

The New Testament, Book 2

The Gospel According to Saint Mark

Mark's gospel is the 2nd of the three synoptic gospels, and it is a gospel of action. Mark includes comparatively little of the teachings of Jesus, emphasizing rather his **deeds**. With no preamble, Mark gets on with the story; one might say that Mark's gospel "hits the ground running." By only the 9th verse of the 1st chapter, Jesus is already in action. As pastor and Bible teacher Dr. J. Vernon McGee put it, "This is the gospel of action and accomplishment. Here Jesus is not adorned with words and narrative but He is stripped and girded for action." Mark is a book of action, emphasizing events in the life and ministry of Jesus, rather than his genealogy or his teachings; for this reason Mark also emphasizes the **miracles** of Jesus. Because of Mark's lean, terse writing style, and because there is relatively little emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, Mark is also the shortest of the synoptic gospels. For this reason, and because Mark's gospel lacks the scholarly style of Matthew and Luke, and has not the deep, transcendent, spiritual nature of John's gospel, it may be thought of as the gospel of the common man.

A. Author. Like the other three gospel writers, Mark does not identify himself in his book. From earliest times, however, Church tradition has consistently identified the human author as John Mark, son of one Mary, in whose home the early Jerusalem believers met. It was to her house that Peter went immediately after he was miraculously released from prison by an angel¹.

The Muratorian Canon. The Muratorian Canon (ca 150-175 AD), also called "The Muratorian Fragment" because the first part is missing, lists the second gospel as "Mark²."

The Testimony of Papias. Even more revealing is the record of Papias, a disciple of John the apostle, and probably the earliest of the Church fathers whose writings have survived. And here we have an example of the value of the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Papias identifies Mark as the writer of this gospel. He wrote, "And the presbyter [i.e. John the Elder/Apostle] said this: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered. It was not, however, in the exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers] but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care: not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements³."

¹ Acts 12:12.

² Although not included in the Ante-Nicene Fathers (except for translators' references and footnotes), this ancient document, the earliest known listing of the New Testament books, is an extremely important document. For more on it, return to "Introduction to the New Testament," and its next-to-last topic.

³ ANF, Vol 1, Fragments of Papias, VI, p 155. Mark, as a boy, was also probably an eyewitness to some events in the life and ministry of Jesus, for his mother was an early disciple, and he seems to have had no living father.

Mark

Although Mark doesn't identify himself in his Gospel, in it there is an interesting vignette, generally believed to have been put there as a reference to himself. He was probably the young man with Jesus on the night of his betrayal who fled, naked, after one of the mob, in attempting to arrest him, had grabbed his robe and was left with only the robe in his hand (Mark 14:50-52).

Mark was a young man, a nephew to the apostle Barnabas; he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, from which he turned back before its completion (Acts 13:13). When Paul refused to take Mark along on the second missionary journey, there was a strong disagreement with Barnabas over it. As a result, Paul parted with Barnabas and took Silas as his fellow-missionary (Acts 15:36-40). Mark became a close associate and spiritual son of Peter, traveling and recording his teachings and accounts of the ministry of Jesus (I Peter 5:13). Mark later appears in Scripture as reconciled and reunited with Paul in Rome (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul refers to Mark as a profitable servant (II Timothy 4:11).

Tradition has it that Peter sent John Mark on a mission to Egypt, that he founded there the church at Alexandria, and was martyred by the Romans in the 8th year of Nero's reign as emperor.

B. Place and Date. The place of writing is unknown, but there is reason to believe that Mark assembled his gospel in Rome. Like Mathew, Luke and John, it was definitely written before the destruction of the Temple by Titus in 71 AD, for that landmark event is not mentioned in any of the gospels (see 13:1-2; Matthew 24:1-2; Luke 21:5-6). Mark probably assembled what he had learned, primarily from Peter, plus the things he himself may have seen, into his Gospel about 40 AD; by 50 AD it was being copied and circulated, for fragments of 3 chapters were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated by Israeli scholars at between 50 BC and 50 AD⁴.

C. Theme. The theme of Mark's Gospel is, as he writes in his opening sentence, that the Messiah is, indeed, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God." To make his case for this Mark emphasizes the miraculous deeds of Jesus. His is a lean, fast-moving book of action.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Mark's Gospel include the following:

1. Jesus Begins His Earthly Ministry. (1:14-20)

The ministry of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus, comes to its end when John is imprisoned by Herod. This imprisonment of the spiritual Elijah, and the end of his ministry, seem to be the cue for the earthly ministry of the Messiah to begin, and Jesus steps onto the stage of history.

He begins to preach in Galilee, his home region and the place where most of his ministry will take place. As He walks by the Sea of Galilee he sees two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, casting a net. He invites them to come with Him and says that He will make them "fishers of men"; without hesitation, or even questions about what He means by this, they abandon their nets and follow Him. A little farther down the beach Jesus sees James and John, sons of one Zebedee, a professional fisherman. They are in their father's boat, mending nets.

⁴ See "New Testament Fragments in the Dead Sea Scrolls" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

Jesus calls them to follow Him and they immediately abandon the boat, the nets, and their father, and follow Him. This unquestioning, immediate response of Peter, Andrew, James and John seems to be supernatural (at the very least it is extraordinary!), and Jesus now has recruited the first four of those who will become his 12 closest followers.

NOTE: Verse 14 tells us that when John the Baptist was imprisoned, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching....” But his home was Nazareth, in Galilee; if He “came *into* Galilee,” where had He been? According to John’s Gospel, He had been in Jerusalem (Jn 2:13f). We shall see more about his early ministry in Judea, while John the Baptist was still preaching and baptizing, in the study of John’s Gospel.

2. A Busy Sabbath Day. (1:21-34)

Jesus and his four new disciples go to Capernaum on the weekly Sabbath day and enter the synagogue there. He teaches, and the people are astonished at his teaching, for He teaches with an authority that they have never heard. A demonized man speaks out, and the demon asks Jesus to stop tormenting him; it seems that the clear Word of God, plainly spoken, is a torment to evil spirits. The spirit also recognizes the divine authority of Jesus, saying, “I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God⁵.” Jesus tells the spirit to be silent and come out of the man; and the man, with a loud cry, is set free. Now the crowd in the synagogue is even more amazed, and Jesus departs. He and his followers go to the home of Peter and Andrew, where Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed with a high fever. Jesus takes her by the hand, the fever leaves her, and she gets out of bed and “minister[s] unto them⁶.” Completely healed, she immediately prepares and serves them food and drink. After sunset (when the Sabbath ends and people can again bear burdens) they bring the sick and demonized to the door and He heals the sick and casts out many demons. Again, the demons recognize him as Messiah, but He commands them not to say this before the people.

NOTES:

a. Capernaum (“town of Nahum”) was a major town on the northwest bank of the Sea of Galilee, of sufficient size to be called a “city” (Matt 9:1). It may have been named for, or founded by, the prophet Nahum. There was a Roman garrison there, whose commander built and donated a synagogue, and a customs office for the collection of taxes. Capernaum became the center of the ministry of Jesus, and his operating base; much of his teaching was done in the synagogue there. The doom he pronounced upon Capernaum (Matt 11:23) was so completely fulfilled that today its exact location is a matter of some dispute.

b. It seems that at this early stage of his ministry Jesus does not want the masses of the people to know that He is the Messiah. We will find Him repeatedly saying, after a healing or a

⁵ It is interesting and significant that demon spirits, servants in Satan’s kingdom, immediately recognized Jesus as the Messiah. His own disciples never really understood this until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and millions of religious Jews still fail to recognize the truth of what demonic spirits clearly and immediately recognized 2,000 years ago.

⁶ The Greek word translated here as “left [her],” is *aphiemi*, meaning “to depart,” suggesting that the fever was caused by an evil spirit, i.e. a spirit of infirmity, and not by bacteria or a virus.

deliverance from demonic bondage, "Tell no man," or "Hold thy peace." But why? Apparently the reason is that He knows that the people (and the religious leaders) are expecting the Messiah to be a military hero like King David, who will conquer the Romans and set the Israelites free. Jesus needs to complete his earthly ministry of teaching and preaching, and fulfill all of the messianic prophecies, which He will do in the following three years. Should word spread, prematurely, that He is the Messiah, the people would probably try to force Him onto a throne, the Romans would react with force, and his ministry could end, premature, incomplete, in chaos, and in bloody ruin.

3. Healing a Leper. (1:35-45)

Going from town to town in Galilee, preaching in their synagogues, Jesus is approached by a leper who kneels before Him and declares in faith that, if He chooses to do so, Jesus can cleanse him. Moved with compassion (one of his most wonderful traits), Jesus says that it **is** his will; He then touches the leper, and heals him⁷. As before, Jesus admonishes the man to tell no one, but to go to the Temple and present himself to the priest in order to be restored to normal life⁸. But the man's joy and excitement are too much for him to contain, and he goes forth, "blazing it abroad," causing such excitement that Jesus can no more enter the city. To keep the crowds from getting out of control, He withdraws into the countryside, and the people come to Him there.

4. Take Up Thy Bed and Walk. (2:1-12)

Jesus goes to Capernaum and enters "the house" (his house there); word gets out that He is there and a crowd gathers⁹. The crowd fills the house and spills outside, so He opens the door and preaches the Word to them from within the house. Four men come, carrying a paralyzed friend, hoping for his healing. Since they can't force their way through the crowd to reach Jesus, they take the man up on the roof, make a large hole in the roof by removing tiles, and lower the paralyzed man into the room where Jesus is. Seeing this amazing refusal to be denied, and the faith of the man's friends, Jesus tells the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven (apparently dealing with first things first). Scribes in the crowd, seeing and hearing this, are thinking that Jesus is speaking blasphemies. "Who," they are thinking, "can forgive sins but God?" Supernaturally knowing their thoughts, Jesus answers them¹⁰. He tells them that, to demonstrate his authority to forgive sins, He will heal the man. He tells the paralyzed man to stand up, go home, and take his bed with him. The man leaves, with his bed, the people are amazed, and God is glorified.

5. The Calling of Matthew (Levi). (2:13-17)

⁷ It is certain that no one else in that place would have touched him!

⁸ Leviticus 14:1f.

⁹ The house identified in v 1 as "the house" in 2:1, as "his house" in 2:15, and again as "the house" in 9:33, is almost certainly one in Capernaum that Jesus and his closest followers used as their base of operations in Galilee. For more on this significant house see the explanatory **NOTE** following Highlight 36 ("The Hidden Treasure") in the study guide to Matthew.

¹⁰ It must have been unsettling for these scribes and Pharisees to have Jesus always knowing their thoughts, and answering them as if they had spoken them out loud.

Jesus goes down to the seaside to teach, and as He goes He passes a publican (tax collector), Levi, son of Alphaeus, working in his office. Jesus says to him, "Follow me," and another miracle apparently takes place: Levi, a wealthy man with a powerful and privileged position in the Roman bureaucracy, simply gets up from his desk, abandons his position and follows. Levi (who will be also known as Matthew) takes Jesus to his home for a celebratory dinner. The guests include many other publicans and sinners (after all, this was naturally any publican's circle of friends). Scribes and Pharisees, following, see Jesus eating with such people and are offended; but Jesus reminds them that it is the sick who need a physician--not the healthy--and declares that He has come to call sinners--not the righteous--to repentance.

NOTE: It is interesting that Mark, the man of few words, tells us more about Matthew (Levi) than does Matthew himself. Here is another example of the need to combine all that the Bible says about anything in the Bible, in order to get the complete picture of it.

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Author's Note. In verses 19-22 following Jesus, in explaining the differences of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, uses the analogy of old and new cloths and old and new wineskins. This will not be included here because it is dealt with thoroughly in the study guide to Luke 5:27-39.

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6. The Sabbath Was Made for Man. (2:23-3:8)

On a subsequent Sabbath day Jesus and his followers pass through a field of grain, and his followers pick and eat some of the immature grain as they go. By this time, it seems, He is enough of an irritant to the religious leaders that they are following Him everywhere He goes¹¹. They are offended because the disciples are picking the grain, for their man-made rules classify this as "labor," thus a violation of the Sabbath. As He often does with insincere people, Jesus opens his response with a deliberate insult by asking, "Have ye never read...¹²?" He then reminds them of the time that David, fleeing from King Saul, ate some of the consecrated bread in the Tabernacle, and gave it to his soldiers. Here He introduces the concept that God established the Sabbath, not as a legalistic requirement to make life more restrictive and difficult for man, but as a day of relaxation and rest, as a blessing for man (and, incidentally, a blessed day of rest for oxen, mules and other work animals). The Pharisees had seen the letter of the law

¹¹ This harassment by the scribes, Pharisees and other legalistic religious leaders will continue for the rest of his earthly ministry. They constantly tried to outsmart Him in order to embarrass, discredit or accuse Him, an undertaking at which they consistently failed. In fact, He often used their interference to silence them, to reveal them for the insincere oppressors that they were, or to better make a teaching point.

