being this new Sacrament. And in a couple special “Comments” sections, I tried to explain - as much as is possible with a supernatural act - what actually takes place in the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood. What I want to do now - as promised in Chapter VI - is to show how this Sacrament is a Means of Grace. It was said in Chapter VI that a Means of Grace is a “means,” an “avenue,” a “mode” or “manner” through which God brings us His blessings of grace. Baptism is one of those Means. Through the application of simple, ordinary water - along with the spoken Word of God (Matt. 28:19) - God enters the life of the person being baptized and claims that individual as His own. Being a child of God brings with it the blessings of faith, God’s love, and forgiveness. How this happens, we cannot explain or understand. But because God says it does happen, we believe it and accept it as true.

The Lord’s Supper is a Means of Grace in much the same way. While Holy Baptism is regarded as the Sacrament of “Initiation” - or the Sacrament whereby a person becomes a child of God - Holy Communion can be regarded as the Sacrament of “Strengthening.” We do not become a child of God through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In fact, we must already be a child of God before we are eligible to partake of this Sacrament. [Cp. I Cor. 11:23-29. Note especially verses 24b and 25b. An unbeliever could not partake of this Sacrament “in remembrance of Me (Jesus)” since he/she does not know Jesus as his/her Savior. Also note verse 28, the unbeliever would not know how to “examine” him/herself, or even what that means. Finally, note that Jesus - when He instituted this Sacrament - gave it to His disciples, to those who believed in Him. Remember, Judas had already left the Upper Room before this took place.]

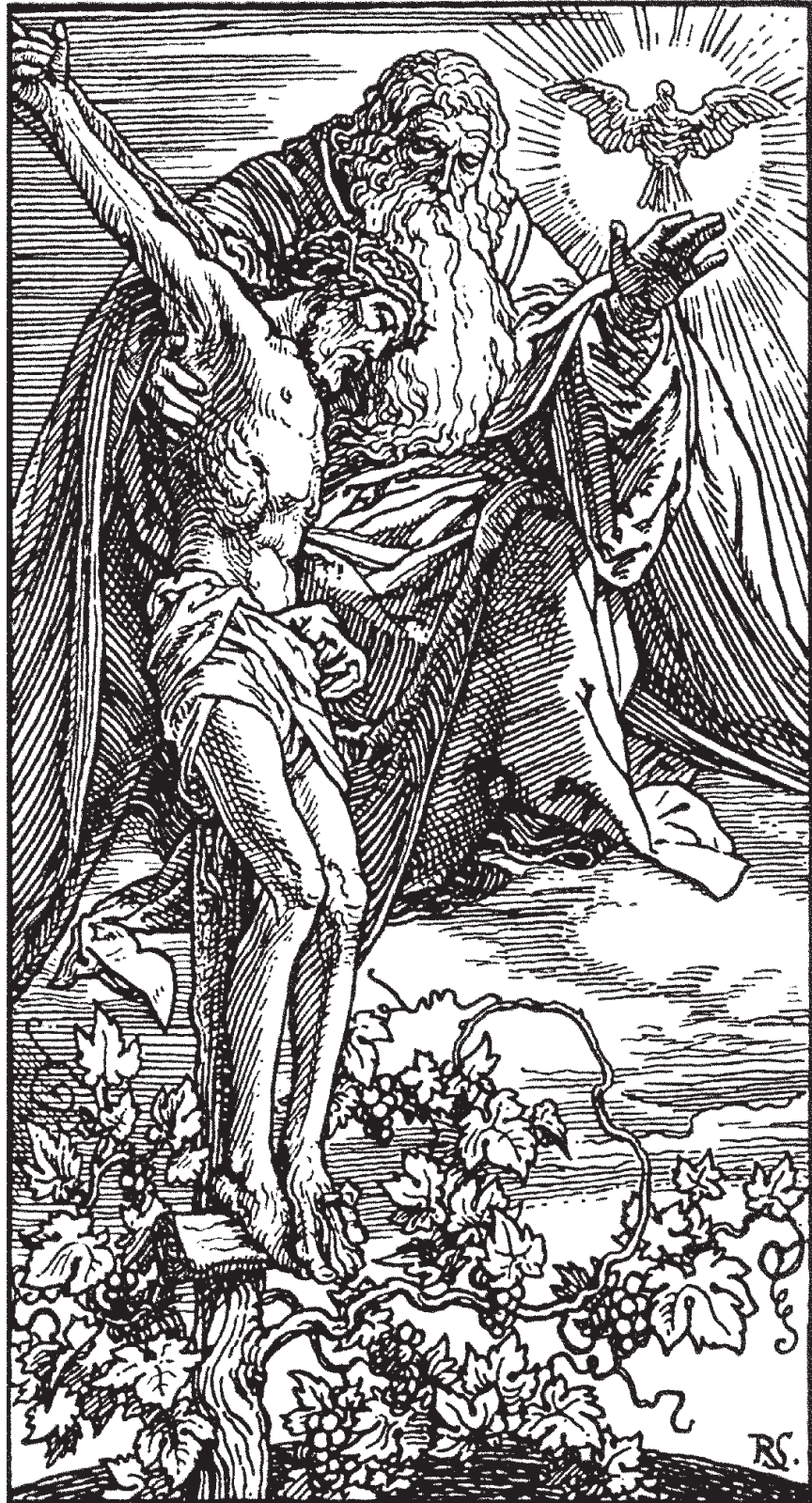
The purpose of this Sacrament, therefore, is to strengthen our already existing faith in Jesus as we “remember” Him in this Sacrament and what He did for us to make this possible. He gave His life into death; He offered His own Body; He shed His own Blood - for the remission of our sins. Thus as we partake of His Body and Blood in this Sacrament (in a supernatural, miraculous way), we receive the blessings

which His suffering and death earned for us - forgiveness of sins. This, in turn, strengthens our faith so that we remain close to God. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is thus a Means of Grace - a means, an avenue, through which we receive God's grace and all that implies. Grace! Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound! (The Gospel as a Means of Grace will be reviewed in the next chapter.)

\*\*\* There is one other thing I want to include in these comments. It is something that Jesus said in the Upper Room to comfort and reassure His disciples. He speaks of leaving them His "peace" (John 14:27). Jesus knew what awaited His disciples in the days - yes, even the years - ahead. So He left them a gift that cannot be adequately described in human terms. He left them His peace. He explains that this is different from the peace of the world. The peace of this world is usually based on the absence of war or hostilities; the feeling we have when we are in good health; when everything is going according to plan; when we know where our next meal is coming from and that creditors are not hounding us. That is a good feeling indeed. But it cannot begin to compare with the peace that Jesus offers.

This is the peace that Jesus brought to His disciples on Easter evening - and a week later. This is the peace of heart and mind that comes from knowing that Jesus has paid for each and every one of our sins; that everything is all right between us and God; that the mansions of heaven are waiting for us after this life is ended. It is the peace that Paul speaks of in Romans 5:1 and Philippians 4:7. It is the peace that comes from knowing what Paul talks about in Romans 8:28-39. That is why Jesus could tell His disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." That peace is yours and mine today - through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a peace that indeed the world cannot give. A peace that will keep us calm in any and every situation the devil or this sinful world can throw at us. Therefore, do not let *your* heart be troubled either, and do not be afraid of anything. You have Jesus' own peace there with you!





*"God Was In Christ Reconciling the World to Himself"*  
by Rudolf Schäfer

## VIII - IT IS FINISHED!

[Since the Jewish day began at sunset, the Passover meal was technically eaten on Friday. The events after sunset, Nisan 14, until sunset on Friday were all part of Nisan 15.]

As Jesus and the now eleven disciples made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, He shared with them more disturbing news. Quoting the gist of a prophecy in Zechariah 13:7b, He informed the disciples that they would all fall away on account of Him - that very night (Matt. 26:31). He told them what was going to happen - not to dishearten them any more than they already were, but to forewarn them lest they be totally devastated by these events when they happened. And the fact that this had been prophesied was intended to let them know that this is not catching Jesus off guard. Instead, this too was fitting into God's Plan for the world. Also notice that He immediately seeks to reassure them by offering them some positive news and the encouragement that they will come through this difficult time (Matt. 26:32).

Peter - dear, impetuous Peter - uses this as an opportunity to affirm his unwavering loyalty to his Master. Remember that during the Passover celebration, Jesus had already informed Peter that he would deny his Lord that night (Luke 22:33-34). This surely took Peter by surprise. So much so that no response from Peter is recorded at that time. After having had some time to reflect on these words of Jesus, Peter is very determined to assure his Master of his loyalty when Jesus tells them that they would all fall away from Him yet that night. Peter even makes a comparison between himself and the others, declaring that even if everyone else falls away, he never would (Matt. 26:33). Jesus responds in a tender, but honest way, repeating what He had told Peter earlier (Matt. 26:34). Determined, self-confident Peter replies in an even stronger fashion, with the other disciples echoing his comments (Matt. 26:35). Only too late will Peter remember this dialogue with the Master. [He will remember it once again, however - after Jesus' resurrection - on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:15).]

Arriving at Gethsemane, Jesus left eight of the disciples near the entrance to the Garden, taking Peter, James, and John with Him a little farther into the garden (Matt. 26:36-37). He confided to these three the deep stress and inner sorrow which was beginning to flood in on Him. He asked them to keep watch with Him (Matt. 26:38). Even seeing their Master in this intense emotional state, there was no

way they could understand exactly what Jesus was beginning to feel. Knowing that something very abnormal was taking place, they still could not envision what lay ahead for Jesus - and them - in the hours ahead. Notice the way Jesus described the sorrow which He was experiencing: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow - to the point of death." Many of us have experienced sorrow before - sometimes even deep sorrow - but never to the point that our Lord was experiencing at this moment. For His sorrow was caused by the weight of the world's sins beginning to bear down on Him. The suffering for the sins of the entire human race was beginning. All in accord with God's Plan of love for the world.

Jesus now left these three disciples, with the plea to watch with Him, and went a little farther into the Garden. Matthew tells us that He fell with His face to the ground (26:39a). Lying prostrate on the ground, He pleaded with His Father in heaven (Matt. 26:39b). He knew what unspeakable suffering awaited Him. He didn't shy away from it. But He did ask that if there was some other way to redeem mankind, might He be spared "this cup." There was no other way for mankind to be redeemed, however. He must drink the cup to its bitter dregs. The sins of the world - from Adam to the last person at the end of time - must be paid for. So "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us" (II Cor. 5:21a). Even as Isaiah had prophesied, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (53:6b). (NOTE: The expression regarding "drinking the cup" is found in different places in Holy Scripture. It was used as an expression of experiencing God's wrath. Psalm 75:8, as well as Isaiah 51:17, use it in this sense. In response to Psalm 75:8b, where it speaks of "all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs," one might question whether this should apply to the innocent Jesus or not. Just remember, at this time Jesus is bearing the sins of the world, so in God's sight, He is the most wicked of the wicked.)

Luke tells us that an angel from heaven came to Him and strengthened Him (22:43). These blessed heavenly messengers. It was angels who announced His birth (Luke 2:9-14). It was angels who came and ministered to Him after His temptation in the wilderness (Matt.4:11). Now, in Gethsemane, it was an angel who came to Him. And in a little more than 48 hours, it would be an angel who would announce His glorious resurrection (Matt. 28:5-6). But the hours between then and now were such that even Jesus, according to His humanity, needed support and strength. The Father sent an angel for this ministry of mercy. The disciples, whom Jesus had asked to watch with Him, could not be counted on. They had succumbed to slumber, due in part, I'm sure, to the stress of the evening (Matt. 26:40a).

A couple of things are worth noting: 1) Mark writes that in His initial prayer in the Garden, Jesus addressed His Father with both the Aramaic and Greek words for “Father” (Mark 14:36). He who had spoken of the closeness between Himself and His Father in the Upper Room (John 14:11, 20, 31; 15:10; 16:28, 32b; 17:4-5, 11, 21-22), now addresses His Father in the tenderest of terms. Not in an attempt to evoke pity from His Father, but to show the urgency of the prayer He addresses to His Father. Yet each time He approaches His Father, He always humbly submitted to His Father’s will (Matt. 26:39, 42, 44). The only time that Jesus did not address His Father with the tender term of “Father” would happen later this day, Nisan 15, about 3 o’clock in the afternoon. [NOTE: The willing submission to the Father’s will in this Garden stands in stark contrast to the failure to submit to the Father’s will in another Garden (Gen. 3:6). In fact, the obedient suffering taking place in Gethsemane finds its necessity in the disobedience which began in Eden.]

2) It is Luke, the physician, who reports a seldom reported incident of an individual sweating drops of blood (Luke 22:44). This is a physical condition known as “hemathidrosis” (this word comes from a combination of two Greek words which means, literally, “bloody perspiration” or “blood sweating”) where the tiny blood vessels beneath the surface of the skin rupture under extreme stress and/or anguish, causing blood to ooze out through the skin with perspiration. [The expression “sweating blood” does indeed have its root in fact. It is possible, but only under extreme stress, such as our Savior was experiencing in the Garden that night. Luke does point out that even after the angel appeared to Jesus to strengthen Him, the Lord was still “in anguish” (“agony” in Greek, as in the King James Translation), thus precipitating His praying “more earnestly.”] The fact that this condition is seldom reported indicates that not many individuals reach this point of stress and anguish. But our Savior did! Another indication of the tremendous extent of emotional (at this time) suffering being experienced by God’s Son! (And it was also because of me - and you - and the many times we followed the example of our first parents and disobeyed the will of our heavenly Father.)

Returning from His first round of prayers, Jesus found His disciples asleep (Matt. 26:40a). The question He asks them is directed to Peter (Mark 14:37), but I feel confident that the other two also felt the sting of guilt. The question is directed toward Peter probably because he is the one who spoke up so forcefully about his loyalty to the Master. Then in another loving warning, Jesus urges Peter - and the others - to watch and pray (Mark 14:38). Leaving the disciples again, Jesus prayed the same prayer, asking for the removal of this “cup” - but only if it was in keeping

with the Father's will (Matt. 26:42). Returning to the disciples a second time, Jesus found them as before - sound asleep. Mark reports that they didn't know what to say to Him (14:40). Even after the first embarrassment; even after the repeated warnings and encouragements, the disciples could not lend any moral support to their Master. These self-confident disciples, who had affirmed their loyalty to their Master only hours before, could not fight off physical exhaustion and watch with Him. (But before we begin feeling a little self-righteous, let's ask ourselves: would we have done any better? Do we do any better when Jesus urges us - through His Word - to watch and pray today?)

Leaving the disciples a third time, Jesus again spoke to His Father, praying the same thing (Matt.26:44). I'm sure it was no surprise - although nevertheless disappointing - when Jesus found the disciples asleep again when He returned to them a third time. This time things were different. The prayers were completed. The Father's will stands. The "hour is near." So Jesus awakens His disciples with the news that the betrayer is coming (Matt. 26:45-46). Things begin to happen very quickly now. The arrival of Judas, along with the crowd sent by the chief priests and Pharisees, as well as a detachment of soldiers (John 18:3), had awakened the eight disciples who had remained near the entrance of the garden. These disciples either preceded - or followed closely behind - the group to where Jesus and the other three disciples were now standing. John makes a point of stating how Judas knew - or at least suspected - that Jesus was at the Garden (18:2). It was a familiar meeting place for Jesus and His disciples, previously however, under much more pleasant circumstances. (Could the location of His praying have been close to the site where He spoke to His disciples at some length on Tuesday?)

Three of the Evangelists identify the betrayer as "one of the twelve" (Matt. 26:47, Mark 14:43, Luke 22:47). John also names Judas as the betrayer, but does not identify him as being one of the disciples. Matthew (26:48) and Mark (14:44) both refer to the "signal" Judas had arranged with the crowd - a kiss. Luke mentions the kiss (22:47b), but does not comment on it being the prearranged signal. John makes no mention of the kiss at all. A kiss! An act normally associated with love and close relationships, is here used by Judas as an act of betrayal. This hypocrisy did not deceive Jesus. In fact, He challenged Judas with a question: "Are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48). As in the Upper Room, Jesus was letting Judas know that his motives and behavior were no secret to Him. It was something that He knew would happen all along. And once again, Jesus reached out to Judas, calling him "Friend" (Matt. 26:50). But as in previous instances, Jesus' "invitation"



fell on deaf ears.

John now tells us something that neither of the other three Evangelists mention. Jesus spoke to the arriving crowd and asked them whom they wanted (18:4). Even if Jesus were not omniscient, it was pretty obvious that this crowd - armed with torches, lanterns, and weapons - did not come to the Garden to discuss the weather. These were men on a mission. They were looking for someone. In His omniscience, Jesus knew the answer before He asked the question. But He was leading up to something - in fact, two things. The first was to demonstrate His omnipotence. When the leaders of the crowd responded that they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus told them that He was the One they wanted (John 18:5a). [Note the way Jesus answered; the words He used: "I AM He." While not a statement in the same sense as the "I AM Statements" we spoke of in a previous chapter, Jesus is again making a statement. He uses the words in Greek that have the same meaning as the Hebrew word "Eh-Yeh" (I am), from which is derived the word "Jah-weh" (He is), which the Jews used when speaking of God. Hence, Jesus is again identifying Himself as the Son of God.]

It was at this point that the omnipotence of Jesus was revealed - also attesting to His divinity. When He informed the crowd as to Whom He was, they all - including Judas - fell backwards to the ground (John 18:5b-6). He knew the crowd would not be impressed with this display of His power. But He did want them to know that they had no power over Him and that His going with them was completely voluntary. This was in accord with previous words of our Lord when He declared that His suffering and death would be at His own initiative and will - and consequently at His own time (John 10:17-18).

After the crowd recovered, He asked them again whom they wanted. Again they responded as before (18:7). Now He reveals His second reason for asking the crowd whom they wanted. Since they were looking for Him - and had indicated that twice - He asked that they let His disciples go (18:8-9). John explains that Jesus spoke these words so that what He had said earlier would be fulfilled (Cp. John 17:12). He was showing His love for His disciples even though He knew that any moment now they would be forsaking Him and fleeing - even as He had told them they would do as they were making their way to the garden a little earlier.

Impetuous Peter now springs into action. Even after the display of Jesus' power, Simon somehow felt he needed to protect his Master. He drew his sword and striking

at the nearest crowd member, cut off the right ear of Malchus, the servant of the High Priest (18:10). The other three Evangelists also include this display of “courage” (Matt. 26:51, Mark 14:47, Luke 22:50). Jesus quickly rebuked Peter, touched the man’s ear and healed it (Luke 22:51). [Another demonstration of His omnipotence. How “blind” the crowd and the disciples were! Another thing, one can’t help but wonder what thoughts went through the mind of Malchus after this!] He tells Peter that if He wanted to, He could call on His Father who would immediately send more than 12 legions of angels (Matt. 26:53). (A Roman legion consisted of 6000 soldiers.) But this would not have fit into the Father’s Plan for the world, so once again Jesus refers to the necessity of what is going to happen (Matt.26:54). This too was part of God’s Plan for the world from the beginning.

Then - under cover of darkness, in the seclusion of Gethsemane, away from the crowds who were sympathetic to Jesus - the soldiers arrested Jesus, binding His hands, as if that could hold the Man who had flung them to the ground by a mere word (John 18:12b). [The soldiers were part of a Roman detachment stationed in Jerusalem. They accompanied the representatives of the chief priests and Pharisees - undoubtedly at the request of the Sanhedrin. Though the arrest was made in an isolated location, the Sanhedrin did not want to take any chances in case the general public found out about this before the “trial” was completed, thus, the sizeable group that came out to take Jesus captive.] Seeing their Master arrested and bound, the disciples took the action Jesus had predicted - they forsook Him and fled (Matt. 26:56b). These perplexed and frightened disciples still did not understand the divine necessity of these events, in spite of all the words of Jesus to this effect.

It is Mark who reports that a young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, left the linen garment behind when the soldiers tried to seize him, and ran away naked (Mark 14:51-52). No name is given to this young man, which gives rise to speculation that this young man may have been John Mark himself, the writer of this Gospel. He was not one of the twelve, but was a follower of the Lord. It has been further speculated that he was, somehow connected with the Upper Room, with either him or his parents owning the home which included the upper room. If this is the case, it could well be that Judas first brought the group from the chief priests and Pharisees to this location, not knowing that Jesus and the other disciples had already left. The noise and commotion of the crowd could have awakened Mark who then quickly followed the crowd to see what they were going to do to Jesus, his friend. This is one possible explanation as to why Mark was present at the Garden, if he was indeed the nameless young man, and why he would be clad only in a linen garment.

Three of the Evangelists report that the crowd took Jesus to the High Priest (Matt. 26:57, Mark 14:53, Luke 22:54a). This eventually happened. But John tells us that they took Jesus first to Annas (18:13). [Could this have been to give the Sanhedrin time to assemble for their “trial” of Jesus?] Annas was a former high priest - and father-in-law of Caiaphas, the current high priest. Under these circumstances, it is possible that Annas was still considered by some to be the “power behind the throne,” and as such, was the first to interview Jesus. In fact, some of the Jews still considered Annas to be the high priest since he was put out of office by the Roman rulers, an action which some of the Jews considered illegitimate and unlawful according to their laws. Some of the interchange that took place before Annas is recorded by John in chapter 18, verses 19-23. John points out that the “high priest” questioned Jesus about His disciples and His teaching. This was obviously an attempt to get Jesus to say something that they could later use against Him. Getting nowhere, however, Annas then sent Jesus, still bound, to Caiaphas, the official high priest (John 18:24). [Note: The last Biblical mention of Annas is found in Acts 4:6, in connection with the trial of Peter and John after their arrest for preaching about Jesus.]

By this time the Sanhedrin (or at least a quorum) had gathered at the home of Caiaphas (Matt. 26:57, Mark 14:53, 55a). In all likelihood, by now the time was well past midnight. Not finding any legitimate charges to bring against Jesus, the Sanhedrin now stooped to looking for false evidence. They were desperate to find some charge for which they could pronounce the death penalty (Matt. 26:59-60, Mark 14:55-56). John reminds us that it was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be better that one man die for the people rather than have the whole nation perish (John 18:14. Cp. John 11:49-50). It is likely that John brings this in at this time to show how impossible it was for Jesus to receive a fair trial from this group. Actually, these night trials were not legal either. That is probably why the Sanhedrin met very early in the morning to render an “official verdict” and thus give some legitimacy to their clandestine proceedings (Matt. 27:1, Mark 15:1, Luke 22:66). Thus Jesus was subjected to three trials (religious) before the Jewish governing officials - before Annas, before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin at night, and before the Sanhedrin at day break.

Matthew reveals some of the details of the trial before Caiaphas (26:59-68). In their desperate attempt to find some “evidence” against Jesus, many false witnesses come forward, but their testimonies didn’t agree. Whether these false witnesses were members of the Sanhedrin, or hastily summoned cohorts, we do not know. Mark records some of these proceedings as well (14:55-65). We should remember that

according to Mosaic Law, no one could be convicted of a crime on the basis of only one person's testimony (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6, 19:15). Finally, two came forward with their testimony. Who these men were, as above, we do not know. Possibly they were individuals recruited by members of the Sanhedrin. The outcome remains the same however. The two who finally did "agree" on something accused Jesus of saying He could destroy the Temple of God and rebuild it in 3 days. [In ancient times, the destruction or desecration of a place of worship was regarded as a capital offense. But note that Mark reports their testimony did not agree either, 14:57-59.]

What was more important to the Sanhedrin, however, was the implication that Jesus was claiming power to rebuild that magnificent temple in three days - a feat that, they believed, could only be done by God. Thus, they were trying to establish that Jesus was claiming to be God - which was considered blasphemy, punishable by death under Jewish law (which had no bearing on Roman law, and therefore would have been useless before the Roman governor). Actually, all this was a distortion of something Jesus had said early in His public ministry. When the Jews were wanting Jesus to give them a sign to prove His authority, He responded, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). But John pointed out (2:21) that Jesus was speaking about the temple of His body. This indeed happened on Easter morning. After they had "destroyed the Temple" of His body on Good Friday, Jesus "raised it again" on the 3rd day - a miracle far greater than merely rebuilding the Temple in three days!

Since they had nothing better, the high priest tried to capitalize on this "testimony." He challenged Jesus to respond to this "charge." Jesus remained silent to this absurd and distorted "accusation." Frustrated, the high priest now resorted to another tactic. He placed Jesus under oath and demanded that Jesus tell them whether He was the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:63). Caiaphas felt that if Jesus denied being the Christ, the Son of God, they could discredit Him and all His "claims." If He admitted to being the Christ, the Son of God, they would find Him guilty of blasphemy. Either way, the high priest felt he couldn't lose. They anxiously awaited Jesus' answer. Being placed under oath, Jesus was now bound to answer or be guilty of (silently) not telling the truth. He admitted that He was the Christ, the Promised Messiah, the Son of God (Matt. 26:64a). [But notice what Jesus says in the last part of verse 64. He is letting this group know that while they are the ones now sitting in judgment, there will come a day when the Son of Man will be sitting on the Judgment Seat and the roles will be reversed. Did Caiaphas and the others catch this? Apparently not, or if they did, they chose to ignore it.]

Feigning shock and dismay, the high priest tore his clothes, asking, “Why do we need any more witnesses?” (Matt. 26:65). The others all joined in accusing Jesus of blasphemy and declared that He should be put to death. According to Mosaic Law, blasphemy (mocking God or reviling God, which the Jews felt Jesus was doing by stating He was the Son of God) was to be punished by stoning - a death sentence (Lev. 24:16). Showing further contempt, some began spitting on Jesus. After blindfolding Him, they struck Him with their fists and mockingly asked Him - since He was “supposed” to be the Christ - to tell them who had hit Him. The emotional stress that Jesus experienced in the Garden was now becoming physical as well.

It was during this time that Peter, sitting outside in the courtyard of the high priest, warming himself by the fire started by the servants of the high priest, found himself in a very awkward situation. After initially running away with the others in Gethsemane, Peter obviously began to feel guilty - especially after His forceful statements about remaining loyal to the Master. Desiring to find out what was going to happen to Jesus, Peter followed the crowd at a distance - right into the courtyard of the high priest (Matt. 26:58, Mark 14:54, Luke 22:54b-55, John 18:15-16. Note: The “other disciple” that John refers to was probably John himself). Three different times someone accused Peter of being a disciple of Jesus. Three different times - with increasing fear and frustration - He denied not only being a disciple, but of even knowing “the Man.” The last denial was accompanied by cursing and swearing (Matt. 26:69-74a, Mark 14:66-71, Luke 22:56-60a, John 18:17, 25-27a).

No sooner had the words of his third denial gotten out of his mouth than a rooster crowed (Matt. 26:74b, Mark 14:72a, Luke 22:60b, John 18:27b). Words cannot begin to describe what Peter felt when he heard that rooster crow. It was as if a knife had pierced his heart. He remembered the words of Jesus - warning Peter of this very thing. Words that he had so cockily contradicted. But now the remembrance of these words went deep into his soul. And just at that instant, the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. It was not an “I told you so” look. That would never come from the Lord. Rather, it was a look of hurt and disappointment - but also a look of love and forgiveness. Peter’s reaction? He broke down and wept bitterly (Matt. 26:75, Mark 14:72b, Luke 22:61-62). Whether the Lord turned and looked at Peter while He was being transferred to the “official” trial of the Sanhedrin at daybreak or when he was being led to Pilate’s Palace is unknown. It is my feeling that it was while Jesus was being taken to the “official” Sanhedrin trial - at daybreak, the time roosters normally crow (Mark 15:1, Luke 22:66).

After the Sanhedrin had rendered their “official” verdict - the decision to put Jesus to death - they led Jesus away to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:1-2, Mark 15:1, Luke 22:66-23:1, John 18:28a). Even though the Sanhedrin had rendered the death verdict, they were powerless to carry it out. The Romans had removed this authority from them. [NOTE: It appears that even though the Roman government had removed the authority of capital punishment from the Jews, they sometimes looked the other way. Compare Acts 7:54-60, which records the stoning of Stephen. But in such a highly charged situation as this, the Jews would not dare carry out the death sentence on their own.] So the Jews now brought Jesus to Pilate, wanting him to order the execution of Jesus. This meant that Jesus was now to be subjected to a Roman trial as well - or to be more accurate, three Roman trials (an initial trial before Pilate, a trial later before Herod, and a final trial before Pilate again). Three religious trials, three government trials. By this time Jesus had had no sleep for 24 hours. Neither was any forthcoming until He closed His eyes in the sleep of death later this day.

Appearing before Pilate brought a different set of charges. The religious leaders knew that the Roman governor would not be interested in their religious concerns. So they now began charging Jesus with things they thought would catch Pilate’s attention. They accused Jesus of trying to subvert the nation; opposing payment of taxes to Caesar; and claiming to be a King. The first two were totally untrue. The third was true - but in a far different sense than they were trying to make Pilate believe. Pilate questioned Jesus only about the “king” accusation. After talking with Jesus for a while, however, he came back out and told the crowd that he found no basis for such a charge against Him (Luke 23:1-4, John 18:28-38).

In John’s account of this situation, he includes something important. Early in the exchange with Pilate, the governor showed his disinterest in this case by telling the Jewish leaders to judge Jesus by their own (religious) law. They countered by saying they had no right to execute anyone. Then John explains why this is important (18:32). If the Jews would have had authority to execute, Jesus would have died by stoning - the Mosaic punishment for blasphemy. But Jesus had spoken earlier of the manner of His death - a death that involved Him being lifted up from the earth, namely crucifixion (John 3:14; 12:32-33). Here is another example of how God used a civil government to insure that prophecy was fulfilled (Cp. Luke 2:1-7 and Matt. 2:1-6).

Luke is the writer who tells us about the second Roman trial of Jesus. As the Jews

were trying to convince Pilate that Jesus really was a threat to the nation, they said that Jesus was stirring up the people all over Judea - having started in Galilee. When Pilate heard that and realized that Jesus was also under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod - hoping to get rid of this "hot potato." Herod was initially pleased since He had been wanting to see Jesus for some time. He had heard a lot about Jesus and was hoping Jesus would perform some kind of miracle for him. [Would this be a legitimate question for us today, "What do we hope to see in Jesus?" Prayerfully, more than a miracle worker to "entertain" us or come to our aid only in time of trouble.] But even though Herod asked a lot of questions, Jesus spoke not a word. After a little of this, Herod lost interest in this Man. To show contempt for Jesus, Herod and his soldiers made fun of Jesus and mocked Him. In an ultimate attempt to scorn this "King," they put a purple robe on Jesus (to give the "appearance" of royalty) and sent Him back to Pilate. Luke notes that on this day Pilate and Herod became friends (Luke 23:5-12). That was the only thing positive that happened for Pilate that day. Jesus was now his responsibility again.

Now the third portion of Christ's Roman trials begin. It is obvious that Pilate wanted nothing to do with this case. He made several halfhearted attempts to let Jesus go. But each time, the religious leaders would hear nothing of it. Pilate thought that perhaps his custom of releasing a prisoner to the people during the Feast might work. He gave the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas is described as a notorious prisoner, having been involved in an uprising against the government and had committed murder. The chief priests stirred up the people to request Barabbas. When Pilate asked what he should then do with Jesus, the crowd shouted, "Crucify Him!" Pilate's wife even got involved. She sent word to her husband, urging him to have nothing to do with that innocent Man, since she had suffered greatly in a dream because of Him. Pilate didn't really need that encouragement, but it did make him more intent on releasing Jesus (Matt. 27:15-23, Mark 15:6-14, Luke 23:13-21, John 18:39-40).

For a third time Pilate tried to reason with the crowd. He told the crowd that neither he nor Herod had found any grounds for putting Jesus to death. He offered to punish Jesus (though knowing Him to be innocent) and then release Him - hoping this would quench the crowd's craving for "blood." But the crowd kept shouting louder and louder, demanding Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate even staged a hypocritical show of washing his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood." As if that pathetic act could relieve him of his responsibility. Pilate had the power to release Jesus, but he was too intimidated by the crowd to do what he knew

in his heart should be done. It was then that the crowd called down upon themselves and their children (descendants) an eternal curse, when they shouted, “Let His blood be on us and on our children.” (Matt. 27:24-25, Luke 23:22-23)

Seeing that he was getting nowhere with the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them [An Interesting Note: The name Barabbas means “son of Abba” - “Abba” being Aramaic for “Father.” Compare Mark 14:36. This “son of the father” was released, even though he was deserving of death as a murderer. In his stead, the “Son of the Father” was delivered up for death, even though He was innocent. Another note - or perhaps “question” would be more appropriate. We wonder if Pilate ever had legal reason to regret this action of releasing Barabbas? We wonder if Barabbas - with his infamous history - ever appeared before Pilate again, and for what charge?] In another desperate attempt to free Jesus, Pilate had the soldiers flog Jesus. He was hoping this inhumane treatment would cause the Jews to change their minds. He should have known by now that nothing short of Jesus’ crucifixion would appease this crazed crowd.

Indeed, flogging (KJV - “scourging”) was inhumane. It is described as something so painful and severe that victims occasionally died as a result of such beatings. Different accounts of scourgings describe these floggings in slightly different ways - possibly because different methods were used in different locales and situations. Basically, the victim would be stripped of his outer clothing, bent forward over a low pillar and restrained. In other instances, the victim was stripped to the waist and tied to an upright post. Either way, the back would be bared and exposed to the full brunt of the blows. Instead of rods as were used by the Jewish officials, the Romans used short-handled whips, to which was attached several leather thongs of approximately two to three feet in length. (Most whips were limited to three thongs, but some accounts speak of up to nine such thongs, leading to the description: “cat of nine tails.”) To the end of each thong was fastened either a jagged piece of lead or bone. As the blows were applied to the victim’s back, the pieces of lead or bone caused deep, bloody gashes - sometimes exposing the very ribs of the victim. Some reports state that in some instances, two whips were used simultaneously - one from either side of the victim.

In contrast to the Mosaic Law which limited the number of lashes to 40 (Deut. 25:2-3), there was no such limitation in Roman scourging. The number of lashes was determined by the officer in charge. This method of punishment was so severe that no Roman citizen could be subjected to it (Acts 22:25). It was rather reserved



for slaves and condemned criminals. The innocent Jesus was subjected to this kind of torture without being condemned by the Roman government - but simply because the weak-kneed Pilate would not exercise his authority and stand up to this ranting rabble. But even this was not the depth of the suffering that still awaited Jesus.

Following the scourging, other soldiers got into the act. They made a crown of thorns and pressed it - not too gently, I dare say - on His head. They put the purple robe back on Him, put a stick in His hand (as a mock scepter), then knelt before Him and mocked, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Again and again they struck Him in the face (Matt. 27:27-31a, Mark 15:16-20a, John 19:1-3). John records another attempt by Pilate to release Jesus. Pilate brought Jesus out onto a porch or platform adjacent to his palace. With the crown of thorns clearly visible, wearing the purple robe, Jesus was "presented" to the mob with the words: "Behold the Man." Any sympathy Pilate thought this might generate did not come to pass. Instead, additional shouts of "Crucify Him" filled the air. Pilate told the crowd to take Jesus and crucify Him, since he found no fault in this Man (John 19:4-6). [Ironically, four Gentiles and two Jews declared the innocence of Jesus that day - Pilate (John 19:4b, 6b and Luke 23:14b), Herod (Luke 23:15), Pilate's wife (Matt. 27:19), the Roman centurion at the crucifixion site (Luke 23:47); the repentant thief (Luke 23:40-41) and Judas (Matt. 27:4a).]

The Jews responded to Pilate's plea by forgetting about any previous civil charges they brought against Jesus before the Roman governor and declared their real problem with Jesus. They said He ought to die because He claims to be the Son of God (John 19:7). When already jittery Pilate heard that, any remaining courage left him altogether. He went in and talked to Jesus again. He was even more fearful and wanted more than ever to release Jesus. Pilate appealed to the crowd again, bringing Jesus back outside and telling them, "Here is your King." To which the crowd responded, "Crucify Him," adding, "We have no king but Caesar." Finally, in desperation, Pilate gave in to their demands and surrendered Jesus to be crucified (John 19:8-16). [NOTE: Scripture is silent about Pilate after this. It does appear from secular history that Pilate, in a state of guilt and depression, committed suicide a few years after this event. One tradition has it that he jumped from a mountain precipice near Lucerne, Switzerland, to his death below. For whatever it's worth, that mountain is known to this day as Mt. Pilatus.]

One figure in this whole scenario has been put in the background temporarily. Let's bring him back to the forefront now. What about Judas - the traitor-disciple who,

humanly speaking, started this sad chain of events? Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers who tells us what became of Judas (27:3-10). When Matthew relates that Judas was filled with remorse when he saw that Jesus was condemned, he was probably referring to the moment when Judas saw that the religious leaders were taking Jesus to Pilate. From that moment on, it was obvious that Jesus had been condemned by the Sanhedrin. Whatever Judas' base motive was in turning Jesus over to the religious leaders, he now had second thoughts. He took the 30 pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders of the people - and told them that he had betrayed innocent blood. To Judas, Jesus was nothing more than "innocent blood" - an innocent Man caught up in a series of events gone bad.

The chief priests could not have been less interested in Judas' problem - and told him so. The money that had earlier been so important to Judas now was totally repulsive to him. So he took the money and threw it onto the floor of the Temple in front of the priests. But getting rid of the money did in no way remove Judas' feeling of guilt. The fact that Judas did not see in Jesus the Promised Messiah, the Savior of mankind - including himself - is evidenced by his next act. He went out and hanged himself [Luke, in the Book of Acts, records the action of the disciples in filling Judas' vacated position among the Twelve (Acts 1: 15-26).] Since this money was considered to be "blood money" even among the priests, they dared not put it into the Temple treasury. Instead, they bought a potter's field for the burial of strangers. It is interesting to note that both Matthew (27:8) and Luke (Acts 1:19) make reference to the name given that potter's field: "The Field of Blood." [I wonder if Judas himself might have been buried here, in a field that he "bought" with blood money. Cp. Acts 1:18.]

The procession began making its way toward the site of the crucifixion. Initially, Jesus carried His own cross (John 19:17a). [There are differing opinions as to whether the Greek word translated "cross" (stauros) refers to the entire cross (the upright or vertical piece and the horizontal or cross-piece) - or only to the horizontal piece, which was later fastened to the upright or vertical timber which had already been implanted in the earth at the execution site. Two Greek Lexicons that I consulted define the word "stauros" as a stake or cross. One elaborates that this word refers to a stake sunk into the earth in an upright position, explaining that a cross-piece was often attached to its upper part. Respected scholars stand on both sides of the one piece versus the two piece cross.] Either way, in His weakened condition - due to the lack of sleep, loss of blood from the flogging, and the flogging itself - Jesus was unable to continue. So the soldiers forced one Simon of Cyrene (a city in Libya,

North Africa) to carry the cross for Jesus (Matt. 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26). Simon was probably of Jewish descent and was in Jerusalem at this time for the Passover celebration. (Acts 6:9 refers to “Jews of Cyrene” - albeit in a negative way. Acts 11:19-20 speak of Jews from Cyrene in a more positive tone.)

Mark makes note of the fact that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. He merely relates this fact, but in a way that it appears these two men may have been known by Mark's readers. A “Rufus” is mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Romans (16:13), but whether this is the same Rufus or not, we do not know. [NOTE: There is strong belief that Mark wrote his Gospel for the Gentile Christians in Rome. Mark was with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment. Compare Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 1:24. Both of these letters were written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Toward the end of Paul's life and during his second imprisonment in Rome, he requests Timothy to come to him in Rome - and to bring Mark with him (II Tim. 4:11). So it is quite possible that there is a connection between Mark and Rufus - and could account for the “matter of fact” reference to Rufus being one of the sons of Simon who helped carry the cross of Jesus.]

The procession finally arrives at the place called “Golgotha,” which means “The Place of the Skull” (Matt. 27:33, Mark 15:22, Luke 23:33a, John 19:17). Luke includes the fact that a large number of people followed the procession, including women who mourned and wept for Jesus. He also records the words of Jesus to these women (Luke 23:27-31). It was at this point, when they reached the site of the crucifixion, that the Sanhedrin and members of the crazed crowd got what they wanted. Jesus was crucified!

We write or speak these words rather easily. But none of us can even begin to imagine what this entailed. The description of a crucifixion that I have read and heard most often during my years of ministry is that the cross was laid flat on the ground near the hole into which it would later be deposited and secured. The victim would then be placed (thrown?) not too gently on the cross. (Remember, in the case of Jesus, His back was torn and gashed grotesquely from the scourging. As He was forced to lie on these timbers, His back was extremely sensitive and riddled with pain.) The arms and legs were then stretched out and held securely, while large, iron spikes were driven through the hands and feet.

[Some believe the nails were driven through the wrists rather than the hands to prevent the flesh from separating when the weight of the body began pulling against the nails as the cross was erected. Others believe that the wrists were secured to the

cross by ropes to prevent the nails, having been placed through the palms, from tearing through the flesh between the fingers. None of the Evangelists, in reporting the crucifixion, describe the method of crucifixion - the details probably being well-known by their readers. The Greeks do have two words for "hand." The one is a more restrictive word, referring to the palm area of the hand. The other is a broader term which includes the entire hand, including the wrist. It is this latter word that is used by the Gospel writers when reporting the sudden appearance of Jesus to His disciples on Easter evening and the week following, where reference is made to (the nail prints in) His hands (and feet). See Luke 24:39a, 40; John 20:25,27.]

Having fastened the victim to the cross, the painful process (for the victim) of erecting the cross began. As the cross became more vertical, the weight of the victim's body began bearing down on the nails driven through his hands and feet. The cross was then jostled over to the hole in the ground and dropped into the hole. Who can even begin to imagine the pain this caused the victim as the cross stopped when it reached the bottom of the hole - and the body wanted to keep falling? [The pain would be much the same if the victim's hands were first nailed to a separate cross-piece, which was then lifted up (along with the victim's body) to be attached to the vertical piece - after which the victim's feet would be nailed to the lower part of the upright timber.]

Then began a process that was repeated over and over again during the hours that would seem never to end. As the victim would tire in trying to remain erect, he would want to relax and rest somewhat. But as he slumped down, it became very difficult to breathe. (Try extending your arms to their full length; lift them to a position where your hands are slightly higher than your head; and see how much more labored your breathing is.) Needing more oxygen, the victim would then have to place the weight of his body on the nails through his hands and feet and try to raise himself to a position where he could breathe more easily. Becoming tired of holding himself up - and suffering great pain from the weight of his body on the nails in his hands and feet - he would once again relax and slump to the point where he could hardly breathe. Then the process would begin again. Over and over and over! Yet even now, Jesus was not experiencing the greatest extent of His suffering! (Incidentally, as with scourging, Roman citizens were exempt from this most inhumane method of execution. This was reserved for slaves and the worst of criminals. Truly, crucifixion was one of the most cruel, inhumane, painful, and shameful methods of execution ever devised by sinful human beings.)

Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at the “third hour,” or 9:00 A.M. (Mark 15:25). Our Savior therefore endured this extreme suffering for over six hours. All four Evangelists make note of the fact that two others, criminals, were crucified along with Jesus (Matt. 27:38, Mark 15:27, Luke 23:32-33, John 19:18). Each also makes the point that these two criminals were placed on either side of Jesus, with Jesus being in the middle. Regarding these two criminals, we will see later that at first both of them joined in with the crowd as they mocked and made fun of Jesus. But then one of them - possibly from watching Jesus’ demeanor and behavior - stopped his ridicule and even chided his fellow criminal for his mockery. Then turning to Jesus, he asked to be remembered by Jesus when He entered His kingdom. While the Scriptures do not identify the position of the repentant criminal, whether on Jesus’ right or left, I would venture that he was on the Lord’s right - even as Jesus describes the “sheep” on His right in the final Judgment (Matt. 25:33).

Matthew and Mark both report that the soldiers offered Jesus some wine mixed with myrrh (or gall), but after tasting it, He refused to drink it (Matt. 27:34, Mark 15:23). This was a mixture intended to help kill some of the pain that victims of crucifixion endured. Jesus refused this mixture, so He would be fully alert and conscious throughout this terrible ordeal. He would not shirk or shy away from paying the complete price of redemption to the fullest; He would be completely aware as He “drank the cup” of God’s wrath to its bitterest dregs. All four Evangelists make note of the distribution of Jesus’ clothing after He was nailed to the cross (Matt. 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34b, John 19:23-24). It was customary for the soldiers performing the crucifixion to lay claim to any possessions of the victim. The smaller items were divided evenly and distributed according to lot (similar to throwing dice). One larger garment remained, woven throughout, without seam. Rather than cut this into pieces, they decided on this garment with a separate casting of the lot - thereby fulfilling a prophecy in Psalm 22:18.

The public notice that all four Evangelists mention (Matt. 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, John 19:19-22) was a normal procedure at crucifixions. It explained the charge for which the victim was being put to death - possibly in the hope that this might serve as a deterrent against any others who might be tempted to carry out the same kind of crime. The “charge” was written on a wooden board of some kind and carried ahead of the victim during the procession to the execution site. At the site, it was then fastened to the cross itself. Up to this point, this custom was normal. What made this particular instance different is the “charge” that Pilate ordered to be written. It read: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” While ordering this wording was

Pilate's way of "getting back" at the Jews for their insistence on having Jesus crucified because He "claimed to be a King," what he wrote was entirely true. Jesus was - and is - the King, not only of the Jews, but of all mankind. Pilate had this "charge" written in three different languages, so that anyone and everyone passing by could read it. Recognizing this as a mockery of their actions, the chief priests wanted Pilate to change the wording to read that this Man "claimed" to be the King of the Jews. This time, Pilate had the last word. His response: "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:22)

The Evangelists record a total of seven "words" (statements) that Jesus uttered from the cross. None of them record all seven words. The order in which they were spoken, therefore, has been set according to the best of human reasoning. It appears that Luke records the first two words of Jesus from the cross. The first word was spoken just shortly after the soldiers had nailed Him to the cross; had erected the cross and secured it in an upright position. Even though He was suffering indescribable pain, Jesus was thinking of others - as a total of three of His words reveal. Now He was thinking of those who were responsible for carrying out the sentence which had unjustly been imposed on Him - the soldiers. He might have prayed for vengeance - at least justice, but He prays for pardon. "Father, forgive them." (Luke 23:34a) His heart of love will not be silenced even by excruciating pain and suffering. [As He was praying for these soldiers, could He have also had us in mind - we who are also responsible for driving those nails through His hands and feet?]

Three of the Evangelists also tell us about the mockery and ridicule that was being thrown at Jesus from beneath the cross. Evidently some of those who were hurling insults at Jesus were among those present at His "trial" before the Sanhedrin. They mocked Him with some of the "testimony" given at that "trial" (Matt. 27:39-40, Mark 15:29-30). Some of the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, poked fun at Him by saying He saved others, but couldn't save Himself (Matt. 27:41-42a, Mark 15:31, Luke 23:35). Still others mocked Him, sarcastically saying that if He would come down from the cross now, they would believe in Him (Matt. 27:42b-43, Mark 15:32a). Little did they know how easily Jesus could have come down from that cross. The only thing that held Him there was not the nails in His hands and feet, but His love for mankind - including these scoffers - and His desire to obey His Father's will.

But we notice that this mockery was coming not only from those beneath the cross. The criminals, also experiencing the same pain of crucifixion, added their voices to

those below (Matt. 27:44, Mark 15:32b, Luke 23:39). Maybe this was prompted by their own pain; maybe they were somehow blaming Jesus for their situation; maybe this was indicative of the kind of persons they were. At any rate, Jesus was receiving no sympathy even from those who were enduring the same treatment as He. At least, that was the way it began. For whatever reason, as was written previously, one of the criminals had a change of heart. He began rebuking his fellow criminal and admitted that they were getting what they deserved. But Jesus, he said, had done nothing wrong (Luke 23:40-41). Whether the Holy Spirit was working on something this man had been taught in his youth, or whether the Spirit used the prayer of Jesus in His first word - plus His behavior and demeanor, we don't know. We do know that the Spirit was working in the heart of this man. After rebuking his fellow criminal, he turned to Jesus and asked to be remembered when Jesus comes into His Kingdom. It was at this time that Jesus spoke His second word, assuring this man that yet that very day, he would be with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:42-43). The second word of concern and love for others. Jesus is always ready and willing to receive another penitent soul into His kingdom.

John is the one who introduces the circumstances that lead up to the third word of Jesus from the cross - again, another word for others. He tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was standing near the cross, along with three other women - Mary's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Mary first appeared on the scene is not recorded. As she stood there, looking up at the pitiful image of her Son, I wonder if she had "flashbacks." Did she think of that day the angel Gabriel appeared to her in Nazareth, informing her that she would become the mother of God's Son? Did her thoughts go back to that unexpected and rather uncomfortable trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because of Caesar's decree - and her delivery in a stable, with nothing but a manger in which to place her newborn? Did she think back to that day in the Temple when Simeon took her Child in his arms and uttered prophecy? Did his words come back to haunt her as she felt the "sword" of which he spoke, pierce her soul with a pain that only a mother could feel? Did she remember the hurried flight to Egypt to escape the murdering soldiers of Herod as they sought this "newborn King of the Jews" to slay Him? Did she remember the panic in her motherly heart outside Jerusalem when she and Joseph realized her 12 year old son was missing - and the relief she felt when they found Him in the Temple? Could she even have been somewhat relieved that Joseph did not have to experience what she was now experiencing? Did she think back to the Wedding at Cana and remember how proud she was of her Son as He performed His first miracle?

It may well have been the words of Jesus, directed to her, that brought her back to reality. The present came flooding back into her conscious emotions as she gazed again upon her Son hanging on that accursed tree of the cross. But what was it that Jesus said? Another word of love and concern - His third. Knowing that His time on earth was limited - and therefore knowing it was necessary to break human ties - Jesus addresses His mother as "Dear woman" - a term intended to express His tender feelings towards her, but at the same time indicating a different type of relationship was beginning. Seeing the beloved disciple John, who was standing near His mother, Jesus entrusted her to his care, telling Mary that henceforth she should consider John to be her "son." Similarly, speaking to John, He turned the responsibility of Mary's care over to him. John immediately assumed that responsibility and took her to live in his own home (John 19:25-27). [Whether any of the other disciples were present at the crucifixion - or even nearby - we do not know. There is a possibility that they could be included in a generalized statement in Luke's Gospel (23:49). However, Matthew (27:55) and Mark (15:40-41) imply that those watching from a distance were only women.]

What about Mary's other children? (Cp. Matt. 12:46, 13:55; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19.) Why were they not expected to take care of their mother? That answer is not given to us in Scripture. Speculation is not sufficient - so we will remain silent on that subject. We do know that Jesus was comfortable in entrusting the care of His mother to John. John was equally comfortable in accepting that responsibility. We have no reason to doubt that he carried out this responsibility adequately and faithfully. For John, I'm sure, it was a privilege to take care of the mother of Him of whom he later wrote: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), indicating the Divine nature of Jesus. Thirteen verses later, John speaks of the Human nature of Jesus when he wrote, "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). There was obviously no doubt in John's mind that his friend, Jesus, was both true God and true Man.

[NOTE: There is only one other reference to Mary after this in the Sacred Writings. She is listed as one of those present with the disciples and others, after the Ascension of Jesus, in an upstairs room (the "Upper Room"?). Luke records this in Acts 1:14. How long Mary lived after this and where she died is not revealed to us. There are a number of traditions concerning this, but that is what they are - traditions. But notice that the brothers of Jesus are now referred to in Acts 1:14 as being present. Could it be that His resurrection was the "proof" His brothers needed to begin believing in Him? (Cp. John 7:5). Matthew names the brothers (actually half-brothers) of Jesus - James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Jude) - in chapter 13, verse 55 of his



Gospel. There is strong reason to believe that at least two of His brothers became important figures in the early Christian Church. In Galatians 1:19, Paul refers to “James, the Lord’s brother.” In Acts 12:17, 15:13, and Galatians 2:9, James is mentioned as being an obvious leader of the church in Jerusalem. It is the common consensus that the author of the Epistle of James is this same James, the brother of the Lord. The other brother of Jesus who distinguished himself in the early Church was Jude. The author of the Epistle of Jude feels it is necessary to identify himself only as a “servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James” (Jude 1:1). It appears that the “family tie” was obvious to those who were the recipients of Jude’s letter.]

Three of the Evangelists now relate a most remarkable phenomenon in nature. From the 6th hour until the 9th hour - from noon until 3:00 P.M. - the brightest part of the day, a mysterious darkness befell the land (Matt. 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44-45a). Neither of these writers mention anything about it becoming cloudy or any other normal reason for the sky darkening in the middle of the day. (Astronomy tells us that this was not an eclipse - since an eclipse cannot occur when the moon is full or near being full.) Luke simply explains: “The sun stopped shining.” Poetically speaking, so aghast by what was happening to its Creator, the sun temporarily refused to perform the work for which it was created - it refused to shine. No mention is made as to any effect this may have had on anyone experiencing this unusual darkness, but I find it hard to believe that this wouldn’t have caused a lot of fear, trembling, and questions in the hearts and minds of those people around the cross especially.

About 3 o’clock in the afternoon, a loud cry is heard coming from the center cross - in the midst of this eerie darkness. Jesus has just uttered His 4th word from the cross (Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34). It is a word that has eternal significance for every human being. Unlike His first 3 words - words of concern for others - these are pleading words. Jesus is pleading with His Father in heaven for some explanation as to what is now happening. Jesus is now experiencing the deepest depths of His suffering. He is now drinking the cup of God’s wrath to its bitterest dregs. He is suffering the full torment and agony of hell itself. And His words ask “Why?” He knew this would be necessary when He left His throne above and came to this earth. But now, in the midst of enduring hell itself, He asks “Why?” Notice the way He addresses His Father: “My God, My God!” Not the endearing “Abba” or “Father” - but “God.” (This is the only time He addresses His Father in this manner.) In this moment, as He is suffering hell’s consequences for each and every sin against God’s holy Law, He is forsaken by His own Father. You see, that is what hell is - to be forsaken by God. To save us from being eternally forsaken by God, our Savior - Jesus the Christ,

God's own Son - is being forsaken for us. As God looks upon His Son in that moment, He sees not His Son, whom He loves, but sin personified - and He turns His back on Him. God sees my sin and your sin - sin which has been laid upon Jesus - and He punishes His Son in our stead.

Did the Father take pleasure in this? In punishing His Son for the sins of His rebellious human creatures? In turning His back on His Son when He was enduring the ultimate punishment of hell itself? Yes and no! No - and I'm speaking here in strictly human terms (for who can explain God's feelings) - it gave God no pleasure in heaping this punishment upon His Son. This was His own dear Son - one in substance with Himself - always obedient, always loving, always willing to listen to His Father. Now I'm speaking as a human father - it would have been easier for the Father to endure this Himself rather than punish His Son. But - and this is spiritual thinking again - the Father knew that this was the only way to redeem fallen mankind. So yes, the Father did take pleasure in this act - but only with the end result in mind. That is what the writer to the Hebrews says about Jesus as well. He speaks of Jesus as enduring the cross - despite its shame and anguish - for the joy that was set before Him - the joy of saving mankind (Hebr. 12:2).

[NOTE: Jesus calls out "My God" as a Person totally subject to the Law. This is one of the reasons why our Savior had to be both true God and true Man. In order for sinful humans to be redeemed from sin and death, the Law, which mankind had not kept, must be perfectly fulfilled. Its every provision must be obeyed. As God, our Savior was above the requirements of the Law. He lived in perfect harmony with the Law - not because He was required to, but because He was the Creator of the Law. The demands of the Law were not binding upon Jesus as God. But the demands of the Law had to be obeyed in order to satisfy God's justice. You see, God is not only a God of love, but also a God of justice. He would not have been true to His justice if He had "overlooked" the sins of the world. But His love sought and found a way that sinful mankind did not have to pay the righteous and well-deserved price for sin. His Plan was to substitute His Son for sinful mankind. His Son would keep the Law for us. But as God, as we mentioned above, the requirements of the Law were not binding upon Jesus. Therefore, our Savior had to be true Man - someone who would be "under the Law" (Gal. 4:4), bound to keeping the demands of the Law because He was subject to the Law. However, as Man alone, albeit sinless and perfect, He could keep the Law for only one other person. So our Savior had to be both God and Man. Man to be subject to the Law and keep it perfectly; God, so that His keeping of the Law would be sufficient for every human being. (There are

two other reasons why our Savior had to be both God and Man. These will be explained in due time.)]