¹² The Pharisees took great pride in having not only read all the Scriptures, but having memorized vast portions. Thus, when Jesus began a response with "Have ye never read...?" or "Know ye not...?" their pride was offended (deliberately, I think).

(and heaped hundreds of man-made restrictions on top of it); but they had completely missed the spirit of the law. Jesus eloquently, and succinctly, sums up the heart of the matter by saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” He then enters the synagogue at Capernaum and sees a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees follow Him and watch, thinking, “Aha--now let’s see if He will violate the Sabbath again by healing this man” (they haven’t learned a thing). Jesus, knowing the thoughts of the Pharisees, is angry at the hardness of their hearts. He asks them if it is lawful to do good things on the Sabbath--a rhetorical question; but they refuse to answer. He then heals the man and the Pharisees are furious. They go out and consult with the Herodians, the political Jews who are allied with the evil King Herod, about ways to stop this thorn in their flesh. Jesus, meanwhile, goes back to the seacoast. The crowd following Him has now grown to include people from every part of Israel, plus pagans from Idumaea, Arabia, Tyre and Sidon¹³.

NOTES: In this passage we see illustrated three important matters:

a. Jesus could be angry and yet not sin, and the same is true of us (Eph 4:26). Notice that what angers Him here is the hardness of the Pharisees’ hearts; yet when He looks upon the crippled man, his reaction is the opposite--compassion for the poor man’s need.

b. In a similar (but not the same) incident recorded in Matt 12:22f, Jesus casts out an evil spirit which has made a man blind and dumb. Freed from the demon, the man can both see and speak. There is no error of contradiction in these accounts; it would be irrational to believe that during his three-years of such ministry He only expressed this vital fact of spiritual life once. The gospels record seven healings by Jesus on Sabbaths, and there were surely a great many more that were not recorded. We should always remember these precious, ageless words: the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

*c. Enter Religious Spirits. Notice the reaction of the Pharisees when their man-made doctrine is offended; it is anger. It seems that some extra-scriptural doctrines are inspired by evil spirits ("doctrines of demons"), and these demons may be thought of as doctrinal demons (see I Tim 4:1). These evil spirits seem to work to protect their unscriptural, and usually divisive, doctrines; and when someone questions or disputes their doctrines their characteristic response is **anger**. In Luke’s account of this incident he records that the Pharisees were not just angry, but “filled with madness”¹⁴! It seems that the religious demons operating in the Pharisees of which Luke wrote were **really** upset. For more on religious spirits see “The Insidious Trap of Falling in Love with a Doctrine” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).*

¹³ The name “Idumaea” appears in the AV (KJV), and in the Apocrypha. It was used by Greeks and Romans as a synonym for Edom.

¹⁴ Luke 6:11.

7. A House Divided and the Unforgivable Sin. (3:22-30)

The scribes, legalistic scholars, who have come “down from Jerusalem,” try a new argument to malign Jesus. To discredit Him they are saying to others that He performs his miracles of healing and deliverance with power given to Him by Beelzebub (Satan)¹⁵. Knowing this, Jesus **summons them** (“called them unto him”); they have crossed a dangerous line¹⁶! Not only are they logically in error, it is **much worse** than that!

He asks them, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” As they stand, unable to answer, He goes right on to say that a kingdom divided against its self cannot stand, and a house divided against its self cannot stand. He then declares the deadly serious reality of the unforgivable sin: i.e., to attribute to the power of Satan and his demonic spirits things actually accomplished with the power of the Holy Spirit. This matter is more fully discussed in the study guide to Matthew 12:31-32; and for a still more complete discussion of this, see “The Troubling Matter of the Unforgivable Sin” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

NOTES:

a. The careful reader will notice what seems to be a contradiction in v 22. Capernaum was north of Jerusalem; so how could the scribes, in travelling north to Capernaum have come “down from Jerusalem”? The answer is that, in such expressions of travel to and from Jerusalem, the common reference was not to direction, but to elevation. Because Jerusalem was higher in elevation than the surrounding area, it was uphill when travelling to Jerusalem, and downhill when travelling away from it.

b. From the time of Shakespeare and John Donne, through William Faulkner, Earnest Hemingway, and until today, writers and politicians have used lines, expressions, and imagery, from the Bible for some of their best titles and lines in the texts of classic poems, books, and speeches. One of the most famous speeches of Lincoln, the master of words and phrases, his “House Divided” speech, was based upon this very passage of Scripture.

¹⁵ Beelzebub (“lord of the flies”) was a pagan god of the Philistines; some take it to mean “lord of demons,” thus Satan. Here it is used as a synonym for Satan, as Jesus makes clear in his response to them.

¹⁶ This is the only place in the NT where it is recorded that Jesus summons his religious enemies to come speak to Him face-to-face, rather than speaking ill of Him to others. He in effect gives them a command (at the very least a challenge), and they obey. This is significant, and speaks of the deadly seriousness of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

8. Who Are the Mother and Brothers of Jesus? (3:31-35)

Mary, Jesus' mother, and his brothers arrive, but cannot get near Him because of the crowd. They cannot even make themselves heard when they call to Him, so others in the crowd pass the word to Jesus that they are there, and are asking for Him. Jesus takes this occasion to make an important point. He asks, rhetorically, "Who is my mother, or my brethren?" Then, indicating the crowd of hungry seekers around Him, Jesus says that all of these sincere people are his mother and his brothers and sisters; and then He explains that whoever shall walk in obedience to the Word of God, doing God's will, are his brothers, sisters and his mother. But what does He mean by this strange declaration? Is he being dismissive, saying that his mother and his siblings are not dear to him? Definitely not! Instead, He seems to be saying that those who do the will of God become part of his spiritual family, and will be as dear to Him as are his own mother, brothers and sisters.

NOTE: Verse 21 tells us that "his friends" had come out to seize Him and take Him home, for they believed that he was overwrought, disoriented or insane ("beside himself")¹⁷. It appears that this word had reached his mother and siblings and Jesus, knowing this, did not immediately stop what he was doing and go to see them as we might expect. It would have been an interruption at the very least, and they would probably have insisted on taking him back to Nazareth--perhaps by force.

9. The Parable of the Mustard Seed. (4:30-32)

Teaching in parables by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard

¹⁷ The Greek word translated "beside himself" is *existemi*, meaning "out of one's senses, out of place, amazed or insane."

seed. The seed is tiny, He says, but when it is planted in the earth and cared for it produces a plant large enough for birds to perch in it and find shade under it¹⁸. Thus He seems to be saying that the Gospel, embraced by only one person, or a small group of people, will spread to many others so that, someday, it will cover the Earth. From small, obscure beginnings, such as those 120 first Christians, gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, great works of God can grow.

NOTE: In nature there are smaller seeds than mustard seeds; but it was, in that day, the smallest seed of herbaceous (non-woody) plants, planted "in the ground" (i.e. planted in furrows and covered with earth, and not broadcast on the surface of the ground).

10. A Man Tormented by Demons. (5:1-21)

g crossed the Sea of Galilee in a storm, during which Jesus rebukes the storm (this event is dealt with in the study guide to Matthew), He and the twelve arrive at a place called Gadara on the eastern shore¹⁹. Once ashore, Jesus is met by a demonized man who has been insane for many years. He wears no clothes, we may safely assume that he doesn't bathe, and he has no peace ("night and day...crying")²⁰.

¹⁸ In hot desert places, birds seek any shade that they can find. In the Mojave Desert there are places where the only shade is that of the shadows of utility poles. The author has seen, many times, clusters of birds carefully sitting in those narrow shadows, perfectly reproducing the shapes of the poles and cross pieces, and carefully moving as the shadows moved.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the difficulties in the two accounts of freeing demonized men in this region of the eastern shore, see highlight 13 in the study guide to Matthew, and explanatory notes b., c. and d. that follow it.

²⁰ The Greek word for "crying" here is *krazo*. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words defines this word as "of any

He cuts himself with sharp stones, and lives in the tombs among the dead. He could not be kept captive, not even with chains, for with supernatural strength he broke the chains. We are told here that the chains had been "plucked asunder," which paints a vivid word picture of the man as he pulls the chains apart as easily as we might pluck handfuls of cotton from mature cotton plants. Here, in this tormented man, we see illustrated Satan's will for us, and classic characteristics of those severely demonized: isolation from civil society, a tendency to identify with death and the dead, nakedness, uncleanness, self-injury and, ultimately, self-destruction. In some cases, they have supernatural strength.

As was always the case, the demons in the man immediately recognize Jesus as Messiah, the divine Son of God (something which most of the Jewish religious leaders never grasped); but they see Him as an enemy (something with which the Jewish religious leaders were in complete agreement). Jesus asks the man his name and the demon answers, saying that his name is "Legion, for we are many"; in this case there are many evil spirits tormenting the man²¹. Jesus commands the demon (and, by clear implication, the rest of the demons) to come out of the man. The ruling demon begs Jesus not to send him and the others "away out of the country," and then the other demons cry out to Him, asking the same thing. It must have been a strange scene--cacophony--with all of the spirits speaking at the same time, but using the demoniac's voice. They beg to be allowed to enter a large herd of swine grazing nearby, and Jesus gives them permission²². When the demonic spirits enter the pigs they stampede, run off a bluff into the sea, and are drowned. The swineherds run to town, telling the story, and the city people come to see. What they see is described in what is to me one of the most beautiful word pictures in the Bible. They see a formerly tormented man who was dangerously and hopelessly insane, sitting peacefully with Jesus, "clothed and in his right mind." The people, who care much more about the lost swine than they do about the liberated man, ask Jesus to go away. The newly freed man wants to go with Jesus, but the Lord tells him to stay there and be a witness for Him. The man then goes all through Decapolis, telling the people what Jesus has done²³.

inarticulate cries from fear, pain, etc."; thus we can know that the tormented man was screaming, moaning, etc, and not weeping (although he surely must have done a great deal of that also). For a more thorough explanation of this see "**On the Other Hand, There Is Great Advantage in the Greek**" in the Introduction to the New Testament.

²¹ Satan's kingdom is structured. In the same way that there are angelic spirits of different ranks in the Kingdom of Heaven, evil spirits are of different ranks, and this one was apparently what may be called the ruling spirit of this group.

²² It seems that disembodied spirits, having no body of their own, very much desire to have a body to live in; if they can't have a human body, then animals will do. See in this regard "Demons and Demon Activity" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

²³ Decapolis was a region in eastern Galilee with 10 cities (thus the name, Greek for "ten cities"). For more on Decapolis and its swine industry, see

NOTES:

*a. There is an extremely important principle illustrated in this passage, and it is easy to overlook it, for it is found in **only three words** of v 6: "and worshipped Him." Surely there could be no one more afflicted with demons than was this poor man. And he was obviously conflicted; for he both worshiped Jesus, and spoke to Him as an enemy. Notice that, as severely demonized as this man was, **he ran to Jesus**; Jesus didn't have to run him down and tackle him. And so, it seems, Satan cannot override a person's will. Simply put, the Devil can't "make you do it." There is no temptation that we cannot resist if we will. In this regard see I Cor 10:13-14 and "Demons and Demon Activity" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).*

b. The herd of pigs is described as "a great herd" of "about two thousand"; this was indeed a huge herd. But does this mean that there were "about two thousand" evil spirits in this poor man? Maybe--but it seems inconceivable. Since a Roman legion consisted of about 5,000 soldiers, some commentators suggest 5,000 demons in the man; this seems even more inconceivable. There may simply have been enough insane pigs with evil spirits in them to trigger a stampede of the entire herd, even though there was not a spirit for each pig.

c. In Luke's account of this (Lk 8:40) "the people" who gladly received Him when He returned may refer to some of his disciples, waiting at the Decapolis beach where Jesus and his friends had landed after the stormy crossing; or, it may refer to the crowd that had been with Him at the western beach in Galilee, and who were still waiting for his return from across the Sea. Most commentators take the latter position, as do I. It seems clear from vv21-24 that Jesus had re-crossed the sea, and there was Jairus, leader of a synagogue, waiting anxiously for Jesus because his daughter was dying. It is doubtful that there were synagogues in Decapolis; and, in the events that immediately follow, there is no mention of another sea crossing--it is obvious that the re-crossing, back to Galilee, has already occurred.

11. Healing the Woman with the Issue of Blood. (5:22-34)

A man named Jairus, the ruler (rabbi) of the local synagogue, falls at the feet of Jesus and begs Him to heal his daughter, who is lying sick and at the point of death²⁴. Together, they walk toward the man's house, with a crowd following and surrounding them. In the crowd there is a woman who has been suffering from uterine bleeding for 12 years. She has spent all her money and has "suffered much" in being treated by many physicians, but with no healing. Instead, all she has accomplished by being treated has been more suffering and the loss of all of her money. She makes her way through the crowd and touches his garment. Apparently, having seen Him

²⁴ The synagogue in question is not identified; but it is probably the one at Capernaum, where Jesus has done much teaching.

touch and heal others, she believes that if she touches so much as just the hem of his garment she will be healed, and that is exactly what happens: the moment she touches his robe she is healed. Jesus, knowing that virtue (power) has gone out of Him, looks around and asks, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples reply that they are in the midst of a moving crowd and that a lot of people are touching Him. The woman, who has apparently slipped away into the crowd, returns, trembling with fear, and tells Him what has happened. Jesus tells her to go in peace, saying that her faith has made her whole.

12. The Raising of a Dead Girl. (5:35-43)

While He is speaking to the woman who touched Him and was healed, a messenger from the home of Jairus comes to say that he and Jesus have arrived too late--his daughter is dead. Hearing this report Jesus tells Jairus not to fear, but to believe for the restoration of his daughter. When they reach the house there is already a crowd of mourners gathering. Hearing Jesus comfort Jairus, saying that his daughter is not dead, they laugh and scorn Him. Ignoring the mourners, and taking with Him only the girl's parents, and Peter, James and John, his closest friends, He enters the house, takes the dead girl's hand and says to her in Aramaic to rise up. At this the girl is restored to life, gets out of bed and walks around. Jesus commands that the girl be fed, and that those in the house tell no one what they have seen.

NOTE: Because, in v 39, Jesus tells the father that his daughter is not dead, "but sleepeth," some miracle-denying commentators contend that she wasn't really dead--that she had only fainted from hunger. However, one who has merely fainted still breathes, and anyone can observe the breathing if, in fact, breathing is taking place. If the girl were alive a pulse could be felt, especially in the carotid arteries in her neck; and her beating heart could be heard simply by putting an ear to her chest. Also, it is not rational to think that the servant would bring such a heart-breaking report to his master if there were any doubt. In addition, the fact that the mourners outside the house "laughed [Jesus] to scorn" at the suggestion that she was still alive must be taken at face value. Also, it is significant that Jesus did not allow the doubters to go into the house; this would have contaminated the dead girl's presence with unbelief, the opposite of the faith required for her resurrection. And, finally, whenever there is any reason to doubt, it is always wise to give God the benefit of the doubt; it is much better to glorify God for something He didn't do, than to risk denying Him glory for what He has done.

13. Deliverance and Healing at Long Distance. (7:24-30)

Jesus and his closest disciples travel to the area of Tyre and Sidon, important coastal cities of Syrophenicia, in what is now Lebanon. This region is outside Israel, and the culture is pagan. Jesus enters the home of an unnamed, sympathetic person, hoping to remain unrecognized by the people; but this doesn't happen. A local woman hears of his presence and she comes and falls at his feet. She begs Him to cast a demon out of her daughter who is at her home, afflicted. The response of Jesus seems harsh, for He replies that He has come to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and that it is not right "to take the children's bread and to cast it unto the dogs."

Rather than taking offense at his words, the Syrophenician woman answers with great wisdom, saying “Yes, Lord, yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.” Jesus replies that, because of her wise response, her daughter is free. The woman returns to her home where she finds her daughter lying in bed, exhausted but free of the demon.

NOTES:

a. To us the reply of Jesus sounds harsh. He was obviously exhausted, and seeking rest from the pressures of ministry; when this woman found Him his frustrated sigh could probably be heard in the house next door. Yes, although divine, Jesus was also very, very human; still, his response seems harsh²⁵.

It helps to know that the word rendered “dogs” here is the plural of “kunarion,” meaning “puppy,” and that it was a common practice for puppies to be allowed to lick up the fragments of food left on the floor after a meal. Also, Jesus may have been testing the woman’s sincerity. What we can know with certainty is that Jesus was never cruel, nor was He disrespectful in speaking to his elders or to women; and He was especially kind to the powerless and afflicted, such as this distressed woman. Perhaps we will get to discuss this with the Syrophenician mother in Heaven.

b. The newly liberated girl was free, but apparently exhausted and hungry. Sometimes, when evil spirits are cast out, the one being set free experiences trying physical things and may be left free, but exhausted and weak. We shall see an example of this in 9:26-27.

14. The Cost of Discipleship. (8:34-9:1)

Jesus leaves the Mediterranean coast and returns to Galilee, where He heals many and feeds the 4,000. Peter makes his great confession that Jesus is the Christ, but is then rebuked for refusing to hear the truth about the coming suffering and death of Jesus. These momentous events were dealt with in greater detail in the study guide to Matthew's account.

At this point Jesus then delivers his great message on the cost of discipleship. He says that those who would be his disciples must deny themselves, take up the cross and follow Him. Those listening to Him don’t realize it, but some of them will literally take up their crosses and follow Him, for in the coming years they will be crucified. For the rest of us, He means that we must be prepared to suffer (and, in some cases, die) for being faithful to Him and the gospel message. He declares a basic law of the Kingdom of God: that in order to save our lives, we must be willing to lose them for his sake. For some of us this will mean physical death; for others it will mean the laying down of our own desires, values and goals and the acceptance of His plan for us.

He confronts the crowd with the relative value of earthly possessions and our eternal destiny. And then He proclaims a sobering fact of life concerning our confession or denial of Him. In a few plain, compelling words, He warns all of mankind that if we confess Him before men (declare our faith in Him and are not ashamed of Him) He will confess us before the Father. But,

²⁵ In the ancient Middle East it was a serious insult to call someone a dog, or son of a dog; it still is.

on the other hand, if we are ashamed of Him, and deny Him before men, He will be ashamed of us when He returns in the glory of the Father. He will say of us, "Depart from me--I never knew you." This is indeed a chilling thought²⁶.

Jesus then closes this teaching session with a statement that those in the crowd could not possibly have understood; He said that there were those in that crowd ("some of them that stand here") who would live to see "the Kingdom of God come with power." It seems that He was saying that some in that crowd would also be part of the crowd at Pentecost who would see and hear the manifestations of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, of course, knew that no one in that crowd could understand his meaning; however, He also knew that when they experienced Pentecost they would remember his words and understand. And, of course, He knew that you and I **would** understand his words as we read them.

15. The Transfiguration. (9:2-10)

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John and leads them up a high mountain²⁷. There, on the mountain, Jesus is transfigured before them, his garments become a dazzling white, taking on a divine brightness, and Moses and Elijah appear there, conversing with Jesus. Peter, not knowing what to say, suggests that they build three memorials there, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah²⁸. No one answers him, and a supernatural cloud overshadows them. From the cloud God the Father speaks saying "This is my beloved Son; hear Him." When the three disciples are able, they look around and only Jesus is still with them. As they walk back down the mountain Jesus tells the three not to say anything of what they have seen until He has risen from the dead. Although He has already told them plainly that He must die and be resurrected three days later, they obviously haven't grasped it--they are still puzzled.

NOTES:

a. The Greek word translated "transfigured" is "metamorphoo." From it we derive the English word metamorphosis, meaning a fundamental change in substance and/or appearance, as when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. This glowing state seems to come from a direct touch by the presence of God; other examples are Moses' face on Mt. Sinai (Ex 34:29f) and Stephen's face before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:15).

b. Mark did not record the nature of the conversation of Jesus, Moses and Elijah, nor did Matthew. Luke, in his account, does tell us, briefly, that they spoke of the coming sacrificial death of Jesus (Lk 9:31); John did not include this event in his gospel. It seems that what they

²⁶ Although this warning is not precisely spelled out in Mark's account as I have written it here, it is clearly stated in Matthew 7:22-23 and 25:40-41. It is definitely true.

²⁷ Beginning with the raising of the dead daughter of Jairus the rabbi, Jesus will take these three with Him, apart from the other disciples, on special occasions. Peter, James and John may be thought of as his "inner circle" of friends. The location of this event is unknown; the most likely is Mt. Herman in the northeast border land, the highest point in (or near) Palestine.

²⁸ Peter was basically an impulsive man of action; and he had a tendency to speak before thinking. Only Mark records this part of the event, which is understandable when we remember that Peter himself was the source in most of these events that Mark recorded. Perhaps the telling of this to his young friend Mark was a mea culpa, an act of humility or confession, by an older and wiser Peter.

were discussing was God's plan for redeeming lost mankind, culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

c. It is fascinating to think that Peter (and, apparently James and John) recognized Moses and Elijah. How could that be? Mark does not explain it, or even raise the point. A similar event (and just as puzzling) was the apparent raising of the spirit of the prophet Samuel. But on that occasion King Saul would recognize Samuel for he had known him intimately in his life on Earth; and it is likely that the witch had seen Samuel, for he had been an extremely prominent figure, and a terror to pagans such as the Witch of Endor. But Peter, James and John would have no way, in the natural, to know what Moses and Elijah looked like; and yet they recognized them. Perhaps they heard Jesus speak to them by name; or, perhaps the three asked Jesus who those terrifying men were, and Peter told Mark. Whatever happened, it is a point to ponder..

16. A Difficult Case of Deliverance. (9:14-29)

When Jesus (with Peter, James and John) reaches the bottom of the hill He finds his other disciples, being questioned by scribes, and a mixed crowd of seekers. A distraught man rushes to Jesus and beseeches Him to cast a deaf and dumb spirit out of his son; the disciples had tried, the man says, but they were unable to help the boy. This demon has tormented his son since he was a child, the man says, sometimes into a fire. He says to Jesus "if thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus replies that if the man can believe that the boy will be healed, it can happen. Weeping, the boy's father replies in memorable words with which we all should be able to identify: "Lord, I believe--[but] help thou mine unbelief."

Seeing an excited crowd gathering around them, Jesus rebukes the spirit and commands it to come out. The demon obeys, but not without causing the boy pain, and the boy falls to the ground, unconscious ("as one dead"). Jesus then lifts the boy to his feet and he is free. Jesus and his followers then return to "the house" (apparently their "home base," the house where they stay when in Capernaum)²⁹. When his disciples ask Jesus why they could not cast out the spirit that afflicted the boy He replies that "This kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting."

NOTES:

*a. Here in v 29 (and in the parallel passage, Matt 17:21) is **the only place** in the recorded teachings of Jesus where He sets forth the important combination of prayer with fasting³⁰. Yet most (if not all) of the modern versions omit the words "and fasting," thus pulling the foundation out from under the concept; and some omit the entire statement of Jesus. Mrs. Siewert, in her Amplified Bible, characteristically includes the entire verse, but with "and fasting" in italics. This is because, in the Westcott-Hort family of Greek New Testaments that she was using, these*

²⁹ For more on this house used by Jesus and his followers see the explanatory **NOTE** following Highlight 36 in the study guide to Matthew.

³⁰ Luke records an historic example of this important combination of prayer and fasting in Acts 14:23; and Paul clearly refers to its importance in I Corinthians 7:5.

*two words do not appear. Because she was convinced that these two important words **should be there** (as in the AV [KJV] and Textus Receptus) she included them; yet, true to her traditional principle of honest translation, she italicized them.*

*b. Because of the reply by Jesus about prayer and fasting, some believe that, in dealing with evil spirit affliction, some spirits are not to be rebuked or cast out; instead, they believe, in such cases the remedy is to "pray and fast" them out. However, in this event (the only one recorded in which Jesus [or anyone else] made such a statement) what did Jesus actually **do** to cause the spirit to release the boy and flee? Did He "pray and fast" it out? Of course not! He **rebuked** the spirit--commanded it to "come out of him and enter no more into him." What He must have meant about prayer and fasting, it seems, is that some demonic spirits are more powerful and resistant than others; and, in such cases, it is necessary to be spiritually prepared beforehand by prayer and fasting. Today, this spiritually prepared state is sometimes referred to as being "prayed up." Jesus was already spiritually prepared. He had just come from communion with God the Father, Moses and Elijah at the doorway to Heaven; in a spiritual sense, when he arrived at the bottom of the mountain, He was already "loaded for bear"!*

17. Jesus Reveals Things about Humility and Children. (9:30-42)

Travelling through Galilee, avoiding and evading the people, Jesus concentrates on explaining to his disciples that soon He must die and rise from the dead the third day. They understand none of it, but are afraid to ask Him about it. Returning to Capernaum, their home base for ministry, they enter "the house³¹." The disciples had been arguing among themselves, as they traveled to Capernaum, as to which of them was the greatest (they had **so** much to learn, and were such slow learners). In the house Jesus, knowing the answer already, asked them what it was that they had been discussing on the road; but they are afraid (or ashamed) to tell Him. So He tells **them** what they had been disputing; and then tells them how wrong they all are. He sets forth the vital principle of the Kingdom that it is not wrong to **be** first, but it is wrong to **seek to be** first, or the greatest. He says that if any man would be first, let him be willing to be last, i.e. the servant of all. The key to humility and success is that if we humble ourselves before God, He will then exalt us in due time--probably meaning, when we can handle exaltation without being destroyed by pride (see I Peter 5:1-7).