Things happen rather quickly now. Knowing that He had successfully completed His work of redeeming the world, John tells us that Jesus uttered His 5th word from the cross. Nothing more was needed; nothing more could be added - except death itself. His tremendous suffering was over. Now He would think of Himself. So He said, "I'm thirsty." (John 19:28) In so doing, He fulfilled a prophecy in Psalm 22:15, which describes the condition of dehydration which Jesus was experiencing; a condition that accompanied crucifixion - due in no small part to the fever that resulted from His wounds. The soldiers fulfilled another prophecy (Ps. 69:21b) when they offered Him a drink of sour wine (vinegar). John describes that action in 19:29. Matthew (27:48) and Mark (15:36a) speak of this action as well.

We look to John again for the next spoken word - His 6th. This is a word spoken to His Father. A word that means "mission accomplished." It is only one word in Greek, but is best translated with three in English, "It is finished." (John 19:30a) The purpose for which Jesus came to this earth is now completed. The Law has been fulfilled perfectly. Every sin of every human being has been atoned for. God and mankind have been reconciled. The separation between God and man that began in the Garden of Eden has now been spanned. These words that rang out from the cross have eternal significance for us human creatures. For now the promise of forgiveness is made real. Not that the promise of forgiveness was empty before. A promise of God is always a sure promise. But up to this point, it was a promise based on the coming redemptive work of Jesus. Now that work was complete. It was finished. Everything necessary for man's forgiveness was done. We now have a sure hope of forgiveness through this atoning sacrifice of our Savior. "It is finished!"

The 7th and final word of Jesus from the cross follows quickly. As with the first word from the cross, this word is also addressed to the Father. Once again, Jesus addresses Him as "Father." The tender, loving relationship between Father and Son that existed from Eternity is now restored. So Jesus commits His spirit (soul) into the loving hands of His Father (Luke 23:46). But notice how Luke describes the way Jesus uttered this word: "with a loud voice." Matthew (27:50) and Mark (15:37) also record the fact of the loud voice. In other words, Jesus now leaves this earth - not as a defeated, helpless victim, but as a Conqueror, One in charge of His destiny right up to the very end. Most victims of crucifixion die in silence - or barely able to speak - a result of untold agony over an extended period of time, totally exhausted. But

Jesus calls out in a loud voice, determining and setting the moment of His death. Truly a death possible only by the Son of God. He bows His head. He stops breathing. His heart stops beating. His body relaxes. The soul of Jesus is now reposing in the loving hands of His heavenly Father.

[NOTE: This is the second reason why our Savior had to be both God and Man. The payment for sin is death. The One who was to save us had to be able to die. As God alone, Jesus could not die - for He is immortal, eternal; the very Author and Giver of life. So our Savior had to be true Man to be able to die. But as Man alone, He could have died for only one sin - not even the sins of one human being. Paul tells us in Romans that the wages - what is earned, deserved - of sin (singular) is death (6:23a). Thus each sin ever committed has a penalty of death. Our Savior had to be true Man to be able to die - but had to be true God, so that His dying would be of sufficient worth to pay the debt of every sin ever committed. The third and final reason why our Savior had to be both God and Man will be explained in the next chapter.]

As soon as Jesus breathed His last and bowed His head in death, several remarkable occurrences took place. 1) The veil in the Temple was rent in two from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51a, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45b). This is the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (or Most Holy Place). Both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were “off limits” to the average Jew. Only officiating priests could enter the Holy Place. And only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place - and that, only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, “Yom Kippur.” The Most Holy Place was obviously the most sacred part of the Temple. The Day of Atonement was a very high and holy day for the Jewish people. It was the day when the high priest offered sacrifices for the sins of the nation. The procedure for this ritual is given in Leviticus 16. (We spoke of some of this earlier in our account of Palm Sunday.)

The veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place indicated the separation between God and man, brought about by sin. Only the High Priest dared go beyond that curtain - and then only once a year - as he offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. When Jesus, as our Great High Priest, had offered the only sacrifice which can atone for sins - Himself, the veil of separation tore in half, indicating that sinful mankind no longer needs any human intermediators, but can go directly to God themselves through our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ (Hebr. 9:1-14, 10:10-22a).

2) The second remarkable occurrence is reported by Matthew alone (27:51b). It was as if nature rebelled again when its Creator died. An earthquake shook the area.

Rocks were split as if they were made of egg shells. 3) The third unnatural occurrence is also reported only by Matthew (27:52-53). During the earthquake, tombs (which were often carved out in rock) broke open and the bodies of the faithful came back to life. They came out of their tombs, but for whatever reason, did not go into Jerusalem until after Jesus' resurrection on Easter morn. The obvious significance of this was to demonstrate Jesus' victory over death by His own resurrection. (What happened to these resurrected individuals or how long they might have lived after this is not revealed to us.)

Witnessing all that had happened, the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail made a pronouncement - not only implying Jesus' innocence, but also attesting to His divinity (Matt. 27:54, Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47).

It was now sometime after 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Sundown would usher in the Sabbath. And this was a special Sabbath since it fell during the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread celebration. There would be many people passing the crucifixion site as they went to the Temple. After all their clamor to have Jesus crucified, the Jewish leaders now surprisingly didn't want the bodies to remain on the crosses on the Sabbath. (Could the sign which Pilate had fastened to the center cross have been one of the reasons they wanted the bodies, especially Jesus', removed?) If the bodies remained on the crosses until sundown, they would have to wait until after the Sabbath to remove them. (No work was allowed on the Sabbath.) So the Jews approached Pilate and requested that the legs of the victims be broken (John 19:31). With broken legs, the victims could not put weight on their feet, pushing themselves into a more upright position to be able to breathe easier. Suffering from increased pain from broken legs, more intense shock, and a greater inability to breathe, the victims would then die more quickly.

Pilate granted their request and gave such an order. The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals, but when they came to Jesus, they realized He was already dead and thus did not break His legs. Unwittingly, they fulfilled prophecy in that act of omission. Exodus 12:46 speaks of the Passover lamb and warns the people not to break any of its bones. Those Passover lambs foreshadowed Jesus, Who is the great Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God, as identified by John the Baptist (John 1:29). The Psalmist David also utters prophecy to this effect in Psalm 34:20. Instead of breaking the legs of Jesus -but to make certain that He was indeed dead - one of the soldiers plunged a spear into Jesus' side, thus fulfilling another prophecy (Zech. 12: 10b), and foreshadowing an event that will take place on Judgment Day (Rev. 1:7). In his

description of these events, John notes that blood and water flowed from Jesus' side and makes reference to the fulfilled prophecies (John 19:32-37). Once again, agents of the government are used by God to carry out His will and fulfill His Word.

As the start of the Sabbath drew closer, a man who will be forever associated with the burial of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea (a Judean town about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem), went to Pilate and requested approval to remove the body of Jesus and bury it. Joseph is described as a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, but one who did not agree with the actions of the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:50-51). He is further described as a believer in Jesus, but did not proclaim his faith openly because he was afraid of repercussions from the Jews (Matt. 27:58, Mark 15:43, Luke 23:51b, John 19:38). But now that the Master was dead, there was nothing that was going to prevent Joseph from burying the body of Jesus. (Joseph's actions were certainly motivated by love and devotion - but could there have been some guilt mixed in with his feelings; guilt over not speaking up in Jesus' behalf before the Sanhedrin when they were plotting to kill Him?) So he goes boldly to Pilate with his request. Mark tells us that Pilate was surprised at this request because he didn't think that Jesus was dead already (15:44a). Sending for the centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail, Pilate was told that Jesus was in fact dead. So Pilate gave permission for Joseph to take the body (Mark 15:44-45).

Another secret disciple, Nicodemus, accompanied Joseph on this errand of love (John 19:39a). Nicodemus, you remember, was the Pharisee member of the Sanhedrin who had visited with Jesus one night to inquire about the Kingdom of God (John 3:1ff). Nicodemus and Joseph lovingly removed Jesus from the cross and laid Him in a new tomb, which was located nearby. The reason for the selection of this tomb was twofold. 1) The Sabbath was rapidly approaching, so the burial had to be done quickly. 2) Matthew tells us that this tomb belonged to Joseph himself (27:60a), which made it very convenient. Scripture also makes a point of telling us that this was a new tomb, a tomb wherein no one had yet been placed (Matt. 27:60a, Luke 23:53b, John 19:41). As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, on which no one had ever ridden, so now on Good Friday, He is laid to rest in a tomb wherein no one had ever been laid. Thus maintaining the practice, although probably not in the conscious thoughts of Joseph and Nicodemus at the time, of using only the best - things never used before for secular or normal purposes - when used by or for God.

Before placing Jesus into the tomb, however, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily followed

Jewish burial customs and prepared the body of Jesus for His burial. Nicodemus had brought about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes, in mixture, which they placed in the strips of linen that they wrapped around the body of Jesus (John 19:39b-40). Matthew (27:59), Mark (15:46), and Luke (23:53a) speak of the body of Jesus being wrapped in a “linen cloth.” John (19:40) speaks of His body being wrapped in “strips of linen” (Cp. Luke 24:12 and John 20:6). There is no problem with these differing accounts. Traditional Jewish practice seems to have been to wrap a corpse in long pieces (strips) of linen cloth, winding it around the body. While wrapping, spices were included as a sort of “embalming” process. That was all held in place by a larger sheet or shroud - as referred to by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, noted earlier in this paragraph. There was also a separate, smaller cloth in which they wrapped Jesus’ head (John 20:7). As Jesus was wrapped in “swaddling clothes” (strips of cloth) at His birth, so now at His death, He is once again wrapped in strips of cloth! (Another comparison: At the beginning of Jesus’ life on earth, He was carried in the womb of His mother, Mary. At the end of His life on earth, He was placed in the womb of “mother” earth.)

After placing Jesus in his own new tomb, Joseph (probably assisted by Nicodemus) rolled a large stone in front of the entrance and left (Matt. 27:60b, Mark 15:46b). Matthew (27:61), Mark (15:47), and Luke (23:55) all report the presence of women at the burial. Seeing the large stone that was rolled in front of the tomb gave rise to a troubling question for the women early Sunday morning (Mark 16:3). A question, as they found out, that needed no answer. Luke tells us that after they left the tomb late that Friday afternoon, the women returned home and prepared spices and perfumes in order to complete the burial process for Jesus on Sunday morning (Luke 23:56). Evidently feeling that their supply was insufficient, some of the women went and bought additional spices after the Sabbath was over, namely, after sundown on Saturday (Mark 16:1). Nothing more is recorded about Jesus or any of His followers until early Sunday morning - a Sunday that has gone down in the annals of Christian history as the day that changed everything; a Sunday now known as Easter!

Matthew does record the activities of some of the chief priests and Pharisees, however. Ignoring some of the Sabbath restrictions, they went to Pilate with another request. It seems odd that these individuals, who were so certain that Jesus was not the Son of God and Promised Messiah, would now be worried about what might happen to His body. They tried to excuse their request by saying they feared the disciples of Jesus might come and steal His body and then tell people He rose from the dead, as He had said He would. Could it be that this delegation might have had another “fear” - that He really would rise from the dead? At any rate, they asked Pilate to

make the tomb secure until the third day. Pilate agreed and even gave them a group of Roman soldiers to guard the tomb (Matt. 27:62-66). A seal was placed on the stone that closed the entrance and a guard was posted. While it is not specifically stated, you can be sure that the Jewish leaders, if not the Roman soldiers themselves, or both, made certain that the body of Jesus was still in the tomb before sealing it and setting the guard. Even with all this, could the chief priests and Pharisees rest well as they waited for the “third day” to arrive? As for the guards, they could keep someone from *entering* the tomb - but what about Someone *leaving* the tomb?

#### COMMENTS:

The crucifixion of Jesus! An historical event limited to the distant past? A sad and sentimental story about the cruel end to the life of an innocent, loving, selfless individual? A story intended to evoke sympathy and compassion for this Man who was caught up in the spiritual politics of His day? If this is all the crucifixion of Jesus means, then the Son of God suffered and died in vain. There is so much more to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the crucifixion you can see how important mankind is to God - how important *you* are to God. You see, God worked out the Plan for our salvation - for your salvation - in Eternity (Eph. 1:3-6, 11). Jesus carried out that Plan in time. For reasons explained earlier, this was all necessary for the redemption of mankind.

Before creating the world; before creating the crown of His creation - man and woman, God knew His human creatures would rebel against Him and “sell their souls” to Satan. In order to redeem them, to “buy them back,” God devised a magnificent Plan which depended on His Son coming to earth in time and fulfilling every requirement of that Plan. Good Friday saw the fruition of that Plan. Easter is the proof of the successful completion of that Plan. Why did God come up with a Plan to save His wayward children? Because of love. Look at the cross and you see God’s love. A love that cannot be adequately explained in human terms. Jesus describes it best in John 3:16, “God so loved...that He gave.” Paul speaks of that love in Romans 5:1-2,6-8. (Read verse 8 very carefully.) If that won’t capture your attention, think of this - God would have done all this if you were the only sinner on earth. God loves the masses. But He loves the individual as well. Look at the cross and see how much God loves you; how important you are to God. Don’t ever feel that you are unimportant; that you don’t count for much. The cross shows otherwise.

The eternal Son of God, having taken on human flesh and blood, carried our sins (my sins, your sins) to the cross and paid for each and every one of them with His innocent suffering and death. He did this so that you and I would not have to spend



eternity in hell, a just reward for our sins, but by His grace, can live with our God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - in heaven throughout eternity. I ask you: will eternity be sufficient time to praise and thank Him for this act of love for us?

#### ADDITIONAL NOTES:

\*\*\* Good Friday will always be remembered - in the Christian world at least - as the day when our Savior, Jesus Christ, was crucified for the sins of the world. We have described some of the horrors of crucifixion in this chapter. Words, however, will never be able to describe the pain and suffering that our Lord endured for us. What is most remarkable, Jesus knew exactly what was awaiting Him. He knew it from eternity, before time began. Yet He chose to follow this Plan, to obey His Father's desire for Him to redeem the world. He lived the perfect life for us; He died the sufficient death for us. He paid the price that no one else - that nothing else - could have rendered. Years after the crucifixion, St. Peter wrote about the price paid, in his First Epistle (I Peter 1:18-19). Notice that in verse 19, he makes reference to Jesus as the Lamb "without blemish or defect" (Cp. Ex. 12:5). Peter also verifies that Jesus knew this from eternity (I Peter 1:20).

\*\*\* It is interesting to note that no one really questioned the death of Jesus on the cross at the time - or even during the lifetime of the eye witnesses. It was not questioned until the beginning of the 19th century - to advance what is called the "swoon" theory. (This will be discussed in the next chapter.) But there can be no logical question about Jesus dying on the cross. When the soldiers came to break the legs of the victims, to hasten their deaths, they saw that Jesus was already dead, so they did not break His legs (John 19:33). They did pierce His side with a spear, however, which resulted in a flow of blood and water pouring from His side (John 19:34). This blood and "water" mixture was the result of the spear puncturing the pericardium (a two layer bag or sac that completely surrounds the heart and contains clear fluid which lubricates the movements of the heart) and the heart itself. Any question as to whether Jesus was really dead before this, was now erased totally. Jesus was indeed physically dead. But there is more proof. When Joseph of Arimathea requested the body of Jesus for burial, the surprised Pilate sent for the centurion, who verified the death of Jesus (Mark 15:42-45). Permission was needed from the governor to remove a body from the cross to prevent family or friends from retrieving a body prematurely and trying to revive the victim. So in addition to physical proof, there is also legal proof that Jesus was indeed dead. (This information will be touched on again in the next chapter.)

\*\*\* One of the doctrines (teachings) of the Christian Church is the doctrine of divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. This is the belief - and a strong, sure belief it is - that the writers of Holy Scripture wrote under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 2:13, II Tim. 3:16a, II Peter 1:16, 19-21; note especially the words of Peter in v. 16). It is true that the various writers had a writing style of their own - cp. II Peter 3:15-16. It was not as if the Holy Spirit had them sit down and then dictated the exact words which they wrote. Each one wrote from his own background, learning, experiences, etc. I'm sure they interviewed eye witnesses to various events and personal experiences, of which they had no firsthand knowledge. But we believe that the Holy Spirit was working in and through each of these things so that when the holy writers had finished their work, they had not written anything that the Holy Spirit did not want them to write.

This gives us comfort and confidence, for we know that the words we read in the Bible are the very words of God - inerrant, infallible, absolute truth (John 10:35b, 17:17; I Thess. 2:13). How else can you explain the many prophecies and their fulfillment which are recorded in Holy Writ? Obviously, when writing prophetic statements, the writers were guided only by the Holy Spirit. We have included some of these prophecies in this and previous chapters. There are many more throughout the Old and the New Testaments. Quite a few of these prophecies had to do with our Savior's suffering and death. Two chapters in particular are full of prophecies that were fulfilled on Good Friday.

Psalm 22 is one of these chapters. In fact, no other Psalm speaks more about the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion than does Psalm 22. It begins already in verse 1. Although David wrote these words as he himself was being attacked by vicious enemies over a prolonged period of time, the Savior spoke these same words to describe His feelings on the cross, indicating the prophetic nature of these words. These were the words He uttered as His 4th Word from the cross, to describe His anguish in being forsaken by His Father because He was bearing the sins of the world for mankind.

Further, read verses 6-8 and compare that with the treatment and scorn and verbal abuse Jesus endured on the cross. Verse 15 describes the thirst He experienced on the cross. Verse 16b speaks of the piercing of His hands and feet, which happened when He was nailed to the cross. Verse 17 tells about His emaciated condition during the crucifixion, while verse 18 foretells the distribution of His clothing by the soldiers. And mind you, all of this was written approximately 1000 years before

Good Friday - and centuries before crucifixion was even used as a method of execution. An argument for divine inspiration? What other answer could there be?

The other chapter I had reference to is Isaiah 53. Actually, the end of chapter 52 begins the description of the "Suffering Servant." Verse 14 speaks of the grotesqueness of His physical appearance on the cross. Chapter 53, verse 3, foretells the opposition and suffering He would endure. Verse 4 tells us that it was for our sakes that He endured this, but we (a generic "we") thought that God was punishing Him for His own actions. Verse 5 quickly points out that this was happening to the Suffering Servant (Jesus) because of our sins. Verse 6b spells it out very frankly. Verse 7 foretells the silence with which Jesus would meet His tormentors ( cp. Matt. 26:62-63a, Mark 14:60-61a; Matt. 27: 12-14, Mark 15:3-5, Luke 23:9; Acts 8:32 is a reference to Isa. 53:7b). Verse 9 explains that as far as those present were concerned, He deserved to be buried with the wicked - while, in fact, He was buried in the tomb of the rich (Joseph of Arimathea). The last part of verse 12 speaks of the fact that He was crucified along with "transgressors" (the two criminals - cp. Mark 15:27) as He paid for our sins - even interceding for the "transgressors" (those who were crucifying Him - His first Word from the cross, Luke 23:34). Another thing - while Isaiah wrote these words approximately 700 years before Good Friday, notice that he wrote this in the PAST tense, as if it had already happened! (We call this the "prophetic future.") Isaiah was so certain that his inspired words would be fulfilled that he wrote in the past tense, totally confident it would happen exactly as he wrote it. Another argument for the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture? Again, what other answer could there be?

As we read God's Word today, therefore, we can have the same certainty and conviction that the inspired writers had; the same certainty and conviction that millions of believers have had since then - that we are reading nothing less than God's own Word; yes, God's own Word to us (I Thess. 2:13). We can therefore believe it, trust it, and cling to it as if our very lives depended on it. And in truth, our spiritual lives do!

\*\*\* This is a good place to bring in the promised explanation of the Gospel being a Means of Grace (Chapter VI). As we approach this subject, we need to remember what a Means of Grace is. It is the means, the avenue, the channel, through which God comes to us and imparts to us His blessings of love, forgiveness, and salvation. God's "grace" in Scripture always refers to His "undeserved" love, which in turn provides us with forgiveness and salvation (Rom 5:6-9). We remember that there are

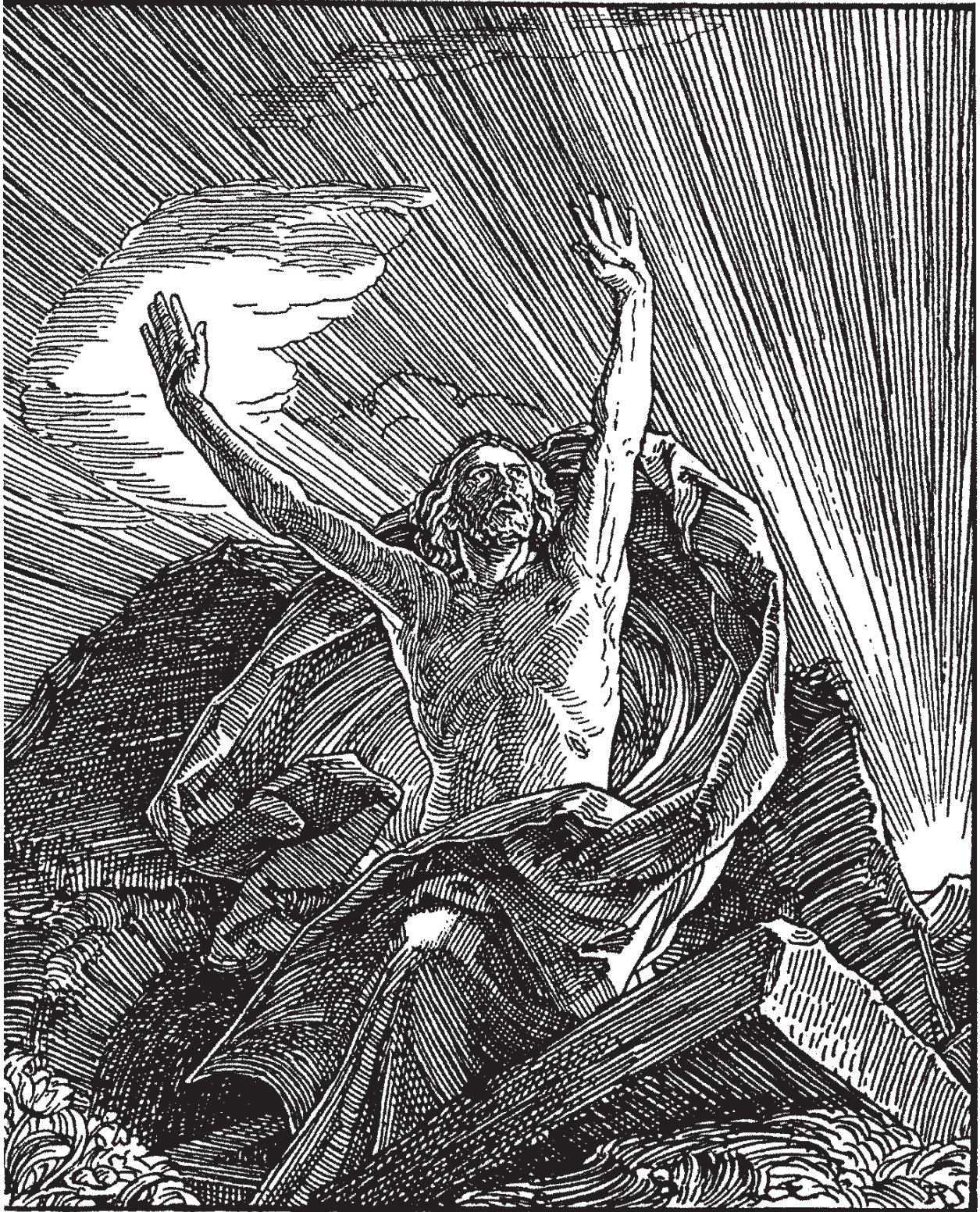
only three such Means of Grace that God has chosen to use - Baptism (Chapter VI), The Lord's Supper (Chapter VII), and the Gospel. The Gospel is the essential element in all three Means of Grace. In fact, the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) are Means of Grace only because of the Gospel connected with the outward (earthly) elements in those Sacraments (water, bread & wine).

Without the Gospel, the water in Baptism would be nothing more than common, ordinary water. But connected with the Gospel (the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19), the water becomes a wonderful washing of regeneration; a water which gives a new birth (spiritual birth); a new life (spiritual life). Cp. Titus 3:5, as well as John 3:5, which is a reference to Baptism. Similarly, without the Gospel, the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper would be nothing more than bread and wine. But connected with the Gospel (the words of Jesus, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins"), the bread and wine are united with the Body and Blood of Jesus (I Cor. 10:16) and become a Means through which God gives us that forgiveness of which Jesus spoke when He instituted this Sacrament on Maundy Thursday night (Matt. 26:26-28).

That brings us to the Gospel. What is the Gospel exactly? The word "Gospel" means "Good News." (Can you think of any better "good news" than what Jesus describes in John 3:16, the "Gospel in a nutshell"?) Paul tells us that the Gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). It is that Word of God which offers, conveys, and bestows God's forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation (Acts 10:43, Rom 10:17, John 3:16, I Peter 1:23, John 20:31, II Tim 3:15, Col. 1:6). That is what a Means of Grace does. It is the means through which God reaches down, touches lives individually, and imparts His divine and eternal blessings. [Note: Whereas Baptism is a Means through which a person can be brought into the Kingdom of God, and Holy Communion is a Means through which a child of God can be strengthened in his/her faith, the Gospel is a Means which can do both (Rom 1:16, I Peter 1:23; Col. 1:22-23a; consider also the words of Jesus Himself in John 8:31-32 - "teachings" is more accurately translated "Word," "logos" in the Greek, as translated in the KJV).]

One word of caution, however. We must never confuse the Law of God's Word with the Gospel of God's Word. Both are found in His Word. But it is only the Gospel that holds the power of God for salvation. The Law can only condemn and show our sins. It is certainly necessary. For without the Law, we would have no way of becoming conscious of our sins and our need of a Savior. Paul calls attention to this important aspect of the Law in Romans 3:20. So the Law is important. But it cannot save. It

can only condemn. That's where the Gospel comes in. After becoming conscious of our sins through the Law - the fact that we have broken God's commands time and time again - the Gospel comes to our rescue, showing us our Savior and the forgiveness He earned for us on the cross. A good way to remember the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to use the International Distress Code: SOS. The Law: Shows Our Sin; the Gospel: Shows Our Savior. Through the faith which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the Means of Grace, we repent of our many sins and throw ourselves on the mercy of a loving God, confident that He will forgive our sins for Jesus' sake.



*"Christ Is Risen!" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## **IX - HE IS NOT HERE!**

It was another Sunday; another first day of the Jewish work week. What will this day bring? So much had happened during the previous week. Last Sunday, the 10th of Nisan, Jewish families selected and set apart a lamb for the Passover meal, which was to be slaughtered at twilight on Nisan 14. Jesus, the Rabbi (Teacher) from Nazareth, caused a huge stir among the people. Traveling into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey colt, He entered the city through the Eastern Gate. Coming from Bethany, He traveled the same route taken by the man leading the scapegoat into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). He was doing a number of things that had been prophesied concerning the Promised Messiah. The crowds recognized this and began acclaiming Him as the Son of David; the One coming in the name of the Lord (Matt. 21:9). These were clearly references intended to state their belief that Jesus was that Promised Messiah. And Jesus did or said nothing to discourage or disavow their statements. Yet the question in many minds that day - and continuing through at least Thursday - was whether this Man really was the Messiah whom they had hoped for, prayed for, and longed for so long?