Jesus then takes a small child in his arms and makes an exceedingly strong statement. Whoever shall receive such a child in his name receives Him; and that is not all, for that person will also be receiving "Him that sent Me" (God the Father). John, obviously not understanding any of what Jesus has just said, interrupts Him with an irrelevant comment. He tells Him that he and others had recently rebuked a stranger who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus³².

³¹ The use of the phrase "in the house" here, and similar phrases elsewhere, such as in 2:15, is a clear indication that Jesus had a house where they lived when in Capernaum. It is interesting that this apparent and significant fact is never clearly stated in Scripture.

³² For another example of this, interrupting Jesus with a completely irrelevant matter when He is trying to reveal vital, timeless truth, see Acts 1:4-9. His closest followers never really understood what He was doing until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Jesus deals with that, and returns to the teaching point with a chilling finale: He tells them that anyone who would offend a little child, injure one in any way or cause one to stumble, i.e. expose one to sin and rob the child of his or her innocence, that adult's punishment will be so terrible that he would wish rather to be cast into the sea with a millstone tied to his neck³³.

NOTE: A casual reading of vv 38-41 here could make them seem to be a contradiction of Matt 12:30 and Lk 11:23; but there is no contradiction. In the similar, but opposite, statements in Matt 12 and Lk 11, Jesus has just been accused of casting out demons with the power of Satan, and He is speaking of his wicked accusers. Here, in vv 38-40, He is speaking of an obscure man who has heard the gospel, believed on Jesus, and was sincerely attempting to serve and emulate Him.

This man was successfully ministering deliverance, from demonic torment, to people oppressed by evil spirits; and he was doing it in the name of (as the representative of) Jesus. John's complaint is merely that the man was someone the disciples did not know; i.e. he was "an outsider," apparently following Jesus and his group, but on the fringes. It appears that this unnamed believer was exercising more faith than the "insiders," and that Jesus was pleased with him. I look forward to meeting this un-named man of faith in Heaven.

18. "Suffer the Little Children." (10:1-16)

Jesus and his disciples leave Galilee, travel into Judea, and cross over the Jordan River to the east bank. As always, the people gather to Him and He teaches. He deals with the matter of divorce and remarriage; and later He explains it further to his disciples in a house, away from the crowd³⁴. Then people begin to come to Jesus, bringing their children, wishing that He might touch the children³⁵. The disciples, apparently trying to protect Jesus from unnecessary stress, tell them to go away; but Jesus, seeing this, was "much displeased." In deathless words He rebukes his disciples saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of God." Continuing, He declares that no one can enter the Kingdom unless he becomes as a little child. He then takes the children up in his arms, lays his hands on them and blesses them.

NOTE: The use of "much displeased" here is interesting and significant. Was Jesus sometimes angry? Absolutely! Was He ever angry with his disciples? He was at least this one time, and we must ask ourselves why. Jesus had a special love for children, and He felt very strongly that they should be protected and nurtured. He also used the innocence and simplicity of a child's thinking to express what our attitudes must be when we approach Him for forgiveness and redemption. In order to receive the Kingdom of God, we must become "as a little child";

³³ My father, in attempting to express the magnitude of the evil of such sins against a child, used to say "There will be a special [i.e. very, very bad] place, nine miles the other side of Hell, for anyone who would do such a thing."

³⁴ Whose house it was that Jesus and his disciples entered is not explained. It could not have been their own house in Capernaum, for they were far away from it, east of the Jordan River. The literal Greek is "the dwelling"; Mrs. Siewert (*The Amplified Bible*) renders it "indoors." It was apparently a house made available to them for this occasion by an un-named believer.

³⁵ Matthew records the fact that the parents also wished for Jesus to pray for the children (Matt 19:13).

otherwise we cannot enter therein.

19. The Rich Young Ruler. (10:17-22)

As Jesus travels on, a man comes running to Him and falls on his knees at Jesus' feet; he is a rich, young ruler³⁶. It seems that he has been hearing Jesus preach about personal redemption, or has at least heard the message from others who have heard Him. He seems convicted of his need of redemption, for he is obviously anxious--perhaps desperate--to find assurance of eternal life. He calls Jesus "good master," and asks "what shall **I do** that I may inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies by asking the man why he calls Him "good," saying that only God is good (Jesus asked questions to make people think--not to get information). Then, in harmony with the religious way the man is thinking, Jesus refers to the commandments of Moses. The man says that he has kept them since he was a child. He hasn't, of course, because only Jesus ever accomplished this; but he thinks that he has kept the commandments. He must have been thinking, "I have been religious all my life--really religious; so why am I so miserable, feeling such a great need?" Jesus, looking upon him and knowing his need, is moved with compassion and love for him³⁷. Then Jesus confronts the man with the greatest barrier to his receiving the redemptive gift of eternal life: it is his riches. He tells the man that if he wants to have this gift of eternal life he must return home, sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then return, take up his cross and follow Him. With this hard requirement, however, Jesus also promises that if the man will do this, he will have great riches in Heaven.

But this is too much for the young man; overwhelmed, he goes away sad, for he has much wealth and many possessions, and is not willing to part with them. One would hope that he later changed his mind; but if he did there is no record of it.

NOTES:

*a. Some, who reject the concept of the divinity of Jesus, cite this statement of the Lord ("Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.") to "prove" that Jesus was only an exceptional human teacher, and not divine. Of course, we know that Jesus was (and is) God; Jesus, however, knew that this man's concept of "goodness" is that of one who carefully observes religious rules. Notice that the rich young man's question is what must **he do** to inherit eternal life; religion is a matter of **our doing** good things to make ourselves acceptable to God, a thing impossible to accomplish. If we could be "good" enough to earn our redemption we would not need a Redeemer; and the suffering and death of Jesus would be nothing but a bad joke. Instead, the key to receiving eternal life as God's child consists of trusting in **what God has already done** in making redemption possible--a priceless gift to be simply received.*

Here Jesus is challenging the man to think on a higher level, beyond the legalistic concepts of

³⁶ This event is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels, and this description of the man is found only by combining all three. He is called "young" only in Matthew's account; he is called a ruler only in Luke's account; but he is revealed as being very rich (the key factor) in all three.

³⁷ Of the three synoptic gospel writers only Mark records that Jesus, looking at the young ruler, "loved him." I find great significance in these two words.

the religious leaders of the day. He is pointing the man's thinking to the absolute, perfect, essential, unchanging purity of God--a state that man cannot achieve by his own efforts.

This young man's question, although expressed in the intellectually sophisticated words of an educated rabbi, is essentially the same as that which will be asked by an uneducated Philippian jailor a few years later, who will cry, out of the desperation of his heart, to Paul and Silas: "What must I do to be saved³⁸?"

b. In this exchange, Jesus was not saying that by selling all he had, and giving it to the poor, the rich young ruler would "earn" redemption. Rather, Jesus knew that this man's riches and possessions held first place in the man's values, and God will not accept second place in our lives.

20. The Camel and the Eye of a Needle. (10:23-27)

As the man leaves, Jesus turns to his disciples and makes a teaching point. He tells them that men's riches can be a significant obstacle to their redemption, not simply because they are rich, or just because they love their possessions, but because it is difficult to be rich and not **trust** in the riches³⁹. To make his point He says that it is very difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. In fact, He says, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (in the natural, an obvious impossibility) than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. His disciples are astonished, and say among themselves, "Who, then, can be saved?" Jesus, looking upon them, and understanding their amazement, gives them (and us) the key. He says that with only human resources such a thing is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

I am convinced that God will never override my will and make a decision for me; if He would, then He would force me (and everyone else who ever lived or will ever live) into Heaven, for He is not willing that any should perish⁴⁰. But He can, and will, work mightily in my heart to bring about a change in my attitudes⁴¹. This is an **extremely** important point, and one worthy of much pondering.

NOTE: *To express the difficulty of a rich man's entering the Kingdom of God by comparing it to a camel's passing "through the eye of a needle" is a powerful metaphor; to our logical minds this is simply impossible. The key of course, is that with only human resources it can't be done; but with God's help anything is possible⁴².*

Some commentators explain this illustration by saying that in (or adjacent to) the regular gates of many cities there was a much smaller gate called "the needle's eye." At night, when the main gate was closed until sunrise, a man could still enter the city through "the needle's eye." A

³⁸ Acts 16:30-31.

³⁹ Although this encounter with the rich young ruler is recorded in all three synoptic gospels, only in Mark's account is the problem of trusting in riches included as an obstacle to redemption.

⁴⁰ II Peter 3:9; I Tim 2:4.

⁴¹ Genesis 20:6; Ez 6:22; Prov 21:1.

⁴² Matthew 19:26; Mk 10:27 and 14:36.

camel, however, could pass through this small gate only by entering on its knees, and only then when its burden had been removed. Thus a camel could pass through "the eye of a needle"; but it wasn't easy, and could only be done on its knees, and with all burdens removed from its back. This may, or may not, not be true; but it makes for a great teaching tool in explaining that you and I can be redeemed (i. e. enter into the Kingdom) only by coming to Jesus on our knees, and with our burdens cast down at his feet, bringing nothing to the encounter but our need.

21. The Hundredfold Return. (10:28-31)

Peter, undoubtedly with his head still swimming from what he has just seen and heard concerning the rich young ruler, camels and a needle's eye, reminds Jesus (as if it were necessary to remind Him) that he and the others had abandoned all that they had to follow Him. Was Peter boasting? Or was he feeling some anxiety about his status, and the status of the other disciples, in terms of entering the Kingdom? Maybe both, for Peter had an impulsive tendency to speak before he thought (e.g. see 9:5-6). Jesus then reassures them all; He says that anyone who forsakes all, including family, home or lands for his sake, will have them restored "a hundredfold" in this life, and in the world to come he will receive eternal life. These blessings in this time, however, will come "with persecutions."

Is Jesus laying down a formula for blessings here? Is He saying that our blessings can be bought with a certain amount of sacrifice? I think not.

Remember that He is still talking about that rich, young ruler, and how the things that we have, and love, in this life can be a hindrance to entering the Kingdom. What He seems to be saying is that, in sacrificing things that we love or possess for His sake and for the sake of the Kingdom, we cannot, ultimately, lose. As I like to put it, we shovel out (give to Him) and He shovels in (gives to us), but his shovel is much larger than our shovel. We cannot out-give Him.

NOTE: *In the 1970s and 1980s there were teachers who laid extremely heavy emphasis on prosperity for Christians. They saw in Scripture promises that if we had faith enough God would make us rich; in fact, they would declare that God wants everyone to be rich. It is an easy message to sell, and can produce large offerings for the prosperity teacher; but the concept seems to me to be fatally flawed at the outset, for all through the Bible we are warned about the deceitfulness of riches. And, in this conversation, Jesus hammers home the message that being rich can be a great--even dangerous--hindrance to us spiritually. Trusting in riches, He says, can even keep us out of the Kingdom. At one point these prosperity teachers seized upon v 30, and believed that they saw in it a formula for being blessed. If we give a certain amount to the church (or to the teacher's ministry), they taught, we will automatically receive back what we gave, multiplied by 100. I remember one man, a sincere believer, who gave a ministry \$10,000, only because he believed that he would automatically receive \$1,000,000 in return. He never did receive the \$million. And, incidentally, the prosperity teachers, when teaching on the "hundred-fold return," usually omitted reference to the words "with persecutions" in v 30. It is important to remember that God looks upon the heart--He cares very much about our motives and*

intentions. It is true that we cannot out-give God; but this applies only when our hearts are right. If we approach Him with a selfish motive we are probably automatically disqualified for the blessing.

22. James and John Have a Really Bad Idea. (10:32-45)

The ministry of Jesus in the towns and the countryside is finished and it is time to go up to Jerusalem. Two weeks of his earthly life and ministry remain.

As they travel, Jesus tells the apostles what to expect in Jerusalem. He tells them plainly that in Jerusalem He will be accused, scourged, spat upon and put to death, but He will rise from death. His disciples are fearful, perhaps because they are finally beginning to believe that He really is going to be put to death. And, even if they aren't fearful for their own lives, they must be feeling terribly threatened at the thought of living without Him.

As they travel onward toward Jerusalem, James and John have a really bad idea: they ask Jesus to grant that when He is glorified they may sit at his right and left hands, in positions of power and glory second only to his. I cannot imagine a more inappropriate time for them to make this outrageously inappropriate, self-serving request!

Jesus, with great patience, asks them if they are able to experience what He is about to experience; they, being completely carnal and naïve, assure Him that they are up to it. He then, knowing the future, tells them that they will indeed drink of his cup of suffering and be baptized with a cruel death, but He is kind enough not to tell them what really lies ahead for them⁴³. He then, very kindly, tells the two ambitious ones that what they ask is not his to grant, but shall be given to those for whom it is prepared. Could He be speaking of Moses and Elijah? Perhaps. And, when the other ten apostles learn of what James and John were seeking they are "much displeased" (as they should be). Jesus then uses the occasion to tell them all, once more, that those who wish to be the most important must become the servants of all. Even He, Jesus says, came not to be served, but to serve others.