Nothing happening during the week gave them any reason to doubt this hope. On Monday, the righteous anger of Jesus flared up again as He cleansed the Temple for the second time during His Public Ministry years. He drove out those who were buying and selling in the outer court of the Gentiles - but were still within the Temple area. He turned over the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. He justified His actions by stating they have made this "house of prayer" into a "den of robbers" (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). This, of course, didn't make the religious leaders happy, but the people in general were pleased to see this happen. They didn't appreciate all the disruption of their worship routines in the Temple. Jesus had other run-ins with the religious leaders that week; with those who opposed Him vehemently. But somehow, He always seemed to get the better of them with His answers to their questions and challenges. He continued to teach the people; to heal (Matt. 21:14; Luke 22:51b); to give His disciples final instructions. The Passover celebration posed no problems, as far as the general populace could determine. But then came Friday!

Friday was one of those days when nothing seemed to make sense. As the general public began waking up, after a late night of Passover celebration, news of the Sanhedrin's shocking actions the previous night and early morning began to spread. The rumor was that late Thursday night, some of the religious leaders, accompanied by a band of Roman soldiers, had gone to Gethsemane and arrested the Teacher,

Jesus of Nazareth. Several clandestine “trials” were conducted before daylight - first by Annas, a previous high priest, and then by the Sanhedrin. They were charging Jesus with blasphemy. An “official” ruling was rendered at daybreak (to make it “legal”), condemning Jesus to death. But why? How could this be? Jesus was well liked by the people. They enjoyed hearing Him teach - for He taught as One who had authority, and not as their teachers of the Law (Matt. 7:28-29). He healed the sick and infirm. He performed miracles of various kinds. He was gentle and kind and loving. He accepted people from all walks of life and of all ages. Why would anyone want to condemn Jesus to death?

Between daybreak and 9:00 A.M., civil trials were held - before Pilate and Herod. The end result was that Jesus of Nazareth was taken out of the city and crucified - along with two criminals. There was that unusual darkness from noon until 3:00 P.M. Shortly after that, the ground shook in a most unusual way. Some followers of Jesus took His body down from the cross after He had died and buried Him. Finally, the Sabbath arrived and everything seemed to settle down somewhat. Now, it’s Sunday again; a new week is beginning. Will it bring anything like last week? Oh, there was some talk about what Jesus said would happen on this day. Something to the effect that He would rise from the dead on “the third day.” There were instances of Jesus raising people from the dead - Lazarus from Bethany being an example. But this was different. Jesus Himself was dead. How could He raise Himself from the dead? Did anyone really believe that Jesus would come back to life this day?

Not the *women!* Dedicated though they were - and their early Sunday morning actions prove this - they didn’t expect Him to rise. They didn’t hasten to the tomb to welcome a resurrected Savior. They hastened to the tomb early Sunday morning to complete the burial preparations that the onset of the Sabbath prevented Joseph from Arimathea and Nicodemus from completing late Friday.

Not the *disciples!* Were they at the tomb early Sunday morning to greet their Master as He came out of the tomb? No, they were in Jerusalem - cowering behind locked doors. Should they have anticipated a resurrection? Absolutely! Jesus had told them on a number of occasions that on the third day He would rise again.

What about the *Roman soldiers* who were guarding the tomb? Did they expect the Man in the tomb to come back to life? Definitely not! Such a thought was absurd. Dead people don’t rise from the dead. In their thinking - initially at least - this guard duty was going to be a “piece of cake.” In fact, they were probably bored.



The *Jewish religious leaders*? Did they expect Jesus to come back from the dead? Who knows? While denying that Jesus was the Promised Messiah, the Son of God, they had to admit He had done some rather remarkable - not to mention unexpected - things. Could their request to Pilate to seal the tomb and post a guard possibly have been motivated not by a fear that the disciples would steal the body, but rather by a fear that maybe He would indeed rise from the dead? But if so, what were the guards supposed to do? Kill Him again?

Generally speaking, no one expected a resurrection this Sunday morning. But it happened! Just as Jesus said it would! [NOTE: This is the third reason why our Savior had to be both God and man. He had to be man to be able to die; He had to be God to be able to come back to life again. As man alone, He could not have accomplished this miracle. But His coming back to life was necessary if He was to overcome the last and greatest enemy of His children - death.]

Matthew reports a “violent earthquake” (28:2a). Only Matthew reports this earthquake. No reference to any effects it might have had is recorded. So whether this quake was felt beyond the immediate area of the tomb is not known. Matthew associates this quake with the angel’s descent from heaven. He rolled back the stone (in front of the tomb entrance) and sat on it (28:2). We hasten to explain that the angel rolled the stone away - not to let Jesus out of the tomb (He was already gone), but to let people in to see the *empty* tomb. This all happened, obviously, before the women arrived at the tomb.

I want to interject something here that none of the Evangelists include. They do report the presence of an angel (Matt. 28:2; Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; John 20:12). [Notice that Luke and John report the presence of two angels. This apparent discrepancy will be explained later in this chapter.] They further report the empty tomb. But none of them reveal where Jesus was nor what He did immediately after coming back to life - not until He began appearing to people a little later. We have to look to the First Epistle of St. Peter for an explanation of Jesus’ actions during this interim period. In I Peter 3:18-19, Peter writes some words that have been misunderstood by many through the years and therefore misinterpreted. An objective study of these verses, however, will help clarify the meaning.

Peter explains in 3:18 that Jesus died for sins. He then adds these words, “once for all.” He adds these words to make a contrast between Jesus’ death on the cross as payment for sins - and the repeated annual sacrifices of bulls and goats by the priests as sacrifices for sin. As our great High Priest, Jesus offered up one sacrifice - Himself

- one time. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of this too. (Read Hebrews 7:26-27; 9:11-14; 10:3-4, 12.) Indeed, the blood of bulls and goats have no power to forgive sins. Those sacrifices were only reminders of the great sacrifice that would pay for all sins for all time - the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, once and only once. Going back to I Peter 3:18, Peter explains why the one sacrifice of Jesus could pay for sins. He is the "Righteous" One, dying for the "unrighteous."

Continuing in verse 18, Peter states that Jesus was "put to death in the body" - as is common for mankind. At the moment of death, only the body dies. The soul does not die, but enters eternity. (The souls of those who accept Jesus as their Savior enter the blessed estate of heaven upon death. The souls of those who do not accept Jesus as their Savior enter the estate of the damned in hell at the time of death.) The body of Jesus died on Good Friday and was subsequently buried. His soul entered heaven. Sometime early Sunday morning - very early - the soul of Jesus re-entered His body, thus revivifying (making alive) His body. The New International Version states that Jesus was "made alive by the Spirit." The King James Version has "quickenened by the Spirit." (Notice the capital "S" in both versions.) These versions both attribute the revivification of Jesus' body to the Holy Spirit. In other references, the revivification of Jesus is attributed to the Father (Acts 2:32; Rom 8:11; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20), while John 10:17-18 quotes Jesus Himself as saying He is responsible for His revivification. Ultimately, the Triune God made possible the revivification of Jesus' body. It is not uncommon for Scripture to refer to more than one Person of the Trinity as being active or involved in the same activity or action. (Cp. Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:1-3; Luke 1:35.) This is quite appropriate since the Trinity, while made up of Three Divine Persons, is at the same time One Divine Substance or Being.

[A FOOTNOTE: Regarding I Peter 3:18, the Greek seems to favor a simple explanation of how Jesus became alive again - without crediting the action to any Person of the Trinity. The Greek simply states that Jesus was put to death in the flesh (body) - implying that His soul (spirit) exited the body. But then He was quickened (made alive, revived) "in the spirit" (small "s") - i.e., when His spirit (soul) re-entered His body. This is what will happen to all the dead on Judgment Day. Their souls (spirits) will re-enter their dead bodies, by the power of God, thus bringing their bodies back to life. Verse 19 immediately goes on to say "in which" - in other words, in His revived (living) body, He "went and preached to the spirits in prison."]

Verse 19 has been the subject of various interpretations and explanations as well. Who are the "spirits in prison" of which Peter speaks? A spirit (soul) is a non-material, a non-flesh entity. A spirit therefore is not bound by material substances, as

is the body - a material, a fleshly substance. There is only one "prison" (the word "prison" automatically carries with it a negative implication) that could hold or restrict such a non-material being - and that is hell. Thus Peter is saying that Jesus went to "preach" to the spirits in prison, to the souls in hell. This is the verse - and the only verse in Scripture - which is responsible for the phrase, "He descended into hell," in the Apostles' Creed. Peter is saying that on Easter Sunday, Jesus became alive again in the tomb. Having gained the victory over sin, death, and the devil, the first thing Jesus did was to go and "preach" (actually, the Greek word here is better translated "proclaimed") to the "spirits in prison" (to Satan and all who were in hell with him). He "proclaimed," "declared" His victory over sin, death, and the devil. Thus it was not the women leaving the tomb who first saw the resurrected Lord, as we tend to think. Instead it was the inhabitants of hell who first knew the truth about Jesus being raised from the dead. [NOTE: Peter refers only to those "spirits" who disobeyed (God) in the days of Noah - when sin was so rampant that God found it necessary to destroy all mankind, except for eight faithful people (Gen. 6:5-7:7). But this age was chosen as representative of all those who in their own lifetimes disobeyed God and found themselves in hell after death.]

Thus immediately upon revivification, Jesus exited the tomb in His now glorified body (I Peter 1:21), and "descended into hell." This took place before the angel descended from heaven to roll the stone away from the door of the tomb. In His now glorified state, Jesus, also according to His human body, was no longer limited by time, space, or material substance - and so left the tomb even though it was still closed and sealed. As was stated earlier in this chapter, the stone was rolled away - not to let Jesus out, He was already gone - but to let people in to see that the tomb was indeed empty. We also hasten to point out that Jesus did not descend into hell to "suffer." He had suffered the pangs of hell already on Friday - while hanging on the cross. (Compare comments in the previous chapter about the 4th Word of Jesus from the cross.) He descended into hell, as Peter states, to "proclaim" to the spirits in prison. He went to the abode of Satan to declare Himself the Victor over sin, death, and Satan. On Good Friday, Satan believed that he had won the battle over Jesus. He did "strike His heel" (Gen. 3:15) - and Jesus died. But in His gloating, Satan forgot the rest of that prophecy. Jesus descended into hell to remind Satan that this prophecy also stated that his (Satan's) head would be crushed. And Jesus' presence in hell - alive and well - showed Satan Who the real Victor was (and is). Jesus went to hell not to "preach" to the souls in hell, with the intent of giving them a "second chance" (Cp. Hebrews 9:27), but to proclaim His victory over the forces of evil through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

We now go back to what the Gospel writers record about Easter morning. What they write took place after the revivification of Jesus and His descent into hell. The Evangelists report many of the same things, but there are instances where one Evangelist will report something that only one or none of the others do. All of the Evangelists record the fact that women went to the tomb early on Sunday morning. Obviously unaware of the angels' presence; definitely unaware that Jesus was no longer in the tomb; certainly unaware that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb (Mark 16:2-3); and quite likely unaware of the guard that had been posted at the tomb on Saturday, the women began making their way to the tomb very early Sunday morning (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1).

Matthew names only Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary" (probably the mother of James and Joses - cp. Matt. 27:56) as going to the tomb (28:1). However, from accounts in both Mark (16:1) and Luke (24:10), we know that there were other women in that group. This is also implied by Matthew himself when he talks about the angel speaking to "the women" (28:5. Cp. 28:8). We know from this that Matthew was also aware that other women were among those visiting the tomb, especially since John tells us that when Mary Magdalene (the only woman John names as going to the tomb) saw that the stone was rolled away from the tomb entrance, she immediately turned back and reported this to Peter and John (John 20:1-2). She was not present when the angel spoke to the women and invited them to see the empty tomb (Matt. 28:5-6; Mark 16:5-6).

What a sight the angels must have presented to the women. Matthew offers a description of the angel's appearance, as well as his clothes (28:3). Mark simply reports the angel's presence and the fact that he was dressed in a white robe (15:5). Luke reports the presence of two angels standing there "in clothes that gleamed like lightning" (24:4, "in shining garments" - KJV). These brilliantly clad angelic messengers are what confronted the women as they arrived at the tomb in the early morning twilight. Matthew (28:5, 8), Mark (16:5b, 8), and Luke (24:5) all report the fear experienced by the women when they saw the angels. Their fear was no more unusual than what we would feel under similar circumstances.

But can you imagine what the Roman guards experienced when the angel descended and rolled the stone away from the tomb? These tough, hardened soldiers experienced a fear unlike anything they had ever encountered before. Matthew reports that they shook (they trembled; their legs were like jelly; their spines went limp) and became like dead men - implying that they fell to the ground as if they were dead (28:4). They probably thought they were as good as dead - or at least wished that they were.

And can you imagine their thoughts when they realized that - for a while anyway - they were “guarding” an empty tomb?

As they began to gather their wits about them, questions started flooding their minds. What had happened to the body in the tomb? What were their superiors going to say? More importantly, what were they going to do to these soldiers who had “lost” the body they were supposed to be guarding? Naturally, they couldn’t go tell their superiors about this. But someone had to be told. What were they going to do? (The guards were apparently still at the tomb when the women arrived and received the message from the angel. They probably weren’t very conscious of this, however, since they were trying to decide on their next action.) Sometime after the women left the tomb (Matt. 28:11), the guards reached a decision. Some of them went into the city. Instead of reporting to their superiors, however, they went to the chief priests and reported everything that had happened (Matt. 28:11).

The chief priests quickly met with the elders to discuss this unexpected turn of events. They thought they were rid of this Man, Jesus. But now, this! What is this that the guards were reporting? Could it really be true? It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. The third day was supposed to come and go without anything extraordinary happening. They thought they had covered all the possibilities - even to the point of posting a guard and sealing the tomb. What is it with this Man? And where is He now? What is He going to do? What were the followers of Jesus - and the general public, as far as that is concerned - going to say and do when this news gets back to them? Will this cause some kind of a turmoil among the people - perhaps even a riot? Some kind of “damage control” had to be decided upon quickly.

After a hastily called meeting, the chief priests and elders could come up with nothing better than more lies - accompanied by a bribe. A huge bribe, no doubt, because the consequences of “sleeping on duty” and/or “losing” the person being guarded were indeed severe. But that’s what the religious leaders convinced the guards to do. They were to lie about what had happened at the site of the tomb. They were to report that while they slept, the disciples of Jesus came and stole His body (Matt. 28:12-13). If the news of their “dereliction” of duty got back to the governor (Pontius Pilate), the religious leaders promised to talk to the governor and keep them out of trouble (Matt. 28:14). And as Matthew reports, that was the story being circulated among the Jews to the day when he wrote his Gospel (28:15).

In the meantime, the women at the tomb heard a message that was just as heartening and joyous as the appearance of the messenger was frightening. That message has

resounded down through the ages - and still has significance today. The simple words, "HE IS NOT HERE!" tell the whole story. There is no dead body in the tomb. There is no need for the additional spices they brought to the tomb; no need for additional "embalming." The tomb is empty. And the reason? The angel answers that question too. "He has risen, just as He said!" As further proof, he invites the women to "come and see the place where He lay!"

He reminded them of the words of Jesus to this effect (Luke 24:6b-8). Then they remembered. Prior to this, it just didn't seem possible that Jesus would come back to life; that He would be alive. But what Jesus had been saying previously is exactly the way it happened. Having successfully completed the work His Father sent Him to do - to pay for the sins of the world with His innocent suffering and death - Jesus rose from the dead as proof of this fact (Romans 1:4 & 4:25). [NOTE: For whatever reason, the angels apparently appeared only to the women, but not to Peter and John when they went to the tomb after hearing the report of Mary Magdalene that the stone had been removed from the tomb (John 20:2-10).]

"He is not here!" Death and the grave could not hold Him! "He has risen!" What a joyful message this angelic messenger got to deliver. It can be compared only with the message the angelic host delivered to the shepherds when Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:9-14). What the angelic spokesman announced to the shepherds that night, "Unto you a Savior has been born," has now seen its completion. Jesus has indeed saved His people from their sins. [As the initial news of the Savior's birth was announced not to the elite of society in those days, but to the "common laborers" - shepherds, so the announcement of His resurrection was given not to the elite of society of that day, but to common people - a handful of women, who in those days enjoyed no standing in society; received no acclaim for whatever deeds they did. This, too, was part of God's Plan - to show that Jesus came to be the Savior of everyone, not just the "higher class" in society; the rich or elite or famous. What comfort this brings to all of us "common" people. What a caring and concerned God we have!]

"He is not here!" The eternal significance of this statement is staggering. Not only is this proof that our sins have been paid for; that we have forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17 & 20a); not only have we been reconciled to God (II Cor. 5:19a, Gal. 4:4-5, Col. 1:22); not only are we justified in God's sight (Rom 3:24, 4:25) - we have also been freed from the power of death (John 11:25-26, 14:19b; I Cor. 15:20-22, 55-57; II Tim 1:10).

Three of the Evangelists report that after the angel had delivered his message to the women, they hurried back into town to give the disciples the message the angel had delivered to them (Matt. 28:7; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:9). Matthew alone records the fact that Jesus Himself appeared to these women as they were hurrying back into town (28:9). Mark reports (16:8) that the women were still bewildered and frightened after the angel's message (and apparently even after Jesus had appeared to them), and so did not say anything to anyone (until, of course, they reached the disciples). It is also Mark who reports the question the women asked themselves on the way to the tomb (16:2-3). A question, as was mentioned in a previous chapter, that needed no answer (16:4).

Luke is the one who records the women carrying out the command of the angel and Jesus regarding their message to the disciples (24:9). They told not only the Eleven (so designated since Judas was no longer one of the Twelve), but also the "others" (disciples in the broader sense of "followers" of Jesus). Luke names Mary Magdalene as being one of the women (24:10). We know from John that Mary initially returned to town before the others (20:1-2) and then returned to the tomb after she had informed Peter and John of the empty tomb (20:11). Luke's inclusion of Mary Magdalene in his account could simply be because she was among the group of women originally going out to the tomb. Luke does report the reaction of the men to the message of the women. "They did not believe the women." (24:11) What the women were telling them just didn't make sense. They knew that Jesus was dead. These hysterical women couldn't possibly know what they were talking about. It was pure nonsense. Luke also interjects the earlier trip of Peter to the tomb (24:12). Why he does not mention John as Peter's running companion, we do not know. But he does state that Peter left the tomb wondering what all this meant. Peter, however, was not the only one left in a mental daze. There were a lot of questions in the minds of others as well; a lot of wonder. What is the answer? What does all this mean? And they thought the events of Thursday night and Friday were puzzling!

John is good about filling in details that the other Evangelists omit. He doesn't disappoint us here. He is the one who tells us about Mary Magdalene, upon seeing the stone rolled away from the tomb, hurrying back to tell someone (20:1-2). She encounters Peter and John (with characteristic humility, John omits his name and merely refers to the "other disciple, the one Jesus loved"). Mary can only exclaim what she feels - that someone has removed the body of "the Lord" from the tomb and "we" (speaking for the other women at the tomb) don't know what they have done with Him. (Notice that even under the impression that death still lays claim to Jesus, Mary continues to refer to Him as "the Lord!") But there is certainly no thought

of a resurrection in her mind.) Who would have done something like this is a mystery to Mary. She simply tells Peter and John that “they” have taken the Lord.

Peter and John weren’t thinking of a resurrection either. With the excited words of Mary ringing in their ears, they set out for the tomb (John 20:3). They too were probably wondering what had happened; was Mary’s impression correct; did someone steal the body of Jesus - and if so, who and why? They had to go to the tomb and find out what they could. They were both running - their curiosity and wonder wouldn’t let them merely walk. Being the younger of the two, John outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first (John 20:4). John does not reveal why, but for some reason he didn’t immediately enter the tomb. He did bend over and look inside. There he saw the strips of linen, in which Jesus had been bound, lying there (20:5). It was only after Peter arrived and entered the tomb that John also went inside (20:8a).

As Peter entered the tomb, he too saw the strips of linen lying there (20:6; cp. Luke 24:12). While Matthew and Mark make no mention of the linen cloths, they both include the invitation of the angel to the women to view the place where Jesus was laid (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6). Putting the four accounts together, it is believed that the linen cloths were still lying right where Jesus had been placed. It is further believed that these cloths were still in a “wound” condition, just as they had been wound around the body of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (Matt. 27:59; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:40). And indeed it would not have been necessary for the linen cloths to have been unwound to free Jesus. Being revived in a glorified state, He merely passed through the cloths - even as He passed through the stone of the tomb when He left the tomb to “descend into hell.”

John makes note of another interesting fact. He states that the cloth which had been placed around the head of Jesus was folded up and lying by itself, away from the linen cloths (20:7). This is certainly an argument against someone entering the tomb and stealing the body of Jesus. Why would anyone wanting to make a hasty retreat from the tomb after taking the body of Jesus, bother to remove (unwind) the burial cloths and then rewind them, plus taking the head cloth and folding it neatly, leaving it in a place by itself? These two things indicate there was no rush to leave the tomb secretly. There can be no other explanation than that Jesus did become alive again - even as He had said He would on a number of occasions. Not only did He become alive, but He left behind the linen cloths as evidence that this was the tomb into which He had been placed. (Later skeptics offered the “explanation” that the women, as well as Peter and John, had visited the wrong tomb that Sunday morning.)



One other thing of note is included by John. After hesitating to enter the tomb initially, John confesses that when he did enter the tomb and saw how the linen cloths were lying, he “believed” (20:8b). He does not explain what he believed. But from the next sentence, a parenthetical sentence, we know that he believed that Jesus had indeed risen - even though he did not as yet comprehend this completely. Even though Jesus had told them previously that He would rise on the third day (See Matt. 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, among other references), even though Scripture had prophesied the resurrection (Job 19:25; Psalm 16:9-10; Isa. 52:13, 53:11a, among other references), it took the empty tomb experience to convince him that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Only later, as they reflected back on what Jesus had said and what had been written in Scripture, did they put it all together and come to a strong and undeniable faith in the resurrected Lord.

John now records an incident that only he reports. The story of Mary Magdalene as she returned to the tomb after reporting to Peter and John that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb (20:10-18). What a tender, touching story this is. We see Mary going from the depths of sorrow to the heights of joy. Returning to the tomb (the text seems to imply that Mary arrived back at the tomb before Peter and John had left - verses 10 & 11), Mary stood outside the tomb and wept. She wept because a close relationship existed between Jesus and herself. Luke is the one who introduces us to Mary (Luke 8:2). At some time prior to this, Jesus had cast out 7 demons from her demon-possessed soul. (What, if any, outward manifestation of this could be seen, we do not know.) This is probably what was responsible for the close relationship with Jesus. She became a devoted follower of Jesus. She was among a group of women who helped to support Jesus and His ministry (Luke 8:3).

She was among the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Judea in their support of His work. She was close by on Good Friday, painfully watching the suffering of her Lord (Matt. 27:55-56). She was one of the women who was at the tomb, watching Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus lay Jesus in the grave and roll the stone in front of the entrance (Matt. 27:59-61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55). Mary was one of three women, named by Mark, who purchased additional spices after the Sabbath, for further anointing of Jesus’ body (Mark 16:1). She was in the group of women who started out very early on Sunday morning to go to the tomb (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:9-10; John 20:1). She is the one who turned back when they saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, to tell Peter and John (John 20:1-2).

Now, she is back at the tomb - weeping. Weeping over the death of her Master. She

had probably heard some of His statements about rising again on the third day. But she was near the cross when He died. She saw Him taken down from the cross and buried. His rising again was the last thing on her mind this Sunday morning. She bent down and looked into the tomb - wondering who had taken the Lord away. And why? She saw the angels seated on the “table” or “shelf” whereon Jesus’ body had been laid. They asked her why she was crying. Tearfully she replied, “They have taken my Lord away and I don’t know where they have put Him.” (John 20:11-13) At this moment she became aware of someone standing nearby. Little did she realize that here was the reason for her tears - this Someone was Jesus, although she didn’t recognize Him through her tear-filled eyes (John 20:14).

He too asked why she was crying and for whom she was looking. Thinking as blurry as her vision, she assumed this Person to be the gardener. Her plaintive reply was to entreat Him to tell her where he had put Him if he had taken Him away - promising to get him (to take Him to another resting place). She didn’t bother to identify “Him.” In her mind, everyone should know whom she was concerned about. There was only one Person that was important to her now (John 20:15). It was at this moment that life became worth living again. She heard one word. One word that changed everything instantly. That word was her name. What made it so special this time is the Person who spoke it. With puzzled disbelief - yet unbridled joy - she turned to the Person she now knew was her living Lord. As He had spoken one word, so her reply was one word: “Rabboni,” which means “Teacher” (John 20:16).

Apparently reaching out for Him, Mary receives the caution, “Do not hold on to Me,” (John 20:17). Ironically, the women to whom Jesus first appeared as they left the tomb earlier did not receive such a command, even though Matthew reports that they “clasped His feet and worshipped Him” (Matt. 28:8-10). Possibly the difference being that the group of women hurrying away from the tomb were in a position of reverence, obviously on their knees as they clasped His feet. It was an act of worship. On the other hand, it could be that Mary had more of their earthly relationship in mind as she approached Him. (Incidentally, there is definitely no cause to read any kind of a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary into this or any other reference to them - as some worldly minded people have done. That kind of a relationship was as impossible as death keeping its hold on Jesus!) Mary felt the terrible loss of a close friend when Jesus died. Now that she saw Him alive, she didn’t want that feeling of loss to ever be experienced again. Jesus was simply telling her that now things will be different. The earthly closeness must now be replaced with a spiritual relationship only. But for Mary, that was enough. Her Lord and Master was alive. She is happy and content.

Following the instructions of her Lord, Mary hastened back to the disciples with her exciting news: "I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18) [NOTE: Nothing further is recorded in Scripture about Mary Magdalene. But what a tremendous "exit." As we think of another "Mary," it is interesting that nothing is written by John about his "new mother," Mary, the mother of Jesus, as to whether, when, or where she saw her resurrected Son. Nothing is mentioned by any of the Evangelists as to when Mary heard the news of her Son's resurrection. Was she in the group of "all the others" to whom the women reported the messages of the angel and Jesus as they returned from the tomb (Luke 24:9)? Was she with the Eleven "and those with them" when the Emmaus disciples returned to Jerusalem to report their encounter with the risen Lord (Luke 24:33)? If so, that means she was present when the Lord Himself appeared to this group (Luke 24:36; John 20:19). We have no specific references to Jesus being seen by His mother after His resurrection, but it is difficult for me to believe that the compassionate Christ would not have allowed her to see Him - and even perhaps have some tender words to share with her - an experience which, if it happened, obviously is not recorded in Scripture. (Perhaps an experience reserved just for Jesus and His mother?) As was mentioned in a previous chapter, Luke does record the presence of Mary with the disciples after the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:14). Also as was mentioned previously, this is the final reference to Mary in the Bible.]

#### COMMENTS:

"He is not here!" Under many circumstances, these words could represent a matter of fact, perhaps precipitate great disappointment - or even anxiety. But this was not the case on Easter morning. These words, spoken by the angelic messenger, changed everything for the followers of Jesus - down to this very day and on into Eternity. Initially met with doubt and wonderment, it soon became evident that these words echoed joy and happiness and hope. Expecting to find a dead Master, lying in the tomb, the women were greeted with these words that turned earth and hell upside down and caused heaven to rejoice. "He is not here!" Why? Because "He has risen, as He said!" The "He", of course, is Jesus the Christ; God's own beloved Son; the Messiah; the Savior of the world. Following God's Plan from Eternity, Jesus came to this earth as a human being - while remaining God - to fulfill the prophecy in Genesis 3:15. He entered this world in the flesh at just the right time in history (Gal. 4:4). Having kept the Law perfectly for mankind; having paid for every sin of the human race through His innocent suffering and death, Jesus now conquered the last and most dreaded of mankind's enemies - death. On the third day, as prophesied, Jesus rose from the dead to show His victory over sin, death, and the devil (John

2:19, Rom 4:25). His resurrection is significant in another way as well. It is unlike any other resurrection from the dead reported in either the Old Testament or the New Testament. Those all died again, at some later time. Jesus rose, however, never to die again (Rom 6:9).