NOTE: *In Matthew's account (Matt 20:20f) we are told that it is the mother of James and John who makes the ill-advised request of Jesus, and yet Jesus replies to the two apostles. Is this a contradiction? No. Obviously, the three of them were standing there, presenting their petition to Jesus; the three of them had obviously discussed it and had come together to ask this of Him. Matthew also records that when the other apostles heard what was happening they were angry with James and John--not with their mother.*

22. Jesus Heals Blind Bartimaeus. (10:46-52)

Jesus and his followers stop over at Jericho, and then continue on their final journey toward Jerusalem⁴⁴. As they are leaving Jericho a blind man named Bartimaeus ("son of Timaeus") is

⁴³ Credible tradition tells us that all of the twelve apostles eventually died as martyrs, except for Judas who hanged himself, and John who lived to be about 100 and died of natural causes.

⁴⁴ Jericho was a natural place for travelers to rest, for the city was large, supplies could be bought there, and there was much shade and plentiful water.

sitting by the road, begging. When he is told that it is Jesus passing by he begins to cry out to Him, saying “Jesus thou son of David, have mercy upon me⁴⁵!” The people around him tell him to be quiet, but the more they tell him to hush, the more Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus. Jesus, hearing his cry, stops and commands that Bartimaeus be brought to Him. The attitude of those around him changes, Bartimaeus casts aside his covering cloak (it is a chilly morning in spring), and he is hurriedly brought to Jesus⁴⁶. Jesus, as He often did, asks him what it is that he desires. Bartimaeus answers that he wants to be able to see. Jesus tells him that his faith has made him whole, and the man is healed. Jesus then tells him to go home, but Bartimaeus follows Jesus instead.

NOTES:

a. We must wonder why Jesus asked Bartimaeus what it was that he wanted. The man was blind, sitting by the road begging! Bartimaeus surely had such a thought--something like, “What do you mean, what is it that I am beseeching you for--isn't it obvious? I'm stumbling around here, blind and helpless, and you are the Healer!” But Jesus never uttered an unnecessary word (see Matt 12:36). He knew that at times what we say is a precursor of what we do. It is one thing to think something; but when we say it, the matter takes a giant step toward reality. In this case, it seems that when Bartimaeus spoke the words, that he wanted to be healed, his faith for the healing rose up within him. He had declared himself. Jesus knows our thoughts; but He wants to hear the words.

*b. In Matthew's account of this event there are two blind men, both unnamed; in Luke's account there is one blind man, unnamed. Is this a contradiction? No. Mark makes it clear that Bartimaeus then followed Jesus “in the way,” becoming one of his disciples. It would be natural to name only the one who became one of them, sharing the excitement, dangers, heartbreak, and final triumph, of the coming weeks. Of course, it is possible that the three writers of the synoptic gospels described three separate events; Jericho was a large city with a population of about 100,000, and there were probably many blind men sitting by the roads leading to and from it, begging. However, the similarity in the setting, and the circumstances of all three accounts, strongly support the belief that all three speak of the same event. In fact, Bartimaeus has become something of a biblical celebrity. Today, in commentaries, superscriptions in Bibles, teachings, sermons and Sunday school materials, he is never identified simply as Bartimaeus--he is always “**blind Bartimaeus.**”*

24. A Small-Town Miracle. (11:1-6)

Nearing Jerusalem, the group arrives at the Mount of Olives, near the villages of Bethany and

⁴⁵ Blind Bartimaeus must have had a revelation that Jesus was not an ordinary "holy man" passing by; by his repeatedly calling Jesus "thou son of David" he seems to be identifying Jesus as the awaited Messiah, something the learned elite in Israel, with rare exceptions like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, never realized.

⁴⁶ One wonders of Bartimaeus, after being healed, went back to get his cloak; it was probably his most valuable possession. I am inclined to believe that, in his excitement of being healed and meeting the Master, he never gave the cloak a thought, and left it behind.

Bethphage, about two miles from Jerusalem, and they stop to rest⁴⁷. Jesus sends two of his disciples to a nearby village. He tells them that in that village they will find an unbroken colt, a young donkey that has never been ridden, and he will be tied. They are to untie the colt and bring it to Jesus; and, if anyone objects, they are to say to him that “the Lord hath need of him.” The two do as they are told, and they find such a colt at the crossroad, the very center of the small village. They untie the colt, and there is a group of local men watching them. When some of the onlookers object, demanding to know what they are doing, the disciples say, as they had been told, that “the Lord hath need of him”; and the men allow the disciples to take the colt away.

This is clearly supernatural!

A perfect analogy would be a small town in the rural South, with a brand new pickup truck, just rolled out of the dealership, with one mile on the odometer. It is parked at the very center of town, with the key in the ignition lock; and there is a group of court house loafers and pocket knife swappers looking on. Two of us, you and I, walk into town, get into the truck and start the engine. The locals look on in amazement, which is quickly turning to anger. They shout, as they move toward you and surround the truck, “Hey, strangers, what the (bleep) do you think you’re doin’ with Bubba’s brand new pickup?!?!” If you replied, “My boss needs it,” what do you think they would do? Would they suddenly be pleased with what you are doing, and say, “Oh, well then, that’s OK--y’all drive safely now, y’hear”?

Of course they wouldn’t! They would drag us out of that pickup, beat the two of us half to death, and then the local sheriff (Bubba’s brother) would drag our battered bodies off to the jail. No, there can be no doubt; the response of the locals, hanging out in that little crossroad village, was clearly a miracle.

***NOTE:** Matthew records that the mother of the unbroken colt was tied up at that crossroads, with the colt, and that she followed her colt in the triumphal procession. Mark, Luke and John mention only the colt. Is this a contradiction? Of course not! Mark, Luke and John don’t deny the presence of the mare--they simply don’t bother to include her in their narratives. Remember that Matthew was writing primarily to the Jews, making his case that Jesus is truly the Messiah; he probably included the mother of the colt in his account to emphasize the fact that Jesus **literally** fulfilled Zechariah’s prophecy, which seems to speak of both the mare and the colt (“...riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass. [Zech 9:9]”).*

25. The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. (11:7-11)

The outer garments of some of the disciples are placed on the unbroken colt as a sort of saddle, and Jesus mounts him; the unbroken colt is supernaturally gentle and obedient--another miracle. Jesus rides down from the Mount of Olives, across the Brook Kidron, and then upward into Jerusalem. The crowd goes before Him, with some of them following after Him, rejoicing,

⁴⁷ Bethany (“house of dates”) was the home of Mary and Martha, and was the scene of the raising of Lazarus from death. Bethfage (“house of figs”) was a village nearby. In and around Bethany there must have been many date palms; and in and around Bethfage there must have been many fig trees.

Mark

praising God, shouting "Hosanna, blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord," and throwing their cloaks and palm branches onto the road before Him⁴⁸. This triumphal, yet humble, entry on the donkey fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9), and the reaction of the crowd fulfills Psalm 118:25-26. It is also in perfect keeping with the humility of Jesus, for a merely human king would make his entry on a prancing war horse, or seated on a throne, on a gilded platform, carried into the city by strong slaves.

It is clear that the "tell no man" policy of Jesus is ended here; but why? The answer seems to be that there is no longer the danger of having a mob of excited people **prematurely** declare Him to be the Messiah, for the time has come for that to happen. Now it is time to shout this glorious fact from the housetops--to the heavens--and let the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and the Sanhedrin deal with it.

Reaching the Temple Jesus enters the outer courts and looks about; and He doesn't like what He sees. It is late in the day ("the eventide was come"); and He and his disciples return to Bethany.

NOTES:

a. Jesus and his disciples always walked between Jerusalem and Bethany, with only this one exception. In his triumphal trip to Jerusalem He rode, in order to fulfill the prophecies.

b. Here in the cleansing(s) of the Temple, and in the cursing of the fig tree, are perhaps the most difficult chronological problems in the synoptic gospels.

John's gospel is not one of the synoptics; yet we should be reminded that only he records the first cleansing of the Temple, very early in the ministry of Jesus [Jn 2:1-17]; but he does not mention the much later cleansing (or cleansings), at the end of Jesus' ministry on Earth, recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke⁴⁹.

One problem in the synoptic gospels lies in the fact that the accounts of both Matthew and Luke seem to say that Jesus arrived at Jerusalem in triumph, was declared by the crowd to be the Messiah, entered the Temple (its outer court), and immediately drove out the vendors, livestock, and money changers [Matt 21:12-13; Lk 19:45-46]. Although their uninterrupted narrative implies it, they do not say that Jesus cleansed the Temple immediately after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; but neither do they say that He waited until the next morning to cleanse it. Yet, here in Mark's account, he recorded only that Jesus entered the Temple, looked around, and then, it being the end of the day ("the eventide was come"), He and his followers returned to Bethany for the night [Mk 11:11]. Mark clearly recorded that Jesus returned to Jerusalem the next morning and cleansed the Temple.

So, how can we understand the differences in the accounts of Matt and Lk on the one hand, and that of Mark on the other?

(1) First, it is wise always to approach an apparent problem in a passage by giving the

⁴⁸ "Hosanna" is a Hebrew word meaning "Save, we pray, oh save," or "Save now," an expression of adoration.

⁴⁹ We should also be reminded that John was much more interested in eternal, spiritual, things than in thorough, sequential, narrative details.

*inspiration of God's Word the benefit of any doubt. It is **never** safe to take the skeptic's approach to a difficult passage; for history has recorded far too many times when apparent errors, or unsupported statements, were later explained by the discovery of archeological or other scientific or historical evidence, supporting the biblical account, and embarrassing the skeptics who had loudly pronounced "Error!" You will find repeated examples of this significant (and, at the time of this writing, unbroken) pattern throughout the book studies in this study guide.*

(2) One possible explanation concerns the basic approach of the synoptic gospel writers. In this explanation it is generally accepted by both traditional and critical scholars that: the approach of Matthew was theological--to validate Jesus as the expected Messiah; that Luke's approach in writing was historical--to record and validate the over-all story of Jesus the God-Man; and Mark's approach emphasized the miracles performed by Jesus, not a thorough recording of all of his acts and teachings.

(3) In recording the cleansings near the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus, Matthew, Mark and Luke, may well have been describing the same event, making the total number of cleansings of the Temple two, and eliminating the apparent conflict. There may be no conflict at all; and a respected 19th Century Jewish theologian may have given us the key.

Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889), in his classic work, "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah," [hereafter cited as "Edersheim"] suggests that, by the time Jesus arrived at the Temple, the hours of worship were over ["and now the eventide was come"], the moneychangers and livestock dealers had left, and the outer court was empty. On the basis of his hypothesis [and Mk 11:11 strongly supports it], there would have been no cleansing to be done in the outer court of the Temple (except for the manure, trash, and other refuse left behind by the offenders). Therefore, the driving of the money changers and vendors from the Temple had to wait until the offenders returned the next day.

Edersheim was already a respected Jewish scholar, deeply knowledgeable in the ancient Jewish writings, when he was converted to faith in Jesus the Messiah. He wrote that the ancient Jewish historians described, "in even stronger terms [than the gospel writers] this offensive transformation of 'the house of prayer' into a 'den of robbers' " (Bk 5, Chapt 2, p 734)⁵⁰.

If valid, Edersheim's hypothesis could reconcile the accounts of Matthew and Luke with that of Mark, because careful reading of the accounts of both Matthew and Luke does not clearly preclude or contradict that of Mark, thus making possible their reconciliation and harmonization. What appears, on its face, to be a problem, may not be a problem at all.

*(4) **And, Finally.** My Edersheim-based hypothesis very much appeals to me, Mk 11:11 seems to be the key, and I believe that it can be defended with confidence. In the final analysis,*

⁵⁰ The fact that this corruption and desecration of the sacred precincts of the Temple courtyard was tolerated by the religious leaders is **self-evident**; for it was obviously ongoing and without interference. **But why?** Although none of the gospel accounts mentions the motivation for this tolerance by the religious leaders, Edersheim tells us that they tolerated this corruption because they were profiting by it financially (Book 5, Chapter 2, p 734). Matthew Henry also makes this point (Vol 5, p 527).

however, I can only say with certainty that there is an apparent problem here with no obvious, definitive, explanation. We can ask Jesus about this when we meet Him (I love the thought that we will have eternity to sit at his feet, learning!). It will also be fun to ask Matthew, Mark, Luke and John about this (and about many other fascinating things).