“He is not here!” “He has risen!” What does this mean to you? What significance does His resurrection have for you - individually, as a person? Have you ever felt burdened by sin? Rejoice! Jesus has paid for all sins, our sins - yours and mine. His resurrection is our guarantee of this (I Cor. 15:17 & 20a). Do you ever feel alone? You need not. It is the resurrected Jesus who promises, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20b) That is a promise for you and me - individually, personally. In a group? There’s a promise for that too (Matt. 18:20). Do the problems and temptations of this world cause you concern? Jesus says, “Take heart! I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33b) Does Satan seem to never leave you alone? The Apostle James, the Lord’s own half-brother, assures us: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7) Worried about the future? Read the Savior’s promise in Matthew 6:25-34. Afraid of death? Remember the Good Shepherd’s promise given through David in Psalm 23:4. Follow that with the words of the Apostle Peter in his First Epistle - chapter 1, verses 3-5. And don’t forget those great words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:23. Afraid of being “left behind”? Jesus assures you that this won’t happen (John 14:1-3). All of these promises are guaranteed by these words: “He is not here! He has risen!” They are guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday morning!

Is Jesus’ resurrection significant? Ask that of someone standing beside the casket of a loved one who has died “in the Lord!” Ask that of a family member standing beside the open grave of someone who will no longer be in the family circle here on earth! Ask yourself that question when *you* are looking death in the face because of illness, accident, or old age! There can be only one strong, sure, spontaneous answer: Yes, the resurrection of Jesus is significant; it is meaningful! It alone gives hope and joy - even in the face of human tragedy! That’s why St. Paul could write to the Christians in Thessalonica: “We sorrow not, even as those who have no hope.” (I Thess. 4:13b. Compare 4:13-18) He doesn’t say that we have no sorrow when a loved one departs our midst in the Lord. But he does say that ours is not a hopeless sorrow. The resurrection of Jesus is what enables us to experience joy in the midst of our sorrow as we say good-bye to a loved one whose soul is now living with the resurrected Savior in heaven. For we know that in Eternity, there will be a happy reunion in heaven, where we will together sing the praises of our great God and Savior forever and ever.

The question of the angel to Mary Magdalene (John 20:13a), the same question addressed to Mary just moments later by Jesus Himself (John 20:15a), are questions to be contemplated by any Christian standing at the grave side of a fellow Christian. Why do we weep? We have sorrow, tears flow, to be sure, but it is sorrow tempered with the sure promises of our resurrected Savior (See John 11:25-26, 14:19b). “He is not here! He has risen!” Words that brought gloom and doom to Satan and hell. Words that bring enduring comfort to all of God’s children - unto and throughout Eternity!

#### ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS:

For the Christian, the single most important event in the history of the world is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no way to over-emphasize the importance of the resurrection to the Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls on the validity - the historical reality - of the resurrection. Paul says in that great resurrection chapter, I Corinthians 15, that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless” (verse 17). Peter makes a similar statement in I Peter 1:3, where he states that our hope is based on “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The overwhelming significance of the resurrection is that it sets Christianity apart from all other religions. The resurrection is the unique stamp of Christianity - for only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its Founder. No resurrection has ever been claimed for Abraham, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, or any other religious leader.

The Christian religion is also the only religion that boasts of a God paying the price for His creatures’ sin; the only religion that boasts of a divine Savior dying for His fallen creatures and rising again for their salvation. The Easter event places the Father’s “stamp of approval” on the sacrifice that Jesus offered for the sins of the world (Rom 1:4). It announces His victory over sin, death, and the devil. It is - for Christians - a “preview of coming events,” a glimpse ahead to our own resurrection and a guarantee that God will take us to live eternally with Him.

However, from that first Easter morning until now, the opponents of Christianity have tried to discredit the resurrection account. They have resorted to lies, theories, excuses, rationalizations, and criticisms. They try to deny the resurrection by discrediting the Gospel accounts. They point to alleged inconsistencies and discrepancies in the four Gospels and conclude that Christ’s resurrection is based only on the disciples’ imaginations and strong desire to believe the unbelievable. But do the Scriptural accounts really contradict each other? We will pose and answer four of those alleged inconsistencies.

1) The *number* of angels reported to be at the tomb! (Matthew and Mark speak of one; while Luke and John refer to two.) Not really a problem! Frequently only the spokesperson is noted in reporting an event, while any accompanying person is not mentioned. Matthew and Mark's comments are not limiting in nature. They just refer to the angel who does the speaking. Luke and John report the total number of angels present at the tomb.

2) The *number* of women going to the tomb Easter morning! [Matthew lists Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (28:1). Mark mentions Mary Magdalene, identifies "the other Mary" as the mother of James (cp. 15:40), and Salome (16:1). Luke speaks of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James - and "the others with them" (24:10). John mentions only Mary Magdalene (20:1, but compare v. 2, "we").] Since none of the accounts limits in any way the number of women visiting the tomb, we can assume that a half dozen or so went out that morning to complete the task of "anointing" the body of Jesus.

3) *When* the women went to the tomb! (Matthew says "at dawn," Mark writes "very early... just after sunrise, they were on their way," Luke reports "very early in the morning," and John states "early... while it was still dark.") Again, no real problem. An easy explanation would be that they started out before daylight - and arrived at the tomb about sunrise. Their walk could have taken between 20 and 30 minutes - depending on their point of origin, and how long it might have taken them to get together at a common location.

4) *To whom* the women reported the news of the resurrection! (Mark states, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The other three Evangelists indicate they brought the news to Jesus' disciples.) They reported to the disciples because this is what the angel instructed them to do. Mark 16:8 explains that they told no one because of fear. But they obviously didn't fear the disciples. However, in view of what had been happening over the previous days, they had reason to fear the Jewish leaders and the Romans. Thus the women said nothing to anyone along the way. They waited until they reached the disciples.

Some comments on the above!

The variations in the Gospel accounts serve to support - rather than undermine - the authenticity of the accounts. Had these accounts been the product of myth or a hoax, we would expect them to be "carbon copies" of each other. Their "differences" demonstrate that the Gospel accounts were not harmonized by some ancient editor;

no group got together and agreed on a “story.” Instead, the variations provide evidence for the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.

In all accounts, women play a more significant role than men. The fact that women were the first witnesses to report the empty tomb also demonstrates the authenticity of the report. For testimony of women was not binding - not deemed reliable - in the First Century. If this was a fabricated story, why would they have women reporting the empty tomb?

Also, do you find it strange that no attempt has ever been made to suggest that Jesus’ body was present in the tomb on Easter morning? It is simply accepted that the tomb was empty! Almost all theories to explain away the miraculous have focused on how the tomb came to be empty - not that it *was* empty.

\*\*\* This leads us now to look at some of the theories regarding the empty tomb. We will pose seven such theories and then give our answer to each.

#### 1) *The disciples stole the body!*

This is the oldest “explanation” for the empty tomb. The Jewish leaders paid the guards to explain the empty tomb in this way (Matt. 28:12-15). The religious leaders did not challenge the fact that the tomb was empty. They simply made up a story to explain why the tomb was empty. They bribed the soldiers to say that the disciples stole the body while they slept.

*Answer:* Wouldn’t this have caused such a furor that the Roman soldiers would have been arresting the disciples for breaking the Roman seal on the tomb, plus grave robbing, and combing the countryside in search of the body? But none of this happened - because they knew better. Further, how could any guards sleep so soundly that the rolling away of the huge stone would not wake them? And even if they did, how could anyone sleeping so soundly have any idea who it was that allegedly broke into the tomb and stole the body?

Still more! Why? How could this have benefited the cause of the disciples? And would the cowardly disciples have even attempted this? Are we to believe that this small band of followers - who were scared witless when Jesus was arrested and fled into the night to save their own skins - suddenly found the courage three days later to take on a guard of Roman soldiers? They were, in fact, completely demoralized by the death of Jesus. Are we to believe that the disciples thought they could move that large stone and steal the body of Jesus without being noticed? And would they have

been prepared to take on the Roman guard if they had been detected? So we rule out Theory # 1.

2) *Joseph of Arimathea secretly removed the body (and took it to a different resting place)!*

*Answer:* The time involved for the removal would have had to be after sundown on Saturday (Sabbath) and before dawn on Sunday. But wouldn't this be rather strange for a respected leader of the Jewish people (a member of the Sanhedrin) to be acting in this manner? (The women probably would have arrived before the task was completed if he had started this at dawn.) And what about the soldiers? And why would he remove the grave clothes, which he and Nicodemus had wrapped around the body of Jesus, and leave them in the tomb? And why would he allow the deception of the disciples preaching the resurrection?

3) *The body was removed by Jewish or Roman officials!*

*Answer:* Re: Jewish officials! The Jewish authorities sought permission from Pilate to seal the tomb and post a guard to *prevent* the removal of the body. Why would they now go contrary to their own actions? Also, why would they get the soldiers to say the disciples had stolen the body (Matt. 28:13) - if they could have produced the body and proven that Jesus was still dead?

Re: Roman officials! Pilate was a stubborn man. (Remember the request by the Jewish leaders for Pilate to change the wording on the inscription showing the charge for the crucifixion - John 19:19-22?) Why would he change his mind now and get involved with this Jewish problem? The Romans had crucified this Man - executed Him. Why would they now be interested in this type of deception? If they had (for whatever reason) removed the body, they could easily have produced it (or at least revealed that fact) when the disciples started preaching Jesus' resurrection - thus preventing a lot of religious and governmental problems, which Pilate did not need.

4) *Jesus didn't really die! (The so-called "swoon" theory).*

At the beginning of the 19th Century, the German rationalist Venturini posed the theory that Jesus did not really die. He only fainted (swooned) - and later revived in the coolness of the tomb. (But remember what was written in the previous chapter about the crucifixion, and the physical and legal proof of Jesus' death!)

*Answer:* Fortunately, this theory is so ridiculous that it is not seriously considered. It totally ignores the deadly character of Jesus' wounds (the scourging; 4 nail wounds



completely through the extremities of His limbs; a spear wound in His chest - puncturing His heart; untended wounds; shock; fever; uncontrolled bleeding). Furthermore, there was no first-aid of any kind when it was needed the most. There was loss of strength from bleeding; loss of strength from lack of food and water and sleep. There were the elaborately wound grave clothes - how could he have gotten out of them? A tremendously heavy stone would have to be moved - by a seriously wounded man. Not to mention a guard of healthy Roman soldiers. But even if he could have overcome all this, would such a figure - naked, hobbling on pierced feet, emaciated, dried blood covering his body - could such a figure give the frightened disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave and inspire them to follow Him even to the point of martyrdom? I think not! (That would be more miraculous than the resurrection itself.)

#### 5) *The women visited the wrong tomb!*

This theory proposes that in the semi-darkness, the women went to the wrong tomb. There they encountered a young man (the gardener) who tried to tell them that Jesus was not there ("He is not here"), then pointing to another grave, said: "See the place where they laid Him." The women became frightened - thought he was an angel - and fled, reporting this to the disciples.

*Answer:* If it was that dark, why was the gardener there? And if it was a gardener, why didn't the Jewish officials produce Jesus' body later to disprove the claims of the women? And why would the gardener have told the women "He is risen" (Matt. 28:6)?

Further, Matt. 27:61, Mark 15:47, and Luke 23:55-56 all relate that women were present when Joseph and Nicodemus prepared and buried the body of Jesus. Are we to suppose then, that when they returned approximately 36 hours later, they couldn't find the tomb? And even if they did get "turned around" and looked in the wrong tomb, did Peter and John do the same thing? And did they imagine seeing grave clothes in the "wrong" tomb? Did the Roman soldiers forget which tomb they were guarding? Did Joseph of Arimathea suddenly have a memory loss as to where his tomb was located? Why didn't he lead the disciples to the "right" tomb? And why didn't the Jewish leaders simply go to the "right" tomb and produce the body? The reason? The women did not make a mistake! The tomb - the "right" tomb - was empty!

6) *The grave wasn't even visited by the women!*

Proponents of this theory say the empty tomb story was just a fabrication to convince people of the resurrection.

*Answer:* This theory was not added until later. It was not initially posed as a possibility. If the women did not visit the grave - and find it empty - why did the Jewish officials find it necessary to concoct the theory of the disciples stealing the body of Jesus? And why didn't they just produce the body to disprove the preaching of the disciples?

7) *Nostalgia!*

This is one of the more modern theories which has become popular with current liberal theologians. It is the idea that the resurrection occurred only "in the hearts" of the disciples. Sometime around 1990, a morning newspaper in a north Texas city reported that this theory had been proposed to the students of a large university in that town by a professor of New Testament theology. He stated in his Easter "sermon" that Jesus had not really risen from the dead in any literal way. What happened instead, he explained, is that Jesus "came alive" in the hearts of His disciples as they sat around and discussed His life and teachings. This, then, in time, came to be taught as a factual resurrection. (Source: Lamb & Lion Ministries' "Lamplighter," April 1994.)

*Answer:* This theory denies the well documented post-resurrection appearances of Jesus (which we will look at in the next chapter) - and like all the other theories, it fails completely to explain the fact of the empty tomb.

Other "explanations" of the resurrection have been and will continue to be offered from time to time. For example, the "Hallucination" theory which states that the disciples experienced a series of hallucinations. However, an hallucination is a highly personal and subjective experience. So are we to believe that 500 believers (I Cor. 15:6) or a group of Jesus' disciples at His ascension (Acts 1:6-11) had the same hallucination simultaneously? (Not a very good theory!) All of the theories used to explain away the resurrection have one thing in common: they require an even greater leap of faith than God's account of what actually happened!

**OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:**

None of the above theories adequately explain the "empty tomb." But there are other important factors that deserve serious consideration.

### 1) *The visit of the women to the tomb!*

As the women started out to visit the tomb early Sunday morning, they were obviously unaware that there had been a resurrection. (Otherwise, why take spices to complete the anointing of the body of Jesus?) They were also unaware that the stone had been sealed (which would prohibit them from entering the tomb) or that a Roman guard had been posted. They were concerned about the stone in front of the tomb - and how they would be able to move it in order to get into the tomb (Mark 16:3). They knew the stone was too large for even several women to move. But when they got close enough, they saw that the stone had been removed already. Obviously, someone had gotten there before them. Someone who had rolled the stone away from the grave. That someone turned out to be the angel who spoke to the women when they arrived. He wasted no time in letting the women know what had happened; why the tomb was empty. He told them why the body of Jesus was not there. He had risen. There had been a resurrection! What no one really expected had happened. All this obviously happened the way it is recorded in Holy Scripture. Otherwise, the women would have been refused entrance by the soldiers and they would have returned to Jerusalem with disappointment and even greater sorrow than they already had. (And we today would not be able to read about Jesus' resurrection, nor celebrate His resurrection!) But the soldiers were not concerned about keeping them from entering the tomb. No stone was in front of the tomb - and no body was in the tomb. There had been a resurrection! And the resurrected Lord appeared to the women on their way back into Jerusalem.

### 2) *The drastic change in the disciples!*

It is important to remember that the disciples were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead (John 20:9). After His death on the cross, the disciples were completely demoralized - hiding behind locked doors (John 20:19). And yet, this very group suddenly came alive with hope and went forth boldly proclaiming the resurrection of their Master - even at the risk of their lives. You can't account for the dramatic change in their lives on the basis of a "stolen body" - and a lie that He had risen from the dead.

Something objective, something factual - not imagined - must have happened. Look at the change! From cowards hiding behind locked doors in fear - to fearless proclaimers of the resurrection. Look at the changes especially at Pentecost (50 days after the resurrection). These were not a few "hysterical" women (as was charged by some) - but a group of disciples. They were fearlessly preaching the resurrection - not for

earthly gain, but almost certain persecution and possible martyrdom (which eventually happened to all but one - John). Would these men perpetrate a hoax under those circumstances? That question is not difficult to answer. Something wonderful definitely happened to change these men - a resurrection; the Resurrection of their Lord and Master.

Look at Peter! Peter, who had denied his Lord three times in cowardice. But after the resurrection (and especially after Pentecost), he began to boldly proclaim Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world - even before the very Council (Sanhedrin) that had condemned Jesus to death (Acts 4:1-20).

Then there's James, the Lord's own half-brother. James did not believe that Jesus was the Promised Messiah before the crucifixion and resurrection (John 7:5). Afterwards? He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15), and wrote the Epistle of James. While not a member of the Twelve, a young man by the name of Stephen gave his life for Jesus (Acts 7:60) - thus becoming the first Christian martyr. [Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the Apostles to help with the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1-5).] And the most ruthless persecutor of the Christian Church for a while, Saul of Tarsus (who was present at, and gave approval to, the stoning of Stephen), became the greatest missionary in the history of the church - all because he encountered the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

### *3) The success of the New Testament Church!*

Proof that the tomb was found empty is provided by the preaching of the resurrection in Jerusalem. How would it be possible to claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead in the very city where He had been crucified just a short time earlier *-unless* there was solid evidence and testimony that the tomb was empty? But the Church grew first and most - right in Jerusalem. The rapid growth of the New Testament Church [Cp. Acts 2:41 (3000); 2:47 (daily); 4:4 (grew to 5000)] would not have been possible if anyone could have produced the dead body of Jesus.

### *4) The complete ignoring of the tomb after Easter morning!*

After Easter morning, the tomb of Jesus is a forgotten item. There was never a stream of pilgrims to the empty tomb. No need! It was commonly accepted that Jesus was alive. His followers believed - and so did His enemies, on the basis of the guards' account. That's why the religious leaders concocted the story they did about the disciples stealing the body of Jesus (although no search was ever made for the body).

### 5) *The actual appearances of Jesus!*

The discovery of the empty tomb, however, did not by itself convince the early Christians of the resurrection of Jesus. It was the physical appearances of the risen Lord that sealed their conviction. These appearances took place not only on Easter Sunday, but also over a period of 40 days and in a variety of locales. Not only was the body of Jesus “found” after the resurrection - but it was alive, breathing, and moving. (We have noted some of the Easter Sunday appearances earlier in this chapter. Other Easter and post-Easter appearances will be related in the next chapter.)

#### SOME SUMMARY STATEMENTS ON THIS CHAPTER!

Easter Sunday changed everything for the followers of, and believers in, Jesus. Despite many attempts by some to disprove the resurrection, Jesus did rise from the dead. The tomb of Jesus was empty. It was empty not because it was the “wrong” tomb. Nor was it empty because the body had been “stolen.” The fact of the empty tomb is not based on hallucinations or hypotheses. It is not based on daydreaming or wishful thinking. The tomb was (and is) empty - because Jesus had risen. That is an historical fact - backed up by legal, religious, and secular records.

There is, however, in my estimation, more evidence to be considered. I’m thinking of the way in which people’s lives have been and continue to be transformed through their encounter with the living Lord. When the disciple Thomas encountered Him a week after the resurrection, he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). The vast majority of believers have not been privileged to see the risen Lord in person - but they have experienced the power of the resurrection in their lives. Although the physical appearances of Jesus continued for only a short time, He has never ceased to be present with His Church - through Word and Sacrament - and His relationship with us has been constant.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is for real - and so will ours be one day. That is the message of the empty tomb. Sin is conquered! Death is defeated! For those who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have been brought to faith in Jesus, the grave has become merely a stepping stone to life - real life - eternal life - life with Jesus in heaven. So together we can say with Paul: “Death is swallowed up in victory! O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 15:54b, 55, 57 - KJV)



*"Life by the One Man - Jesus Christ" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## **X - LIVING PROOF!**

Easter Sunday started off with a “bang” - actually, an earthquake (Matt. 28:2a). The “impossible” happened! A dead man came back to life - through His own power and doing [Matt. 28:6 - Note the wording: He “has risen,” not “was raised,” although other references also attribute the resurrection of Jesus to the other Two Persons of the Trinity as well (see previous chapter for references). Plus, compare the words of Jesus Himself in John 10:17-18]. Jesus had told His disciples that this would happen. But the very human disciples obviously dismissed His words as “just talk.” Then, on Easter morning, the women going to the tomb to complete the burial preparations for Jesus, found the tomb empty and heard an “unbelievable” message from the angel descended from heaven. But as the puzzled, fearful women were returning to tell the disciples of their discovery - per the angel’s instructions - the risen Lord Himself appeared to them (Matt. 28:9-10). What greater proof did they need that their crucified, dead, and buried Master was alive again?

Not long after His appearance to this group of women, He appeared again. This time to His dear friend, Mary, from Magdala (Mark 16:9, John 20:14-16). And this was just the beginning of a number of appearances which Jesus granted to His disciples and other followers as convincing proof that He really was alive - just as He had previously told them would happen. These appearances continued at various times and places for a period of 40 days (Acts 1:3).

While no details are given, we know that sometime on Easter Sunday - after His appearance to Mary Magdalene, but before His appearance to the disciples on Easter evening - He appeared to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34, I Cor. 15:5a). In mid to late afternoon of Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to two disciples (followers) who were making their way from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus, a town about 7 miles away. [Even if you are familiar with this story, it is well worth reading again (Luke 24: 13-35).]

After the Emmaus disciples had hurriedly returned to Jerusalem and were excitedly telling “the Eleven and those with them” about their encounter with the living Lord, who should suddenly appear to this entire group but Jesus Himself (Luke 24:36-40, John 20:19-23)! Luke describes their reaction upon seeing Jesus suddenly standing in their midst. Despite His calming greeting, “Peace be with you,” the disciples were “startled and frightened,” thinking they were seeing a “ghost.” Seeing their fear, Jesus continues to try and calm them - and reassure them. He invites them to look at His

hands and feet. In fact, He encouraged them to touch Him - reminding them that a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as He obviously did. Why does He invite them to look at His hands and feet? He does this to let them see the scars - scars resulting from the nails driven through them, fastening Him to the cross where at least some of them had last seen Him. He wanted them to know, without a doubt, that He was the same Person they had known and been with for the past three years - not some kind of apparition. This was necessary since the last time some of them saw Him, there was a drastic change in His appearance.

Those nail-scarred hands and feet could leave no doubt that this was their Master in the flesh. Luke's comment about the disciples still not believing it "because of joy and amazement" (Luke 24:41) would describe what we might call a "too good to be true" experience. Their Lord and Master had been crucified on Friday. He died. He was buried. They had eyewitnesses to testify to that. Then, earlier this day, they began hearing reports that He had risen. It was reported that He had appeared to different ones. But could it really be? They just couldn't believe it. But now, here He was - standing there in their midst, showing them His nail-pierced hands and feet. He was alive! It was just too good to be true! To convince them further, He asked for something to eat. (In His now glorified body, eating was no longer necessary for Him. He did this for the benefit of the disciples.) They gave Him a piece of broiled fish. He ate it - just like any other living human being would have. Yes, He is alive! He did rise! Their joy and excitement was unbounded!

But there was another reason for His appearance in their midst. He reminded them that all of this had happened for a purpose - according to a Plan; God's Plan from Eternity (Luke 24:44). As He was talking with them, He "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Before, as He told them the same things, their biased understanding did not grasp - did not comprehend - what He was saying. Now, it was different. Not only did they listen more carefully, the Spirit of God enabled them to comprehend what Jesus was saying. Now it all began to make sense. This was possible because of the "blessing" which John says Jesus "breathed" upon His disciples. This was the blessing of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). While the disciples received the gift of the Spirit in that room, it was not to the extent that came upon them on Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-4). That special gift would be granted to them after they had had time to better absorb what had taken place on Good Friday and Easter. But for now, they received what they needed for the immediate future. They were given authority to forgive - and retain, when necessary - the sins of the people. What a tremendous privilege; what an awesome responsibility



- to be servants of Jesus, His representatives, His ambassadors.

Jesus explained to them the planned result of His suffering, death, and resurrection. It was God's Plan from Eternity that Jesus would purchase forgiveness of sins for the world with His own suffering and death. Forgiveness would be available as a gift to all who believed in Him as their Savior. And the disciples were chosen to play a very important part in the Father's Plan to reveal this gift to the world. They were now to go out and preach this Good News to all people (Luke 24:47; Cp. Acts 1:8). They were to tell the nations about God's love for them - a love that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Rom 8:32). What a privilege was being bestowed upon these disciples. They not only were to be the bearers of good news - but the bearers of the Greatest News of all times.

The Apostle John adds some additional thoughts. He is the one who makes note of the fact that the disciples were cowering behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Even after seeing the risen Lord, the disciples - a week later - were still cowering behind locked doors (John 20:26). [Compare this demeanor with the change we see in the disciples after Pentecost; after they had been empowered with the special gift of the Holy Spirit.]

While Luke and John both record Jesus' appearance to the disciples on Easter evening, it is John who reports the absence of Thomas (John 20:24). As soon as these excited and joyful disciples saw Thomas after this, they told him about their life-changing experience (20:25a). You would have expected Thomas to be excited also - perhaps even expressing regrets about not having been there too. But Thomas had a completely unexpected reaction. He expressed skepticism, along with an ultimatum. He insisted on seeing the Lord himself - including the nail marks in His hands, plus placing his hand where the spear had pierced His side. Until that happens, he said, he would not believe what the disciples were telling him (20:25b). [Is there any wonder that he came to be known as "doubting Thomas"?]

The omniscient Christ knew Thomas' doubts. The love that kept Jesus on the cross also for Thomas did not let Thomas live in his doubt and uncertainty any longer than necessary. The following Sunday, the disciples were assembled in the same house as previously. This time Thomas was present. Again, without notice, Jesus appeared to them behind their locked doors. He extended the same greeting as before, "Peace be with you." Then directing His attention - and His words - to Thomas, He invited Thomas to do what he had insisted on a week earlier (20:26-27). Thomas' reaction when thus confronted by the Risen Lord? A confession that showed his doubts and

uncertainties no longer existed. A confession that each of us would do well to echo each time the Savior confronts us in His Word: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

John also records the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples, as a group, after His resurrection (21:1-14). It was by the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1) and the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1). Sometime after Jesus’ second appearance to His disciples, a week after Easter, they - per Jesus’ own instructions (through the angel’s message to the women, Matt. 28:7 and Mark 16:7, and His own words to the women, Matt. 28:10) - traveled back to Galilee, their homeland (cp. Acts 1:11a). [Judas was the only disciple from Judea.] At Simon’s suggestion, six of the disciples joined him in going fishing one night. In addition to Simon, there were Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, plus two unnamed disciples. It is not surprising that Peter, James, and John were among these fishermen (See Matt. 4:18,21-22). Fishing and/or boating was not uncommon for those who lived near this body of water (Sea of Galilee).

Experienced fishermen though they were, this night’s toil ended with the same result that many fishermen have experienced: “They caught nothing” (John 21:3b). This was not the only time they were unsuccessful, however (Luke 5:1-5a). They were soon to find out that a common denominator with that previous fishing trip was going to change everything again (Luke 5:5b-6). As the horizon was beginning to brighten, these disciples became aware of someone standing on the shore. It was their “common denominator” - Jesus - but they weren’t aware of that just yet. He called out to them, inquiring about their success - or lack thereof. Exhausted, exasperated, and possibly even a little embarrassed (they were, after all, experienced fishermen), they had to admit the truth (John 21:5b).

The Stranger on the shore then encouraged them to do something that didn’t seem too logical at first. “Throw your net on the right side of the boat.” (John 21:6a) What was He thinking? What difference would that little distance make? They had been fishing all night - probably casting their net on both sides of the boat - without success. Why would this cast be any different? For whatever reason, they followed the Stranger’s suggestion, though. When they did, they temporarily forgot all about the Stranger on shore. Why? Because their net became so filled with fish - large fish - that they couldn’t even haul it aboard (John 21:6b). It was John who first realized Who that Stranger was. He blurted out to Simon, “It’s the Lord.” (I wonder how long it took the disciples to remember that previous fishing trip that Luke reports in chapter 5 of his Gospel? We’ll come back to that trip shortly.)

Simon, with customary impetuosity, jumped into the water and began swimming for shore - forgetting all about the fish in their net. The other six - also excited, but exercising more restraint than Simon - started heading for shore too, dragging the net and fish behind the boat. Arriving at the shore, they saw a fire of burning coals with fish and bread already being prepared. (Do you catch the miracle here?) Jesus invited them to add some of the fish they had caught. While their fish was cooking, the disciples dragged the net ashore and began counting their catch. John was so impressed with the first miracle that day - the number of large fish in the net - that he remembered the exact number to the day that he wrote his Gospel: 153. With their fish safely on shore, Jesus invited them to have breakfast (John 21:7-12).

Now, back to that previous fishing trip that Luke talks about in the 5th chapter of his Gospel. On that trip, too, after a night of unsuccessful fishing, the Lord instructed His disciples to "try again." The results were the same as this day. Their nets filled with fish - so many that their nets began to tear (Luke 5:6). [Notice how John - writing about the second such catch - probably remembered that first experience and made note of the fact that despite the large number of fish, their net did not tear this time (21:11).] Of greater import than the fish or nets, however, is how Jesus followed up each of these fish miracles. He used the first occasion to call Simon (as well as James and John) to full-time discipleship (Luke 5:10-11).

On this second occasion, Jesus reinstated Peter to full discipleship after his three-fold denial of Jesus in the early morning hours of Good Friday (John 21:15-17). [I wonder if the fire of burning coals (v. 9), reminded Peter of the fire of burning coals in the high priest's courtyard where he warmed himself as he denied his Lord (John 18:17-18, 25-27)?] Peter had denied his Lord three times. Jesus now questions Simon three times. Notice that in each instance, Jesus addresses him as "Simon, son of John" (John 21:15, 16, 17). This is in stark contrast to Jesus' words to Simon in Matthew 16:17-18. In John 1:42, when Andrew brought his brother, Simon, to Jesus, after explaining to Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (v. 41), Jesus looked at Simon, called him by name and told him, "You will be called Cephas." (Both the Aramaic "Cephas" and the Greek "Petros" mean "rock.") Simon was to be known as the "rock" man. In Matthew 16, after Simon's strong confession declaring Jesus to be "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus declared him to be "Peter," the "rock man." Now, in these post-denial days, Jesus addresses him only as "Simon, son of John." Simon had failed to act like the "rock man" when confronted by some servants in the high priest's courtyard, and so had forfeited this title.

The Lord's three questions to Simon, and especially the command that followed each of Simon's answers, were intended to formally and publicly reinstate Peter into his office as the "rock man," and into full discipleship once again. These three questions, Peter's answers, and the subsequent commands are all interesting and important. Some believe that three questions are merely a reminder to Simon of his three-fold denial. They are reminders - but much, much more. To better comprehend the full import of these questions and answers, we need to understand a little about some of the Greek words that are used here. In the English translation, the word "love" is used in all three questions and answers. But in the Greek, two different words are used. It is true, the English translations are not incorrect in using the word "love" in all instances. But in the Greek, these words for "love" have different emphases.

To explain, the Greek language has three different words which can be translated "love." The noun versions of those words are: *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*. *Eros* generally has a sensual connotation, as we see in the English word "erotic." This is not to imply that this word always has a negative implication, for it can also describe the conjugal relations between husband and wife. (This is not one of the two words used for love in this account.) *Philia* has the connotation of "affection," "like," "brotherly love." *Agape* however, refers to the highest type of love possible. (John 3:16 gives us a good example of that kind of love.) The latter two Greek words are those used by John in recording the interchange between Jesus and Simon on the lake shore.

Jesus begins by asking Simon, "do you love (agape) Me more than these?" In other words, do you love Me more than these (other disciples) do? The words "more than these" obviously refer to Peter's boasting in Matt. 26:33 and Mark 14:29, where he places his love and loyalty to Jesus over and above the other disciples' love for Jesus. (And yet, it was Simon - not the others - who denied his Lord three times. ) [NOTE: Jesus was aware that Peter would deny Him, as is evidenced by the above two references. Jesus was also aware that Simon would "return" to Him - through repentance (Luke 22:62) - and instructed Peter to strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-32).] The wording of this question could not have escaped Simon's attention. One can't help but wonder how many times Simon had "replayed" these events in his mind since that Friday morning.

Simon's answer shows that he had learned a lot since he had failed his Master. His proud boasting was now gone - replaced by deep humility. He wouldn't dare make any comparisons to the other disciples. In fact, he doesn't even put his love for Jesus on the same high plain of love that Jesus asks about. His answer merely states, "Lord, You know that I like (philia) You." He is counting on the Lord's omniscience to

know what is in his heart, but he just can't bring himself to acknowledge an "agape" love for Jesus. Peter is completely humble now - devoid of all pride and boasting. He is throwing himself completely on the Lord's omniscience and mercy.

The Lord's omniscience sees that Peter is sincere. He accepts Simon's confession and profession. And with the first of a three-part command, He begins reinstating Peter into his apostolic office. He tells Peter, "Feed My lambs." [In the second and third part of His command to Peter, Jesus speaks of His sheep. But Jesus mentions His lambs first. When we think of Jesus' comments in Matthew 18:1-6, 10; 19:13-15, and Mark 10:13-16, it is not difficult to understand why. In these references, we see the special love that Jesus has for children - the "lambs." By giving this command to Peter, Jesus is revealing His intense desire that these lambs receive very special care - not only by Peter, but also by those who follow in Peter's footsteps; those who have the pastoral care for the eternal souls of His precious lambs.]

Jesus continues with a second question. "Simon, son of John, do you love (agape) Me?" While this second question is similar to the first - and thus may cause some to wonder why it was asked - notice that Jesus does not include a comparison with the other disciples. But Peter is not taken "off the hook" by this omission. On the contrary, this question probes even deeper than the first. Whereas the first question draws attention to comparing Peter's love for Jesus with the love of the other disciples for Jesus, this question goes directly to Peter's heart alone. Jesus is asking, in effect, whether Peter really loves (agape) Him. Peter alone is the object of this query. With his three-fold denial in mind, Jesus wants Peter to examine his own heart to see whether there is any love (agape) for Jesus there at all. Peter's answer is the same as before. "Yes, Lord, You know that I like (philia) You."

In response, Jesus broadens the command He gives to Peter, "Shepherd (be a shepherd to) My sheep." Jesus is now including all His flock, not just the lambs. The "shepherd-sheep" imagery conjures up thoughts of the special relationship between a shepherd and his flock. David speaks of that relationship between the Good Shepherd and His flock in Psalm 23. Jesus Himself speaks of that relationship when He describes Himself as the Good Shepherd - and what that Good Shepherd would do (and did do) for His sheep - in John 10:1-18. Jesus is not giving absolute authority over the flock to Peter, as some have claimed. Notice that Jesus still calls them "My" sheep. It is clear that Peter understood it this way. In his later years, as he wrote his First General Epistle, he encourages fellow pastors (undershepherds) to be "shepherds of *God's flock* that is under your care," until the "Chief Shepherd appears" (I Peter 5:2-4). This second command also shows public reinstatement into office. Even though

Peter could only muster acknowledgment of “having affection” (philia) for Jesus, Jesus is telling Peter to use that affection in tending His flock. As he shepherds the sheep of Jesus, he will prove his affection for his Lord.

Jesus is not finished yet. He questions Peter a third time. Notice that in verse 17, John twice calls attention to the fact that this is a third question. Peter denied his Lord three times. It is only appropriate that in his public reinstatement, he should acknowledge his love for Jesus three times. John points out that Peter was grieved over this third question. We may want to ask “why?”. Peter denied his Lord three times, why should he be grieved now because the Lord questions him three times? The answer to the cause of Peter’s grief cannot be found in the English translations of this account. For in each instance, the English word “love” is used. But remember, the Greek language has different words for “love” - each emphasizing a different aspect of “love.” In the first two questions, Jesus asked Simon if he “loved” (agape) Him. Peter replied that yes, he “liked” (philia) the Lord.

The cause for Peter’s grief is that the third time, Jesus used the same word (philia) that Peter used in his first two answers. Jesus was asking, in effect, “Simon, are you sure that you even ‘like’ (philia) Me?” This is what grieved Peter. Not that this was a third question, but that Jesus was probing still deeper into Peter’s heart and wanted Peter to be absolutely certain whether there was even “affection” in his heart for Jesus. Peter was to set aside all pride, all pretense, any defensive feelings - and search out his true feelings for Jesus. For did he not even deny knowing this Man when accused of being one of His followers? If Peter was to resume his role as an Apostle, there must be no doubt about his love and loyalty for the Master. The Lord needed faithful followers, “rock” men to carry on the work He would leave for them when He returned to His heavenly home.

Though not stated, I would not be surprised if Peter hesitated a moment or two before responding to this third question. Then appealing once again to the omniscience of Jesus, he attested his affection (philia) for the Lord. For the third time it is obvious that all of Peter’s sinful pride is gone - replaced by quiet humility. Probably with bowed head, Peter responds, “Lord, you know all things; You know that I like (philia) You.” The public reinstatement is completed then with the third part of the Lord’s command to Peter: “Feed My sheep!” The second command instructed Peter to “shepherd,” take care of, oversee, the flock. This final command shifts back to “feeding” the flock, that is, teach and preach the Word of God in its truth and purity; administer the Sacraments according to Christ’s institution, so the flock will be well fed.

As the unofficial head of the Apostles, Peter's responsibility to the "lambs" and "sheep" of Jesus' flock had just been outlined by the "Chief Shepherd" of the entire flock. This is also what Peter was to emphasize to the rest of the Apostles (and later, other "elders" or pastors) as Jesus instructed him on "the night in which He was betrayed," as recorded by Luke in chapter 22, verse 32 ("when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brothers"). Standing beside a fire of burning coals, Peter forfeited his office of discipleship by denying his Lord three times. Now, also standing beside a fire of burning coals, he humbly confessed his love for his Lord three times and was reinstated to this office by the risen, living, and forgiving Lord.

The Lord has one more thing for Peter (John 21:18-19). On Thursday night of Holy Week, in the Upper Room, Jesus had told His disciples that He would soon be leaving them, but that they could not come with Him (John 13:33). When Peter asked Jesus, "Where are You going?" (13:36a), Jesus responded, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." (13:36b) Peter protested and stated, "Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You." (13:37) The other Evangelists report much the same thing (Matt. 26:35a, Mark 14:31a, Luke 22:33). In all four instances, these conversations are connected with Jesus' warning to Peter about his impending denial. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report Peter's statement about being ready to die with Jesus rather than disown Him. In his account of this post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee, John records how the Lord puts all of this together as He predicts another event in Peter's life.

Jesus reminded Peter that in his younger days, he pretty much went where he wanted to go and did what he wanted to do. But, the day is coming, says Jesus, when this will no longer be the case. Others would determine where he would go and what he would do - and this would not always be according to Peter's wishes. John explains in 21:19 that Jesus was indicating the kind of death by which Peter would "glorify God." While no specific manner of death is described, it is clear that Peter would die the death of a martyr. We should not read into Jesus' words, "lead you where you do not want to go," that Peter would resist a martyr's death. Jesus is simply indicating that Peter would have no control over the situation.

Jesus is also following up a previous comment, on Maundy Thursday night, about Peter not being able to follow Jesus now (he would not die with Jesus, even though Peter stated that he would be willing to do that), but he would follow Him later (John 13:36b). Jesus is telling Peter that in time he would follow Jesus in death. And his death, after a long and successful ministry, would indeed "glorify God"

(21:19). Regarding the time to which Jesus was referring, Peter did lay down his life for his Lord. Eusebius, an early church historian, tells us that Peter was crucified - like his Lord. But unlike his Lord, Peter requested to be crucified upside down. [It is reported that Peter made this request because he did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Jesus. Thus the “upside down cross” has become a symbol of Peter’s martyrdom. History also tells us that Peter was crucified in Rome, by Emperor Nero, in 64 A.D. To the best of human knowledge, Peter was the only Apostle to be crucified, although all the other disciples (save one, John) also were martyred in one manner or another.]

Other post-resurrection appearances include His meeting with the Eleven on a Galilean mountain, where He had instructed them to go (Matt. 28:16-20). Exactly when this took place is not revealed. It was at this time, however, when He gave His disciples (and the Church) what is now known as the Great Commission. [We will comment on this in a later chapter.] St. Paul (I Cor. 15:6-8) mentions four post-Easter appearances. (1) He speaks of Jesus appearing to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time. (It cannot be definitely ascertained when or where this happened.) (2) Paul reports a meeting with James. Again, no information regarding the time or location. But it is believed that this James was the Lord’s own half-brother (Matt. 13:55). [This could certainly explain James’ change of heart and mind concerning his half-brother. Before, Jesus’ siblings did not believe in Him (John 7:5). After the resurrection, however, there was a change in their thinking and they joined the Apostolic band in Jerusalem after the Ascension (Acts 1:14). James is one of those siblings, and later became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Gal. 1:18-19, 2:9), and the author of the Epistle which bears his name (James 1:1).] (3) “All the Apostles.” This could have either been His meeting with the disciples on the mountain in Galilee - or on the Mount of Olives when He ascended. (More on His ascension in the next chapter.) (4) Paul includes himself as one to whom the Lord appeared - this being on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6) - an experience that forever changed the life of Saul of Tarsus. This concluded the recorded appearances of the risen and living Lord. If there were others, that information is not given in Holy Writ.

#### COMMENTS:

As we stated in the last chapter, the Christian religion stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The Scriptures do report the resurrection in all four Gospels. That should be sufficient for the Christian Church. But the Church is made up of sinful human beings. Saints, to be sure, but sinners at the



same time. Human beings who are subjected to the spiritual assaults and temptations of Satan. And if Satan can create doubt in the mind of any Christian over the certainty of Jesus' resurrection, he would be delighted. So in addition to reporting the resurrection of Jesus, the Scriptures also report a number of bodily appearances by the resurrected Savior to His disciples and friends for a period of 40 days (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20 & 21, Acts 1:3; 10:40-41, I Cor. 15:4-8).

The Lord did not want even one of His children to be in doubt about the success of His work for the redemption and salvation of His people - and the resurrection is the proof of that success. For as Paul explains, if Christ has not been raised, the preaching about Christ's death and resurrection is useless (I Cor. 15:14) and our faith is worthless, because we would still be filled with sin (I Cor. 15:17). Then God's Plan for the world would have failed. For God planned from Eternity to have His Son enter this world as a human being, fulfill the Law perfectly for His fallen creatures, take the entire load of sin to the cross and pay for it with His innocent suffering and death, sanctify the believer's grave by the burial of His Son, and overcome death and the grave by His glorious and victorious resurrection on the third day. And praise be to God, His Plan did not fail. Jesus did not fail. He carried out the Father's eternal Plan fully and completely. And the appearances of the resurrected and living Lord are unmistakable proofs to that end.

There are some other things we can learn from these appearances of Jesus after He had risen from the dead. Or, to be more accurate, we can learn from what Jesus said during some of those appearances, for as Luke tells us in Acts 1:3b, Jesus "spoke about the Kingdom of God." That was always foremost in His mind while on earth. And now that He was about to leave the earth, according to His visible presence, He wanted His followers to carry on that important work. Luke reports this in his Gospel, chapter 24, verses 44-49. While Jesus was addressing these words primarily to the Apostles, we know from the writings of the Apostles that the privilege of telling the Good News about the Christ is given to all believers (Cp .Eph. 4:11-13, for example). This is a privilege that has been reserved only for the children of God. Even the angels have been denied this glorious privilege, with only a few exceptions, such as the Christmas angels and the angels at the empty tomb. (More on this privilege in the final chapter.)

We can learn from the experience of "doubting" Thomas as well. Thomas did not believe the words of his fellow disciples when they told him about the Lord's appearance to them. He demanded proof. More importantly, however, he did not believe the words of the Lord Himself, Who had told the disciples on a number of

occasions that He would rise on the third day. When Thomas was confronted with the “proof” he demanded, his tone changed drastically. Now he could only exclaim, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus’ response to Thomas should be of special interest to each of us today. Jesus reminded Thomas that he believed because he had seen; because he had gotten the “proof” he demanded. But He calls those “blessed” who believe without physical proof. None of us living today has seen, with our physical eyes, the risen Lord. And we don’t need to. We have His Word - His written Word - in Holy Scripture. This Word is just as true and certain as the words He spoke to His disciples while He was with them. By the power of His Spirit working in our hearts, may we always cling to and believe His inspired Word to us - because it is true.

There are a couple other lessons we can learn - both from Jesus’ words to Peter at the time of his reinstatement as an Apostle. The first is the importance that Jesus put on the “lambs” in His flock. That was His first charge to Peter: “Feed My lambs.” Jesus showed that concern for children during His public ministry, as was noted previously. These little ones are not to be ignored or overlooked by the Church today. Because they are young; because they are immature; because they have juvenile ways, they are sometimes looked upon as unimportant in the Kingdom. They are sometimes even avoided or shunned by no less than the called ministers of Christ. But look again at the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:1-6 & 10, 19:13-15, and Mark 10:13-16. The called ministers of Christ, Christian parents, and the Church in general should never forget those words. Jesus came to this earth, suffered and died, for these “lambs” as much as for any adult. It is a cliché, to be sure, but nevertheless true: “The youth of today is the church of tomorrow.” They will be faithful leaders of the Church tomorrow only to the degree and extent that we feed (spiritually) and prepare them today. Parents, the Lord has entrusted an immortal soul to you in the form of each of your children. Raise up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), tell them Bible stories, teach them to pray, pray with and for them, take them to church and Sunday School. For in so doing, you will be “training a child (your child) in the way he should go” (Prov. 22:6).

The second lesson we can learn is from the questions Jesus addressed to Peter about his love for the Lord. If Jesus were to ask us today, “Do you love (agape) Me?” what would be our answer? Would our answer be a strong, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love (agape) You!”? Any time is a good time to look deeply into our own hearts and contemplate our measure of love for Jesus. To be sure, we will find many examples in our lives of betrayals, denials, secret sins and public sins, hesitations to confess Him, deliberate transgressions of His holy Law, sins of omission and sins of commission.

But may we also see, by the power of God's Spirit working in us, contrition and repentance, the simple but sincere words, "I'm sorry." And may this be followed by trust in the blood-bought forgiveness Jesus earned for us on the cross, and a resolve to amend, to change our lives, our thoughts, our words, our actions, to follow more closely in the footsteps of our Savior. For in this way, we can not only say, but demonstrate, our heartfelt love (agape) for Jesus, for the Father, and for the Holy Spirit.



*"The Lord Will Come Down . . . With the Trumpet Call of God" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## **XI - HE WILL RETURN!**

After His glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday, the risen Lord appeared to His disciples and others for a period of 40 days. Jesus used these periodic appearances to reassure and convince His followers that He really was alive. He was the same Lord they knew before His crucifixion; the same Lord who had walked with them, talked with them, ate with them, performed miracles in their presence. He gave them 40 days before He removed His visible presence from them to give them time to think about what had happened; to recall the things He had told them; to reassess and discuss their time with Him (Acts 1:3). As He met with them in His final days before returning to His heavenly home, He spoke about many of the same things that He had told them before (Luke 24:44). One of His favorite topics was “the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3b). He spoke about that Kingdom which exists “From Eternity to Eternity.” Before, they had difficulty comprehending what this all meant. But now, Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures better - though not totally or completely (Luke 24:45-46). Now, things appeared in a new light. Now, things that He had said - and was saying again - began to fall into place, began to fit together in a wonderful Plan. He was preparing them for the time - rapidly approaching - when He would no longer appear to them in His visible presence, but would call upon them to carry out the work He would leave for them to do.

Then that day arrived. He led His disciples out to the Mount of Olives, near the village of Bethany, where He had spent many delightful hours with His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 24:50, Acts 1:12). Sometime prior to this day, Jesus gave His disciples instructions on what to do - or not do - in the days immediately following His ascension. He told them to remain in the city (Jerusalem) until they had received “power from on high” (Luke 24:29. Cp Acts 1:4-5). This “power” was the “gift My Father promised.” Jesus had spoken of this gift in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday night (John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13). This was, of course, a reference to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, an event which took place 10 days after the Lord’s Ascension. It appears from the two accounts of these instructions, both penned by St. Luke (Luke 24:42-49, Acts 1:4-5), that Jesus spoke these words on Easter evening (note the references to “eating,” as well as the context in Luke 24:36 ff).

On the Mount of Olives, just moments before the risen Lord would take His leave from them, the disciples reverted back momentarily to a familiar - but erroneous -

idea that had occupied the minds of many of their countrymen previously. Unmindful of what was going to happen very soon, the disciples questioned Jesus about whether He was going to restore the Kingdom to Israel at this time (Acts 1:6). He had spoken to them many times about the “Kingdom” - the “Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3b). But even though He had “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45), the ingrained thinking of the children of Israel for many years surfaced once again. Could the disciples have been thinking about the same Kingdom that Jesus was talking about? Possibly. It is much more likely that they were thinking about the hope that Israel entertained of a glorious restoration of a mighty earthly rule to be established by the Promised Messiah. According to this thinking, Israel would return to the glory days of Kings David and Solomon. This was not the Kingdom Jesus had been speaking about. But His response to the disciples seems to imply that they were thinking of that Kingdom.

Jesus does not bother to try and explain again. That deeper understanding of this Kingdom would have to wait until they had received “the power from on high” (Luke 24:49b). He simply - but tersely - told them that the timetable of the Father’s plans was none of their business at this time (Acts 1:7). The Kingdom would be restored to Israel - the spiritual Israel (Rom 9:6b; Gal. 3:26-27, 29; 6:16) - but in God’s own time and way. Now Jesus wants to focus their attention on the “here and now.” They should be concerned about the things He has in store for them; things they should be busying themselves with; things that pertain to the Kingdom of God - and their role in it. He spells out for them - in precise language - their role in this Kingdom (Acts 1:8). They are to be “witnesses” for Him. They are to speak of Him, for Him, about Him. They are to tell the Good News of His redemptive work for sinful mankind. Like the shepherds of old (Luke 2:17), they were to make known the message of God’s love for the world.

And where were they to begin? Right there in Jerusalem! Right there - where the Messiah had given His life; had shed His blood; had suffered and died for the sins of all mankind of all ages! Right there - where this message was needed so badly! Right there - where the Messiah was rejected and abused and scorned and crucified. These men were to be witnesses like no others could be. They had been with Jesus for approximately three years. They had heard His teachings, seen His miracles, experienced His love. They had seen Him arrested in the Garden. Peter had seen His look of love after he had denied Him three times - even as the Lord had predicted. John was there under the cross - an eyewitness to His unspeakable and indescribable suffering. They had all seen and talked with the risen Lord. They had heard from the

Master's own lips why all this had to happen - so that repentance and forgiveness of sins could be preached in His name (Luke 24:46- 47). And now, Jesus was calling upon them to be witnesses to these things, even as John acknowledges in I John 1:1-3.

They were to make known all these things to all the world, beginning in Jerusalem. Jesus had told them this on Easter evening (Luke 24:46-48). He was repeating their assignment now - 40 days later - just before leaving them to return to His heavenly home (Acts 1:8). These men did start in Jerusalem. In due time, the mother church of all Christendom was established there. But the work was not to stop in Jerusalem. On the contrary, Jerusalem was just the starting place. These witnesses were to take the message of God's love for the world to "all nations" (Luke 24:47b), to "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). During the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus met with His disciples on a mountain in Galilee, where He had instructed them to go previously. There He had given them similar instructions, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19a). Jesus had come to this earth to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world, of all mankind. Thus, all the world, all nations, all mankind should hear this message. (The Books of Acts is the history of the spread of this message through the first two-thirds of the first century.)

Eleven men! Eleven men were given an "impossible" assignment. Impossible? By themselves, yes. But the Lord did not ask - or expect - them to carry out their assignment by themselves. Yes, there were others who assisted them. There was Matthias who was added to the ranks of the Eleven, to replace Judas (Acts 1:26). Later there was Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the Church (I Cor. 15:8-10). And there were still others - many nameless - who helped with this work (Eph. 4:11-13). And there are those who to this day are making known the message of God's love to the world. But this is not what I meant when earlier in this paragraph I said that the Lord did not ask or expect His disciples to carry out this assignment by themselves. For even with the countless others who have been added to the list of "witnesses," they could not have carried out this assignment by themselves.

And yet, that assignment has been carried out. The Gospel, the Good News of God's love for the world, has been preached - at one time or another - in all the world, to all nations. Yes, there are parts of our world today where the Gospel is restricted - even prohibited. But at some time in the history of the post-Easter Church, the Gospel has been brought to every nation on this earth. So Jesus' instructions to His disciples was not only a command, an expectation, but also a promise as well. There have been "witnesses" of Christ's work of salvation throughout

the world. [This is not to say, however, that the witnessing for Christ has been completed. There is still much work to be done. There are still millions upon millions who do not believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior; many who have never even heard the Good News of Jesus Christ coming to this earth to obtain salvation for all mankind. We will speak more on this in the next chapter.]

Why did Jesus know that His disciples - and those who followed them - would be able to proclaim the Gospel to all the world? He told the Eleven why they would succeed. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." (Acts 1:8a) There's the answer. That's the secret. The power of the Holy Spirit. The power that Jesus promised His disciples in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday night (references listed earlier in this chapter). But before they would receive this power, Jesus must return to heaven (John 16:7). That would be happening very soon now. But He wanted to reassure His disciples once again that He would not leave them without hope or help. He wanted them to know that the power of the Holy Spirit Himself would accompany them in their work and assist them with that work. [Isn't it comforting to know that our Lord never asks His people to carry out His commands without the assurance first that He will provide the necessary aid and assistance? Consider, for example, His assurance and promise regarding the Great Commission -Matt. 28:18-20].

Now, the time has come! Luke tells us that Jesus "lifted up His hands and blessed them" (24:50b). One final blessing before the Master removes His visible presence from them. And while He was blessing them, He was taken up from them before their very eyes (Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9a). Jesus did not suddenly vanish as He had done following His appearances to them during the previous 40 days. This leaving was different. Whereas He appeared and disappeared and reappeared to them during those 40 days, the disciples were to be aware that this time was different. He would not be appearing to them visibly any more on this earth. His presence was now slowly and visibly being taken from them as He ascended, upward, heavenward. With arms outstretched in blessing, He majestically rises higher and higher until a cloud hides Him from their sight (Acts 1:9b).

This was not the kind of cloud that enveloped the top of the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5). It was not like the pillar of cloud that guided the Israelites through the wilderness (Ex. 13:21). It was not like the cloud that covered Mount Sinai as Moses prepared to meet the Lord there, where he received the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19:9, 16). It was not like the cloud that would come down and stay at the entrance to the "Tent of Meeting" (Tabernacle) while the Lord spoke to Moses (Ex. 33:9,40:34).



It was not like the cloud that filled the Temple of the Lord when the priests took the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the Most Holy Place of the Temple (1 Kings 8:3, 4, 6, 10). Nor was it like the clouds upon which Jesus will return to judge the world on Judgment Day (Matt. 24:30b, 26:64).

It was just an ordinary cloud that hid the risen and rising Lord from the disciples' sight, although it was at this particular location at this particular time probably by divine intervention. It played an important role on that Ascension Day. For when that cloud hid the Savior from their sight, He was immediately transferred into the heavenly realms. Jesus was instantly transported into the glories of heaven - seated at the right hand of the Father, in all the majesty and glory and power which had been His from eternity (John 17:5). The cloud's purpose was to remove the physical body of Jesus from the gazing eyes of the disciples. Jesus was not to continue rising on into the regions of outer space. He had now entered eternity again - where there is no space (as we know it) or time or other physical restrictions. But the disciples continued to gaze up toward the heavens - probably hoping for one last glimpse of their ascending Master. If only the cloud would move on. But even if it had, their eyes would have seen nothing; the visible presence of Jesus was gone.

Because the gaze of these disciples was focused upward, they did not at first notice another phenomenon taking place right beside them. Out of nowhere, two heavenly messengers appeared (Acts 1:10). It was probably the words of these angels that brought the disciples "back to earth." The presence of the angels at this time was to convince the disciples of the reality of Jesus' Ascension. His physical presence would no longer be with them. They would see Him no more until they themselves entered the realms of heaven upon their death. But there was another reason for the angels' appearance. They began directing the disciples' attention to the day when Jesus would return to this earth. They addressed the disciples as "Men of Galilee." (Remember, Judas was the only disciple not from Galilee. And he, of course, was no longer with them.)