26. Cursing the Fig Tree and Cleansing the Temple. (11:12-26)

Having spent the night in Bethany (almost certainly at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus), Jesus and his disciples return to Jerusalem in the morning. They have had no breakfast and Jesus is hungry. Along the way He sees a fig tree at a distance; He sees that it has leaves, and He hopes to find some ripe figs on it. After walking to the fig tree He finds it barren of figs, "for the time of figs was not yet." Jesus curses the tree, saying "No man [shall] eat fruit of thee forever," and they resume their walk to Jerusalem.

NOTE: It seems unreasonable to curse the tree for having no fruit, when it is not yet time to bear fruit. I have read various attempts by traditional commentators to justify what appears to be an irrational reaction--this cursing of the fig tree by Jesus--to something which should have been expected. Contrarily, critics, who typically attack his divinity, seem to enjoy explaining it negatively--as a temper tantrum.

For those such as I, who have grown and loved figs, however, this little episode seems easy to understand. Fig leaves appear early in the Spring, and soon create a beautiful, dense, green covering of the bush or tree. Soon after the leaves reach full size, the little fruits appear and grow rapidly, but are covered by the leaves; a fully grown and ripe fig can easily be overlooked, hidden under a leaf, even when standing next to the tree and looking for it. At a distance, there could be several ripe figs, covered by the leaves and unseen. On the other hand, there could be none.

The apparent problem here is in v 13 ["for the time of figs was not yet"].

The time of this event was late Springtime. Sometimes, in late Spring, a few figs will grow and ripen ahead of the normal schedule--before "the time of figs" [v 13], and they are a special treat. All fig trees do not perform in the same way; there are individual differences among plants, just as there are among animals. Most cows produce only one calf a year; but some will often produce twin calves, and such cows are more valuable than those who never produce twins. Some fig trees will set on fruit early and a few will ripen early, simply because it is their genetic nature to do so; yet the trees all look alike.

At a distance it is impossible to see whether or not there are yet green figs on the tree or bush, let alone a few early ripe ones; so Jesus, hungry and probably somewhat irritable, walked some extra distance to the fig tree, hoping for a few early ripe ones⁵¹. Finding no ripe figs after the extra walking certainly did not please Jesus. He was, we must remember, fully human as well as

⁵¹ A key here also is in the word "haply" in v 13. It clearly implies that Jesus knew that there might **not** be edible figs on that tree. "Haply" is an Elizabethan English word meaning "perhaps" or "maybe." The Greek word rendered "haply" removes any doubt; it is *ara*, and it means "perhaps."

fully divine; but maybe his cursing of the fig tree was not to punish it. Perhaps his purpose was to illustrate a lesson for his disciples in faith, a lesson that He would teach them the very next morning (vv 20-26).

Jesus and his disciples arrive at the Temple, still hungry, and business by the vendors in the outer court is thriving. Without preamble or warning, Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers and vendors, and drives them out of the Temple; He also forbids the carrying of merchandise through the Temple⁵². Quoting Isaiah, He declares to all who can hear Him, "Is it not written that 'my house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer'? ⁵³" And then He declares that they "have made it a den of thieves." The scribes and chief priests are greatly offended, but are afraid to rebuke Him because the common people are loving all of this.

The fact that one man, and without a weapon, could frighten this multitude of criminals to the extent that they allowed Him to overturn their tables and drive them from the Temple seems miraculous⁵⁴. But this was no ordinary man; and he was surrounded by the multitude which had praised and proclaimed Him as the Messiah as He rode up to Jerusalem⁵⁵. Matthew Henry records an ancient tradition which stated that on this occasion "his face shone, and beams of light darted from his blessed eyes, which astonished those market people and compelled them to yield to his command⁵⁶" At any rate, his commanding presence spoke for itself.

At the end of the day they return to Bethany to spend the night. In the morning, as they return to Jerusalem, they pass the fig tree that Jesus had cursed the previous morning, and Peter is amazed to see that it is withered and dead. Jesus responds by saying that the miracle is a matter of faith. He then delivers a teaching on faith, saying that when they pray, believing, they can have the thing for which they pray. Even if they tell the Mount of Olives to be cast into the sea, it can happen⁵⁷.

And then He adds a second, and extremely important, teaching point, saying "When ye stand praying, forgive." If we are holding resentment, He says, we must forgive, or we will not be forgiven. Refusal to forgive will nullify our prayer; and, by extension, the results could be even more dreadful than just the nullification of that one prayer. Could refusal to forgive others keep us out of Heaven? At the very least it can consume us and make our lives miserable.

⁵² Apparently, since the Court of the Temple had become a market place, merchandise was also carried through the court by vendors, perhaps even as a shortcut to other destinations, with no thought as to its sacredness.

⁵³ Isaiah 56:7.

⁵⁴ In the first cleansing of the Temple, early in his ministry and recorded only by John, Jesus had made a whip (scourge), and used it to drive the defilers from the Temple. Matthew, Mark and Luke, in describing the subsequent cleansing of the Temple (at the end of Jesus' ministry), make no mention of a weapon. John makes no mention of the latter cleansing(s).

⁵⁵ There is no record even to suggest that his 12 apostles assisted Jesus in this attack. They were probably standing back, as amazed as were the offending money changers and vendors.

⁵⁶ Matthew Henry's commentary on Matt 21:12-13, Vol 5, p 298. If this tradition is valid, it was a fulfillment of Proverbs 20:8. The tradition, and the 8th verse of Proverbs 20, are definitely compatible.

⁵⁷ According to Edersheim, "rooting up mountains" was a common hyperbolic metaphor used by rabbis for doing the impossible (Book 5, p 733, footnote 6).

NOTES:

a. Jesus had cleansed the Temple before. Only John records the first cleansing, early in the ministry of Jesus, soon after his first miracle, the changing of water into wine at Cana. In the three years that had passed since that first cleansing, greed and corruption had again turned the outer courts of the Temple into a marketplace (and it probably didn't take three years for this return to corruption to occur).

This corruption of the Temple had been dealt with at its surface three years earlier, but had not been dealt with at its wicked roots. It had had re-sprouted and was flourishing. Perhaps this was part of the lesson for Jesus' disciples in the cursing and death of the fig tree "from the roots up"⁵⁸.

b. Matthew's account appears to have the cursing and dying of the fig tree. occurring on the same day. Is this a synoptic contradiction? Maybe not.

In Matthew's abbreviated account he writes that, after Jesus cursed the tree, it "presently" dried up. The Greek word rendered "presently" is "parachrema"; it can mean "presently" [in the near future], "forthwith" [without delay] or "soon." Thus the word could mean immediately, or it could mean the next day; it could even mean in several days.

In Mark's more detailed account we find that it is Peter who speaks of his amazement that the tree is withered away. And we must remember that Peter was the primary source for Mark's gospel, thus making more detail at this point in the account likely, both in Peter's remembering it, and in Mark's writing of it. Edersheim suggests that this more detailed account of the unfortunate fig tree explains what appears, on its face, to be a conflict in the accounts of Matthew and Mark⁵⁹.

*Of the synoptic gospel writers, only Luke, the careful historian, does not mention the cursing of the fig tree **at all**. Perhaps this is because he considered the event to be of no historical significance.*

*c. In teaching his disciples there in the Temple Jesus said, "When ye **stand** praying, forgive" (emphasis mine). It was customary then for the Jews to pray standing; this may still be seen today, as religious Jews in Jerusalem stand, praying at the "wailing wall" (a remnant of a retaining wall that stabilized the Temple Mount). We may also recall that in the parable of the insincere Pharisee and the sincere publican, praying in the Temple, both are praying while standing⁶⁰. According to Matthew Henry, the ancient Jews referred to these times of prayer as "standings"⁶¹.*

27. The First and Great Commandment. (12:28-34)

⁵⁸ Jesus had, not long before, spoken the parable of the barren fig tree that was to be cut down as useless (Lk 13:6-9). If it would not bear fruit it would become fuel for a fire.

⁵⁹ Edersheim, Book 5, Chapt 2, p 733.

⁶⁰ Luke 18:9-14.

⁶¹ Matthew Henry, Volume 5, page 528.

On the last day of his public ministry, Jesus is confronted by the religious leaders, the scribes, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadduces, in one last effort to embarrass Him and/or accuse Him of some crime against the Romans. They, of course, failed. This was covered in detail in the study guide to Matthew 22 and will not be repeated here; however, Mark's account of the very last attempt on that final day includes the amazing and, I think, wonderful ending of that famous, final crossing of mental swords.

As we saw in Matthew's account, when the Pharisees, Herodians and Sadduces have failed, they take their last shot: they send out their best man, a scribe, an expert in religious law⁶². This man, presumably a bright, articulate young man, asks Jesus which is the most important commandment of all. In asking this question, he is surely thinking that no matter which commandment Jesus chooses, he can demonstrate from his vast knowledge of the law that He is wrong--that there is one that is more important. Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the "Shema"); and, without pause, He goes on to say that there is a second commandment that must go with it: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18). Then Jesus concludes his answer by saying that there is no commandment greater than these.

The reply of the scribe is astonishing!

It is obvious that the words of Jesus have produced a supernatural change within the man, for he calls Jesus "Master"; then he not only agrees with Jesus, but goes on to say that to do these two things "is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices"! We must remember that this scene is being intently watched by all of this man's friends (and religious superiors), who hate Jesus and all that He represents.

But that is not all that is amazing here. For all of his life, this man has believed, and taught others, that **nothing** is more important than the religious law of burnt offerings and sacrifices! And Jesus, knowing what is happening within the man, looks upon his last philosophical adversary with compassionate understanding and replies, "Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God." I won't be surprised to meet this young man in Heaven.

28. The Widow's Offering. (12:41-44)

Having silenced his doctrinal enemies for the last time, Jesus closes out his last day in the Temple, sitting by the treasury and watching as people bring offerings of money. Many rich people come, with flourish and fanfare, and give large amounts of money. And then a poor widow comes. Undoubtedly feeling conspicuous and embarrassed because she is giving so little, she casts into the treasury two mites, tiny copper coins with the least value of all coins in circulation at the time⁶³.

Always ready to take advantage of an event in order to make a teaching point, Jesus calls the twelve to come to Him; and He tells them that, of all those who had come to give money into the

⁶² In Matthew's account he is called "a lawyer." Since this is their last such attempt, it is safe to assume that this is their very best man, a "hot shot" fresh out of graduate school with post-doctoral studies--their best and brightest.

⁶³ The coin is a lepton, worth about 1/10th of a penny. Today such a coin is called a "widow's mite."

treasury, the widow has given the most. She obviously has not given the most quantitatively, so He explains that the wealthy ones who brought large gifts have given out of their abundance--only a small part of what they have--and it was easy for them. She, on the other hand, has given all that she has; therefore she has given the most.

NOTE: After this Jesus and the twelve leave the Temple for the last time; He will never return to this Temple, and in about 40 years it will be completely destroyed by the Romans, the materials removed, and the site plowed, as if it had never been there.

29. Anointed for Burial. (14:1-9)

The time for the feast of the Passover is two days away, and the religious leaders are making plans for Jesus' death. Jesus, meanwhile, is in Bethany, in the house of one Simon the Leper, having dinner⁶⁴. As they dine, a woman comes into the place with an expensive alabaster container of spikenard, a fragrant, very expensive, ointment. She breaks open the container and pours the spikenard over Jesus' head.

Judas and others of the twelve grumble about this, considering it to be a great waste of money that might otherwise have been given to the poor.⁶⁵ Jesus replies in often quoted words, saying that there will always be the poor, and they will always need help; but He has only a short time to be with them. Speaking again of his soon-coming death, which the twelve seem still unwilling to believe, He says that this woman has anointed his body for burial. Then He goes on to prophesy that what she has just done will be spoken of all over the world. Isn't it exciting to realize that, as we read and discuss what she has done, we are, at that moment, fulfilling that prophesy of Jesus?

30. Preparations for the Passover Meal ("Last Supper")⁶⁶. (14:12-16)

Jesus sends two of the disciples into Jerusalem to find the place for them to eat the Passover meal⁶⁷. He tells them that when they get to Jerusalem they will be met by a man carrying a pitcher of water; this man, He tells them, will lead them to a house. There, they are to say to the master of that house, "The Master saith, 'Where is the guest chamber where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?'" The master of the house, Jesus tells them, will take them to a large upper room; there, He says, they are to make preparations for the meal. The two disciples go into Jerusalem and things happen just as Jesus told them they would; there, in that upper room, they make preparations for their final meal with Jesus. This incident is obviously supernatural; and it is a perfect counterpoint to the miraculous event when Jesus sent his disciples to get the

⁶⁴ Almost certainly he was Simon the ex-leper, a man Jesus has healed; otherwise, this occasion would be a gross violation of Levitical law.

⁶⁵ John records a similar event at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, in which he states that Judas' reason for complaining about the waste was that he was stealing from the communal purse, of which he was the keeper. This incident will be treated as a highlight in the study guide to John's Gospel.

⁶⁶ It was Leonardo De Vinci who called the meal "the last supper"; Jesus called it "the Passover" (as do all Jews and many Christians to this day).