The angels addressed a question to these disciples in a fashion similar to the question addressed to the women at the empty tomb. (Whether these were the same angels, however, we do not know.) The angels at the open tomb asked the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5b) In other words, you will not find the One for whom you look here in the tomb. The reason? "He is not here. He has risen!" (Luke 24:6a) Similarly, the angels on the Mount of Ascension ask the disciples, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?" (Acts 1:11a). In other words, the One you are looking for is not there any longer. He is gone. But, take

heart, “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11b) The meaning? He left visibly. He will return visibly. He went to heaven. He will return from heaven. He went away bodily. He will return bodily.

The angels do not spell out that when Jesus returns, He will come in all His glory, on the clouds of heaven, accompanied by His holy angels (Matt. 24:30-31). Neither do the angels explain that His return will be for the final judgment (Matt. 25:31-32). Nor do the angels say that every eye shall see Him when He returns - even those who pierced Him (Rev. 1:7a). But that is the way it will be! Yes, our ascended Lord will return. He will return in power and great glory. He will return visibly. He will descend on the clouds of heaven (Luke 21:27). Whereas a cloud hid Him from the disciples’ gaze as He ascended, when He returns, the clouds will draw attention to His coming. They will call attention to His presence and His power - just as the clouds did on the occasions mentioned in a previous paragraph in this chapter. He will return with His angels who will gather His elect from every corner of the earth (Matt. 24:31). He will return for the Great Judgment.

The first time He came to this earth, He came as Savior. When He returns, it will be as Judge. Matthew 25:31-46 gives us a little glimpse into what will happen on that great and awesome day. All nations - all people from every land of every age - will be gathered before Him as He sits on His throne in all His heavenly glory. He will separate the people into the believers and the unbelievers. The believers (sheep) He will place to His right, while the unbelievers (goats) will be placed to His left. Then comes the judgment. He will issue an invitation to those on His right, “Come...take your inheritance.” Then He will list a number of reasons why they will receive the inheritance (vs. 35-36). No mention is made of any sins. Why? Didn’t they sin during their earthly lives? Oh, yes! But those sins were forgiven through their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, He calls attention to their works! But doesn’t the Bible tell us that no one is saved by their works, by obeying the Law? Indeed it does (Gal. 2:16, 3:11, 5:4; Eph. 2:8-9). Scripture is very clear that we are saved by faith alone. Not some kind of a generalized faith, some vague faith in some kind of a Supreme Being somewhere. We are saved by a very specific faith, a focused faith - a faith in Jesus Christ, God’s one and only Son, as our Savior. But since we cannot “see” faith, Jesus calls attention to the works of the believers which are evidence of their faith (James 2:14, 17, 26).

What about those on His left, the unbelievers? Jesus calls attention to the lack or absence of works in their lives - which shows the absence or lack of faith.

Consequently, the verdict pronounced upon them will be, “Depart from Me.” And what a damning verdict it is. They are forever doomed to the eternal fires of hell (Matt. 25:41). But notice that even in this verdict, there is evidence of God’s love for the human race. Jesus speaks of the fires of hell being “prepared for the devil and his angels.” It was never God’s intention to condemn His human creatures to the fires of hell. It was only after His creatures turned against Him, then later when some of them refused to accept the salvation and forgiveness purchased and won for them by the innocent suffering and death of His Son - and continued to reject God and His salvation till the day they died - that God found it necessary, to be true to His own justice, to condemn the unbelievers to such a horrible eternity. (Compare Ezek. 33:11, I Tim 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9b. Also Matt. 23:37 and Acts 7:51.) Other Bible passages which speak of the Judgment on the Last Day include: Dan. 12:2, John 5:28-29, 2 Cor. 5:10, and Hebrews 9:28.

Can we know ahead of time whether we will be on Christ’s right or His left? Indeed we can! The Word of God gives us the answer. It is summed up in that beautiful verse that has come to be known as “The Gospel in a nutshell” - John 3:16. Perhaps you know those words by heart. Perhaps you are not that familiar with those words. Either way, take your Bible in hand and read those words - slowly, thoughtfully - and let God’s Spirit work in your heart the meaning, the certainty, of those words. Notice that the initiating action is all God’s. He loved... and He gave. He loved the world - all nations, all tribes, all people, YOU and me. His love was so great that He withheld nothing - not even His own Son - so that the world could be saved. Now, all who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin will be on His right on that Day of Judgment. They will not perish, will not be condemned to the fires of hell, but will be given the eternal inheritance of heaven. They will live eternally in heaven. Other Bible verses worthy of note in this regard are John 3:36, 17:3; Rom 10:9, among others. The promise of Jesus in John 10:27-28 is another comforting passage.

How can we know if we “believe” in Jesus as our Savior from sin? Simple. If you accept as true what the Bible - the Word of God - tells us about Jesus coming to this earth to suffer and die for the sins of the world (that means YOUR sins, too); if you trust that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day - even as He predicted - as a guarantee of your salvation (Rom 4:25); if you believe His Words, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19); if you acknowledge that Jesus is the Lord - your Lord, you are a “believer” (Rom 10:9). Then the expectation of the Psalmist (16:11) will be your expectation - and experience - in eternity. The critical point in all this is to place your hope of salvation in no one other than Jesus Christ, God’s Son. For no one else suffered and died for your sins. Hence no one else can forgive your sins.

(Read John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 10:43, 16:30b-31.) If Jesus means all this and more to you, then you will demonstrate your faith by following the commands of the Greatest Commandment, as well as the Second Greatest (Matt. 22:37-39) - not to try and save yourself or try to earn "credits" with God, but to show the world your great love and obedience to the God who has already saved you. And the "works" you do in demonstrating your faith will be referred to by Jesus on the Day of Judgment as He includes you in His invitation to "Come... take your inheritance."

Not so with the "unbelievers" - those on the Lord's left at the Judgment. They are those who do not believe in Jesus as their Savior; who, in fact, reject Jesus as their Savior (John 3:36b), and therefore have no saving faith in their hearts. Basically, they care nothing about God - and in many instances, their fellow man. To be sure, there are some unbelievers who are "good" people in the eyes of the world. They are good citizens, good neighbors; they help others in need; they pay their bills and obey the laws for the most part. But if the truth is known, most if not all of those "good" deeds are done for selfish reasons. They are basically self-centered; their actions are motivated by love for self, by the desire to make themselves feel good about themselves and/or to impress others with their "good deeds." This is on one end of the scale. On the other end are those who will go to any extreme, do whatever is necessary, to get what they want - no matter what impact this may have on others. But none of these believe in Jesus as their Savior. None of these have faith in their hearts. Consequently, none of even the best of their "good deeds" (in the eyes of the world) merit any "credit" or have any worth in God's eyes. For as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebr. 11:6. See also Isa. 64:6). And the verdict handed down to them is: "Depart from Me."

Are the unbelievers concerned about this now? No! For whatever reason, this is not a matter of concern for them now. It will become a matter of concern only when it's too late; when they hear those heart-wrenching words of the Judge: "Depart from Me." Then all the regrets in the world will be of no avail. Is there no hope for any of the unbelievers then? Not on that Day of Judgment. There would have been during their lifetimes. If they would have listened to the pleadings of the Holy Spirit - through the written or spoken Word of God; if they would have repented and turned from their unbelieving ways; if they would have accepted Jesus as their Savior from sin - then, yes, they would have been placed to the right of our Lord and would have been given the invitation to "Come." But remember the words of the writer to the Hebrews, "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment." There is no second chance after death. So as St. Paul writes in 2 Cor 6:2b, "Now is the day

of salvation,” i.e., now is the time to be concerned: See also Isaiah 55:6-7.

Preceding the Judgment, however, there will be the resurrection of all those who have died prior to that moment (John 5:28-29a). What about those who have been dead for many years, for centuries, for millenniums - whose fleshly remains have long since deteriorated and returned to the dust from whence they came (Gen. 3:19, Eccl. 12:7a)? What about those who have been cremated or whose bodies were totally destroyed in one manner or another? What about those who were drowned at sea and whose bodies were never recovered? Will the Lord be able to restore those bodies? Just as easily as He brought Adam into existence from a pile of fashioned dirt, into which He breathed the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Just as easily as He brought Eve into existence from a rib which He had taken from Adam (Gen. 2:21-22). Just as easily as He formed Jeremiah in the womb of his mother (Jer. 1:5a). Just as easily as God has brought every other human being into existence from the microscopic beginnings of sperm and egg joining and growing through the various stages of development until birth. For with God, nothing - absolutely nothing - is impossible (Luke 1:37). Furthermore, God will raise the same bodies which have died. He will not form new bodies to look like the previous bodies - even though some of those bodies have decayed and deteriorated over the years. The same atoms and molecules that once constituted or formed a body will be called back into existence in the form of the previous body. Read Job's words in Job 19:25-27 and note particularly his comments about “my flesh” and “my eyes.”

And what about those who are still alive when the Great Day of Judgment arrives; when Jesus returns as the angels promised the disciples on the Mount of Olives? Scripture has some definite things to say about them too. Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth, describes what will happen to the believers who remain alive on that Day (1 Cor. 15:51-52). Similarly, in writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul reveals what will happen to those who are “left till the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:14-17). They will not “precede (get ahead of) those who have fallen asleep.” But neither will they be “left behind” (1 Thess. 4:17, John 14:3).

When will the Great Judgment take place? Only the Triune God knows the answer to this question. A day has been set (Acts 17:31), but has not been revealed to us. In the last days of His public ministry, as Jesus was busy preparing His disciples for the work He was counting on them to do after He left them, one of the things He emphasized was His return to judge the world. He wanted to impress upon them the necessity to remain on guard, to be alert, to expect His return at any time. Possibly to prevent a question which He could not answer at that time, He disclosed

to His disciples that no human, no angels, not even Himself knew the day or the hour when time would come to an end (Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32). He could not truthfully make that statement now - nor anytime after His resurrection. Let me explain. When Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, He was in what we call His "State of Humiliation." This was the time when He humbled Himself and denied Himself the active use of His divine powers which He had enjoyed from all eternity (Phil. 2:5-8). This included the time from His conception in the Virgin's womb until the time He revived in the tomb and entered what we call His "State of Exaltation" (Phil. 2:9-11).

Another way to describe His "State of Humiliation" is to say that He did not always or fully use His divine powers and ability. Though still possessing these divine attributes (such as, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), He did not always or fully make use of them. Occasionally, He would. An example of using His almighty power (omnipotence) is when He would perform a miracle. Or an example of using His omniscience (knowing all things) is when He would reveal things that a human alone could not know. (See John 1:42, 47-48.) It was in this "State of Humiliation" that Jesus uttered the words above regarding not knowing the time of the Last Day. Now, in His "State of Exaltation," He could not truthfully make that statement, since He has resumed the full use of His divine powers and abilities (attributes) after His resurrection (John 17:5). [Which explains why He could leave the tomb, bodily, before the stone was rolled away and why He could appear to His disciples while they were hiding behind locked doors.]

Even though Scripture does not reveal the time or hour of the Last Day, it does speak of that Day. Matthew records the predictive words of Jesus which tell us that the return of the Lord will be quick - as quick as a streak of lightning (Matt. 24:27). St. Peter tells us that it will come when we least expect it - like a thief in the night (2 Peter 3:10a). What is the main lesson for us to learn from this? Quite simply, be prepared! Scripture speaks to this issue very clearly. The Lord, in His discourse to the disciples, referenced earlier, informing them about the Last Times, told them very plainly, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will return." (Matt. 24:42) Two verses later, He repeats the warning (24:44). At the conclusion of one of His final parables, that same warning comes through (Matt. 25:13). The warnings are there. The admonition given to John by Jesus for each of the seven churches of Asia Minor is quite in order here too: "He who has an ear, let him hear." (Rev. 2 & 3) [In the next chapter we will look at ways to prepare for the Lord's return.]

The Lord will return! There should be no question or doubt about that. But what is the Savior doing now? This might sound like a crude question, but human nature being what it is, we have questions. And Scripture does not leave us without an answer. Maybe not to the extent some of us may desire. But enough for what is necessary for us to know. We might begin with the words of the Lord Himself. On the night in which He was betrayed, in the Upper Room, after celebrating the Passover a final time with His disciples, and instituting His Supper for His followers until the end of time, Jesus told His disciples where He was going and what He would be doing. He told them He was going to His “Father’s house” (heaven). And He told them what He would be doing there. “I am going there to prepare a place for you.” (John 14:2) [And look at that comforting promise in John 14:3.]

Were these words spoken only for the benefit of His disciples present in that Upper Room? By no means! While spoken to them, His words include every one of His followers - before, during, and after His stay on earth. Look, for example, at His words in John 14:6b. This is a truth that applies to all human beings - not just the disciples that night. Similarly, look at John 14:23, 15:5, 17:20-26. Jesus spoke these words to His disciples that night - for their benefit and ours. Jesus wanted His disciples to know where He was going and what He would be doing so they could pass along this information to those who would become believers through their sharing these words with others (John 17:20). The disciples were representatives of all subsequent believers in Jesus. Jesus clearly has us in mind in the Upper Room that solemn Thursday night. So yes, His words to His disciples were meant for our spiritual edification too. He is in heaven - in His “Father’s house” - even as you read this, “preparing a place for you.”

Does this mean that the “Father’s house” is incomplete; that Jesus must do something to complete it, to make it better? Not at all. Everything in heaven is complete. Heaven is the ultimate in perfection. To better understand what Jesus means by this statement, we must attempt to devoid our human minds of our earthly thinking. Here in time we cannot adequately think in terms other than time and space and material substance. The most - and the best - that this kind of thinking can do is to conjure up in our minds the best, most attractive, most inviting, most happy images of “home” possible. At best, these can only be images or visions of the “mansions” or “rooms” that are awaiting us in heaven. Other than this, our finite reasoning cannot grasp the meaning of Jesus’ words. (But even this limited understanding can produce a kind of “heavenly homesickness” in our hearts, a longing to be with our God and Savior in those heavenly mansions.)

Let's throw out a few thoughts that may be helpful in comprehending these words of Jesus. First of all, there are "mansions" or "rooms" in heaven. "Many" of them, Jesus states. The Psalmist David spoke of these rooms approximately a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, when he confidently declared that he would "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps. 23:6). Again, this "house," those "rooms," are not to be understood in an earthly sense. The fact that there are "many" rooms simply indicates that Jesus has prepared salvation for many. (Actually, for all - although many will not enjoy this salvation through their own fault.) The only way one can enter the "mansions" of heaven is through the salvation Jesus obtained for us through His suffering and death, and affirmed by His resurrection. There is nothing incomplete, nothing lacking, in that salvation. The mansions are there - and have been from all eternity, because of the anticipated and then completed work of salvation in time by God's Son. How does Jesus "prepare" them then? Simply by Himself being present in heaven. The presence of Jesus in His Father's home makes the mansions ready for us. For only through the presence of our Redeemer in heaven is it possible for us to enter heaven. If Jesus would not have successfully completed the work His Father sent Him to do, there would be no home, no rooms, no mansions awaiting us in heaven. But Jesus did complete the work (John 19:30); He did return to heaven (Acts 1:9); the mansions are ready and waiting for us; and Jesus will return for us in due time (John 14:3).

There are, however, other things that Jesus is doing before He returns for all His own on Judgment Day. The inspired writers of Holy Scripture mention a number of things. For example, Jesus is seated (or standing) at the right hand of God (a reference to exercising divine power and authority) in the heavenly mansions (Acts 7:55, Rom 8:34, Hebr. 1:3). According to Ephesians 1:20b-23, Jesus is ruling over all things in the interest of the Church. Ruling over the Holy Christian Church, one of the things Jesus does is to send workers to His Church and for His Church, for the spiritual strengthening of His Church (Eph. 4:10-12). Both St. Paul and the Evangelist John speak of another activity of Jesus in behalf of His Church - or more accurately, the members of His Church (the believers). This is something very important to us as individual members of the Church - every time we sin; every time we transgress any of God's Holy Commandments. Earlier, when we were talking about the believers - those who will stand on the Lord's right in the Judgment - we were not implying, nor should anyone infer that believers are without sin once they come to faith in Jesus as their Savior. No, our sinful human nature stays with us until the day that we no longer live on this earth. And that sinful nature will cause us to sin again and again during our lifetime.



That is why the passages by Paul and John are so very comforting to us. For Paul writes, “Christ is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (Rom 8:34) John says much the same thing in his First Epistle, “If anybody does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.” (I John 2:1b) When John writes, “If anybody does sin,” he is not implying that maybe we will, but then again, maybe we won’t sin. No, this has to be taken in the context of the first part of that verse. There John is encouraging the children of God not to sin at all, even though he knows this is impossible (Cp. I John 1:8, 10). But he then goes on to say that if anyone does sin - which we all do - we have someone who will speak up in our defense. Not only does John name this “Defender” - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One - but he also tells us why He is such a successful defender: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 2:2a)

Perhaps we could picture a judicial scene. In fact, picture yourself standing before the Judge (Jesus - Cp. Acts 10:42, 17:31). The prosecuting attorney (Satan) presents all of the “charges” (sins) against you. You know that you are guilty on every count. What choice does the Judge have but to condemn you to everlasting punishment? But then Jesus steps down from the judge’s bench, takes His place beside you, and becomes your defense attorney. In response to each charge, Jesus counters with, “Yes, that is true - but I have already paid the penalty for that transgression.” Consequently, the defendant is declared “innocent.” John puts it another way in these words, “The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7b) That is why we can say that every believer, every child of God, is “simul iustus et peccator” - in other words, at the same time justified (by Christ) and sinner - saint and sinner at the same time. In spite of our sins and sinfulness, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all our sins and we stand justified (declared innocent) before God. Is there any question as to why we will be singing the praises of our great God and Savior throughout eternity?

#### COMMENTS:

\*\*\* After 33 years on planet Earth, three of which were spent in public ministry - culminating in His suffering, death, and resurrection - Jesus appeared to His disciples and select others (Acts 10:40-41) for a period of 40 days (Acts 1:3b). Then on the 40th day, Jesus removed His visible presence from the disciples - and the world - by ascending into heaven. While His disciples saw Him no more, they were not left alone or helpless. Jesus continued to be with them - and His Church - through Word and Sacrament. He was with them - as He is with us today - according to His invisible presence. He still leads and guides His Church through those precious gifts

He has entrusted to His Church - His holy Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and His own Supper (Holy Communion).

When we refer to the Word of God, we generally think of the written Word as we have it in the Bible. And that is not incorrect. But the Word is much more than that. The Word (“Logos” in the Greek) refers to Jesus Himself. Think of what the Evangelist John writes in his Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2) [Does this put a new light on Gen. 3:8 - “Then the man and his wife heard the sound (“voice” in the King James Version) of the Lord God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day”? Jesus is the Word of God - the “voice” of God - personified.] John 1:1-2 is one of the Bible references which shows that Jesus is the *eternal* Son of God - even though this is denied by some church bodies. But this is a denial of God’s own Word. The Apostle John further testifies to the Word’s (Jesus’) Incarnation when he writes, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) Though no longer with us in His visible presence, Jesus is still with us in His Word.

Then there is the Sacrament of Holy Baptism Our Savior is present with His Church in this Sacrament, which consists of water and the Word (See Matt. 28:19). The word “baptize” speaks of the application of *water*; the baptismal formula, “baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” is the *Word* - the Word spoken by “the Word,” Jesus Christ, as He gave His Church the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). Paul’s words in Galatians 3:27 apply to this point: “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (A more literal translation of “have clothed yourselves” is “put on” - as in the King James Version - but with the understanding of “putting on an article of clothing.” Either way, the closeness of Christ to the individual is certainly brought out in these words.) The bottom line is that Jesus is with the baptized individual in His invisible presence.

The presence of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar (i.e., the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion) is very plainly spelled out by Jesus Himself when He instituted this Sacrament. Matthew writes these words of Jesus, “Take and eat; this is My body... Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant.” (Matt. 26:26b, 28) John writes some interesting words in his Gospel (6:53-56). These are words of Jesus Himself. Some exegetes (an exegete, simply put, is an individual who studies the text in great detail, in the original language) say these verses are not a direct reference to the Lord’s Supper. My knowledge of the Greek language will not permit me to challenge their findings. I do have one question, however. Is not what Jesus says in

these verses exactly what happens in the Sacrament? Even without this reference, the presence of Jesus in the Sacrament is well founded in Jesus' own words, recorded by Matthew (see above).

Jesus Himself sums up the fact of His invisible presence with the Church in the words that Matthew quotes from the Great Commission, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:20b) Yes, Jesus removed His visible presence from the earth when He ascended into heaven. But that does not negate His invisible presence among His children. So no matter how lonely you may feel, how isolated you may be, you are never alone. Your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is always there with you - with His love, His care, His comfort, His mercy, His strength, His reassurance, His forgiveness.

\*\*\* While what follows is not covered explicitly in this chapter, the numbers spoken of (Acts 1:3b) - or implied (Acts 1:8a) - are interesting to note. It is no secret that many of the numbers used in Scripture are used in a symbolic way. The Book of Revelation is a good example of this. Sometimes those meanings are easy to understand. Other times, the reader must arrive at the symbolism by comparing how that number is used in other parts of Scripture. And there are still other times when the numbers appear to have no symbolic relevance at all. Actually, the symbolism of numbers used in Holy Scripture can be a study of its own. We will confine our comments to the two numbers associated with this chapter. Luke refers to the number of days between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension - that number being 40. It was during those 40 days that Jesus appeared to His disciples on different occasions to assure them that He had truly risen from the dead - as He had foretold; that He was truly alive.

Why "40" days? Look at other instances where the number 40 is involved. Moses was on Mount Sinai for the giving of the Law by God for 40 days (Ex. 24:18). The threatened overthrow of Nineveh was to come in 40 days (Jonah 3:4). The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness lasted 40 days (Matt. 4:1-2). Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (Josh. 5:6). Rain fell from heaven for 40 days and nights at the time of Noah, resulting in the Flood (Gen. 7:4, 12). A footnote in the Concordia Self-Study Bible explains that the number 40 is frequently used in connection with a period of time that often characterizes a critical period in redemptive history. The above references are examples of this. Similarly, the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension are a critical period in the redemptive history of God's people. It was indeed critical that Jesus' followers were completely convinced of His resurrection in order for them to proclaim confidently and convincingly that fact to the Church, thus assuring the Church throughout the ages of its full and free redemption.

The implied “10” days from the day of Christ’s ascension to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 1:8a) was not just an arbitrary number. The number 10, as used in Scripture, frequently implies “completeness.” It is considered a “complete number.” Think of the number of Commandments God gave to His people through Moses (Ex. 20:3-17, 34:28). These “10” Commandments were a complete number of commands that God wanted His people to have and follow. Even to this day, no matter what transgression of the Law you name, what sin you commit, it would be covered by one of God’s complete list (10) of Commandments. Similarly, the 10 days between the Ascension and Pentecost were exactly the “right” number of days for Jesus’ disciples to prepare for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:12-14).

\*\*\* In answer to His disciples’ question on the Mount of Olives shortly before He ascended - a question that inquired about God’s time and timing (Acts 1:6) - Jesus responded that it was not for them - nor us - to know the times or dates that the Father has set (Acts 1:7). In spite of this, there have been those who try to predict the end of time. In 1833, William Miller, the founder of the Adventist movement, predicted that the world would end sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. Thousands believed him and became his followers. When March 21, 1844, came and went, he told his disappointed followers that he had miscalculated and reset the date for October 22, 1844. When this second date also proved incorrect, many of his disillusioned followers left him.

Throughout the years, there have been other attempts at predicting the end of the world - all with the same fate as met William Miller’s predictions. There were even some half-hearted predictions that the world would end with the end of the last millennium or the beginning of the new millennium. This was accompanied by the debate as to when the new millennium would begin - with January 1, 2000 or January 1, 2001. The fact that you are reading these words now is evidence that the words of Jesus are true, “of that day and that hour knoweth no man” (Mark 13:32, King James Version). All future would-be “time setters” will do well to remember these words, as well as the words of Jesus to His disciples on Ascension Day, “It is not for you to know.” (Acts 1:7a) But be assured, a day has been set (Acts 17:31). He will return (Acts 1:11). He will return as Judge - and each of us will appear before His Judgment Seat (2 Cor. 5:10). Therefore we also need to heed the words of Jesus to be prepared (Matt. 24:44). Jerome, an early church father, once made a statement in these or similar words, “That one day is hidden from us in order that we may pay attention to every day.”

\*\*\* In the main body of this chapter, we looked at some of the things that will take place in the great Judgment - the separation of the sheep (believers) from the goats (unbelievers); the placing of the sheep to Jesus' right and the goats to His left; the public explanation of why the believers are on His right and the unbelievers are on His left. One thing we didn't touch on was the question which each side addressed to Jesus after being told why they were on their respective side. Jesus refers to the works of those on His right - and the absence of works of those on His left. (We have already - in the main body of this chapter - explained why Jesus refers to "works" which can be seen, as opposed to "faith" which cannot be seen.)

When Jesus outlines the works of the believers, which demonstrated their faith, they ask Jesus, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed you, etc." (Matt. 25:37-39) And the King responds, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me." (Matt. 25:40, KJV) Notice that the believers were quite surprised when Jesus told them what all they had done for Him - and how. It is obvious that the believers were not doing these things to "make points" with God. They weren't even aware they were doing these things for the Lord. They were simply motivated to do good because of their faith and love - love for God and love for their fellow man. Faith was obviously present. For where there is faith, works follow. Works are done because of faith; because the believer is already saved - not in an attempt to be saved (Hebr. 11:6a). For those on Jesus' left, the exact opposite is true. Since no faith was present, they did no works (that are recognized as good works by God) either for God or their fellow man.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a generalized account of what is called the "General Judgment," when all mankind must appear before the Judgment Seat (Acts 17:31a, 2 Cor. 5:10). There is, however, another "judgment" that is mentioned in Scripture. That is referred to as the "Individual Judgment." The writer to the Hebrews speaks of this judgment, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." (9:27) What this says is that each person who dies - as he/she enters eternity - is judged. It would appear that everyone dying before Judgment Day would therefore be judged twice - once, when they die; secondly, in the General Judgment. It has been explained that the judgment would be the same. The only difference is that the Individual Judgment would be made public in the General Judgment. But that explanation is subject to our present, human understanding of time. We pass into eternity at different times here on earth. To us, it only seems logical that there would be a waiting period in eternity between the times that individuals depart this life on earth.

Eternity, however, knows no such measure of time. In eternity, there is no time. There

is only the “eternal present,” the “always now.” This is where our human, finite thinking has problems. It is difficult for us who live in time - who work with a past, present, and future, who know that everything in God’s creation has a beginning and an end - to conceive of eternity. Eternity has no beginning or end. It is, as the name implies, eternal, forever. It is from before time and will continue after time. God is the Author and Creator of eternity. God also created time - but He is not limited by time; not subject to time; not affected by time. He is above and beyond time. God - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - has existed forever. There never has been a time when God was not - and there never will be a time when God is not. Psalm 93:2 states, “Your throne was established long ago; You are from all eternity.” God will endure continually, forever. The Biblical concept of “eternity” and “eternal” refers to the endless past and the unending future. God’s eternity envelopes (surrounds) time and creation. Time is just a small segment within eternity. God is unaffected by time or change. He doesn’t grow old or older. He is eternal, everlasting, unchanging (Ps. 90:1-2,4, 102:27; Mal. 3:6a; Hebr. 13:8; James 1:17b; II Peter 3:8). God does not view time as humans do. When time is seen in the light of eternity, an age appears no longer than one day - and a day seems no shorter than a long age.

How we can reconcile these “two” judgments is impossible for us to comprehend. When a person dies, the body remains on earth and is generally buried; the soul enters eternity. The eternal destiny of that individual is determined at the moment of death (Hebr. 9:27). The soul goes immediately either into the blessed estate of those with God in heaven - or the state of the damned with Satan in hell. (There is no in-between state.) There the soul remains until the end of time, when God will call forth all those in the graves - or from their final resting places (John 5:28-29); reunite the bodies with the souls prior to the “General Judgment” - after which (the Judgment) both the soul and body will return to the place (heaven or hell) where the soul had resided since the time of the earthly death of that person.

However, since there is no “time” in heaven (as we know time), can we say (and this is where our minds really get confused) that everyone enters eternity at the same “time”? If so, can we further say that everyone will be judged at the same “instant,” that the difference in the “time” involved in the “two” judgments is something known only to us creatures of time? (I personally take comfort in the knowledge that God - in addition to being “eternal” - is also “omniscient,” or all-knowing, and that He has known the answer to these questions already before He brought time into existence.) One more point on this subject - the statement in Hebrews 9:27 does not contradict the account of the General Judgment in Matthew 25. The writer to the Hebrews

simply wants each individual to be aware that he/she must stand before the Judgment Seat of God - and therefore make preparations for that time NOW while there is time. (We have touched on this subject of preparing for eternity earlier in this chapter - and we will do so in more detail in the next chapter.)

We have stated that each person will be judged on the basis of faith or the absence thereof. That is true. But what is that faith based on? The Word of God! Either a person accepts as true what God's Word tells us - or not. And remember, that Word includes all the sayings of Jesus Himself, who is the Word of God personified (John 1:1, 14). Jesus speaks of the Word judging those who reject Him and do not accept His Word (John 12:48). On the positive side, Jesus compares a person who hears His words and puts them into practice with a man who builds a house and places it on a solid foundation (Luke 6:47-48). [He also points out the opposite position - Luke 6:49.] The disciples acknowledge the importance of Jesus' words in John 6:68. Other passages which speak to the importance of God's Word include: Matthew 4:4; Romans 1:16, 10:17; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:22; Revelation 22:18-19.

The bottom line is that God has given to us, His children, everything we need to know to prepare for our Lord's return on the Last Day. No, we don't have the answer to every question which may cross our inquisitive minds. But God has given us everything necessary to be able to spend eternity with Him and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So read His Word! Listen attentively when it is preached and taught! Accept every word of it as true and correct - even if it doesn't seem logical to our finite minds - because it is true and correct in all its parts. For it is God's own Word to us (2 Tim 3:16a; 2 Peter 1:21).



*"The Signs of the Times" by Rudolf Schäfer*



## **XII - UNTIL THEN!**

The fortieth day after Jesus' resurrection has come to be known as Ascension Day. For it was on this day that Jesus left this earth, according to His visible form, and ascended to His Father's home in heaven. Immediately after His ascension, two angelic messengers told the disciples that Jesus would return in the same manner as they had seen Him leave. In other words, He would return visibly, bodily. That we know. When He will return, we do not know. A day has been appointed. That we know (Acts 17:31). When that day will be - whether quite soon or some time in the distant future - we do not know. As far as the individual Christian is concerned, however, it doesn't really matter. If soon, we must be prepared for that day (Matt. 24:44). If some time in the distant future, we must still be prepared, because we do not know when the Lord will send His angel of death to remove us from this earth individually and take our soul to be with Him in eternity. Since our eternal destiny is at stake, it is of utmost importance that we be very conscientious about our preparation to meet the Lord - whether that be at the end of time or at the end of our lives.

In the previous chapter, we touched on the subject of preparation. Since this is a many-faceted and eternally important subject, we will bring in some additional thoughts in this chapter. The most important part of preparation for the Judgment is to maintain and strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ, God's One and Only Son, as our one and only Lord and Savior. We cannot do that merely through our own will power and determination. It is possible only as we avail ourselves of the Means of Grace which God has entrusted to His Church on earth - the Word of God and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper (all three of which we have detailed in previous chapters). It is through these Means that God the Holy Spirit works and/or strengthens faith in our hearts. In order to make these Means available to us readily, Christ has established His Church - the Holy Christian Church - on earth. As the Head of His Church (Col. 1:18a), Christ rules the world in the interest of His Church (Eph. 1:22-23). It is in and through the Church - as it preaches and teaches the Word of God in its truth and purity, and administers the Sacraments according to Christ's institution - that our faith is nourished and strengthened.

It is therefore extremely important that we affiliate with and remain an active member of a Christian Church that does teach and preach the Word of God in all of its truth and purity, and administers the Sacraments according to Christ's institution - and not according to some kind of human logic or rationalization. The church we join must hold Jesus forth as the eternal Son of God and only Savior of all mankind. For

that church which remains true to God's Word has the promise of Isaiah 55:10-11 and Ephesians 2:19-20. And the members of that church, who believe the teachings of that church, will know the comfort of Jesus' words in John 8:31b-32. The importance of joining and remaining with a church that teaches God's Word correctly is also pointed out in passages like Matthew 7:15-16a, Romans 16:17-18, Galatians 1:8, and I John 4:1.

As members of a church that is conscientious about preaching and teaching God's Word as God's Word, we will strive -with the help of the Holy Spirit - to believe that Word with all our heart, and live according to that Word to the best of our God-given ability. We will use the Ten Commandments as our guide. In short, we will strive to live our Christian faith. Not - as we stated in a previous chapter - to try and "earn points" with God; not in an attempt to save ourselves, but to show others the love and gratitude we have for the God who has already saved us. We will be so proud of our God and the salvation He has bestowed upon us that we will want to do what Jesus encourages in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:16), "Let our light shine (let our example be seen) before men, that they may see our good deeds and (this is important) praise our Father in heaven," (we don't seek credit or recognition for ourselves).

We will strive to live at peace with each other, as St. Paul encourages us to do in I Corinthians 1:10 and Ephesians 4:3. We will follow the command of Jesus in John 13:34-35. (Isn't this what the religious song talks about when it tells us "they will know we are Christians by our love"?) We will use as a motto for our lives the pattern that the Apostle Paul gives us in II Corinthians 5:15, Galatians 2:20, and Colossians 3:1-2. We will resist the temptations of Satan, the world, and our own sinful natures, so that we do not fall into the sins listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and Colossians 3:5-9. Instead, we will pray for the Spirit's help to engage in the fruits of the Spirit as Paul outlines them in Galatians 5:22-25 and Colossians 3: 12-17. Our daily goal will be to take Paul's message to heart in Romans 12:1-2, 9-21. Will it be easy? No! Possible? Not on our own power! And even with our best intentions - and the help of God's Holy Spirit - there will still be many times that we fail - fail our goals, fail our selves, fail our God. For our sinful flesh will give in again and again to the temptations of Satan and the sinful world around us. It is exactly then that God's promises mean so much to us. Sincerely repenting of those failures and shortcomings, promises like Psalm 130:3-4, Isaiah 1: 18, and I John 1:7b, 9, bring enduring comfort.

But there is still more that we, as God's children, need to be doing before the Day of Judgment. As we prepare ourselves, we need to remember the millions of those who

do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and hence have no saving relationship with Him (Rom 3:22b-23, Gal. 5:4). Thus, Christ also calls upon us to be His witnesses. The command of Acts 1:8 is just as relevant today as it was on Ascension Day. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20a and Mark 16:15-16 -compare Acts 10:42-43) applies to the Church today (that's us) just as much as when Jesus first gave this command. The need is even greater today, I dare say, than in the days of Christ. Why? Because of the greater number of people on the face of the earth today. And a majority of these people are without Christ and therefore without salvation. It is no secret that non-Christian churches are growing faster than Christian churches. The growth of non-Christian churches is continuing throughout the world; in America, perhaps in your own area. And all of these people - unless they can be successfully reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ - are headed for eternal damnation.

God has been so good to us. From all the millions and billions of people in the world, He chose us to be His own. He worked in our lives - through Christian parents and/or friends - so that we have been reached with His Gospel and have been included in His Kingdom of Grace. Can we now turn a deaf ear to His call to be witnesses for Him? As the words of an old mission hymn ask, "Who will answer, gladly saying, 'Here am I. Send me, send me?'" (These words are based on the response of Isaiah when the Lord asked whom He could send, Isa. 6:8.) Each of us must always be ready to testify to our faith, whenever an opportunity arises (I Pet. 3:15). Remember, "God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son." (John 3:16) The world! That's a mighty big place. As we think of our task as witnesses for Christ "unto the ends of the earth," it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Do you think the disciples felt overwhelmed at first? Quite possibly! But they also remembered the promise of Jesus (Matt. 28:18, 20b; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8a). That promise was fulfilled on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Was that promise effective? Read Mark 16:20; Acts 2:41, 47b, 4:4. And this was just the beginning. As was stated in an earlier chapter, the Book of Acts is the history of the growth of the Christian Church in the early years of Christianity.

That was the disciples! What about us today? Believe it or not, we have the same promise for the gift of the Holy Spirit. No, He will not come to us through a mighty, rushing wind and tongues of flames (Acts 2:2-3). But we do have the promise of the Spirit's power and blessing nevertheless. The promise of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) was given not just to the disciples, but to the whole Church (the disciples did not live until the "end of the age," but Jesus promised to be with His

disciples - the Church - until the end of time). The same is true with Jesus' promises in the Upper Room, concerning the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17a - note the words, "be with you *forever*," John 14:26, 16:7b-11- a continuing activity; John 16:13a. Also compare Isa. 55:10-11 and Luke 8:4-15, especially the seed falling on "good ground"). But just as in the days following the Ascension, so also today - the Holy Spirit does not come to us in a vacuum.

When the disciples were instructed not to leave Jerusalem before receiving "the gift My Father promised" (Acts 1:4), they did just as Jesus instructed. And according to Luke 24:53 and Acts 1:14, they spent that time in prayer, worship, and I feel confident, in the study of God's Word. It was after this preparation that the Holy Spirit came upon them in that wonderful miracle of Pentecost. Likewise today! The Holy Spirit will not force Himself up on us. But He will come to us - with all His power and blessing - in response to our sincere prayers. Our prayers request His presence and His power. He answers those prayers through Word and Sacrament. He comes to us today through the Means of Grace. He enlightens us, empowers us, strengthens us, emboldens us, guides us, comforts us - and when we witness for Jesus, He will help us find the right words to speak (compare Matt. 10:19-20; that promise is good even if you're not "arrested").

Where do we begin witnessing? Like the disciples, right at "home." Our "Jerusalem" is where we are. Among our family members, neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances. If all of these know Jesus as their Savior - which is probably not the case - you can still help strengthen their faith. You don't have to memorize some contrived speech. If you do, it's easy to get befuddled if the person you're talking with comes up with a question that you're not expecting. Just tell them about Jesus and what Jesus means to you (they can't easily argue with you about what Jesus means to you). And pray - before, during, and after your witnessing experience. You'll be surprised how calm you will be, how easily the words come, and how good you'll feel when you're finished. And think of the joy you'll experience if you see that person (or persons) in heaven because of the message of salvation which you brought to them! "To the uttermost parts of the earth"? Most of us cannot travel to the far flung places of the earth. But our prayers can. And our mission gifts can help enable others to go for us.

Will this work ever end? No! Not until time itself ends! For even in areas where there was success at one time in history, Satan and his allies are still busy trying to change that; trying to undo the work of missions and missionaries; trying to sabotage the work of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel. Look at modern day Jerusalem. The Christian presence in the place where Christianity had its beginnings is only minimal today.

Other parts of the world which once had a strong Christian presence is now overrun with non-Christian influence. As we said earlier in this chapter, the growth of non-Christian church bodies is far outpacing the growth of Christian Churches. The work of the Christian Church will never end this side of eternity. In addition to all those who are living today - a majority of whom are not believers in Jesus and His salvation - think of the number of babies born into the world each day. We know from Holy Scripture that all of them are born in sin, with sinful natures (Ps. 51:5, John 3:5-6a). So we have a whole new mission field confronting us each new day!

Will it get any easier for the Christian Church to spread the message of salvation? Not according to the prophecies of Scripture. In fact, we see that times will become worse as we approach the Judgment. Jesus speaks of some of those things in Matthew 24:4-14, 23-31. He speaks of wars and rumors of wars (v. 6); nation rising against nation (v. 7); famines and earthquakes (v. 7); persecutions (v. 9); falling away from the faith (v. 10); false prophets (vs. 4-5, 23-24, 26); lovelessness (v. 12); signs in nature (v.29). St. Paul describes the godlessness in the last days as well (II Tim 3:1-5). That's what makes Jesus' words of warning so important (Matt. 24:42, 44). In addition to the above, see what the holy writers prophesy about conditions within the church on earth itself (and this refers to those churches which are called "Christian Churches"). The Apostle Paul writes words of terrific importance to the young pastor Timothy (I Tim 4:1-3; II Tim 4:3-4). The Apostle Peter writes similar words of warning (II Pet. 2:1-3a). Are not some of these things happening within the Church this very age?

There are pastors, churches, and church bodies that are "scratching the itching ears" of their members - giving them what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear; not dividing Law and Gospel properly; emphasizing either Law or Gospel to the detriment of the other; approving things which are specifically forbidden in Scripture (for example, homosexual behavior - see Romans 1:18-27; ordaining women into the ministry - see I Tim 2:11-13 [Note: Paul was not writing these words based on some social custom of his day, as some have claimed. He connects this prohibition to the order of creation itself (v. 13 - consider also Gen. 2:18a, 3:16b; I Cor. 11:3, Eph. 5:23). Still more, the requirements for an "overseer," or "elder" ("pastor"), listed in I Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 are all geared to the man. And, as with all of his writings, Paul wrote this too by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Tim. 3:16a, II Peter 1:20-21). Thus, any disagreement with these words is a disagreement with God Himself]; ordaining homosexuals into the ministry (Rom 1:18, 21, 24-27, I Tim. 3:2); changing the meaning of Scripture to fit their own agendas; forbidding

things that are not forbidden in Scripture; commanding things that are not commanded in Scripture; having a form of godliness but denying its power - as Paul writes in II Timothy 3:5. (All such unfaithful pastors should carefully consider the Words of God written in Jer. 23:21-22, 28-32.)

Lest the faithful be overcome with discouragement in the face of these godless actions, both St. Paul and St. Peter issue encouragements along with these warnings. While I Timothy 4:6-10, 13, 15-16 is written to Timothy as a young pastor, much of these words can be applied to every Christian. II Timothy 4:2 is certainly geared to a pastor's responsibility. But lay people can do much to help their pastor in this through their prayers and words of appreciation and encouragement. (And I might add, words of reminders if the pastor fails in this task.) St. Peter's words can be found in II Peter 2:7-9a.

Throughout the years there have been verbal and written attacks on Jesus, Christianity, the Bible, and Christians themselves. One of the latest has been introduced in the form of a book, entitled, "The Da Vinci Code," by Dan Brown. While receiving much attention by the liberal media and one movie company which plans to make a movie of this book, the book is actually based upon inaccurate statements regarding Holy Scripture, historical errors, and an ancient heresy (Gnosticism). In short, it presents more fiction and untruth than fact. If you have read this book - or might be planning to read this book - I would encourage you to read a Christian answer to this error-filled book. That Christian response can be found in another book of similar title, "The Da Vinci Code - Fact or Fiction?" by Paul Maier and Hank Hanegraaff (published by Tyndale Press). The Rev. Dr. Laurence White has also prepared an excellent study of Brown's book, showing its many fallacies. (This paper can be accessed on the Web Site of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Houston, Texas, at [www.osl.cc](http://www.osl.cc).)

Longer standing attacks on Christ and Christianity have been advanced by such groups as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU - or is it "Anti-Christians & Liberals United" ?), Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People for the American Way (PFAW), and the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF). You are probably well familiar with some of their efforts. They want to eliminate all references to God, symbols and references to the Ten Commandments, religious displays on public property, symbols of crosses, the "Under God" phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance, and on and on, ad nauseam. They try to justify their actions by referring to the nonexistent phrase "Separation of Church and State" in the United States Constitution. Ironically, they tend to ignore symbols and references to non-

Christian religions. [A thought: could it be that they have an inner fear that God does exist and they are afraid of encountering Him? Denial has never been a good defense however.]

Then there are the world conditions. Jesus talks about nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom. A person doesn't have to listen to the daily news very long to hear examples of that - and more. Terrorists delighting in killing innocent people by the thousands. Extremists misusing their religion as an excuse for mayhem and murder. People in positions of authority taking advantage of those who cannot help themselves. Disrespect for law and order exists even in so-called civilized countries. Disrespect for the property and possessions of others can be seen not only in criminals, but also in some normally decent citizens. The emphasis these days is too much on "self," what "I" want; what "I" think would be good and/or convenient for "me."

Thousands of innocent victims are being killed each year through abortion. Assisted suicide - something no one would have even talked about several decades ago - is now receiving acceptance by some. Embryonic stem cell research is advocated by some. And yet, each of those embryos is one of God's children (Jer. 1:5a). Many of those who advocate such research are doing so for selfish reasons - willing to sacrifice another human being, in the hope that they can somehow be helped with their disorder, rather than trust that God knows what He is doing in their lives, and accordingly turn to Him for patience and strength.

Misuse of alcohol, drugs - even prescription drugs - pervade our own country. Premarital and extramarital sex, heterosexual couples living together without the benefit of marriage, and homosexual partners simply living together, all of this is being accepted more and more by some people as a normal and natural thing - and yet, all of these things are in direct opposition to the clear words of Holy Scripture (Gen. 2:24, which Jesus repeats in Matt. 19:4-5). In fact, homosexuals are flaunting their aberrant behavior upon a disgusted public. (Even the animals do not resort to this kind of degenerate behavior.) And how repulsive it is to the general public to hear about these individuals seeking and demanding same-sex "marriages" - again, in direct opposition to the God-ordained rule of marriage between a man and a woman. (Besides, how could same-sex partners physically fulfill the words of God in Genesis 1:28a, for a man and a woman to be "fruitful and multiply"?)

Even more repulsive is the fact that some legal officials (who are going against common sense and time-honored tradition) - and even some very misguided clergy

(who are either Biblically illiterate or who just deliberately disregard the plain truth of God's holy Word) - are performing that type of "wedding." May God have mercy on our country! Would that we instead follow the words of II Chronicles 7:14. [It would be well for those who are demanding this "right" to read what God has to say about such behavior through the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32. Actually, these verses go far beyond homosexual behavior. That behavior is, in fact, a result of general godlessness and wickedness among mankind. Because of this, God has given the godless and wicked over to various kinds of specific sins (read these verses again very carefully). It is true that at times God will punish sin with sin. In other words, if people want to be godless and wicked, turning their backs upon God, He will allow them to do what they want - to go on sinning - as they, all the while, are heaping punishment upon punishment on themselves, forgetting that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23a) - sometimes a very painful and horrible death.]

To make matters worse, there are liberal politicians who see nothing wrong with either abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, or homosexual behavior; who are more interested in votes than standing on God-ordained principles! And then there are some otherwise conservative politicians who are afraid to stand up and be counted on the side of what they know is right (a Pontius Pilate complex?! We can only pray that America sees the errors of its ways before it is too late. I say America, because while the majority of Americans may not indulge in these sins, it is our Christian responsibility to stand up for what is right lest we become as guilty as the godless and wicked by allowing such things to continue. We need only think of the Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20). Though not all residents of those towns were guilty of the aberrant sexual misbehavior taking place there (from which is derived the word "sodomy"), the entire cities were destroyed by God's punitive action, with the exception of Lot's family (Gen. 19:1-25). [Notice that the aberrant sexual misbehavior listed in these verses is homosexuality (v. 5).] The Lord's patience does have a breaking point when it comes to sinfulness and wickedness. Compare Genesis 6:1-8 (the Flood) and Exodus, chapters 3 through 14 (Pharaoh). The world conditions today much resemble the conditions in the days of Noah. The words of Jesus in Matthew 24:37-39 are well worth our serious contemplation today.

With the uncertainty of life - which we know all too well from news reports every day (and also take into consideration what Jesus says in Luke 12:16-21) - the necessity of Christians taking a stand against the wickedness all around us, and even more importantly, sharing the Good News of the Gospel, is becoming ever more apparent. Remember, the only way to change a person (or nation) is through the power of the



Gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16a). We who are believers in Jesus Christ as our Savior have much work ahead of us - and we need to work while it is day, before the night (of death) comes when no one can work (John 9:4). That, too, is part of God's Plan for His children! And another reason why it is so important for us to be the witnesses that Jesus wants us to be - for it is only through the Gospel of Jesus Christ that people can change.

Jesus also speaks of "famines and earthquakes" and "signs in nature" (Matt. 24:7b, 29). So each famine and each flood; every earthquake and volcanic eruption (and don't forget tsunamis); each new epidemic and disease and plague; every eclipse and meteor, should be a reminder to us that the end is coming. True, all of these things have been happening for thousands of years. And God, already in the Old Testament (Joel 1:1-2, 10-11; 2:30-31), spoke to His people about the signs that would precede the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Toward the end of His life on this earth, Jesus repeated these warnings (Matt. 24:4-14, 23-31; Luke 21:10-11, 25-31). Another sign of the end of time is given by Jesus in Luke 17:26-30. There He describes the materialism (the emphasis upon worldly, material things) that will precede His return. This emphasis upon worldly things has also taken place in previous generations. But does it not seem that materialism is increasing with each generation? (Even if it isn't, think of how much closer to the end we are today than when these prophetic warnings were first issued!) Rare indeed, but extremely blessed, are those who still sincerely put God first in their lives!

Other world conditions, which point to the deteriorating conditions near the end of time, include some corporations (at least the heads of these corporations) taking advantage of their employees and/or other "little" people, deceiving them and making it virtually impossible to recoup any lost wages or benefits. The reason for this behavior? Greed, pure and simple. God's Word speaks to this situation as well. Read James 2:5-6 and 5:1-4. Another thing, while not a world condition, it is a condition that will take place (and in some instances, is already happening) in the world. And that is circumstances within families. The division between godliness and godlessness, which results between those who follow Christ and those who don't, can invade the basic institution of society - the family. Jesus speaks of these possibilities in Matthew 10:35-37. Pray to God that this does not happen in your family. Pray - and work with God in bringing up your children in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4b, King James Version), encouraging them to seek out mates who also believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Considering all the things that Scripture reveals will happen - or has happened -

before the Last Day, a person could easily become discouraged, even depressed. But these “signs” are not given to discourage anyone. Rather, they are intended to show us the necessity of being prepared, of staying in the Word of God, of remaining strong in the faith as we see the end approaching. This is what St. Paul encourages in Ephesians 6:10-18. These “signs” are given to make us aware that “the end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). While these “signs” can be intimidating at times, they are accompanied with repeated encouragements to be prepared (Matt. 24:33; Luke 21:28,36), so the believer will not be caught unaware.

As we think of the approaching end of time, and step up our personal preparations for the Lord’s return, we should remember that it is not enough to simply call attention to the godlessness and wickedness in the world around us. As difficult as it may be for us as sinful beings, the love of Christ for us - and the whole world - demands that we pray for the conversion of those who teach and live contrary to the sacred truths of God’s Word. Yes, Jesus died for all people - criminals, terrorists, assassins, murderers (including mass murderers and serial killers), dictators, kidnappers, abortionists, homosexuals, pedophiles, rapists, crooked politicians, our neighbors, our friends, our families, you and me! By God’s grace, we know about God’s love and forgiveness - and we thank and praise Him for that knowledge. We now need to pray - and do whatever else we can - so that others will come to that same saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior too - *before* the Lord returns!

Does the Lord also offer words of hope and positive encouragement? To be sure! Take your Bible in hand and read Matthew 24:13, 22; Romans 8:28-39; Titus 2:11-14; Revelation 22:20a. We also need to remember that all of the “signs” given in Scripture, which are to precede the second coming of Christ, have been fulfilled or are being fulfilled in our day. There is no Scriptural reason at this time in history for Jesus to delay His coming. The end could come at any time. And as soon as the last of His elect has been gathered into His Kingdom, He will return. So we pray with John at the end of his Revelation, “Even so, come Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20b, King James Version) Come quickly! For then we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:17b).

#### COMMENTS:

To summarize - the Lord will return! What are we Christians to do UNTIL THEN?

Believe - John 3:16

Be in the Word of God - Col. 3: 16

Remain in the Word - John 8:31b-32  
Live in Christ - John 15:5  
Live for Christ - II Cor. 5:15, Gal. 2:20  
Remain faithful to Christ - I Tim. 6:11-12, Rev. 2:10b  
Love one another - John 13:34-35  
Be a Christian example - Matt. 5:16  
Do not conform to the world - Rom 12:2a, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph 5:3-7, I Tim. 6:9-10  
Put on the armor of God - Eph. 6:10-17  
Prepare for the Lord's coming - Matt. 24:44  
Pray - Matt. 6:9-13, Col. 4:2, I Thess. 5:17  
Pray for all mankind - I Tim. 2:1  
Pray for the saints - Eph. 6:18  
Pray for workers in the Kingdom - Luke 10:2  
Pray for unbelievers - Mark 16:16  
Pray for those in authority - I Tim. 2:2  
Work in the Kingdom - John 9:4  
Help make disciples - Matt. 28:19  
Be ready to witness at every opportunity - I Peter 3:15  
Thank God for all His blessings - Ps. 107:1  
Look forward to the Lord's return - Luke 21:28. (What a great and joyous day that will be for the children of God!)



*"Come, Let Us Sing for Joy to the Lord" by Rudolf Schäfer*

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

God has a Plan - A Plan He devised in Eternity. His Son carried out that Plan in time. Its blessings will remain throughout Eternity.

The fulfillment of that Plan began with the creation of everything material. God started with our planet Earth. On the fourth day of time, He filled in the “heavens” - the Solar System and Outer Space - with the Sun, Moon, other planets, and countless stars. After completing work on this planet, He created the crown of His creation - man and woman. It wasn't long before the crown of His creation disobeyed His command to them - and sin entered the world. Even though man and woman failed God, God's love did not fail them. He gave them a promise. It was the promise of a Savior. His grace and love would not let go of His fallen creatures.

In time, He kept that promise and provided a way of redemption for mankind. He sent His Son into this world as a true human being. Jesus became one of us so He could take our sins upon Himself and pay the ransom price that none of us - nor all of us - could ever offer. Thus, God redeemed His wayward children through the sacrifice His Son offered up for us through His innocent suffering and death on Calvary's cross. And by His triumphant resurrection on Easter morning, Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil was forever assured. God would not have had to do this. But He did... in love... for us!

He wanted us to know about His love, His Plan of salvation, His forgiveness. So He - through the Holy Spirit - inspired a number of writers to give us His Word. A Word that is true in all its parts, divinely inspired and therefore inerrant, infallible, absolute truth. A Word that we should hold very dearly - because it is God's own Word to us. From the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9) to the Book of Life (Rev. 21:27b), God's Plan for our Eternal Life is revealed to us in His Word.

Our God - the only true God; the Triune God; the Eternal God - is a great God. His *might* can be seen in His creation of the universe. His *wisdom* can be seen in the many marvelous functions He has placed in the bodies of His human creatures. His *love* can best be seen in His Plan of Salvation. And all of this - ALL OF THIS - was with the crown of His creation in mind. You and I are part of this crowning creation.

When Jesus had completed the work His Father had asked Him to do on earth, He returned to His heavenly home. One day He will return to earth to take us there to

be with Him forever. Whether that will be at the end of time or the end of life, we do not know. But we eagerly await that day and look forward to joining with the angels, archangels, and the entire company of heaven in singing the praises of our great and wonderful God and Savior.

Isaiah, in vision, saw and heard some of the praises sung by the seraphs (Isa. 6:3). John, in his divine Revelation, had a similar experience (Rev. 4:8-11; 5:9-14; 7:10-12; 15:3-4; 19:1-7). Our loved ones, who have departed this life in the Lord, have already joined this great throng. In God's own time, we will have that same privilege. When we reach heaven and better understand God's love and blessings, and hear those heavenly choirs - which we will be able to join - we will want eternity to never end. And it won't!

Thanks be to God for all His blessings to us unworthy - but greatly loved - sinners. To this Great and Wonderful God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - be all glory, praise, and honor now and forever. Amen.