⁶⁷ Luke, ever the man for the complete, detailed record, identifies the two as Peter and John (Lk 22:8).

unbroken donkey for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Those final pleasant days of the Lord's earthly ministry began with the miracle of taking the unbroken donkey; and they end with the miracle of the mysterious man who leads them to the house with the upper room, and with the meal that follows.

NOTES:

a. The word "Passover" has three meanings (or uses): it means the feast of that name, with all its events and observances; it can also refer to the lamb which is killed and roasted for the Passover meal; and it can also be used to speak of the meal itself, on the Day of Preparation.

b. One interesting aspect of this miraculous event is that the man was carrying water; carrying water in that time and place was a woman's work.

c. The account of the Passover meal in the upper room will be found in the study guides to the gospels of Luke and John, because they are more complete than Mark's account.

31. Out to the Mount of Olives. (14:26-31)

The Passover meal is completed with the singing of "an hymn" and, for the last time together, they go out to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus tells the twelve that, in order to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy ("Smite the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered."), all of them will, that night, desert Him and flee. Peter immediately declares that, even if all of the others desert Him, he will never do so; and Jesus tells Peter that before the night is over, before the cock crows twice, Peter will deny Him three times. As usual, when he should have been listening, Peter continues to speak. Even more insistent, He declares that even if it should cost him his life he will **never** abandon Jesus. The other ten agree (Judas has left to set up the betrayal), and join in Peter's vehement declaration ("also said they all")⁶⁸. If Jesus corrected them it is not recorded, but He must have looked upon them with compassion and sadness, for He knew that they were sincere; yet He also knew that soon they would all be running for their lives.

NOTE: *Here is a truly wonderful thing! Rabbinical records reveal that, in the First Century, singing at the Passover meal consisted of selections from certain Psalms. The celebrants could sing as many of the selections as they wished; however, if they sang only one, **it had to be Ps 118:22-24**. Therefore, because both Matthew and Mark record the fact that they sang only one ("an hymn"), we can know exactly what they sang on that night. Read those three verses, realizing that Jesus sang them, and that He knew exactly what horrors awaited Him in that "day that the Lord hath made." And consider that He sang, "...we will **rejoice** and be **glad** in it." He sang, "This is the **LORD's doing**; it is **marvelous** in our eyes." I think He must have been thinking--and declaring, "The horrible things that will happen to me in the coming night and day will not be the work of Caesar, nor of Herod, nor of the Sanhedrin; no--it will be my Father's doing, the fulfillment of His redemptive plan. And, although unimaginably horrible for me, yet it*

⁶⁸ We tend to remember Peter as being the one who vowed never to desert Jesus, even if it should cost him his life, only to deny Him three times, later that same night. However, both Matthew and Mark tell us that all eleven of them made the same foolish declaration, and all eleven of them (plus at least one other--a young boy, thought to have been John Mark) fled when Jesus was betrayed and arrested.

is a marvelous thing in my eyes; and I will rejoice and be glad in its final, victorious outcome." In this regard, see Hebr 12:2, which we shall examine thoroughly in the study guide to Hebrews.

32. The Flight of the Naked Young Man. (14:50-52)

Jesus and the twelve have gone out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus has agonized in prayer, and the mob, led by Judas, has come to seize Him. At least one other disciple, a young man, has joined the group, and as the disciples run for their lives someone in the mob grabs that young man's cloak to hold him. The young man slips out of his cloak and sprints away naked, leaving his would-be captors holding only his cloak. Many commentators believe that this was Mark's way of including his own narrow escape in the incident, but without naming himself. Strengthening this theory is the fact that none of the other gospel writers includes this detail, and there seems to be no other reason for it to be included here⁶⁹.

NOTE: *Jesus is taken to Jerusalem, to the palace of the high priest. Peter has followed at a safe distance but, when he arrives at the palace, he is recognized as a follower of Jesus and is so accused. He denies even knowing Jesus three times, swearing oaths, and with vulgar cursing. After the third denial a cock, having already crowed once, crows the second time just as Jesus has prophesied. We will see this crisis moment in Peter's life more fully in the accounts of Luke and John.*

33. Supernatural Darkness. (15:23-33)

Having been taken from the palace of the high priest to the judgment hall of Pontius Pilate, Jesus is condemned, brutally scourged, and crucified. The soldiers offer Him sour wine ("vinegar") mixed with myrrh to deaden the pain; but He refuses it, determined to experience the pain of atonement fully. He is nailed to the cross at "the third hour" (9:00 A M)⁷⁰. From 9:00 AM until noon ("the 6th hour"), He suffers in the sun. At noon supernatural darkness settles over the land, lasting for three hours ("unto the 9th hour"). At 3:00 PM the darkness ends, and Jesus gives up the ghost.

The humanistic skeptics have tried to find a way to explain this darkness as an eclipse of the Sun, but without success. It is likely that the darkness was yet another symbol of the identity of Jesus as God's Passover Lamb. In Egypt prior to the Exodus, the 10th plague was three days of supernatural darkness, followed by the 11th and final plague, the death of the first-born, and the killing of the Passover lambs. Here, on Calvary, there is darkness for three hours, followed by the death of the "firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), and the Passover Lamb of God (I Corinthians 5:7). Jesus shouts "It is finished!" and gives up the ghost at the 9th hour (3:00 in the afternoon), the very time that the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple.

NOTES:

a. Crucifixion was notoriously known as one of the most painful ways to die; and it sometimes

⁶⁹ This is comparable to John's referring to himself anonymously as "one of his disciples, [the one] whom Jesus loved."

⁷⁰ Only Mark gives us this time (Mark 15:25).

took several days for the crucified one to die. Our English word, “excruciating,” meaning pain in the extreme, is derived from the Latin word “excrucio,” (to torture, or torment exceedingly), which is itself derived from “ex” (from, or out of) and “cruciatum” (to cause pain, or torment). This, and related Latin words, derive from “crux” or “cruc” (cross).

b. This supernatural darkness also literally fulfills the prophecy of Amos 8:9, **even to the time of day.**

c. The “vinegar” referred to in the accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus was not the vinegar with which we flavor foods today; a tiny sip of what we call vinegar today will tell us that no one would drink it as a beverage. The Greek word rendered “vinegar” is “oxos” and it means sour wine⁷¹. This souring of wine took place naturally as a result of acid, produced largely by lactic acid bacteria, which naturally occur on the skin of the grape⁷². The wealthy would not drink it; they drank only freshly vinted wine before it began to turn sour. It was, however, the inexpensive common beverage of the poor, common laborers, and ordinary Roman soldiers, who drank it every day.

It is highly likely that Jesus and his family drank this sour wine with every meal; and it was safer than drinking most water, because its low alcohol content and lactic acid killed most disease-producing bacteria and other micro-organisms⁷³. John’s account of the crucifixion tells us that Jesus requested some of this sour wine just before He gave up the ghost, because dehydration from the heat, exertion, and massive blood loss had made Him extremely thirsty⁷⁴. For more on this topic see “Wine, Sour Wine, and Vinegar” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

34. The Sin-Bearing Moment. (15:34-37)

NOTE: I must make it clear at the outset here that my commentary on these four extremely important verses is mine and mine alone; I have never read nor heard of another commentator who interprets these verses as I do. And, I must make it clear that it is my **theory**, and my profound belief, after many years of thinking about it. It is not, however, presented as a statement of theological fact. My theory, and my rationale for it, follow.

* * * * *

After six hours on the cross, that moment that Jesus has so profoundly dreaded finally arrives. This is the moment over which, on the night before, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He had sweat

⁷¹ In the English speaking world, in the 16th and early 17th Centuries, sour wine was called “vinegar.” The translators of the Authorized Version, in 1611, quite naturally translated *oxos* as “vinegar.” The Geneva Bible of 1599 translated the Greek *oxos* as “vinegar.” This was the Bible brought to the New World by the founders of the Virginia Colony in 1607, and by the by the Pilgrims who founded Plymouth Colony in 1620.

⁷² This souring of wine continued to be a predictable problem until 1864 when French scientist Louis Pasteur discovered that it could be largely prevented by heating the wine to kill the acid-producing micro-organisms, cooling it, sealing the container, and storing it in a cool, dark place. This process (“pasteurization”) was not commonly applied to milk until the early 20th Century.

⁷³ I Timothy 5:23.

⁷⁴ John 19:28 (“I thirst”).

blood and asked “if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me...”

In the near-fatal scourging and beating, and in the six hours on the cross, He is bearing the sins of all mankind--all who ever lived, or who would ever live--as the sacrificial, spotless, sinless, Lamb of God--the just for the unjust. He is paying the sin debt that began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and which has accumulated, exponentially, ever since.

But the sacrificial death of our Redeemer is about to get inexpressibly worse.

To fully understand the horror of this coming moment (if, indeed, it is possible for us to understand it fully), we must remember one terribly important thing. It is that, on the cross, He is not only taking upon Himself and paying the sin debt of all mankind; but, in so doing, He is about to become sin--actually **become sin**--for us⁷⁵. Jesus, the Christ of God, the only pure, sinless, person who ever lived, or would ever live, is about to become, on that filthy, bloody cross, the personification of every hideous sin, including even those sins that are unthinkable and sickening to you and me⁷⁶. For this one, unimaginably terrible, moment He will become an agonizing mass of evil. And, because God is holy and cannot look upon iniquity, Jesus will suffer this horror completely, in every sense, alone⁷⁷.

The sin-bearing moment arrives and, for the first and only time in all eternity, He is without the loving presence of his Heavenly Father. Thus, He cries out in unimaginable, confused agony, “Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani” which, being interpreted, is “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” And then, as suddenly as it had begun, that sin-bearing moment, that horror, the thought of which had made Him literally sweat blood the night before, is past⁷⁸.

Once again He is the sinless Lamb of God; and, having endured that horrible sin-bearing moment, his work of atonement is perfectly finished; He has taken away the sin of the World⁷⁹.

Jesus is utterly spent, and desperately thirsty. With his mouth and throat so dry that He can barely speak, He says “I thirst⁸⁰.” The Roman soldiers give Him sour wine (“vinegar”) to drink, soaked in a sponge. He drinks it, summons all that remains of his strength, and He cries with a victory shout, “It is finished!” And, having done all that is required of Him, He willingly seals the atonement by deliberately yielding up his human spirit.

And He dies.

NOTES:

a. This is the only time in Scripture where Jesus calls the Father “my God.” Up to this moment in his earthly ministry He has always spoken to, and referred to, Him as “my Father” or “the

⁷⁵ II Corinthians 5:21.

⁷⁶ Luke 1:41-47. Even Mary, the blessed virgin, human mother of the unborn Incarnation of God, in her inspired prophetic declaration that we have come to call “The Magnificat,” glorified the Lord as “God, **my savior**” (emphasis mine). Yes, even Mary, the mother of God, needed a Savior, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God Rom 3:23).

⁷⁷ Isaiah 59:2; Hab 1:13.

⁷⁸ This cry of Jesus, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” fulfilling Psalm 22:1, is found only in Mark’s gospel.

⁷⁹ John 1:29, 36.

⁸⁰ This last request is only recorded by John (Jn 19:28).

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Father"--never as "my God." And, immediately after the sin-bearing moment, Jesus again speaks to Him as his beloved Son saying, "**Father**, into thy hands I commend my spirit [emphasis mine]⁸¹."

The significance of this seems to lie in the spiritual concept that YHWH is everyone's creator God, and everyone is ultimately responsible to Him; but He is not everyone's Father. Consider the fact that when the unredeemed are in a crisis moment of fear or heartbreak they will say, reflexively (and sincerely), with no thought, "My God!" or "Oh, my God!" They will never say, "Oh my Buddha," "Oh my Dagon," "Oh my Krishna," or "Oh my Heavenly Father." Never. There is something in even the unredeemed that, when things are really bad, cries out to "my God" (but never to "my Father").

b. However, there is a question here: we must wonder why Jesus would cry out, in a loud, agonized voice, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Why would He ask such a question, when He has known all along that He would suffer and die in this manner? Over and over, He has told his disciples that this would happen.

Part of the answer is that, in so saying, He fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 22:1. Yet, what was happening to Him was very real--He wasn't just reciting a verse from a Psalm, in order to fulfill a prophecy--He **screamed** those nine words⁸²! It seems illogical and, beyond this point I have only a theory.

My theory is that, during that horrible, hellish, unbearable, moment of physical, emotional and spiritual torment, He was not the sinless Son of God. Instead, spiritually, He was (although this was not visible to the onlookers) an ugly, sickening, mass of sin, He was completely alone in this unimaginable agony, and **He did not understand**. It is definitely one of those mysteries beyond our understanding; yet, within the limits of my finite understanding, I think of it in the sense that He was temporarily, completely, without the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

But then--as suddenly as it had begun--that horrible moment is over.

c. There is ongoing controversy among commentators concerning the language in which Jesus spoke here. Some say it was a Chaldean language, some say it was Syriac, and some insist that it was Aramaic. Others, authorities concerning ancient languages, say that it is none of these--that, instead, it is no known language.

We should consider this: if it was one of these known languages, commonly spoken in the ancient Middle East, He would have been understood by some of those who were looking on and commenting. Remember that Pilate felt it was necessary to have the sign on the cross written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, because literate Jews from many lands were there for the Passover. Fifty days later, at the feast of Pentecost, there will be "devout Jews from every nation" hearing, and understanding, at least 16 different known languages, supernaturally spoken by the Christian

⁸¹ Luke 23:46.

⁸² The literal Greek here is *with a loud voice*; however, if my interpretation is valid, I think it is not an exaggeration to use the word "screamed."

disciples⁸³. Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan, multilingual city. The centurion, supervising the crucifixion would have been an educated man. And yet, it seems clear, no one present understood what Jesus had said; they thought He was calling for Elijah to come and take Him off the cross.

But Why? If Jesus spoke these agonized words in an unknown tongue, why would He have done that?

I don't know; but I have a theory.

My theory is that if He had cried out those words of confusion and defeat, in a language that those around Him understood, his accusers, enemies and mockers would have used them to discredit Him and his claims as the divine Messiah (and his detractors would be doing it today). Today, we have the advantage of 2,000 years of history and scholarship, and we know about the prophecy in Ps 22:1.

For us, what Jesus cried out is yet more evidence of his validity; for his accusers and mockers, however, had they understood Him, this would have been ammunition to discredit Him. They were kept in the dark; but today we know and understand exactly what He was saying--and, I think--we know why⁸⁴.

35. The Empty Tomb. (16:1-8)

At sunrise on the first day of the week (our Sunday) Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, take sweet spices to the tomb, to anoint the body of Jesus. As they walk they are wondering how they can get into the tomb, because it is sealed with a very heavy stone. Arriving at the tomb they find the stone already rolled away; and, looking in, they see an angel ("young man") sitting inside and they are terrified. The angel tells them not to be afraid, that Jesus is risen, and invites them to look at the place where he had lain. Then he tells them to tell the disciples "and Peter" that they are to go to Galilee, where Jesus will meet them, as He had said⁸⁵.

NOTE: Only Mark tells us that, when the angel directs the disciples to go to Galilee to meet Jesus, he says, "and Peter." But why? It could sound like Peter is no longer a disciple after his denials of Jesus; yet we know that Peter went on to do great things as an apostle. I believe that Jesus has instructed the angel to do this, saying something like, "...and when you remind them to meet me in Galilee, mention Peter by name--he needs that," for Peter's heart was doubly broken.

And, we must recall, it should not be surprising that this small detail of two words is found only in Mark's account; for it was Peter who related this story to Mark, his young disciple and scribe.

36. Resurrection and The Great Commission. (16:9-18)

When Jesus is risen from the tomb He appears first to Mary Magdalene, "out of whom He had

⁸³ Acts 2:4-11.

⁸⁴ It is significant, I think, that v 34 reads "which is, being interpreted...", and not "which is, being translated..." See in this regard I Cor 12:10, 30, and 14:27.

⁸⁵ Jesus had told them this in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night in which He was betrayed (Matt 26:32).

cast seven devils,” and then to two others who are leaving Jerusalem⁸⁶. When those who have seen Him alive tell the other disciples, the others don’t believe them. Later, the resurrected Jesus appears to the eleven as they are eating, and He rebukes them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who had seen Him alive. Having done this, He gives them their “marching orders”--what we have come to call “The Great Commission.” He tells them to go into all the world and preach and proclaim the good news of redemption. He also tells them that those who “believe and are baptized” shall be saved (redeemed); but, He says, those who “believe not” shall be damned (condemned). They are to preach the good news of the gospel “to every creature”; and He makes it clear that some will believe them and become disciples, while some will reject their message and the gift of redemption⁸⁷. The responsibility of the preachers is to declare the good news; whether or not their message is accepted is the responsibility of those to whom they preach.

He then goes on to assure them that they will minister with the same supernatural anointing of the Holy Spirit’s power with which He has ministered for three years⁸⁸. He tells them that they must do this “in my name” (as his representatives); and, as a result, they and those who accept their message and become disciples will perform miracles as they preach. He tells them that they will cast out evil spirits, speak with new tongues, will be protected from snakebite and poisons, and that they will heal the sick. In this way Jesus makes it clear that his Church will be a Church with Holy Spirit power, a Church of miracles⁸⁹.

NOTES: Mark 16 is extremely rich in content, and includes some things that are the subject of much controversy. The following explanations should help to clear away an accumulation of misunderstanding concerning them.

a. There is, among both Christians and secularists, a widely believed assumption to the effect that Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute, and that Jesus had rescued her from a life of degradation. There is **not even one tiny scrap of evidence** to support this idea, which seems to have flowed originally from his having “cast seven devils” out of her. Much worse, the God-hating movie-makers and writers of fiction have even created the myth that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers, or were married, and had children; and these people have become very wealthy in the process. Unless they repent of their outrageous blasphemy these proud fools will someday kneel, naked and trembling, before the Judgment Throne of that same, sinless Jesus, with their pride and wealth turned to bitter ashes in their mouths, and will then spend eternity

⁸⁶ We shall see these two, walking to Emmaus, in Luke 24:13f.

⁸⁷ Although today we use the word “creature” to refer to sub-human animals, in the New Testament it is used to refer both to them, and to the supreme product of creation, man. For examples of each see II Cor 5:17 and I Tim 4:4.

⁸⁸ See Acts 2:22 and 10:38. Jesus did not perform his miracles because He was the Creator God of the Universe (which, of course, He was, is, and ever shall be); He performed them as “a man,” “anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power...for God was with him.” We shall see more about this in the study Acts 10:38 and of Jn 14:12.

⁸⁹ The eleven, and at least 70 other (un-named) disciples, have already preached and performed miracles, when He sent them out two-by-two.

regretting what they have done. For more on this Mary, see “Who Was Mary Magdalene?” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

b. In the modern versions of the Bible the last 12 verses of Mk 16 are either omitted, or they are set apart with marginal notes suggesting that they are not to be trusted. If Mark had ended his great gospel at v 8, as the modern versions do, it would have ended with the disciples defeated and impotent, hiding and trembling, in fear of the Sanhedrin and the Romans. The very last words of Mark’s glorious gospel would have been “they were afraid.” It would be difficult to think of a worse ending for this most important story ever told, the story of the Savior of Mankind, the ultimate Conqueror who holds the keys to Hell and death, and the founding of his invincible, triumphant Church⁹⁰. For more on this see “The Case for the Last 12 Verses of Mark 16” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

c. Many are especially troubled by v 18 with its reference to poisons and venomous snakes; but careful reading and a bit of word study will explain it. There are very sincere Christians, primarily in remote mountain areas of the South, who practice in their worship services the handling of venomous snakes; some practice also the drinking of poison. These zealous Christians believe that if they don’t do this they are not fully trusting God. The problem here is that they haven’t read v 18 in its context; everything Jesus is saying here **is in the context of the Great Commission**. This statement applies (at least primarily) to those who are going forth into all the World to proclaim the gospel, make new disciples and establish churches--not to anyone who decides to go to church on a given Sunday. Another problem with this practice is that they haven’t read the verse carefully; rather, they are trusting the traditions of men (their ancestors and preachers), which have “made the Word of God of none effect.” Verse 18 **does not** command us to drink poison; it says **“if”** we drink any deadly thing (by implication, unknowingly and in the line of duty) as we proclaim the gospel it will not harm us. This could refer to literal poisons, placed in food or drink by enemies of the gospel; it could also refer to drinking water, contaminated by disease-producing parasites or bacteria.

The serpent part is a little more difficult, but **only** if we forget the context. If one is in a remote jungle or desert place, proclaiming the gospel to pagan people, and if duty requires it, this verse applies. It does say that we “shall take up serpents” (not “if”); but it must mean that if it is, for any reason, necessary to catch and hold a venomous snake, we will not be harmed by it. Please note, however, that this is a **promise--and not** a commandment. For a scriptural example of this see Acts 28:1-6 where Paul, bitten by a viper, shook it off and suffered no harm. For a believer to deliberately drink poison or handle a venomous snake, however sincerely, constitutes tempting God; and some of these sincere Christians tragically suffer serious injury, or die, unnecessarily⁹¹.

And here the underlying Greek text is **extremely** important. The Greek word rendered “take up” is “airo” and its meaning is to lift, or pick up; but it also means to “remove, take away, or

⁹⁰ Mrs. Siewert, in her "Amplified Bible," includes the last 12 verses, and without equivocation.

⁹¹ Deuteronomy 6:16; Matt 4:7; Lk 4:12.

pluck up,” as in pulling weeds from a garden. This same word is rendered “taketh away” where John the Baptist made his great declaration that Jesus is “the Lamb of God which **taketh away** the sin of the world” (emphasis mine). In the Bible the serpent is symbolic of Satan and his evil works. Thus, this taking up of serpents can mean the nullifying of, or destroying, the works of Satan, the sickness of sin and demonic affliction, removing them from the lives of people and the Church. The Geneva Bible (published in 1599 AD), the Bible brought by the first permanent settlers to Jamestown in 1607, and to Plymouth by the Pilgrims in 1620, renders the Greek word “airo” as “take away,” i.e. “In my name...and shall **take away** serpents” (emphasis mine). Thus it is saying that as we go forth to fulfill the Great Commission we shall remove the works of Satan from the lives of the new believers and set them free.

So, what does all this mean for us? Does it mean that if we must deal with a venomous snake, or if we should ingest a poison by accident (or be poisoned by an enemy) in carrying out the great commission, that we will not be harmed? Or is it really just a command to destroy the works of the devil as we go into all the world? I believe that the answer is both; and it appears to have nothing to do with bringing snakes and poisons to church to demonstrate our faith.

d. The statement of Jesus about the reception of the preaching by the unredeemed is significant. In saying that those who “believe and are baptized” shall be saved (redeemed), but that those who “believe not” shall be damned (condemned), He seems to be saying that water baptism is an inseparable part of redemption, but that the only requirement for salvation, i.e. the irreducible minimum, is believing the claims of Jesus (and, by clear implication, accepting them).

Many Christians teach that baptism produces salvation, and that one cannot be saved without it. This doctrine is called “baptismal regeneration,” and is embraced by such groups the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Church, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists and the Campbellite denominations (Disciples of Christ, Independent Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ). Of these groups, the liturgical denominations usually believe that infant baptism must be followed (at about age 12) by confirmation of the salvation received as an infant. Others, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, teach that baptism in water is extremely important, but not necessary for salvation.

To be considered here is the fact that Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross beside Him that “this day” he would be with Jesus in paradise, yet the thief had not been baptized. Also to be considered is that Peter referred to water baptism as “the answer of a good conscience toward God” and it is difficult to imagine how one could be unredeemed, yet have “a good conscience toward God.” Another passage which would argue for believer baptism (as opposed to infant baptism) is the encounter between the evangelist Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In vv 36-38 the Ethiopian eunuch, after hearing the gospel message, sees a body of water and asks to be baptized. In v 37 Philip replies that “if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The eunuch replies, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” and Philip consents and

baptizes him⁹².

I will not attempt to “prove” the validity of either position; but we must carefully consider what Jesus says here. He is saying that believing and being baptized will produce salvation; but, He plainly says, damnation comes as a result of not believing--rejecting his claims--not as a result of failing to be baptized. Jesus appears to be saying that believing on Him and receiving his free gift of salvation is the only absolute necessity for salvation, its irreducible minimum, its “sine qua non⁹³.”

37. The Ascension and the Birth of the Church. (16:19-20)

With his work on Earth complete, the Lord Jesus bids his followers farewell and ascends back to Heaven whence He has come, and resumes his seat in glory at the right hand of the Father⁹⁴. Having received their marching orders and the final instructions from their risen Lord, the disciples go forth and preach all over the known World, with the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit to lead, comfort and empower them, and with the performing of miracles which confirm the message that they are preaching.

⁹² The modern versions commonly omit v 37 entirely, or omit the words "if thou believest, thou mayest." Thus the only verse in the Bible that clearly, regardless of interpretation, supports believer baptism, is removed. Mrs. Siewert, in her "Amplified Bible," not only includes the entire verse, but enriches its meaning with her amplification. Being an honest scholar, however, she italicizes the verse, because it is not in the modern Greek text from which she worked.

⁹³ "Sine qua non" is Latin, meaning literally, "without which not." It means that the thing referred to (in this case, believing Jesus and accepting Him as Messiah) is the absolute essential ingredient in order to achieve the result. In this case, the result is redemption, passing from spiritual death into spiritual life.

⁹⁴ We will see this event in greater detail in the study of Acts 1.